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SOME PROBLEMS OF STATE ARCHIVAL ADMINISTRATION

WHAT I have to say upon problems of state archival administration is derived almost entirely from my own experience and observation. It may not represent any archival establishment other than the Division of Archives of the Indiana State Library. One of the problems continually facing me is lack of time for filling out questionnaires, so I have forborne writing to the other forty-seven states about their problems of archival administration. Besides, I have troubles enough of my own without taking on those of other administrators of archives. Also, like the runner-up in the recent presidential election, I am to be classed as an amateur, not as a professional—a member of this organization by accidental or arbitrary allocation and by virtue of the desire of the founders to have a large charter membership.

The situation confronting us would-be archivists in Indiana developed about as follows. For the first 106 years of territorial and state organization there was no provision for the preservation of state documents other than as made by each separate office. In 1906 the Division of Indiana History and Archives was set up under that title in the state library and it was recognized in the library organization acts of 1913 and 1925. The entire library then occupied only one large room in the statehouse and the quarters of that division were limited to a small amount of desk space, a number of open shelves, and a safe. Any extensive collection of state papers in this place was out of the question. The librarians had to content themselves with accepting a few of the papers offered them by overcrowded offices, and with rescuing a few important collections which they happened to find in danger of immediate destruction.

In the long agitation for a state library building, the necessity of providing for archives held a prominent place and proved to be one of the most potent influences in finally securing a tax levy in 1929 for a state library and historical building.

The new building was occupied in 1933. The archives received a large office and reading room, a large stack room containing two levels, a large vault, and two basement storage rooms—one 170 by 33 feet, the other 68 by 34 feet. The archives remained a part of the Division of Indiana History and Archives under Miss Esther U. McNitt. To her is due almost entirely the preservation and effective care of such documents as had been collected down to the time of moving into the new building. Meanwhile, for the first time, a person was appointed to give his full time to the archives, and the archives became virtually, and in 1937, officially, a separate division of the state library.

Since that time the division staff has consisted of one person in charge of the archives, occasionally an assistant and a stenographer, and a varying number of employees of the FERA, the CWA, and the WPA. None were trained or experienced in archival work. This condition was our first problem. It has been a serious one. With a relatively small number of manuals, guides, magazine articles, and textbooks available, we found few printed helps and directions to fit our situation. The publication of *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, beginning October, 1937, has been one of the most effective of the printed helps. I want to express here the appreciation of at least one group of otherwise despairing administrators.

In spite of *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, however, and other printed guidance, my conclusion after wrestling with the problem of establishing a division of archives with an inexperienced and untrained staff is that it ought not to be done. It is better to have a head-on collision with the appointive power and to insist, even at the risk of imminent destruction, upon reasonable qualifications on the part of appointees. These qualifications should include, in addition to a good character, a good disposition, and a liberal education, (1) some specialization in history and political science—if possible, in the history of the state concerned, (2) at least a modicum of training in library service, and (3) an apprenticeship in an archival establishment. Whether specialization in history and political science or a course in a library school is the better introduction to archival work, I will not undertake to say. Courses in the administration of archives belong equally well to the two schools. Probably more important than either, at least so it seems to the speaker, is experience even in a subordinate position in the actual administration of archives. The perfect combination of course is rare, but with the great advance in the inter-

est in archives and in the establishment of archives, it certainly seems that the time has come to fight vigorously for a professional staff in even the smallest establishments.

The problem of the relation of the division of archives to other state divisions and departments has not as yet bothered me very much. It seemed best to proceed along the line in which the state library, perhaps in default of interest on the part of any other state office, started twenty or thirty years ago. The Indiana archives have probably fared better as part of the state library than they would have done had they been connected with any other department or had they been in the care of an independent office.

It is logical to have the archives under the secretary of state provided materials and operations are not limited to the documents in his department. It is highly important that the archives from the beginning be of service to all departments. The secretary of state, though his primary function in many states has been so overlaid with other duties that it has been almost forgotten, is really the secretary of the state. The care of all state documents comes within his domain.

It is also logical to have the archives an independent office. In fact, if one were given a beginning from scratch without any antecedent connections, this would seem to be the best course in most states as it has been in the national government. However, where connections have been established with the library, the secretary of state, or other office, the slowness of officials to realize the function and the value of archives, and the prevalent indifference make it advisable to change connections as little as possible. It takes a long time to establish an archival office in the knowledge and in the confidence of all the departments of the state, and needless changes tend to upset the whole process.

