

THE CWA SURVEY OF HISTORICAL SOURCE MATERIAL IN PENNSYLVANIA

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WHAT little value my remarks may have, in a brief discussion of the recent CWA survey of historical source material in Pennsylvania, is due entirely to the outstanding richness of these deposits, and the somewhat successful attempt to synthesize them into one master file for future reference. The leading role of Pennsylvania in national affairs is well known. What is not so well realized is the unparalleled variety of rich strains of local history, rivaling in culture and interest many old world communities, which have all contributed their vari-colored threads to the rich and beautiful fabric of the Commonwealth's past, still to be fully revealed by the general historian. Many agencies have already explored these fields. Much has been gathered into local societies; many articles have been written by learned men not well known beyond their locality. But as yet these factors are largely unrelated as they react on each other in the making of history.

There were two main objectives when the Archives Division of the State Library, under the general supervision of the Department of Public Instruction, undertook the survey. First, was the natural desire, as supervisor over the official records in the Commonwealth, to know the status of its charges and the extent of its dominions. Secondly, to follow out the thought above expressed, a beginning at comprehending the basis of our stream of history could be at least attempted.

The whole status of administering source materials in any given area is still largely in the antiquarian era. What statesman-like plans for archival work have been advanced stand like the Himalayas above the haphazard hit or miss methods of the ordinary archive or historical depository. The methods employed by the Canadian Archives, with its well known calendars, the Carnegie Institution guides to sources, and in smaller sphere,

by the Illinois Historical Society and the Minnesota Archives, all point the way to thoughtful planning.

It was with something of this spirit that we grasped at this unusual opportunity. Our greatest handicap was the necessity of using unskilled workers. Any attempt at critical objectivity in weighing and evaluating source material with analysis of content was out of the question. It was resolved to make this a stocktaking, or inventory of classes of material, having the workers list carefully the description of the class or the name of the collection, giving the amount in the most convenient unit, such as volume, box or bundle, and the inclusive dates, being especially careful to note any gaps which might occur. This all inclusive-ness, it appeared, was especially valuable for our purposes. We were unusually blessed in surrounding ourselves with an able staff composed for the most part of graduate students in history, numbering twelve regional supervisors who traveled, each over a definite area, contacting workers and sources, and four assistants in the archives to direct the work and examine reports for accuracy and completeness. While a great percentage of the reports will have to be checked back to sources for accuracy and proper arrangement, it is hoped that some of this staff will fulfill this function if federal aid is again forthcoming and the survey completed.

The sweeping promises of the halcyon days of CWA were encouraging to bold enterprises. Taking a leaf from the economists, we resolved on the utmost for a planned archival economy. Careful consideration brought these general classes of deposits forth as the most important:

1. Archives of all governmental units.
2. Historical depositories including societies, libraries, universities, etc.
3. Manuscripts in private collections.
4. Churches.
5. Business records.
6. Social and fraternal organizations.
7. Maps.
8. Newspaper holdings.

We shall state briefly the accomplishments and value of the survey for each class.

Archives. The hierarchy of government units in Pennsylvania from the standpoint of importance is somewhat as follows: state, county, municipality, borough, and township. Our workers completed the state archives and forty-four of the sixty-seven counties, with the greater part of the remaining twenty-three counties nearly finished. What was done on the municipalities, the townships, and the hundreds of boroughs is hardly worth mentioning for we went falteringly into that phase about the time of the first shutdown. I think decidedly our greatest permanent result from the archival survey is the accumulation of data on the relative values of official records, and the way in which they are at present housed. A basis is now laid for permanent reform, which I shall discuss later.

