

# The Impact of Genealogical Users on State Archives Programs

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THE ILLINOIS STATE ARCHIVES, a division of the Office of the Secretary of State, was established by the General Assembly in 1921. The statutory responsibility of the archives consists of preserving state and local governmental records that are of permanent legal, administrative or historical value, and disposing of records without such values. The archives building was opened in 1937, and it now holds some 60,000 cubic feet of records. This facility was created, in large part, by the demand of World War veterans who wanted to see constructed a sanctuary for records when the old State Armory burned in the mid-1930s. Adroit manipulation of this demand resulted in the construction of an excellent physical plant directly south of the Statehouse.

The Illinois State Archives is one of the major genealogical reference and research centers in the Midwest. In 1981, over 50,000 genealogical requests were handled by the reference staff. Since 1976, two additional programs of major interest to genealogists have been initiated by the archives. The first of these, the Public Domain Computer Conversion Project, was completed and opened to use by the public in 1981. The second program, the Illinois Regional Archives Depository system (IRAD), has reached maturity as a local governmental records counterpart to the State Archives.

## Genealogical Users of State Archives

Obviously, then, genealogists make up an important constituency of the Illinois State Archives. This article will examine in turn the

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resources which are available to genealogists at the State Archives; the programs that are addressed specifically to these users; the impact of these users on collection and appraisal policies; and the place occupied by genealogists in the allocation of institutional priorities.

Despite, or perhaps because of their numbers, many archivists have traditionally held genealogists in low esteem. The reasons for this antipathy are complex and include the fact that many archivists characterize genealogical research as a low-level use of their holdings, a pursuit which they feel requires little intellectual skill or ability. Complementing this judgment is the undeniable fact that archivists have preferred to think of their collections in terms of use by scholars, probably in hopes of status by association. This condescension toward nonscholarly users is, at last, beginning to break down everywhere. This is predominantly due to the fact that in a period of diminished budgets, archivists have been forced to realize the importance sheer numbers of users can have for an institution.

Genealogists have been assured of a decent reception at the Illinois State Archives for a number of years. The reasons for this treatment help to characterize the State Archives. The fact that the archives is a completely public, tax-supported institution is central. This alone is a powerful force against the development of reference elitism, and one which works in favor of attempting to satisfy the greatest possible number of patrons without passing judgment on the nature of their research. However, public funding of the archives is not the entire explanation. Closely linked with this is the fact that the Illinois State Archives is a "pure" archives, by which is meant simply that it is the custodian exclusively of governmental records. In Illinois, public records are under the purview of the State Archives; all other records go elsewhere.

In terms of providing reference services, this restriction can be a handicap. Public records are bulky, and it is not uncommon for a single record series to take up dozens of cubic feet, or even hundreds of bound volumes. Public records, or archives, can also seem to be of less immediate or obvious interest than manuscripts, or private records. So pronounced is this difference between archives and manuscripts, in fact, that institutions which hold both public and private records often learn that public records are neglected, by staff and patrons alike, in favor of manuscripts.

Like hanging, being a pure archives focuses the attention. Governmental records do contain much information of value to the genealogist. Titles to land, births, deaths, marriages, matters of probate, military service records, censuses, all are governmental records, and all

## *Impact of Users on State Archives Programs*

are replete with names. The problem is one of exploiting these resources, both for the user and for the archival administrator.

In the past, pure archives have received little use by scholars. By far the bulk of scholarly attention has been drawn by manuscript collections. Even the much-heralded "new" social history of the 1960s and the advent of quantification have failed to make themselves felt as major presences in governmental records repositories. What does this leave archives with, in terms of users? Despite trends in scholarship, government employees and genealogists remain the core user groups for a pure archives.

### **Illinois State Archives Records of Interest to Genealogists**

The resources available at the Illinois State Archives are substantial for one who is interested in doing genealogical research. The State Archives has indexes to the men who served in Illinois units during the Indian Wars, the Black Hawk War, the Mexican War, the Civil War, and the Spanish-American War. It also has alphabetized veteran's bonus records for World War I, World War II and the Korean War.

