

Leland to Connor: An Early Survey of American State Archives

ROBERT R. SIMPSON

THE STATE LITERARY AND HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION of North Carolina proposed in 1903 that there be established an historical commission that would collect, edit, and publish the state's historical source materials. The legislature that year responded by passing an act creating just such an agency, one, however, with a severely restricted budget. The commission's annual expenses were limited to \$500, and its five appointed members were given no salary, mileage, or per diem for their meetings.¹ As a result, the commission accomplished little during its first few years.

The commission's secretary, who was the principal of Wilmington High School, Robert D. W. Connor, clearly saw the need for a stronger organization with a paid secretary and a trained staff. Not knowing just what form the reorganized agency should take nor how to proceed in obtaining legislative control, Connor sought advice from a number of members of the emerging archival profession, among them Waldo Gifford Leland.

Leland, not yet thirty years old, had studied archival methods in Europe and was working at the Carnegie Institution's Bureau of Historical Research, which was under the direction of J. Franklin Jameson. The two were to work as a team to develop a professional attitude toward American archives. As one writer put it, Leland was the theorist, Jameson the publicist.² They deserve

The author is associate professor of history and social science at Coker College, Hartsville, South Carolina. He has published articles on the origins of the Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi state archives.

¹ *Public Laws and Resolutions of the State of North Carolina, 1903*, Chap. 767.

² H. G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 7.

much credit for establishing the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association, which in turn led the movement to establish state archival commissions and laid the foundations for a new archival profession.³ Leland compiled several archival guides, one the highly useful *Guide to the Archives of the United States in Washington* (written in collaboration with Clyde H. Van Tyne). In 1909 Leland organized the Conference of Archivists, a semi-autonomous section of the American Historical Association. Its founding marks the beginning of a new profession.⁴ So widespread was Waldo Leland's influence that he is sometimes referred to as the "Dean of American Archivists."⁵ Following is his assessment of state archival organizations and advice which was to prove so helpful to Connor and to the North Carolina program.⁶

CARNEGIE INSTITUTION OF WASHINGTON

Department of Historical Research
J. Franklin Jameson
Director

Washington, D.C.

February 7, 1906.

Dear Mr. Connor:

I think I can reply now at some length to your queries as to what states have done the most for their public records.

First of all I want to distinguish between two kinds of historical activity: (1) the publication of records; (2) the collection, arrangement and preservation of archives and historical documents. There has been great and widespread activity of the first sort, and hardly any state has surpassed North Carolina so far as the quantity of material published is concerned. In some cases the state has done the publishing itself, as in the case of North Carolina, Georgia (just starting), New York, Massachusetts, etc. In others a historical society has been subsidized. New Jersey and, I believe, New Hampshire are good examples of this. In almost all that has been done, however, it is unfortunately evident that the second sort of activity should have preceded the first. The archives and records should have been thoroughly collected and arranged before publication was commenced. It is due regard for the necessity of doing this that is causing the War Department to delay publishing the Revolutionary records. It is the fact that the necessity of doing this has been overlooked that is likely to impair the value of the Georgia publications,

³ David D. Van Tassel, "John Franklin Jameson," in *Keepers of the Past*, ed. Clifford L. Lord (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), p. 82.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁵ Lester J. Cappon, "In Memoriam, Waldo Gifford Leland, 1879-1966," *American Archivist* 30 (January 1967): 127.

⁶ The original can be found in the Correspondence of the Director, State Department of Archives and History, Raleigh.

and that has made it necessary for supplemental volumes and parts of volumes of the North Carolina records to be produced. It is much to be hoped that in the future, states which desire to publish will be able to curb their ambition until the more vital matter of completing and arranging their original records has been attended to.

In looking over the field I have been greatly impressed with the fact that only a very small number of states have made any special provision for the care of their records. In most cases the records accumulate in the offices to which they pertain, are often regarded as so much lumber, and are relegated to out-of-the-way, often unsuitable, places where they are inaccessible and frequently in actual danger.

