

Records Surveys: A Multi-Purpose Tool for the Archivist

Introduction

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THE RECORDS SURVEY is not a recent innovation in archival practice. Indeed, there have been at least three generations of surveys in the past fifty years. The first, of course, was the well known work of the Works Progress Administration's Historical Records Survey, familiar today through its still useful publications, through a substantial body of secondary literature, and through the Society of American Archivists' recent project to locate the survey's unpublished records. The work of the HRS taught the young archives profession a great deal about archival administration and, in particular, about records surveying. But above all, the HRS was a project to put to work vast numbers of unemployed white-collar workers in a time of national crisis. As such it was unique; never again will there be anything exactly like it.

In the past twenty years, and especially in the past decade, many smaller-scale surveys have been undertaken. Historians, librarians, manuscripts curators, and archivists have surveyed at various times in fields ranging from the history of music to the operation of county government, from the Hawaiian sugar industry to the ethnic communities of Pittsburgh. Unlike the highly centralized HRS, however, these diverse projects have not been under the sponsorship of a single institution. Often they have been carried out in extreme isolation from each other and without wide publicity within the archival and related professions. Nonetheless, these surveys have taught us a great deal about the location and condition of historical records in the United States and about the records survey as an archival technique. In addition to very specific lessons about the use of fieldworkers, the design of questionnaire survey forms, and the like, we have learned that records surveys can be far more challenging than we have

acknowledged. We found that navigating by the seat of one's pants, clipboard in hand, frequently was inefficient and unproductive. It also was costly and we began to feel a survey backlash from outside funding agencies and especially from agencies and individuals whose records and papers were the objects of our surveys.

The three projects described here represent a third generation of records surveys. They reflect a sophisticated awareness of the need for intensive planning before beginning data gathering, especially in the vital matter of gaining access to the records to be surveyed. But what distinguishes these surveys from earlier efforts is not their techniques and procedures or their subject areas. Rather it is the degree to which they were designed to derive the greatest possible benefit from the money and effort invested in them. Specifically, each survey is part of a long-term strategy to encourage archival preservation of the records with which that survey is concerned. These strategies include the familiar tactics of informing researchers of valuable source materials and of encouraging custodians of historical records to make appropriate arrangements for the care of their holdings. But the strategies go much farther. Each of the surveys described here is gathering information necessary to shaping public and private policy, that is, the legal and institutional frameworks within which decisions are made regarding the disposition of historical records.

Should archivists take such activist positions? Will such strategies actually succeed in better preserving historical records? These are only two of the larger issues raised by these presentations.

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