

## PRESERVING OUR PUBLIC RECORDS.

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Those who have had an opportunity to investigate the condition of the public archives of the State of Washington have good reason to deplore the lack of interest that heretofore has been taken in the preservation of these sources of our history. However, one has but to read the reports of the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association to gain a mite of comfort in the knowledge that many an older state than Washington has been even more negligent in preserving records and that conditions elsewhere are even more deplorable than here.

The history of Washington as a separate political organization runs back to 1853. In all these years the seat of government has been Olympia, but the several offices have made many moves. The governor, the secretary of state, the librarian, the other officers have found quarters at different times in different parts of town, and not until recent years were they all gathered under one roof. Moves of this character do not make for continuity in the keeping of old records, nor for the preservation of books or papers not required for immediate purposes. The result is that the early territorial records, the books and papers and writings that form the base of our history, are scattered. Possibly they can be found and assembled; possibly they cannot. No man knows. No man, in fact, knows very much about the early records of Washington. Down in the basement of the state house are two great packing cases full of the manuscripts, papers and records of Governor Isaac I. Stevens, the first territorial governor. Stored in the vaults of the auditor's office are piles and bundles of papers of some of the other territorial governors. In the governor's office itself are a few old record books, lacking continuity, chief among them being the volume in which Governor Stevens recorded his first official acts. But there are no papers referring in any way to territorial days to be found in the governor's office, while the bundles in the auditor's office contain none of the papers or records relating to administrations earlier than that of Governor Newell. Where the others are I do not know. I have made no extended search for them, for were they found now there is no room for them in the absurdly small closet, called by courtesy a vault, in the governor's office.

In the vaults of the secretary of state are to be found the journals of territorial house and council, the journals of state house and senate, the constitution, the laws and the like, but with them is a great mass of other papers and records that has accumulated for years and that contains, no doubt, some important and valuable matter.

The other offices are in the same condition. When all moved into the new state house they gathered together what they could find and brought it, though none of it was systematically arranged, catalogued or indexed, save the current records. When the old territorial capitol on the hill was abandoned, papers galore were found in the attic and elsewhere and at least some of them were brought along. Some one found two old barrels full of strange looking papers. These, after strenuous experiences, landed in the office of the adjutant general. That gentleman—General Drain—took the trouble to examine them and found they were part of the Indian war records; original orders, reports and the like. The general turned them over to the state librarian in whose custody they are now, but no provision has yet been made for indexing them.

This chaotic condition of the state's archives is in no way the fault of the present officers. The same condition—and with less excuse—has been found to exist in many other states. It is the result of years of neglect by earlier officers, inadequate filing room, frequent changes of office location and lack of systematic attention to the important work of record preservation. There is evidence, too, that the archives have been ravaged by individuals for their personal collections. An incoming officer in the state administration finds in his limited filing accommodations these old accumulations. No matter how good his intentions he finds it impossible to do anything with them, for he soon learns that the current business of his office, with the growth of the state, is constantly increasing and that he has all he can do, with the small force that characterizes every state office at Olympia, to keep up with his current work without seeking to rearrange the old files. Further, it takes but a slight investigation on his part to learn that absolutely nothing of consequence can be done to bring order out of the chaotic condition without the services of a person skilled in indexing, cataloguing and the handling of archives. Hence the officer lets things stand as he finds them.

To digress for a moment, this condition is not peculiar to the State of Washington. The State of Wisconsin, notable for its splendid historical society and for its generous appropriations for historical research, only in recent years began to put its

archives in proper condition. I quote from the report of Carl Russell Fish, Ph. D., on the public archives of Wisconsin to the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association at the annual meeting of 1905:

“Governor’s Office—The archives of this office are preserved in two vaults, an upper vault, equipped with iron filing cases, and a lower vault, poorly arranged and containing little of importance. Numbers of the filing boxes of the upper vault are empty, although labeled. It is said that the papers in them were removed at the time of the fire and are still in existence, although a careful search failed to reveal them. It is thought best to mention these documents, adding the word ‘missing’. The more important series of papers have been completely indexed by the card system, and **an expert indexer is at work with the object of completely indexing the records in the office.**”

It is safe to assume that the old county and city records in the State of Washington are in quite as bad condition as the old records of the territory. Now that so many persons are beginning to take a lively interest in the history of Washington, it would seem that the time is ripe for the various historical societies to agitate such action by the legislature as will make all these early records available not only to the officials but to the student and the investigator. It is a real handicap to a public officer not to have available and within easy reach accurate information regarding the previous conduct of his office, but in no office can a consecutive and accurate record of all proceedings back to the establishment of the office be found, save, of course, in the instance of offices created within recent years.

