

PENNSYLVANIA AND HER ARCHIVES

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THE public records of Pennsylvania, created by governmental officials in the discharge of their duties, are of primary use as administrative and business records essential to the conduct of public office. As the years go by these records become progressively less important to the creator or recorder of them, but during this same period their significance as historical records is steadily enhanced until their value can no longer be measured by ordinary monetary standards. Actually the existing body of current and non-current archives constitutes the very core of all data on the record of human achievement. It is that record. Only by our awareness of past achievements and mistakes can we confront present problems and intelligently prepare for those of the future. Public archives are the repository of the daily record of human progress and as such they are capable of broadening the general education, awakening the historical consciousness, and enriching the cultural heritage of state and nation alike. Without an analysis of them the study and administration of government may be likened to the search for truth in the realm of chance, ignorance, and doubt.

As society has increased in complexity the older, simpler governmental organization has changed rapidly to a more highly developed form of state government with many additional functions. The number and volume of records required by law or kept as a matter of convenience have grown proportionately. The inability to house properly and to care for these records has made them completely inaccessible unless some provision is made for storing and classifying them. Obviously the destruction of old, so-called non-current records will not solve the problem because as time goes on it is found that new developments require frequent

reference to many of the old records. Modern states have become great business concerns which need, for efficiency of operation, to organize their records in such a way that desired information can be procured quickly and copies of important records made promptly, accurately, and economically. This problem can be solved satisfactorily only through the organization of a modern archival system under the direction of a trained archivist.

The volume of the archives of Pennsylvania is enormous. There are many hundred of thousands of cubic feet of records in the various government depositories. The character of this material varies greatly. It includes letters received and copies of letters sent; accounts, receipts, and even canceled checks; messages, proclamations, orders, rules and regulations; land grants and surveys; vital statistics; material and scientific data; reports of departments, bureaus, commissions and officials; laws, legislative journals, and minutes; and reports of committees, petitions and resolutions, court records and such fundamental documents as the original charter to William Penn and the constitutions of the state.

A brief analysis of the materials now housed in the Archives Division (a division of the State Library and Museum, Department of Public Instruction), will indicate that it is in no real sense a hall of records for the Commonwealth. While it is true that the records of the colonial period and the Revolution have received a considerable amount of attention, many of them having been published in the *Colonial Records* and the ten series of *Pennsylvania Archives*, no recognizable principles of archival economy have been employed in the cataloging and storing of these documents, and the editorial quality of most of the publications is universally lamented. These records are included in groups titled as follows: Provincial Papers, 1664-1774; Provincial Record Volumes, 1682-1775; Revolutionary Papers, 1775-1783; Committee and Council of Safety Records, 1775-1777; Post Revolutionary Papers, 1784-1793; Supreme Executive Council Minutes and Corresp., 1777-1790; General Assembly Minutes.

For the period during which the Constitution of 1790 was drafted and adopted, the Division has several valuable series of records, presumably most of the extant archives of those years, but there can be no doubt that additional material for the period would be uncovered by a systematic search of the records in the custody of the executive offices. The archives in the Division

which fall into the period 1790 to 1838 include Executive Minutes, Comptroller General and Auditor General Papers, Legislative Communications, Acts of Assembly, Land Office Records, and Register General Papers. There is in addition a large mass of papers called Governors' papers, which is a chronologically arranged assortment of bills and receipts, plus some letters and memoranda, a miscellany of negligible documents principally from the offices of the Treasury, Auditor General, and Secretary of the Commonwealth. These papers span the period from 1790 to 1838, and are divided by gubernatorial administrations. They are in no sense the archives of the executive nor of any of the executive departments, but merely a motley mass of documents which, apparently, was the residue of those archives after more significant materials had been taken from them. Material on roads and canals for this period has been segregated, and there are several other subject classifications by which documents are arranged, but the arrangement in no instance follows the basic archival principle of agency of origin. Moreover, there are several important obvious gaps for this period, which is the only period for which the Archives Division has a comprehensive and representative body of archival records. There are, for example, none of the records of the state judiciary under the Constitution of 1790, and the basic legislative records, the journals of the legislature, are not in the Division.