The problem of space for archives, the architectural setting, is with us not only at the beginning but at almost every stage. The ideal arrangement for any state is a separate building designed specifically for the preservation and use of archives and occupied by the archives alone. Unfortunately, few of us have any opportunity of attaining such good fortune, either at present or in the near future. Most of us are in buildings the larger part of which are occupied by other institutions, and these institutions, in the eyes of many, are of greater importance than are the archives. The result is that almost from the beginning the question of the problem of providing sufficient space becomes insoluble. This situation is likely to arise even in build-

ings devoted wholly to archives. Any state building near a capital, a combination of archives with offices, a museum, a library, or a separate archives building are so situated and so classed that they are examples of monumental architecture, either not adapted to expansion or involving great expense for expansion. I believe that for all of us a time will come when two separate buildings or parts of buildings will have to be used for archives: one, an administrative office and a place for documents of importance and documents which are likely to be frequently consulted, and another, a fireproof warehouse of less expensive construction and less expensive location, which is devoted to the storage of documents of less importance and documents which are seldom or never consulted. Insurance companies set an example for this development a long time ago. The Harvard College Library is now putting up a storage building on property near the edge of Cambridge. Here the Harvard library, the Boston Public Library, and other institutions will store unused duplicates and other relatively dead material at a comparatively small cost, and they will all have more space available for material in active use. In this instance, provision is made for small space for a staff to work in the building. This is, of course, desirable, but in most states it is probable that such a building will have to be administered solely from the central office of the archives.

The problem of transferring papers from offices in which they originate or to which they come, involves policies which are under perennial discussion. The only certainty is that we can never be certain that the right policy has been adopted. Shall the transfer of material be left to the initiative of the office to which it belongs, or shall it be determined by the archival administration, or by a third office? Shall the decision as to the destruction of material considered not worth preserving be left to the office involved, or should it be decided elsewhere? Shall the state division of archives undertake to preserve records of political subdivisions such as counties, cities, and towns? In Indiana these problems were complicated and aggravated by a false start. As soon as quarters in the new building were available for the Division of Archives, all the offices of the executive department were notified and invited to send over material which was occupying space needed for other purposes. The result was that the division was swamped with material which it could not assimilate; most of it was of little or no value; much of it should have been destroyed.

A partial remedy was found in the passage of an act creating a Commission on Public Records consisting of the governor, the secretary of state, the state examiner of the state board of accounts, the director of the state library, and the director of the historical bureau. This commission was given sole authority to decide what material was of official value, what material was of historical but not official value, and what material was of neither official nor historical value and therefore properly subject to destruction. It was also given sole authority to transfer the first class of material to the archives, the second class to the state library, and the third class to the incinerator or the wastepaper collector.

The wording of the law is such as to give this commission mandatory powers. It can legally take the initiative, and, without action by an office in control of certain papers, transfer papers either to the archives or to the state library. Thus far it has seemed wise for the commission not to assume such authority. It has acted only upon request of one or another of the state offices. To do otherwise would probably lead to the abolition of its authority; besides, under present conditions, one of its functions is to protect the Division of Archives from an unmanageable flood of documents. It has also served as a check upon the unauthorized and careless discarding and destruction of papers. Not yet has it percolated through all the state departments that the incumbent of an office does not have the right to throw away papers which he thinks he will not need during his term of office. One of the problems of the administration of our archives is to make the ever changing body of state officials realize that the papers of any office constitute, or at least contain, a permanent record; the essential parts of it must be preserved for the guidance of officials, for the use of citizens and businesses concerned, and for the study of historians.

Since I have been secretary of the commission, I have periodically, especially after times of numerous changes in offices, sent letters to all the departments of state, summarizing the law and the policy to be observed in the treatment of public records. Always the reaction to these letters is both varied and interesting. Many of the new officials receive such a notification as an accusation, an implication of some offense; others write at length pointing with pride to their past records, and assuring the commission of full co-operation; many others ignore the notice and follow a course, formerly common to most, of throwing away their oldest papers in order to make way for any recent accumulations. At present there is not, and probably can-

not be for some time, any penalty imposed upon this mistreatment of records unless criminal intent is shown.

