

NHPRC's Records Program and the Development of Statewide Archival Planning

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Few programs in American archival history have the potential for radically altering the structure of the archival world as does the records program of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Through the mechanism of state records advisory boards for statewide planning and project evaluation, the NHPRC has given archivists the opportunity to transcend many institutional limitations to coordinated activity and to develop more comprehensive programs for the acquisition, preservation, and access to archival sources. This paper examines these initial state plans—"statements of priorities and preferred approaches"—submitted to the national commission, giving special attention to (1) what the state boards consider their major archival concerns; (2) the degree to which the boards are responding to needs created by recent archival development; and (3) some important omissions in these initial planning documents. Finally, the paper speaks to the responsibility of archivists, particularly state archivists, in the statewide planning process.

The Impetus to State Archival Planning

From the very beginning of the records program, when NHPRC consultant Herbert Angel was going around the country meeting the historical agency and archival people, it was clear the commission saw the records program as a vehicle to break down those introspective and proprietary attitudes that isolate archivists and to bring together competing interests within a state to talk about basic archival problems and develop common approaches to their solution—in short, to make some plans. As early as 1976, the commission adopted guidelines calling on each state board to prepare a state historical records plan. "Common sense," the commission wrote, "dictates that from the beginning some attempt be made to identify major program areas, particularly records projects that cannot or should not wait, and to systematically set about to deal with these to the extent possible."¹

Because of the lack of deadlines little planning was done; though, ironically, many of the first plans, nine in all, came from what were at the time some of the

¹ National Historical Publications and Records Commission. Records Program. *The Records Program. The State Historical Records Coordinator and the State Historical Records Advisory Board: Suggested Roles and Procedures* (Washington, 1976), p. 2.

most archivally underdeveloped states. Iowa, for example, was the only midwestern state to submit a plan. In 1978 the commission put some teeth into its request, voting to "henceforth defer action on grant proposals from a state which has not submitted a formal written statement of its priorities and preferred approaches."² As of October 1979, thirty-four states had submitted statements. The Midwest region has the best compliance record, with only Nebraska and North Dakota missing of twelve states. The poorest record goes to the six New England states, of which only Connecticut and Rhode Island have submitted statements. At the June 1979 meeting, for the first time, the commission selectively deferred action on proposals because of advisory board inaction. No doubt some of the fifteen boards³ which failed to submit statements have already heard from disgruntled applicants.

As preliminary planning documents, the statements of priorities and preferred approaches have several purposes:

1. identification by the advisory board of critical areas of need on which to focus particular attention, especially through its own activities in fostering or undertaking programs;
2. informing applicants and the general public of the board's likely attitude toward various types of grant applications;
3. assisting the NHPRC in its review of grant proposals from the state;
4. assisting the NHPRC in setting national priorities and in measuring the progress of the records program on a national scale.⁴

The statements are provisional and short-term. According to the Indiana board, their plan is "an organic one," to be adjusted as needs are defined and specific problems identified. Minnesota will make this adjustment annually, while the Alaska document is "intended as a focus for activities" for three to five years. As a result of data gathered through record surveys and special studies sponsored by the state boards, the statements are to be refined and revised to become more comprehensive and solidly based—to become more of a genuine state archival plan.

While some statements, Montana's is one example, are well-focused planning documents, others are either so vague or all-encompassing that they are worthless as blueprints for archival activity. Some were hammered out in a single meeting, while others are the product of careful thought and numerous revisions. Many underscore the inexperience of archivists and their allies in long-range program planning and in devising strategies to meet their goals. Others deal with political situations that demand a less specific focus. The statements further reflect the checkered and uneven progress of archival development in the nation. Those from boards attempting to establish a statewide program deal primarily with archival rudiments; other statements mirror the fact that the basic elements of such a program are already well in place.

² Records Program Report No. 79-1 (Jan. 2, 1979), p. 2.

³ Maine chose not to participate in the program and thus has no board.

⁴ Records Program Report No. 79-1, p. 3.