The conditions I have described thus hurriedly are familiar to a number of those who are interested in the history of Washington and who desire to have a remedy applied. But even among these there seems to exist a confusion of ideas as to what should be done and how it should be done. True, these old records are chiefly of historical value, but also they are public records and have a distinct value as such. Putting them in available form for the official and the student is the work of the state itself, not of a society. The attitude of the American Historical Association toward the subject is informing. This association, seven years ago, began the work of trying to secure on the part of states a better attention to their priceless archives. The association established its own Public Archives Commission to investigate conditions and agitate reforms so as to make records available to the student. That commission now forms one of the association’s chief activities. The influence of the work is seen in legislation in many states and awak-

ened interest in many others, both of which facts are contributing to the better preservation of archives and to making them of value to the historian.

The character of the legislation enacted in the states that have taken up the work is suggestive. Pennsylvania in 1903 created a division of public records, in connection with the state library, which was to receive, care for and make available all public documents which were more of historical value than useful for current business, while an unsalaried advisory commission, with the librarian, was required to investigate and report on the condition of all public records in the state and to make recommendations for their better preservation.

The governor of Pennsylvania, in his succeeding message to the legislature, wrote:

"The department of public records provided for at the last session in connection with the library has been organized and is doing efficient work. The archives upon which the foundations of our history rest, which up to the present time have lain about cellars and out of the way places, being gradually stolen, lost or destroyed, have been gathered together and are now being prepared and permanently secured in volumes chronologically arranged and open to the investigations of scholars."

Maryland in 1904 created a public records commission of three persons to be appointed by the governor, to serve without pay save expenses, to examine and report on the condition of public records in the state. That state also enacted legislation regarding the quality of paper and ink hereafter to be used in making public records.

Mississippi established in 1902 a department of archives and history along somewhat the same lines, although its work included also the work of an information bureau, bureau of statistics and bureau for the exploitation of the resources of the state. Alabama has a department the duplicate of this.

Delaware in 1905 created a division of public records, which, while not removing any records from an office, was charged with the "classification and cataloguing of, looking to the preservation of all public records throughout the state, which are now in the custody of the state and county officials, but not in current use, and, consequently, primarily of historical value". This division consists of six appointees of the governor, selected from the membership of patriotic and historical societies.

In 1905 South Carolina created an historical commission, unpaid, with a secretary at \$1,000 a year, to do this same work in the archives and to gather general historical information.

These are but instances. The work is being pressed throughout the union. The American Historical Association, through its Public Archives Commission, is investigating the condition of the archives in most of the states and already has secured reports on more than 30. Last year Prof. Jacob N. Bowman, then of the State Normal School at Bellingham, now of the faculty of the University of California, was appointed the member of the commission to report on Washington. During the last summer he spent considerable time at Olympia and was given free access to all records. It is quite certain that he gained a broader knowledge of what the state possesses in the way of records than any other man. His report, no doubt, was presented at the December (1906) meeting of the Association at Providence, R. I.

At the meeting of the Pacific Coast branch of the American Historical Association in 1905 a committee was appointed to investigate the condition of the California state archives, of which committee Prof. C. A. Duniway, of Stanford, was chairman. It found most of the old records piled in a basement vault, on the floor, on ledges and generally uncared for. At the request of Governor Pardee, the committee reported to him recommending as follows, the recommendations being quoted in full since they so accurately cover the situation in Washington:

"First. In the judgment of this committee, legislation should be devised to transfer to the custody of the state library all those portions of the archives of the state which have their chief value as historical material, while legal and business records should continue in charge of the officials to whose departments they properly belong. Such, indeed, has been the general scheme put in effect in recent years by the federal government as to the several departments of government and the library of Congress.

"Second. This legislation, having due regard for the circumstances under which the several categories of archives, and especially the main collection in charge of the secretary of state, have been collected and must be administered, should largely leave the decision of just what categories are to be put in charge of the state library to the discretion of the several chief executive officers, after consultation with the state librarian. One method, adopted in New York, is to direct by law that all papers not strictly legal in character are to go to the state library when more than five years old.

"Third. It is assumed that an archives division of the state library would be created to have the administration of the material which would thus be acquired. The officer or officers assigned to this division would classify, arrange and catalogue the archives in order to make them accessible. At present, particu-

larly in the older papers, there is an almost total lack of these systematic aids to the public service.

"Fourth. We wish to point out that if these general principles are approved by the legislature, as they have been by the secretary of state and the state librarian, the difficulties of adjustment and administration seem to require only a little patient study of actual conditions and a continuance of the spirit of co-operation for the public good already manifested by the officers most concerned.

"Fifth. The building and furnishing of adequate fireproof rooms—as we have recommended to the capitol commissioners—would not be a waste of public money, even if a building for the library and archives should be constructed in later years. The rapid accumulation of legal papers of the secretary of state in the routine business of his office will then require these rooms for his department."

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