THE GOVERNMENT-SUPPORTED HISTORICAL SURVEY OF PENNSYLVANIA IN THE WESTERN COUNTIES

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During the past year and a half, except for three suspensions, the several national emergency works administrations have supported an Historical Survey of Pennsylvania, the original purpose of which was to inventory the public archives of the counties of the state, and the scope of which has been subsequently expanded to include national, state, and municipal archives, manuscripts, and miscellaneous materials in depositories, newspaper files, maps, church and school records, the papers of old banks and industrial establishments, and what one might call important attic accumulations. In December, 1933, Dr. Curtis W. Garrison, archivist at the Pennsylvania State Library, applied to the recently established Civil Works Administration for approval and support of a state-wide inventory of county archives under his general supervision. The project was promptly authorized; it was rapidly expanded in scope. It was revived in some of the leading counties under each of the works administrations that followed the CWA, but at the present time it is suspended everywhere. For the time being, therefore, it is not entitled to CWA, RWD, LWD, or any other official prefix but is known simply as “the” Historical Survey of Pennsylvania, except at the offices of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, where the writer’s devastat-

1 An expansion of a paper, entitled “The Ups, Downs, and Accomplishments of the Government-supported Historical Survey of Allegheny County,” read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on March 26, 1935. Mr. Johnston was associated with the project under discussion as foreman of a district embracing Beaver, Butler, Clarion, Lawrence, and Mercer counties during the first period of activity, December 4, 1933, to April 7, 1934, and as investigator and then foreman in Allegheny County during the survey’s continuations there, from June 22 to August 21 and from November 17 to March 2, 1935. Ed.
ing raids on the supply room have caused it to be referred to as the "IOU
Historical Survey."

The historical society provided headquarters and office facilities for the
conduct of the survey in Allegheny County and, in a measure, in other
parts of western Pennsylvania. Moreover, the Western Pennsylvania
Historical Survey, of which the society is one of the sponsors, assisted in
formulating, launching, and supervising the project, at first on a re-
gional basis and then in connection with its revivals in Allegheny County.
For this service the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey was excep-
tionally well prepared, as a result not only of previous study of the possi-
bilities in this direction, but of an actual survey of the archives and other
historical resources of one of the western counties, Somerset, made in the
fall of 1931 by Mr. Alston G. Field, then a member of the staff of the
Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey.

This article is designed to explain the administration, problems, accom-
plishments, and plans of the larger, government-supported survey, with
special reference to its operation in the western part of the state—that is,
the following twenty-seven counties: Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver,
Bedford, Blair, Butler, Cambria, Cameron, Clarion, Clearfield, Craw-
ford, Elk, Erie, Fayette, Forest, Greene, Indiana, Jefferson, Lawrence,
McKean, Mercer, Potter, Somerset, Venango, Warren, Washington,
and Westmoreland. At the outset these counties, together with a few of
those farther east, were divided into seven administrative districts, of
which Allegheny County was one. A traveling foreman was appointed for
each district and under him a staff of two or three investigators in each
county except Allegheny, where enough material was known to exist to
justify the appointment of ten. Both foremen and investigators were ap-
pointed by their home county units of the Federal-State Employment
Service from persons registered for employment relief and approved by
Dr. Garrison. Foremen were not required, however, to be residents of the
district in which they worked, and as a matter of fact five of the seven
lived in Pittsburgh. These five made week-end reports to the regional ad-
visers at the Historical Building and all seven reported regularly to Dr.
Garrison by mail. In each county outside of Allegheny, moreover, a
prominent historically-minded citizen was enlisted to serve as an adviser to the foreman and to help him make local contacts. Much of the commendation to which the survey may be entitled must be credited to these volunteer advisers, without whose splendid cooperation many valuable prospects would have been overlooked or lost.

