

‘A Modicum of Commitment’: The Present and Future Importance of the Historical Records Survey

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THE SUCCESS OF ANY GOOD IDEA depends largely upon those who are charged with its implementation. When the Civil Works Administration of the New Deal undertook a survey of Pennsylvania state and local records in 1933–34, Francis S. Philbrick, a University of Pennsylvania professor, was inspired to propose a more comprehensive nationwide program.¹ But it was the genius of Luther Evans that was responsible in 1935 for launching the Historical Records Survey (HRS). Operating on the basis of a presidential letter that placed him initially in the Women’s and Professional Division of the Works Progress Administration, Evans and his staff created a hierarchical system of records description and centralized editorial control that even today has no peer. It worked because the forms and procedures they developed were simple and logical and because the supervisory personnel they chose in the states ultimately, if not originally, were able people who in their own right contributed by refining and improving the instructions received from the central office.

In Maryland, for instance, Evans had difficulty at first in finding someone to direct the survey in conformity with his directives. Although the Maryland HRS was begun in February 1936, by November it was clear that virtually no progress had been made toward its initial goal which was to inventory county

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¹ 1937 Maryland Field Supervisor [Reports], [untitled paper by Walter F. Meyer and Morris L. Radoff], p. 2, Box 138, Records of the Works Progress Administration, Historical Records Survey, Record Group 69, National Archives Building. Hereafter cited as WPA, HRS, RG 69, NA.

records. When the new director, Walter F. Meyer, filed his first progress report in February 1937, he explained to Evans that in the previous year 22,000 inventory forms had been completed, but all were "no good or near useless."² In effect Meyer and his second-in-command, Morris L. Radoff, had to begin anew. By March, when Sargent B. Child, field supervisor for the HRS, visited the Maryland headquarters in Baltimore, Meyer and Radoff had the project well under control. Child first called on Meyer and Radoff's immediate superior, Emma F. Ward, director of the Baltimore office of the Women's and Professional Division of the WPA.

It is quite a different experience to walk in Dr. Ward's office and find such glowing praise for the Project and its directors than the feeling I had two months ago when the Roman candles were going off. I tried very hard to get some information which might not be quite as favorable but failed. Dr. Ward is delighted with the way Meyer has brought order out of chaos and she said that she had a very meager idea of the real importance of the project until Meyer took hold. Radoff comes in for an equal amount of praise. . . .³

Although distressed by the lack of progress on the project under the previous regime, Child was enthusiastic about what Meyer and Radoff had already accomplished and about the prospects for the future.

I deeply regret to report that the field work done by the Survey before Meyer and Radoff took charge had proven to be valueless. It has been discovered that a resurvey can be conducted far more accurately and swiftly than a checking of the old HR forms. Already the following counties have been completed starting at scratch: Allegany, Washington, Garrett, Frederick, Montgomery and Howard. The church records are not quite complete in these counties but the county and town records, with one exception, have been completed and checked. Added to the above, we can report three-fourths completion of the county records in Carroll and St. Mary's Counties, one-half completion in Baltimore and Cecil Counties, and one-fourth completion in Calvert and Charles Counties. Harford and Anne Arundel, which were completed under the [former director], will have to be tackled anew, *but* at the rate which the workers are hitting now we can only stand back and cheer with full knowledge that a cracker-jack job is being done. One man, a Dr. Laing, has come in this morning for the first time from the field. He has completed Allegany County and has done perfect work. The boys [Meyer and Radoff] have nailed him

² Walter F. Meyer to Luther H. Evans, February 4, 1937, Box 138, WPA, HRS, RG 69, NA.