As to the value of this material for the student, I should like to quote from a paper on the subject by one of my staff, Dr. Blake McKelvey. There is no question that these records are now our greatest unworked source. Dr. McKelvey says, in part:

"Passing on to another item . . . our work in the courthouses will be of tremendous significance for any study of almost any phase of legal history. I happen to be interested in two phases: that of the development of police power; and that of the criminal law. Students of the police power have said a great deal concerning regulatory laws and conservative and liberal decisions of the supreme court, but nobody has been able to tell us how effectual all of this theoretical expression of the police power has been in practice. The charter books that we have surveyed, if they were examined from a statistical and analytical point of view by a graduate student, would probably reveal some very significant evidence as to how the various uses of the police power have actually affected industry. As for my other interest, criminal law, we likewise have almost unlimited source material available and material which has scarcely been touched by scholars as yet. For example, an individual graduate student might well go into some courthouse and trace through the records of Quarter Sessions Court, making a statistical study of the character of the various cases for over a period of fifty or more years—cases that were carried through to completion. Penologists today are urging the legislatures to provide funds for the collection of such statistics in order to help plan the penal program of the future. An

historical survey of these same factors would provide a very useful perspective for a consideration of modern statistics, to say nothing of the light it would shed on social history.

"Now in regard to another subject, the changing codes of morality, we have surveyed dockets that open up possibilities here as well. We have tabulated tavern license books, liquor license books, and other dockets on this general question offering opportunities for intensive study of this problem, the actual practice in the community as over and against the generalized law. I noticed one interesting docket reported in Philadelphia—divorce argument docket, beginning 1850, showing the arguments for divorce. A very suggestive study might be made of the changing grounds for divorce."¹

These are only a few of the subjects of possible interest to students. I wish to emphasize that the results are not in analytical content form, although we had planned to analyze the records of several model counties as our next objective. The survey only indicates the existence, location, and completeness of the original files.

Depositories. Pennsylvanians are "literate" in the most complete and exceptional use of that term. Their realization of the meaning of the past respect to the present, their interest and joy in ancestral achievement, their curiosity in the record whether drab or brilliant surpasses antiquarian activity and takes on the hues of a philosophical inquiry. This is reflected in the existence of some sixty-odd county and institutional historical societies, of which a score or more are of considerable importance. Fifty-five which we have surveyed included such large and flourishing organizations as the well known Historical Society of Pennsylvania, a major institution, the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society, the Tioga Point Museum, Haverford College, the Friends Historical Society, the Schwenkfelder Historical Society, Valley Forge Historical Society, Lehigh University, the Lutheran Theological Seminary, and so on, not to weary you by extending the list unduly. About twenty-nine of the depositories are of surpassing significance. I forbear to call the roll of the county societies. With the exception of several large depositories such as

¹From a paper on "The Survey and the Graduate Student," presented at the Second Annual Meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association.

the Reformed Church Archives, or the Moravian Archives at Lititz, this phase was carried through to completion. The results of the survey of some smaller societies showed a deplorable lack of organization, and the second stage will be rechecking certain reports and rearranging the contents in logical order. I am frank to say that the poor arrangement was due in part to inexperienced workers whom we did not have time to supervise, and partly, to illogical filing in the depository.

On the value of this phase for research, I cannot forbear to quote from a very excellent paper by another member of my staff, Mr. Alfred V. Boerner, who discusses the uses of this survey in a general way for the writing of the history of Pennsylvania, referring generally to every phase of the survey. One section reads as follows:

"There has long been a need of a comprehensive study of land speculation in Pennsylvania, an enterprise that colors almost every other phase of our history. An exhaustive examination of its implications would undoubtedly give new significance to much that we already know. For such a study, there is an enormous amount of material available. In the county archives are to be found literally tons of documents relating directly or indirectly to land speculation. Thousands of deeds, drafts, surveys, transfers, records of sale, litigation papers, and assessment lists chronicle the tale of the land development of Pennsylvania, of the effect of the western frontier, the rise of new industries, and the growth of transportation facilities on land prices and sales. In the land office in Harrisburg is a collection of between sixty and seventy thousand pieces, among them the Nicholson papers, which have never been adequately worked up. These important papers are mainly the documents collected by the Nicholson commission appointed in 1806 by the legislature to investigate John Nicholson's activities—and consist of correspondence, articles of agreement of the Pennsylvania, Asylum, Holland, and other land companies formed or owned in part by John Nicholson, transfers of stock, accounts, deeds, bills of sale, minutes of meetings, maps, drafts, and other records which the commission used in settling the Nicholson controversy—some forty thousand pieces in all. The Wallis papers in Muncy, 7,200 pieces of correspondence, deeds, bills of sale, stock, etc., concerning land sales covering the