As far as possible the foremen made all contacts, so that the investigators were given specific assignments only after the methods and objects of the survey had been fully explained to the owner or custodian of the materials to which access was desired and his cooperation had been secured. In the few cases where the authority of the foreman, the value of the work, or the motives of the investigators were questioned the good offices of the local advisers or of Dr. Garrison succeeded in dissolving all suspicions and doubts. On one amusing occasion the authenticity of a letter to a certain county official (not in Allegheny County) that the writer typed himself was questioned because the writer's initials followed by those of a secretary did not appear in the lower left-hand corner. This breach of correspondence etiquette was smoothed over somehow, and similar difficulties were avoided thereafter by inserting the initials in the proper place followed by LDI, standing for "Louie Did It."

The size of the districts and the amount of contact work the foreman had to do necessitated letting the investigators work with a minimum of direct supervision. This procedure involved difficulties, but not insurmountable ones, as the technique was quite simple and the written instructions from Dr. Garrison were complete and clear. Report forms for each type of record were also furnished. The investigator simply listed on slips of paper each separate record found in a given office or depository and noted the nature of the record when its title was not self-explanatory, the number of volumes or other units, inclusive dates, date gaps or other deficiencies, the general condition of the materials, the degree of protection from fire and theft, and the availability of records to responsible students for purposes of research. When an office or depository was completed in this manner a careful check was made, and cellars, attics, and vaults were searched for missing units. Then a preliminary report was typed and submitted to the foreman on his next visit. Possibly
revisions in form or other minor changes were ordered. Then a second draft was prepared in triplicate and submitted to Dr. Garrison, who occasionally called for a second redrafting, usually only in the interest of uniformity with similar reports from other districts. When finally approved, one copy was filed permanently in the state library and one was sent, with the compliments of the survey, to the head of the office or institution surveyed. The third copies of the Allegheny County reports were filed with the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania as they were completed, and at a later period a complete set of the reports from the other western counties was presented to the society by the Pennsylvania State Library.

After May, 1934, RWD regulations required that all projects be organized strictly on a county basis, and, unfortunately, the survey was renewed only in Allegheny of the western Pennsylvania counties. This restriction involved the loss of several valuable contacts in the outlying counties, but it necessitated no important change in the administration.

The survey encountered most of the difficulties that have arisen generally in the administration of work relief projects and that have contributed to the undeniably unsatisfactory accomplishments of many of them. Three of these, it seems to the writer, constitute especially severe handicaps to "white collar" projects. The political question of whether or not it is necessary or desirable to feed a sick economy alphabet soup is, of course, altogether outside the scope of this article; but it can hardly be denied that as long as such a policy is pursued the community is entitled to reasonable service from its temporary employees. It is always in order, therefore, to make criticisms designed to increase the probability of such service.

The most serious problem was the utter lack of security. This necessitated frequent revision of personal budgets as the pay took a drop without notice. Unpleasant as this result seemed for the moment, it was less important in the long run than the impossibility of efficient planning when the duration of the survey was not known. To be sure, the project was authorized for a specified period at organization and at each renewal, but the period was subject to change without notice, and work could be planned therefore only from day to day and sometimes only from hour
to hour or not at all. The writer recalls receiving on one day in February, 1934, five different sets of instructions regarding the status of the survey in Mercer County, ranging from "Increase staff to original quota at once" to "Drop all activities at close of business tomorrow." As luck would have it, the latter of these proved to be final and irrevocable. The most recent suspension in Allegheny County occurred in this way: On a certain Friday at 2:30 P.M., upon returning from an interview with an official of a large industrial establishment with permission to begin an inventory of the records in the company files the following Monday morning, the writer found awaiting him an official notification, delivered by special messenger at 11 A.M., that owing to the depletion of funds the survey would be discontinued at the end of that day. This was the first notice of any kind received except the vague and conflicting rumors that had appeared in the press for over a month. These incidents are perhaps somewhat exceptional, but not extremely so, for the survey has never run the authorized period without suspension, has always been suspended without preliminary notice, and has never been informed of the length of the suspension. Each suspension, therefore, caught the staff with many uncompleted reports and many fresh contacts, which had to be promptly dropped to the disgust of the persons whose cooperation had been solicited. Above all, such a situation weakened the morale of the members of the staff and prevented their doing their best work.

