

Maximum and Minimum Standards for Religious Archives

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MANY standards for religious archives could be given in this brief presentation. Standards relating only to the following matters, however, will be discussed: organizational authority and administration, scope and objectives, building and facilities, and personnel.

Organizational Authority and Administration

In practice, religious archival depositories have frequently been established as private ventures and have remained so. This, however, is a mere minimum provision. Sometimes a theological seminary library, a religious educational institution, or even a secular university has collected such resources. Concerned forces have at times been joined to form a historical society to give moral and material support. On other occasions State archival agencies or municipal libraries have served as depositories for ecclesiastical records because of their competence. None of these, however, really fills the needs of a religious archives. Such arrangements should be considered as minimal.

The only permanent and effective way to operate an archival-historical records program in a church is to have it properly authorized and maintained by a denomination or its geographical subunit that has created the records. This does not exclude cooperative ventures between several of the agencies included in a communion. It must be emphasized that where such a hybrid exists, the relationships between the sponsoring organizations—whether secular or church related—need to be spelled out in detail to eliminate operational confusion. An organizational chart with documentation will be most useful. Ownership of the resources must be defined so as to leave no doubt in the event that a future archival agency is established.

Whether a hybrid agency or a denominational historical agency exists, specific resolutions and statutes (canon law) must be created. Ideally, these should be drafted and adopted by the highest legislative authority, such as a house of bishops, a conference of presidents, a convention itself, or, where applicable, a decree of the top official. In other words, the establishment, authorization, and provision for a denominational archival agency should come from the highest authority rather than from an intermediate one.

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If at all possible, such statements should be embodied in the constitution of the agency itself. The formulation may be rather brief and simple, but it ought to be precise and, contrary to the Delphic oracle, leave nothing to doubt or speculation. It should refer to the general collecting policies, the definition of the scope of the collection, the provision for an orderly and routine transfer of records from the administrative and board offices, and references to personnel and control. Specifically also, ownership—whether retained by the authorizing agent or by the archives—should be spelled out. It is better to incorporate the archival agency and hold it legally responsible so that it may be enabled to carry out all activities and functions of a corporation.

Further, the administrative relationships or tieups with the communion or denomination itself need to be adequately defined. Ideally, the archival agency should be established as a separate department governed by a separate board or commission. The top officials of the communion should in some way be responsible in constituting the governing board, either through direct participation as members of the board or by appointing representatives.

As Dr. Posner has emphasized in his *American State Archives*, any attempts at controlling current, operational records should be placed under the ultimate jurisdiction of the archivist-historian.¹ Even if no specific provision has been made, the regulations should refer these responsibilities to him in general terms. Moreover, principles of ownership, control, accountability, use, restrictions, and disposition of the collection must be spelled out. It is highly advisable to consult legal counsel to make certain that no elements have been overlooked.

In this context it is logical to discuss financial support, budgetary provisions, and the like. May it suffice to say that, far too often in the past, church archives initiated through a private undertaking or historical society have been inadequately and haphazardly supported through limited membership fees. Although societal membership contributions can augment it, they should never be allowed to underwrite most of a church archives program. Such funds must come from the church budget itself, assuring the kind of continuity essential to a group program. This is also true with respect to the monetary contributions made by "angels." It is far more advantageous to allocate such funds for special projects rather than to use them for operating expenses.

To avoid further inadequacies and headaches, much depends upon the regulations and the authority drafted into the enabling and policy resolutions. To avoid future internal and external conflicts, it is essential that good working principles and policies be established at the outset. Ideally an agency should attract as many historical and archival resources into a single collection as possible. All forms of competition should be avoided like the plague. Perhaps one reason why so many of our church

¹ Ernst Posner, *American State Archives*, p. 356 (Chicago, 1964).

related archival-historical agencies have contributed so negligibly both to the field of scholarship and to the archives profession in general is that their status, their function, their form, and even their future have never been critically examined.

Purposes, Objectives, and Scope of the Agency

I believe that I would be safe in saying that we have no archival agencies in the narrow, limited sense among our religious groups in America. It is for this reason that we have consistently referred to them as archival-historical agencies—or departments of archives and history. But in spite of this, it would not be impossible to establish narrowly defined objectives and establish an archival agency in the stricter European sense.

Nevertheless, a discussion of minimum and maximum standards should cover the establishment and development of archival-historical collections within a denomination in the broadest terms. It is for this reason that the objectives and scope of a collection must be well defined, comprehensive, conclusive, but yet flexible, allowing for adaptability and ease of operation.

Therefore, it is recommended that the work of religious archival agencies include the collection and preservation of nonofficial and private papers, denominational publications, periodicals of interest, worship books, histories, and the like. They should also be concerned with preservation of historic buildings and houses, with historical tours, with the proper observance of anniversaries, etc. In other words, all matters pertaining to archives and history should devolve upon the agency. The implications for reference and research, enabling the agency to answer the simplest query to the most complex and difficult historical question, should be obvious. Naturally, the more complete the historical data, the more frequently the records will be consulted; and the greater the usefulness and service, the greater the budgetary provisions should be. There is no substitute for a comprehensive collection and an effective service program.

