

## Research Article

# The Ohio Historical Society and Establishment of the State's Archives: A Tale of Angst and Apathy

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**Abstract:** The author traces the evolution and development of Ohio's state archives from the early 1900s to 1959, the year legislation passed naming the Ohio Historical Society as the archives administration. The failure to establish a clear archival authority and the absence of sustained financial support forms part of the story. That the Ohio Historical Society, beset by multiple demands on limited resources, a quasi-public relationship to the state, and an uncertainty about its role and mission, became a captive of its involvement in the effort to preserve the state's archives is also part of this tale of angst and apathy.

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MORE THAN A CENTURY AND A HALF ago, Richard Bartlett, secretary of the State of New Hampshire, observed that providing for "the safe and perfect keeping of the Public Archives, is so obviously one of the first and most imperative duties of a legislature, that no argument could make it plainer to a reflecting mind."<sup>1</sup> Further, after decades of experience, an accepted tenet among archivists recognizes that state public records acts should clearly designate and define the authority of the state archival agency and establish a central authority to administer an archival program.<sup>2</sup> Archivists have also learned that when legislatures fail to act as Bartlett proposed, when budgetary support is nonexistent or inadequate, when leadership is either ambivalent or uncertain, and when state archival bodies either refuse or are unable to act responsibly in preserving and making available historical records, then the promise and potential for the archives is blunted.

In Ohio, the history of the state archives clearly demonstrates that all these elements and conditions stifled and delayed the development of a sound archival program by the host institution, the Ohio Historical Society. The concept and spirit of the word *movement* does not apply to the effort to establish a central archival agency to preserve Ohio's historical records. From the early 1900s to the present, sporadic, diffused activity—spurred by crisis; ignored by legislators and administrators; influenced by librarians, historians, and archaeologists; and shaped by the peculiar nature and perceived mission of the parent institution, the Ohio Historical Society—dominated the history of the state archives.

The Ohio Historical Society now serves as the archives administration for the State of Ohio and its political subdivisions. After the passage of legislation in 1959, Bruce C. Harding, the first full-time state archivist, wrote, "This act is a step toward the realization of a dream over fifty years old."<sup>3</sup> That dream of a state archives developed at the beginning of the twentieth century. The period from 1803, when Ohio became a state, to 1904, when a historian first surveyed the state's historical records, qualifies as a century of neglect. At the beginning of statehood, preservation of the state's records rested with the office of origin or with some other office charged with their care. Little concern for the early records was evident as the seat of Ohio government moved four times during the 1800s. Such activity hardly made a central archival entity in the state a possibility.

### Beginnings

During the 1880s and 1890s, the legislature gave some attention, on a very selective, piecemeal approach, to the state's historical materials. In 1897, the legislature appropriated \$2,000 to purchase the letters and proclamations of Arthur St. Clair, governor of the Northwest Territory, for the State Library of Ohio. This institution, established to provide service to the legislature and state government and libraries in the state, developed as the de facto historical library for the state. Later, the state library also acquired the papers of former governors, Return Jonathon Meigs, Thomas Worthington, Ethan Allan Brown, Samuel Huntington, and Micajah Williams.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Richard G. Wood, "Richard Bartlett, Minor Archival Prophet," *American Archivist* 17 (January 1954): 14.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, H. G. Jones, *Local Government Records: An Introduction to Their Management, Preservation and Use* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1980), 24–25, 29.

<sup>3</sup>"Ohio's Public Records," Press Release, January 1959, Archives-Library Division Chief Files, Ohio Historical Society. This and other items identified as being from the division chief's files existed in that office at the Ohio Historical Society at the time I occupied the position and served as state archivist.

<sup>4</sup>In 1974, the State Library of Ohio loaned these collections to the Ohio Historical Society for inclusion

By the 1890s, several organizations with an interest in preserving Ohio's history had come into being: the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society (now the Ohio Historical Society and hereafter referred to as the society) in 1885; the Old Northwest Genealogical Society in 1897; the Western Reserve Historical Society in 1867; the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio in 1831 (now the Cincinnati Historical Society); and the Ohio Archaeological Society in 1875.

At its inception, the society sought to promote a knowledge of Ohio archaeology and history. The society focused its resources and energy on the exploration and development of prehistoric and historical sites, historical publications, and a library. None of the previous archaeological and historical societies had received direct support from the state. In 1875, the state provided \$500 to the Ohio Archaeological Society to participate in the centennial celebration in Philadelphia. The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, a privately incorporated organization, clearly embraced a public responsibility and developed a public character. Receipt of state funds in 1889 by the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society certainly started the process. Coincidentally, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the society annually searched for a home. From a third-floor room in the capitol in 1889, the society moved to consolidate its growing library with the state library in 1890; in 1894 the society moved its specimens, artifacts, and library to Orton Hall at Ohio State University (OSU). Three years later, the society's library again relocated to the state library, and the exhibits remained at the university.

In 1899, the books returned to the university's expanded Orton Hall.<sup>5</sup>

A burgeoning, aggressive acquisitions program brought about space problems for the society, and in 1902 the organization moved again, this time to Page Hall at the university. Eight years later, the state provided \$100,000 for a building on the campus, and in 1913 the building finally was occupied. In 1927 a wing was added to the building to house the society's library, but not until 1951 was shelving in the wing completed. The next year, new library offices and a reading room became available. The intermittent movement of the library between OSU and downtown Columbus and a preoccupation with space problems for growing printed material, archaeological, and historical collections hardly placed the society in a position to actively pursue becoming the state's archives.<sup>6</sup>

### Calls for an Ohio State Archives

As the society grew and wrestled with the problems caused by its success, the state of Ohio took steps in 1904 to improve its recordkeeping and preservation. Legislation created a bureau of inspection and supervision of public offices and established a uniform system of public accounting, auditing, and reporting under the auditor of state.<sup>7</sup>

Two years later, the clarion call for a central state archives came from the historical profession. Working in collaboration with the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association (AHA), history professor Richard T. Stevenson of Ohio Wesleyan University conducted the first survey of Ohio's public

in a microfilm edition. See Linda E. Kalette, *The Papers of Thirteen Early Ohio Political Leaders: An Inventory to the 1976-77 Microfilm Editions* (Columbus: Ohio Historical Society, 1977), 5.

