

THE STATE ARCHIVIST LOOKS TO THE FUTURE¹

NOW and then it is well to pause and try to see just where we stand, to view our efforts and accomplishments, if any, from the long view. After every major military or naval engagement the commander finds it necessary to count his gains or losses, regroup his forces, and re-think the strategy of his campaign. Periodically in most types of business it is customary to take an inventory of holdings, chalk up assets and liabilities, compute a balance sheet of profits and losses in the past, and seek to plan for the future. The same procedure in the field of state archives may be worth while.

During the past few years we state archivists have come a long way. Only a short time ago there was not a single state in the Union which supported an archival program that even began to meet the need. Today, on the other hand, every state maintains an agency of one kind or another in the field, and some of them have made long strides toward facing and solving their problems. In viewing the present situation, it is not as if nothing at all had been accomplished, so that we could merely butt our heads against a stone wall. Instead, we have already advanced so far that we can be hopeful of still greater progress in the future. We can view our problems in a definitely optimistic frame of mind.

In taking our inventory, there are several questions which we may well ask ourselves. For one thing, have we yet broken sufficiently with the past? In years gone by the archivist (if indeed he was known by that name) was thought of as leading a leisurely, untroubled existence. Since the volume of records with which he had to deal was limited, he had ample time to potter through yellowed and time-worn documents, now and then pausing to relish some juicy morsel. Occasionally he would pause to wait on some musty but eminently respectable old gentleman who had come in seeking to unravel the mysteries of years gone by. To a large extent the archivist was a mere antiquarian, whose interests lay mainly in the past. It was unthinkable to his contemporaries that he could play a real part in meeting the current problems and administering the affairs of his state government. His position was

¹ A paper read at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, November 8, 1944.

thought of as definitely subordinate, of little consequence among the politicians and big-wigs who frequented the state capital.

Of course such a concept has long been left behind in the leading states. And yet I wonder if all of us, perhaps unconsciously, are still more or less influenced by it. Dealing as we do primarily with noncurrent records, having contact with those whose interests lie largely in the past, it is difficult for us to break entirely with tradition. And our difficulty is made greater by a large element of the public which persists in thinking of us in terms of the old gentleman and his musty papers.

We may ask ourselves, too, whether we are too much influenced by the needs and requirements of persons who are reconstructing family trees. Such persons, we all know, form a large proportion of the total number who make use of our records, and it is only natural that their point of view is kept constantly before us—they see to that. I am wondering, however, whether we may be emphasizing too much the serving of the ancestor hunter and genealogist to the neglect of other functions which ought to be considered more important.

Then, too, we may enquire whether we perhaps lay too much stress upon historical activities to the neglect of our archival program. Nearly all of us engage in certain non-archival work such as maintaining a historical museum, caring for historic sites, issuing historical magazines or other publications, preserving unofficial historical manuscripts, planning or assisting in the celebration of anniversaries, supplying historical materials to the schools, and performing other similar function. But do some of us, we may ask, put too much time on such things, and would we be justified in de-emphasizing them?

Again, do we sometimes devote too much attention to research, to detailed study of our records, which may consume time and energy that ought to be devoted to other ends? Several years ago I had occasion to refer to an archives department in another state a private request for certain genealogical information, and after a week or more there came back a letter containing data which must have required three or four days to dig out. It was courteous of the department in the neighboring state to go to so much trouble to meet such a request. The trouble was that, after all, the searcher had missed the point and had failed to answer the question which

had been asked. And I could not help wondering whether, regardless of whether he had answered the query or not, he was justified in using so much of his state's time for such a private purpose. Should we perhaps strictly limit our activities in this field?

Along the same line, may it be that some of us spend too much official time in writing? Probably it is well for us to do a certain amount of writing based upon research in our records, for thereby we gain a more thorough knowledge of them and can keep in mind more clearly and sympathize better with the problems of the researcher. It may be advisable, however, for us to consider carefully the extent to which such writing should be designated as a part of our official duties and the degree to which it should be considered as of a personal, unofficial nature.

Again, do we perhaps do too much editing? As in the case of research and writing, there are certain advantages to such work, and it may be that we are justified in doing a reasonable amount of it. But perhaps we might consider whether in some cases and at some times we do too much.

Another question which may be appropriate is this: Do some of us devote too much attention to private and unofficial manuscripts? Most of us probably feel that we are justified in collecting and preserving, but we might stop to think whether we may be giving too much time and energy to such work, especially in those states where agencies other than the state archives department are active in the field.

The questions which have been asked so far relate primarily to activities other than those in the field of archives. Now coming to the heart of our work, we may raise certain queries as to our program in the field of state archives themselves. For one thing, do we undertake too much detailed work in arranging the materials we receive? Many of the series which come to us are just as they were filed in the office of origin, and no arranging is needed. Indeed, as all of us know, to attempt any rearranging would be to violate one of the cardinal principles of archival work. But a good many series, especially the older ones, reach us only after they have been badly disarranged, and there is nothing to do but attempt to put them in some kind of order. Then arises the question, how much time should we put on such work? Should we go at it minutely and in great detail, or should we merely seek to put them in some kind of

reasonably good working order, so that they can be used for official and other purposes, with the idea that later, if and when the opportunity offers, we will come back to them and do the work more thoroughly?

