

## HOME FRONT RECORDS OF NEW YORK, 1940-1945: THE PROBLEM OF DISPOSITION<sup>1</sup>

AFTER the first World War many of the records of New York state's home front activities were gradually destroyed. The result is that outside of the legislation which is naturally available, there is very little material which bears on the story of the war-time organization of the state. This is true for the Office of the State Historian, for the localities generally, and even for some of the state departments. Part of what little was left in the executive office has since been destroyed by water and steam. One professor at Cornell went to Albany and saved some records of the Farm Machinery Repair Program by picking them out of the scrap basket. Individual cities occasionally published military records and there were a few short statements on the production of war equipment by representatives of individual companies, as are to be found in the three-volume work entitled *World War Service Record of Rochester and Monroe County, New York*. No extensive collections, however, are available and no systematic attempt was made to preserve any.

It was to prevent this sort of thing from happening again that in April, 1945, the New York State War Council secured from the legislature an amendment to the War Emergency Act which added a new power to those previously granted it. The language of the grant empowered the State War Council "to provide for the care, custody, control, or disposition of books, papers, and records of local councils and their agencies," subject to the authority of the commissioner of education over records generally.

Pursuant to the authority granted the council in this amendment, it issued Order No. 23 in relation to "the books, papers, and records of local war councils and their agencies," which in effect required local councils to retain their records and authorized the executive secretary to act for the council and issue the necessary instructions as the work progressed.

Section 1197 of the Education Law empowers the commissioner of education to authorize disposal of records upon application from

<sup>1</sup> A paper read at the ninth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Indianapolis, November 7, 1945.

a public governmental authority. Accordingly, permission was sought and obtained from the commissioner of education which empowers the war council to authorize disposal of three types of records which we will refer to below. So much for the legal aspects of the problem of disposition.

You have gathered, perhaps, that New York state has operated during the war years under the general authority of legislation collectively entitled "The New York State War Emergency Act." This act created a State War Council to carry out purposes and exercise the powers granted by the act. The council consists of the governor as chairman, and in addition the presiding officers, the majority and minority leaders and chairmen of the finance committees of both houses of the legislature, and twelve members appointed by the governor. This State War Council had as its agents local war councils, the creation of which was authorized originally by executive order on August 1, 1940. These were established in every county and city of the state and financed locally. The State War Council created and financed new agencies on the state level to help with the war effort only where it felt the work of already existing state departments would be inadequate.<sup>2</sup> Where the state departments were already in the field, funds previously voted in a lump sum to the State War Council by the legislature were allocated by the council to these different departments for specific purposes. The result of five years of war operations by such a system of state and local war councils, State War Council agencies, and state departments was the creation of groups of records concerned with every conceivable phase of the domestic war effort and located in widely scattered communities all over the state. It is the future of this material which is the subject of the present paper.

The question as to the proper disposition of these records was taken up by the war council last spring. After consultation with Dr. Albert B. Corey, director of the Division of History and Archives, the secretary of the council appointed the secretary of the newly formed New York State Association of County Historians, a teacher of European history by profession, to do the job: time limit—six months.

The plan adopted July 1 was worked out by him with the very

<sup>2</sup> Among such agencies were the offices of Civilian Mobilization, Physical Fitness and War Transportation, the Emergency Food Commission, and the Committee on Discrimination in Employment.

generous advice and co-operation of Dr. Corey and Mr. Henry Eddy, state archivist. It called for:

1. A state-wide inventory of all war council records created under the authority of the War Emergency Act on the two levels, state and local.
2. A decision as to which records should be saved and which should be destroyed, indicated as item No. 14 on the inventory check sheets.
3. A decision on the local level as to which of two or three available depositories should receive these records for permanent storage and servicing.
4. A decision on the state level as to whether the records of a department which are deemed of permanent value should remain with it or go to the state archives for storage and servicing, and if so, when this transfer should take place.
5. The enforcement of the above decisions as indicated on each of the inventory check sheets which were to be returned in copy to the council or agency in question.

