

Shorter Features

CHRISTOPHER BEAM, *Editor*

The Shorter Features department serves as a forum for sharply focused archival topics which may not require a full-length article. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in areas of archival interest are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Shorter Features should range from 500 to 1,000 words in length and contain no annotation. Papers should be sent to Christopher Beam, Shorter Features Editor, the *American Archivist*, National Archives and Records Service (NNFD), Washington, DC 20408.

Living with a Guide

ROY C. TURNBAUGH

Producing a guide to the holdings of an archives always carries a substantial freight of hopes and ambitions. In the case of *A Descriptive Inventory* (1978) of the Illinois State Archives, the impact was predictable in some areas and greatly disappointing in others. There were several reasons for writing *A Descriptive Inventory*: to inaugurate a multilayered system of intellectual control made up of detailed inventories and subject entries, to develop a professional staff, and to recapture lost institutional prestige. Even more ambitiously, however, the State Archives hoped to use the guide to change the composition of its user group and attract scholars as well as

genealogists. In short, a complete transformation in clientele was anticipated.

What has life with a published guide been like at the state archives? Its impact on the services provided was positive. For the first time, the archives staff was able to deal efficiently with reference requests. Prior to the creation of a body of descriptive inventories which became the basis for the guide, intellectual control of the holdings was spotty. Too much depended on the recollection of staff members who had specialized only in certain records groups. Publication of the guide replaced this patchwork service with a system of access that both

Roy C. Turnbaugh is head of information services at the Illinois State Archives, Springfield. This article is adapted from a paper presented at the 46th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, 21 October 1982, in Boston, Massachusetts.

staff members and patrons could use with ease. An index provided subject access to link series that had no apparent similarities. The availability of the guide has made it likely that a user will receive the information needed and has made it probable that any staff member can supply the answer. In addition, the unpublished descriptive inventories, which formed the basis of the guide, contain very detailed descriptions of series and hence reduce the time and effort spent by users in grappling with what, in times, were many cubic feet of records.

Compiling the guide aided the establishment of priorities in a number of areas. Accession priorities, which had previously been set more by intuition than by logic, were developed. An example of this process was the revelation that there were no prison records in the state archives, although Illinois has several penitentiaries. This lacuna was called to the attention of the records management staff. As a result, four years later, the archives is concluding a program of accessioning records from all state prisons.

Another offshoot of the guide was the setting of arrangement and description priorities. As the guide was being compiled, processed or partially processed records had to be described. Other records, which required a more substantial commitment of time and effort, were tagged for inclusion in a projected revision of the guide. Incoming accessions could thus be fitted into the existing structure.

Restoration, conservation, and retention priorities emerged from a shelf by shelf exploration of the stacks. For the first time, precise budgetary justifications for these measures could be advanced confidently. Rather than simply claim that many records had deteriorated, the staff could now say how many records were in poor condition, what

these records were, and what conservation measures they might require. Not surprisingly, the systematic examination of all holdings of the state archives uncovered many records that did not merit permanent retention. Once identified, these records were deaccessioned to release space for storing records worthy of retention. In short, the guide had a tremendous, almost revolutionary impact on the state archives. Patron access on a planned basis replaced staff vagaries. Considerable savings resulted from this project, the staff became more efficient, staff morale and institutional loyalty improved, and more space and records became available.

One can argue, of course, that none of these improvements, with the exception of the effect on the staff, really depended on the publication of a guide and that had production of *A Descriptive Inventory* been halted after the inventory stage was completed, the results described above might well have been the same. Still, the appearance of a published guide provided the momentum to undertake and complete several ambitious new programs. It meant that the archives could turn its attention to other matters, such as the development of a regional archives system, computerization of the records of the sale of the public domain in Illinois, experimentation with automated access and control systems, and inauguration of outreach programs.

In a sense, the Illinois Regional Archives Depository system, formed in 1976, is the younger sibling of the state archives, but it focuses exclusively on local government records. Permanent funding for the regional program was secured just as the state archives guide was completed. The effort that had gone into publication of *A Descriptive Inventory* was now partially redirected toward production of a complementary guide for the regional system. Moreover, the

existence of a guide to state records added legitimacy to the work on local records and gave the state archives staff somewhat more authority in its dealings with local officials and state university faculty and students.

Concentration on providing access to a single record group, such as the records dealing with the sale of public lands, could also take priority. Completion of the guide provided the impetus for a second project—encoding the 550,000 entries of the public domain sales—and gave the archives the wherewithal to draw on the data processing resources of the secretary of state, resources that proved invaluable in completing the project. Since the guide represented levels of access to and control over records that had already been achieved, it was logical to build on these levels and to use the guide as a basis for the development of automated systems that promised better access, especially subject access, and more precise control over state archives holdings.

