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The Advantages and Disadvantages of a Network System
for the Administration of Local Government Records

Frank R. Levstik

During the past decade, the viability of archival networks has been a recurring concern of the membership of the Society of American Archivists. A number of sessions at annual meetings have been devoted to the topic. The background and operation of the Ohio Network of American History Research Centers in the administration of local government records may prove suggestive to other archivists as they contemplate such an arrangement.

While the Ohio Network of American History Research Centers was founded in 1970, the idea of a regional network in Ohio dates from 1959. In 1959 the Ohio Historical Society was officially designated as "the archives administration for the state of Ohio and its political subdivisions." The enabling act (ORC 149.31) further provided that the archives administration could "make other disposition, such as transfer to libraries and county historical societies, of those records of the state and its political subdivisions which may come into its possession."

Under the authority of this legislation, the Archives Division began to assemble a regional depository system for local government records. Included in the system were: Kent State University for the archives of Portage County and the immediate area; the Western Reserve Historical Society for Cuyahoga County; the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio in Cincinnati for Hamilton County; Ohio University, Athens, for Southeast Ohio; the Williams County Historical Society, Montpelier, for Williams County; and the Toledo Public Library for Lucas County. A county archivist was hired by the Society to assist county and municipal records commissions in establishing records programs when requested. The situation remained relatively static for the next decade, with a single staff member assigned to the entire state. Local government records accessions were limited due to a shortage of professional staff, insufficient archival storage facilities, and insufficient commitment from participating depositories.

The still-born depository system of 1959 was revived in 1970 with the establishment of the Ohio Network of American History Research Centers composed of eight participating institutions: The Ohio Historical Society, Cincinnati Historical Society, Western Reserve Historical Society, Wright State University, Bowling Green State University, Kent State University, University of Akron, and Ohio University. The Network remains much the same today, except that the University of Cincinnati has replaced the Cincinnati Historical Society. The establishment of the Network was consummated by a legal agreement, which dealt with local government records. Subsequently,

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agreements have been written for newspapers, manuscripts, and audio-visual materials. From 1970 to 1975 the accessioning of local government records at the various Network Centers depended largely on the time and staff available at the institutions. As total staffing at most Network centers ranged from one to three persons with teaching, archival, and other library duties, records acquisition and inventorying were extremely limited.

In February 1975 the State Controlling Board released funds to the Ohio Historical Society for the employment of the necessary staff members to implement the Ohio Historical Society's (OHS) legal responsibility in local records. Eight local records specialists were hired and one assigned to each Network Center, where they began the inventorying of local government records in their region.

Although the enabling legislation of 1959 provided that OHS be the "archives administration for the State of Ohio and its political subdivision," the Ohio records statute provided that only counties and cities were to inform the Society of record disposition. Townships could transfer archival materials if they so desired. School districts and municipal courts were exempted from direct OHS jurisdiction.

Records are the immediate goals of the present local records program. Local records specialists inventory records in county courthouses and city halls, assist in the preparation of retention schedules for local officials, provide advice on microfilm reproduction and paper conservation, and transfer records of historical value to the appropriate Network center. Since the commencement of the program, local records specialists have inventoried over one million cubic feet of government records, prepared nearly 50,000 schedules of records retention and destruction, transferred 5,000 cubic feet of historically valuable government records to Network centers, and assisted in the destruction of 90,000 cubic feet of worthless records. After nearly a century and a half of neglect, Ohio's county officials were approached by the local records specialists. All eighty-eight counties have been inventoried by the specialists and work has begun in Ohio municipalities. A Local Government Records Manual has been prepared as part of the county phase of the program (a how-to-do-it book on establishing a records program), as have a County Records Manual (a records retention guide) and an Abstract of County Records Inventory 1803-1977 (a listing of 8,300 records series of historical and genealogical value in Ohio counties). A Municipal Records Manual (another retention guide) will soon be completed. Published guides to local government records holdings have been compiled at Wright State University, the Ohio Historical Society and Ohio University.

The Network as presently constituted consists of American History Research Centers at: Bowling Green State University serving nineteen counties with a population of 1,350,000; Ohio University serving eighteen counties with a population of three-quarter million; Ohio Historical Society serving eleven counties with a population of 1,250,000; Wright State University serving eleven counties with a population of 1,250,000; University of Cincinnati serving eight counties with a population of 1,500,000; Western Reserve Historical Society serving five counties with a population of 2,600,000; Kent State University serving eighteen counties with a population of 800,000; and the University of Akron serving eight counties with a population of 1,300,000.

The adequacy of storage space for local government records at the various Network centers varies significantly. Bowling Green State University has adequate room for several hundred linear feet of accessions while stack space

at Wright State University is nearly exhausted. Ohio University has adequate room for several hundred linear feet of local government records, and the University of Cincinnati now has space for about the same volume of material. Western Reserve Historical Society does not anticipate room for expansion in the near future. The University of Akron, Kent State University, and the Ohio Historical Society each have adequate room for several hundred linear feet of local records. Nearly all Network centers have a microfilm camera or access to one. Only two centers microfilm local government records on a regular basis, however, since the Legislature has failed to appropriate monies for preservation microfilming.