Even so there is a marked degree of similarity in the priorities identified by the state boards, and for an obvious reason: the NHPRC provided a model. In fulfilling its charge to make plans, estimates, and recommendations for historical records preservation, the commission adopted in November 1977 a "Statement of National Needs for Historical Records." The original intent was that the states use the document as the basis for planning. On reflection, however, the commission wisely decided that national priorities were too general to provide a focus for the activities of state boards, and went on to adopt a system giving states greater flexibility in priority planning. Nevertheless, this document with its seven categories of national need, along with a model companion piece from the advisory board of the little-known State of West Dakota, has had great influence on the initial state plans and has tended to make many of them very derivative. The NHPRC had not anticipated this result. Indeed, it has been disappointed in the lack of critical comment from state boards and archivists generally, especially about the preferred approaches within each category of need. As one staff member lamented, "We had assumed these methodological-philosophical statements would have led to a lot of discussion. Not so!"⁵ Nevertheless, the statement has given less archivally advanced states a convenient, if not altogether useful, framework for setting state priorities and approaches; if nothing else they have met the commission's requirement.

Basic State Priorities

System-wide Programs for Governmental Records

Not surprisingly, the development or improvement of system-wide records programs for state and local governments, a major national need, is also a principal concern of at least twenty states. Indeed, the records program was conceived primarily to remedy the deplorable public archives situation in the states. Iowa's initial plan, for example, dealt almost exclusively with the urgent need to identify and preserve permanently valuable state agency records, as well as regional, county, municipal, and other local public records. To meet these needs, the Georgia board supports projects "to develop a model program which may be adopted system-wide or by any comparable unit or units within the state." Other boards call for pilot programs linking archival programs with records management activities; for the development of manuals of general records schedules for county, municipal, school, and court records; for regional records depository systems; as well as for programs to address the pressing need for standards for microfilming local public records and providing archivally secure storage for such film.

The Archival Survey

But most archivists believe there must be a survey before there is a system. Not surprisingly, the survey of records not in archival custody—a major national need—was also a favorite of about fifteen states. Here the Illinois survey program is by far the most ambitious, including all-encompassing surveys of profit and non-profit organizations; individual creators of records; records created by state,

⁵ Written communication to the author, 25 June 1979.

county, municipal, and village government; and records created by independent taxing authorities.

One reason for the popularity of the survey is that boards often believe they do not possess the data necessary to determine needs and priorities correctly, a point most forcibly made in the Oklahoma statement. One suspects, however, that in some states the boards are deciding not to decide, but rather to gather information. The fact is that the records survey which is not an integral part of an archival system for the identification, collection, and preservation of records rapidly depreciates in value as the records are rearranged, transferred to other locations, or destroyed. Cognizant of this fact, Minnesota, for example, supports surveys only where there is an "explicit commitment to the acquisition of the materials and a reasonable expectation that acquisition may be possible." Taking a plank from the "National Statement of Needs," Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Kentucky also give priority to programs designed to update survey data, while the Ohio board requires that survey results be published.

Many states also favor a second type of survey, the repository survey. These surveys have two basic objectives: first, to provide basic data about the operation and scope of all state repositories, and, second, to gain control over their major holdings. This information, of course, should be collected regularly to supplement and update information about repositories listed in the *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States*, an approach supported by the Tennessee board. Further, as several boards including Michigan point out, such surveys are essential in determining which types of records are being collected and preserved and which have been overlooked.

A third type of survey recently completed by Minnesota and proposed by Wisconsin is an inventory of all archival program resources including technical and storage facilities, staff, and budgets. No traditional records inventory, this survey is a stock-taking of archival resources and a gathering of information essential for statewide planning.

Guides to Historical Records in Repositories.

A third major concern for both the commission and the state boards (and one closely related to the above priority) is convenient, centralized access to information about archival holdings. Most state boards have made provision for finding aid proposals, particularly repository guides. As should be expected, the less developed states are most concerned with basic bibliographic control over the holdings of state archival repositories. Some of the more advanced states support some type of state or national bibliographic network, possibly involving the use of SPIN-DEX or other data base systems. Illinois proposed a survey of published guides, agencies producing guides, and agencies which need to produce guides. Practically all these approaches, which are best spelled out in the New Jersey statement, involve cooperation and stress the necessity of compatible, centralized information about archival holdings, which may be updated. Several boards, including New York and Washington, made the preparation of item indexes and detailed calendars or lists a low priority or specifically ruled such activities ineligible for support.

The Preservation of Historical Records.