One of the difficulties comes from the existence of temporary commissions. The problem of getting records of such commissions is more acute in the federal government than in state governments. The WPA Survey of Federal Archives outside of Washington, imperfect as it was, revealed an immense mass of federal archival material, even in the relatively permanent establishments, which has escaped the knowledge of federal officials at Washington, and which undoubtedly will elude any archives catcher from the National Archives. How much more difficult is it for the National Archives to secure the papers of memorial and other temporary commissions, the members and staffs of which often are unfamiliar with governmental procedure and without any feeling of responsibility for records! The fact that most of these records are not worth preserving and would crowd out more important papers, while it makes their loss explicable, also makes the loss more certain. State archival establishments seldom have a sufficient staff to detail a man to get records of commissions and offices as they expire. A letter or a visit is not sufficient. In most cases, the archivist himself has to see that records are not destroyed and has to attend to their transfer to the archives.

All of this is part of the larger problem of education which devolves upon the state archives. That division of the government must educate not only a large clientele of establishments in which there is a very large turnover of personnel, but it must educate the public generally, both to secure its support and to impress those who will later enter public service. In the process every known means of influence must be used, even to the verge of propaganda. Newspaper and periodical publicity is probably least productive of the desired results. Form letters, even though disguised and signed as personal letters, are not to be depended upon. Personal acquaintance and the cultivation of friendly relations are the most efficacious tools in making a state archival-minded, especially in those states in which the field is not too large.

In most cases the state archives come into existence after a long period of careless and devastating indifference to records on the part of public officials. Accumulations are very spotty. Many important records have been destroyed and great masses of useless records have been preserved in out-of-the-way storerooms. In many cases indexes

that once existed have been lost; in other cases no indexes were made. In many instances records have become badly mixed so that a tax record is found in the middle of a package of militia muster rolls, and a canal report in a mass of papers of the state superintendent of public instruction.

An illustration of the gaps that occur in important records comes to mind. The Indiana Historical Bureau has long had on its list of proposed publications the journals of the territorial legislature. As thorough a search as could be made in the overcrowded storerooms of the secretary of state revealed only fragmentary remains of a couple of sessions. The *Western Sun and Commercial Advertiser* of Vincennes printed the journals of one or another of the houses of a few of the assemblies. The largest collection of journals, the originals, had passed into the hands of a collector and are now in a university library in another state. It is a happy dream that some day libraries, historical societies, and archives will return to their rightful place documents in their possession which do not belong to them. Meanwhile, it is one of the problems of the state archivist either to recover such documents or substitute photostats for them. Such gaps and such confusion in records unfortunately are not limited to times long past.

In this confusion, the selection of material to be preserved and of material to be destroyed is a difficult problem. At present we pass the problem over to the Commission on Public Records. This commission always makes its decision in conference with a representative of the office concerned, preferably the head of the office. For the most part the decision is based upon the judgment of his representatives and the advice of the commission member who comes from the Board of Accounts. I believe that the process is as good as any which could be devised, but I am sure that no one is completely satisfied that the decision to keep or to destroy is always made correctly. The presence of the attorney general or a representative of his office is usual at meetings of the commission and acts to prevent the destruction of documents which may be needed in court.

The most economical and most convenient use of space is a problem always acute, though its acuteness becomes apparent too late to make the best solution possible. It is self-evident that material belonging to a given department ought to be kept together. At the beginning it is impossible to tell how much space any one department will need. Economical arrangement is made the more difficult by the possession

of material of different types, as, for instance, small papers such as cancelled checks, legal size papers, charts and maps, pamphlets, and bound volumes. The desirability of movable equipment, filing cases, and book shelves on wheels, inevitably comes to mind, and I believe that experiments of this kind have been made on a small scale. This equipment, however, would have to be made to order, and the ordinary state archives can afford only standard equipment. Our equipment has to be ordered through a state purchasing agent and under competitive bidding. It takes a good deal of both persistence and shrewdness to obtain the most satisfactory of even standard equipment. Our first step toward the solution of the problem of economical use of space was to separate bound volumes from the rest of the material, using the same order of arrangement and classification, however, for both the bound volumes and loose papers. Bound volumes are shelved in two levels of regular library stacks. Loose papers, so far as possible, are kept in transfer cases. These transfer cases, of course, give more flexibility in the placing of files than do the larger units of three- or four-drawer filing cases. Some of the cheaper transfer cases, which our Division of Archives has had to accept, are likely to lacerate employees' hands on sharp corners, and are liable to upsets and a disastrous disarrangement of the contents owing to inadequate locking.