entire state have never been thoroughly worked over. A private collection of a few hundred pieces in Lewisburg casts some more illumination on this development; the Parry, Yost and Hey papers in the Schuylkill County Historical Society's possession bring the story into the coal regions. In the Lancaster County Historical Society collections are several hundred items of varying importance—correspondence, deeds, minutes, stock, etc., of the Lancaster County Land Company. The Bingham Land Company of Wellsboro, Tioga County, still in existence, has enormous files of later records, and of course, only those of no current value would be available to the student. Records of the Asylum venture, which ties in with the Nicholson speculations can be found in the archives of Luzerne County, which at the time included Bradford County and in the Tioga Point Museum at Athens where Mrs. Louise Wells Murray, the mother of the present curator, collected hundreds of manuscripts relating to the French Royalist settlement. At Towanda, the Bradford County Historical Society possesses the bill of sale for the Asylum tract from Robert Morris, the younger, to Doniatius Le Ray de Chaumont, as well as many of the original deeds and patents of Robert Morris. Here are several hundred pieces of correspondence, reports, orders, etc., of Kingsberry, the Bradford County agent of the French proprietors, as well as drafts, maps and deeds of the Dupont tract, the Susquehanna Purchase and other ventures in land development. At Tioga Point Museum may be found some fifty papers of the same character concerning the Susquehanna purchase. . . . This by no means exhausts all possibilities, for I have chosen my illustrations at random, and have included nothing from the larger centers like Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Wilkes-Barre, from which we have not yet received the final reports. We may reasonably expect them to produce an even greater abundance of material for the investigator.”²

Private manuscripts. Of some 600 manuscript collections in private possession reported on mainly by supervisors and special workers, I should say only about two-thirds were of real historical value. We were agreeably surprised by having access to manu-

² From a paper on “The Survey and the Writing of Pennsylvania History,” presented at the Second Annual Meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association.

scripts which would only tantalize the research student should I name them, since this information is confidential. I cannot refrain, however, from throwing out some references as it were for bait, such as various collections of Muhlenberg papers, a James Burd collection, the diary of John Fulton (1846-1874), who opened up coal, iron and ore mines in western Pennsylvania, the Admiral Barry papers, and dozens of others which I fear to mention.

Arrangements can be made to ask permission for access to accredited scholars, which may or may not be forthcoming. This is a fertile field for the organized depositories, which should take greater advantage of the opportunities knocking at their door.

Churches. In the church survey, we probably made a mistake in attempting an absolute result. If we had limited ourselves in date, the evidence collected would have been more complete and more interesting. Here again we were deceived by promise of unlimited aid. Of the 1,600 church records surveyed, the majority do not reach back to the Civil War, and many churches were founded after the turn of the present century. Not a few, especially of the Calvinist sects, have lost their earliest records. I wish to exculpate the Presbyterians from this charge, but naturally refrain from further mention of names. In connection with the church archives, the church survey indicates that the history of the development of religions in Pennsylvania is still to be written.

Business and social records. The surveys of both business records and of the records of social and fraternal organizations were frustrated by the closing down of the project. In Philadelphia, we did investigate a score of the most important firms and corporations. The results were surprisingly productive and proved that this type had been decidedly neglected by the general student.

Maps. A union catalogue of maps in the twelve or more major collections of Pennsylvania promises to be the slow outgrowth of this survey. The work is now at least seventy-five per cent complete.

Newspapers. For the newspaper holdings, it would have been folly, of course, not to plan the survey as a unit of Miss Wini-

fred Gregory's major project. To that end we adopted her suggestions and forms for entries. For our purposes, check lists from all towns and even rural sections were desired. If completed in the future, the list will, then, transcend even Miss Gregory's needs. This phase was checked in mid-stream, and its untimely halt has caused us great discontent.

So much for the accomplishments of the CWA survey of historical source materials in Pennsylvania. The records deposited in the State Library will in time be indexed. The Library will then become a clearing house for research information.⁸

The problems of administration pictured by this survey are of no minor size or consequence. Underlying all, is the surprising ignorance encountered among all descriptions of educated people concerning the meaning and value of manuscript record. Aside from the world of research there is little conception of what constitutes the base of the social sciences. This is an anomalous condition for it is on the records produced by the non-academic groups that the social sciences depend. It is not unusual to find cultured families with only a vague realization of their duty concerning the papers which some important relative has bequeathed. On the burning and disposing of collections each archivist has blood-curdling tales which have become a tradition of his establishment.