The second difficulty was the impossibility of getting prompt appointments of qualified persons after the project had been authorized, in spite of the best intentions on the part of employment service managers. This difficulty arose from a number of causes, including inadequate classification of applicants; detailed, vague, and contradictory instructions from the state employment office; lack of authority in the employment managers to consult with qualified citizens in regard to criteria for selecting special types of workers; the necessity of almost endless checking and reporting of each step in the assignment of workers to positions; and the prohibition against allowing the sponsor, adviser, or foreman to make his own selections from the files. Be the causes or the cure what they may, some of the facts from the writer's experience are that it was necessary to interview a dozen applicants for each appointment even though
only definitely unqualified persons were rejected, that the quota of authorized employees was never filled until just before a suspension occurred; that during the most recent period of activity in Allegheny County, covering fifteen weeks, the requisition for a stenographer, an indispensable member of the staff, was not honored until the end of the eighth week; and that only half at most of the persons hired ever received the minimum training in their duties before the next suspension was ordered.

By way of partial compensation some of the interviews with applicants were most amusing. One husky young Viking impatiently interrupted the explanation of his prospective duties with the remark: "Ah, you don't needa explen nothing. Anybody with a little horse sense can do this here CWA work. An' I got the horse sense. Why, when I yusta drive a pop truck I never hada call the shop when things went screwy. I even doctored up sick carburetors myself." Then there was a young lady in New Castle, whose family was reported to be in dire circumstances, but who just couldn't grant an interview that day to anybody, for she had received an invitation to the local Roosevelt birthday ball. A third applicant, living far off from an improved road in northeastern Butler County in a hut that had been a piano box, who admitted with all the calm and dignity of a Sioux chieftain asserting his kingship that he was a Ph.D. in biochemistry, an ordained minister, a first-class ball player, and a poet of international renown, nevertheless declined the job in order to busy himself with a great epic he had conceived.

The third problem was an almost terrifying turnover in personnel. In part this indicated a desirable transfer of employees to private positions during suspensions. The principal cause, however, was frequent minor changes in the rules of eligibility, which often operated to disqualify former employees whose financial status had not improved to any noticeable degree. As a result it was necessary at each renewal to resume operations with a staff at least half of whom were completely inexperienced, while experienced and satisfactory workers returned to the ranks of the needy unemployed. Only the writer and one investigator have been associated with the survey in western Pennsylvania since its organization.
Because of inadequate personnel, the frequent suspensions of the survey, and the early discontinuation of the work in the outlying counties, substantial inroads were made upon the available material only in the fields of county and city archives, Protestant church records, and depository collections. In most other aspects of the survey the work accomplished represents a mere beginning cut off shortly by a suspension, or else a special interest or temporary fill-in assignment of an investigator. Practically nothing was done outside of Allegheny County with industrial and business papers, bank records, maps, or newspapers. In none of the fields was all the known material surveyed either in or outside Allegheny County or, with the exception of county and city archives, in any county. Nevertheless the survey turned in a total of 723 separate reports, including 708 inventories of the records of as many different public offices and institutions; a dozen historical sketches and memoranda obtained in lieu of or supplementary to inventories of original records; a consolidated inventory of maps; another of newspapers; and a biographical index of past and present prominent citizens of western Pennsylvania.  

The most nearly completed unit of the work is the listing of county archives. A total of 227 of the county offices that keep permanent records, or from seven to ten offices in each of the twenty-seven western counties except Allegheny, Clearfield, Crawford, and Somerset, were completed. Of the thirty-one separate county offices in Allegheny County, twenty, including all the major ones except those of the treasurer and the controller, were done; three minor ones were partially done; and seven minor ones, plus those of the treasurer and the controller, were not started. In Clearfield County, for reasons not known to the writer, nothing was done on county archives. In Crawford County the project got under way quite late and was suspended early, with the result that the investigator working on the county records succeeded in finishing only those of the prothonotary, recorder of deeds, and register of wills. In Somerset County, the reader will recall, an inventory of the

