

# Microfilming Activities of the Historical Records Survey, 1935-42

CLIFTON DALE FOSTER

**Abstract:** Although rarely mentioned by scholars, the Historical Records Survey undertook an impressive microfilming program. The 1930s witnessed the development of microphotography to encompass scholarly research materials. Influential in this development was the Historical Records Survey, which microfilmed state and local records, newspapers, and other research materials. The Survey experimented with new applications of microphotography, such as in the compilation of union catalogs, and was responsible for several innovations in the field.

*About the author:* Clifton Dale Foster received his B.A. in history and economics from the University of South Alabama and is a graduate of the History-Library Science (HILS) program at the University of Maryland, where he specialized in archives and manuscripts administration. He has held positions with the National Archives and Records Service, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and as Archivist/Records Manager at George Mason University. He is currently Technical Services Librarian at Mobile College.

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THE HISTORICAL RECORDS SURVEY WAS CONCEIVED in a period of economic depression as part of the New Deal work relief program of the Roosevelt administration. Its primary purpose, like that of several other relief projects, was to provide employment for white-collar workers. This was a unique relief program, however, in that its task was to identify and preserve scholarly research materials and to publish inventories of local records that were to have lasting value.<sup>1</sup> One product of this effort was the thousands of feet of microfilm produced by numerous microfilming projects across the country. Although many of the Survey's other activities have received substantial treatment in historical literature, scholars have seriously neglected this aspect of the program. Yet, the microfilming projects were some of the most innovative activities undertaken at the time. Microphotography for scholarly purposes was in its infancy in the early 1930s. Due in part to the efforts of the Historical Records Survey, this technique was able to reach its adolescence by the end of the decade.

On 15 November 1935 President Franklin D. Roosevelt formally established the Historical Records Survey as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). In the beginning, the Survey was administered by the Federal Writers' Project, one of the Four Arts Programs. Luther H. Evans, a former assistant professor of political science at Princeton University, was appointed national director with an initial budget allocation of \$1,195,800. One year later, the Survey separated from the Federal Writers' Project and became a distinct

program within the WPA's Women's and Professional Division.<sup>2</sup> By 1939, Congress had become increasingly antagonistic towards many New Deal programs. The arts projects came under attack for employing suspected Communists as well as for a number of other reasons. The result was the passage of the Emergency Relief Act of 1939, which ended the Federal Theatre Project and terminated all nationally directed WPA projects. The Historical Records Survey, not a particularly controversial program itself, was allowed to continue under state sponsorship. Finally, in April 1942, as the nation's attention turned to war, the Survey came to an end.

The Survey was organized into state units, each of which had a supervisor who coordinated all activities. In most states, several diverse projects were operating simultaneously. Its largest project was the Survey of County Records, which located, identified, arranged, and described massive amounts of public records found in county archives. The result was the publication of some 628 volumes of inventories. Other programs of major importance included the Survey of Federal Archives, directed by Philip M. Hamer; the Survey of Church Records; and the American Imprints Inventory. The various microfilming activities undertaken by the Survey did not receive the resources or the attention given to some of the other nationally directed projects. Yet their overall long-term contribution to scholarly research was considered by some to be the most promising. Robert Binkley, in a paper on the microfilming projects of the Survey, considered

<sup>1</sup>David L. Smiley, "The W.P.A. Historical Records Survey," in *In Support of Clío: Essays in Memory of Herbert A. Kellar*, William B. Hesseltine and Donald R. McNeil, eds. (Madison, Wis.: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1958), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed administrative history of the Historical Records Survey see William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1969), pp. 751-827.

microfilming to have “an importance as great as the printing-press in the history of Man’s effort to use and store the wisdom of the past.”<sup>3</sup>

By the 1930s microphotography had progressed considerably from its mid-nineteenth-century beginnings. Its usefulness, other than that of a military or novelty nature, was just beginning to be realized, especially by scholars and scholarly institutions. One of the earliest uses of microphotography for scholarly purposes was by the renowned Library of Congress Project “A” in 1927. Under the direction of historian Samuel Flagg Bemis, more than two million pages of European, Canadian, and Mexican materials relating to America were microfilmed. The first Recordak microfilming camera was developed for commercial use by banks in 1928. Its eventual use was to be far more diverse. Robert Binkley’s monumental *Manual on Methods for Reproducing Research Materials* was published in 1931. Although it dealt with documentary reproduction methods in general, a significant part of the manual was devoted to a detailed discussion of microfilming techniques and equipment. For the first time, comprehensive information on microphotography was available in published form.