I do not suppose that many people would burn a Franklin or a Lincoln manuscript; it is of the generality of material that I speak. This distinction between collector's or association values and historical values is widely prevalent among small curators. It has been responsible for the antiquarian conception of storage concealment practiced in some archives and depositories. Intrinsic and historical values often coincide, but may be as far apart

⁸ Since the above was written the Philadelphia, Allegheny, and Dauphin county units, under the reorganized Federal relief plan known as SERB, have pushed forward the work on three main phases, namely court records, depositories, and newspapers. This summer work is now temporarily halted but it is hoped will go forward again this fall and winter to the completion of these phases. The Dauphin County survey is practically complete for those objectives, but a small staff will be organized to begin in earnest what was started and planned out by Doctors Selsam and MacKelvey—the organization and indexing of the reports. In addition it is hoped that in at least ten or a dozen counties where the objectives were by no means attained, small forces can be organized under SERB to complete the work.

as the poles. A mere signature of Thomas Lynch is worth, in cold cash, a large sum; the accounts of a later nineteenth century ironworks are valued at considerably less. I would not have the curator overlook association. That would shock our very natures. We must learn to understand both monetary and historical values and reverence those records which will some day be our only testimonials.

It is no exaggeration to say that official custodians of records are often least educated in an appreciation of their historical values. There is oftentimes an exception, of course, in favor of those who file court records, or wills, deeds, and other classes which are constantly required for the legal basis of the community's rights. I have a real sympathy, however, with official custodians, for their filing problem is one which, so far, the learned world does not seem to comprehend. It might be expressed by a paraphrase of Malthus' Law: The volume of record increases in geometrical progression while the volume of space increases by arithmetical progression, so that records are always pressing on the margin of space capacity, and, I may add, unlike Malthus' law, this law is actually working. There are four factors involved in this tremendous increase of official records within the last few generations: Population, wealth, socialized activities of government, and modern business practices. This has been reflected very largely in those offices which have had to do with the executive and fiscal branches of government such as, commissioners, assessors, treasurers, secretaries of revenue, auditors, controllers, and so on. One hundred years ago, taxes were a relatively simple affair compared to the innumerable forms imposed upon the same average family today. We now have automobiles requiring licenses. Investments are taxed more heavily. Hunting and fishing licenses must be paid for. Dog licenses are a necessity. For all of these, duplicate receipts are filed in the office of issue. The enormous amount of government business which has been produced by the growth of trusts and corporations is well known. The state and its subdivisions have entered extensively into such things as city planning, mothers' assistance funds, and other social activities which create records. Officials are loath to part with vouchers, and warrants, which they think might be needed for reference, and so the older records

are pushed into attics, cellars, and dirty, steam-filled halls, formerly used for lockups, and at last, crowded out of these, they are finally carted off to the paper mill and destroyed.

This condition is infinitely worse for the minor governmental units which have no fixed loci for their records. What little the survey did with borough and township records shows immediately the crying need for the most primary education in regard to their value. They oftentimes are regarded as very little more than the property of the particular official who is creating them. I venture to say that a majority of township and borough records in the state of Pennsylvania do not antedate the last few generations, and many are only a few years old. This is by no means peculiar to official records, as I have pointed out. All these problems I should like to discuss as part of a general plan for administering the historical resources of the state.

These thoughts as to a plan of archival and manuscript economy are merely thrown out for discussion. The exigencies of the different counties and the different commonwealths demand separate remedies. They embody no original ideas, but old ones thrown into juxtaposition. Naturally, the first principle which presents itself from a study of the foregoing problems is that of selection and preservation. This applies particularly to official records. The process of "weeding" files is by no means generally practiced, and many tons of useless material is yearly saved and impounded. Rules should be drawn up by the archives or historical departments of a state for the guidance of officials in every political subdivision, since county and township records are more or less standardized, classifying their records accordingly, thus: (1) those of legal and historical importance; (2) those needed for a brief period for administrative reference; (3) those which should be destroyed. There should be an official attached to the state archives to see that these rules have been carried out. Under the second class, comes material such as bills, warrants, and receipts, which have to be kept until the time has expired by the statute of limitations, when they can be safely discarded. I should say, aside from this restriction, the first principle of selection would be whether the material duplicated documents in more permanent form without adding additional information. Modern business methods require a great deal of such duplica-

