
Review Essay:
The Plight of State and Local History

by Leo J. Mahoney

In June 1980, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) convened a meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, of state historical records coordinators. The aim of the conference was to recommend policy and procedural improvements to NHPRC in the administration of the agency's records programs. One of the recommendations to emerge from the meeting was for preparation of state-wide reports on archival planning and a strategy for renewal of state and local records administration.

Perhaps prophetically, before NHPRC had an opportunity to pursue the conference proposal very far, the agency was faced with the possibility of its abolition in the debates over the federal budget for fiscal year 1982. Wisely, NHPRC decided to commit some \$600,000 of its remaining 1981 allocation to a series of grants to survey the condition of public and private records repositories in twenty-seven states. This was not an impolitic decision. On June 24-25, 1983, with the fiscal crisis behind it, NHPRC and the National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators organized a second conference in Atlanta to assess the state reports that NHPRC had commissioned. The seventy-one-page NHPRC/NASARA report, *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States*, published in the fall of 1984, and edited by Lisa B. Weber, is the fruit of that assessment.

Documenting America is actually a summary of some twenty-odd state reports to NHPRC completed in time for the June 1983 conference. The report is divided into four sections that survey the current conditions of state archival programs, local government records, historical repositories, and statewide archival functions and services. Unlike some of the state reports they summarized, the four surveys are of excellent quality even though the final evaluation of statewide services echoes much that is stated in the three previous sections. The authors are practicing archivists with distinguished professional cre-

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dentials. Dr. Edwin C. Bridges, director of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, wrote the first of the report's surveys on "State Government Records Programs." Mr. Richard J. Cox, head of the Government Records Division of Dr. Bridges's department, reported on "Local Government Records Programs." Dr. William L. Joyce, assistant director for rare books and manuscripts at the New York Public Library, was responsible for the survey of "Historical Records Repositories" in the states. Dr. Margaret S. Childs, assistant director of the Smithsonian Institution Libraries, wrote the report on "State-wide Functions and Services."

In general, the picture the reports give of conditions among state and local archives in this country is a bleak one. A basic problem is lack of money, and, as a result, most historical repositories are barely able to maintain their daily operations. Lack of proper funding also leads directly to inadequate care of records and inexpert administration of them. These failings are particularly evident in local government records agencies and historical repositories outside of large universities and state records centers.

State records agencies are themselves in bad shape in many states. In his section of the report, Bridges tells us that most state programs are hamstrung in their efforts to attain full professional administration of records by lack of departmental autonomy, separation of archival and records management functions, weak control or no control over public records outside the archives, and the absence of satisfactory policies for the mountains of computer-generated and microfilm records produced in recent decades.

Although Bridges does not say so explicitly, the problems with which he deals in his survey are really political in nature. There is, for example, no uniformity among the states on placement of records, and ten states reported shortages of necessary storage space for their holdings. Arizona's report, for instance, flatly stated that "new acquisitions are either piled on the floor or shelved temporarily in an inappropriate location outside of the Capitol Building" (p. 5). Under conditions such as these it is not surprising that many state archives do not know what public records exist outside their immediate control and, as a result, have no idea how many records have been included within agency retention schedules. In Pennsylvania, for example, only twelve hundred of four thousand records series scheduled for retention were actually inside the state's records center when its report was tendered to NHPRC in June 1983. Worse yet, many of the commonwealth's records are simply inaccessible. Of Pennsylvania's approxi-

mately sixteen thousand cubic feet of state records, few series include satisfactory scope and content notes, although there are administrative histories of most of the agencies that generated them.

As for restoration and conservation of state records, Bridges's survey of state reports finds "an absolute decline" in these procedures in the last five years. Only five states reported maintaining conservation laboratories, and seven others complained of lack of funds and staff for their similar endeavors. The Pennsylvania report admitted that "identification of materials for possible conservation work is carried out in an ad hoc fashion" and went on to estimate that "less than 1% of materials needing conservation work have received conservation treatment" (p. 7). In the face of such bleak conditions, new conservation problems requiring urgent attention are simply ignored in most states. New techniques for treating nitrate film, poor-quality paper, color photographs, and magnetic tapes are going by the board as state budgets restrict even storage space for public records.