A brief explanation of these five steps follows.

The inventory of the local war council records is now over 95 per cent complete. It was the first to be undertaken in order to take advantage of the summer weather for traveling and to forestall the possible destruction of materials in the smaller offices through ignorance or carelessness. In three cases destruction of major proportions was discovered to have already taken place. The execution of the project was obviously beyond the powers of one man—108 local war councils were just too many—and completion would not have been possible within the time allotted without the willing co-operation of the five staff members of the field service of the Office of Civilian Mobilization. These men were assigned to the director of the Division of Records, accompanied him on several initial trips and then took over the work of inventorying the records of the remaining councils in their respective territories. The director was then free to deal with the state agencies. In all cases where it was possible, the person or persons originally in charge of the files were present during the taking of the inventory, and when it seemed a safe procedure, were allowed to do the actual work themselves, after its nature had been thoroughly explained. Only once or twice has the work had to be redone. In the case of drawers of correspond-

ence we have requested a breakdown of the file by folder headings on the back of the inventory sheet. The inventory of the records of state agencies and departments, about 25 per cent of which has now been completed, has generally been farmed out to the clerks in charge of the files, following a preliminary session of instructions. The forms in use for state and local records are adaptations of blanks worked out by the National Archives and are the same with the exception of item No. 14. This refers to the alternatives available in the matter of disposition. Now we come to the second step.

After four months of operation the decision as to what to keep and what to throw away has pretty well crystallized, but at the beginning not all the pertinent factors were known. We had to learn as we went along. The basic principle of selection is the insistence by the war council that a minimum of historically valuable material be preserved to make it possible to tell the story of what took place on New York's home front during the second World War. The attitude of localities and individuals toward their records has varied greatly. Some want to keep everything, especially if they are proud of their local organization. Others are quite content to throw everything out. The latter are this time in a minority. Of course, there are the usual variations from one extreme to the other.

Generally speaking, we have said that the local councils may keep everything if they wish, except personnel cards and enrollment blanks containing information of a highly personal or confidential nature. After discussion with the attorney-general's office it was thought advisable to require that these be destroyed. On the other hand, as we have mentioned above, we have been permitted by the commissioner of education to authorize them to destroy, if they wish: (1) "Card files regarding personnel and containing information of a personal nature, and also personnel files of such bulk as to render permanent retention impossible or impractical"<sup>3</sup>; (2) "Covering letters, acknowledgements of communications received, and similar incidental items of correspondence not essential to an understanding of the operation of the agency"; and (3) "Duplicates of vouchers and of financial records of similar type whose originals are

<sup>3</sup> Examples are the personnel files of the volunteers who worked in the Civilian Protection and Civilian Mobilization organizations, the survey cards showing evacuation accommodations prepared by the State Division of Housing, Child Care Committee Case Studies, and fingerprint cards now duplicated in the Albany office of the Department of Correction.

filed with the Department of Audit and Control, or, in the case of local agencies, with the appropriate financial officer of the political subdivision creating the agency in question."

Furthermore, we are also suggesting that communities need not keep unless they wish: (1) state and federal letters, circulars or directives of a general nature that come to them in mimeographed form, since copies of these materials are preserved in the files of state and federal departments and will likewise be in the State Archives, on the completion of our program. One exception here is the *Official Bulletin of the State War Council*, a printed newspaper. Nor is it necessary to retain: (2) duplicate copies of directives or circular letters issued by them provided they have two complete files for their own records.<sup>4</sup>

At first we checked each inventory sheet not only on item No. 14, but also marked each folder heading in the breakdown of the correspondence files on the back of the sheet. That took more time than the director subsequently found at his disposal. The result was a two-page letter to the local councils which accompanied the inventory sheets upon their return to the council. It is not a guide to the disposition of specific folders, and it could not have been written at the start of the inventory. It does, however, save the director's time and it also embodies additional instructions subsequently found by experience to be advisable. Guidance in the disposition of their records is usually much appreciated by the officials of the local councils, especially if they are proud of their work.