<sup>5</sup>Harlow Lindley, "Chronology and Roster of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society," *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* 54 (1945): 248-49.

<sup>6</sup>Lindley, "Chronology and Roster," 248-49.

<sup>7</sup>"The Archives or Public Records of the State of Ohio, a Brief Resume Prepared by Miss B. E. Josephson, Chief, Department of Documents," c. 1945, Division Chief Files, Ohio Historical Society.

records. The results of Stevenson's study were published in the AHA annual report in 1906. He noted that "the State of Ohio has not yet reached the advanced position of some other States in the establishment of a central agency for the care and use of its official archives." Stevenson reported that an effort had been made in 1906 to draw the legislature's attention to the need, and he expressed the hope "that it will not be long ere the consideration of the question will result in such an organization of means to centralize the official records and put them in charge of a department of archives and history which will satisfy the demands of the most exacting lover of order."<sup>8</sup>

Stevenson believed that obtaining access to records in various offices posed no problem, but noted that "departmental control of records and the overlapping of interests and the common use . . . of the same vaults" made it "difficult for the student to discover what he may want from the stored records of the State." Concluding on an optimistic note, Stevenson observed that "the State is on the upgrade in the effort to complete and preserve its records" and cited as an example the 1904 legislation. Further, and most importantly, he opined that Ohio did not "lack the spirit of the historian or is not proud of its possessions." Recent developments in the Ohio historical community convinced him that "the desire to preserve archives after the most approved fashion" existed.<sup>9</sup>

Stevenson's optimism may have been unbounded. It also proved to be unfounded. His survey revealed that the archives of the supreme court, attorney general, and department of agriculture, among others, were in the vaults under the main capitol building or in respective offices in "steel cases, bound volumes and

bundles." In the governor's office, he found most of the usual executive records in "good condition," but in the governor's vault, he found a veritable jumble of records in boxes and bundles, as well as correspondence "running back many years." These latter records lacked the "care, analysis, and classification . . . to make them of immediate value to one engaged in research." He hoped for future appropriations to provide better care and order. In the secretary of state's office, all seemed in good order except for the manuscript journals of the general assembly. Stevenson did not then know that the journals for 1803 to 1837 were missing. (It was believed that they had been destroyed in a fire in February 1852.) In 1942, William D. Overman, curator of history and archivist for the society, reported finding a letter from 1836 revealing that the original journals were either lost or found in "more pieces than of which it was originally composed" at offices of the state printer.<sup>10</sup>

In 1906, William C. Mills, curator of the society, presented his annual exhortation to the members that they should "devote every honorable effort to secure a permanent and adequate home for the largest and finest archaeological collection in Ohio." He observed that the state "was practically free from invasions by other institutions outside of our state, for the purpose of carrying away our state treasures." Mills reiterated the rapid growth of the library and the inadequate space for that collection. He also ventured the opinion that "we, as a Society, are not making the necessary effort incumbent upon us, to secure the state papers and even the libraries of our most prominent men in Ohio." Presumably the "state papers" to which Mills referred were those executive papers identified in the Steven-

<sup>8</sup>*Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1906* 2 (Washington, 1908): 165.

<sup>9</sup>*Annual Report*, 165.

<sup>10</sup>*Annual Report*, 165; William D. Overman, "Ohio Archives," *American Archivist* 5 (January 1942): 37-38.



son report. Yet the society's involvement with Stevenson's survey and a growing awareness on the part of the officers and staff of a larger historical mission in Ohio indicates a recognition of the conditions and circumstances affecting the state's historical records.<sup>11</sup>

A second reason for discounting Stevenson's optimism in 1906 for the state's archival future rests on the simple fact that twenty-one years elapsed before the state took definite steps to preserve its historical records. Between 1906 and 1927, the legislature did tinker with archives-related laws: considering how copies of records were made admissible as evidence in court; imposing a penalty for altering public documents; restoring lost or stolen records; reclaiming lost records; reclaiming land when records were lost; requiring county recorders to leave seals and books to his or her successor; and permitting county commissioners to transcribe worn or defaced records so as to have the same legal force as the original. Certainly no legislation anticipated the creation of a separate archival entity either within or outside of state government. Little evidence exists to indicate that the society's board of trustees or officers, the historians, or other interested parties aggressively sought to establish the state's archives during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Society officials devoted their attention and energy to things archaeological, promoting and building the library collections and manuscript collections, securing funding for nonarchival activities, and obtaining a separate building.