Outreach programs could be initiated with some degree of confidence and could be more easily justified in budgetary requests after publication of the guide. Without the guide, outreach would, of course, have been possible; but logically, outreach should follow control of holdings, and control was a main objective of *A Descriptive Inventory*.

In sum, a guide is a *sine qua non* for other projects which an archives with resources and ambitions probably should attempt. Compilation of integrated but unpublished finding aids will not bring about the same results as publication of a guide. A guide, therefore, is the nexus between the inner workings and the public activities of an archives. As the focus of an archives moves from the inside to the outside, a

published guide becomes essential.

One question remains: did the state archives staff learn anything new from the publication of *A Descriptive Inventory*? The most important lesson learned in developing the guide was that it did not attract new groups of users to the archives. The hope was that shortly after publication, the archives would acquire a growing coterie of scholarly patrons. These expectations have not been realized. The state archives had some scholarly users before the guide appeared and continues to have about the same number since it was published.

Where were all the scholars? Perhaps they never existed, at least in sufficient numbers. There have never been enough scholars in the United States to provide adequate justification for maintaining a really effective, tax-supported archival program. Paradoxically, however, archives have been linked traditionally, and not just in the popular consciousness, with the scholarly community. The notion of an archives as a preserve for historians is especially deep-rooted. It is also nonsense. Historians are usually thought of as providing the first rank of scholarly clients for an archives. Since 1933, approximately 30,000 doctorates in all fields of history have been awarded in the United States. Even if the Illinois State Archives received one reference request from each of these historians, living or dead, in the course of a single year, it would still remain heavily dependent on use by bureaucrats and genealogists to justify its continued existence. For a public agency, the complexity of the reference service provided to a user is a factor that is difficult to quantify in annual reports. Yet it is just these complex reference services that are demanded by scholars. Hopes of attracting modest numbers of new scholarly users were groundless. Social scientists use monographs, jour-

nals, and informal personal contacts heavily and do not rely very much on a library to locate references. Formal channels of information dissemination are relatively unimportant to them. The inference is clear: a guide to the holdings of an archives will not be used by those for whom it was prepared if it is prepared primarily for use by scholars.

Guides will not reeducate existing groups of users. Our experience with *A Descriptive Inventory* has shown that users prefer to maintain their habitual patterns of research. When a guide appears, these users prefer to ignore it. A guide presents users with too much information that is not germane to their research. Genealogists, for example, would rather deal with lists of names

than with a guide, and the reference demands they place on the archives have been limited to the conventions they followed long before the guide was published. Government employees find that provenance gives them all the information they need for access.

A published guide can be valuable for an institution, but discovering the value of a guide often means breaking with traditional views of its merits. Developing a guide will help provide a solid substructure for efforts at improving the quality of public service and enhancing the level of control over holdings. While responses may differ from archives to archives, the lesson of publishing a guide remains constant: an archives defines itself by the guide it produces.

Principles for Local Government Records: A Statement of the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators

BRUCE W. DEARSTYNE

Principles for Local Government Records, reprinted below, is an official statement adopted in July 1982 by the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators (NASARA) and published as a supplement to its quarterly newsletter, *NASARA Clearinghouse: News and Reports on Government Records*.

NASARA was organized in 1974 and includes as members state archivists and records managers in almost all of the states. The broad mission of NASARA is to promote awareness and understanding of state archival and records management programs, to encourage and facilitate exchange of information among state archival and records management agencies, to develop and improve professional standards of

government records and archives administration, and to encourage study and research into the problems and concerns of public records administrators.

State archival and records management administrators have opportunities to discuss common problems and issues at annual NASARA meetings. NASARA publishes *Clearinghouse*, which carries news of the organization, the National Archives, and state archival and records management programs. Each issue also has short articles on problems and issues in the area of public records and on completed projects. NASARA's *Principles for State Archival and Records Management Agencies* and *Policy Statement Regarding the Disposition and Preservation of the Official Records of Governors* contain the

Bruce W. Dearstyne is principal archivist for external programs at the New York State Archives, Albany.

association's policy recommendations in these areas. In 1982 NASARA published *State Archives and Records Management Terminology, Measurement, and Reporting Standards*, a manual designed to introduce a more uniform approach among state records programs in these areas. The association has also worked closely with the National Historical Publications and Records Commission in the development of state historical records assessment and reporting projects and works very closely with the steering committee of state historical records coordinators, which sponsored a conference in Atlanta in June 1983 to discuss progress on those projects.

