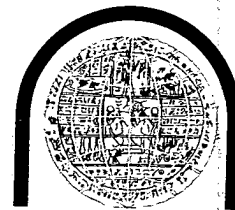


AREA A



*"Record Protection in
an Uncertain World"*

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A PROGRAM FOR MICROFILMING COUNTY RECORDS

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The governments of the fifty states of the United States of America, while basically alike in constitutional organization, vary greatly in administrative structure. Each state has evolved its own traditions, directions, and agencies. Nowhere can this diversity be demonstrated more clearly than in the varying patterns of archival administration and records management among the states.

These differences notwithstanding, counties constitute a most important level of government in all areas except New England, where towns are more significant. Louisiana, of course, calls parishes what other states refer to as counties.

In the area of recordmaking and recordkeeping, counties daily touch the lives of our citizens. In the county courthouses are recorded our birth, our marriage, our voting privilege, our property ownership, our death, and the settlement of our estate. In the same courthouses are adopted our local taxes and our local ordinances. In short, county government is *personal* government; it protects, in writing, our rights and privileges as citizens. These records concern us from birth to death, and they concern our descendants after we have passed on.

The importance of the protection of these records can hardly be exaggerated. The loss of our courthouse by fire, of records by theft or other destruction, of legibility of records by humidity or poor recording mediums, affects each of us intimately. Our citizenship can be brought into question, the title to our property can be placed in jeopardy, our right to vote can be nullified. In short, while federal and state records are important to us, local records are indispensable in our daily lives. These must be protected. Yet, ironically, county records in every state have suffered major losses from disaster, neglect, and deliberate destruction.

North Carolina, one of the original thirteen colonies, serves as an example of what has happened in most of the states. From the issuance of the Carolina Charter in 1663, laws required the keeping of local records. The care with which these laws were carried out varied with the competence and conscientiousness of the local officials. For the first half-century, there were no courthouses, and records were kept in private homes. Even with the building of courthouses in the eighteenth century, disaster continued to strike, for fireproof construction was unknown. But there were other enemies to preservation: some officials, untrained for their job, simply had little respect for their records; some relegated records to over-dry or too-damp storage areas where they suffered from the elements or from vermin and insects; some officials failed to turn over the records to their successors; some records were scattered or soaked by hurricanes; others were recorded on inferior papers with impermanent ink; and some were lost

in the movement from town to town or from one building to another. During wars invading forces destroyed and carried off some records. There was no central colonial or state authority to oversee the proper keeping of the records.

Notwithstanding heavy losses--at least half of our 100 counties have suffered--a remarkable accumulation of county records has survived in North Carolina. But as the twentieth century emerged, the dangers of the past continued to threaten. The realization of the value of the records and fears of their destruction helped bring about the establishment in 1903 of the North Carolina Historical Commission of which R.D.W. Connor was the first secretary. Its organic law gave it only the authority to accept local records, and the commission sought to bring into the State Archives records not being properly cared for in the county courthouses. By 1920 some records from 47 counties had been brought to Raleigh, arranged, and made available to researchers. A good start had been made, but there was still no state law placing in the agency the authority necessary to oversee the proper care of records still in the counties. A.R. Newsome, then secretary of the Historical Commission, wrote in 1932 that the "failure of North Carolina to make systematic provision for the preservation of public records has resulted in untold losses from fire, water, rats, carelessness, deliberate destruction to make space for rapid accumulations of new records, and by gifts and unreturned loans by public officials to private individuals."

It was at Newsome's urging that in 1935 the first comprehensive Public Records Act was passed by the General Assembly. The law defined public records; fixed legal responsibility for their care; prohibited their destruction, sale, loan, or other disposition without the approval of the Historical Commission; required officials to deliver all public records to their successors; required legal custodians to demand records from anyone in illegal possession of them; enjoined officials to make their records available to the public and to keep them in fireproof safes or vaults; and empowered the Historical Commission to examine into the condition of public records and to aid and advise officials in their records problems.

Armed with legislation of its own writing, the commission might well have launched a comprehensive archival program in 1935. But the bugaboo of all archivists--lack of funds--raised its ugly head. Thus, except for progress possible with the meager funds available, emphasis on a local records program had to await a better day.

That better day came in the form of outside assistance: the Historical Records Survey in the 1930's and the microfilm program of the Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, beginning in the 1940's.

The HRS, a project of the Works Progress Administration (later the Work Projects Administration), conducted a program of inventorying the records in all courthouses, and, in some instances, of arranging and making more accessible the records. More than a hundred workers were employed on this project at one time or another, and the inventories, when completed, were published in three thick volumes titled *The Historical Records of North Carolina: The County Records*, edited by Dan Lacy and Christopher Crittenden. North Carolina, incidentally, appears to have been the only state to publish its county records

inventories in letterpress format. For the first time the actual holdings of the state's 100 county courthouses were known.