Bridges's survey concludes that "state archivists are staggered by mountains of work and totally lack the resources to make a significant impact" (p. 7). If possible, the condition of local government records is even worse, according to Richard J. Cox, who surveyed the state reports to NHPRC on this topic.

Cox's survey describes a renewal of interest in local records since NHPRC began backing local programs with grant funds in 1975, but regretfully argues that the effort has had no appreciable impact on the status of local records. His survey of the reports of twenty states found that poor storage and inaccessibility, lack of trained records administrators, and — significantly — poor relations of archival to local government agencies were the general rule.

The storage problem is clearly a function of local political conditions. Local officials do not like to dispose of records for any reason, and the account excerpted by Cox from the Mississippi report shows why. In that state, as in others, "there is 'a general reluctance to dispose of anything. . . . It seems preferable to throw, toss, or occasionally stack noncurrent records in a basement, attic, or elsewhere, than to risk public outcry at the disposal of such records'" (p. 20). The solution adopted by some local agencies is placement of the overflow in historical societies or libraries, but this tactic only puts off the day when appraisals and a developed records policy have to be faced. It is not hard to believe that the accumulated local records, scattered to the four winds in diverse offsite storage locations, are not likely to be properly appraised when the time comes to do so.

The neglect of local government records, like the confusion in state records programs, is, at bottom, a political problem that calls for a political solution. Cox, like Bridges, reports little attention being given at the local level to new technology, legal privacy issues, and new conservation methods. Yet the reports tell us that most local records administrators simply do not have the time, the money, and the training to deal properly with what, to them, must seem esoteric issues.

William L. Joyce's brief survey of the state reports on historical records repositories again underscores Bridges's point that state and local archives are becoming impoverished. In three of the states reporting, two-thirds of the historical repositories surveyed had annual budgets of less than \$10,000. Obviously, trained archivists are a rarity on the staffs of such institutions. There is some question as to the viability of poorly funded repositories and there is no doubt that staffs find it impossible to take proper care of the records committed to their management. For example, Pennsylvania reported that one-half of the two hundred repositories surveyed in that state had less than one hundred cubic feet of records, no regular staffs, no system of climate control, no security procedures, and no systematic arrangement and description methods.

Not surprisingly, Joyce finds a "remarkable decentralization" of historical records repositories among the reporting states. In this case, there is an obvious need for state leadership in such important matters as standards of archival management, conservation, collections policy, appraisal techniques, and purchasing. The state records programs, however, according to Bridges, are themselves in some danger of being officially relegated to the status of museums for older records. Increasingly, the problems of records and archives administration seem immune to strictly professional remedies.

There is no avoiding the glaring fact that the deplorable conditions of state and local records in America are attributable to the lack of political influence, leadership, and unity in the archival profession. The four consultants who surveyed the state reports to NHPRC again and again pointed out that the curators of our state and local records have been unable to make their influence felt with the state legislatures, which alone can offer financial and legal relief for the poverty and impotence of records programs and their conservators.

Success in the political field is not directly a function of improved and easily available professional training for amateur records clerks, however much that lacuna may need to be addressed on grounds of technical proficiency. The real crisis is not educational in the technical

sense, but was put succinctly by Margaret Childs in her survey of reports to NHPRC on "Statewide Functions and Services." In Childs's opinion, "the archival community is a cottage industry on the verge of an industrial revolution which will impose many of the requirements of the assembly line on what has heretofore been a remarkably idiosyncratic profession" (p. 53). When the rushing future becomes the present, archival repositories in the states either will have evolved the political sophistication and influence to be equal to the challenge or they will end up, as Bridges fears, museums for older records that nobody but a few genealogists will want to consult.

Of course, most state and local records administrators are not ordinarily in a position to develop the influence required to control the operational conditions of their work. National organizations like NHPRC, NASARA, and the Society of American Archivists, backed by the energy and the courage of state archival agencies as well as private repositories, are needed to exercise their leadership to bring about increases in funding, broader access to technical skills, and better physical facilities in state and local archives. In 1984, Pennsylvania has made a good start in the right direction with its NHPRC-supported County Records Survey. But what is needed is enlightened public support for the continued success of this project, including its final phase of establishing modern county records centers. A careful reading of *Documenting America* could be a useful place for doubters to begin. ■