In the comparatively few states where special provision is made for the care of the archives three methods of doing so may be distinguished.

1. The more important records are placed in the office of the Secretary of State.

2. A division of the State Library is charged with the care of the archives.

3. A special department is established, which has charge of all the public records of the state.

(In discussing these three methods I am going to refer to articles in the Annual Reports of the American Historical Association, for these volumes are accessible to you in the State Library. Captain Sherrill⁷ has placed them on the top row of one of the cases, about the middle of the east side, and on the north side of the case. They are bound in blue cloth and I think you can find them easily enough. You see the American Historical Association has a Public Archives Commission, which has for about five years been publishing reports on the archives of the various states. These contain a good deal of information in which I think you will be much interested, and which you will find very helpful.)

(1) To take up the first method. Massachusetts has employed it most successfully. A division of archives has been established in the office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth, and here are carefully preserved, in steel cases, the records of the Secretary's office, all the Legislative records and what are known as the "Massachusetts Archives." These are the colonial and provincial records of all kinds; they are bound in volumes and indexed. The other state offices retain their records and file them in good order. You will find an account of the Massachusetts records, with a short history of the archive division, in American Historical Association Report for 1900, volume two, page 47. The state, however, has interested itself in the local records, also, and for about a dozen years has had a Commissioner of Public Records whose duty it is to go about the state and see that town and county records are carefully preserved. You will find an entertaining account of the work of this office in American Historical Association Report for 1901, volume I., page 95.

⁷ Miles O. Sherrill was the state librarian from 1899 until 1917.

I have written to the commissioner, Robert T. Swan,⁸ in your behalf, and have asked him to send you what material may be of use to you. I have told him that you will doubtless correspond with him. He should be addressed as Commissioner of Public Records, State House, Boston. Local records in Massachusetts have been much neglected, and Mr. Swan has done splendid work.

Rhode Island is situated somewhat as is Massachusetts. An account of the Rhode Island archives can be found in *American Historical Association Report for 1903*, I, p. 543. Rhode Island has a Public Records Commissioner, Mr. R. Hammet Tilley,⁹ who is firmly of the opinion that all the public records should be centralized.

New Hampshire has done little more than to provide a vault in the Secretary of State's office, where the records are safe, at least.

It should be noted, however, that in all these states there are active societies, independent of the state, that have done much to collect historical material. The manuscripts of the Massachusetts Historical Society are among the most valuable in the country; those of the New Hampshire Historical Society are also important; the Rhode Island Historical Society has fewer. Thus the collection of material is not left for the state alone, as is the case in North Carolina.

South Carolina will probably develop this first method most fully. A. S. Salley, Jr.¹⁰ has been appointed permanent secretary of the Historical Commission; this is really the position of archivist, and nominally is under the direction of the Secretary of State. Unlike the Massachusetts archivist, however, he will have charge of the records of all the state offices. This, it seems to me, is as it should be. Salley is the best man in South Carolina for the job, but the salary is so low that it is an act of self-sacrifice and devotion on his part to hold the office. I have written to him about you, and I am sure he will be glad to help.

2. To take up the states that put their records in the State Library.

Pennsylvania has made the best start in this respect. About two years ago a Department of Public Records was established within the State Library. In this department are placed the legislative papers, those of the Secretary of State, and the records of the other state offices up to 1750. This date is ridiculously early and should be moved down to about 1875. Inasmuch as a commission has been established to make recommendations for the further preservation of the records, it is to be hoped that in time the Department of Public Records will contain *all*

⁸ Swan held this position from its inception in 1889 until his death in 1907. His tenure saw the enactment of legislation which greatly improved the conditions of recordkeeping in his state. See Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 15.

⁹ In 1910 the functions of this official were vested in the state librarian. See *ibid.*, p. 243.