The Historical Commission endorsed plans of the Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to microfilm records of genealogical value, and in May 1941, this work was begun in North Carolina. The commission served as liaison agency with the county governments and, in turn, received a positive microfilm copy of all filmed records for use in its Search Room. Despite the problems of wartime, the program continued sporadically for more than a decade. Some filming was done in 67 counties.

Because of its broadened authority in the preservation of historical materials, the name of the Historical Commission was changed in 1943 to the State Department of Archives and History. Following the war the department entered the new field of current records management on the state level, but except for the accumulation in Raleigh of valuable records of no further administrative use and for authorizing disposition of useless records, it did not have sufficient staff to permit it to extend records management services to the counties.

I had been State Archivist of North Carolina only a short while until I began to understand the need for a concerted statewide program for the preservation of county records. Our department, charged with the responsibility, needed a staff to assist local officials with their current records problems as well as with the preservation of the older records. An archivist quickly learns that the greatest enemy to preservation of the important records is the attempt to save everything. Yet we had no overall state plan to encourage the orderly disposal of purely housekeeping records so that the permanently valuable ones could be better preserved. Though we had continued to bring to Raleigh the important records which were not needed in the daily administration of the counties, many significant records were required to remain in the courthouses--records such as will books, deed books, and marriage registers. Some of these records had been filmed by the Genealogical Society, but the quality of the earlier filming was inferior due to poor equipment and supplies available during the wartime period, and the cutoff dates varied from county to county. Furthermore, the Genealogical Society had filmed only records of genealogical interest; other important historical records such as election records and court actions were generally not included.

In a poorly mimeographed letter dated January 23, 1958, I proposed to each clerk of Superior Court, register of deeds, and county attorney a state-financed program of reinventorying, scheduling, and microfilming the permanently valuable county records. The results of my request for comments were surprising. Replies were received by mail or in person from one or more officials in 53 counties. Of these, only three were noncommittal and just one was opposed (the latter gentleman promised actively to fight the idea which he viewed as "just another effort at centralization in Raleigh").

Armed with this overwhelming sentiment, we carried the proposal to the various statewide associations of county officials. These influential organizations adopted the proposal as their own and made it a part of their legislative program. We wanted the legislation to come from the county officials rather than from us. We wanted to be able to stand back and say,

"Why, that's a fine idea. Give us the funds and we will be glad to carry it out."

In August, 1958, we created a position of Public Records Examiner with the primary responsibility of working with county officials in developing a statewide program. Despite the fact that I had been a Yeoman Second Class in the Navy during World War II, I found myself with a retired Rear Admiral - A.M. Patterson - as my assistant. The choice was a happy one, for the Admiral, a native North Carolinian, has done more than any other person in the past decade to build the program about which I am talking today. The program is, in reality, what he has made it. Within six months either he or I or both had visited every courthouse in the state, and when the bill was considered by the 1959 General Assembly, there was not a single vote against it. It carried an initial biennial appropriation of \$147,410, a figure that has grown to more than \$300,000 for the 1969-1971 biennium.

The program was popular from the beginning. Counties vied for top priority, but it was decided that no favorites could be played. Consequently, after starting the program with three nearby counties, the schedule thereafter included counties in the order of their creation--beginning with the counties formed in the 1660's.

Our procedure for bringing a county into the program is as follows. First we clear the plan with the Board of County Commissioners who, in turn, commit their county officials to cooperation. These formalities taken care of, Admiral Patterson and members of his staff go into every county office that holds official records, and there they inventory each series of records by title, dates, quantity, and location. To this inventory is added a retention/disposition schedule for each series, indicating how long it is to be preserved--whether permanently or for a specified number of years. The document is subsequently edited, mimeographed, assembled in bound form, and distributed to each recordkeeping office in the county. Each custodian then has at hand a guide for the further preservation or disposition of his records. Adherence to these schedules results in the preservation of valuable records and the timely disposal of nonessential records, with resulting economy in space, personnel, and money and with improved efficiency in office operation. The schedule also indicates which original records should be transferred to the State Archives and which records are to be microfilmed.

Upon receipt of original records in Raleigh, they are cleaned, fumigated, repaired, arranged, and described for use in the Search Room.

During the inventorying, the staff selects for restoration those deteriorating permanently valuable records that are required for daily administrative use in the courthouse--such as will books and deed books--and temporarily transfers them to the department's Document Restoration Laboratory in Raleigh where they are deacidified, laminated by the Barrow process, and rebound, after which they are returned to the county.