Another of the NHPRC's seven national needs, preservation of historical rec-

ords, is a priority for at least seventeen boards. Significantly, most state boards recognize the economic necessity of a cooperative approach to conservation. Michigan, Minnesota, and Missouri favor feasibility studies for establishing regional or statewide conservation centers; Wisconsin, on the other hand, gives priority to a preservation network which would maximize use of current facilities by relying on existing institutions and current archival structures. Many of these centers would offer such services as microfilming and copying of endangered photographic collections, in addition to paper conservation. Indeed, several boards, following the national statement, favor preservation projects with a primary regard for the informational content rather than the artifact value of the archival record, and they also favor those microfilm programs that combine the goals of security and wider availability. Georgia advocates microfilm projects in which centralized deposit of copies can be arranged, while Delaware endorses the creation of a cooperative facility to store master negatives. The Kansas board supports a project for cooperative buying plans to make archival supplies available to institutions with limited budgets and needs. Several boards also stress the necessity of basic training. The Missouri board, for example, supports statewide conservation workshops "to acquaint smaller historical societies, libraries, and other agencies with the importance of correct care as well as remedial action to be taken in case of disaster."

Archival Standards.

In addition to the preceding priorities, several state plans have either set criteria for program participation or, as in the case of Missouri and Michigan, made the development of archival standards a major need. The Ohio document, for example, specifies that grant applicants must "meet accepted archival standards for housing and use of historical material and be committed to continuation and independent financial support for the program." Similarly, in Minnesota support will go only to an institution that is making genuine efforts to provide long-term funding, is willing and able to allow access to the holdings on a regular basis, and agrees to make information about the holdings available through recognized archival channels.

The Response to Recent Archival Developments

While a majority of statements deal with the basic long-recognized archival needs just discussed, there are newer and equally urgent needs, needs created by some fundamental changes in the archival landscape. What are some of these changes and what has been the advisory boards' response?

Archival Awareness and Assistance Programs.

One of these changes is the proliferation of archival programs and the decentralization of archival holdings. In the future an increasing proportion of the archival record will be held, not by the major repositories which are rapidly approaching the limits of archival growth, but by diverse organizations—churches, businesses, civic and social welfare organizations, educational agencies, local historical societies, museums and libraries, and municipalities. The list could go on. While spreading the burden of documentary preservation, this development has created several urgent needs. One of these is to increase awareness among records creators of the importance of good archival practice, another is the need to make

an increasing variety of extension services available to an expanding number of records custodians. Both the South Dakota and Ohio boards, for example, will support programs to assist institutions to establish, maintain, or improve archival-records management programs. Delaware proposes a consultant service to raise the quality of archival management, especially in smaller institutions. North Carolina and Georgia solicit proposals to encourage business and industry to develop archival and records programs, and the Wisconsin statement calls for a statewide archival extension services program. This program, supported by such funding approaches as re-grants and cost-sharing, would offer consultation and assistance in planning and developing archives-records management programs. It would also provide inventorying, appraisal, and processing services, and assistance in preparing grant proposals.

College and University Archives-Records Management Programs.

The priority eight states place on archives-records management programs for colleges and universities, both public and private, is further evidence of this trend to develop *in situ* institutional archives. North Carolina supports the development of a system-wide program for the component institutions of the state university, New Jersey and Kentucky call for "a conference and report" to demonstrate the value of such a program to academic administrators, while other boards support more general programs of awareness and assistance.

Education and Training for Non-Professionals.

The proliferation of archival programs has also created a demand for education and training. The California board, for example, notes the existence in the state of 300 "manuscript handlers" with no archival affiliation and apparently no training. Twenty-two boards make this need a priority but, wisely, most emphasized emergency, post-employment training—workshops, seminars, symposiums, and short-term institutes—aimed at training non-professional, volunteer, or part-time custodians. Pennsylvania calls for area-wide programs directed toward assisting historical societies and archival units in the proper archival management "over the short term"; Indiana stressed the need for such a program so that "awakening [archival] interest of Hoosiers is professionally directed"; and several other states simply adopted the national statement calling for programs to "improve the knowledge of those who are not professional archivists but who administer historical records or repositories in which they have been deposited," as well as awareness programs for organizations which have created records of long-range value.

Coordinated Accessions Programs.

