# Dumped from a Wharf into Casco Bay: The Historical Records Survey Revisited

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A FEW YEARS AGO when the International Council on Archives met in Washington, one of the French representatives, trained in the École des Chartes, asked Lyman Butterfield why was it that the United States, in the midst of a great depression, was able to carry out an unprecedented survey of its historical records, publish many excellent volumes of guides, calendars, and inventories, and then, in its more affluent years, abandoned the great task and left it unfinished? It is a good thing he picked Butterfield to ask this question of. Many—most—persons wouldn't have known what he was referring to. Also, it was fortunate that he didn't ask what had happened to the products of that unprecedented survey. To have had to answer would have been embarrassing to Butterfield, and the answer would have shocked the visitor from France.

I don't know what response Butterfield gave, but it could have been this: the primary purpose of that unprecedented survey —the WPA Historical Records Survey—was not to survey records but to give work to the unemployed. With the coming of World War II the need for make-work ceased, and the Historical Records Survey ended. The participants, particularly those who had been on relief and who for survival had been dependent on the survey's monthly wage, sometimes as little as $50 or $60, were willing to put behind them that part of their experience. For three decades there was no serious effort to

The author is deputy director of the records appraisal staff at the National Archives. This paper is essentially, but not exactly, the one read September 28, 1973, at the St. Louis meeting of the Society of American Archivists. After it was read the chairman of the session, Luther Evans, spoke, drawing on his memory of the events. Some of what he revealed, which could not have been deduced from any other source, has been incorporated here.

revive the Historical Records Survey. Only recently have there been the stirrings of another such effort, the National Historical Records Program, which is being proposed for somewhat the same reason, the glut of historians and others who can't find jobs for which they have been trained. Meanwhile, for three decades the products of the Historical Records Survey—unpublished and published—have remained unused, for the most part forgotten, and sometimes discarded.

The movements during the nineteenth century and the first thirty years of the twentieth to survey the records of this nation have been described more than once. So here we will start with a happening in the first year of the depression. It was an event that was shortly to prove significant.

In 1930 the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council established a Joint Committee on Materials For Research, with Robert C. Binkley as chairman and T. R. Schellenberg as secretary. This action laid the groundwork for a national survey of local records.

In the next several years there were, under the Civil Works Administration and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), a few surveys of state and local records. Then, in January 1934, in answer to a call of the joint committee, a conference met in Washington to consider the possibility of a nationwide survey of archives. In February the joint committee directed Schellenberg to draft a proposal for a survey, and it formed a subcommittee (the Commission on National Archives Survey) to promote such a program.

The commission proposed a survey of state, county, and local archives to be carried out by 2,775 workers during an eight-week period, and alternate projects of two and twelve months duration. However, a provision of the Emergency Relief Act of February 1934 prohibiting federal projects squelched these proposals. But there was a loophole. Though the FERA could not initiate projects it could encourage state and local governments to start them on their own. By October 1934 the FERA was circulating among the state ERA offices a set of working procedures for surveys of historical records. Some states apparently got survey projects started under the FERA's grant-in-aid program.

We turn now to the Princeton campus, spring 1935. Princeton, more conservative then than now, let go what seemed to the university to be a radical young Texan, an assistant professor of political science. Outraged at the university's action, one of the young Texan's students invited him to spend a weekend with his

family. As a result the student's father, Herbert Bayard Swope, asked Raymond Moley about the possibility of a job in Washington for the dismissed professor. Moley called Harry Hopkins. This led to the young political scientist's traveling to Washington and talking with Hopkins. Few actions in the history of what was to become the Historical Records Survey were to be as significant, for it brought onto the scene the dominant personality of the survey, the one who, more than any other, was to be responsible for making the survey the success it was. And it was successful, even though it is now mostly forgotten and overshadowed by projects such as the Federal Writers' Project with which it is constantly confused but which can scarcely hold a candle to it in terms of achievement. The young political scientist was, of course, Luther Evans.

We return to Washington, June 1935. Harry Hopkins had noticed in the basement of the Capitol a jumble of old records. Doing something about them would be, he thought, a good project. Evans diplomatically explained that the recently established National Archives could best take care of these records. However, said Evans, since they were on the subject of records a useful project would be a survey of federal records outside of Washington—the records that were in the customs houses, federal courts, and federal offices throughout the country. Hopkins, interested, suggested that Evans explore the idea and return.