This movement accelerated as the decade progressed. The Recordak Corporation began microfilming the newspaper files of the *New York Times* covering the years 1914 to 1918. In 1935 the Joint Committee on Materials for

Research sponsored the microfilming of the hearings of the U.S. National Recovery Administration and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. That same year saw the recently established National Archives organize its Division of Photographic Reproduction and Research with Vernon D. Tate as chief. Other important events of the decade included the establishment of the first successful commercial micropublishing firm, University Microfilms; the introduction of the first scholarly publication devoted exclusively to microphotography—*The Journal of Documentary Reproduction*—published by the American Library Association; and the commencement of the Harvard Foreign Newspapers Microfilming Project.<sup>4</sup> Of course there were other developments in the field during this period, but these examples clearly illustrate that microphotography was becoming increasingly popular as a method of preserving and disseminating scholarly research materials. It is within this context that the microfilming activities of the Historical Records Survey were developed. These activities were both an effect of, and an impetus for, the development of microfilming for scholarly purposes.

Microfilming was not in the original plan for the Historical Records Survey. The fact that it was incorporated into many of the programs was due largely to the efforts of Robert Binkley. Binkley, aside from his influence as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Materials for

<sup>3</sup>Robert C. Binkley, “The Moving-Picture Camera Aids the Nation,” October 20, 1938, Files of the Historical Records Survey, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Record Group 69, National Archives, p. 1 (hereafter referred to as HRS Files). Binkley was chairman of the Joint Committee on Material for Research, established in 1930 by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council.

<sup>4</sup>For a more detailed history of microfilming in this period see Jack Rubin, *A History of Micrographics in the First Person* (Silver Spring, Md.: National Micrographics Association, 1980); Lester K. Born, “History of Microform Activity,” *Library Trends* 8 (January 1960): 348–58; Alan M. Meckler, “The Early Years of Scholarly Micropublishing,” *Scholarly Publishing* 12 (July 1981): 339–54; and Meckler, *Micropublishing: A History of Scholarly Micropublishing in America, 1938–1980*, Contributions in Librarianship and Information Science, No. 40 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).

Research, played an important role in the establishment of the Survey and worked closely with Luther Evans in an advisory capacity and as a part-time field director in Ohio. It seems natural that Binkley, as one of the early promoters of microphotography, would try to incorporate this technique into the tasks of the Survey. During the first few months of the Survey's existence, he frequently urged Luther Evans to broaden the project's scope to include microfilming. Evans, although hesitant at first, was eventually convinced and implemented many of Binkley's suggestions.<sup>5</sup>

One of the earliest microfilming projects undertaken was the Microfilming of Public Records Survey, which involved the filming of county and state records. The first, and largest, such project was carried out in Indiana under the supervision of state director Samuel J. Kagan. Completed in 1936, this project filmed some 205,061 pages of old and valuable records from seventeen counties.<sup>6</sup> The actual filming was contracted out to J.Q. Kerrins of the Record Film Corporation. Luther Evans described the equipment used as follows:

His camera is a home made contrivance but seems to be well adapted to bound volume work. He uses a two inch 3.5 lense. He has a cast aluminum base, twenty-four inches square and four inches high. It is ribbed underneath for strength and weighs thirty-five

pounds. In this base he sets a three inch aluminum post five feet high; focusing is achieved by markings on the post and also by viewing the document through ground glass. The camera has a depth of focus of approximately five inches and elbo [sic] clamps are provided for holding bound newspapers and other volumes at an angle when such volumes cannot be opened flat.<sup>7</sup>

