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*ARCHIVES AND THE FLOW OF RECORDS
MASSACHUSETTS AS A CASE STUDY*

Richard W. Hale, Jr.
and
James M. O'Toole

In considering the proper relationship between a state's archival program and its records management operation, Ernst Posner wrote: "The interests of the state . . . are served best if the records management and archival functions are administered by the same agency. If the two functions are assigned to different agencies, however, there should be close co-operation between them."¹ Massachusetts is one of those states in which the responsibility is divided. The state archives is, according to the Constitution, in the office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth; the state records center and records management program are by tradition under the executive Office of Administration and Finance. This arrangement suggests four propositions concerning the relationship of a state archives, or any archives, to the flow of records and to the management of that flow.

Before considering those propositions, two fallacies that obscure the proper understanding of the primary function of an archival agency² must be dispelled. The first is the belief that the archives' job is to provide source material

Mr. Hale, the late Archivist of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, prepared the original version of this paper for presentation before the Society of American Archivists in Philadelphia, October 2, 1975. Mr. O'Toole, current Acting Director of the Archives Department, graciously edited the work for publication.

for historians and other social scientists. Building a research collection may be the mission of private and semi-private collections of manuscripts and other rare material, but it is not the work of state archives. Readers of Posner's *Archives in the Ancient World* will remember that clay tablets were used by Assyrian administrators in 2100 B.C. to record the activities of their organizations and were kept in archives for future reference. Not for 4,000 years thereafter, until the nineteenth century A.D., did scholars, led by German historian Leopold von Ranke, realize that history could be written from such records. Von Ranke discovered that it was precisely those records that administrators and policy makers preserved to keep their organizations under control which provided the best source material for history. It is true that good history cannot be written without archives, but the importance of archives to history is only secondary. The primary duty of an archives is to store and make available the records an organization needs to document its work.

The proper relation between the archivist's administrative and historical responsibilities may be demonstrated with a specific example. The Massachusetts Archives holds and proudly displays those very rare ballots used by the state's members of the Electoral College in 1972 to vote for George McGovern. These have obvious historical value. The reason they are kept by the Archives, however, is that the law requires it, against the day that the difficulties attendant upon the election of 1876 might be repeated. Thus, the selection for administrative value serves at the same time to select for historical value.

The second fallacy concerns the frequent confusion of archives with manuscript collections. Many archives collect manuscripts as well as official records, and indeed, there is a point at which archives and manuscripts merge. A ready example of this is the current discussion of the ownership of presidential papers. Manuscript collecting by archives can be beneficial to the historian, but many archives consciously refrain from collecting, preferring instead to leave that function to the private sector. This is the course adopted in Massachusetts. The policy of excluding non-records from the Archives has the advantage of obviating rivalry and competition between the public and private sectors. It preserves too the "purity" of the Archives itself. More important, it underlines the essential point that material accessioned into an archives is retained for the benefit of the organization that supports and maintains the archives.

These two fundamental issues clarified, we may proceed to the four propositions. The first is that *the archivist must be concerned with all stages of the flow of records*. Because he has exclusive jurisdiction over the final stage in the flow, his work is affected significantly by the policies and decisions made at all the former stages. He must therefore have some involvement in making those policies and decisions. At the very least, to be able to judge their value and service the records properly, he must know what happens to the files before they arrive in the archives.

The legislative records of Massachusetts provide a practical example demonstrating the truth of this proposition. Because the legislature in 1826 decided to engross the laws on sheets eighteen inches long, special storage equipment had to be provided. The recent change to engrossment on a fourteen-inch page is due, at least in part, to the fact that the Archives had run out of appropriate storage equipment. This example is perhaps a mundane one. Of greater significance would be efforts toward forms control, improved inventorying procedures, micro-filming, and automation. Still this one example demonstrates the importance of involvement for the archivist in all aspects of the flow of records from the cradle to the grave.

The second proposition is that, from his perspective at the end of the flow of records, *the archivist must decide which records will be so useful in the future that they must be kept and which can be discarded as soon as the immediate need for them is fulfilled*. Making that selection can be difficult, of course, but select the archivist must. It is possible to compare management of the flow of records to the doctrine of predestination. When a series of records is created, it should be predestined to one of three fates. Some records clearly deserve to go to heaven, the archives--original and final copies of legislative acts, records of the major programs and policies of executive offices, court decisions, military service records. Some are worthy only for hell, the incinerator--out-dated forms, duplicate copies, working papers. The rest belong in purgatory, the records center--there to be sifted and judged for eventual sanctification or cremation. What is more, all records should have their destination set out for all to read in disposition schedules. The archivist has a crucial role to play in the process of predestination.

