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## Local Records in Distant Lands:

Volunteers to the Rescue

James H. Neal

COLONIAL RECORDS S.O.S. The Caribbean Research Foundation seeks participants during July and August to help save priceless historical documents on Grand Turk Island before they are lost forever. Retirees, students, and others who want adventure and the satisfaction of preserving an important history should write to James Neal, History Dept., Middle Tenn. St. Univ., Murfreesboro, TN 37132.

This and similar classified ads appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, The New York Review of Books, and numerous professional newsletters during the spring of 1983. Of the hundreds of persons who responded, twenty-four were selected to participate in an exotic but useful local records project in the West Indies.

This project began as a result of a graduate student's curiosity about the history of the Turks and Caicos Islands where she was engaged in an anthropological survey. When she inquired about archival records, she learned that a large quantity existed, but she was denied access to them because they lacked order. The student contacted the author, a Middle Tennessee State University history professor who had taught courses in archival administration and had directed several public service projects, including establishing the Rutherford County archives in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The author agreed to draft a records survey proposal on behalf of the

Caribbean Research Foundation, a contributor-participant organization which had been engaged in anthropological work in Turks and Caicos for several years. In the proposal, the administrative value of the records was stressed, as well as their importance for developing community identity in the colony which was rapidly attaining political autonomy. Permission was requested for the foundation to survey the records and to provide the government with a superficial description of them. Project volunteers would undertake some minimal conservation activities and the project director would prepare a final report to include recommendations for additional processing and maintenance. The proposal emphasized that the survey would be undertaken as a service to the local government and that the highest ethical standards would be observed by all participants. The government was not requested to make any financial contribution to the project.

The Honorable Robert Hall, Turks and Caicos minister of health, education, and public welfare, enthusiastically endorsed the proposal. The foundation named the author project director, advanced \$2000 for advertising, broadsides, and brochures, and sent the project director to the islands for a week to develop a plan for the survey and to secure housing for twenty-four volunteer workers.

The Turks and Caicos Islands is a British colony south of the Bahamas and eighty miles north of Hispaniola. Of the thirty islands in the colony, eight are inhabited, including tiny (less than ten square miles) Grand Turk Island, the administrative center. Since the seventeenth century, the principal economic activity on the islands has been the production of salt. The colony has been administered at various times by Bermuda, the Bahamas, and Jamaica. Presently there is a resident governor at Grand Turk. The population is mostly of African ancestry and many residents are descendants of slaves brought to the colony by Georgia loyalists in the



late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By 1830, most of the loyalists had abandoned both the islands and the cotton plantations they had established there.

The records surveyed by the Caribbean Research Foundation were local government files created by island administrators and assemblies charged with carrying out instructions from the crown and with purely local legislative and administrative responsibilities. When examined by the project director in May 1983, the records were in a forty-by-fifty foot basement room under the main post office, fewer than forty feet from a short seawall which protects the island's business and administrative section from the Atlantic Ocean. Many were stacked on rough wooden shelves which lined the stone walls of the basement or which formed two floor-to-ceiling stacks running three-fourths of the length of the room. Thousands of loose documents formed a mat as much as three feet thick along the aisles between the stacks and in the areas where there were no shelves. In addition, scores of huge canvas mailbags, full of loose records, were stacked almost to the six foot ceiling. Very few records were bound, most bound materials having long been claimed by local collectors.

Clearly, the records would have to be removed from the basement even to survey them. Minister Hall offered use of a primary school auditorium, two miles from the post office, for a work area. Classrooms, furnished with cots from the foundation's anthropological projects, would serve as dormitory rooms. All that remained was to recruit volunteers and to purchase and ship the necessary supplies.

As mentioned above, classified ads were placed to recruit project volunteers. The plan was to select twelve persons for each of two three-week sessions. Of the twenty-four, it was hoped that at least six would be professional archivists. Each participant was to contribute \$530 in return for housing and meals. Professional archivists were offered a discount. Most of the contribution would be tax

deductible, as would be travel expenses to and from the islands. The contributions were to pay for food and incidental expenses of the expedition, for travel and other expenses of the project director, and for start-up money for the next year's project.