Along the same line we may raise the question of how much into detail we ought to go in preparing catalogues, finding lists, or other guides to the records. Certain archival agencies undertake to make card catalogues of their holdings, and some even go so far as to prepare a card for each box of loose papers or volume. Others do not attempt to make card catalogues, but resort instead to inventories and finding or shelf lists. The catalogue has certain advantages in that it is detailed, convenient to handle, and perhaps the simplest type of guide for the general public to use. Where there is a separate card for each box or volume, it is easy for the searcher to call for the exact unit he desires and for the attendant to locate that unit in the archive areas. The great disadvantage lies in the large amount of time required to prepare such detailed catalogues, so that with our limited staffs we tend to fall behind in our work. The inventory or shelf list, on the other hand while perhaps not always as efficient in locating immediately a specific item, has the advantage of being prepared more quickly. A number of archival agencies follow the practice of preparing preliminary lists or inventories, and then later, when opportunity offers, make more thorough and more detailed guides.

Obviously there is no easy solution to this problem. What we all wish to do is to make our holdings available in the most efficient way possible. If another department of the state government needs information from the records of which we have custody, we want to be able to produce promptly all the materials which may possibly concern the desired data. And we wish to be able to do the same thing for the politician, the graduate student, or anyone else who may call upon us. Clearly much of the assistance we can render will have to depend largely upon our own knowledge of our holdings, and no lists or catalogues will be perfect or fool-proof. All of our finding aids ought to be prepared with the purpose of indicating to the searcher what materials we have and of aiding us in producing the desired records for him. In seeking these ends, should we prepare detailed catalogues or will it be best to limit ourselves, at least for the present, to less detailed lists and inventories?

These are a few of the broad, long-view questions which we state

archivists may pause to ask ourselves. Have we broken sufficiently with the past? Are we influenced too much by the needs of ancestor-hunters? Do we engage in too much historical, as contrasted to archival, work? Do we devote too much attention to research, writing, and editing? Do we stress too largely work with unofficial manuscripts? And too, in the field of strictly archival activity, do we spend too much time and go too much into detail in handling and preparing guides to the materials we receive?

Before trying to answer these questions, I wish to ask another one. What, in the final analysis, should be the major function of the state archival agency, and, in making long-range plans, toward what ends should we bend the larger portion of our energies? If we can answer that question satisfactorily and clearly, then perhaps we will be in a better position to solve the other problems which face us. What is our primary duty? How can we give the largest return for every dollar which is appropriated to us? How can we best plan a broad program to serve both our own state government and the public at large?

Our primary purpose, it seems to me, is clear-cut and easy to define—first of all we should serve as the official state records agency, within that field we should direct the major part of our effort, and we should seek to do the job thoroughly and according to a broad and well planned program. Insofar as other state departments and the general public are concerned, it might be well if we would call ourselves agencies for dealing with records rather than archives, for the former term is less easily misunderstood. Furthermore, records sound like something of real practical importance and of business value, while archives tend to mean something musty and archaic, with nothing more than antiquarian interest. There is a great deal to be said for the Maryland term, "Hall of Records," for other state departments, all of which keep records, can appreciate the services to be rendered by a records agency and the general public can understand that the agency preserves and cares for the records of Maryland and its people. And incidentally would it have been better if we could have broken with the European continental precedent and named our national archival agency "The National Records," "The Public Record Office," or something similar? Whatever serves legitimately to emphasize our function in dealing with records would appear to be to the good.

In seeking to perform our duties as archives or record agencies,

we state archivists should consider first how we can best serve our state governments, what program will be of most benefit and value to them. For if we can sell ourselves to the other state departments, if we can prove to them that we are rendering a service of real and practical value, then we will have gone a long way toward securing adequate support, financial and otherwise, for our program.

There would appear to be three major methods by which we can render service to our state governments. First, we can co-operate in the disposal of useless records. Provided the department where the records originated certifies that certain series have no further value in the conduct of current business and provided further that the archival agency certifies that they appear to have no value for historical or research purposes, then they may be destroyed or otherwise disposed of. Since the major proportion of state records have no permanent value, this phase of the archival program will be very important, dealing with the bulk of the records by the simple procedure of destroying or otherwise disposing of them.²

Second, the archivist can assume custody of noncurrent records which appear to have value and can preserve them permanently. The records thus cared for will not bulk so large as those disposed of, but by the process of selection they will be far more important and valuable. It is of course our duty to take charge of them, to put them in suitable condition, to prepare the best possible guides to them, and to make them available for official and public use.

Incidentally, in dealing with official requests that we co-operate in handling noncurrent records, we usually will be under pressure to act with speed, so that the records can be removed to provide space needed for other purposes. The more promptly we are prepared to render this service, the more good will we can build and the larger measure of support we may expect to receive for our program.