¹⁰ Salley was the first secretary of the South Carolina Historical Commission, serving from 1905 until 1949. See J. H. Easterby, "The Archives of South Carolina," *American Archivist* 15 (July 1952): 241-47.

the archives. You will find considerable information about the situation in Pennsylvania in American Historical Association Report for 1900, II, p. 280; 1903, I, p. 411; and in the Report of the State Librarian for 1903, pp. 14, 18 and 91. This last reference is to the act establishing the department. Mr. Luther R. Kelker,¹¹ Custodian of the Public Records, State Library, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, is the man to be communicated with, and I have written to him in your behalf.

In Connecticut a sort of half-and-half system prevails. In the State Library are preserved the documents supposed to be of most historical value, selected from the Secretary of State's office. The remaining records are in their respective offices. I cannot see that this system has anything to recommend it. There is, however, a Commissioner of Public Records, and something more may be done in the future. You will find a description of the Connecticut archives in American Historical Association Report for 1900, II, p. 26.

New York does somewhat similarly. The colonial records are in the State Library, which has also much other manuscript material, while various offices keep their own archives. In American Historical Association Report for 1900, II, pp. 66-69, you will find a general account of the situation, while on page 235 is a digest of the New York laws relating to the public records. New York has a state historian,¹² whose work has not met with much favor among historical students, and a bill has been prepared for the establishment of the office of Commissioner of Records. You will find the bill in American Historical Association Report for 1902, I, pp. 231-236.

In Virginia the Legislative records and, I believe, those of the office of the Secretary, have been placed in the State Library. The State Library has been reorganized and has an up-to-date librarian (John P. Kennedy) who is trying to have a Manuscripts Division established in the library, which will probably aim to secure *all* the public records, and to get what private stuff it can, as well.

California is planning to bring the public records together in a division of the State Library.

So you see that in states where the state library is put to service ordinarily only the more important records, historically, are entrusted to it. There is a tendency, however, to make a separate department of the library custodian of *all* the records.

Note that of the states I have just referred to: Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania, have strong historical societies, independent of the state, which have large collections and thus supplement the activities of

¹¹ Kelker was Pennsylvania's initial Public Records Custodian, serving from 1903 until his death in 1915. See Henry Howard Eddy, "The Archival Program of Pennsylvania," *ibid.* 12 (July 1949): 261.

¹² This unnamed New York state historian was Hugh Hastings, a purely political appointee who held the position from its 1895 inception until 1907. See Edward F. Rowse, "The Archives of New York," *ibid.* 4 (October 1941): 271.

the state in the gathering of material. In California there is a reorganized historical society, but I think it has no collections.

At this point I might possibly mention the cases of Wisconsin and Maryland, which differ somewhat from those described, and perhaps should be put in distinct classes. In Wisconsin there is a very strong historical society, which is liberally supported by the state and is made a trustee of the state, to care for its historical interests. The society is housed in a magnificent building erected by the state, known as the Wisconsin Historical Library. Nevertheless the public records of Wisconsin are still kept in the various offices, notwithstanding that the new library is clearly the most suitable place for them. It is not improbable, however, I think, that the archives will be transferred to the library in course of time. This library is to all intents and purposes a state library, although I believe there is another institution of that name, which contains only legal works. Dr. Reuben G. Thwaites¹³ (Superintendent Historical Library, Madison) is one of the best men in the country for you to correspond with, being much interested in such matters; and I have written to him.

In Maryland the colonial and Revolutionary records were until some years ago kept in the Land Office (!). They have been deposited, subject to recall, with the Maryland Historical Society, at Baltimore, and thus are some miles away from the capitol at Annapolis. A commission has been created to make recommendations respecting the public records, so it is likely that changes will be in order in the future. Maryland is in a class by itself, so far as the disposition of its records is concerned, but I have put it under the second heading, for the Historical Society performs in a way the function of a state library.