Evans talked with officials at the National Archives and in July returned with the proposal that was to become the Survey of Federal Archives. In a second interview Hopkins raised the question of doing something similar for state and local records. Evans asked about federal jurisdiction and, assured that there was no problem, began drafting plans. Schellenberg at the National Archives made available the plans of the 1934 commission. Evans submitted to Hopkins a statement of purpose, an administrative plan, an estimate of the cost of such a program, and a proposal for an advisory committee to assist in working out detailed plans.

In July 1935 the Archivist of the United States, R. D. W. Connor, meeting with the chief of the National Park Service Historical Division and with Works Progress Administration officials, entered into a tentative arrangement under which the National Archives would cosponsor a survey of federal records in U.S. depositories outside the District of Columbia. This became the Survey of Federal Archives. The conferees also agreed on a survey of state and local records, to be sponsored by

the National Park Service. Evans spent August and September drafting plans for this survey. Assistant Historian of the Park Service Herman Kahn provided office space, a typewriter, and advice.

By October, Evans, now WPA "Supervisor of Historical Projects," had completed his plans. In November $1,195,000 became available. This appropriation was broken down into separate allotments by state, which meant that there was to be a series of state projects, coordinated by Washington but initiated and controlled by the states. The allotments were made and rescinded on the same day. The money was then given in a single allotment, and the Historical Records Survey became a WPA-sponsored federal project under the Federal Writers' Project. The National Park Service dropped out as cosponsor. This assignment to the Writers' Project seems to have been for administrative convenience. As might be expected, it led to trouble; and in October 1936 the HRS became a separate project within the Women's and Professional Division of the WPA. Meanwhile, state HRS projects were organized, and by May 1936 there was one for each state.

Although its public image was considerably better than those of the other arts projects, the HRS eventually became a victim of increasing congressional hostility toward the arts projects, hostility that culminated in a provision that such federal projects end by August 31, 1939. Thereafter the states set up their own projects and the federal government shared the expenses. This wasn't as drastic a change for the HRS as for the other arts projects, most states having agencies or bodies with archival jurisdiction. In November 1939 Librarian of Congress Archibald MacLeish persuaded Evans to become director of the library's Legislative Services Division. Though officially off the HRS payroll as of December 1, 1939, Evans unofficially directed the headquarters office until March 1940 when his long-time assistant, Sargent Child, became HRS national director.

The 1939 Appropriation Act wiped out the national headquarters office of the HRS. But the Library of Congress sponsored a District of Columbia project (the WPA treated the district as a state) and hired most or all of the HRS headquarters office personnel and some of the Writers' Project headquarters staff. The HRS part of the LC project provided technical guidance and assistance to the state HRS projects. The LC project lasted until August 1940. Thereafter the WPA carried a few HRS technical personnel on its administrative payroll. By June 1941 twelve were left; by year's end, four. By February

1942 any remaining HRS activities had to be war-related. And by February 1943, the HRS, federal and state, was dead.

## Program of the Historical Records Survey

In December 1935 Luther Evans's advisory committee, which included Binkley, Waldo Leland, A. R. Newsome, Solon Buck, and Schellenberg, held an organizational policy meeting. A majority favored a program limited in concept, time, and money; a minority favored projects of varying kinds but limited geographically. (That is, instead of inventorying the *records* of all counties in a state, inventorying intensively in a single county *all documents* of significance. Other counties would, presumably, follow the lead and procedures of this pilot project.) The majority view prevailed until 1938 when it was reversed, the number of relief workers was trebled, and the HRS began (and left uncompleted) a variety of projects, "few of which" (to quote a scholar familiar with the survey) "achieved the technical excellence of the original project," the survey of county records.

*Public records.* Although the HRS surveyed records of all jurisdictions within the states, the category for which it is most remembered—and its major achievement—was the survey of county records (in New England, of town records). By the time it ended, the project had, according to the estimate of its last director, completed the fieldwork for the inventories of 90 percent of the 3,066 counties in the United States. Of these completed inventories perhaps 20 percent were published. The rest, on stencils (which were never to see a mimeograph machine), in typescript, or hand-written, were caught by the war and stored in the states.

*Manuscripts.* Surveys of manuscripts in public repositories such as historical societies and libraries, and, occasionally, in private possession, resulted in statewide guides summarizing what was in each repository; in guides to the holdings of particular repositories; and in calendars and inventories of individual collections.

*Church records.* Though sometimes taking other forms, descriptions of church records were generally inventories of records of a single denomination within a state.

*Inventory of early American imprints.* This bibliographical listing of all copies of all imprints through 1876 or later was the project furthest removed from the original program of the HRS and the least significant.