Third, we can render advice and assistance to other departments in meeting their current records problems. We will not, of course, understand in detail all the procedures of filing and records handling with which the different departments have to deal, but through our contacts with many departments, with varying functions and problems, we will be in a position to develop a broad point of view and

² For a more detailed discussion, see Christopher Crittenden and Nell Hines, "The Disposal of Useless State Archives," *THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST*, VII (July, 1944), 165-173.

perspective which way prove valuable to each department in solving its own problems.

If we perform competently and thoroughly these three functions for other state departments, we will move toward an eventual procedure whereby every single official record which has become non-current will come under our control, either to be disposed of or else to be transferred to our custody. Now I am wondering how many of us have really faced this situation? Each year every state government in the Union is producing millions upon millions of records, from time reports to governor's proclamations and from pay roll sheets to engrossed acts of the legislature. Have any of us really conceived of the anormity of the problem we will be up against when we undertake to deal with all, or anything like all, of these records? Or are we in the position of the little boy who tried to dam a river by throwing in a few handfuls of sand? The current of archives today is a mighty one, in the future it promises to become even mightier, and it can be controlled only by efforts on a major scale. Have we sought to plan a program sufficiently broad to handle this problem?

Now in the light of this task which we will have to face, let us return to the questions asked earlier in this paper. Have we broken sufficiently with the past and are we still too antiquarian? It seems perfectly clear that there is no room for the respectable-old-gentleman attitude in the work and activity of the alert and up-to-date state archivist, who faces frankly and earnestly the enormous task which rises before him and seeks to work out the best possible procedures in dealing with millions of records annually.

Are we influenced too much by the needs of genealogists and ancestor-hunters? We may expect that in the future, as in the past, there will be large numbers of such users of the records in our custody, and we should always be ready and willing to serve them. But if our chief duty is to function as the state archival agency, to serve other state departments, perhaps we should consider a shift of emphasis, a re-apportionment of our time and effort.

Do we engage too much in non-archival activities? Probably it is both inevitable and advantageous that we do certain work which is not strictly archival. In origin most of our agencies were largely historical, as is indicated by their being named historical commissions, departments of archives and history, and the like. Furthermore, in many cases our organic laws make it our duty to engage in certain

historical activities, and even where such duties are not specifically prescribed by law, it is probably wise for us to engage in some of them, for we are in a better position to perform them than is any other agency, and by doing so we can better sell our program to the general public. A historical museum, for example, can serve as a kind of show window for an archival agency. But admitting all of this, if our chief function is to serve as the state archival agency, we may be in danger of laying too much stress upon such non-archival activities, to the detriment of our archival program. We should give such a program the highest possible priority, and look on everything else as secondary.

As for research, writing, and editing, again it is largely a question of emphasis. Probably it is fitting and proper that we do a certain amount of these things, but if we are to perform our primary function in handling the state records, should not these other functions be looked upon as secondary?

Likewise it is perhaps appropriate that we collect and preserve private and unofficial manuscripts and probably none of us would refuse to accept a valuable collection merely because it was not official. Indeed, by handling such collections we can often round out and supplement official series, as, for example, when the private papers of a governor are housed in the same depository as the official records of his administration. But if we are to place first things first, should we not subordinate such manuscript work to our state records program?

Now as to how much into detail we ought to go and how much time we ought to spend in arranging and classifying official records which are transferred to our custody and in preparing catalogues or finding lists for them, should we not consider this problem in the light of the magnitude of the problem which will face us? In the past, when many of us were receiving only small quantities of records, it was possible to prepare minute and detailed guides. But what of the millions of items which we will be called upon to handle in the future? Many of us, it is true, may enjoy substantial increases in staff, so that our number of employees may be doubled, trebled, or enlarged even more. But the quantity of records we are called upon to receive will multiply not merely by two or three. Rather, that quantity will increase twenty, thirty, or even fifty-fold.

Now if that is to be the case, can we hope to handle the materials

we receive and to make them available for use within any reasonable period of time if we attempt to do detailed work in arranging them and preparing catalogues or guides? Will we not rather be compelled to work out procedures whereby we can deal with far larger masses of records at greater rates of speed than at present? And will not such procedures inevitably cause us to cut down the amount of time we spend in arranging and classifying in cataloguing or preparing finding lists?

I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not in favor of letting our standards, and I am not advocating that we do shoddy, inefficient work. I am seriously raising the question, however, whether we are justified in spending weeks and months on small bodies of materials while in the meantime we are falling farther and farther behind in handling the large masses of records which are being or ought to be turned over to us. What I am advocating is that we take the long view, see our problem in its major aspects, and marshal our available resources in order to take full advantage of the opportunity which is ours.

If in the past the archivist an innocuous old gentleman poking among ancient documents, in the future may he not hope to be something very different? Will not the active, well administered state archives department be recognized as playing a vital role in the state administration? Will it not be called upon frequently for advice in meeting current record problems and in handling noncurrent records, and will the materials in the department's custody not be looked upon as a storehouse of information needed for the conduct of the state's business, consulted frequently by the various departments? In thus serving the state will not the archives department at the same time be that much better equipped to serve the general public? When he comes to render such essential services, perhaps the archivist will find that he no longer holds a mere subordinate position. Perhaps instead he will be recognized as one of the most valuable and important of all state officials.

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