tion. Sometimes the same material can already be found more conveniently in printed form. This is especially true of government documents, and unless these have an intrinsic or associational value, such as acts or governors' messages, they might be disposed of according to the discretion of the custodians. Old registers of voters, which are sometimes printed or duplicated by directories, occupying many cubic feet of space generally add nothing to city directories and they are much more inconvenient to use. Records before 1860 do not usually duplicate printed materials. I should say anything before the beginning of the twentieth century should be carefully scanned and checked before it is disposed of.

The second rule on the selection and preservation of material would be as to its ephemeral or historical qualities. This is a matter which cannot be set down without laying ourselves open to the popular charge of "regimentation." Each custodian will have to be a rugged individualist in this matter. So often archivists and curators, however, have really transcended the bounds of common sense in their attitude and entitle everything as "precious." I think, however, we shall safely leave these matters to the common sense of officials and archivists in conference as to which is ephemeral, especially for material of the twentieth century. As we recede in years, we become more and more controversial. It is best to accept as settled the material preceding a certain period and restrict our destructive activities to current files, for they are the source of our real problem.

A code, then, for the selection from an official and historical standpoint of the records of all governmental subdivisions of the state, should be drawn up and an officer appointed to enforce it. That is the first recommendation. The primary selection from the larger current deposits of any state department cannot be settled by a code, but will have to be adjusted currently by the executive in consultation with the archivist.

The second general principle under the archives problem is that time-argued question: concentration *versus* non-concentration. I really do not think that this argument can be settled either one way or the other, because it depends entirely on conditions within a state. For my part I know it would be absolutely impossible to force concentration on Pennsylvania. The genius

of the state and the whole force of her history would oppose it. The great majority of the sixty-seven counties have each their own enriching historical traditions. I feel it would be like tearing history up from the roots to move quantities of records out of any locality. The policy there would be to develop this feeling by strengthening the association between the records in their midst to the traditions and history of the community. I do not mean to say that records are always carefully preserved, quite the contrary. In many counties, the most valuable have been lost or disposed of. On the other hand, it is not uncommon that the local historical societies have been the means of saving and preserving that which would otherwise have disappeared. I wish to throw out this suggestion, however, for those states which must concentrate. A great part of those records used for legal reference must necessarily remain with the county. Others, the officials will not release. Therefore, it must invariably result that a separation is being made at the same time that concentration is being accomplished, and the inventory of the concentrated records cannot be complete without reference to what is left behind.

However, for states like Pennsylvania, where it is best to keep records in the community, I do not advocate turning over wholesale large groups to private societies even though supported in part by county funds. In time we must expect that all counties will have custodians of records and such records shall be treated in all respects as an important archive like those of any state. Plans should be made for the housing and equipping of the courthouses or municipal buildings with reference to the future and to the use of these materials. When it is absolutely unavoidable that some records will have to be shifted from a courthouse or municipal building and there is no other official residence for them, the alternatives are to place them either in the local society, or to take them to the State Archives. I would vote in favor of the society for limited materials, but would leave the power entirely in the hands of the State Archivist, who would be guided by the equipment and facilities offered. Many county societies are quite incapable of this trust.

The minor local units should be required by law to place their records in some central building and not in the homes of the

various officials. Oftentimes there is no such building, but what with fire houses, schools, courthouses, and other public buildings some suitable repository at least can surely be found. This law should be enforced by the proper state officials.

One of the greatest arguments in favor of concentration is the ease of consultation by scholars. This argument, however, is being steadily diminished by recent strides in reproductive facilities, soon to be used personally by any research worker of consequence, coupled with ease of transportation. At any rate, complete concentration can never be effected, although I admit it solves the tremendous problem of preservation much more effectively than decentralization.

