

Commentaries & Case Studies

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The Commentaries and Case Studies department is a forum for sharply focused archival topics that may not require full-length articles. Commentaries and Case Studies articles generally take the form of analyses of archivists' experiences implementing archival principles and techniques within specific institutional settings, or short discussions of common theoretical, methodological, or professional issues. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in areas of archival interest are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Papers should be sent to Managing Editor, *The American Archivist*, Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal, Suite 504, Chicago, IL 60605.

State Archives and Metropolitan Records: The Case of Chicago

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This article offers a brief study in one of the most demanding and problematic areas of American state archival programs—the archival and records management needs of a state's metropolis. It outlines the recent steps that the Illinois State Archives has taken to deal with that problem in Chicago, and explains how it was possible to bring about that project. It is hoped that this explanation will be of use to other state archives that face the same task.

From December 1983 until March 1986, staff of the Illinois State Archives drew up records retention and disposal schedules for

more than 200 public agencies in Chicago and Cook County. The work resulted in 475 schedules which were formally approved, as required by law, by the Cook County Local Records Commission. Those schedules embraced 514,559 cubic feet of records material. The project's total cost was \$659,000, of which National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grants contributed \$126,000. Its overall goals were to establish a records disposal program for local governmental agencies there and produce accessions for a unified city and county archives in Chi-

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The origins of this project date from as early as 1961, when the Illinois Local Records Act placed the responsibility for local government records management and archival services upon the Illinois Secretary of State, who also serves officially as state archivist. That meant that this burden was in fact, and correctly, placed upon the State Archives. Yet twenty-two years passed before it was dealt with fully, despite a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1976 that made it possible for the State Archives to establish a system of six regional archival depositories (the Illinois Regional Archival Depository [IRAD] system) to supply the mandated services to all other counties in Illinois.

Cook County and Chicago were included in the original planning for the IRAD system, but that portion of the plan proved unsuccessful. The State Archives' first five-year developmental plan, fashioned in 1976 with the support of the State Archives Advisory Board, identified the delivery of all legally mandated records services to Chicago and Cook County as one of its principal goals. The first steps taken under that plan involved Archives staff visits to agencies in Chicago. Until that time, the Archives' presence there had been slight at best. In addition, it was necessary that staff members contact area cultural agencies, libraries, and universities to explain the Archives' overall goals and to build support for them. (The Archives Advisory Board members were especially helpful in this.) It was a slow process but an educational one, and by the latter part of 1977 the chief barrier to any public records program in Chicago had become only too clear. Public agencies there regularly had been supplied with ample funds to rent storage space in the area. Those funds had been channeled to politically "right" landlords, and all excess or outdated records had been moved to their facilities for storage. This system

contented everyone involved, particularly the agency administrators who saw no records problems at all. The situation was almost a seamless web: the Archives' efforts to supply services were blocked, and the question of a Chicago archival depository stood moot since no accessions were possible for it.

Under these circumstances it was necessary to adopt tactics of patience, persistence, and maintenance of a presence in Chicago. The last step was taken largely through steady attendance at meetings of organizations of local officials and cooperation with projects of the Chicago Metro History Fair and other organizations. These labors were not always inspiring, but they were sustained by a confident knowledge that a system of public records such as Chicago had, in which records were endlessly and expensively amassed with no plan for their disposal, could not long endure. And a few tremors did occur. In 1978 Mayor Michael Bilandic actually appointed an official city archivist for Chicago. It is true that official had no staff, and that he was dismissed in 1979 by Mayor Jane Byrne after Bilandic's disastrous election defeat in April of that year, but the event was a rent in the curtain. City Hall did indeed know what an archivist was, and that one could actually be placed on the payroll.