³ "Report on Maryland, March 6-8 [1937]," *ibid.*

and are going to use him to check other county records and to do a certain amount of legal research. Formerly he was an insurance man and after having him join us at lunch today I concur with the belief of the office here that he is an outstanding worker.⁴

Over the next five years, the purview of the Maryland HRS was expanded to encompass the church records noted by Child, completion of the Federal Archives Inventory, participation in the American Imprints Inventory, and calendaring of manuscripts. In order to write historical introductions, the editorial staff discovered it was necessary to channel some of their energy into abstracting laws relating to the creation of records, and ultimately 9,000 typescript pages were produced. In the field, the survey workers often found it imperative that records be cleaned, collected, and arranged before they were in any shape to be inventoried. Yet, the Maryland Historical Records Survey more than justified Child's optimism.⁵

In February 1940, two years before the premature demise of the HRS, in a report to the central office, Meyer summarized the long and impressive list of accomplishments of the Maryland project. On the survey of county and town records, five inventories had been published. Four were in the process of being published, and four more had their fieldwork completed. Meyer predicted that in six months time the field work would be finished in Baltimore City and in nine additional counties. Of a total of twenty-three counties, there was only one (Kent) for which "no considerable amount of work" had been done.⁶

The inventory of church records was also well in hand by 1940, with 70 percent of the ca. 2,000 churches and chapels in the state completed. Meyer was proud of the effort and commented that he found it interesting "that our files list more church units than directories or official lists hitherto published, indicating that we are doing a more thorough job than even the official denominational organizations have done."⁷

In July 1938, the Maryland HRS began contributing to the American Imprints Inventory. By February 1940, 26 percent of the libraries in the state had been surveyed, resulting in the identification of 105,474 volumes for which 65,434 cards were

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Walter F. Meyer, "Progress Report on the Historical Records Survey for the Period from February 14, 1936, to February 14, 1940," p. 3, Box 52, WPA, HRS, RG 69, NA.

⁶ Ibid., p. 1.

⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

typed and sent to Chicago for incorporation in the national inventory.⁸

Beginning in October 1938, the Inventory of Federal Archives also became part of the HRS, and by February 1940, twelve of the originally projected seventeen volumes had been published for Maryland, of which half had been completed by Meyer and his staff. The remaining five volumes existed in typescript and had been forwarded to Washington.⁹

Perhaps the least successful activity of the Maryland HRS was the manuscript repository survey, which by 1940 had been sidetracked into a time-consuming calendar of only one collection of the Maryland Historical Society instead of a decidedly more useful guide to manuscript holdings.¹⁰ For a variety of reasons, including the apparent resistance of the Society, a catalog of the collections in the society's possession was never undertaken by the HRS, and the public was left without one until the appearance in 1968 of the excellent *Guide* compiled by Avril Pedley.¹¹

At most, 500 people worked on the Maryland HRS between 1936 and 1942, although the personnel turnover was extremely high because it was designed to be temporary relief work with a prohibition against anyone being supported for more than eighteen continuous months. Of the 344 people employed between February 1936 and February 1940, 58 percent worked six months or less, 74 percent worked one year or less, and 93 percent worked two years or less. Taking into account the first ten months of wasted effort, but ignoring the time necessarily taken up in training new personnel, the impressive list of accomplishments reported by Meyer in February 1940 resulted from the labor of a staff roughly equivalent to 77 full-time employees. About 20 percent of this labor was devoted to essentially bibliographical nonarchival work on the American Imprints survey, a proportion that apparently did not change during the remainder of the project, although the average full-time employee equivalent declined to 38. In other words,

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14. In contrast to the HRS, most of the *Survey of Federal Archives* (SFA) was published. This was due in no small measure to the excellent direction at the national level by Philip M. Hamer and at the local level by such people as Carl N. Everstine, who supervised the Maryland SFA. Unfortunately, the field survey forms for the SFA have not survived to the extent that they have for the HRS, and it is from these unpublished worksheets that so much is to be learned both about the records themselves and about how best to describe them.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

¹¹ *The Manuscript Collections of the Maryland Historical Society* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1968).

while there were, on the average, the equivalent of 61 people employed full-time on all aspects of the Maryland Historical Records Survey during its sixty-five productive months, only 48 were engaged in archival or archival related activities. But whether it was 61 or 48 it was a labor force allocated to archival work unparalleled at any time before or since in the state's history. To duplicate it today would cost between \$651,968 and \$513,024 annually, and it is unlikely that such funds will be forthcoming for a similar sized full-time staff any time in the near future.¹²

