

---

## REVIEW ESSAY: *The State of Penn's Archives*

---

by Leo J. Mahoney

**P**ROFESSIONAL archivists ought to figure among the loyal readers of John Le Carré's suspenseful spy stories. The intricate plots of some of his better literary productions often turn on uncanny exploitations of Secret Service documentary records stored away in admirably organized, if not freely accessible, agency archives.

One typical case is that of Le Carré's "memory man," Leo Harting, fictional archivist in Her Majesty's Bonn embassy and chief focus of a bizarre man hunt in *A Small Town in Germany* (1968). Perhaps Le Carré's most famous secret sleuth, George Smiley of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (1974), finds a Russian mole in the service through careful researches in agency records which stimulate sometimes painful personal memories. Taken together, however, they sustain the main intuition of professional archivists: The records prod the memory until Smiley is able to identify and lay a trap for the traitor.

On reflection, the largest part of the work of the world's intelligence agencies amounts to little more than what archivists would call expert appraisal of highly specialized records. In such cases as Le Carré's plots, and in not a few factual ones, successful intelligence analysis — like sound historical research and convincing literary realism — comes down to knowing what you're looking for. Archivists might be quick to add that the "what" that is sought has first to be there and be accounted for before it can be found.

Le Carré's literary dependence on and brilliant exploitations of archival records makes me wonder how many of Pennsylvania's writers know about the valuable cultural resources in their own state's public and private archival repositories — resources that are a good deal more easily accessible than those mined by the Smileys and Hartings of this world. The case is doubtful in theory if for no other reason than that,

---

Leo J. Mahoney (Ph.D., American history, Kent State University) currently teaches history at Camden County College, New Jersey. He received the Certificate in Archival Studies from Duquesne University in 1985; in fulfilling the requirements for that achievement, he served internships at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, the Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection (Archives of an Industrial Society), and the Pennsylvania County Records Survey.—Editor

*The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (July 1986)  
Copyright © Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania

Le Carré excepted, fictional works are not ordinarily attributable to inspirations and imaginings prompted by archival researches. The situation is both sad and wasteful, and the commonwealth's archivists might profitably give a thought to the prospects of making all of our home-grown and budding writers aware of the treasure trove of literary, as well as historical and technical, resources in their care.

A useful place to begin an archival public relations policy for writers might be with the Pittsburgh Authors Guild, a private conclave of writers and would-be writers in Allegheny County which meets monthly in area libraries and welcomes speakers offering helpful advice. No doubt other similar organizations flourish throughout the state. According to Leon J. Stout, author of *Historical Records in Pennsylvania*,<sup>1</sup> the single "most important communication need" of the state archives is to publicize its mission among the public and with the legislature in Harrisburg. Considering the proximity of the Capitol to the Bureau of Archives and History, it is at least mildly surprising that communication between the two official entities requires any comment at all. Given a problem of communication with the legislature such as Stout describes, it may be even more useful to the archives if its publicity were directed to university faculty clubs, veterans' organizations, private service clubs, school teachers, librarians of all kinds, and literary fraternities like the one just mentioned.

Inquiry into this matter at the Bureau of Archives produced evidence of recent efforts at archival outreach directed to publications, genealogists, and county records custodians. That is a start, of course. Much more needs to be done to bring the news of the mission of the archives to the attention of the actual body politic of the commonwealth. Stout's report admonishes the public to recall that "the archives, courthouse, historical society, and manuscript collections all house . . . the record of what we did in its unvarnished and undigested form."<sup>2</sup> But archivists, genealogists, and records custodians presumably know that much already. It is the ordinary citizen who must be reached with the vital message because, in a very physical sense, the truth about the importance of public records is also a herald of his birthright. Reaching the people is a tall order but, if undertaken systematically and aggressively, the people's legislators will more easily and more effectively be made to recognize the cultural and political

---

1 Leon J. Stout, *Historical Records in Pennsylvania: An Assessment Report for the State Historical Records Advisory Board* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1983).

2 Stout, *Historical Records in Pennsylvania*, v.

significance of the records situated but a stone's throw from the Capitol. The communication gap between the bureau and the legislature will disappear forthwith.

Stout's study was commissioned as a part of a 1982 survey, funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), of state and local records repositories. In 1983, Stout reported his findings to the Pennsylvania Assembly, the governor, the State Historical Records Advisory Board, and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Despite his urgent call for public support of archival agencies throughout the state, the report was not made available in published form until the early summer of 1985. His survey covers the gamut of archival conditions and problems in the commonwealth including issues of staff competence, research arrangements, security and access, conservation, and collection and preservation of documents. He also makes some useful technical suggestions for adaptation of computerized records control and access to current archival practices.

Stout's report properly addresses the major problems of state and local government records from programmatic and operational standpoints and includes a significant chapter on private historical records repositories. As he sees it, the biggest obstacle to comprehensive and systematic accession of Pennsylvania's state records is the organic separation of the Bureau of Archives from the Bureau of Publications and Paperwork, which supervises disposal of non-archival records and the transfer of those of permanent value to the archives. Logically, if not realistically, Stout recommends unification of archival and records management functions in state government, and it does appear that some progress has been made in recent months in coordinating the activities and interests of the two bureaus.

The basic trouble with the report is its bureaucratic orientation to the exclusion of analysis of the essentially political origin of many of the issues addressed. For example, Stout mentions (and this reviewer agrees) that a second major obstacle to realizing the potential utility of the state archives is that the bureau is obviously not adequately staffed to carry on all the functions which its professional personnel have properly identified as important to their mission. Among other lacunae, an insufficient number of qualified personnel means imperfect coordination with records management staff, slow appraisal of state agency records, and no capacity to accession, appraise, and preserve judicial and legislative records. Further, the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission recently expended nearly a half-million

dollars for a State Conservation Center. A chief conservator was finally retained in October 1985, although Stout pointed out in 1983 that there was an immediate need for a professional conservator as well as for established standards for appraisal, arrangement, preservation, and access to records at the state's historical properties and museums.