But not every event was promising. The state's Local Records Act placed the final approval of all local records schedules into the hands of two records commissions—one for Cook County and Chicago, and one with authority over all local records for the remainder of the state. The second, or "downstate," commission met regularly from its inception and provided excellent services to the agencies for which it bore responsibility. But the Cook County Commission was moribund. The act directed that the commission meet only at the call of its chairman, and the commission fell into the hands of chairmen who simply did not call meetings. (From 1974 to 1983 only two

meetings were convened, at one of which a quorum did not appear.)

In 1982 the system displayed its first major, and inevitable, breakdown. The Chicago Board of Education suddenly faced bankruptcy, and among its other retrenchments it planned to abandon its grand quarters on LaSalle Street. But the building's basement and storerooms were crammed with volumes and papers, much of which the board could not even identify. The emergency was tailored for the Archives' purposes. The Archives' offer to aid in resolving the problem was welcomed by board officials; we encountered the first success with a major Chicago public agency. (As it happened, the records that subsequently were scheduled included volumes dating from the board's establishment in 1840, many of which had survived the great Chicago fire of 1871 almost unscathed.)

Encouraged by that project, the Archives prepared a grant proposal to NHPRC for funds to support the increased staff that would be needed for more scheduling projects for city and county agencies. It seemed clear that these units would soon meet with the sort of financial pinch that the Board of Education had endured, and that would provide similar opportunities for the Archives' work. It should be emphasized that it was not *known* that that would be the case. The Archives' program had relied on its natural allies of problems of time and space, but no one could be certain that events concerning either of them would be of the right nature or timing to suit that program's purposes fully. The early months of 1983 were a time of some apprehension; the worst case scenario involved the receipt of a substantial grant and the denial of entrée to agency offices to put it to use. Also on the horizon was an anticipated change of administration in City Hall and the question of what it would bring.

The change brought good times. The new mayor, Harold Washington, who faced a host of problems when he assumed office,

announced that records management and archival services were desirable things, and he instructed his principal executive officer to take that message to all city agency heads. And the mayor's first executive order concerned freedom of information. It antedated by a year the State of Illinois' Freedom of Information (FOI) Act and included a provision uncommon to any such legislation at the federal level or in other states: a requirement that every agency should prepare and make available to the public, upon request, a complete listing of all records in its possession. The effect of this provision on most Chicago agencies was one of flat consternation. The questions came quickly: What *were* such lists? What were they to contain? How should they look? Has anyone around here ever made up such a list? The Archives staff called group meetings of city agency heads (the mayor's office directed them to attend) and explained that the records schedules they could prepare for their agencies were the very thing they needed, and that the Archives would do that work at no charge. At almost the same time, NHPRC informed us that our grant proposal was successful. The timing of those events was excellent. With the mayor's office behind the program and the NHPRC's money in its account, work became routine. It was a rather great routine, of course, and it soon grew larger still when Cook County and suburban agencies joined in to demand our staff's services. They were aware of pending state FOI legislation, which contained the same public records list provision as the mayor's executive order and which would affect them in the same way.

After that, only one area of concern remained and it was, not surprisingly, Illinois politics. The period 1983–1986 coincided exactly with what will commonly be known in Chicago's history as “Council Wars.” The Archives had to consider how its staff might be seen in the context of those political struggles. The staff was committed

to work closely with a set of brawling Chicago Democrats who might easily have taken them to be (as they were) from “down-state” and representatives of a Republican secretary of state. The potential difficulty was resolved by a very conscious practice of strict professionalism. Directions were issued that no one was to speak about politics to anyone, not even jokingly. And sometimes the staff donned lab coats, gloves, and clipboards more often than was actually necessary.