Next, a team of cameramen sets up the Recordak MRE planetary cameras in spaces provided by the county, and the filming begins. Two pages are filmed at a time on 35 mm. film usually at a reduction ratio of 16 to 1. The film is sent to the department's own Microfilm

Processing Laboratory in Raleigh where it is processed by a Houston Fearless Labmaster. Local Records Section staff members then proof the film. If errors are found, orders for corrections are sent to the cameramen; these corrections are later spliced into the master negative. When the filming has been completed for a particular county, the reels are forwarded to the Genealogical Society here in Salt Lake City where three additional copies are made--one for the department and two for the society (one for its underground vaults, another for its research library).

When the work in a county has been completed, the following results have been accomplished: (1) An inventory-schedule for each record series in every county office has been published, showing title, dates, quantity, location, and recommended retention period for each series; (2) officials have been furnished with schedules to use as a guide for the destruction of records of no further value; (3) records of permanent value have been microfilmed, and the master negative film has been stored in a security vault (both in Raleigh and Salt Lake City) for reproduction purposes should the original records be lost, and duplicate copies have been made available for research; (4) original records of permanent value no longer needed in the day-to-day operations of the county have been transferred to the State Archives for preservation; (5) records in need of repair have been laminated and rebound; and (6) the role of the Department of Archives and History in advising and assisting county officials in their records problems has been demonstrated.

What has been accomplished in the past decade is gratifying not only to our department but to county officials and to researchers. We have completed the work in 85 of the 100 counties; only 15 post-1850 counties remain to be covered, and these will be completed within the next biennium. Thereafter we will go back to the counties covered in 1959 and subsequent years and bring the program up to date. Within approximately five years we should be able to return to each county once a year, thus providing security to within a twelve-month period at all times.

Let statistics speak: To date we have brought into the State Archives 5,500 volumes and 5,000 cubic feet of loose papers; we have laminated and rebound 1,800 volumes of county records; we have filmed an estimated 63,000 volumes (these, along with some loose papers such as marriage records fill 29,500 reels of microfilm); we have constructed beneath our new building a specially-designed security vault for the housing of our master negatives, and we have loaned our film to the Genealogical Society which has made two additional copies of each reel--one for storage in its underground vaults, the other for research use. For the first time in history the information contained in our most important county records is assured of preservation, and for the first time researchers can study the records without the necessity of visiting 100 county seats. Indeed, more than 10,000 researchers are served each year in person or by mail through our Search Room in Raleigh; additional untold thousands use the film copies available here in Salt Lake City and in the Genealogical Society's branch archives. Writers of scholarly history, who in the past have ignored county records because they were not conveniently available, no longer have that excuse.

You will recall that in the beginning I mentioned the need for advice and assistance to

county officials in relation to their current records problem. I am glad to report that, after slow and still limited services, we are now able to do more along these lines. We have one staff member whose duty is to make recommendations on recording equipment, supplies, and techniques. At a time when great changes are taking place in the means of recording, we will need to give even more emphasis to these problems, for, although the genealogist is usually interested in *old* records, the genealogist and historian of tomorrow will be just as interested in *today's* records. We must make sure that current records are created in forms and on mediums that will lend themselves to preservation and use by the researchers of tomorrow.

I have attempted to give you the story of how a program of microfilming county records was developed in one state. Inherent in what I have said is my belief that microfilming alone is not enough. Whether conducted by a state agency, a county, or an organization, the care and reproduction of county records involves identification, appraisal, and the establishment of retention/disposition schedules for the original records. Without the inventory/schedule, the substitution of microfilm for the original records can become an end in itself. If this should come to pass, we will ultimately face the same problem that is so evident in the care of paper records: We will have such a vast amount of microfilm copies of valueless records that the sheer quantity alone will interfere with the preservation and use of the valuable filmed records. True, microfilm miniaturizes records and allows great volumes to be stored in a small space; but it is equally true that microfilm is difficult to use unless the materials are filmed in proper sequence and unless definitive indexes are available. Microfilm is a partner in a well-conceived program of archival preservation--a very important partner. To make it the sole element, however, would be to substitute one problem for another.

During the discussion period I shall be glad to answer questions concerning the specific procedures and techniques in the North Carolina program. Let me leave you for the moment with one lesson that we have learned: There is a practical way of preserving and making available valuable county records. The North Carolina way was through a state-financed program administered by the State Department of Archives and History under the state's uniform public records act. In states where such funding is not feasible, similar results can be obtained, if not uniformly, then certainly in the more enlightened counties, by the formulation of a comprehensive program outline by the cognizant state archival agency and the "selling" of this program to the county officials. It *can* be done.