*Other.* Some states compiled union lists of their newspapers,

indexed certain newspapers, inventoried portraits, transcribed or microfilmed old records, and did other similar projects. Individual projects included a bibliography of American literature, an index of U.S. musicians, an atlas of congressional rollcalls, a continuation of Richardson's *Messages and Papers of the Presidents,* and an index of presidential executive orders. Many of these followed the 1938 policy reversal.

*Survey of Federal Archives.* Finally, there was the project mentioned and about which a little more should be said. The Survey of Federal Archives was not originally part of the Historical Records Survey. Backed by a provision of the Records Act that empowered the Archivist "To inspect personally or by deputy the records of any agency of the United States Government whatsoever and wheresoever located," R. D. W. Connor in the fall of 1935 filed with the WPA an application for a "Survey of Archives of the Federal Government Outside of the District of Columbia." He received an authorization of more than a million dollars and appointed Philip M. Hamer as national director. In 1937 Hamer and his staff were transferred to the HRS, but they continued as a separate unit with offices in the National Archives. The fieldworkers were transferred to the state HRS projects. By the time the Survey of Federal Archives finally closed, it had published 506 volumes; only 81 remained unpublished. The Survey of Federal Archives essentially finished what it set out to do.[1]

## The Unpublished Inventories

And now let us turn to the products of the survey, what became of them, and to the question of what their value is. I discuss these matters subjectively and hope my experience will supply or suggest answers.

Fifteen years ago I knew as much about the HRS as the average person, which was approximately nothing. Then I began a job that involved locating public records and private documents of the late eighteenth century. In seeking these out I gradually came to know and to value the inventories, guides, calendars, and other finding aids prepared by the survey.

In the course of this search there came a time when it looked

[1] This, in brief, is the history of the Historical Records Survey. For anyone who wants more details William F. McDonald's book, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press), which Professor McDonald completed close to the event, in 1945, but which was not published until 1969, is an excellent account to which this one is indebted.

as if I might have to locate and examine certain New England town records, particularly the 1787–91 town meeting minutes. In New England, unlike the rest of the United States, the important local records-keeping body is the town, not the county.

I knew then that only a small fraction of the HRS inventories of town records had been published—probably a smaller fraction than of the county records. I knew that these unpublished inventories of the hundreds of New England towns had been deposited, in 1942, in the various states wherever space could be found. And I knew the locations of these depositories as of 1942.

I had also determined that if you visited a town clerk the chances were about fifty-fifty of his knowing whether or not he had his town's minutes for 1787–91. The odds were about one in four that he didn't know but was willing to make a search, and about one in four that he was certain he didn't have them and that they didn't exist (and this in towns where there was good reason to believe they did exist).

Why good reason to believe they existed? In about 1908 the records of certain Maine towns were surveyed and the results published. Thus, there were available the names of some towns whose 1787–91 minutes had survived into the twentieth century and, presumably, were still in existence. I visited a number of these towns between Kittery and Portland, Maine. It is on the basis of my experiences with clerks of towns I knew to have the records I wanted that I make my estimates.

But the pursuit of these records in the hundreds of old New England towns would be endless. And I wouldn't have, as I had in Maine, evidence enabling me to insist politely that a clerk conduct a search for something he was positive didn't exist. So the HRS inventories—the few published, the many unpublished—provided the needed key. They revealed which towns had their 1787–91 minutes and which didn't. (Here let me say that when a series description showed gaps it gave whatever information could be discovered to explain these gaps—fire, flood, or whatever.) Thus these inventories provided a list of towns that had, as late as the 1930's, their 1787–91 town meeting minutes. The inventories would provide the location of the minute books down to room, shelf, or cabinet drawer; they would provide probably an exact description of the volumes. This evidence could be persuasive with clerks who might contend that such records didn't exist.

I used the set of published HRS volumes in the National

Archives (which has the most nearly complete set—nobody has all of them). Then I started out to find and examine the unpublished HRS inventories.

Connecticut's unpublished inventories were deposited in 1942 in the Sterling Library at Yale, a good, safe depository. I went there. The Sterling's records showed that on a certain day in October 1950 a truck from the Connecticut State Library had picked up these records, 108 cases of them. Since these were state records, that was a proper transfer. Eventually I got to the State Library. I spent a month there, examining the official and unofficial documents of late eighteenth-century Connecticut. I found no trace of the HRS materials. Sylvie Turner, who was then state archivist, did an extensive search in her own administrative records and in the administrative records of the library. She talked with people still there who had been with the library at the time and with people who had since retired. Neither on paper nor in anyone's memory could she or could I find any clues as to what had happened to the 108 cases. And to this day there has been, so far as I know, no clue.