According to specifications submitted for bid, the records were filmed on "35mm acetate or non-flammable" film. All filming was done on the premises where the records were located. The finished film was to be "Chrome alm hardened to withstand separation test of not less than 190°." The total cost of filming was reported as \$2,000, less than one cent per page.<sup>8</sup> Copies of these films were deposited in the Archives Division of the Indiana State Library. Kagan reported that "this method not only presents such records to those interested, in a centralized and accessible manner, but will prevent the wear and tear that must always accompany the use of records even with the greatest of care and consideration."<sup>9</sup> As it happened, the microfilming of these records was to prove even more valuable. In 1937 a flood devastated a large part of the state and destroyed or damaged many records housed in county archives. Thanks to microfilming, copies of these materials were

<sup>5</sup>Edward Francis Barrese, "The Historical Records Survey: A Nation Acts to Save Its Memory" (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1980), pp. 101-03; Luther H. Evans to Robert Binkley, 28 October 1935, HRS Files.

<sup>6</sup>"A Statement Concerning the Historical Records Survey in Indiana," attachment to Samuel J. Kagan to Julian P. Boyd, 22 December 1936, HRS Files. For a list of state and local records microfilmed by the Survey see Sargent B. Child and Dorothy P. Holmes, *Bibliography of Research Project Reports: Check List of Historical Records Survey Publications*, WPA Technical Series, Research and Record Bibliography, No. 7, rev. (Washington, D.C.: Federal Works Agency, Works Projects, 1943), pp. 86-98. For Indiana records see also George B. Everton, ed., *The Handy Book for Genealogists*, 6th ed., rev. and enl. (Logan, Utah: Everton Publishers, 1971), pp. 62-64.

<sup>7</sup>Luther H. Evans to Robert Binkley, 23 July 1936, Papers of the Joint Committee on Research Materials, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>8</sup>"Historical Records Survey in Indiana," Kagan to Boyd, 22 December 1936, HRS Files.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

preserved.<sup>10</sup>

Another major county records microfilming project was implemented in New Jersey under the direction of George J. Miller. Some 15,000 county records were filmed, many of them from the pre-Revolutionary War era.<sup>11</sup> The procedure used in this case called for the Survey to furnish the camera and labor while interested or sponsoring institutions supplied raw negative film and the processing of two copies, one negative and one positive. The institution retained the positive copy, and the negative was deposited with the American Documentation Institute, a microfilm copying and distribution service.<sup>12</sup> A Folmer-Graflex Photorecord microfilming camera was used by the New Jersey project. This highly portable camera was capable of reproducing cards, letter-size documents, or bound volumes on 35-mm film.<sup>13</sup> A photograph of this camera and accompanying apparatus is shown in Figure 1. This setup does not differ significantly from many present-day microfilming operations.

The microfilming of public records was implemented in other states but not on as large a scale as that of the two previously mentioned projects. The Louisiana state project microfilmed birth records from the State Board of Health (1911–41) and from the New Orleans Board of Health (1847–1901). The New Jersey survey filmed early court records relating to Bucks County, Pennsylvania.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most innovative microfilming activities undertaken by the Survey dealt with the compilation of union cata-

logs. The idea of a combined catalog for several libraries was fairly new in the 1930s. The application of microphotography to this concept made it even more innovative. Microphotography had not been used in this way before the Historical Records Survey, in cooperation with sponsoring institutions, applied it to libraries in the Philadelphia metropolitan area.

Before the project was actually implemented, an experiment was conducted to determine the feasibility of such a union catalog for the Philadelphia area. The project was based on a proposal made in August 1934 by Theodore R. Schellenberg, then secretary of the Joint Committee on Materials for Research, in which he suggested the use of Recordak cameras, equipped with 16-mm film, in union catalog work. According to a report on the experiment, the Recordak camera “offered a means of getting an inexpensive, full, and accurate record of a library’s holdings in a very short time and with minimum disturbance of local arrangements and routine while it was being made, a record which could easily be transported to a central editorial office or elsewhere where it might be required.”<sup>15</sup> The Recordak Corporation offered the free use of one camera and projector for the experiment. Camera operators were supplied by the Historical Records Survey. The experiment involved twenty libraries from which main entry catalog cards from ALBERT to ALGEM were microfilmed and compared with Library of Congress main entry cards. Library of Congress cards were stamped with library symbols for

<sup>10</sup>Binkley, “Moving-Picture Camera,” 4–5.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Luther H. Evans, “Recent Microfilming Activities of the Historical Records Survey,” *Journal of Documentary Reproduction* 2 (March 1939): 49.