### Historical Society's Quest for Space and Establishment of State Archives

In 1910, the state granted \$100,000 for a new building, and the next year Ohio State

University granted land on which to build. In December 1913 the society's library moved from OSU's Page Hall to the Ohio State Museum. Additions to the society's library collections between 1914 and 1926, the creation of separate library and museum divisions in 1920, and the establishment of a newspaper department in the library in 1925 provide evidence of an active, vital, expanding organization. Such growth only produced the need for more space.<sup>12</sup> Starting in 1920, society officials annually requested funds with which to acquire more space. Simultaneously, certain influential military and political figures advocated adding state funds to privately held money for construction of a memorial honoring those who served and sacrificed in World War I. The influence of two former governors, James E. Campbell, then president of the society, and James M. Cox, helped link the expansion of the library-museum building and the war memorial. They decided that the money would "be employed in building . . . an addition to the Society building" to house "exclusively, collections and data, historical and otherwise, bearing upon the Great War." In 1922, partial construction began, and the next year the legislature appropriated \$238,000 to build the war memorial and complete a north wing. On 6 April 1926, state and society officials dedicated the memorial. The year 1926 proved to be a pivotal one in the society's history, its quest for more and more space, and the creation of a state archives.<sup>13</sup>

Preparatory to the war memorial dedication, the society hosted a conference entitled "Cultivating the Field of Ohio History." Dr. Alexander C. Flick, director of the Division of Archives and History of

<sup>11</sup>"Twentieth Annual Meeting of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Publications* 14 (1905): 337-38.

<sup>12</sup> Josephson, "The Archives . . . of the State of Ohio"; Lindley, "Chronology and Roster," 249.

<sup>13</sup>C. B. Galbreath, "The World War Memorial," *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society Publications* 35 (1927): 27.

New York State, and Wallace H. Cathcart, director of the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, were among the conference's participants. Flick's address—"The State's Function in Promoting the Cultivation of History"—clearly charted a course for the society and the state relative to the preservation of public records. Under a general theme, borrowed from the French historian Charles Victor Langlois, that without documents there is no history, Flick referred to the removal of archaeological specimens and artifacts and historical books and manuscripts to eastern universities and museums, which had prompted the formation of the society in 1886. Flick provided a lament and litany (all too familiar to the modern archivist) about neglect and lack of appreciation of official documents and local records. But in his view, although the "public records of the State" were in better condition than local records, they were by "no means intact."<sup>14</sup>

Flick's solution centered on awakening the citizens from apathy and indifference. He charged the historical and patriotic bodies to become "devotees of Clio" and to utilize local societies in saving and publishing local records, preserving buildings, erecting markers, and surveying historical materials.<sup>15</sup> Flick issued a clarion call for a cooperative effort under the leadership of the society and he challenged the society to correlate and federate all historical organizations "in order to define and direct some uniform state policy."<sup>16</sup>

Flick also saw a role for the state in this effort. He characterized the state as a servant of the people, not a police officer and tax gatherer, and cited its increasingly important role in education. Flick identified the "safeguarding of public records and

maps" as "one of the fundamental obligations of the state."<sup>17</sup> He called Ohio one of the "worst sinners" in neglecting public records and listed many of the same transgressions earlier identified by Professor Stevenson. In clear, precise terms, Flick urged the society to find and cooperate with sympathetic members of state government to "enact laws to compel local as well as state officials to keep all public records and maps in fireproof safes and vaults, or in fireproof buildings; erect state and regional halls of records; appoint a state archivist with adequate staff; and repair and catalog manuscripts."<sup>18</sup>

Wallace Cathcart also supported Flick's ideas. He believed the society had a role in preserving the "real history of Ohio, as contained in the state archives." He suggested that "if the State Historical Society could in some way get hold of those records and safeguard them, I think it would be one of the greatest advance steps they could take."<sup>19</sup>

The society's secretary, Charles B. Galbreath, provided a clue to the importance and impact of the Flick and Cathcart remarks. Characterizing Flick's address as a "contribution of great value," Galbreath concluded it "was just what those to whom it was delivered need at this time." He believed the speeches at the war memorial dedication "may properly be considered for years to come in shaping the policy of this Society." It remained to be seen whether the speaker's remarks indeed shaped the course the society took in affecting the state's attention to its historical records.<sup>20</sup>

Seven months later, the trustees of the society requested more money from the state for yet another new wing for the Ohio State Museum. The president and the secretary

<sup>14</sup>C. B. Galbreath, "Dedication of Ohio's World War Memorial," *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society Publications* 35 (1927): 458.

<sup>15</sup>Galbreath, "Dedication," 455.

<sup>16</sup>Galbreath, "Dedication," 445-56.

<sup>17</sup>Galbreath, "Dedication," 458.

<sup>18</sup>Galbreath, "Dedication," 458.

<sup>19</sup>Galbreath, "Dedication," 472.

<sup>20</sup>Board of Trustees Record of Proceedings, 1927, Ohio Historical Society Archives, Series 2962.

sent letters in November 1926 to members and newly elected legislators asking for their support. Without specifically mentioning the state's archives, the officials implied that the request for building money would provide for the rescue, protection, and practical use of "Ohio's rapidly deteriorating and disappearing original historical material . . . now stored in inaccessible places and subject to deteriorating conditions."<sup>21</sup> Flick's earlier exhortation for an expanded role for the society may have motivated the historical society officials.

Further evidence of the impact of Flick's remarks came the next year, 1927, when Viola D. Romans, a member of the general assembly from Columbus, introduced the "first comprehensive legislation for the safe and permanent preservation of the archives of the State of Ohio." Romans may have introduced the legislation as the result of her friendship with Galbreath.<sup>22</sup>

While a suitable building had been provided by the state in 1926, no legislation provided for the transfer of records to it. The Romans law gave that authority. The act provided that a state department, board, commission, officer, or administrative agency "could" arrange to transfer documents, books, manuscripts, records, or papers to the society on terms agreed to by the state agency, the society trustees, and the governor. The law did not *require* that such transfers be made. Secretary Galbreath viewed the tripartite agreement for

transfer as a benefit, a safeguard to protecting the state's records.<sup>23</sup> The beginning of the Ohio archives came in December 1927, when Governor Vic Donahey approved the transfer from his office of non-current records dating from 1803. Much of the material was executive correspondence from the earliest years of statehood.<sup>24</sup> The secretary of state, state treasurer, state auditor, and adjutant general soon followed suit. The Romans law and the transfer of the state's records clearly established the society as the state archives. The society, out of a sense of mission and public service, had sought the arrangement with the state, but all too soon it became apparent that the role was more of a burden than a blessing to the organization. Neither appropriations for staff nor equipment accompanied Romans' legislation. And acceptance of the records only worsened the space problems for the society.<sup>25</sup>