So much for official records. Now government is carried on by private individuals, acting in an official capacity. Then there is the invisible government which needs no comment, and the many public men who influence affairs of state. An archivist would be simple indeed who thinks that the boundaries of his domain halt at his portals. True, outside those portals he can exercise no power. In English law, much in a person's papers is considered private, which would not be so recognized by Latin countries. In the state departments are records of official conversations; in private collections are notes and memoranda of conversations with dinner guests. Not infrequently the latter tells the story which the glazed surface of the official document cannot reveal. Going on from the papers of officials and people interested in influencing government, we come by imperceptible degrees to historical manuscripts of every kind, for the history of this Commonwealth has no boundary line between political, economic, and social accounts or events. It is impossible for a state archivist not to feel a great concern and interest over all classes of material and strive to lend his active support to any schemes for preserving it.

The first essential is a campaign of education. Naturally, this should start with the public school system. There is no reason for any student waiting until his graduate years to know the meaning of a manuscript. There is no reason why any individual should not be taught the meaning. All have contact with paper, ink and typewriters, even in elementary studies, and they should know the moving force of these great inventions in developing

the course of history. There is no reason why even elementary classes in history and the social sciences cannot be taken to depositories and have their first lesson in understanding what is in the background of all those printed words which they have seen. This will have the most powerful effect on teaching the meaning between true and false. They will come to understand that books do not represent the truth unless their basis is proven. The fetish of the printed page will no longer maintain its thrall. I would strongly advise that all state archive departments and public school systems get together on this point and arrange such factors as a part of the school curricula. Then the state archives or historical body should from time to time issue attractive pamphlets or books, which would have a wide circulation among the public, explaining what there are in the way of historical records in the state and in the archives, and what meaning these have for the state's history.

More important, however, is the preparation of pamphlets on the elementary meaning of records for they will have to be prepared with subtlety and imagination and should appeal especially to people of all classes to preserve their records and make them available to some central depository. People should be advised to consult historians and curators in the matter of the selection of the important papers and should be warned that all papers are not important. It is generally true that when people are respectful of manuscripts, they feel that each has a like claim to their reverence without discrimination. This information should be disseminated especially through church, business and social agencies in coöperation with the headquarters of the various denominations and through the executive departments which contact the business organizations and corporations of the state. If the organization has a good depository with archival equipment, so much the better; but if not, and there is no likelihood of obtaining such, they should be urged to put their records in the nearest institutional or private depository after consulting and advising with the Archives Department.

For the minor historical depository in the state, be it a library, institution, or society, the archivist should prepare a guide on the arranging, care, housing, cataloguing and analyzing of records. This guide should be suited to the collections and not

couched in too general terms. One which will do for the Public Archives of Canada or the Library of Congress would naturally be of no interest to local curators. It has been our experience in Pennsylvania that such advice is most necessary. It would be one of the most positive influences which we could think of in interpreting for each community the meaning of what they possess. A jumble and miscellany of manuscripts is devoid of much of its historical importance. A logically arranged collection assumes a new meaning for the development of that community's history. These depositories should also be advised concerning equipment. They should be urged to expand, if necessary, and to institute a regular campaign in the acquisition of collections within the sphere of their influence. The archivist should not seek to take everything for himself which he deems of interest even if it could be had for the asking. He should confine himself to items which transcend local interest and properly belong with the state's records.

Last, and most important, he should attempt to interrelate all local deposits by the creation of a union inventory of all unpublished materials. If this can be accomplished by state funds or by federal aid, so much the better. Voluntary aid from local communities cannot be depended upon, but exceptional societies will sometimes have the time and means to give him a list of their collections. It is impossible to advise as to how this can be accomplished, but he should certainly leave no stone unturned and should devote much planning and thoughtful care to this ultimate end. Once the union inventory is fairly established, it can be added to year after year by using forms. The annual acquisitions of any one depository would not be large. This should be kept separate from his union list of records found in all the official offices of the state and local subdivisions, but should be integrated in his mind and used in connection with it.

So much for the counsel of perfection. I hope I have not offended by seeming to play the paragon in enumeration of any supposed virtues. It is only because it contrasts so fatally with the defects observed through our survey of historical sources in Pennsylvania, and likewise the defects in the finished survey, that we have been able to present it. Otherwise, the purblindness of our present situation would never have been revealed.