While NASARA's main concern is to improve the care and administration of state government records, the organization is also concerned with improving the administration of local government records. It is particularly concerned with defining the responsibility of state archival and records administration agencies for local government records. An initial draft of this statement was prepared in 1980 by a committee consisting of Cleo Hughes of Tennessee, Lewis Bellardo of Kentucky, and John Dunn of Georgia. After discussion of the draft at the 1981 annual meeting, a new committee, consisting of John Burns of California, Bruce Dearstyne of New York, Louis Manarin of Virginia, and Samuel Silsby of Maine, was appointed to produce a new statement based on that draft. The statement was reviewed and formally adopted, with a few minor changes, at the annual meeting in July 1982. NASARA hopes that the statement will provoke discussion by state archivists and records managers, other archivists, local officials, and the concerned public about ways to improve and strengthen the management of local government records throughout the United States.

More information on NASARA programs and copies of NASARA publications may be obtained from NASARA Executive Director Joseph Halpin, 1141 Santa Rosa, Santa Fe, NM 87501.

Principles for Local Government Records

Adopted by the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, July 1982

Introduction

The National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators recognizes local government records as one of its major concerns. The importance of local governments and their records deserves renewed emphasis. During much of the nation's early history, before the expansion of state and federal services so prominent today, local governments were the most important political entities in terms of impact on people's lives. Today, many local governments have extensive home rule powers and also function as the administrative arms of state and federal agencies, delivering services and enforcing mandates from these higher authorities.

The records of local government document the origin, evolution, and current operations of local government programs. These records provide evidence on policy formulation processes and on administration of those policies. The records include information on taxation and on the management and expenditure of public funds. Information is also present on the legal rights and obligations of the government itself and on the births, deaths, marriages and property holding and legal rights of its citizens. Finally, selected local government records have enduring value for historical and other research.

The information contained in local government records is now more in demand than ever—by administrators concerned with the origin and continuity of public policies; by citizens advocating open government and accountability of public servants; by genealogists and family history researchers tracing their “roots”; by historians studying community or regional history themes; and by other researchers studying social groups or trends in demography, land use, transportation, or economic development.

A number of factors have combined, however, to limit application of sound records management and archival techniques in the creation, maintenance, disposition, and preservation of records. Local governing boards and councils often do not recognize the essential role of records in the efficient administration of modern government operations or the need for systematic records management. Local records custodians frequently take office without previous training or experience in records management or archival techniques, and the everyday pressures and duties of their offices leave them little time to give adequate attention to records issues. There are few publications and training courses on local government records management, and exchange of information on workable records-keeping practices is limited. As a result, records are often not as well managed as their administrative, fiscal, legal and historical importance would warrant. Important records may be difficult to locate when they are needed or they may be inadvertently discarded. On the other hand, obsolete records may be retained longer than necessary, creating an unnecessary and expensive storage burden and competing for space with newer or more important records.

This statement of principles is designed to provide guidance to local government officials and state archival and records management officers interested in improving records management and archival practices. It is intended to encourage a working partnership between state and local officials to ensure sound records management. The principles are general and must be interpreted and applied in light of state and local laws and traditions.

1. Legislation. State legal authority should extend to all the records of all local governments. State law should recognize the responsibility of state archival or records management agencies to ensure uniform procedures in the management of non-current local government records and should cover the following areas:

1. *Definition of records.* The legal definition of what constitutes a “record” of local government should be precise but broad enough to encompass microfilm and modern information-carrying or storage devices such as electronic data processing tapes and discs.
2. *Legal custody.* The local government authority responsible for the custody of records should be designated. This may vary, depending on the type of government, state and local laws, and municipal charter provisions. Possibilities include the chief executive officer, clerk, department heads, or the local governing body.
3. *Disposition, including destruction or transfer.* Disposition procedures, including supervisory

authority of the state archival or records management agency, should be spelled out.

4. Preservation and protection.

5. Microfilmed records. The law should permit microfilmed copies of records to be substituted for originals, provided the standards established by the state archival or records management agency for identification targeting, archival quality, and storage are met. Such microfilm should be legally admissible in court in lieu of the original records.

6. Tampering with, defacing, or stealing records. Specific penalties should be provided for these crimes.

7. Access to researchers and the public. The law should state that records are open to the public with certain exceptions; e.g., situations when disclosure would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy, impair collective bargaining negotiations, disclose trade secrets, or interfere with ongoing police or judicial proceedings.

