

LOCAL ARCHIVES¹

PUBLIC archives may possibly be divided into four general subdivisions: local, state, national, and international. We shall limit this paper to only three classifications of local records: vital, land, and tax records.

As archivists, keepers, organizers, and protectors of public records and documents which are to be preserved as evidence of fact, you are necessarily vitally concerned with the painstaking care and industry required of local officials who make and assemble these records.

While much of this discussion applies directly to Connecticut, one of the older states, an inspection of the laws of several states indicates very similar procedure. The earliest Connecticut law requiring recording of births and marriages was passed by the General Court in 1644, and the code of 1650 included the recording of deaths by the town clerks.

The technique of recording births, marriages, and deaths has been more or less standardized. Forms prepared and supplied by the several state departments of health are completed by licensed physicians or midwives, but when neither of these is available, parents or near relatives may file the necessary data. Marriages are reported by ministers, priests, or justices of the peace, in the town, county, or subdivision where the marriage is performed.

In our state, registrars are supplied with proper forms by the state director of vital statistics. Recording and indexing instructions; the use of approved papers, binders, inks, and typewriter ribbons; and the installation and use of fire-proof vaults, are all under the jurisdiction of the examiner of public records, who is available at all times for consultation concerning administrative and equipment problems.

Whenever new laws are passed which change the principle of recording and care, registrars are called together and the new procedure is thoroughly discussed and agreed upon.

Many states now have laws which provide a method for recording belated birth certificates, allowing the substitution of secondary evidence in the place of information ordinarily given by doctors, midwives, or parents. Where secondary information is submitted, more

¹ A paper read at the eighth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, November 9, 1944.

than two corresponding records are required, and they may be obtained from church records, family bibles, school registers, census records, diaries, printed genealogies, or insurance applications, which were dated at least fifteen years prior to the request for the recording of the birth record. It is also possible to secure affidavits from two or more persons who have known the applicant for a long period of time, beginning in childhood.

Realizing the importance of birth records for the purposes of social security, old age pensions, and, in war-time, the obtaining of positions in industry, registrars often expend considerably energy and time in helping an individual obtain the necessary documents to prove his birth and entitle him to an official record.

The following case recently came to my personal attention in Hartford. A man whom we shall call Mr. Allen, born supposedly in 1898, a carpenter by trade, was urgently needed in a factory which was manufacturing gliders. According to the rules and regulations, his birth certificate was required before he could be employed. Mr. Allen belongs to a very old Hartford family, but when he applied at the official record office for a copy of his birth record he was much surprised and disturbed to learn that it was not on file. The physician who was supposed to have attended his birth had passed on. The church record, which should have properly recorded his baptism gave only his name, and disclosed neither his father's nor his mother's name, nor his birth date. The registrar learned that Mr. Allen was born in the home of his grandparents in Hartford, and that his father died soon after his birth. When the boy was three years old his mother died. After this the grandparents applied to the probate court for guardianship papers. These court papers showed that the grandparents had adopted a minor child, without giving the child's name or age. When the boy was sent to school, the registration card stated his age, but no place of birth; in place of the parents' names, the names of the grandparents were recorded. It was learned that Mr. Allen was married in Brewster, New York, in 1910. That marriage record indicated his age and named his birthplace as Hartford, Connecticut, but no parents' names were given. Unfortunately he had bought no life insurance that would help to clarify the problem. A copy of the census record was secured from Washington, on which appeared the names of his grandparents as father and mother, and the child's age, but not the date of birth. Copies of all of these records

were made for the registrar, each contributing a meager bit of information.

Fortunately, after much search, it was discovered that Mr. Allen's brother compiled, and had printed, a genealogy of the Allen family. In that book, on a certain page, was actually listed Mr. Allen's birth, naming the proper parents, also the birth date and birthplace. The registrar, with the approval of the state Department of Health, accepted this collection of material and made the necessary birth certificate so that our man Allen went to work for the glider factory, happy in the assurance that he really had been born.

Because of the lack of official records in the early days, the church, in many cases, provided the only record of birth, marriages, and deaths. These records have become in many cases the only semi-official sources available.

You may be interested in a specific instance encountered while trying to acquire some of these records. My assistance was requested to help obtain a set of church records which had been missing for years. Information came from a registrar who had heard hints that they might possibly be in the possession of a former church clerk who resided on an old, run down, weather beaten farm. Others had attempted to gain a hearing there without success.

The day was very snowy, with a high wind blowing, which condition would ordinarily have rated an invitation inside to talk business, but the little old lady who answered my knock seemed satisfied at first to let me remain outside. After stating that I was from the State Library on a matter of business, and that her own distant cousin, the probate judge, had suggested that I should call, she finally allowed me to enter.