But, although desirable, such a concentrated effort may not be necessary. In the course of six years, all of the then-extant county records in the United States were surveyed and described according to HRS standards. Assuming that the records could be transferred to an archives where they would not be disturbed except under the supervision of trained archivists, a situation that unfortunately did not prevail after the field work was completed on the HRS, the process of records description could be conducted on a reduced scale by a smaller staff than that employed by the HRS. For example, in Maryland a full-time staff of seven devoted to record description in the HRS mode would take thirty-seven years to do what the equivalent of forty-eight people accomplished in sixty-five months. Perhaps thirty-seven years is not an archivist's dream, but it does represent an achievable goal if persistently pursued.¹³

If funds for a large increase in full-time staffing of most state archives are not likely soon, the HRS set another successful example deserving careful scrutiny. As the final report on the Maryland HRS explained, the project's greatest technical accomplishment was the

demonstration of the ability of inexperienced and untrained workers, under careful supervision, to accomplish worthwhile results. Contrary to the judgment and accepted standards of experts in the field of history and archives, persons not previously familiar with such tasks were able to execute work in these fields in such a manner that the results exceeded the sponsors' fondest hopes. Without sacrifice of any of the high standards which had become traditional with the archivist, more was accomplished during the six years of life of this project than in all the previous years of the nation's existence.¹⁴

¹² This estimate is based upon data found in WPA, HRS, RG 69, NA, boxes 51, 52, 138, and 160; WPA, Historical and Cultural Records Surveys (HCRS), "Alabama-Michigan," Box 11, RG 69, NA; and current salary scales at the Maryland Hall of Records.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Maryland Research and Records #XIV," [p. 4], Box 11, WPA HCRS, RG 69, NA.

Under the direction of a few well-trained professional archivists, smaller, but similarly unskilled workforces composed of students, housewives, and others interested in part-time employment, could accomplish major archival work, assuming it was modeled on the examples and procedures of the HRS.

But even if the principle of using part-time help to accomplish archival goals does not prove feasible, there are at least two tangible ways in which the heritage of the HRS can be well utilized by archivists now and in the future. The first is concerned with archival theory and procedure; the second with a practical application of surviving HRS forms.

The HRS bequeathed a method of record description and editorial control which is easily discerned from central office records and published manuals of instruction and which carefully observed three fundamental archival principles: determining the nature and origin of existing records, establishing the reasons for their creation, and reconstructing as far as possible any series in which the records in question may have been a part. Sometimes this meant physically cleaning, rearranging, and sorting records in courthouse storage areas so as to facilitate the process of description. Sometimes it simply meant leaving the records where they were found and attempting to bring intellectual control over series and apparently miscellaneous items by sorting together slips of paper with record descriptions on them, a task that today can be automated. Field workers were guided by a masterful set of instructions and simple but comprehensive survey forms. Their work was checked and rechecked by field supervisors and editors who had thoroughly grounded themselves in the history of the agencies that generated the records. Once the fieldwork was completed, summaries of the inventory sheets were written in a format prescribed by the HRS central office. These were then organized by the office that at the time of the survey had jurisdiction or control over the records described, and a brief sketch of the office was written. In addition, essays illustrated with maps, charts, and floor plans were composed on the history of the county, on its governmental organization and records system, and on the housing, care, and accessibility of the records. When the guide was finished and assembled in manuscript form it was sent to the central office for approval. There it was given a thorough review, and often additional work had to be done before permission would be granted for publication.¹⁵

¹⁵ For example see editorial correspondence in Box 160, WPA, HRS, RG 69, NA.

Ample evidence of the quality of the work done on the HRS can be derived from a perusal of the published guides, but less readily accessible are the instructions that were given to fieldworkers, supervisors, and editors working on the state projects. In their most complete form they are to be found in *W.P.A. Technical Series Research and Records Circular No. 5, Volume I*, published in May 1941. Its preface explains that the circular "is based on more than four years' experience of historical records survey projects. It reflects the thought of many archivists and survey workers which was focussed on the problems of preparing archival guides under the leadership of Dr. Luther H. Evans, who launched the program in 1935 and served as its National Director until March 1940." Composed of 135 easily updated looseleaf pages, Circular No. 5 is much too long to summarize adequately here, but nothing else in print offers the training in archival procedure that a careful study of this and other HRS publications listed in the *Check List of Historical Records Survey Publications* can provide, especially if combined with a knowledge of how the HRS worked in practice.¹⁶