In a small measure, the state boards underscored the increasing concern about distortions and gaps in the documentary record and the need to develop more coherent, comprehensive acquisition strategies. Delaware spoke for other boards when it noted that "uncoordinated collecting goals" is one factor "inhibiting a unified approach to a sound, systematic program for preserving private historical records." If archival accessions programs continue on their present course, it is only a slight exaggeration to say that historians 500 years from now will assume that Americans were either politicians or people who passed their days at the academy.

To document contemporary life and culture more adequately, several boards, including Texas, Ohio, and Oklahoma, note the need to cover neglected areas of history such as agriculture, Blacks, business, science and technology, and the extractive industries. However, only a few boards advocate coordinated collecting efforts to accomplish this goal. Yet only through such a strategy can archives make most effective use of limited resources to collect, identify, and fill major gaps in the archival record, and, as the Wisconsin board wrote, to "allow the fortuitous accession to become part of a comprehensive and systematic program." This approach seems to be primarily a midwestern phenomenon: the Missouri board encourages regional and cooperative collecting proposals in underdeveloped record collecting areas; Minnesota recommends that studies and discussions be undertaken to examine subject and/or geographical specialization and to divide up the "archival turf" in an effort to eliminate conflict and to design strategies for documenting subjects not well covered. Iowa agreed but noted that such a step would require tact and leadership. As a first step, both Minnesota and Iowa encourage repositories to issue collecting policy statements.

The Archival Network.

One response to these needs for assistance, coordination, and cooperation is the archival network. Networking in the area of descriptive control and conservation is either specifically mentioned or implied in many statements, yet only a few boards are utilizing the network structure for a comprehensive, integrated records program at this stage of planning. The concept is, however, the heart of the Montana plan. That advisory board proposes a historic records network, including the historical society and six universities, to acquire collections cooperatively, loan collections or copies between member institutions, delineate areas of collecting, and provide training for network operations. "Methods of cooperation," it states, "must be achieved to maximize the impact of records programs." Certainly the evidence to date indicates that networks more effectively utilize limited resources for archival work, better assure that such work is coordinative rather than competitive, and greatly facilitate programs of awareness and assistance.

Neglected Areas of Archival Planning

The Impact of Technology on the Archival Record.

But there are other important archival changes not adequately recognized in these statements. One of the most obvious is the urgent problem created by the impact of modern technology on the archival record. Photography and electronic recording have enabled us to capture information about the visible and audible world with a speed and fidelity heretofore impossible. Easily and inexpensively made, these records exist in profusion and have greatly increased our opportunities for documenting society. They have also made the archivist's job in selecting, preserving, and organizing the record more difficult and complex. Like most modern records, these media are meant for short-term use; they are frequently unstable—color photographs, for example—and may require special environments for long life. Unfortunately, it costs a great deal to organize and preserve them. Further, magnetic recordings are made on reusable media and are often difficult to access before the information is erased. Finally, because the new tech-

nology makes it easy to make and use these records, they have begun to replace both written records and communications, with profound results for the archival record. But the advisory boards have yet to respond to these problems of the recent past. True, eleven states made the collection and preservation of historic photographs a priority, yet only three mention the need to survey and preserve recent photographs, motion pictures, sound and video recordings, or machine-readable records as information sources. Though several boards noted that these media present complex preservation problems, none suggested the immediacy of these problems—that their ephemeral nature and reusability might make these the most endangered records of all.

The Wider Use of Archives.

Another significant omission of practically every state board is the need to promote the wider use of archival resources, to develop programs to disseminate the information in the records themselves as well as to broaden the current archival constituency and develop new ones. Archivists are all familiar with the importance of microfilm publications in making their important holdings more widely and freely available, but technology now makes it easy and relatively inexpensive to make other sources just as accessible once there is some sort of duplicate master. Photograph collections are now being reproduced on microforms of all sorts, video cassettes can be produced for inter-institutional loan, and thousands of numeric machine-readable data sets are mailed around the country. More prosaic, perhaps, are the millions of rolls of archival microfilm, copies of which could be used anywhere in the world. By using the same easy and inexpensive technology that makes non-textual and machine-readable records such a problem for the profession, archivists can turn things around and make a large proportion of their holdings as easily available as the printed book; that is, they can if they change some outmoded proprietary attitudes still held about where and by whom resources are used.