### Early Years of Historical Society's Efforts to Administer State Archival Records

During the New Deal, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) undertook several projects in the society's library. Federal money and manpower enabled the division to calendar six decades of Ohio governors' papers, publish indexes for seven newspapers, collect and catalog the library's entire newspaper holdings, and rearrange the stacks. With the society as cosponsor, the WPA also conducted a historical records survey and the writers' project in Ohio. A full-time manuscripts curator was employed to supervise the growing collections, but the society neither received nor allocated funds to deal with the accumu-

<sup>21</sup>"Secretary's Report," *Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Publications* 36 (1927): 587-89.

<sup>22</sup>"Law presented by V. D. Romans in the 77th General Assembly enacted into Law. Testimonial by my friend C. B. Galbreath." Enclosure with letter. C. B. Galbreath to Viola D. Romans, 11 June 1930. Viola D. Romans Papers, Ohio Historical Society, Box 1. Also in Secretary, Editor, and Librarian Correspondence, 1930, Ohio Historical Society Archives, Series 3044. Romans, the first woman elected to the legislature in Franklin County, also served as president of the Woman's Republican Club of Ohio and honorary president of the Ohio Women's Christian Temperance Union.

<sup>23</sup>"Law presented by V. D. Romans."

<sup>24</sup>Josephson, "The Archives . . . of the State of Ohio."

<sup>25</sup>Elizabeth C. Biggert, "History of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society Library," April 1952, Division Chief's Files, Ohio Historical Society.

lation of state records (other than the governors' papers calendaring project). Not all of the records stored in the statehouse came to the society after 1927: Space limitations prevented it. In 1935, the Department of Public Works transferred "several tons" of canal records (1825–1915). This action "practically exhausted" the space at the museum. The society's curator and designated archivist, William D. Overman, sought first to find adequate space for the records and then to provide a complete catalog of them.<sup>26</sup>

By 1939, the society was still experiencing space shortages. A tremendous backlog in processing and cataloging the state's historical records faced the staff. A staff committee, comprising the director, librarian, and curator-archivist, reviewed the situation. They noted the construction of the National Archives in Washington and the archives buildings in Illinois, Maryland, and other states—wishing that some agency, person, or official in Ohio would introduce legislation to establish an archives division. They also concluded that space adequate to house the state's records would require adding a fourth wing to the society's museum building, although they acknowledged that other departments and activities also required the space.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>*Museum Echoes* 8 (November 1935): 43.

<sup>27</sup>"Meeting of Certain Staff Members of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society with Reference to Archives," 4 January 1939, Ohio Historical Society Archives, Series 2962; "Meeting Held in the Office of the Director of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, January 4, 1939, with Reference to a Policy in Dealing with the State of Archives," Secretary's Correspondence, Series 4005, Ohio Historical Society Archives. The author uncovered no evidence that the proposal of the Department of Public Works was the result of dissatisfaction with either the society's handling of state records or that a private organization—not a state agency—had become the custodian of the historical records. It seems entirely appropriate that state officials and legislators, concerned about saving the state's records, would look to the Department of Public Works as the state agency to be responsible for the records, particularly for transporting and storing records.

The staff committee's report also disclosed that the state's archival plans had become more confused as the result of a proposal that the Department of Public Works establish an archives division to house current and semi-current records of various state offices and provide a messenger service for the retrieval of the records. That the Department of Public Works seemed intent on seeking a specific appropriation for their archival activities may have prompted the society staff's review and subsequent recommendation: that the society's board of trustees should seek legislation requiring the appointment of a public archives commission.<sup>28</sup>

Two versions of the staff committee's report appear in the society's archives. One called for society representation on a public archives commission, continuation of the staff committee to study the archival situation, a policy of "watchful waiting," and maintenance of a state of preparation to assist any attempt to "put through archives legislation if it is on the proper basis, and likewise to prevent the introduction of any premature or ill-advised legislation." This report may have been the staff's response to the plan to create a state archives division under the aegis of public works: the "premature or ill-advised legislation." The second staff (study) report supported the appointment of a public archives commission to study the situation in the state and to establish regulations for the care and preservation of records until the commission recommended and the legislature approved the construction of an archives building. This is clearly the course of action the society favored.<sup>29</sup>

The society took no immediate steps to pursue the study committee's recommendations. The policy of watchful waiting

<sup>28</sup>Series 2962, 1939, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

<sup>29</sup>Series 2962, 1939, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

ended in 1941 when seven more truck loads ("several tons") of records, again mainly from the governor's office, came to the society. The transfer only exacerbated the society's space problems. Records were "piled into aiseways and stack entrances . . . in front of and on top of other records." Again, the society received the state's records, but not the state's funds to care for them.<sup>30</sup>

The following year, William Overman observed that "the situation is not as good as it might be" for the state's archives. He was especially concerned about the lack of state funds for personnel and equipment and the absence of either a public archives commission or a separate agency of the state charged "with the proper housing, care and administration of the state archives." Until that happened, Overman believed, the society would continue to give the best possible care and administration to the archives. Overman would not be the person to attend to the archives; he left the society in 1943 to join the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company as historian and archivist.<sup>31</sup>