3. To pass now to the third method, a separate state office or department.

In Mississippi and Alabama are Departments of Archives and History, whose duty it is to collect, arrange and preserve the records of all the public offices, to secure all the historical material of all kinds that they can, and in general to have charge of the historical interests of their respective states. I do not need to describe these departments in detail, because so much has been printed about them. The Mississippi Department is described in American Historical Association Report for 1904, p. 487. In the same volume, p. 235, is an excellent account by T. M. Owen,¹⁴ the director of the Alabama department, on the possi-

¹³ Thwaites succeeded Lyman C. Draper in 1887 as the Historical Society of Wisconsin's corresponding secretary and upon the latter's death in 1891 became superintendent. Thwaites continued Draper's endeavors and before his own death in 1913 had established the society's reputation as one of the nation's most progressive. See Clifford L. Lord, "Reuben Gold Thwaites," in Lord, *Keepers of the Past*, pp. 53-66.

¹⁴ The Alabama Department of Archives and History, established in 1901, was the nation's first and provided the chief model for Connor's use. For more information on its founder and first director see James F. Doster, "Thomas McAdory Owen, Sr.," *ibid.*, pp. 97-108; Mitchell B. Garrett, "The Preservation of Alabama History," *North Caro-*

bilities of such a department. In both states these departments were preceded by a historical commission which prepared a pretty elaborate report on the sources of the states' history, and recommended the establishment of the department. I have written to the directors of these departments (Thomas W. [sic] Owen, Director, Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama; and Dunbar Rowland¹⁵—same title—Jackson, Mississippi) and have asked them to send you material relating to their departments. They will be glad to correspond with you.

This last method has attracted much attention and will probably be adopted in many states. It just missed being adopted in Tennessee last year. It is admirably suited to states where the state library is obviously not the place for the archives (in most states it is not) and where there is no strong, collecting society to supplement the activities of the state. Such a department not only cares for *all* the records of the state offices, it may receive county records, not in current use; it should attract many valuable documents and collections from private hands, either as gifts or as loans. It tries to secure complete files of newspapers; it preserves the printed documents of the state; it maintains a museum; in short it cares for all the historical interests of the state.

I make no secret of my strong conviction that such a method is best suited to North Carolina. A great start has been made already, for much of the preliminary work has been done. Reports on the state and county records have already been printed (see A. H. A. Report, 1900, II, p. 251; 1904, p. 603). The archives in the capitol are full of interest and would form the main body of the collections of the new department. In time the counties would probably be persuaded to deposit their records there. What is now in the Hall of History could doubtless be transferred, as could the thousands of papers at Chapel Hill. I have no doubt that, safety and proper care assured, many private collections would come your way. Colonel C. E. Johnson has indicated his intention of disposing of his magnificent collection of Iredell papers. And so it would go on, until the department would have a mass of material that would attract students from many parts of the country.

I think that perhaps I have indicated sufficiently for your purposes what is done in other states. I have mentioned most of the states whose example is worthy of note, and have referred to the men who can be of most service to you. To all of them I have written, and all will be glad to hear from you and to aid in any way that they can. One more name I should mention,—that of Professor Herbert V. Ames, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. He is chairman of the Public

lina Historical Review 5 (January 1928): 3-19; and Robert R. Simpson, "The Origin of the Alabama Department of Archives and History," *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 34 (Summer 1972): 155-70.

¹⁵ Rowland served as director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History from 1902 until 1937, becoming known as a pioneer in the field of archival classification. See William D. McCain, "History and Program of the Mississippi State Department of Archives and History," *American Archivist* 13 (January 1950): 27-34.

Archives Commission of the American Historical Association, and is familiar with conditions in many states. I have written to him also.

For your convenience I append (1) a list of the volumes and articles that will be of service to you, and (2) the names and addresses of those to whom I have written.¹⁶

I should add that I have just sent to the [Raleigh] *News and Observer* an account of the North Carolina records, recently found here, and took occasion to point out in an accompanying letter the desirability of making adequate provision for the public records in North Carolina. I tried to put the matter in such a way as to help the cause, and was careful to say nothing that might give offence. I intimated to Mr. Daniels¹⁷ that I should like to have the thing appear next Sunday.

I must apologize for having delayed this answer. I started to reply last Friday, but it has taken me longer to complete the task (which has been one of great pleasure and profit to myself) than I thought it would.