The third and fourth steps involve the selection of a suitable depository. This is a relatively simple matter on the state level, but has a number of complications on the local level. On the state level, an informal agreement is easily reached with department and agency heads as to whether their records are, or will be, active or inactive. Most existing state departments that have received war council funds prefer to retain the resulting records in their offices if the war-time program is at all clearly related to their regular work.

<sup>4</sup> A list of the major types of records to be found in the offices of the state and local war councils and the state department is: correspondence; minutes; reports of all kinds; personnel card files of all sizes; finger-print cards; housing and child care survey cards; volunteer enrollment blanks; receipts for civilian protection equipment; the usual purchase vouchers for equipment; receipts for freight shipments of salvage goods; state, federal and local directives, newspapers, circular letters, and press releases; posters and form for collecting, analyzing, and dispensing information; photographs, charts, and maps.

Where this is not the case, they have been glad to have us box the records for storage with the Division of History and Archives.<sup>5</sup>

As for the records of the war council's own agencies, such as the Office of Civilian Protection, Civilian Mobilization and Physical Fitness, the War Transportation Committee, and the Committee on Discrimination in Employment, these have all become inactive with the recent closing of those offices. Consequently, with the exception of the files of the last named committee, which we have temporarily made available to the new State Commission Against Discrimination in Employment, these files have been prepared for storage with the Division of History and Archives.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of disposition, however, an inventory is being made of the records of all state programs financed in whole or in part by the State War Council.

In dealing with county and city war councils, on the other hand, we have found that the local situation usually dictates the choice of a depository. While we ordinarily prefer the public library, historical society, county or city historian's office, or county or city clerk's office, in that order, one or two of these institutions are frequently missing or inadequate. We have found that the local people usually know the best place once we make clear the importance of the following factors: (1) Freedom from danger of fire and dampness. (2) Adequate care and servicing by a trained person or staff interested in preserving historical records. (3) Future accessibility to the public for purposes of legitimate historical research. It is worth mentioning that after further discussion with the attorney-general's office it was determined that we might "authorize the transfer of local records that are to be kept to depositories such as private libraries or museums, having the best available facilities for storage and servicing," provided they are those to which the public generally has access. Furthermore, as soon as the local war council officials discover that we are not planning to take their records away from them, but instead are as much interested as they to have them well

<sup>5</sup> The records of a considerable part of the war-time agricultural program which was operated from Cornell University will remain at Ithaca.

<sup>6</sup> In preparing files for storage we gave up very soon our original attempt to cull files folder by folder. Occasionally, we still split a folder, but usually a folder is either kept entire or thrown out. In boxing files, we use a carton which comes flat and when made up with gummed paper strips two inches wide, holds letter size folders one way and legal size the other. When full, the boxes are tied, numbered consecutively, labelled as to contents, and a typed box list is prepared showing the number and contents of each box.

housed and cared for in their own community, they co-operate with us willingly enough in everything else. Occasionally there occurs a tug-of-war between two local groups as to where the records should be placed. This is a rare event, and takes place only when the community is split into factions which have not co-operated harmoniously during the war. In such instances our position has been to take no stand in the matter, if each of the two places is satisfactory. In such cases, we have preferred to let the chairman of the local war council make the decision. Only where one of the proposed depositories is not desirable have we written persuasive letters which at the same time contrive to make clear indirectly that there is legal authority behind our preference. To date our authority has not been questioned, nor has any initial suspicion of state interference, which is sometimes encountered, persisted unduly.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the actual disposition of the records themselves, the other part of our program should be briefly mentioned. This is the preparation of a number of specific reference tools for subsequent research into the internal history of New York state during the second World War.

