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## Just Think ... To Survey or Not to Survey

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TO SURVEY OR NOT TO SURVEY?

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**I**n December, 1974, Congress passed, and President Gerald R. Ford signed, several bills of importance to archivists. Although most public attention has been directed to regulations for the handling of the Presidential papers of Richard Nixon, for archivists there is another bill that ultimately might have more impact. Congress changed the name and enlarged the scope of the National Historical Publications Commission. The new name is the National Historical Publications *and Records* Commission (NHPRC), and its new responsibilities include every aspect of the preservation of historically valuable records. One of its principal concerns is to survey materials to determine what records exist, where they are located, and what sort of care is needed.

The expansion of the Commission is an important step forward in the effort to preserve the sources of our history, but in this particular action Congress did not move fast enough or far enough. The proponents of this legislation, including many professional archivists, requested an extensive program run by a newly created agency and funded on a very large scale. Some people compared the proposal to the Historical Records Survey of the 1930s--a nation-wide, federally-funded program to inventory records and publish finding aids. As is usual with proposals to Congress, the result was less in amount and different in function. The budget of the NHPRC, which is part of the National Archives and Records Service, was not directly enlarged, but an annual appropriation increase from \$2,000,000 to \$4,000,000 was permitted. Congress must decide each year whether to grant the increase. The additional funding has yet to be granted. It can be seen that

we do not have a program that can conduct an extensive national survey in the next several years.

The records division of the NHPRC nevertheless is doing an excellent job with the resources available. The Commission has set up historical records advisory boards in the individual states and has been soliciting grant applications. The applications are evaluated by the state advisory boards and then processed by the Commission, a combination of local effort and central funding that has resulted in several important new projects. At present, however, the NHPRC is unable to fund all the requests it receives. Even with an increased appropriation, there will not be enough money. If a national effort to survey and preserve historical materials is a worthwhile venture (and I am certain it is), then we archivists, librarians, and manuscripts curators should help. We must do more than merely support or cooperate with the NHPRC. We must do our own surveys.

Our surveys should begin with material not now in an archival repository (the materials in archives presumably are safe). They should include materials that are scheduled to be transferred to our institutions, but we should be concerned principally with "strays"--the records of businesses, schools, churches and other institutions no longer in existence.

There is no conflict between our own actions and the plans of the NHPRC. I have been working on a survey of the church records in some 1,500 local United Methodist churches in Indiana. Recently I have applied to the Commission for a grant to pay the expenses of a field worker to complete the survey and evaluate the results. If the NHPRC cannot fund this project, I shall apply for assistance elsewhere. In this way the resources of my repository and other institutions will be combined on a project useful to many researchers.

Regional archival organizations might play a significant role in surveying and preserving records. The Society of Indiana Archivists, for example, is establishing a committee to work with the members of the state advisory board. The committee can provide more variety and depth of experience than the seven-member board, and it can call attention to special problems. It can encourage institutions to apply for grants, either to the NHPRC or to an appropriate foundation.

Reports of the Historical Records Survey set high standards for completeness and accuracy, yet many of the records described in those reports have been lost or destroyed. This time we must make better provision for the surviving records.