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2 The files of these reports in the possession of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania State Library are available to properly qualified students. Reports from the eastern counties of the state will also be found at the state library.
archives had already been made under other auspices and of course was not duplicated. These inventories of county records are not mere lists of files with Latin or legal titles. In two respects an effort was made to render them useful to a student not familiar with legal terminology or courthouse recording systems: the content of the various records and the relation of one record to another were indicated, and to some extent cross references were made between offices. This supplementation, however, is dependent upon the completion of all the offices in a given county, requires the services of someone more qualified than the non-legally trained investigators on the survey, and should eventually take the form of a general index prepared by someone thoroughly familiar with the achievements of the survey in this field throughout the state. The preparation of such an index was not started, although it has been contemplated ever since the survey was first organized.

The survey completed listings of the records of twenty-nine boroughs in the region. To the best knowledge of the writer, the only systematic work with this class of records was done in Beaver County and includes the records of all the boroughs in the Ohio and Beaver valleys from Ambridge to New Brighton. The other reports in this field cover principally the home towns of the investigators, done for reasons of civic pride, and a few isolated communities assigned as fill-in work. The Beaver County set of reports, used in conjunction with the reports for the city and school district of Beaver Falls, constitutes an extensive collection of materials that should be valuable to anyone interested in the history of that region; but the other reports are of very little value, as they pertain to isolated towns that may not be at all typical of the regions in which they are located.

Inventories of the archives of third-class cities and of school districts were done only as fill-in assignments to temporarily free investigators, except that the archives of Beaver Falls, both municipal and school, were included in the systematic survey of municipal records in the Ohio and Beaver valley sections of Beaver County, and the school record of Pittsburgh were deemed of sufficient importance to assign one investigator to them during the busiest part of the winter of 1933-34. In spite of a lack of deliberate planning in this work, the records of twelve third-class cit-
ies were surveyed, including old Allegheny, Bradford, Clairton, Duquesne, Erie, Franklin, Johnstown, McKeesport, Meadville, Monongahela, New Castle, and Washington in addition to Beaver Falls, and eight school districts in addition to Pittsburgh. In several cases the school records were simply reported with the municipal records, because both records were in the custody of one person. Thus, more or less by accident, the records of a substantial number of the third-class cities of western Pennsylvania were surveyed, but with the single exception of Pittsburgh little of importance was done on school records.

From the beginning of the survey at least two members of the staff worked on the city records of Pittsburgh. At the last suspension final reports on five offices were on file, and first-draft reports on the remaining offices were in the writer's "unfinished business" folder. They have all since been sent to Dr. Garrison for criticism and advice, owing to the fact that the problems encountered on this work were the most difficult of all and that the experiences with county archives had not proved of much help in solving some of the mysteries of the city archives. Except for indexing, a little checking, revision in form, and typing, however, this set of reports is complete; and, as in the case of the county archives, it is hoped that a general inter-office index, possibly with cross references to the county records, will eventually be prepared.

Three other classes of public archives—township records and state and federal archives in local branch offices—were not touched, except that an inventory of the Pittsburgh bureau of vital statistics of the state department of health was made on the erroneous assumption that this was a city office.

The earliest expansion of the scope of the survey was to include, in addition to county archives, manuscripts and miscellaneous materials in public and semi-public depositories. Many of the later expansions had to be revoked, but this one was continued during the entire life of the survey. In fact, the survey really became an inventory of county archives and depository collections, with local exceptions made for good reason; and these two aspects of the work were pushed to the exclusion of others in most of the western counties. In listing manuscript collections the survey found at hand a recently published inventory of the holdings of the His-
torical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and it made its own inventories of similar materials in thirty other depositories. Among the institutions independently surveyed were Allegheny, Geneva, Grove City, Washington and Jefferson, and Waynesburg colleges; the Pittsburgh-Xenia and Western theological seminaries; the public libraries of Aliquippa, Ambridge, Beaver Falls, Bradford, Coudersport, Johnstown, New Castle, and Warren; the historical societies of Blair, Cambria, Greene, Potter, Warren, Washington, and Westmoreland-Fayette counties; the Allegheny County Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall; and the archival headquarters and central business offices of several Protestant denominations. The principal omission in this field was the extensive manuscript collections of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, attention to which was postponed overlong in favor of less well known or readily accessible holdings elsewhere. Unfortunately, the survey's inventories of this class of materials were not subjected to critical editing. They are therefore mere lists of records, of limited value in their present form except to well-trained scholars. It is hoped, however, that they will be edited and published eventually, probably by the staff of the Pennsylvania State Library, and that they will prove to be of much greater value than is now realized.