<sup>13</sup>Binkley, “Moving-Picture Camera,” 9.

<sup>14</sup>Child and Holmes, *Bibliography of Research Project Reports*, pp. 86–98.

<sup>15</sup>Paul Vanderbilt, “Report on an Experimental Section of the Proposed Union Catalog of the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area,” 23 August 1935, HRS Files, p. 2.



**Figure 1.** Microfilming of public records in New Jersey. From "Photographs and Exhibit Materials," 1937, files of the Historical Records Survey, records of the Works Projects Administration, Record Group 69, National Archives.

those books found in the Philadelphia libraries. Photographic paper-copy enlargements of microfilmed cards were made for the first copy of any book located for which there was no Library of Congress card. These would then be filed with the Library of Congress master catalog cards to form a complete union catalog.<sup>16</sup>

Two problems immediately developed. First, there was the problem of how to tag film frames that needed enlarging. Second, positive enlargements of individual frames could not be produced economically from the Recordak films. The only enlarging process available from the Recordak Corporation at the time required the enlargement of every frame on a roll.<sup>17</sup>

The first problem was resolved by fitting a Model 6 Recordak projector with an attachment to punch a small hole in

the film margin corresponding to a particular frame that needed enlarging. The second problem was slightly more difficult to resolve. The Willson Magazine Camera Company, later renamed Vi-Cam Photo Company, was approached. This company was known to build special photographic equipment from spare camera parts. Through the ingenuity of Edward McNutt, a special enlarger was built which provided the solution. The project paid \$54.50 for this invention, which was a prototype of microfilm printers used by libraries today. After each roll of microfilm was compared with the master catalog and marked for enlarging, it was sent to the Willson Company, who returned positive paper-copy enlargements of each marked frame the following day. The McNutt machine was described as follows:

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 2-4.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 4-5.



It was very small, containing an automobile headlight, condensing lenses, and a special mechanism for keeping the film in exact focus while still allowing it to be drawn through the enlarger by hand. The lense was a small f 1.9. The degree of enlargement was twelve diameters, which, from so small a negative, requires great optical accuracy.<sup>18</sup>

The experiment was an obvious success, not only for proving the feasibility of a union catalog for Philadelphia, but also for the adaptation of microfilming to a new use. In December 1935 Paul Vanderbilt and Julian Boyd, directors of the project, issued a statement of intended procedure for the proposed union catalog. They stated that, "The suitability of [the Recordak camera's] application to the photographing of library cards is now without question."<sup>19</sup> The project was carried out with sixty-five libraries in the Philadelphia area participating. The same procedure was used in the compilation of a union catalog for libraries in Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>20</sup>

Two similar microfilming projects were undertaken in the District of Columbia, following much the same procedure. The first involved the Department of Agriculture Library. Its purpose was "the filming of special catalogs prepared by that library on particular subjects pertaining to the field of Agriculture."<sup>21</sup> The second project was much larger for it concerned the compilation of the Union Catalog for the Library of

Congress. The Survey was responsible for filming catalog cards for special libraries in the Washington, D.C. area.<sup>22</sup>

Another major concern of the Historical Records Survey was the microfilming of newspapers, particularly those published since 1865, or the beginning of the "wood pulp" era in paper manufacturing. The Survey was heavily involved in the indexing of newspapers. Recognizing the deteriorating condition of many of these, the Survey began an effort to preserve on microfilm the information they contained. As Sargent B. Child, Evans's successor as national director, explained, "making indexes to newspapers which fall apart when handled is scarcely an activity which we can intelligently endorse."<sup>23</sup> Microfilming was seen as having other advantages as well. Robert Binkley envisioned a time when "the major files of American newspapers will not only be indexed, but will be nationally accessible so that any scholar at any point may borrow a film copy of any file for a given year."<sup>24</sup> In order to accomplish this objective, Binkley outlined the "Conditions Governing the Operation of Newspaper Indexing Projects, Including the Microfilming of Selected Newspaper Files."<sup>25</sup> The procedure followed provided for three copies of a newspaper file to be made. The negative microfilm copy would be deposited with an agency approved by the WPA, such as the American Documentation Institute. One positive copy

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>19</sup>Paul Vanderbilt and Julian Boyd, "Intended Procedure for Compiling the Union Library Catalogue of the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area," 18 December 1935, HRS Files.

