

Buried Treasure: The Official Correspondence of the Connecticut Governors

By ROBERT SCHNARE and HERBERT JANICK

ON APRIL 26, 1969, approximately 80 historians, archivists, and librarians met in Hartford for the conference "Research Opportunities in Connecticut History." The remarks of the five members of the panel surveying scholarly interest in the history of the State contrasted sharply. Those dealing with the colonial and early national period described important published works, noted even more studies in progress, and pointed to tasks waiting to be undertaken. Specialists in late 19th- and 20th-century Connecticut history reported apathy and neglect.¹ Additional evidence confirms this dual picture of vigor and inactivity. Of the 152 research projects on State history reported to the Association for the Study of Connecticut History between 1967 and 1970 only 6 touch the 20th century; the focus of exactly half is on pre-Revolutionary Connecticut.² Why has the last 100 years of State affairs proved so unattractive to historians? Though no single factor is responsible, one serious obstacle is the lack of available manuscript sources. Few State figures preserved their correspondence, and libraries and historical societies have made only sporadic efforts to locate and catalog existing papers.

The official correspondence of Connecticut Governors, until recently a hidden asset of the State library, partly fills the void. The correspondence, which the library has collected since 1909, was ignored until 1969 when the library staff during a move to a new wing, discovered the buried treasure and began pulling it together from scattered corners. The library is now eager to make the treasure available to scholars. The primary purposes of this article are to

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¹ Association for the Study of Connecticut History, *Connecticut History Newsletter*, no. 4 (June 1969), summarizes the comments of the speakers at the meeting.

² *Ibid.*, no. 6 (June 1970), the annual cumulative list.

describe the valuable resource and to suggest ways in which it might be useful to historians. It is also hoped that tracing the history of the documents through half a century of obscurity will call attention to the continuing problems of protecting the sources vital for reconstructing the past of the American States.

Nineteen Connecticut Governors, beginning with Rollin Woodruff (1907-9) and including Abraham Ribicoff (1955-61), have deposited the records of their terms of office in the State library. The smallest part of the collection is 136 letterboxes for the period 1907-31. A topical and biographical index on 3- by 5-inch cards was discovered with the correspondence. Though the index can be helpful, its intriguing subject titles lack consistency and often direct a researcher to empty folders; another difficulty is that each single term of a Governor is indexed as a distinct unit, with no cumulative guide to the records of executives who served more than one term. The main part of the correspondence, 342 storage boxes containing records of Governors from 1931 to the present, is arranged alphabetically in manila folders by the names of the individuals or agencies communicating with the Governors. Unfortunately historians will find overlapping materials for Governors who were in office for a considerable length of time because each 2-year term is considered a self-contained entity. Except for the recently completed shelf list of the 80 boxes of Wilbur Cross's records (1931-39), there is no separate finding device for this segment.

The discretion permitted each Governor to determine which office records were of public importance accounts for the vastly different quantities of documents for each administration. The single letterbox of formal pronouncements deposited by Govs. Rollin Woodruff, George Lilley, and Frank Weeks, the first Governors to serve after the passage of the 1909 law allowing officials to give the State library noncurrent records for preservation, are dwarfed by the 111 storage boxes from the administration of Abraham Ribicoff. The increase in volume is not merely a reflection of the growing complexity of State government. Only five storage boxes of bland material officially record the executive stewardship of Chester Bowles (1949-51). This meager documentation is disproportionate to the activity of the administration of Bowles, who was elected in 1948 because of his attacks on Republican inertia in such fields as housing and education. In contrast an earlier and less dynamic Governor, Raymond Baldwin (1939-41 and 1943-46), dispatched 21 storage boxes of material after his first term in office.

Not only does the volume of records preserved by each Governor vary, but the manuscripts differ in quality. Although such prosaic

details as speaking invitations, job requests, and colorless communications to and from minor State employees make up the largest part of each Governor's files, the amount of informative data available depends on the personality of the Governor, his conception of the duties of the post, and the critical nature of the historical period in which he served. The correspondence of Governors Woodruff, Lilley, and Weeks consists of public statements prepared and signed by a secretary. Incoming letters are absent. Even though John Trumbull occupied the statehouse for 6 years (1925-31) spanning prosperity and depression, his 40 letterboxes contain little besides routine business records. It appears that his reply to a constituent about a pending bill on Sunday baseball, "I feel that it would be unwise to state in advance my position on any bill which the legislature is considering," set the tone for his administration.³ On the other hand the records of Marcus Holcomb (1915-21) and Wilbur Cross bulge with illuminating, substantive letters.