The return of the inventory check sheets to the local war councils as guides to the disposition of their records is not the only use to be made of them. Our present plan is to file them at the office of the state historian as a permanent union catalogue, showing type, quantity, method of filing, and permanent location of all records created under the authority of the War Emergency Act. This is the only material that is at present being considered for microfilming, and will constitute the only available guide to the nature and whereabouts of the various groups of records until, and unless, it be subsequently published. This procedure, however, is being considered in conjunction with brief administrative histories of each state department, agency, and local war council. A bibliography of all pamphlets which these agencies have published or distributed, to-

<sup>7</sup> The fifth and final step is the return of the check sheets to the local councils with the letter of instructions and a notice of free cartons for the boxing of their records upon application to the State War Council. This is necessarily a weak point in the program, for we are depending upon human beings who, no matter how interested they may be in preserving the records of their local council, are busy and apt to delay action where the work is unfamiliar. The actual work of transferring records to the final place of deposit, which we do ourselves on the state level, has to be delegated on the local level. We are consequently planning a final checkup of the local councils at the very end of the program.



gether with the titles of articles and addresses describing the work of the various agencies, would probably be included. This triple combination would constitute a reference manual designed primarily for administrators, legislators, and scholars.

A second reference tool is being created in the form of a file of brief, five-year administrative histories of the war activities of each state department, State War Council agency, and local war council. We are calling for these now, while those concerned with the work are still alive and memories are vivid. The local councils have been asked to emphasize their own programs rather than those originating with the state. With each manuscript we are also placing copies of all forms (including posters) that have been used to collect, analyze, and dispense information regarding the programs under way. These include questionnaires, form cards, leaflets, mimeographed syllabi, and newspapers, and furnish further evidence as to how the war-time problems were handled.

In the third place we are building up for the state historian's office a pamphlet file of all substantial publications mimeographed or printed during the war years by the various state agencies and departments. This will also include many federal pamphlets distributed in New York through state channels. Our aim is to keep two copies of each in Albany, and to distribute as nearly complete duplicate sets to half a dozen of the chief reference libraries of the state.<sup>8</sup> This file will provide the chief basis for the bibliography of war-time publications projected as part of the reference manual.

A fourth item, which will constitute an addition to the pamphlet bibliography will be a list of the titles of important articles and addresses published or delivered by state officials on the war-time programs of their respective departments.

At the last meeting of the State War Council it was recommended that the council consider the advisability of presenting in print to the citizens of the state and to the rest of the country generally the picture of a people democratically organized on the home front to wage total war. Furthermore, that this story be presented in at least three different ways:

1. To public officials and scholars through the reference manual described above.

<sup>8</sup> These are the New York Historical Society in New York City, the New-York State Historical Association at Cooperstown, the libraries of Cornell and Syracuse universities, the Grosvenor Library in Buffalo, and the Public Library of Rochester.



2. To the people at large,

a) through a narrative history of the organization of the state for war and its achievements in production, in preparation for civilian defense, and in the solution of war-connected problems of an economic and social character.

b) through three dimensional exhibits in the state museum to illustrate the organization of the state in time of war and the permanent political, economic, and social gains that have resulted from five years of war experience.

The collection of materials for exhibits in the state museum is progressing slowly but steadily. A brief, five-year history of New York state in the second World War has recently been authorized by the council and we have begun to collect information. The reference manual is a distinct possibility for next summer.

When the entire records program is completed, New York state will have a coherent body of reference materials for the war years, well housed and catalogued. The bulk will be in Albany, New York City, and Ithaca. The remainder will be decentralized in the counties and cities, but access to these local records will be available through the catalogue in the Division of History and Archives in Albany. Likewise, some progress will have been made in the collection of tangible objects with which to illustrate visually the impact of the war years upon the state's civilization. A brief, inadequate effort will also have been made through the five-year report to pull all the threads together and present a total picture as it appears now at short range. This material, taken together, will, we hope, be adequate for any subsequent research into the operations of the home front in New York state during the second World War.

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