<sup>20</sup>Adeline Barry to Luther H. Evans, 16 January 1936, HRS Files.

<sup>21</sup>"Report on Microfilming in the District of Columbia by the Historical Records Survey of the Works Administration," attached to John W. Bowker, Jr., to Luther H. Evans, 21 July 1937, HRS Files.

<sup>22</sup>For a listing of libraries involved see note 21 and Luther H. Evans, "Microfilm Program of the Historical Records Survey (Works Progress Administration)" *Journal of Documentary Reproduction* 1 (Winter 1938): 59-60.

<sup>23</sup>Sargent B. Child, *Status and Plans for Completion of Inventories of the Historical Records Survey* (Newark, N.J.: Historical Records Survey, 1941), p. 17.

<sup>24</sup>Robert Binkley to Herbert Keller, 31 October 1939, HRS Files.

<sup>25</sup>Robert Binkley, "Conditions Governing the Operation of Newspaper Indexing Projects, Including the Microfilming of Selected Newspaper Files," 21 January 1939, HRS Files.

would be used to replace the original newspaper file. The other positive copy would be made available through inter-library loan. A microfilm copy of the newspaper index would be made on demand.

The most active newspaper microfilming program was in Ohio. Sponsored by the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, this project microfilmed several major newspapers, including the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, the *Toledo Blade*, the *Akron Beacon Journal*, and the *Dayton News*, as well as several smaller papers.<sup>26</sup> The Survey supplied labor for the filming of Milwaukee newspapers for the period 1837–1920, including the *Milwaukee Sentinel* and the *Milwaukee Journal*.<sup>27</sup> The Kentucky project filmed selected years of the *Lexington Herald*, the *Lexington Leader*, and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*.<sup>28</sup> The New Jersey Survey filmed the *Hasbrouck Heights-Corona News-Letter*.<sup>29</sup> In most cases, the Survey supplied the camera and the labor while sponsoring institutions provided raw film and paid processing costs.

A number of other microfilming projects were undertaken by the Historical Records Survey. As part of the American Imprints Inventory, catalog cards from the Rare Book Room of the Library of Congress were microfilmed. The New York City Historical Records Survey microfilmed catalog cards from the U.S. History catalog of the New York Public Library and the American

Loyalist Transcripts, 1783–1790. Early American broadsides were microfilmed in Connecticut and Maryland.<sup>30</sup> As part of the Bibliography of American Literature, the Pennsylvania project filmed a bibliography on the writings of Van Wyck Brooks. The Maine Historical Records Survey produced a microfilm copy of *Counties, Cities, Towns, and Plantations of Maine: A Handbook of Incorporations, Dissolutions, and Boundary Changes*.<sup>31</sup>

It is difficult to assess the worth of the Historical Records Survey. No doubt it left scholars with a great source of information in the form of inventories of county archives (perhaps its most notable achievement) and other publications. Yet, as several writers have pointed out, the published and unpublished legacies of the Survey have, to a large extent, remained neglected or have been destroyed. The experience of Leonard Rapport is indicative of this. When attempting to locate unpublished Survey inventories in Maine, he was told that “they were dumped from a wharf into Casco Bay.”<sup>32</sup> There may be one consolation, however. As Rapport and others have suggested, the primary purpose of the Survey was to provide jobs for unemployed white-collar workers. Perhaps it is from this perspective that the Historical Records Survey should be judged.