Because the amount and type of records left by each Governor fluctuate so greatly, they present a range of opportunities and challenges to the historian. In some cases they are rich enough to serve as the basis for an in-depth study of the State during crucial periods. The 44 boxes of letters of Marcus Holcomb present a vivid picture of Connecticut during a turbulent time of war and reconstruction. Wartime problems of administering the military census (Connecticut was one of the few States to complete the task) and operating the State Council of Defense are fully treated. A folder labeled "Anarchism" holds letters to Holcomb from citizens in a frenzy over bolshevism. A complaint from a woman in Middletown about a "red" lecturer at Wesleyan University and a series of unsolicited reports from a Waterbury private detective detailing the extent of radicalism in the Naugatuck Valley suggest the hysterical atmosphere in the State. Governor Holcomb's pungent replies, in which he castigates Industrial Workers of the World members as "firebrands" who should be deported, indicate that antiradicalism was not confined to the ordinary citizen.⁴

Significant issues of Federal-State interaction cannot be understood without reference to the Governors' Correspondence. The 80 boxes pertaining to the 3 terms of Wilbur Cross tell much about the Little New Deal in Connecticut. Communication with the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Housing Authority, the Na-

³ Trumbull to Mrs. J. Hobart Yale, March 2, 1925, in Trumbull correspondence, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Conn. In this article citations have been provided for direct quotations only; all references to correspondence are to that in the Governors' Correspondence in the State library.

⁴ Holcomb to M. A. Woodell, June 30, 1919, in Holcomb correspondence.

tional Recovery Administration, and other "alphabet" agencies are abundant in this collection. A simmering feud between Hugh Johnson and Cross over the performance of Connecticut industry in establishing NRA codes hints that harmony between Hartford and Washington was not total. The complete files of the Connecticut Unemployment Commission, which operated during the transition years 1931–33, supplement the Cross correspondence.

Striving to direct historians' attention to worthwhile research projects touching upon the Presidential administration of Harry S. Truman, Richard Kirkendall suggested: "Worthy topics are basic economic problems—stabilization, mobilization, demobilization and reconversion."⁵ The operation of these forces in the 1940's can profitably be examined from a State vantage point. In Connecticut the 7 boxes of documents from the term of Robert Hurley (1941–43) and the 45 boxes from the second administration of Raymond Baldwin (1943–46) are a logical place to begin. An extensive file of letters between the Governor and officials of the Office of Price Administration, broken down into folders on such specific commodities as meat and milk, is available. A series of personal memoranda between Chester Bowles, head of the OPA and later the Connecticut chief executive, and Baldwin is illuminating. Bowles makes such frank evaluations as: "I am of the opinion that we have in Connecticut a substantial black market both in poultry meat and beef."⁶ Intricate economic issues with political and social implications are treated in a four-cornered correspondence involving Baldwin; Wilson Wyatt, Director of the National Housing Agency; the administrator of the Connecticut State Housing Authority; and the Boston regional office of the National Housing Authority. Reports, memoranda, instructions, and complaints dealing with the Office of War Mobilization, the War Food Administration, and the Manpower Administration await historians' evaluation.

Even the Governors who seemed intent on purging their official record of anything more vital than a speech to the Dairymen's Association have not foiled the historian. Insight into trends and evidence to test broad generalizations is present in the most ordinary materials. Though the content of the 25 boxes of the administration of Simeon Baldwin (1911–15) is as cold and distant as the old judge, it is possible to gauge the alleged antilabor bias of the first Democratic Governor of the State in the 20th century by examining the folder on the use of the State police in the 1912 Russell Arms

⁵ Kirkendall, *The Truman Administration as a Research Field*, p. 3 (Columbia, Mo., 1967).

⁶ Bowles to Baldwin, May 15, 1945, in Baldwin correspondence.

strike in Middletown. Simeon Baldwin's records also shed light on the cleavage between the Bryan and Cleveland factions of the Democratic Party in the State. Social currents in Connecticut are suggested by parts of the generally sterile correspondence of the Republican trio that presided over the prosperity of the 1920's. The influence of the Manufacturers Association on State government is highly visible in the files of Govs. Everett Lake, Charles Templeton, and John Trumbull. When the American Civil Liberties Union demanded the repeal of the State sedition law passed at the height of the Red Scare in 1919, Lake insisted that this law was effective in "preserving the state and keeping property within its confines from acts of violence and disorder from irresponsible agitators."⁷ Templeton's reference to "more desirable immigrants and less desirable immigrants" and his capsule critique of the immigration problem as "a matter of digestion" indicate social attitudes of the State establishment during a decade of rapid change.⁸

Letters from citizens, which are plentiful in the files of almost every Governor, make it possible to gauge public opinion in the State. The numerous laments about the high cost of living received by Governor Holcomb in 1919 and 1920 highlight the importance of this long-ignored issue. A survey of letters sent to Gov. Raymond Baldwin by irate citizens during the spring of 1940 testify to the strength of anti-Nazi, pro-Allied sentiment in Connecticut. Historians have concluded that the removal of wartime price controls in 1946 caused a rise in prices, followed by an angry public reaction, which in turn prompted a temporary reestablishment of some regulations. They should be eager to examine the 70 letters sent to Baldwin on the subject, showing an average increase in rents of 57 percent during the weeks after the lifting of the Federal rent ceiling. One complaint reported a rent hike of 340 percent. In July 1939, before Baldwin signed a law permitting each community in the State to hold a referendum on the legalization of bingo, he was deluged by letters on both sides of the issue from fraternal, civic, veterans, and especially church groups. An analysis of the origins and contents of the letters, as well as the reports sent to Governor Templeton about violations of prohibition, may provide a productive approach for studying social history.