The State Archives has a single, massive surname index of residents of Illinois up to 1855, which is based on federal and state census information, executive records, and other records with a high incidence of names. The archives also has the records of the ten federal land offices in Illinois. These contain information about the first sale of each piece of land within the borders of the state, and the information includes the name of the purchaser, the date of purchase, and a legal description of the land that was bought.

Furthermore, the sale records of the public domain have been converted to machine-readable form, so that types of access more suited to use by genealogists, among other groups, have been developed. The two most popular arrangements of the 550,000 land sales in Illinois are alphabetical, by surname of purchaser, and geographical, by legal description within a given country.

Published county histories, most from the nineteenth century, feed into another name index, as each volume is comprehensively indexed by volunteer. These county histories can provide researchers with a wealth of background information, since each name in the index appears with a page and book citation.

By far the most heavily used records, from a genealogical perspective, are the census records. As mentioned previously, a comprehensive name index, with citations, covers the period up to 1855. The 1860 census is currently being indexed by volunteers. This arduous task,

however, has only begun. The 1870 census has only had three counties indexed to date. Fortunately, the 1880, 1900 and 1910 censuses; have all been indexed, either by Soundex or by Miracode. The indexes enable a patron to move through the information contained in the censuses with authority. The remaining fragments of state censuses, up to 1865, are not indexed, so that user access is limited to searches based on geography (county, township).

Although this does not exhaust the range of sources available to genealogists at the Illinois State Archives, this brief descriptive list does constitute the most frequently and heavily used records. In 1978, the archives published *A Descriptive Inventory of the Archives of the State of Illinois*,<sup>1</sup> a comprehensive guide to its holdings, with record descriptions at the series level. Surprisingly, perhaps, this guide has been little used by genealogists. The reasons which have been offered for this neglect range from the notion that the guide holds too much information—at 700 pages, it can be intimidating—to the idea that genealogists somehow know in advance what records are useful at an archives. None of these rationales is entirely persuasive. It is probably closer to the truth to offer a generalization about genealogists as patrons, which is: as a group, these users prefer to remain with sources of information, or finding aids, that conform to their established patterns of use rather than to experiment with new and unfamiliar sources of information.

Yet another limiting factor is created by the fact that the bulk of the genealogical reference handled by the State Archives comes by mail. This operates to restrict both the nature of the research and the type of response made by the archives. Mail request must be tightly defined for a reference staff to be able to cope with the volume of requests that come in without creating a hopeless backlog. Metaphorically, the services provided by the State Archives to its users who send in requests for information are not dissimilar to the operations of a fast food restaurant. The archives offers a limited, yet appealing menu, and it takes immense pains to deliver what is offered. In concrete terms, this means that users are asked to request no more than two specific items at a time; to designate the record to be searched; to provide the complete name of the person or persons to be searched; and to refrain from submitting a second request until the answer to the first has been received. The predictable, repetitive quality of the reference requests is precisely the element which enables the reference system to function efficiently. It should also be pointed out that the reference staff handles only genealogical requests. Other users are directed to other members of the archives staff.

## *Impact of Users on State Archives Programs*

### **The Illinois Regional Archives Depository System**

A somewhat different picture exists with respect to the Illinois Regional Archives Depository (IRAD) system. To repeat, IRAD collects only local governmental records. At present, the system holds large amounts of records of primary interest to genealogists, both in paper originals and on microfilm. Many of these records offer the researcher the opportunity to move beneath the barebones information held in census records, land records, or military service records, and to develop more detailed pictures of one's ancestors and how they lived.