Permanent preservation of loose papers demands filing, preferably vertically, in special folders which have no chemical action upon their contents. Such folders, however, are far too costly for our purchase. There ought, also, to be as little handling of papers as possible, but with WPA help, papers are bound to be handled too much and often carelessly. Carbon copies of letters are the greatest sufferers. There is not the most remote possibility that Indiana will follow the example of Connecticut and some other states in establishing and enforcing the best standards for ink, typewriter ribbons, carbon paper, and papers for carbon copies. The originating office, for the most part, has no copy of the most important letters sent out except for carbons on the cheapest of yellow paper. Exasperated workers in the archives have suggested that the state offices keep the originals and send out the carbons. The suggestion, so far as I know, has never been carried out. We must resign ourselves to a situation in which the life of many important papers is limited to comparatively few handlings and to a few decades.

The allocation of papers in the Division of Archives in the new

Library and Historical Building happened to synchronize with the passage of the State Executive—Administrative Act, popularly known as the Reorganization Act. By this act all of the departments, offices, and commissions of the state, other than those in the judicial and legislative branches, were grouped by executive order under eight departments. This looked like a boon to the archivist, for it provided a ready-made plan of placing material belonging to offices then in existence. The rose, however, was not without its thorns. For reasons of state, into which the archivist has no business to enter, at least one department in hands not overfriendly to the administration was limited to an exceedingly small sphere; divisions which seemed logically to belong to it were assigned to other more friendly departments. The governor has power to change the assignments of divisions from one department to another. This also disturbs the peace of mind of the archivist, but thus far the power has not been used so extensively as to cause much grief. As was to be expected, a ninth department was segregated within three years and in 1939 the Legislative Bureau, which had been placed in the legal department, was removed from the category of the nine departments and made an independent office. The Division of Archives will have to accommodate itself to such changes. During the recent campaign the opposition party, which in the election secured control of the legislature and of most of the state offices, promised to repeal the Reorganization Act. If this is done, it may disrupt the present arrangement of archives but probably will not make an impossible situation. Changes in the allocation of divisions, creation of new departments, and establishment of new offices are bound to take place. So far as I can see, however, they can all be registered so that related documents can be located and, if necessary, brought together for use by means of accession lists, the catalogue, and the index.

Incidentally, I am told that there is seldom a demand for all the documents belonging to any office or even to any extended period within any office. Almost without exception, patrons of the archives ask for a single document. It seems evident, therefore, that the one great desideratum is the ability to administer the division so that any one document can be found quickly and used most conveniently.

As to commissions and governmental organizations which terminated before the Reorganization Act, the archivist has had to use his judgment about the department to which any discontinued office would most naturally belong. All documents, of course, should

be kept so far as possible in the context or grouping in which they are delivered to the archives. In those cases where they were delivered as a haphazard collection of fragmentary remains, the old filing system, which usually had no index and was no system at all, had to be broken down. A workable, understandable system had to be substituted. Masses of unrelated, hopelessly scrambled records about which the issuing office had little or no information, had to be set up imaginatively in files such as might have been used in the original office. Whether such collections of papers were assigned logically and with historical accuracy is of much less importance than that they are filed some place where they can be readily found and used.

For finding documents, which side by side with preservation is the second comprehensive problem of the state archivist, a tentative system necessarily incomplete has been worked out through (1) an accession list, (2) shelf lists, (3) a catalogue, hopefully and optimistically considered also as a classification, and (4) an incipient index. A calendar would be desirable, but for us it is an insoluble problem. We have neither the staff nor the resources to bring to light by calendar the content of documents. All we can hope to do is to locate them. The index, which we hope to make ultimately a general, unified index, was made a WPA project. It is an index of names down to 1851. Though far from perfect, it has proved useful.

A desideratum the attainment of which is problematic is a descriptive catalogue or history of all state documents, offices, commissions, and so forth, from the beginning of Indiana Territory in 1800 to the present. If this could be compiled and published, it would be very useful not only to the archivist but to many other state offices. This will probably have to be left to the historical bureau to do. The same may be said of a descriptive catalogue of state publications. With this as a possibility, it is fortunate that the Indiana division of the state library has carried its collection of state publications so far.

As can be imagined, I have mentioned only a few of the problems which have actually arisen. Fortunately, in this as in life generally, we "have had many troubles, most of which have never happened."

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