In 1943 an *Ohio State Journal* editorial encouraged the state to solidify its relationship with the society and to provide a "financial lift" to preserve the "source material for future historians and students of government." Within the context of providing facilities to meet the growth of state offices, the editorial identified the society as a "ready made agency" to preserve the public records, and it noted that the society, although a private organization, "proved of such financial value to the public" that the state had rendered "financial support and splendid housing" in the past. The editorial concluded: "They are deserving of generous public assistance."<sup>32</sup> Despite this support, another unsuccessful legislative effort to have the Department of

Public Works oversee the disposal of state office records occurred before the year ended.<sup>33</sup>

In 1944 the society printed a report of William Overman, who had recently left the organization. He observed:

We have plenty of archives—enough to fill a large building. Some are jammed into the all-too-crowded library stacks of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society and a great many more are still filed as 'dead storage' in various State offices. In these archives reposes most of the State of Ohio's unwritten history. Like the old woman who lived in the shoe, however, we have so many archives and so little space, equipment or personnel to take care of them that we, too, hardly know what to do.<sup>34</sup>

As the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society approached midcentury, it became increasingly apparent that the society was both a captive of its purpose to play a leading role in things historical in the state and a victim of the state legislature's willingness to heap more responsibilities, without adequate financial support, on the organization. Although this dilemma was readily apparent in the state's archives, it extended to other areas, such as state memorials and publications. At least one society official began to have doubts about continuing as the state's archives. The director, identifying the archives as an "urgent need," nevertheless speculated that perhaps the situation "only collaterally" concerned the society. This suggests that the solution lay in following the example of other states in creating a separate archives building run by an agency or organization other than the society.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup>*Museum Echoes* 17 (May 1944): 36.

<sup>31</sup>Overman, "Ohio Archives," 38; *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* 52 (1943): 207.

<sup>32</sup>*Ohio State Journal*, 2 March 1943

<sup>33</sup>Leonard J. Stern to William D. Overman, 15 February 1943, Series 3044, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

<sup>34</sup>*Museum Echoes* 17 (May 1944): 36.

<sup>35</sup>Director's Files, Series 4007, 1944, Ohio Historical Society Archives.



Yet in January 1945, society officials again took the initiative. They convened a Committee Without a Name, composed of men from around the state who had an interest in the organization's future. The curator of state memorials, Erwin C. Zepp, told those assembled that the society faced three problems: its quasi-public status, a definition of the purpose of the state memorials, and historical problems in the state from the legislators' viewpoint. Beset by requests for guidance and assistance from different localities and pressure from legislators asking that the organization "become the custodians of properties in their districts," the society clearly sought to define itself and its mission.<sup>36</sup>

Zepp hoped the committee could serve as a "sort of public relations and liaison committee."<sup>37</sup> The problem of the state archives was just one of several problems the group learned about from Zepp. He described the conundrum the society faced as follows:

They are records which need preservation and which the Society feels it must preserve in the absence of any other agency to save them. The Historical Society feels its responsibility of making the citizens of Ohio and the legislators conscious of the need for preservation of governmental archives. But it has not been provided with adequate space and funds for caring for these records.<sup>38</sup>

Before deliberations ended, the group informally decided that it would serve a lob-

bying function and send seven of its number with society representatives to the Finance Committee of the legislature.<sup>39</sup>

### **Renewed Efforts to Gain Support for a State Archives**

The next month, February 1945, the trustees formed an advisory committee on the administration of the state archives and adopted a joint resolution for the general assembly to appoint a committee of ten to cooperate with the society's advisory committee in studying procedures for the selection of records for preservation; the methods of housing, care, and preservation of the records; and the administration of the records. The resolution also asked that the committee report back to the 97th General Assembly regarding these matters.<sup>40</sup>

Lindley, the society secretary, sent letters and a copy of the proposed joint resolution to the leading state officials: the governor, secretary of state, auditor of state, state treasurer, director of the department of public works, and the chairman of the history department at Ohio State University. The society, perhaps as a gesture to show some commitment to the archives, named Bertha E. Josephson, an editorial associate, to head a department of public documents with part-time responsibility for the archives.<sup>41</sup>

The optimism and promise of February evaporated. No joint advisory committee of state and society officials resulted. If state

<sup>36</sup>James A. Rodabaugh, "The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society in a Changing World," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* 54 (1945): 229.

<sup>37</sup>"Minutes of the Meeting of the 'Committee Without a Name' of the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society," 19 January 1945, Series 2962, 1945-46, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

<sup>38</sup>"Minutes of the Meeting of the 'Committee Without a Name.' "

<sup>39</sup>"Minutes of the Meeting of the 'Committee Without a Name.' "

<sup>40</sup>Harlow Lindley to Frank L. Raschig, Joseph T. Ferguson, Don H. Ebright, Dr. Kenneth C. Ray, and Dr. George A. Washburn, 1 February 1945, and attachment, "Proposed Joint Resolution," Series 3044, Ohio Historical Society Archives. *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* 54 (1945): 210. These men served respectively as director of public works, auditor of state, treasurer of state, director of education, and chairman of the department of history, at Ohio State University.

