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Regional Depository Systems:
The Complications of Compromise

David Levine

Since the creation of the Wisconsin network of Area Research Centers in 1951, the concept of regional depositories for the management and preservation of local public records has received a lot of attention. Such networks have been described, praised, and criticized, but have not yet been analyzed for what they are -- a compromise system -- and for what they can accomplish. Their correct place within a total local records program has yet to be defined. In order to determine the proper role of regional depositories, it is first necessary to admit that such systems are essentially compromises, and that several interest groups will, in all probability, attempt to mold a depository system to fit their own needs and desires.

The purpose of a regional depository system is to provide a secure location, near the place of origin, for the permanent deposit of local public records (county, municipal, or special district) of permanent historical value which may not otherwise be preserved or may not be accessible to the public. It is the intent of the depository system to preserve such records in accordance with modern archival standards, and make them available for research to interested persons. In almost all cases, regional depositories are located in state-supported institutions of higher education. The actual location of the depository is generally within the university's own archival or manuscript facility. Host institutions are generally required to provide secure stack space for the storage of records deposited in that institution.

The essential compromise is between the state archival agency's mandate to provide for the management and preservation of local public records on the one hand and the lack of space in the central facility on the other. The politically risky action of removing local records some distance from their place of origin is also a real concern. Records placed in a regional depository fall under the jurisdiction of the state archival agency, yet remain reasonably close to their place of origin. By this arrangement the state archives is freed from the expensive prospect of providing stack space for possibly thousands of linear feet of county or municipal records. But, like most cooperative ventures, this one can work only if compromises are made.

Regional depository systems are subject to pressures from different interest groups. Although some of these pressures would apply to any type of local records program, they come together in a unique way when that program includes regional depositories. In so doing, they impose certain limitations on what the regional depository network can accomplish. There are four interest groups that, for reasons which will become apparent, take

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an especially strong interest in a regional depository network: local government officials, the host institution, the research community, and last, but certainly not least, the state archival agency. Each has its own perceptions of the purposes of a regional depository system.

For the most part, local government officials are interested in the program only if it can offer them a service in the area of records management. One of the biggest problems faced by county and municipal officials is finding space for the records created and maintained in their offices. They look to the local records program to help relieve them of the burden of keeping unwanted or unneeded records. Local government officials do not look for assistance to a program that professes as its main interest the service of scholarship. Their desire or willingness to transfer records to a regional depository is almost wholly predicated on their own administrative needs. Some county officials want to transfer records regardless of their lack of historical or research value. Masses of such records stored in basements or attics may be offered for placement in a depository. The archivist must use appraisal talents very critically if the regional depositories are not to become warehouses for record series of short-term value.

Furthermore, local officials hesitate to transfer vital records because they are perceived as being, and often are, crucial to the daily operation of the office. Deed records, for example, are very valuable to many types of research, but also serve a vital legal function. Even in cases where the law allows the transfer of such records to a depository, local officials have expressed reluctance to do so. One reason for this hesitancy lies in a widely held reverence for records as a symbol of office or stewardship. Some officials believe that the transfer of such records would, at the least, impair the functioning of their office and, at worst, suggest an abdication of public responsibilities.

Virtually opposed to the local officials are the administrators of the host institutions whose major motivation for joining a depository system is to enlarge their research collections. Their idea is that students and faculty will benefit from the addition of quantities of primary documentary sources. The obligations of host institutions vary from one system to another, but would not generally be considered burdensome. In most instances the host is required to provide secure stack space and reference services. The amount of stack space given over to the local records program varies greatly from one depository to another; when a space crunch arrives, a serious conflict can develop between the host institution and the state archives. On the whole, however, stack space requirements are minimal and flexible and are at the discretion of the host. Because the state archives is using borrowed space for its local records program, the host institution can exert a great deal of influence over the quantity and quality of accessions. This is perhaps the most critical compromise affecting a depository system.

Once a university has become a depository and accessions local records into its stacks, unanticipated problems arise. Much to the dismay of one university librarian involved in a depository network, his library came into the genealogical spotlight when a local newspaper columnist discovered that it was a depository for county records. The librarian did not want his staff to be burdened with that particular segment of the research community. On more than one occasion administrators of host institutions have urged that the accessioning of records especially attractive to genealogists be avoided. This, of course, places the state archives in an awkward position since, as
a tax-supported public institution, it must serve all segments of the public equally. This potential conflict must be handled with care lest it result in hurt feelings and a loss of support for the regional system.

The third interest group, the research community, is far from being monolithic, as it is made up of a number of subgroups, each with its own notion of what constitutes legitimate research. Amateurs and professionals, students and faculty, historians and political and social scientists, all have their own particular research interests. Segments of the research community, or even individuals within it, will not hesitate to pressure the state archives to accession certain kinds of records they feel are more worthy of preservation than others. An urban historian may be interested in city tax records or building permits; a genealogist may want to see deed records, marriage certificates, and the like; a political scientist may be interested in county election returns; while a geographer may be interested in the records of special districts, such as those concerned with flood control.

Local historical and genealogical societies are often potent political forces, especially in smaller communities. These groups can make local officials very uncomfortable if they choose to cooperate with a program not approved by the local society. If these local groups perceive the depository system as something from which they will benefit, it will gain their full support and its chances for success are increased. On the university campus, faculty can exert a similar pressure on the administrators of the library hosting the depository. Formal or informal advisory committees can bring pressure to bear on the system that is difficult to ignore. In either case it is important for depository system staff to resist any attempt by any interest group to mold the system to meet only its needs.

Finally, the attitudes of the state archival agency must be considered. Ultimately accountable for the operation of the entire system and for its success or failure in managing and preserving local public records, a conscientious state archives will want to develop a comprehensive and coherent program that fulfills its responsibilities. The danger lies in the good intentions of the state archives, which tries to make the regional system alone serve all those needs. A regional system has far too many limitations imposed on it from without for it to be the sole element in a local records program. Limitations on stack space demand that a very high degree of selectivity be used in accessioning local records. Limitations imposed on the transfer of original records sometimes make it difficult to develop the first-rate research collections the host institutions expect when they join the system.

If regional depositories are to serve a useful purpose, the state archival authority will have to take the lead in shaping the system to meet the requirements of local records administration. Depositories can probably best serve a limited function as sites for the retention of a small quantity of highly valuable records. Other, broader functions of local records management will have to be met through other programs, such as microfilming vital records or record series with good research potential that are too bulky to be placed in a regional depository. Another vital component of any records program is a comprehensive records retention schedule. The development and use of retention schedules can eliminate many of the potential conflicts by stating clearly just which record series are eligible for placement in a depository, which are to be microfilmed, and which are to be destroyed after their administrative usefulness has ended.
The state archives must take the initiative in bringing together the several interest groups and educating them about the uses and limitations of a regional depository system. Local government officials will have to learn that regional depositories cannot become huge research collections. Regional depositories are not the answer to all local records problems. In conjunction with a total records management program a depository system can be a useful component of a local records program. State archival agencies looking for an easy, inexpensive means to provide the services local governments are increasingly demanding will find that a depository system alone cannot provide solutions to all the problems they are facing. The biggest danger is that regional depositories will be used as crutches, taking the place of fully developed records management programs. If regional depositories can be realistically seen for what they are, they will be able to assume a respected place in state archives management. However, if they are looked upon as the final solution to local records management problems, they will do nothing but contribute more to the chaos archivists already know so well.