Surveys of Historical Records

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For the past several years, many historians and archivists have expressed the need for more surveys of historical records. Some see surveys as a means of exerting control over diverse and under-utilized bodies of state and local records. Others perceive surveys as a way of bringing together information on widely scattered collections pertaining to a particular topic. Still others are critical of surveys and call for a reevaluation of this method of records control. The panelists explored all of these perspectives, and the discussion that followed reflected a diversity of opinion.

FRANCIS X. BLOUIN, JR.:

Traditionally, surveys have been a matter of listing collections of like subject matter from various institutions, or listing general holdings of various institutions in a neat, compact, and usable format. The information has varied considerably but usually includes dates, subject matter, bulk, kinds of material, restrictions, etc.—enough information to introduce a researcher to a collection without an actual visit and, more important, to assist the researcher in weighing the comparative holdings of one institution in a particular field against another. I wish to argue that surveys provide a valuable reference function for archival institutions because, unlike printed works, archival holdings do not circulate widely.

Of course there are significant problems in encouraging surveys. They are enormously expensive. The future of projects of this sort will depend largely on the extent to which the profession as a whole accepts the importance of surveys as research and reference tools. Surveys do contribute positively to each participating archives, since the surveys force archivists to reexamine their collections and collecting policies rather than dwell on current research topics. Surveys also help familiarize individual institutions with the holdings of other archives. The real challenge to surveys is in reaching the valuable but hidden collections in small institutions and in private hands.

The challenge to archivists today is as much to determine what to discard as what to collect. Often institutions do not have the internal resources to survey large collections adequately, and the collections are accessioned in their entirety. Funding in the area of select record groups surveys would yield two-fold benefits. First, collective experience in this area would help develop techniques and standards for the appraisal and weeding out of large collections. Second, systematic surveys would help reduce the bulk of unwieldy twentieth-century collections, thus yielding higher quality collections.

So where should our priorities lie? Surveys are fundamental to the effective operations of archival institutions and the traditional survey is necessary in providing effective service to the researcher. On the other hand we must be judicious in our selection of topics to survey. Too many will wear down the tolerance and

responsiveness of our professional colleagues. We must be sensitive to the role of surveys of historical records as a first step in larger projects. Finally, the results and problems of survey projects should be shared as much as possible.

MARY PEARSON:

My discussion of records surveys has to begin at home with the current survey of county courthouse records in Texas. The Texas County Records Inventory began in 1973 under a grant to North Texas State University from Title I, Higher Education Act of 1965. The project is a county-by-county survey of records in courthouses and in storage areas, conducted in cooperation with Texas colleges and universities, county officials, and the Texas State Library. To date, twenty-seven inventories have been published; an additional fifty are in progress.

The value of the project is that each published inventory is of immediate use, and several long-term goals will be realized with its completion. As historians have long believed, the immediate benefit of the survey in any courthouse is to the researcher. Documentation of the types, nature, and quantity of records is of immense value to any person interested in the history of his community, county, or state. Most researchers have little time or money to spend probing the musty basements, attics, closets, vaults, barns, or warehouses in numerous counties. The frustrations of sorting out valuable documents from among piles of varied papers, boxes, and volumes are overwhelming. And most researchers do not bother. Yet the documents lying unused in the courthouse provide the drama of history, and the stories of our communities and our counties and even our state are the less for that neglect.

The second ongoing goal of the Texas project is the preservation of the permanently valuable local records in depositories across the state. The inventories, in documenting existing records, provide a first step in the implementation of the Regional Historical Resource Depository (RHRD) program, mandated by the Texas Legislature in 1971. Depositories have been established, primarily in colleges and universities across the state, to receive noncurrent records which need to be placed in safe environmental conditions and made available to researchers.

The close of the project will see the implementation of the statewide records retention and disposal schedule for county officials. Guidelines for records management will result in increased operating efficiency of offices of local government, and will save taxpayers the burden of storage costs of records that no longer need be kept. At present, county officials are reluctant to dispose of records, agreeing with Luther Evans's statement that "a disposed record stays disposed for a very long time."

The surveys provide an invaluable service to the county official by detailing for him what he has within his custody. On numerous occasions inventory takers have found records that county officials have thought were destroyed or stolen. It is not unusual for an official to ask the inventory taker to "tell us what we have."

Although county officials are becoming more aware of the importance of their records to many people, they need assistance in records administration. Local officials supervise a large body of records, and they need to learn to arrange records properly and make them readily accessible. The inventory work alerts the county to pay more attention to what they have. But since the majority of records will remain in the courthouse, a concerted effort must be made to help county officials with records maintenance.