<sup>41</sup>*Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* 54 (1945): 210.



officials offered any guidance or assistance in response to the society, it was to let the matter be resolved in the legislature. In April the society's trustees did form a committee on policy. The recommendations of that committee regarding the state archives illustrated the society's ambivalence and uncertainty regarding the entire issue. The report posited that "if the Society is to become the depository for the state's archives," the legislature should provide for a separate archives division and furnish the necessary space and funds for its operation. That failing, the committee recommended, the society should retain the archival material in its possession but place it in dead storage to relieve overcrowding in the library. And, finally, the report declared that under "present conditions" the society "cannot and does not wish to become the depository of the State's Archives. The problem is one for the State Legislature to decide." The society's position seemed clear. It remained to be seen whether it would be regarded by the state legislature and officials as a ploy for the society to obtain more money.<sup>42</sup>

Before the legislative session ended, neither the society's call for a joint committee nor its hard-line declaration prevailed. Legislation was passed to create a state records commission composed of the attorney general, auditor, and state librarian, who served as chair, and to charge that body with the task of reviewing all agency requests to dispose of records. Records that either were six years old or had been microfilmed would be approved for disposal, and records could be transferred to "an educational institution, library, museum, historical research or patriotic organization." The secretary of the records commission was to give notice of authorization to destroy records to the

society's curator-archivist, who had the right to select any records for preservation in the museum-library.<sup>43</sup>

Zepp, who was also the society's legislative representative, described the legislation as "extremely faulty." The bill basically provided for either records destruction or transfer to another institution. But the society, through its curator of history and archivist, had the right to select records for transfer to the society. In Zepp's view, the measure failed to follow "the rules of efficient archival administration" because the selection of material was left to only one person, the curator of history. He also lamented the lack of funds for administration of the state archives. And he complained that responsibility for the central administration of the state's archives rested "solely upon the Society." He reiterated an earlier plea that a legislative committee be formed to study the state's archival situation and to propose legislation to the general assembly, "erecting a program of state archival administration in accordance with the best methods of the federal government and other states."<sup>44</sup>

Under the 1945 law, "several more tons" of records soon found their way to the society. To control the situation internally, society officials required that Lindley, the librarian, and Bertha Josephson, head of the department of documents, be promptly "supplied with complete and full information" regarding any negotiations, arrangements, or proposals made by the society's staff to any state officials and that no member of the staff make any proposal or approach "with anyone" without consulting both Lindley and Josephson. Once

<sup>42</sup>"Report of the Committee on Policy to the Board of Trustees of the Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society," Series 2962, 1945-46, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

<sup>43</sup>"Report of Legislative Representative," Series 2962, 1945-46, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

<sup>44</sup>"Report of Legislative Representative"; "A Brief History of the Ohio State Archives," Press Release, October 1956, Division Chief's Files, Ohio Historical Society; Also see Series 2962, Proceedings, 1945-46, in Ohio Historical Society Archives for a report entitled "Archives."

this was understood, only the director and Lindley would approach Governor Frank J. Lausche with a proposal that Lindley would appoint “qualified individuals,” even from outside the society, to inspect records in state offices and to confer with state workers regarding the nature and value of the material. The deputies would then report to the director about the immediate storage space, amount of equipment, and number of workers needed to process the records. The society intended to use these recommendations to approach the state for emergency funds with which to accomplish the work. This internal report concluded that if arrangements and funding were not made available the society should “refuse to accept any more state archives.”<sup>45</sup>

Six years later, in 1951, the society’s problem with its state archives and tremendous backlog was, depending upon perspective, either solved or exacerbated. Fire struck the library. Sparked by the touch of a welder who, ironically, was building badly needed library stacks, the fire—together with heat, steam, and water—devastated the archives and library. All told, 1.5 million documents, 4,000 maps, 50,000 volumes of newspapers, 14,250 microfilm rolls, and 70,000 books and periodicals were either destroyed or damaged.<sup>46</sup>

In September 1953, a report on Ohio’s public records by Zepp (by then the society’s director) and James H. Rodabaugh (head of the history and science division) became the blueprint for the society’s effort to settle the archival situation. The report labeled Ohio as “one of the backward states of the Union” in preserving and administering public records of state and local government. The reference to local government records was a new one for the society. It further outlined the history of action by more

than twenty other states in dealing with public records, and it noted that “Ohio has had no program for the care and administration of public records by a central archives.” The report summarized the inadequacy of past legislation in Ohio, citing the lack of rules, regulations, funds, and trained personnel. Zepp and Rodabaugh emphasized that the demands from state offices for information and telephone requests from officials took place “without cost to the state of Ohio.” After defining public records and outlining the purpose of a public records administration as well as a records management program, the authors delineated how records were valuable to state agencies involved in litigation and claims from citizens and described the desirable features of a building to house archives. Zepp and Rodabaugh observed that the seriousness of the archival situation “was brought to our attention sharply in recent months, when new state officials took office and began to weed out records to make room for the better operation of their department.” The detailed, forward-looking report prepared by Zepp and Rodabaugh stands as testimony to how the society embraced the development of archives elsewhere in the nation and used what are now commonplace arguments about the value of archives in presenting the society’s case to the state. Clearly, Zepp and Rodabaugh had taken steps to inform themselves about basic archival concepts and principles and to employ them in an effort to spur action by the state.<sup>47</sup>

The Zepp-Rodabaugh report stressed that the society should continue as the official custodian of the state’s records, that a new public records law should be sought, and that an appropriation for an Ohio hall of records should be pursued. They also urged immediate action to provide funds with

<sup>45</sup>Report on “Archives,” Series 2962, 1945–46, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

<sup>46</sup>*Museum Echoes* 24 (July 1951): 54–55.