Response to the advertisements was overwhelming. Inquiries were received from across the United States and Canada as well as from the West Indies and Europe. Respondents were sent application forms and descriptive brochures. The brochure made it very clear that the work would be hard and the accommodations Spartan. Among the twenty-four persons selected were a West Virginia physics professor and his wife, a vice president of a midwestern utilities company, a clinical psychologist from Illinois, a real estate broker from the Florida Keys, a broadcasting executive from Memphis, a French textbook company representative from Manhattan, librarians from Los Alamos and Chicago, a university guidance counselor from California, and a candy shop owner from Saint Louis. Others, including secretaries, students, and retired civil servants were from Pittsburgh, Nashville, Connecticut, Indiana, South Carolina, and South Dakota.

The only disappointment was the small number of experienced archivists who applied. Although many archivists, including a former Society of American Archivists president, inquired and indicated a desire to participate, only two, Inez Prinster from Colorado and Claire Collier of the Rockefeller Archives in New York, made the financial contribution required of all expedition members. Thus, each group had in its number one librarian and one archivist.

The project and the work and living routine were explained to the volunteers soon after their arrival at Grand Turk. An orientation session included tips on water conservation (there is no fresh groundwater on Grand Turk), shopping and cooking (each day two persons were assigned the task of food purchase and preparation for the group), and relating to the islanders, including British expatriates and permanent residents. Volunteers were instructed not



to discuss the contents of the records with anyone outside the group, although they could talk freely about the nature of the work and could invite interested residents to watch the activities. The work day was 7:30 to 12:00 and 1:30 to 4:30 five days a week. During off hours volunteers were free to enjoy magnificent beaches with crystalline water, to socialize in local lounges and discotheques, to make friends among the islanders, or to engage in any other activity not inconsistent with local customs or which would not reflect poorly on the project.

As for the work itself, it was something more and something less than a traditional records survey and involved the equivalent of partial processing on several different levels at once. The initial task was to establish intellectual control of the records. Here Prinster's expertise proved invaluable. She and the project director assigned alphanumeric designations to every bay and shelf in the post office basement as well as to floor areas and to individual canvas bags. They posted instructions as to the number of bundles into which records from each area should be grouped and they constructed a chart of bundle identification numbers based on shelf and bay labels. The numbers controlled the order for bringing records to the school, for assigning them to individual processors, for returning them to "permanent" storage, and, presently, they permit retrieval.

Bundling and removing the records from the basement was the most physically demanding task of the entire project. Near unbearable heat, poor ventilation, and low ceilings, which prevented workers from walking upright, took such a toll that work there was limited to the morning hours. Rest breaks were called every hour. In one morning five persons could bring out enough records to keep the team busy for two days. The difficulty in securing vehicles to transport records from the post office to the school often made havoc of the schedule and volunteers sat around for hours with nothing to do. Sometimes a pickup truck was available; other times

donkey carts were hired.

At the work room volunteers were assigned bundles of records which they cleaned with soft brushes and, occasionally, Absorine or Opaline. Clips, rubber bands, and other connectors were removed and sometimes replaced with plastic fasteners or file folders. Some materials were weeded from the bundles (subject to two levels of review) and the contents of the remaining documents were recorded on three-by-five cards. On each card the volunteer described the documents on a rough equivalent of the file folder level. (Most records were not in folders.) They recorded the bundle number, the office of origin, the type of record, quantity in pages or tenths of inches, inclusive and bulk dates, topics or subjects, their own initials, and a card number. For some bundles only one or two cards were prepared, for other bundles the number of cards exceeded fifty. Additional notes and comments were sometimes recorded on legal tablets.

Some volunteers became "specialists" in various phases or types of processing. In each group there was one person who worked exclusively with copies of the Gazette, the official printed record of activities of local government. Another person worked more than a week sorting and cataloging the local library's collection of the only known copies of a nineteenth century local newspaper. One person spent two weeks with three feet of particularly valuable water-soaked records, carefully separating, drying, and interleaving them. Another was adept at untying knots in the red linen tape and was officially designated as the project's "knotty lady." Archivist Claire Collier devoted much of her time to rice paper mending and otherwise repairing active records from the magistrate's office.

The volunteers were extremely dedicated and worked very hard. There was much talking and laughing as they read particularly humorous, poignant, or otherwise noteworthy information that passed across their desks. A parchment bearing Victoria's seal, a Lincoln transcription, or a



Churchillian commendation of local school children for their contribution to the war effort brought volunteers to their feet as they clustered around the desk of the person who had discovered the latest "treasure." Good archival practice it was not, but it clearly demonstrated that they were interested in what they were doing.