I hope to be in Raleigh in a couple of weeks, perhaps sooner, for a day or so, and am looking forward with much pleasure to seeing you again and to having a good talk with you about all these matters.

Believe me,

Very sincerely yours,
Waldo G. Leland

Feb. 8

P.S. I have just heard from Mr. Kelker and Professor Ames, who express themselves as anxious to be of what service they can. Mr. Kelker is willing to go down to Raleigh if that will do any good. The exigencies of the office work have delayed the sending of this letter, for which I grieve.

W.G.L.

Leland's advice to Connor was gratefully received, as was the advice and information furnished him by numerous archivists with whom Leland put him in touch. Those who replied whose letters are still preserved include Dunbar Rowland, Alexander Salley, Luther Kelker, and Thomas Owen.¹⁸

Dunbar Rowland, director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, sent Connor copies of the act which created his department, a lengthy letter explaining in some detail his duties, and an additional letter offering practical suggestions resulting from his experience with legislative bodies. In the second letter he sug-

¹⁶ The appendixes are not to be found with the original letter.

¹⁷ Josephus Daniels, editor of the *News and Observer*.

¹⁸ The Rowland and Salley letters can be found in the R. D. W. Connor Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina. The Kelker letter can be found in Correspondence of the Director, State Department of Archives and History, Raleigh. The Owen correspondence is contained in both collections.

gested that Connor secure the governor's endorsement as well as that of patriotic and historical societies, and he advised strong appeals to such sentiments as state pride and patriotism.

In contradiction to Leland's advice, Alexander S. Salley, Secretary of the South Carolina Historical Commission, tried to convince Connor that he should follow South Carolina's lead in publishing the North Carolina records already collected before adding to this collection or expanding into new fields of historical endeavor. Connor did not follow Salley's advice in this regard.

Luther Kelker, Custodian of the Public Records, Pennsylvania State Library, suggested that Connor not follow the example of his state. He felt that a division or department of public records should be an independent agency subject to no one except the governor and his appointed commission. Kelker's reasons were based on his experience with time-consuming red tape that seemed to hamper his work.

Connor was already in correspondence with Alabama Department of Archives and History Director Thomas M. Owen before the receipt of Leland's letter. Owen had sent Connor several copies of the act creating the Alabama department and had recommended that he adopt the Alabama plan, terming it the best way devised for a state to meet its duty to its archives and history. Leland had expressed his conviction that Owen's plan was best suited for North Carolina, and Connor must have concurred, because his newly reorganized commission was similar in many particulars to the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

Connor made himself familiar with the structure, methods, and problems of similar institutions and, on the basis of this knowledge and his own experience, drafted a measure almost completely reorganizing the North Carolina Historical Commission. By March 1907 the legislature accepted Connor's plan, and Connor was reelected secretary of a more powerful and permanent governmental agency.

The new commission immediately began its work. The first task was to rescue the public archives which were neglected and scattered throughout Raleigh, the state's capital. The collection, classification, and filing of these records was a job that required years to complete. A vigorous appeal by Connor for privately owned, historically valuable documents resulted in the accumulation of thousands of letters and papers. The secretary also began the commission's role in sponsoring historical exhibits, assisting local historical societies, aiding historical research, and contributing in numerous other ways to advancing the cause of history in North Carolina.

Before long, practically all the predictions that Leland made in his letter had come true. The Hall of History had been transferred to the Historical Commission, the counties had begun to deposit their records there, and students had begun using the collected "mass of material." Only the transfer of the "thousands of papers at Chapel Hill" (the basis for the university library's historical collections) did not come to pass.

Robert D. W. Connor resigned his post as commission secretary in 1921 to become Kenan Professor of History and Government at the University of North Carolina, and in 1934 he was appointed by President Roosevelt as first Archivist of the United States. Connor's three successors who headed the state's archival program—Albert Ray Newsome, Christopher Crittenden, and H. G. Jones—each built upon the firm archival foundation laid by Connor with the advice of Leland.