In quantity and accuracy, considering the region as a whole, the best work was done with the records of Protestant churches, 373 of which were covered. Yet work with this group of institutions was emphasized only in Allegheny, Indiana, Westmoreland, and Jefferson counties; it was never started in ten counties; and the indications are that it was operated almost everywhere with a censurable lack of systematic planning. Instead of an organized attack upon the materials, one denomination at a time, or from oldest to youngest congregations in a community, to mention only two procedures that suggest themselves in retrospect, each investigator assigned to church records was allowed to drift into a planless procedure, beginning with his own church, or his own town, or no place in particular, and considering the age, size, and individual or denominational importance of the churches only as his fancy or convenience sug-

3 Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, Inventory of the Manuscript and Miscellaneous Collections of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, published in multigraph form as Bibliographical Contributions, no. 1, January, 1933.
gested. As a result most denominations, all age groups, and many communities are represented in the finished work, but none was completely surveyed. Some concentration on the large denominations and the old congregations did take place. Especially gratifying is the fact that in the four counties where this work was emphasized practically all the churches established prior to 1825 were covered. This resulted from accident, the force of circumstances, or the common sense of the investigators rather than from planned procedure. The negligence of the foremen in this regard can be explained though hardly justified. Access to church records is relatively easy, and can usually be intrusted to the worker himself. Contact work in other fields frequently kept the foremen busy full time. Church records are usually quite orderly, self-explanatory, and conveniently located, necessitating a minimum of supervision. A church can be surveyed in a short time, or at odd moments, as between other assignments, right before a holiday or suspension, or just after renewal when other contacts have not been made. Since the plans called for including all churches eventually it was easy to believe that it made no difference where the work began; investigators were therefore told, "Go and do some church," whenever nothing else was ready for a day or two, or whenever the boss, caught unprepared, was looking for the path of least resistance. If the work is resumed it is to be hoped that each investigator will be limited to one denomination and to the oldest and largest congregations, until all the important groups have been completed.

Nothing was done with Catholic archives, much as their importance and value were appreciated, except in Indiana, Jefferson, and Westmoreland counties, where a systematic effort was made to survey all churches and religious organizations, and in the home parishes of the Catholic investigators on the staff. Experience had taught the foremen that satisfactory progress was impaired by having too many irons in the fire, and it was decided in most cases not to undertake the Catholic records until other work under way had been finished and until the maximum assistance from the church officials had been secured. The latest suspension interrupted preliminary correspondence with the officials of the Pittsburgh Diocese in regard to a survey of the diocesan archives.
For two months a pair of investigators in Allegheny County worked on the papers and books of several old business houses and banks in Pittsburgh, in part as training for permanent assignment to this type of work, but mostly, it should be confessed, because the writer was having too many troubles of his own to find them other work, and because they were well enough acquainted and sufficiently reliable to make their own contacts and work without supervision. Most of their reports are still in preliminary draft and have not been examined in detail.