That aside, the project’s work assignments came to read like the entries in the City Hall and County Building telephone directories. They included the county’s Bureau of Administration, Highway Department, sheriff, medical examiner, Department of Public Health, treasurer, Forest Preserve District, and the vast Cook County Hospital; the Chicago Police Department, the Department of Aviation (which administers O’Hare Airport), the Chicago Transit Authority, and the Board of Election Commissioners; the departments of revenue, purchasing, and budget and management; and the city comptroller, the Corporation Counsel, the city clerk (the clerk of the city council), the Chicago World’s Fair Authority-1992 (abruptly dismantled in 1985), the Jury Commission, and the Brookfield Zoo. The project was not able to provide services to all public agencies in the area during its grant period, notably, the Chicago Park District, the Metropolitan Sanitary District, and the clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County. Work has continued with such agencies since that time.¹

Another stroke of good fortune occurred in 1983 with the appointment of a new chair of the Cook County Local Records Com-

mission—Mary Kehoe Griffin, whose name is included here with the specific intent of paying her the regard she deserves. As noted above, all former chairs of that commission regarded that position as a totally indolent one. Kehoe Griffin understood the commission’s use and value and at once set regular monthly meetings. The commission’s other members have been attentive as well and deserve commendation for their work. They are supported in that work, now, by three full-time State Archives records analysts based in the Chicago area to continue the program.

The Illinois Local Records Act, in all its provisions, now runs in Chicago. The Cook County project’s last goal was attained in 1987 when Northeastern Illinois University agreed to serve as the site of the seventh, and final, IRAD depository, to house the archival records of the city and county. The project’s first major accession—1,500 cubic feet of material from the office of the city clerk for the period 1833–1940—has been fully processed and will be deposited at the university as the core of the IRAD collection there.

What value is this case study for other state archival programs? In those cities where true municipal archives programs have been established (e.g., New York and Philadelphia), the impetus has come from local officials and agencies, as it ideally should.² The case was different in Chicago because of the antagonism that exists between the city and county governments. A locally supported archives in Chicago necessarily would have had to be either a city or county agency, and neither could serve as a centralized depository for the records of both jealous entities. The State Archives, as a

¹The Park District at the time was headed by an implacable political opponent of the mayor, but he has since been replaced and as of January 1988, Archives staff are preparing to inventory and schedule the district’s materials. The Sanitary District, an independent governmental entity, has been moved by its impending centennial in 1989 to request our services, and it is the next major project scheduled after the Park District. Such great numbers of the circuit court’s records have been (and are being) impounded by the FBI in the course of the Greyhound investigations that work with them has not been possible, and most likely will not be feasible until after all prosecutions are completed.

²New York simply engulfs five counties, and how many are aware that those counties even exist? The city and the county of Philadelphia have been coterminous since 1854.

neutral third party, has stepped in to bridge this gap. Illinois' state archives is not unlike others in rather small towns—state capitals—at a considerable distance from larger cities in the state. This geographic characteristic has been the basis of a usually unspoken excuse by most state archives to make no real efforts to deal with the archival problems of major cities. Whatever the reason, the notorious fact remains that cities in the United States are the governmental units worst served in the care of archival records. While there are great hindrances to state archives' abilities to redress that failing, the other fact is that a basic obligation to provide those needed services lies within state archives' responsibilities. The question remains: "If not us, who?"

The crucial step of the Illinois Archives' efforts in Chicago lay in the barren years between 1977 and 1982. Despite the lack of return for the efforts made then, and the resulting disappointment, it was vitally important that the Archives sustained its local contacts and presence. The conviction that the records practices in use there could not

continue indefinitely was, at best, cold comfort. When success finally did arrive, it was possible to ascribe some of it to luck—certainly no direct efforts of the Archives caused the Board of Education's fiscal problems or influenced Mayor Washington's election victory and his freedom of information executive order. Those were all "breaks," certainly; but if the Archives staff had not maintained its presence in Chicago, it would never have been in a position to take advantage of those chances when they did occur. The careful waiting game of 1977–1982 paid its results then.

The lesson here is for state archives to build and maintain relations with agencies in major cities, even if, for example, there exists no legislation that would support that work. Legislation can be achieved in time. It is clear that such work will not be easy to carry out and might even be actively unpleasant at its outset. Yet, what is an honest alternative? What other professional group bears more of a natural responsibility to promote the growth of archival services for major cities? The question of "If not us, who?" should, really, hardly even be asked.