In many instances, the products of the Survey’s microfilming projects have not fared much better. In the case of the New Jersey public records, the micro-

<sup>26</sup>Laurence R. Bartlett, “Big City Newspapers Filmed,” *The Ohio Newspaper* 19 (December 1938): 5–6. A card file in the Newspapers and Current Periodicals Division of the Library of Congress suggests that a number of other papers may have been filmed.

<sup>27</sup>William H. Herrman, “Microphotographing Bound Volumes of Milwaukee Newspapers” (no date), Records of the Joint Committee on Materials for Research, Library of Congress.

<sup>28</sup>Child and Holmes, *Bibliography of Research Project Reports*, p. 94.

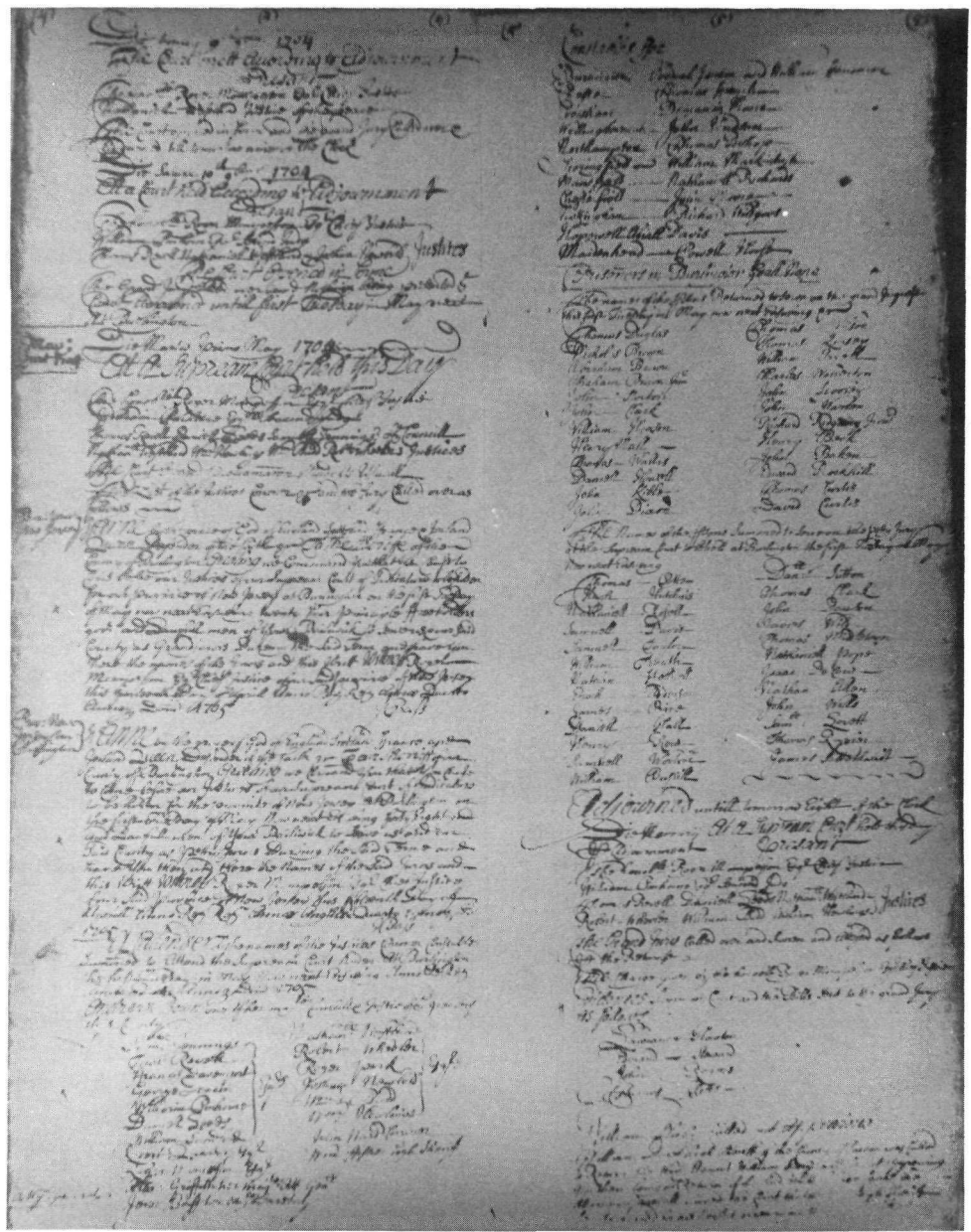
<sup>29</sup>Evans, “Recent Microfilming Activities,” 49.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 48–9.