It is obvious that no other agency or institution, either within or without a church, can provide such an integrated collection. The main interests of other agencies all too frequently by demand and necessity direct them into many different areas. The concept, however, of a well integrated and complete reference and research collection is far more essential in church agencies than in municipal and governmental archives. Just as space should not be the criterion by which the scope of the collection is defined, so also the media of recording information—such as manuscripts, unprinted materials, photographs, etc.—should not form exclusive nor inclusive categories. There may be a pamphlet, a book, some periodicals, and related items that are as essential for archives and history as manuscripts and papers. Often one cannot be used effectively without the other. However, if such a collection can be closely

related to a theological library collection, which may concentrate on denominational history, certain items, if unique, must be arbitrarily placed in one or the other depository. Relationships with geographical subunits or auxiliary agencies should be taken into consideration.

Much depends upon the definition of the scope, purposes, and objectives of the agency. Since this affects the governing board, the buildings and facilities, the budgets and staffing, the services and many other aspects of the program, these matters need to be precisely enunciated.

Buildings and Facilities

Matters of space and facilities are extremely important and crucial even after the authority, administration, and financial support have been defined. As a general rule, it is better to sacrifice convenience and centrality of location for good, useful, adequately appointed buildings and facilities. Naturally the location and geographical proximity to the headquarters offices and potential users are important. The most important consideration, however, is that the facilities provided render maximum protection to invaluable and irretrievable resources, making possible efficient use of the collection with a minimum of research effort. Future expansion must also be kept in mind. The rate of receipts, the potential use of the collection, the necessary staff, and similar matters ought to be studied and reviewed from time to time so that these will not become the rule in deciding either the scope of the collection or the services rendered.

Even though a collection can initially be confined to small quarters, special emphasis must be placed upon accessibility, staff control, and adequate stack storage, particularly with controlled atmospheric conditions in climates where great fluctuations occur. Anything less than this will ultimately cause destruction, loss, and chaos. Further, the work space for the staff and for the visiting researcher should be attractive and pleasant. Ample space must be provided for functions such as photography, fumigation, exhibits, inventorying, appraisal, etc. Incidentally, exhibits, especially if they are rotated frequently, do much to solicit and continue public and constituency interest.

Though initially a collection may find a home in the hospitable quarters of a seminary library, the grave danger exists that the historical depository may become a stepchild, far overshadowed by other activities. Of course, this would still be superior to housing archives in a private home or in the basement or attic of a church-related building. May we remind ourselves in the words of Dr. Posner:

Archives administration and library administration are intrinsically different tasks in regard to materials handled and techniques, and while the state library may be charged with the archives function, its dual role as the state's archival agency and library should be recognized in its organization as well as in its title.²

This is not to deny potential "piggybacking" in buildings and facilities,

² *Op. cit.*, p. 352.

however, so long as adequate safeguards have been provided to preserve the integrity and the independent character of the archives. The ideal, naturally, is a separate building with separate facilities and services. Services can be purchased in such technical areas as fumigation, microfilm, Xerox, binding, laminating, and similar processes. The minimum office equipment that an archives requires is a typewriter, files, file boxes, and other normal office equipment. Let us remind ourselves that it is unwise to initiate new programs unless they can be kept up in the future.

Personnel

When a religious archives is first established, it may have to depend upon volunteer, part-time help only. The question then often is asked, what kind of a hyphenated ability is required? Should the individual be involved in some library service? A professor of American or church history? An individual who is interested and zealous but has perhaps little academic or professional training? A retired clergyman—who may no longer be serviceable in other areas? Any one of these combinations would serve as a minimum, but merely as a way of “getting by.”

As soon as better provisions can be made, professional workers should be brought in. Where a “civil service” program exists in the church, it is well to follow those procedures. What are some of the basic qualifications for such a position? We may say that there are two basic requirements: (1) a thorough knowledge of the history and theology of the church and its services and functions, manifested by a thirst for further knowledge and the ability to encourage it in others; and (2) a knowledge of archival skills and techniques and a willingness to master and implement them and transmit them to others.

While this may seem to be a large order at the outset, provision ought to be made for inservice training. Today, in contrast to only a few years ago, there are many opportunities available at universities, in seminars and symposia, in workshops and conferences, so that archival training programs can easily be provided to interested individuals. In this connection we should again urge that at least on a regional basis as much sharing as feasible among the denominations and cross-fertilization with municipal and State archival agencies be provided for through symposia, workshops, and conferences. This also means the necessary budgetary provisions to enable staff to participate.

Besides the archivist or agency executive, the other necessary technical, secretarial, clerical, and even student, maintenance and custodial personnel should be provided. Of course, salaries should be commensurate with the job responsibilities. A worker in the department of archives and history of the average communion ought to receive a salary commensurate to that of a theological professor, the head of a library, or a church administrator in a comparable field. Workers cannot be expected to remain in this highly specialized field of service merely because they are dedicated or find their work challenging.