The archivist's role cannot be exclusive, however, and this is the third proposition. Like it or not, he must share the decision-making procedures with at least three other state officials: the chief of the state's bureaucracy (whatever name that officer may bear), the attorney general, and the auditor. In addition, of course, someone from the agency whose records are being judged must be involved, since he will know the records firsthand and thus will be able to offer advice on their present and potential use. These three officials must join the archivist in the selection of records because they all approach the problem of records management from different angles and bring to it different needs and predispositions. The head of the bureaucracy, for example, is interested in realizing maximum efficiency and minimum cost through disposing of all unneeded records as quickly as possible. The attorney general is concerned to keep records only so long as they can be valuable in prosecutions and appeals. Similarly, the auditor wants to keep fiscal evidence until his report is prepared and all accounts are cleared. The archivist, who should have longer vision and greater awareness of administrative needs not apparent to his colleagues, is alert to preserving the programmatic records that will prevent reinvention of the wheel by future administrators. Somehow a balance must be struck among the interests of these four officials if sound decisions are to be made as to which records are to be discarded and which are to be retained for a period of years or permanently.

Massachusetts now has the machinery to strike this balance. This was not always the case. In 1920, an Obsolete Records Commission was established ostensibly for the purpose of authorizing destruction of "obsolete records." Neither the archivist nor the auditor was a member, although somehow the superintendent of state buildings was. The Commission was faced with uncertain jurisdiction, cumbersome procedures, and no enforcement power. Records management in the state limped along. Only now are we discovering just how much damage was done, just how many priceless records were destroyed during this period of lax control.

In 1973, the Commission became the Records Conservation Board. The change was one of substance as well as one of name. Membership was fixed to include the Archivist as Secretary of the Board, thus placing him in a position to know the recommended disposition of every records series approved by the Board. A broadly-inclusive definition of

records "regardless of physical form or characteristics" was also placed on the statute books. The Board meets regularly to consider clearances and to establish disposition schedules. It has powers, which it has not yet used, to collect inventories of holdings and set standards of management. The flow of records is not yet smooth and constant, but the limited success demonstrates that the statutory structure is sound.

Our experience with the Records Conservation Board suggests the fourth and final proposition. *While the archivist must share with other administrators the responsibility for approving the destruction or transfer to the archives of the state's records, he must hold sufficient power to insure that his viewpoint receives strong consideration.* The other administrators do not have (nor should they) the long-range interests of the archivist: they are concerned to retain a record only so long as it is useful to them. The archivist must act as a check on their impulse to throw away by reminding them of the needs of future administrators and planners. In short, in the records management process, the archivist must be a kind of *primus inter pares*.

Power can take many forms, of course. The power of sweet reason can be very successful on occasion: the right diplomatic suggestion at the appropriate moment can solve a records management problem on a friendly, personal basis and spread archival good will at the same time. Sweet reason is not always effective, however, with entrenched, sour bureaucrats, and the power of precisely worded legislation is needed. The archivist should take an active interest in the drafting and passage of legislation that guarantees his position in the flow of records. In addition to his other duties, the archivist should become a lobbyist as well. The ultimate form of power is an absolute veto. The archivist who has the authority to say "no" to any destruction of records certainly will be listened to. At least in those states with some form of records management already established, and possibly in others as well, the veto power will prove hard to attain. Thus, the archivist probably must content himself with a lesser form of authority.

In Massachusetts, the Archivist does not possess a veto over the operation of the Records Conservation Board. It is conceivable that the other members could out-vote him and authorize the destruction of records he favored keeping.

In fact, this has never happened and seems unlikely. The Board functions on a friendly and efficient basis. Discussions are honest and conducted with a view toward satisfying as many of the contending interests as possible. The clearly defined authority of the Board and its members makes such amicable operation possible. What is more, membership on the Board seems to have the effect of alerting each member to the interests of the others. This kind of records management "consciousness raising" is a genuine, if unexpected, benefit of the structure.

These four propositions and the ways in which they are applied in Massachusetts tend to confirm the truth of the assertion by Ernst Posner that began this study. We remain convinced that, although the archives and records management functions may be divided between two different agencies, they are in fact inseparable. When the two come together in one branch of government, the efficiency of the entire system is measurably increased. In states where the authority is divided, adherence to the foregoing propositions can minimize the damage and insure the proper management of the flow of records. The Massachusetts experience confirms that interdepartmental cooperation can lead to success in spite of the vagaries of the state's bureaucratic history.

NOTES

¹Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago, 1964), 364.

²The word "archives" is used in this essay to mean: "The noncurrent records of an organization or institution preserved by that organization because of their continuing value in documenting the activity of that organization." See Frank B. Evans, *et. al.*, "A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers," *American Archivist*, 37 (July, 1974), 417, 426.