<sup>31</sup>Found in the Microforms Division of the Library of Congress.

<sup>32</sup>Leonard Rapport, “Dumped from a Wharf into Casco Bay: The Historical Records Survey Revisited,” *American Archivist* 37 (April 1974): 210.





**Figure 2.** Document microfilmed by the Historical Records Survey. George J. Miller to Luther Evans, 28 October 1937. Files of the Historical Records Survey, Records of the Works Projects Administration, Records Group 69, National Archives.

film copies were “discovered only two years ago in an unopened crate of WPA materials.”<sup>33</sup> Copies of newspapers deposited with the American Documentation Institute have long since vanished and were never listed in guides to their holdings. Microfilm copies of Louisiana birth records are in the State Vital Records Office but are not accessible for research because of state law.<sup>34</sup> In other cases—the Indiana public records, for example—microfilm copies have been made readily available to researchers.

One reason for the lack of interest in, and neglect of, this resource is the poor quality of the microfilm copies. As shown in Figure 2, the text of many filmed documents is almost illegible. One general complaint of those repositories housing copies of Historical Records Survey microfilm was that the film images are unreadable. This is due, in part, to the poor condition of the original document and to shortcomings of photographic technology in the 1930s. No doubt time has taken its toll on the film as well. The purpose of the microfilming projects was to preserve the records of the past and make them available for researchers. Fifty years hence, it seems that the accomplishments of the Survey have, in many ways, fallen short of this objective.

It may not be possible to fully justify the microfilming activities in the way scholars have justified the Survey as a whole, that is, as a program that provided jobs. Microfilming, by its nature, is not a labor-intensive process. In fact one of its greatest assets is that it requires only a few people to do a great deal of work. Therefore, only a very limited number of workers were involved in these activities.

This is not to say, however, that these microfilming projects did not make a

lasting contribution or were not of any value. The Survey served as a promulgator of the micrographic technique applied to scholarly research materials. At various times the Survey exhibited its micrographic arts and shared its experiences through newspaper articles and journal publications, thereby educating interested individuals in the possibilities of the technique. Many institutions and individuals contemplating the use of microphotography sought the advice and assistance of the Survey. In this way, it served as a forum for the expression of new ideas and new applications of the technique. Through this exchange of information, the Survey was able to relate the lessons learned from its experiences to other projects. Furthermore, the Survey served as a sponsor for microfilming projects which otherwise might not have been carried out given the economic conditions of the time.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the microfilming projects of the Survey was in the area of innovation. The Survey was a proving ground. By applying microphotography to new and different situations, it assisted in the development of new equipment and techniques. The microfilming of county records, the use of microphotography in the compilation of union catalogs, and the invention of the McNutt enlarger are examples of this contribution. This innovativeness was spurred, to a large degree, by the cooperation of government and private enterprise. By providing funds, expertise, and labor, the Survey was able to work with commercial firms to develop new applications. Firms such as Recordak, Record Film Corporation, and Folmer-Graflex were in turn very responsive to the needs of the Survey and were willing to experiment. This relationship was beneficial to

<sup>33</sup>Karl J. Niederer, New Jersey Department of State, Archives Section, to Dale Foster, 8 February 1984.

<sup>34</sup>Randolph S. Jones, Louisiana State Vital Records, to Dale Foster, 27 January 1984.

both parties; the Survey received use of the latest available equipment while the commercial firms were granted government-sponsored business contracts in a period of economic depression.

Finally, these microfilming projects must be viewed in the historical context of a developing technology. The application of this method for scholarly purposes was just beginning in the 1930s. Largely through the efforts of the Survey, microfilming was to gain major importance and come into widespread use. If nothing else, the microfilming activities of the Historical Records Survey helped prove the practical utility of microfilming research materials.