<sup>47</sup>“Ohio’s Public Records: A Report,” September 1953, Series 2962, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

which to employ a well-trained, experienced archivist to act on agency applications to dispose of records and to survey the entire records situation. They wanted emergency funds to rent or build temporary space to house existing and future records entrusted to the society.<sup>48</sup>

### **Movement for a State Archives Building**

A year later, in December 1954, the society trustees convened a special meeting, principally to receive the reports of its Archives Committee. The committee chair, Jacob A. Meckstroth, recounted how he, fellow trustee Don Weaver, and Preston Wolfe, who owned the *Columbus Dispatch*, had visited the National Archives while attending a newspaper editors meeting in Washington, D.C., in 1953, and noted that he and Zepp had also visited the new State Library and Archives Building in Tennessee. With the committee's prior approval, Meckstroth had approached state library officials, principally State Librarian Walter Brahn and the State Director of Education and fellow society trustee R. M. Eyman, about lending support to an effort to have a new archives and library building. Meckstroth had also sought and received the endorsement of Ted Brown, the secretary of state, for such an undertaking. In the meantime, Brahn asked Walter R. Marvin of the Ohioana Library about that organization's space needs. The Ohioana Library, established in 1929 by Martha Kinney Cooper, the governor's wife, to recognize the accomplishments and contributions of Ohioans to the arts and letters, occupied space in the state office building with the state library. The Ohioana Library directors soon joined the effort to obtain a new building.<sup>49</sup>

Convinced that a new building for the archives could become a reality, the society trustees adopted yet another resolution, this one calling on the governor and the general assembly to establish a public records administration and provide the necessary housing facilities.<sup>50</sup> A joint committee representing the interests of the society, the state library, and the Ohioana Library soon met with Governor Frank Lausche and wrote to the members of the governor's cabinet for support. The committee lobbied members of the legislature and obtained endorsements for the program from local historical societies in the state. Society trustees and Columbus journalists Jacob Meckstroth and Don Weaver supported the project. Preston Wolfe, who owned the *Columbus Dispatch*, provided an additional endorsement. A major article, including photographs showing crowded shelves and Secretary of State Ted W. Brown examining documents, appeared in a Sunday edition of the *Dispatch* late in January 1955.<sup>51</sup>

By mid-January 1955, bills to establish an eleven-member commission to construct a \$5 million state library and archives building reached the general assembly. The grounds of the old governor's mansion was the favored site for the new building. Ultimately, the well-organized, cooperative effort of the society and the two libraries failed. The high cost of the new building and an inability to convince legislators of

<sup>50</sup>"Special Meeting."

<sup>51</sup>Erwin C. Zepp to Frank J. Lausche, 22 December 1954; Joseph P. Gorman to Ohio Historical Society, 30 December 1954; Erwin C. Zepp to Joseph P. Gorman, 5 January 1955; Erwin C. Zepp to Paul B. Belden, Sr., 3 January 1955; Erwin C. Zepp to Fred J. Milligan, 3 January 1955; Erwin C. Zepp to Laurence H. Norton, 3 January 1955; Erwin C. Zepp to Rees E. Tulloss, 3 January 1955; Erwin C. Zepp to Lehr Fess, 3 January 1955; Rees E. Tulloss to Dr. B. H. Pershing (copy), 5 January 1955; News Release, 18 January 1955; Erwin C. Zepp to Lehr Fess, 3 February 1955. Series 3068, Ohio Historical Society Archives; *Columbus Dispatch*, 30 January 1955.

<sup>48</sup>"Ohio's Public Records."

<sup>49</sup>"Special Meeting, Board of Trustees, December 14, 1954" and "Meeting of the State Library and Archives Building Committee," 21 December 1954, Series 2692, 1954, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

the economic feasibility of the state archives combined to defeat the proposals.<sup>52</sup> A letter from Judge Lehr Fess, the president of the society, to the director prior to legislative action provides important insight.

Neither the members of the Legislature nor the public at large are as "hot and bothered" over the preservation of historic documents as the members of the Society. Therefore, I think it quite important to stress the economic feasibility incident to the saving of personnel and space.<sup>53</sup>

Despite this setback, the society persisted. In 1957, the state again responded to what was becoming the society's annual call for a separate building for the archives and funding for the state's archives. The state designated the governor's mansion as the archives building, reserved the grounds for a future new building, and appropriated \$40,600 for the archives. Space in the mansion was insufficient to include either the state library or the Ohioana Library, and the size of the property precluded constructing an adjacent structure to meet the needs of the state library. The Ohioana Library directors categorically refused to move from its central location in the state library to the governor's mansion several miles east of downtown.<sup>54</sup>

The legislation also required the exhibition of the state's archives. To obtain

the mansion, the records had to be displayed. The society trustees promptly created a division of records and hired a superintendent of records to direct the archival program.<sup>55</sup>

That same year, the state also passed legislation requiring the finance director to create schedules of records retention for approval by the state records commission. The legislation also started the state's records management program. The society retained the right to select archival records, but, for unknown reasons, it was excluded from membership on the commission.<sup>56</sup>

The state's legislative action in 1957, the infusion of funds, and the hiring of an archivist boded well for the program. Bruce Harding, the newly hired superintendent of records, took the initiative to convince society and state officials of the value of archives and to determine the steps that needed to be taken to improve the law and procedures further. In a series of three press releases and position papers in 1958 and 1959, Harding outlined what needed to be done on behalf of state and county records. His recommendations and plans included inventorying the state records in the library-museum building; transferring those of archival value to the governor's mansion; preparing display cases for the presentation of archival material; securing support from groups and individuals to obtain legislation to create a sound, integrated archival program for the state, counties, and cities; securing a separate appropriation for an inventory of the storage areas in the capitol building; and continuing the study of archival establishments in other states so as to prepare for a new building in Ohio.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup>Copy of the letter from Mrs. Franklin J. Trannett to Mrs. Arthur T. Davis, 5 March 1957, containing the report of the Franklinton Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.) for Investigation of the State Library and Archives Building and Old Governor's Mansion, Series 3068, Ohio Historical Society Archives; *Museum Echoes* 28 (February 1955): 14–15.

<sup>53</sup>Lehr Fess to Erwin C. Zepp, 19 January 1955, Series 3068, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

<sup>54</sup>"A Brief History of the Ohio State Archives," Division Chief's Files, Ohio Historical Society; Copy of letter from Mrs. Franklin J. Trannett to Mrs. Arthur T. Davis, 5 March 1957, Series 3068, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

<sup>55</sup>"A Brief History of the Ohio State Archives with Some Recommendations," Press Release, September 1958, Division Chief's Files, Ohio Historical Society.