IRAD depositories are located at Eastern Illinois University, Charleston; Illinois State University, Normal; Northern Illinois University, DeKalb; Sangamon State University, Springfield; Southern Illinois University, Carbondale; and Western Illinois University, Macomb. All these depositories are staffed by graduate student interns, who are contractual employees of the State Archives. Each facility has from two to three interns; each intern works twenty hours a week in the depository. When the IRAD program began, in 1976, the interns spent the bulk of their time arranging and describing records which had been accessioned. As the program developed, however, the pace of acquisitions fell off, and the emphasis began to shift from processing records for use to providing reference service to those records.

Even though the volume of reference work handled by the regional depositories has increased dramatically during the past five years, it still amounts to only about five percent of that performed at the State Archives itself. With fourteen interns, this means that more time can be spent dealing with each individual request for information. This is fortunate, because the records in IRAD lack the precise name indexing of the heavily used records at the State Archives. Still, genealogical users are asked to observe the same policy established by the reference staff at the archives itself.

### **Information Programs for Genealogists**

Within the last two years, the Illinois State Archives has created programs oriented to genealogists. Two programs, both initiated with IRAD, have proven to be greatly effective. The first of these programs is a slide/tape program entitled "Windows on the Past." This was done to introduce potential users of IRAD to its structure and holdings. It is available in two formats: one with a cassette with silent tones for synchronized projection, and the other with audible tones for manual projection.

“Windows on the Past” lasts only ten minutes, and it does provide users with an overview of the program and what it can offer researchers. To the initial surprise of archives staff members, the multiple copies of the program are in continual use. Many requests for it now come from out of state, especially from the states west of Illinois. It does not seem premature to associate showing of this program with an increased volume of reference requests from areas where the slide show has been seen.

The second, more elaborate program directed in part toward the genealogical public consists of six computer-generated finding aids for the records in IRAD. These finding aids manipulate the information entered for each record by county, by subject descriptor, by depository, by title, and by date. The following information is entered into a master file for each record: accession number, accession date, depository, county, status, office of creation, title, beginning date of the record, ending date, quantity, and up to ten subject descriptors.

The most popular listing, so far as genealogists are concerned, is the county listing, and a single record from it contains the following:

County	Montgomery	Office	Recorder	
Accession Number	Title	Depository	Beginning Date	Ending Date
4/0212/01	Deed record	SSU	1821	1958

Users begin with the county, which is their basic point of entry to the information, and proceed to the title of the record. When they encounter a record of interest to them, such as the deed record above, they are given supporting information about it. They can see that it is on deposit at SSU, or Sangamon State University. They can also see that the record begins in 1821 and ends in 1958. These informational elements have proven to be adequate for the purposes of most genealogical users of the IRAD system, at least in terms of identifying and locating records of potential research value. The seven-digit accession number that accompanies each record is a unique number used by the IRAD system to link manual finding aids with the computer-produced listings, and also to provide the physical location of the record within the depository. Many users have learned that the most efficient way for them to proceed is to cite the accession number as a part of any reference request.

When these listings, collectively known as System Nebo, were designed, archives staff members were aware that it was essential to get the listings, or portions of them, into the hands of the users. As an

## *Impact of Users on State Archives Programs*

experiment in information dissemination, the listings were also produced on computer-output microfiche. A free set of this microfiche was sent to every library in Illinois with a brief cover note. This note explained what the purpose of the listings was and how to use them. The recipient was informed that he or she would be able to receive free microfiche updates if the recipient requested these updates from the State Archives.

At present, nearly 300 libraries do subscribe to these listings. At the same time, the archives offers to send any user, at no charge, hard copy of a listing for a single county. This measure has proven to be extremely popular and effective with genealogists, who have experienced no difficulty in using the listings once they have received them. The ease with which patrons use these computer-generated finding aids was not accidental; they were designed with an eye to absolute simplicity and concomitant intellectual accessibility. The standard by which the listings were evaluated during the design process was whether any user, without any familiarity with computers, would be able to use them with little or no instruction.