And that, as it turned out, was to be the story of the New England Historical Records Survey. Over a period of time I learned that with the exception of one state, or possibly two, all of New England's records had disappeared.

The one certain exception was Massachusetts. The records survived in Massachusetts because they had been stored in the Forbes Library in Northampton, because the Forbes is one of the best libraries in this country, because the successive chief librarians of the Forbes had an appreciation of the value of the material entrusted to them, and because the material itself was stored out of the way in the library's high attic. One reached that attic by going up a tall stepladder to the top of a cabinet, then from the top of the cabinet up iron rungs on the wall, then through a push-up trap door in the ceiling. There, in a surrealist circus-tent setting—with beams and rafters and steel cables and a high peaked roof (everything but a trapeze, and underfoot, instead of tanbark, itchy rockwool insulation)—were the unpublished records of the Massachusetts Historical Records Survey. They were in 132 bundles, wrapped like laundry but feeling like short-weight sacks of portland cement, about a ton and a half of them, resting on a specially built platform and extending almost across the attic, and covered against leaks with heavy plastic. We are all indebted to the Forbes Library.

With about an eighty-foot dropcord plugged into the socket in the hall below, I spent a Saturday afternoon sampling these

bundles. There, for Massachusetts, was the information I wanted. And there was much, much else: forty-five bundles of town inventories; ten bundles of county inventories; fourteen bundles relating to church records; four bundles of material gathered for a "Guide to Manuscripts Relating to the Negro in Massachusetts"; ten bundles relating to portraits, engravings, silhouettes; and more besides.

Several years later the Ford Foundation made available enough money for me to make a hasty survey, by long distance telephone and form letter, of what survives of unpublished Historical Records Survey inventories throughout the United States. I wasn't able to locate the material for all the states, but I was able to get the general picture. The greatest loss was in New England. There were other states that didn't answer or whose answers were too vague to determine whether or not they had their unpublished materials.

I reported these findings to the Ford Foundation and sent summaries to the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the Society of American Archivists. The only one of these organizations that did much about it was the OAH, which in 1972 submitted by way of the American Council of Learned Societies to the National Endowment for the Humanities a proposal for a grant to locate, preserve, and publicize the unpublished inventories. The National Archives volunteered to conduct, if asked to, this search. The National Archives would seem to be the logical agency because it has, scattered throughout the country, its regional archives, each with a historian-archivist who could if neccessary investigate collections that might or might not be HRS materials (for custodians sometimes have trouble distinguishing between HRS and Federal Writers' Project materials).

Recently the executive secretary of the OAH reported that the HRS proposal is not included in the 1974 fiscal year budget of the National Endowment for the Humanities. And that's where the matter now stands. Whatever is being done to locate and preserve and publicize these unpublished inventories is now being done on an informal, *ad hoc* basis. In 1973 we learned by chance that a state university library, custodian of its state's unpublished HRS inventories, was moving to a new building and wanted to get rid of the material. We passed the word on to the state archives, which has since accessioned the records.

Historical Records Survey material deposited in other state universities didn't always fare as well. One librarian reported that the material survived there for some years until the file

cabinets and space were needed; then the records were thrown out. Another state university librarian wrote: "We know where the files were in 1958, and approximately where they were in 1963 or thereabouts. I have seen corners of the building I have never been in before, and sampled transfer files and boxes I had not previously known were in the building. Former librarians have been queried by long distance. . . . We do not know how it can be so, but we can only conclude that, somehow, the files no longer exist."

Finally, we will return one last time to the state of Maine. In August 1942 the WPA official in charge of the records of the by then defunct Maine Historical Records Survey wrote to WPA headquarters in Washington, "We have made several attempts to have the material stored at the University, and other college libraries, and the State library. The librarians at these various places state that they do not have room available, and are not interested in the manuscripts which are stored in our warehouse." On September 2, Washington replied: "This will acknowledge a letter of August 27, 1942, from Miss Twombly, concerning a depository for the files of the Historical Records Survey. The Library of Congress will pay shipment of that material to the Library for the duration." That is the last document in the file.

I had high hopes that we would find this material in the Library of Congress. Many interested members of the staff aided in the search, first in the Manuscript Division, then in the other divisions, then in the library's various warehouses. There was no trace of the Maine material. Finally, I wrote to Elizabeth Ring of the Maine Historical Society, who had been with the Survey. She did some detective work, located Miss Twombly, who had since married, and then wrote me that the former Miss Twombly recalled that "failing to find a Maine Library who would accept the HRS and Writers' Project materials they were dumped from a wharf into Casco Bay—."