A great deal of work is being done on the Texas County Records Inventory Project, and momentum is high. But a great deal more remains to be done. As an aid to the Regional Historical Resource Depository program and as a prerequisite for any records management schedule, the survey needs to be completed soon. It does cost money, and we need substantial assistance from corporations, foundations, and historical groups. This is not the type of project to do slowly. The Texas County Records Inventory Project meets a great need in documenting the heritage of the state recorded in county archives. Funds paid for this work are an investment not only in education, but in the future.

JOHN A. FLECKNER:

In recent years, records survey projects have demonstrated considerable appeal to federal and foundation grants programs. Survey projects confidently promise some tangible product at the end of a specified time period; survey techniques are relatively simple; surveys can be relatively self-contained, creating little disruption to ongoing programs; and survey overhead and operating costs can be kept low. With the exception of a project director, surveys can draw staff from the large pool of able but inexperienced people willing to accept limited-term employment in archival work.

The resurgent interest in records surveys rests not only on the inclinations of today's grant-givers but, more important, on basic changes in the professional outlook of American archivists. Many archivists now acknowledge that they must adopt a vigorous role in consciously choosing records and papers for archival preservation. This acknowledgement reflects their growing sense of professional identity and confidence. Equally important, the sheer mass of modern documentation has hastened the transformation of the archivist from a passive custodian of antiquities to an active participant in the process of documentary selection and preservation. An important corollary is the concept of a universe of documentation of which the holdings of the archivist's own repository comprise but a small portion. Archivists must know something of this larger body of documentation if they are to select their archival sample with competence, to provide the fullest assistance to researchers, and to plan sound archival programs.

Because they can provide comprehensive data, records surveys may be valuable initial steps in developing acquisition strategies. Information about the quality and location of documentation, both in and out of archival custody, will contribute to informed judgments about collecting in previously ignored subject areas; about areas in which collecting is not likely to be successful; about areas which require immediate action to preserve endangered materials; and about areas which are overdocumented. Surveys also permit first-hand examination and appraisal of potentially valuable materials and an introduction to their custodians and potential donors.

In addition to encouraging the transfer of historical records to archival custody, records surveys may contribute to the preservation of these materials in other ways. Identifying and reporting poor records storage conditions may motivate custodians to adopt simple remedial action. In other instances, survey data can provide the basis for comprehensive records management procedures. These procedures may be the only means of protecting large corporate bodies of records from poorly conceived records creation, filing, storage, and disposition practices which reduce

or destroy the informational value and physical integrity of important materials before they reach the hands of an archivist.

Surveys of records in archival custody are a logical extension of the archivist's internal descriptive systems (card catalogs, registers, guides, etc.). By locating and describing materials outside their immediate custody, archivists meet a fundamental professional commitment to facilitating research access. Given this central role in producing research tools, the records survey, as Francis Blouin suggests, undoubtedly will continue to receive substantial financial support from our cultural agencies.

To conclude, the use of records surveys will expand as more archivists take an activist view of their profession. For archivists taking this perspective, well-designed records surveys can contribute to reaching important goals, particularly in the areas of acquisition strategies, program planning, and intellectual control over large bodies of sources. Such surveys inevitably require careful attention to technical details, but more basically they demand that projects be designed to put the survey-gathered data to productive use. In evaluating proposals for records surveys, archivists and records program administrators must insist that data-gathering does not become an end in itself, set adrift from its larger purposes. Only when data-gathering further broadens archival goals can records surveys merit a portion of our scarce archival resources.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

This discussion began with a question about the residual benefits and side effects of records surveys. Patrick Quinn expressed the opinion that records surveys are too often "static snapshots" of records extant at any one time, and that not enough is being done to preserve the records identified by such surveys. Mary Pearson agreed and noted that the Texas County Records Project is actively encouraging county clerks to establish records disposition schedules and cooperate with the state archives. She remarked that project staff members have been sending information regarding the state and condition of county records to the state archives for further action. She also commented on the varying levels of interest in her project among county clerks. Some clerks, even after their records have been inventoried, are not interested in sending anything to the state archives; other clerks, some in counties not yet visited by the survey project, are very interested in working with the regional depository system of the state archives. She further noted that her staff is working on a records management schedule to be used as part of the project.

Walter Rundell was interested in the procedural aspects of records surveys. He wanted to know how the Texas Records Inventory Project chose which counties to survey. Mary Pearson responded by noting that certain counties and local universities are very interested in her project and have been willing to provide the volunteer labor to conduct the surveys. She stressed the dependence of the project on volunteer labor; she indicated that foundations have not been forthcoming with their support for survey workers. Rundell remarked that the project was fortunate in getting good geographical distribution in its initial county surveys.

