

The Palmetto State's Memory: A History of the South Carolina Department of Archives & History, 1905-1960. By Charles H. Lesser. (Columbia: South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 2009. Pp. vi, 116. \$10.00. Paper).

Those interested in the history of archives will welcome this publication, a traditional, well-researched institutional history of one of the oldest state archives in the country. The author, a long-time staff member of this archives, builds the study around the archival sources and reports of the state archives. Lesser ceases the study at 1960, noting time constraints and objectivity issues, but he provides a brief epilogue bringing the story up to the present.

Anyone familiar with these institutions, especially the older ones in the South, will identify with the story Lesser tells effectively and with ample detail and documentation. He starts with a brief background on early government recordkeeping from the Colonial period to the beginning of state government archives in the early twentieth century. The earliest efforts were similar to what occurred in every colony and state, namely securing housing for the records and running copying and publishing programs.

Individuals knowledgeable about other state archives will immediately recognize one of the most common features of these institutions, namely the small number of directors; South Carolina has had five directors, just two in the half-century period covered in this study, while, for example, Maryland has had three since 1934 and Alabama five since 1901. Given this characteristic, it is not surprising that a considerable part of this study focuses on the personalities and politics of the three directors, especially the first one, Alexander S. Salley, Jr. Salley

was an extremely difficult person but who commanded considerable authority with both committed supporters and vocal detractors. Lesser, finishing his discussion of Salley's tenure, notes, "Alexander Salley had played a key role in establishing a separate state agency responsible for the government's records and had kept it alive against formidable odds. Victim of the professionalization of history, the passing years, and the unfortunate aspects of his own personality, Salley went into retirement" (p. 55). James Harold Easterby, director in 1949-1960, represents quite a contrast to Salley, bringing modern and professional approaches to the archives, pushing new methods to preservation work such as both the Barrow lamination process and micrographics, focusing on systematic planning, introducing records management, and taking an active role in professional associations such as the Society of American Archivists.

Being part of state governments, these archives are political entities. This study provides nearly equal emphasis on the politics of the state archives and its internal programs and activities. Over the half-century of the state archives, especially under Salley, there was a heavy focus on documentary editing. This emphasis was slow in production and expensive in resources (although microfilm was later adopted to speed up such work), and it is not a focus that every state archives possessed. One can wonder if this documentary work negatively affected the other essential work of the state archives (something suggested in the discussion about the hosting of the John C. Calhoun Papers project and the extensive list of documentary editions and other publications at the end of the book). Lesser provides considerable attention to the political battles, budget hassles, and staffing

issues, especially the long fight to acquire to acquire a new building, one which finally opened in 1960. Nearly any other state archives history would feature the same topics, as these were issues and challenges held in common by this type of archival program. The names are different and the politics vary, but they possess remarkably similar histories.

Although it was certainly not the author's intent, it is interesting to read this study in light of the recent financial crisis and the collapse of staffing and resources in many state archives. Lesser's study tracks a tremendous growth of staff over this institution's history, from just a few in the early 20th century to 13 in 1961 to 177 in 1974. In his useful epilogue covering 1961-2009, Lesser adds this statement: "Ten forced downsizings since 1990 caused the end of a nearly century-old documentary editing program in 1995, the elimination of all evening and weekend reference hours in 2002, and ever-increasing reliance on earned and federal funds to keep essential programs operating" (pp. 103-104). An interesting question, tangential to this study, would be what factors in the history of such a state archives contribute to such drastic budgetary cuts at times of fiscal crisis?

Despite these fiscal issues and other problems with program authority and resources, Lesser ends the study on a positive note: "The department's role has significantly expanded since the death of J. Harold Easterby in 1960. With half the staff it had at its peak in the late 1970s, the department still has reason to celebrate its achievements. One of the best sets of government records of any state is under remarkably better physical and intellectual control; the state's rich heritage of historic sites is increasingly well-catalogued and protected; and the department is a

participant in a major inter-state cooperative effort to preserve ‘born digital’ electronic records” (p. 104). This is an assessment that can be, of course, challenged by others looking in detail at the state archives in its second half-century and in comparison with what has been going on in other state archives.

Indeed, this issue of comparison suggests just one of several criticisms that can be aimed at the book. First, the book would have been stronger, if some comparison were made more often about key issues in the history of this state archives (some are made, but not enough to make this a study of interest very far beyond the borders of South Carolina). Second, despite the title, this is not a book about the state’s memory, but rather more about the memory of the archives itself. There is really only one place memory is mentioned in the book, and that is at the very end when Lesser notes that in 2005 a three day conference on the state’s history was held to mark the centennial of the department, with papers given by historians. “Most of those historians had long worked in the records in the state archives,” Lesser writes, “the Palmetto State’s memory which the staff proudly seeks to preserve” (p. 104). There is a rich and useful scholarship on public memory that could have been tapped into to enrich Lesser’s study. Third, while there is remarkable detail on the political, administrative, and other activities of the state archives, we really lack a sense of the actual use of the archival materials by historical researchers and genealogists (and others, such as the state officials themselves, a typical pattern visible in at least some other state archives).

Despite such concerns, this is an informative history. I wish the primary and secondary sources used had been listed at the end and an index provided. Mostly,

however, I wish the pages had not started falling out as I read the book, telling another story contrary to the state archives' interest in preservation.

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