8. The law should provide that state and local governments may seek the return of official records that have been alienated from government custody.

II. Principles of good management.

Local government administrators and records custodians should recognize the importance of the records created by local government operations and the information these records contain. Records should be managed

systematically, effectively, and economically.

1. Responsibility for management, preservation, and legal disposition of records should be clearly assigned.

2. Records should be easily accessible to government officials and to the public through the use of indexes, systematic filing systems, and other techniques.

3. Inactive or noncurrent records should be segregated from active records and stored away from busy office areas.

4. A vital records program should be developed to ensure the survival of records and information necessary to resume and continue government operations after a serious fire or other catastrophe.

5. Selected records with long legal minimum retention periods, where the original record is no longer needed and a microfilmed copy will suffice, should be considered for microfilming in accordance with guidelines provided by the state archival or records management agency. Microfilm may be substituted for the original records once state standards have been met.

6. Electronic data processing should be employed where warranted.

7. Records personnel should be trained in techniques of records and information management.

8. Obsolete records should be disposed of periodically following legal procedures.

9. Historically valuable records should be preserved in a local government archives, designated local or regional repository, or state archives.

III. *Role of state archival and records management agencies.* The combined state archival and records management agency should work in partnership with local officials in establishing strong records management and archival programs. Where they are not combined, the actual division of supervisory, regulatory, and advisory authority between the state archives and the state records management agency should be clearly defined in each state to ensure a minimum of overlap and a common approach to local government records problems. State agencies should assume the following responsibilities:

1. Records disposition. State authorities should establish legal minimum retention periods and regulate the disposition of local government records. This responsibility can be carried out by having state authorities: review and approve or veto requests from local governments for approval to dispose of specific records; review and approve or modify records retention and disposition schedules submitted by local government; or promulgate and distribute records retention and disposition schedules with statewide applicability. In regulating records disposition, state authorities should consider the administrative, fiscal, legal and historical and other research value of the records.

2. Records management advice and assistance. State authorities should

provide technical advice and assistance on various aspects of records management systems such as legal disposition, handling inactive records, security, protection, indexing, filing systems, storage of inactive records, and electronic data-processing systems. Such advice and assistance may be provided through a combination of field visits to local government offices, workshops and training institutes, and publications.

3. Preservation of historically valuable records. State authorities should develop programs to ensure the identification and preservation of records with enduring historical or other research value. This may be accomplished through: (A) providing advice and assistance to local governments to establish archival programs; (B) providing for the transfer of records to designated local or state repositories; or (C) accessioning historically valuable local government records into the state archives. Choice of a method will depend on the state's laws and traditions. Whichever method is selected, the following minimum standards should be met: (A) records are systematically appraised to identify those with archival value; (B) archival records are properly protected against fire, theft, or other loss; (C) records are arranged and described according to commonly accepted archival standards; (D) records are available for research at reasonable times.

4. Consultation with state and federal agencies. State archival or records management personnel should

consult with state agencies whose regulatory, supervisory, licensing, or other activity have an impact on local government recordskeeping. These personnel should also continuously monitor the recordskeeping impact of federal mandates or federal programs administered through local governments.

5. Microfilming. State archival and records management agencies should take the lead in advising local government on an appropriate role for microfilm. This might include advice on: (A) microfilming records with relatively long legal retention periods and disposition of the original records; (B) microfilming of selected records as part of a vital records program; (C) microfilming historically valuable records to make the information more accessible to researchers; or (D) deterring the microfilming of disposable, noncurrent records. In each case, the state agencies should promulgate standards for identification targeting, and archival filming, processing, and proper storage, based on the standards of the American National Standards Institute and the National Micrographics Association. In addition, state agencies may consider: (A) actually performing the

microfilming of local government records; (B) performing quality checks and tests on microfilm; (C) providing secure storage for the master (camera produced) negative of the film; (D) securing a reference copy of film for research use at the state archives; or (E) securing a copy of the film for use by researchers via interlibrary loan.

6. Conservation and restoration. The state archival and records management agency should develop a statewide strategy to meet records conservation needs and the need to repair or restore deteriorated or damaged records. Such an approach might include: (A) organizing workshops or publishing manuals on conservation administration and techniques; (B) developing or designating a private or public institution somewhere in the state to take the lead in conservation training and in performing the most challenging of conservation procedures; (C) using the state records management or state archives preservation lab to perform conservation work for local governments; or (D) organizing and coordinating a statewide disaster assistance program.