Beginning with the renewal of the survey authorized for Allegheny County in July, 1934, one investigator devoted all his time to compiling a card list of maps, which reached a total of about five hundred entries. The basis of this list was the rather extensive collection of maps in the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. In addition those of the Carnegie Free Library of Allegheny, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and several Allegheny County offices, together with a few in public offices, depositories, and small private collections in the outlying counties, were included. At first all maps found anywhere were listed, but about the middle of August Mrs. Hazel S. Garrison, a volunteer assistant to the state director of the survey, undertook to prepare for publication at the earliest possible date a list of Pennsylvania maps prior to 1900, and the efforts of the Allegheny County investigator were confined thereafter within this limitation. From the resulting western Pennsylvania list and from similar ones prepared in other sections of the state, as well as from information obtained by mail from important depositories outside Pennsylvania, Mrs. Garrison prepared and state headquarters of the survey published a check list containing about sixteen hundred entries.4 Copies of this list were sent to the contributing units of the survey and to the cooperating depositories outside the state for their use and for the discovery of inaccuracies and omissions. Even in its present provisional form

4 Hazel Shields Garrison, ed., Check List of Maps Pertaining to Pennsylvania Up to 1900, published in 1935 in mimeograph form for the Historical Survey of Pennsylvania by authority of the works division of the State Emergency Relief Board and under the supervision of the state department of public instruction. The holdings of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania are not included, apparently because the report on them was lost in transit, but the original card list of this local collection remains available for incorporation in any revised edition of the union list.
the compilation constitutes an extremely valuable guide to old Pennsylvania maps to be found in the principal depositories within and without the state, and it is expected that the list will be revised from time to time as other maps are discovered.

Having in mind the publication of a list similar to the map list, workers in Allegheny County this spring began to prepare a card list of newspaper files, with particular attention to old Pennsylvania newspapers; but this undertaking was barely well started at the last suspension. Only the files of the major local papers in the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, the papers at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, and several small collections in minor depositories and private files were covered. Operating units of the survey in other counties made but little more progress, and no out-of-state depositories were canvassed. The Allegheny County list was built on the foundation of a recently published provisional inventory of the larger and more readily located newspaper files in the county, which covered in considerable detail all the earlier files of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and some of those of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, but which was avowedly far from complete. It is to be hoped that the survey’s partial expansion—and elaboration of this list and its similar projects in other counties will soon be resumed with personnel, time, and private cooperation sufficient to complete a thoroughgoing canvass, issue by issue, of all the known and discoverable files.

One of the most useful contributions of the survey is a card list, including short biographical and more extensive bibliographical notes, of over twenty-five hundred living and deceased western Pennsylvanians of prominence. In its preparation the information contained in such publications as county histories, biographical and genealogical works, and Who’s Who in America was freely drawn upon. The two investigators assigned to this work estimated that approximately one thousand five hundred additional names could be included without departing from a high definition of “prominence.” They would not admit, however, that

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5 Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey, Inventory of Files of American Newspapers in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, published by the offset process as Bibliographical Contributions, no. 2, August, 1933.
this index can ever be finally completed because such an admission would imply that western Pennsylvania has ceased or will cease to produce famous men and women. As a result of a commendable modesty no member of the staff of the survey was included, although several frankly avowed ambitions along this line. Some other people were not so restrained, however, for the writer received a number of unsigned nominations for membership in this roll of honor, some of which he truly believes were written by the nominees themselves.

These are, in outline, the accomplishments to date that in the writer’s judgment justify the contention that so long as governmental works relief is deemed necessary in the fight on economic depression the Historical Survey of Pennsylvania can be intrusted to make worthy use of continued grants. In fact one might be justified in hoping that enough interest could be aroused the carrying on of the survey as a private undertaking should the government’s policy of subsidizing such enterprises be finally abandoned before the major objectives of the survey are achieved.

For the future, assuming that the work is to be resumed and completed, the official sponsors of the survey have ambitious hopes centering around the indexing, editing, and publishing of inventories of related groups of records. With the exception of the map survey, however, no aspect of the work has as yet advanced to the stage from which such an undertaking looms on the horizon. Attempts will doubtless be made also to centralize in public depositories, such as the state library or the library of the historical society, not only inventories but some of the records themselves, especially in cases where a series or sequence is now scattered or the materials are not safe from fire, theft, loss, or destruction. Finally, as the work and purposes of the survey become better known and more appreciated, some real influence may perhaps be exercised toward more scientific record-keeping and against the hasty destruction of records, public or private, that do not seem to have present value.