The advantages of a network system are several. One of the most important is that local government records can be retained in the geographic region where they were created for easy access. Resource materials for academic and genealogical researchers are usually within one hour's drive of any county in each one of the regions. Graduate students and faculty need not travel hundreds of miles or expend immense sums of money for research trips.

A network system allows an archival agency to save significant amounts in the administration of local governmental records. The Ohio Historical Society would lack the space and equipment necessary to house all county records under the program. Even if available, the investment in equipment (shelving and space at OHS) would involve an added expenditure of \$25,000. Personnel costs of \$50,000 and travel expenses of \$15,000 would also be involved.

Administrative disposition of local government records can be more closely supervised under a network arrangement. Local records specialists within one hour of a particular county can visit a governmental office not only to supervise destruction but also to appraise records and to act quickly to acquire historically valuable records, thus insuring against inadvertent destruction of the state's precious historical heritage.

A network system enables the institutions to increase their prestige as research centers. A regional center designation for an institution can do much to elevate an educational institution's prestige. In Ohio, for example, Network participation helped to elevate the image of Bowling Green State University, once recognized only as a state teachers college, and Wright State University, once seen as strictly a commuter institution. A collection of primary research materials can be a crucial factor in attracting quality faculty members to an institution. Similarly, the existence of a research collection may act as an incentive for private and governmental funding support.

Housing local government records at network institutions has increased reader use 25% to 50% and expanded the clientele of all types, including faculty, students, and genealogists. Faculty, students, and other scholars who had failed to use an institution's archival center because of its narrow focus (i.e., university archives, manuscripts, or special collections) can be attracted as researchers. These same local records also complement other archival holdings of a Network center.

A network system does have significant disadvantages. Among these are problems of cooperation between the network coordinating authority and network centers. Since local records specialists operate out of a regional Network center where they are furnished a desk and mailing privileges, OHS staff members often run the risk of being considered an extension of the Network center's staff, resulting in potential conflict. Differing research interests at member institutions may lead to accessions not in keeping with general appraisal

guidelines from the coordinating authority. A local records specialist stationed at a Network center may have to bear the burden of accessioning local records without the assistance of Network staff. The special research interests or job obligations of Network staff are such that certain aspects of local records work, including public relations, are neglected by supervisory personnel. In a period of financial restraint and no-growth budgets, networks may come to require more time, staff, and collection development than a coordinating authority may be able to support. It would be particularly difficult to provide proper conservation and microfilm production.

Another problem associated with network systems involves the uneven commitment of staff, budget, and facilities from network centers. As originally conceived, a Network center within the Ohio system was thought to need at least four staff members: an administrator, an archivist, a librarian, and a clerk. Other assistance would be provided by graduate assistants or work-study students. Lacking any budgetary control over the allocation of funds at participating institutions, commitment to Network responsibilities has been uneven at best. For example, in 1979, one Network center has only a single staff member devoted to archival duties, whose Network responsibilities are in addition to obligations as university archivist, special collections administrator, and classroom instructor. Due to declining enrollments and spiraling inflation, three centers have reduced staff size since 1970. If a support staff member has left, the person has not been replaced. One institution has declined to accession material due to a lack of space, a situation which has existed for nearly five years. Three members are maintaining the same staff level that existed at the Network's inception, and only two institutions have improved staffing levels since 1970. Nearly all members have a microfilm camera available to them, yet only two film government records on any regular basis. Others film only manuscript material, or the camera stands idle due to lack of staff or expertise. The suggested 1970 minimum operating budget of \$25,000 for salaries, supplies, equipment, travel and purchases, not adjusted for inflation, is barely met by a majority of Network members today.

State archival institutions adopting a regional system must be prepared to accept the fact that their leadership role will be blurred by such an arrangement. No longer will the state archives be considered the single institution to visit for a given state's history. For the Ohio Historical Society, the nation's largest state historical agency, the roles of Network coordinating authority and repository for local government records of Central Ohio raise questions as to whether that institution's state-wide mission of preserving the state's historical heritage is being diffused or eroded. Quality and cooperation are small consolation for administrators when prime archival records series are transferred to a Network center.

Although most local historical agencies are museum operations, there are three or four county and municipal historical agencies which administer archival collections in Ohio. As a result, the coordinating authority is placed in the awkward position of making a final determination as to where local records are to be deposited. The Ohio statute states that the Ohio Historical Society has this authority, and Network centers are not specifically provided for by statute. The coordinating authority can be caught between the statute and the Network agreement. Problems such as these are especially difficult when local government records complement the manuscript collections of a prominent local individual held by one of these organizations outside the Network. This can become ticklish for a publicly supported historical agency to defend before a legislator representing a constituency in which one of these other agencies

is located.

The decentralization of local government records has entailed uneven progress in their processing for research use. Limited staff commitment at Network centers due to other duties makes assistance in local records processing very rare. Significant travel demands are made on the local records specialist since Network regions range from five to nineteen counties and the program emphasizes acquisition. The arrangement of records and the preparation of finding aids also largely devolves on the specialist, who is already engaged in the inventory of offices, records scheduling, and acquisition. Therefore, some Network centers may have records readily available and be able to inform researchers of their holdings while others are in a less enviable position.

Despite its shortcomings, the regional network has been a generally workable solution to local government records preservation in Ohio. True quality or consistency will only come with adequate legislation, minimum standards, and adequate budgets for professional staff and collection development.