<sup>56</sup>"Ohio's Public Records," Press Release, January 1959, Division Chief's Files, Ohio Historical Society; *Museum Echoes* 32 (August 1959): 62–63.

<sup>57</sup>*Museum Echoes*, 62–63.

### Legislation for a State Archives Is Passed

Harding's recommendations in 1958 and 1959 became the basis for new legislation. In January 1959, he recommended repealing current statutes regarding the disposal of records and enacting legislation to provide effective procedures for state, county, and municipal offices to clear their offices of records. He also called for the creation of an archives administration, to be headed by a trained archivist at the society who would have the duty and funds to evaluate, select, preserve, arrange, service, repair, and exhibit those records of permanent value to the state or its political subdivisions. Amended legislation passed the general assembly in 1959, which formally designated the society as the "archives administration" for the state and its political subdivisions; placed a representative on the state records commission; gave the society the first right of refusal of state, county, and municipal records; and revised the definition of public records.<sup>58</sup>

The legislation of 1959 did not create a perfect archival world in Ohio. Five years later, Ernst Posner observed that there was "no movement of any significance to support better care of the state archives" and that he was unable "to discover any strong interest in the archives on the part of state officials." Posner also found the Ohio archives building "wholly unsuitable," pointedly observing that the state needed a "strong and well-supported archives program" and additional professional staff.<sup>59</sup> Fifty-eight years after Professor Richard Stevenson's survey of state records and call for a central archival agency, the state of Ohio and the Ohio Historical Society acted to achieve that end. The resulting archival

act was not the major achievement the Ohio Historical Society had sought for most of the twentieth century.

The society, a private organization founded by public-spirited citizens devoted to preserving archaeological sites, antiquities, and relics; publishing Ohio history; and maintaining a library, believed that the state had an obligation to preserve its written historical record and consciously sought to assist the state in achieving that end. The active role the society played in having Viola Romans introduce archival legislation in 1926 and the subsequent studies, reports, and resolutions by the board of trustees and the staff clearly illustrate the society's vision and good intentions.

Once committed to serve as the state's archives, the society became a captive of its own mission. It also learned that more than legislation and authority was needed. The necessary funding for space, staff, and other needs to house, process, and make the archives available did not follow, and the society began a yearly battle to obtain space and other resources from the state.

At the same time, the society pursued its principal interests and goals: to preserve archaeological sites, antiquities, and relics; to publish Ohio's history; and to maintain its library, newspaper, and manuscript programs. Clearly, the archives was a lower priority than other society endeavors. In 1944 Director Henry Shetrone identified the state archives as an "urgent need," but he concluded that perhaps the situation "only collaterally" concerned the society. The next year society officials openly threatened to refuse to accept any more records unless state support was forthcoming. At this time in its history, society officials noted that the organization operated in a changed and changing world and publicly wondered about its value and obligations. James Rodabaugh openly admitted that the society had achieved only partial success in reaching the people and preserving and teaching his-

<sup>58</sup>*Museum Echoes*, 62–63.

<sup>59</sup>Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 216, 219.



tory and that, clearly, the organization had not achieved perfection.<sup>60</sup>

Through the society, the state of Ohio found a way to preserve its historical records. The officials of the society may not always have had a clear vision of the role the organization should play, and they did not always either acquire or allocate the necessary funds for the care and processing of the state records. Once committed, the society had little choice but to pursue a program for the public records and to seek state support, simultaneously with other programs, for more space and resources for the archives. Most importantly, the society persisted: It attempted to learn from other states what was needed to establish a sound, centralized public records program. It joined with the state library and the Ohioana Library to obtain new facilities for the three organizations. It enlisted support from trustees, particularly from the major Columbus newspapers, and sought help from local historical societies and public-minded citizens. And it paid visits and homage to the state's elected officials and legislators. Society officials recognized the value of keeping the state archives out of politics and subject to the periodic changes in political administrations. They believed that the society, as an "essentially non-political" organization, was the proper place for the archives. And further, the officials recognized the society's library as an asset and believed that if the state placed the archives with another organization or state agency, it would be engaged in a duplication of effort because funds for a reference library

to complement the archives would be required.<sup>61</sup> Throughout the century, the society persevered, adapted, learned, and remained open to the possibilities.

The society did not achieve all that it sought for the state's archives. The private, quasi-public nature of the organization and governance of the society may have contributed to its ultimate failure on the archives issue. Members of the board of trustees, representing different regions and groups and pursuing personal and local agendas, were perhaps unfamiliar with the relatively new field of archives and the professional issues attendant to such a program. For them, more traditional and understandable pursuits were archaeological sites, publications, and educational programs and adding to the library and the manuscripts department. In the end, the judgment of society President Lehr Fess that neither the legislature nor the public was "hot and bothered" about the archives issue best explains why the state did not ultimately support the campaigns for a new facility and a strong, centralized archives program. The history of the effort to establish the state archives in Ohio validates the tenet that the designation and definition of central authority in any archival program, particularly one concerning state records, should be clearly stated. The Ohio experience also confirms that Richard Bartlett's dictum—the "safe and perfect keeping of the Public Archives is so obviously one of the first and most imperative duties of a legislature"—was not met between 1927 and 1959 and perhaps beyond that time.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup>James A. Rodabaugh, "The Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society in a Changing World," 228-29.

<sup>61</sup>"Some Notes on an Ohio State Archives," undated, Series 2692, Ohio Historical Society Archives.

<sup>62</sup>Richard S. Wood, "Richard Bartlett," 14.