The professional implications of this last program, especially when contrasted with the reception of the State Archives guide by genealogists, are encouraging. Genealogists are not resistant to innovative finding aids. However, all finding aids directed at this group of users should be designed to conform with known genealogical patterns of use. The *Descriptive Inventory of the Archives of the State of Illinois* was arranged by agency, and then subject indexed by permuting the narrative descriptions of the records. The structure of the guide, equivalent to provenance, was one which was generally irrelevant for genealogical purposes. Subject access was likewise irrelevant, since most subjects that a genealogist would select would in all likelihood be broad ones, such as the Civil War, or Winnebago County. In fact, subject access has been largely ignored by genealogists who use the State Archives, and the subject listing for IRAD is used very infrequently.

### **Genealogists' Influences on the Illinois State Archives**

How are genealogists bound in relationship to an institution such as the Illinois State Archives? What strengths can they impart to an archives? These are difficult questions to answer, because of fundamental tensions between groups of users. That is, most of the time, users are competing with other types of users for finite resources. To complicate this situation, genealogists, even when satisfied, inevitably demand more.

In general terms, one can say that genealogists do help to reinforce an institution's sense of being a public agency. This is a real virtue, insofar as it operates to prevent diversion of archival resources to small, self-constituted elites of users. In other words, the presence of genealogists can help to democratize an archives. An illustration of this type of impact is the Public Domain Computer Conversion Project, which was completed by the State Archives in 1981.

*Public Domain Computer Conversion Project*

The conversion project was initiated in 1976 with the assistance of a \$58,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). This grant was eventually supplemented by a \$22,000 additional grant from NEH, but even this relatively sizable total would have been inadequate without the assistance of the Data Processing Division of the Office of the (Illinois) Secretary of State. Data conversion consumed five years. Coders were hired, trained, worked for some time, and then left, to be replaced by new coders in a rather disheartening cycle. The work required from the coders was quite demanding in terms of reliability and accuracy. Each original sale had to be entered on an 80/80 code sheet; completed code sheets were then keyed onto magnetic tape; and the tapes thus created were played onto paper so that the entire process could be rechecked by the coding staff.

Difficulties were compounded by the fact that the original records had been written by a variety of nineteenth-century clerks, some of whom had penmanship that was extremely hard to decipher. An error of a single character in transcribing or entering a sale could make nonsense of the sale. Obviously, genealogists would be able only to make a relatively superficial use of the end result of the data conversion, since their preferred access would be by name or possibly, by place. Academic and governmental users would require the computer to manipulate combinations of data, so that one of these users could discover how much land sold for a certain price during a specified interval, for example. However, the size of these last two groups would be miniscule when compared with the numbers of genealogists who would use the conversion project. In a real sense, therefore, all other groups of users benefited from the fact that genealogists would provide the sheer numbers necessary to justify completion of this task.

This forecast accurately reflects what has happened. Genealogists do use this file of 550,000 sales entries extensively, if predictably, while other groups use it infrequently, if at all. Thanks in great part to the fact that the State Archives was able to dovetail the needs of several groups of



## *Impact of Users on State Archives Programs*

users in formulating this project, Illinois is now the only state which has accomplished such a massive conversion. The Illinois State Archives is the only institution of its kind to have created precise access to this type of record.

A situation which contained a great amount of potential user competition, therefore, was in this case transformed into a cooperative one. Quantitatively, of course, genealogists do gain the most from this project. Qualitatively, however, it is difficult to deny that users who want to manipulate the file to produce generalizations about patterns of land ownership, land sale, and other questions requiring large amounts of data have gained more than the genealogists. In essence, then, a symbiotic relationship between competing groups of users has appeared. The project would not have been undertaken solely for the benefit of genealogists, yet it would have been extremely difficult to justify the outlay of resources for it without their presence.

### *Records Collection and Appraisal*

Genealogists are also a factor in collection and appraisal strategies. No matter what criteria an archives employs in appraising records, at the bottom of the appraisal logic remains the fact that given the choice, most archivists would prefer to accession records that will be used rather than records that will not be used. Part of this desire is economic. It becomes expensive to provide a permanent, archival home for records. If significant sums are going to be spent acquiring records and readying them for use, it is logical that those records should receive some use. Few things are more demoralizing than finding, accessioning, arranging, and describing records which are then shelved and never receive the attention of patrons.