Along with the administrative files and published works of the HRS, the second tangible heritage of the HRS is the unpublished field survey forms and accompanying historical introductions.¹⁷ A recent test of two counties in Maryland, Somerset and St. Marys, proved that the HRS forms and introductions were of inestimable value in searching out and identifying records, even if they were no longer in the same place they were when last inventoried. Both counties were chosen as samples because their HRS surveys are unpublished. The HRS materials for each county were first carefully examined to determine what records ought to be found and to learn as much as possible about their characteristics and history. The minimum amount of information found for each county office was the completed WPA forms 12-13HR; the maximum was a summary key to all offices surveyed, histories of the offices and their record series, abstracts of survey forms written as entries for publication, and the forms themselves.

After working through the HRS files, we next made Xerox copies of record descriptions in order to illustrate to the present custodian exactly what we hoped to find. As might be expected,

¹⁶ Copies of these two publications should be available at all HRS depository libraries, but the Hall of Records, P.O. Box 828, Annapolis, Md. 21404, will supply a microfilm of both, on request, at cost plus mailing.

¹⁷ Leonard Rapport has tried to locate all extant unpublished HRS material. Inquiries about their whereabouts should be addressed to him at the National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. 20408.

records in both counties were no longer where they had been when examined by the HRS. In fact, in Somerset and St. Marys, some of the records sought had been thrown together into piles of no discernible order. But with the HRS descriptions in hand, and some elementary sorting, we easily identified most of the records for microfilming or removal to the Hall of Records.

With the film or the records, the HRS descriptions, modified as required by loss or changes in condition since 1942, were then used in the preparation of finding aids, a technique not new to the Hall of Records. For instance, the basic entry information in *The County Courthouses and Records of Maryland* (1963), for records still in the counties, was partly derived from the published inventories and the unpublished HRS forms.

In the thirty-two years since its demise, the Historical Records Survey and its work have gradually been forgotten. Unquestionably, many of the procedures and techniques developed have been adapted and are employed at least in part by most archival institutions in the country, but the perspective and vision inherent in the administrative structure created by Luther Evans and kept viable by well-run state projects, such as that in Maryland, have been obscured. The scarcity of labor and the steadily declining number of actively employed archivists trained by the HRS are possibly major reasons for the current lack of interest in the accomplishments of the HRS. But it also may be that the major premise of the HRS has been forgotten: that intellectual control over historical records, through application of a hierarchical model of records description and the most efficient use of available resources to this end, is no longer the ultimate goal of the archival profession. Some indication that this may be the case is evident in the noticeable lack of recent comprehensive guides to public records. Even in the era of the Public Archives Commission (1901-34), more such guides were being published annually than today, and then most of the work was done on a voluntary basis with one or two contributors in each state.¹⁸

But whatever the reasons for its past neglect, the HRS is still capable of exerting its influence on a new generation of archivists, if they strive to understand how the HRS achieved its measure of success. They need only refer to its central office files, its manuals of procedure, and, in those cases where they have survived, the completed survey forms. For the revival of a

¹⁸ For example, see the *Reports* of the Public Archives Commission in the *Annual Reports* of the American Historical Association for the years 1900-1922 (Washington, D.C., 1901-28).

great idea, however, there must be at least a modicum of commitment to do the necessary work its effective implementation will entail. We have before us the promise of a new beginning in the National Historic Records Program, but it will take dedicated people like Evans, Meyer, and Radoff to bring it to fruition.¹⁹

¹⁹ Charles E. Lee, "President's Page: The Proposed National Historic Records Program," in *American Archivist* 35 (July/October 1972): 368-77.

Samuel A. Burkholder - 1-23-41. (Form 34)
(Donor's full name) (Date) (Form identification number)

WORKS PROCESS ADMINISTRATION
DIVISION OF WOMEN'S AND PROFESSIONAL PROJECTS
THE HISTORICAL RECORDS SURVEY, 1937
1734 NEW YORK AVE. NW.
Washington, D.C.