The Governors' Correspondence has many other research uses. It provides windows through which national politics can be glimpsed, touching upon, for example, Simeon Baldwin's presidential boomlet at the Democratic Convention of 1912, Franklin Roosevelt's

⁷ Lake to Albert DeSilva, February 19, 1921, in Lake correspondence.

⁸ Templeton to Raymond F. Gates, November 22, 1923, in Templeton correspondence.

campaign trip to Connecticut in 1936, and William Allen White's effort to promote pro-British sentiment in 1940. Themes such as labor unrest and racial discrimination can be traced by using the Governors' records. The letters that surround the 1942 efforts of Harold Peters, a self-appointed Negro spokesman from New Haven, to convince Gov. Raymond Baldwin to name him "Referee of Negro Affairs" in Connecticut are typical of the grist that is available for the historian's mill. Labor ferment in the 1930's can be viewed through the ample folders in the Cross correspondence dealing with the 1936 Remington-Rand strike and the 1937 sit-in strike at the Electric Boat Works in Groton.

Considering the value of the correspondence to historians it is shocking that chance rather than careful planning has determined its fate. The fact that it was deposited in the State library rather than destroyed was an unplanned byproduct of a 1909 act by which the State legislature intended to protect early town, church, and court records. When the General Assembly decreed "any official of the state or of any county or town, or any other official, may turn over to the State Librarian with his consent, for permanent preservation, any official book, records, documents, original papers or files not in current use in his office," they ignored the fundamental question of ownership of the manuscripts.⁹ As the 1909 law remains practically unchanged today, the Governor is under no obligation to turn over to the State any of the records of his office. Equally surprising is the passive role that the legislature assigned to the State library. It is clear from the wording of the 1909 law that the library was to serve merely as a storage depot for the papers of State officials and that the library staff was to have no voice in deciding which records should be saved. In practice neither the State Librarian nor the Examiner of Public Records has made suggestions about guidelines for the disposition of State officials' correspondence. No consultation between the executive and the library has taken place. Except for the State Librarian's occasional acknowledgment of receipt of a batch of correspondence, the subject is ignored in letters passing between the library and the Governor's office. In fact a former Examiner of Public Records stated that he deliberately avoided checking the records of high State officials. "They would police themselves," he confided.¹⁰ The current picture shows little improvement. Except for the small group of professional librarians in the State library directed by recently appointed Archivist Robert

⁹ State of Connecticut, *Abstract of Laws Relating to Public Records*, ch. 239, p. 8-9 (Hartford, 1909).

¹⁰ Interview with Harold Burt.

Claus, few State officials are disturbed at the lack of an orderly system for collecting and storing Governors' records. Only in the last few weeks of Gov. John Dempsey's term was the library called in to rapidly inventory the 525 boxes of material relating to his 8 years in office. Because of the limitations of staff and time, Public Records Administrator Rockwell Potter has continued to concentrate on the records of the State's 169 towns. The establishment in 1956 of the State Record Center at Rocky Hill, which now houses the recent records of 41 State agencies and institutions, was prompted by a desire to store records economically, not by a desire to preserve valuable historical material.

Discovery of buried treasure is an exciting event, but it is only a first step. Difficult processing and publicizing remain to be done. The State library has assumed responsibility for preparing accurate finding aids to the entire collection. Shelf lists for the Cross and Baldwin records have already been completed. A search for private papers of the Governors and an oral history project to interview living ex-Governors would help fill the gaps in the official material. Expansion of this program to other State officeholders and to important figures without an official portfolio, such as John Bailey and Meade Alcorn, is desirable. Greater cooperation between the library and the current executive staff would guarantee the preservation of the records most useful to scholars.

When archivists and elected State officials cooperate to protect State governmental records, they are only performing a preliminary, although an indispensable, task. Unless historians mine this ore, all will be wasted. It is time for more members of the historical profession to heed the suggestion of James T. Patterson and "turn from the excitement of Pennsylvania Avenue to the more prosaic events of Albany, Atlanta, and Sante Fe."¹¹ They will find that the absence of drama in State affairs, if such a condition exists, is offset by the importance of governmental activities that touch every facet of the lives of obscure citizens—the basic building blocks of history.

¹¹ Patterson, *The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition*, p. vii (Princeton, N.J., 1969).