What a place that old fashioned kitchen was! On one side was a rusty old kitchen range piled high with wet wood which had been brought in from the fields, and the oven was packed full of wet bark. Half a dozen antique chairs, scattered about the room, were stacked high with books, papers, and old clothes. The large old-fashioned table in the center of the room was covered with food cans, empty, half full, and full; also an eloquent array of patent medicine bottles; and a couple of large bowls partly filled with dirty clothes soaking in ice-coated water.

After much preliminary conversation, I mentioned that I came to look at the church records to make an estimate of the cost of photo-

copying them for the State Library. She hesitated, but finally admitted that they were in her possession. Then very unexpectedly she announced that that she was not afraid of me, because she had a little six year old girl in the next room whom she had instructed to run home and tell her mother if I showed any signs of making a disturbance. I assured her she need have no fear, for I should take particular pleasure in going out any time she cared to ask me to remove myself.

A lengthy history of her family, and a recitation of how brave they were, followed. Suddenly her fears vanished. Then she grudgingly produced the volumes, one at a time, from under the bed in an adjoining room. Finally she agreed to let the library copy them, come spring. A subsequent call convinced her that the records should be copied immediately, and with her permission, the work was accomplished. That precious information has been rescued, and is safely protected!

Land records have been recorded in most states for many years. In our section, the examiner of public records has direct charge of these records, their indexing and protection. The practice of retaining both town and county clerks over long periods is usually helpful, both from an administrative point of view and also from the angle of efficiency in record keeping.

Whenever a new record official comes into office, the examiner spends some time explaining the work and discussing problems with the new office holder.

Any general changes in methods are discussed with town officials at a general meeting of all town clerks in their association.

It is the duty of town clerks to receive for record whatever documents are presented to him or her for recording. In spite of carelessness on the part of conveyancers, and the general public, who often fail to familiarize themselves with their deeds, great advance has been made in accuracy of description of property transferred.

A glaring example of how not to describe a piece of property appears in a deed dated 1812 recorded in Hartford.

147 acres, 3 roods and 19 rods after deducting whatever swamp, water, rock and road areas there may be included therein and all other lands of little or no value, the same being part of said deceased's 1280 acre colony grant, and the portion hereby set off being known as near to and on the other side of Black Oak Ridge bounded and described more in

particular as follows, to wit: Commencing at a heap of stone about a stone's throw from a certain small clump of alders, near a brook running down off from a rather high part of said ridge, thence by a straight line to a certain marked white birch tree about two or three times as far from a jog in the fence going around a ledge nearby, thence by another straight line in a different direction around said ledge and the Great Swamp so called . . . thence after turning around in another direction and by a sloping straight line to a certain heap of stone which is by pacing just eighteen rods and about $\frac{1}{2}$ rod more from the stump of the big hemlock tree where Philo Blake killed the bear, thence to the corner begun at by two straight lines of about equal length which are to be run in by some skilled and competent surveyor so as to include the area and acreage as hereinbefore set forth.

Fortunately bears have migrated from our part of the country so that most property is now bounded by lines indicating standard measurement between merestones, set for that purpose.

Tax laws are continually undergoing change. Forms and procedures vary somewhat from year to year. This past summer our state inaugurated a five day school for tax officials with courses pertaining to general tax problems and records. This school is the outgrowth of co-operation between the tax commissioner with his several division heads, and the Department of Business Administration of the University of Connecticut at Storrs, Connecticut. All of the tuition, housing, meals, and recreation were covered by a fee of twenty dollars.

Without circularization outside of our state, officials came as students from several states—one from as far west as Wichita, Kansas. Plans were originally made to take care of possibly thirty students, but when registration day came, more than eighty applied for admission. It is notable that every student completed all of the courses. Every person was present at every session of the school and was given a certificate signed by the dean of the university, showing the work done.

The tax commissioner of the state gave the registrants opportunity to make suggestions and offer criticisms of the courses which will prove helpful in making plans for another year. It is expected that next year the basic course used this year will be repeated, and more advanced subjects will be added as need is indicated.

Although opportunities for similar instruction had previously been given in one or two other states for an hour at a time in evening

schools, this is the first school of its kind (as far as we know) which has devoted a continuous five-day period to increasing the efficiency of tax officials, and perhaps indicates the advisability of making available similar opportunities for other groups.

This is a short sketch of a small section of the romance of keeping local archives in a small state. We gratefully acknowledge the advice and inspiration given us by our helpful sisters and brothers, and are always glad to reciprocate.

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Connecticut State Library