And archivists can package materials. Most of us should be familiar with what academic historians have done in compiling resources for use in the schools by using some fairly sophisticated notions about history. But there are other constituencies, some focused on community historical agencies and others part of a grassroots revival of interest in community and individual origins. These new constituencies are natural audiences for exhibitions, audio-visual and mass media programming, and inexpensive publications, forms too often overlooked by archivists.

It is understandable that a state just starting to get its archival house in order may have more immediate needs, but as these statewide programs develop, promoting the wider use of archives should become a major program component. It certainly is an element that should be added to the list of national priorities and to the priority statements of those states that are more archivally advanced.

Research and Development.

In the all-important areas of research and development, the seventh national need, only two states have developed any specific suggestions or recommendations. These ranged from experimental sampling and bulk reduction programs to testing cooperative structures for communities that cross state boundaries. But we need many more such projects, for if our real needs are cooperative collection

strategies, preservation and information networks, programs of archival awareness and extension services, and studies on the impact of technology on the modern record, then it is necessary to develop and test other specific models, procedures, methods, and practices to make these concepts and programs operational.

Regional Planning and Cooperation.

And what of developing cooperative regional structures to deal with these needs? The statements, with one exception, say nothing of cooperative and coordinated planning between the states. Yet few priorities were unique to a particular state. Indeed, if these statements reflect actual needs, archivists would seem to be addressing common problems some of which might yield more easily to a regional rather than a state solution. This omission is not a defect in these statements but rather a component that should be built into future planning for the states and region. This omission suggests an important role for organizations such as the regional archival conferences in fostering regional archival planning based on these initial priorities and approaches to records preservation.

The Advisory Boards and Planning: An Opportunity and Test.

To return to the thesis of this paper, the records program has been an opportunity for people with diverse archival and historical interests to work together to identify major weaknesses in the overall state archival program and to agree on priorities and programs to correct these weaknesses. It has been an opportunity for archivists to think in terms of cooperation, resource sharing, and networking, notions once foreign, even treasonous, to many archivists. What is more, this opportunity has been the peculiar province of the state archivist. In thirty-two states the archivist is the state coordinator; in fourteen others the coordinators head the agency that has responsibility for the state archives, and here most state archivists act as deputy or *de facto* coordinator.

But the coordinators and their boards have not responded well to this opportunity. True, they are beginning to use the new rhetoric, but they have yet to follow through with substantive program recommendations. Indeed, a majority of these initial plans are little more than archival laundry lists; only twelve statements are sufficiently focused and developed to qualify as workable planning documents. This performance is but one indicator of the malaise and passivity affecting all but a few advisory boards.

This situation undoubtedly has contributed to the choice of the topic for the NHPRC caucus session of the 1979 SAA annual meeting: "Should the State Advisory Boards Be Abolished?" Making the boards optional is one alternative being considered by the commission. In those states without a board, the archivists and their allies, of course, will have lost one of the most potentially valuable mechanisms ever put in their hands to redirect and restructure the administration of historical records in their states. Further, given the NHPRC's emphasis on activities which involve statewide and regional cooperation and planning efforts, the states without boards and plans will be in a poor position to compete with their better organized neighbors.

But how can state boards improve their planning efforts? One way is by sharing their successes and concerns, by a wider distribution of the best of these "Statements of Priorities and Preferred Approaches." A second is by developing

among the boards a colloquy concerned with mutually perceived problems. And this colloquy should lead to a dialogue between the boards and the commission so that national priorities truly reflect state concerns. And third, as state plans are refined the boards will be in a better position to identify which of their needs stem from common national or regional interests and should be solved jointly, and which priorities stem from particular circumstances and demand a localized solution. In short, the board will be better able to tailor their plans to their own conditions.

But one of the chief problems of all planning activity is recognizing how to plan for particular circumstances when the background of shared problems is only partly understood. Here is where the advisory boards need help. They need assistance in better structuring their membership (here the commission has recently taken steps to insure a stronger archival voice); in the sensitive issue of replacing inactive or ineffective coordinators; and in identifying planning goals and step-by-step procedures to achieve those goals. In short, a program of assistance in long-range statewide archival planning and its administration is desperately needed. Should not the commission alone or in cooperation with the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators set up a planning office to assist states in these matters?

If the records program is an opportunity, it is also a test both nationally and within each state as to whether archivists can and will transcend traditional approaches to archival activity. Given the rapidly changing and sophisticated nature of the archival record, it is a test archivists cannot afford to fail.

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