Genealogists can and do influence collecting and appraisal programs. At the Illinois State Archives, some records are accessioned because their governmental value is high, whatever their research value may be. Other records are accessioned because their historic value is great, in the hopes that eventually they will be the subject of historical inquiry. Examples of this category of record include nineteenth-century election records, especially those which were created prior to 1848, when Illinois still had *viva voce* voting. When they are discovered, records this valuable are accessioned without hesitation.

The bulk of appraisal decisions, however, fall into a kind of gray area. That is, the records in question do have some value, but nothing that overwhelms the person doing the appraisal. This person must

decide whether the records justify setting in motion the whole mechanism of accession, arrangement, description, and reference. If the records contain information of value to genealogists, the appraiser has one solid variable in favor of acquiring them.

### *Influencing Program Directions*

In a period of scarcity, or austerity, as it has been called, the value of a user rises for an institution. This exists, in paradoxical relationship, with the fact that austerity can strangle the delivery of services to the same user whose value is rapidly appreciating. There is no easy avenue out of this dilemma. However, it seems evident by now that institutions with major archival programs will find it necessary to count, and perhaps even to court genealogical users, if for no other reason than their numerical significance. If handled intelligently, these users need not prove to be a tremendous strain on staff time and program development.

In fact, the opposite may result. To return to an earlier metaphor, genealogists tend to patronize the fast-food aspects of an archives. It is not always obvious that a thriving fast-food operation can provide the capital for more ambitious fare within the same building. Put another way, volume of use can provide some margin for services which hinge on quality or complexity of use.

In more concrete terms, the most urgent need confronting the Illinois State Archives is for the development of an archival program for the city of Chicago and Cook County. This area holds nearly half the population of Illinois, yet the governmental records which it produces are poorly controlled by the State Archives, and there now exists no facility where these records can be used. As a group, genealogists can work toward provision of archival services for this area—a goal from which a multiplicity of users will benefit.

### **Conclusion**

What relationship does the Illinois State Archives have with its genealogical users? Simply put, the best kind of relationship, one based on mutual need. The State Archives, for its part, can provide genealogists with an array of resources, some of which are truly unique, and all of which are without charge. For those people who have Illinois ancestors, the Illinois State Archives is a logical place to begin, or to continue, one's quest for information.

## *Impact of Users on State Archives Programs*

Genealogists exert a variety of influences on an institution. Most basic is their presence as a factor in the allocation of resources. This presence must be balanced with the needs of other, competing groups of users, so that institutional policies and programs do not become one-sided. Fortunately, the demands made by genealogical users tend to be less complex than those made by other groups. One subtle effect of the presence of large numbers of genealogists is the need to make reference services efficient. Put another way, service that would satisfy an academic researcher would break down when confronted with the volumes of responses required by genealogists. Genealogists do provide a powerful impetus for the modernization of archival access and services. On the part of the State Archives, the implementation of automated access systems was made necessary by the growing volume of use by genealogists.

The numerical strength of genealogists can, when given proper direction, provide a powerful rationale for the development of new programs. In patron-oriented institutions, genealogists can provide the statistics necessary to support smaller, costlier groups of users. In turn, genealogists have a right to expect services from archives which stand to gain from their presence. One illustration of this is the fact that the State Archives purchased the 1910 census for Illinois automatically, as soon as it became available, despite its considerable cost. There can be little doubt that genealogists will receive more consideration from the institutions they frequent. In a period when the concept of user is undergoing study and consequent revision, genealogists constitute a group of real users.

### **Reference**

1. Irons, Victoria, and Brennan, Patricia C. *Descriptive Inventory of the Archives of the State of Illinois*. Springfield: Illinois State Archives, 1978.

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