For the period after 1838 the Division has no consistent series of archival records. This means that practically all of the extant records of the Commonwealth's development during the past century are scattered among the cellars and attics of public buildings in Harrisburg, under bridges, and in other places where they are exposed to every destructive element. Several large, but relatively unimportant groups of records for this period have found their way into the Division: legislative petitions and documents deposited with state agencies by county officials to 1889; records of pardons to 1888; Attorney General's letter-books, 1875-1907; materials relating to state roads to 1881; records of soldiers' absentee votes (a tremendous mass, of negligible value); and account books of state Treasurers. These and a few smaller groups of documents constitute the whole of the State Archives deposited in the Archives Division. There are about fifty personal collections and a considerable mass of material relating to the Chicago Fair of 1893,

but the searcher will look in vain in the Division for records of the Governor's office after 1859, for records of the administration of public education when that function belonged to the Department of State or after the Department of Public Instruction was instituted, or for records of the Departments of Military Affairs, of Internal Affairs, and the like.

At the present time a student who is investigating, for example, the perennially neglected field of Pennsylvania legal history in the colonial period, will look in vain for material in the Archives Division. Upon investigation he will discover that the office of the prothonotary of the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania has "some old papers." He will call upon the prothonotary's secretary to ask whether he may see these papers, and will be shown a time-worn volume known as the "Docket of 1709." If he is insistent the clerk in the prothonotary's office will show him a list of some twenty typed pages which is the inventory of eighteenth and nineteenth century Supreme Court records preserved in the vault of the prothonotary's office. This list is written, for the most part, in very ambiguous language and reveals the fact that the records, particularly for the eighteenth century, are stored in no systematic order. If our hypothetical student asks to see those records he will be told that they are very valuable papers which must not be handled. This same situation may presumably be found in most of the state offices; in many of them the student will receive far less courteous attention. The moral of this story is obvious.

One of the problems in this Commonwealth has been that Pennsylvanians have looked upon their older public records largely as interesting curiosities, of value primarily as museum pieces. This feeling has been responsible for the organization of the State Archives as a part of the State Library and Museum and for the fact that only the oldest records have been turned over to the Division. But the primary purpose of public records is to serve the state in its transaction of public business, and experience in other states has shown that state records are frequently used from the legal as well as from the historical point of view. The increase in state business without a corresponding development of a state archival establishment has created such congestion that it is difficult for many offices to care even for their current records.

Sometimes files endanger the flooring. Stored improperly the records thus become a fire hazard.

Many basic records of the Commonwealth for the period before 1897 were destroyed in the fire of February 2 of that year; it is generally assumed that almost all the significant records were destroyed. There can be little doubt, however, that an efficient search would uncover a vast amount of valuable historical material for that period, material which obviously should be placed in the custody of a trained archival staff headed by an administrator with power to act on behalf of the people of Pennsylvania for the preservation of such priceless possessions.

Non-current records have been destroyed or stored in basements, attics, and vaults. In no event under such conditions are they filed so that they are available for reference. There is at the present time a manifest need for a centralized archives system. Such a system economizes space, provides for the destruction of really useless papers, and makes those which may be called for reading available. Not only will a central repository economize space but the actual cost of building and operating it would be less than the cost of a series of haphazardly selected and located, and often rented, repositories. By furnishing promptly and surely any desired information it would help to clear titles and dispose of claims which are sometimes unwarranted and even fraudulent. Regardless of the initial cost of constructing an archives building, equipping it with the latest facilities and staffing it with trained officials, a modern archives system is a boon to the taxpayer and is an imperative necessity in Pennsylvania. An archives building will speed up and simplify the work of state departments and agencies. It will safeguard the records against loss from dust, damp and mildew, temperature changes, fire, flood, insects, rodents, "souvenir fiends," vandals, thieves, and other enemies, and it will possess the facilities for keeping valuable documents in good repair.

While it is important to erect an archives building as a repository for our non-current records it is likewise apparent that legislation must be enacted requiring state departments to turn over these records at periodic intervals to the central archival organization. The archivist must be given charge and superintendence over all archives or records belonging to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He should have the power:

- (1) To appoint all persons employed by the State Archives;

- (2) To inspect the archives of any agency of state government;
- (3) To requisition for transfer to and to store and preserve in the State Archives Building all archives or records approved for such transfer by the archives council;
- (4) To make requisitions for the arrangement, custody, use and withdrawal of materials deposited with the State Archives;
- (5) To exercise immediate custody over and control of the State Archives building and such other buildings which may become additional repositories for state records; and
- (6) To make recommendations to the General Assembly regarding the disposal of papers and other documents among the archives and records of the Commonwealth which appear to have no permanent value or historical interest.

The right of Pennsylvanians to consult their public records will remain a legal fiction until this or a similar program is enacted into law. The furtherance of sound archival administration is a duty incumbent upon every citizen of the Commonwealth. Her historians, in particular, have much at stake. What are they going to do about it?