Robert Warner shifted the discussion to other survey projects. He registered some surprise that the panelists had not discussed the value of the Historical Records Survey (HRS) of the Works Progress Administration, and he asked what the HRS had achieved, how valuable it was, and whether the panelists in their surveys had learned anything from the HRS.

Mary Pearson responded by stating that the HRS has been a valuable tool for several reasons. First, the HRS proved that volunteers could be trained to survey records effectively. Second, the HRS taught archivists that surveys must focus on an achievable goal. Survey projects should concentrate on the description of records, and not on peripheral activities such as types of subjects or topics which could be researched in records. Third, the HRS taught archivists that the processing of surveyed materials would be very difficult. Finally, the HRS taught archivists that it is very difficult to keep going with a small staff, especially if the inventories are to be published. Pearson concluded that there is a great deal to be learned from HRS.

Francis Blouin concurred with Pearson. He added that the HRS demonstrated that unpublished, uncirculated surveys have little impact on the establishment of local records programs. He argued that the HRS project in Massachusetts is the best example of this problem; because the inventories in that state were not published, they did nothing to alter the disposition of historical records in town halls. In Michigan, the project staff did publish some of the inventories and they continued to be useful because they were updated periodically by local archivists. Blouin emphasized that surveys are not useful unless there is a follow-up procedure to accession, appraise, and process records not in an archival repository. The survey is only the first step in this process.

Ann Campbell disagreed with Blouin about the value of unpublished HRS inventories. The unpublished inventories contain useful information on the location and condition of records; these records could still be in the same condition and location today. Edward Papenfuse agreed with Campbell, stating that the staff of the Maryland state archives uses the unpublished HRS work sheets as guides to county courthouse records. He remarked that the worksheets are essential in Maryland for any survey of public records and that these inventory forms could be useful in other states as well. Papenfuse added parenthetically that the published inventories are particularly useful because the records series descriptions are so brief. The unpublished HRS inventories are labor-saving tools, he observed, because they give the archivist a good idea of what records to *expect* in a particular county courthouse. Such inventories are a useful means of identifying records for county clerks and other officials. Papenfuse expressed the opinion that archivists are "missing a big bet" if they don't start their surveys with the HRS inventory worksheets.

Larry Hackman remarked that the Historical Records Survey was above all else a project designed to put people back to work, not to preserve historical records. The HRS had no permanent base of operations and no continuing financial support after 1942. The inventories became less and less valuable after that point. Hackman emphasized that the most valuable lesson to be learned from the Historical Records Survey is that such projects have to have residual operations to insure the *use* of survey information. That means a continuing commitment on the part of archival repositories and foundations.

The residual impact of surveys was a topic of interest to those present. Philip Mason asked Andrea Hinding about the follow-up operation of her survey of women's historical materials. How did she propose to disseminate the valuable information about record keeping that she had uncovered in conducting the survey? Hinding responded by noting that the advisory board of her project is prepared to assemble a conference to address the substantive issues of the survey. She added that the field reports are full of information on a wide variety of topics—how to use bulk mailings, how to approach records keepers, and other subjects. Hinding noted that

a book-length publication is in order and that she and her staff planned to do such a publication.

Elsie Freivogel remarked that she had been very critical of subject-oriented records surveys until her involvement in the Women's History Sources Survey. The striking thing about this survey is that it revealed substantial information on records outside women's history, a boon which was not anticipated. The women's survey uncovered information about economic trends, population movements, and other topics. Freivogel stated that archivists should try to anticipate these peripheral benefits and list them in any grant proposal. Hinding agreed with Freivogel and expressed a hope that the survey guide would become a source of research for many aspects of American history.

The discussion shifted to the question of foundation support for records surveys. Richmond Williams observed that there seemed to be some disagreement on the funding of surveys. He noted that some archivists believe that county records surveys are a state obligation, but others seek foundation support. He asked if there was any agreement about how surveys of historical records should be funded. Should the various companies of Texas support the Texas County Records Project? A number of conferees responded that private funding for such surveys is hard to obtain from foundations other than the National Endowment for the Humanities or the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

John Daly asked about nontraditional sources of funding. Has any archivist approached large law firms for support? They have plenty of money and are supposedly committed to the importance of legal records. Andrea Hinding added that telephone companies have funds and a good understanding of the large number of records-generating organizations. Many of those present agreed that nontraditional sources of support are important for records surveys.

The diverse views on records surveys lead Charles Lee to conclude that the archival profession needs a "survey of surveys or a certification of surveys." The great proliferation of surveys in recent years has demanded substantial amounts of time by the nation's already over-taxed archivists. Lee suggested that surveys should be registered with some central body, perhaps the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Such an agency would evaluate survey projects the better to insure that they would be useful to the great majority of repositories surveyed. He concluded by postulating that the confusion over records surveys is another indication that the profession needs a national historical records program.