All of this data is important technical information valuable for its clear picture of the plight of the archives in Pennsylvania. Still, the problems are, at bottom, political in origin, and no amount of professional expertise, however desirable for its own sake, can resolve them in political terms. The key to a solution of the archives' difficulties lies in the political arena where Stout chose not to tread. That key is an aroused public conscience made active by an awareness of the fundamental and essential relation of public records to the heritage of citizen rights and liberties. This important intuition of the physical relation of the records of past public acts to present and future civic values is nowhere to be found in a report whose major themes might easily have rested upon it.

The same point needs a double emphasis in connection with the report's conclusions about records that are even more vital to most citizens' civic interests than the documents housed at the Bureau of Archives and History. Local government records are in generally poor shape here and in other states, says Stout, due to lacks of money, trained staff, and state leadership. The 1984 NHPRC general report on its survey of state and local records programs, called *Documenting America*, corroborates Stout's conclusions nationwide. With respect to the condition of local records in particular, Pennsylvania is probably better off than most of the other twenty-odd states surveyed, but having served a brief archival internship with the Pennsylvania County Records Survey and Planning Study staff at the Allegheny County courthouse, this writer is able to confirm all but the last of Stout's 1983 criticisms.

Within the limits of bureau resources, the state *has* acted to take a leadership role in most of the commonwealth's counties and cities. More county and urban officials are currently aware of the technical problems associated with their record-keeping responsibilities than ever before. The County Records Survey and Planning Study was meticulously carried out much to the credit of the Bureau of Archives, and the project generated a valuable data base for future actions in this sphere. Three model records storage facility plans were also developed for use by county government, and the plans are already being utilized by Allegheny, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and

Westmoreland counties.<sup>3</sup> The will to assume leadership is there; only additional funds and staff are lacking now.

The next steps in the technical process are appraisal and disposition of the county records presently described on some 40,000 data sheets. From a strictly professional point of view, the steps represent the main challenge to the bureau posed by the County Records Survey. Politically, however, Stout's report comes closer to the real problem of local records by mentioning local parochialism, fragmented responsibility, traditional distrust of state government, and a general lack of interest among line officers. There are important historical and political reasons for these seemingly anachronistic conditions. It may even be that certain local officials are fearful of the introduction of centralized archival and records management systems in county and city government. Where is the money for these programs to come from? Who is to control the jobs at the county archives and records centers? Can professional politicians long survive the appearance on the scene of non-partisan experts in the last bastion of party power in America, local government? They have managed so far to preserve their bailiwicks against the assaults of all manner of do-gooders and more essential regulatory and services agencies. But in some counties centralized, professional control of local government records may seem to strike at the core of their functions, duties, patronage, and interests. Compromise is always possible, of course; but it is first necessary to perceive the issue clearly. Judging from Stout's report, it is doubtful that either side has yet reached that point. In order to win the round for professional management of records on local turf, archivists may have to develop a considerable political faculty that they have thus far not shown.

One of the practical means to a happy resolution of the problems of local government records is, ironically, direct state assistance to and encouragement of private historical repositories. Stout recommends that the more than 670 institutions and organizations holding historical records in the commonwealth meet "to confer on the future direction of collecting and preserving the state's documentary heritage."<sup>4</sup> Such a conference is to be hoped for. Quite often local histori-

---

3 For detailed descriptions of the storage facility models — for new construction, for renovated county office buildings, and for renovated commercial structures — see *County Records Planning Study: Record Storage Facilities for Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission* (Reading: 1984). My thanks to Dr. Roland Baumann, Chief, Division of Archives and Manuscripts, PHMC, for bringing the study to my attention.

4 Stout, *Historical Records in Pennsylvania*, 188.

cal societies are supported by influential private citizens whose community standing, wealth, lineage, and cultural values may make them natural allies of the archival profession in the successful resolution of some of the problems described in Stout's report.

Lately, the state archives seems to be moving in the correct direction. During 1984 and 1985, it has developed potentially valuable ties with the Committee on Pittsburgh Archaeology and History, the Heritage Commission of Delaware County, and the Association of County Commissioners. An initial conference on Documentation Strategies for Pennsylvania Repositories is presently planned. Perhaps this meeting will lead the way to a valuable alliance between state archival staff and important members of local communities. Among several useful technical recommendations, Stout's report suggests a very wise course for PHMC planners when he proposes that they help private repositories obtain grants for conservation, collection development, staff instruction, and improvements in environmental conditions. This is the kind of state leadership that is essential if the bureau's professional goals at both the state and local levels are to be realized in this century.

Stout's report on historical records in Pennsylvania is a first-rate technical survey of current organizational, operational, and environmental conditions in historical repositories and government records agencies in the commonwealth. He pulls few punches in assessing problems and in recommending appropriate professional and administrative solutions. His detailed account of the troubled history of public archives in Pennsylvania could even serve as a textbook example for the cultivation of realism among students enrolled in archival studies programs anywhere in the land.

The report is clear, concise, and well organized. It tells us that Pennsylvania's archives are in better hands than ever before. The serious remaining problems are being addressed by dedicated, experienced, qualified professionals. The report could become a valuable tool in the hands of state, local, and private archivists whose professional integrity, personal commitment, and political skills combine to secure Pennsylvania's documentary heritage from the perils of public apathy, political indifference, and bureaucratic inertia that have plagued it in the past. ■