VOLUMES AND UNBOUND RECORDS FORM

County St. Mary's State Maryland

Name of agency or office Orphans Office
(Office of custody) (Office which made the record, if different)

Address of office of custody Court House, Leonardtown
(Name of building, room number, street address)

1. Title "Decree Record"
(Give present full title in quotes; assigned title, if any, in brackets.)

If record has had other titles, list them with dates or quantities or both

2. Dates 1815--
(Earliest and latest dates; missing dates. Show exact date of breaks).

3. Quantity 30 Vols.
(Number of volumes; file drawers; file boxes; bundles; other)

4. Labeling See Addendum attached.
(Explain fully; years; numbers; letters; number of records so labeled)

5. Discontinued and missing records
(If record discontinued, give reason and state

whether same information shown in another record. Explain why records are

missing, if possible)

6. Contents These volumes give specified data and
(Purpose and general nature of record. Principal items of information

shown. Summary of form used in making record, (type, headings, etc. If a very

general or miscellaneous record, detailed information as to type of records

contained on pages covered, if each should be given. Unless contents of those

records are described by other forms 12-13HR, such forms should be filled out

complaint, date Petition and order of Court

and attached

6. Contents—continued appointing guardian, also lists
of written interrogations, and examiners return
of testimony + plaintiffs exhibits, Plffs. Exam.
Date filed. Answer to Guardian List of (see item # 12.)
7. Arrangement Chron. by date + numerically by no. in Equity.
 (Chronologically—by what? Numerically—by what? Alphabetically—by what?)
8. Indexing Alph. by name of respondents + complainants
 (Self-contained—describe what it shows. If separate, fill out a form for it,
showing folio no + no in Equity
 and place cross reference hoto to that form by title and identification number)
9. Writing H. A. W.
 (Handwritten. Handwritten printed form. Handwritten printed head. Typed.
 Typed printed form. Typed printed head. Printed. Photostat. Other. Give months
 and years covered by each kind of writing)
10. Size 18 1/2 x 13 x 3" 491 pp-
 (Of record or container. Height, width, thickness or depth. Average number of
 pages or documents)
11. Location by dates and quantities J.M.M. No. 8; C.B.G. No. 9. North
 (Room, vault, wall—N.E.S.W., section, bin, shelf.)
Worcester - other records West Worcester, Worcester
Cabinet, on floor
Chancery Office 1st. floor -
12. Other information
 (Condition of record if not good. Relation to other records.)
J.M.M. No. 8 and C.B.G. No. 9. Worcester - leaf
 Information on prior, subsequent, or similar records. Whether record is known
 to have been kept earlier than dates shown in item 2)
interrogation, Agreement to set final hearing,
Desire date filed. Trustees Bond, Report of Sale,
Part of Questioners + publication, Ratification,
13. (For use in Florida.) Early imprints
Copy of Copy, Auditor's report (copy) of
Guardianship filed. Final Ratification of
 (Place of publication) (Date of publication)
Auditors report.

HRS Series No. 34, St. Mary's County, Maryland, Circuit Court

All markings on outside of vols. or fd.	Dates covered in vol. fd.	Arrangement	Indexing	Writing
"DECREE Record" St. Mary's Co. J.F.F. No. 3.	6-6-1870 4-2-1871	Chron. by date, and numerically by no. in Equity	NONE	H. der.
" " J.F.F. No. 4.	12-13-1880 5-22-1888	"	"	"
" " J.F.F. No. 5.	10-25-1873 8-30-1887	"	ALPH. by name of respondent & complainant giving folio no. no. in Equity	"
" " J.F.F. No. 6.	12-27-1886 1-12-1891	"	NONE	"
" " J.F.F. No. 7.	5-18-1891 3-7-1901	"	"	"
" " J.J.G. No. 1.	4-9-1892 11-30-1896	"	"	"
" " E.B.A. No. 1.	10-8-1897 6-26-1900	"	ALPH. by name of respondent & complainant showing folio no. no. in Equity	"
Total no. of vols. or f.d.'s	7 Vols.	Size: largest	18 1/2 X 13 X 3"	
Average no. of pages	578	smallest		
Estimated no. of papers				

(Form 34)
1-14-41.

HRS Series No. 34, St. Mary's County, Maryland, Circuit Court