After volunteers cleaned and surveyed the records, they filed some in folders and document boxes. The rest were rebundled and labeled. During the last week, all of the bundles were wrapped in acid-free wrapping paper. Prisoners and pickup trucks were provided to haul the records to "permanent" storage where they were shelved by the project director.

After returning to the United States, the project director used the cards to prepare his report. Two computer-generated lists, one chronological, the other arranged by bundle number, and each eighty-seven pages long, include almost all of the information from the cards. A shelf list indicates where individual bundles and boxes are shelved.

In the report, the project director suggested that the project be extended into the summer of 1984 to carry approximately six hundred linear feet of remaining records to the same level of processing as the nearly fifteen hundred feet surveyed during the summer of 1983. He also recommended creation of a local records commission, employment of a professional records manager/archivist, and termination of Caribbean Research Foundation participation in local archives projects upon completion of the survey in 1984. Untrained volunteers could not properly process the records to a level required for research and administrative purposes. He urged the local government to secure adequate storage space for the records. Some are presently shelved in the Victoria Public Library; others are stored in the post office basement.

The project was completed in August 1984 and a comprehensive report should be available in 1986. What remains is to evaluate the concept and to



consider its implications for similar ventures.

The proposal was articulated in terms of administrative and civic values. Before 1983, the local government had no access to most records more than four or five years old. Since 1984, all surviving records of local government dating from the mid-nineteenth century are, loosely speaking, accessible. The project definitely sparked public interest in local history. Volunteers were often asked what information had been discovered about particular families and communities. Local legend and a growing body of scholarly research declares that Columbus's first landfall in America was in the Turks and Caicos rather than on Watlings Island in the Bahamas. Honesty requires acknowledgment that interest in the project waned in some quarters when volunteers confessed their work had uncovered no documentation of that initial landing. A number of items of high visual impact were withdrawn from the records and deposited in the Victoria Public Library. Displays incorporating these materials were very well received and further stimulated interest in local history.

There is no question about local residents' support of the project. The volunteers, popularly referred to as "the archivists," were treated as visiting royalty. Frequently their work schedule was interrupted for receptions provided by civic organizations and government officials.

The project seems to have benefited the volunteers, many of whom had no idea what an archivist was when they arrived in Grand Turk. Work time was set aside for archival workshops so workers would know why they were doing some of the strange things assigned to them. The director and the archivists lectured on the basics of archival practice and conducted a conservation workshop. Two years later, at least three of the volunteers were preparing for careers in archives, one having been hired by the Tennessee State Library and Archives as recently as December 1985.

What the Caribbean Research Foundation volunteers

accomplished in Grand Turk could be duplicated elsewhere. Problems encountered there were identical to those which confront concerned archivists and other citizens in thousands of communities across the country. There is nothing unique about stacks of disorganized papers in the basement of a government building lacking only labor, space, money, and commitment to make them available for research. Virtually every aspect of the project was based on or was subsequently applied to the author's county archives project in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. In both projects, university public service funds (\$2500 for Grand Turk) were awarded for purchase of archival supplies. In both projects, academic credit was available on an internship basis. The techniques used to identify and remove documents from the post office cellar for processing at another site were based on experience with county records discovered in an earthen pit. The use of prison labor to move great quantities of records in a short time corresponded to use of Reserve Officer Training Corps cadets for similar tasks in Tennessee. Even the rewards were similar as attested by the plaques, proclamations, and certificates hanging on the author's office wall.

Volunteer programs used to start local archives clearly are feasible; but are they a good idea? Neither Turks and Caicos nor Rutherford County, Tennessee have employed a professional archivist. Turks and Caicos officials and researchers can now retrieve the records they need, but without adequate security those records are as vulnerable as they were before the project began. Rutherford County records are accessible because the author keeps the archives open on Mondays and posts his phone number on the door. Sometimes local officials develop the attitude that if the records are so important that people will voluntarily initiate a project, they must be important enough for the same or other volunteers to continue it indefinitely.

For the author the question is moot. This is his last volunteer project; making slide presentations at



professional meetings based on the last one is enough. On the other hand, ecclesiastical records in Turks and Caicos must be microfilmed as soon as possible. With the right equipment and a few professional photographers looking for a working vacation, who knows what might develop?

James H. Neal is professor of Latin American and Caribbean history at Middle Tennessee State University where he offers courses in archival administration.