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Bureaucracy, Public Relations, and Archival Cooperation: The Preservation and Accessibility of State Historical Site Records

Asa Rubenstein

The records of large historical agencies embracing geographically dispersed sites pose great opportunities for historical scholarship and better management of historical properties. Unfortunately, all too often the lack of archival policy dealing with these records makes the records inaccessible and exposes them to gradual deterioration or permanent loss.

In turn, the lack of an archival policy stems from the failure of the agency's field and central office staffs to accept the legitimacy of one another's conflicting perspectives and their common inability to appreciate the outside viewpoint of the professional archives that hopes to service the records. Friction between the central office and field staffs over the distribution of power and resources within the agency results in disagreement over control of its records. Also, despite a common historical orientation and interest in old records, the nonarchival historical agency's specialists in architectural history, historical restoration, archaeology, and museum curatorship are often skeptical about the archives generalist's competence in appraising and scheduling records pertaining to those fields.

To make matters worse, tight budgets restrict the staff size of most professional archives, while the demands upon them from a host of other agencies...
increase. Under these circumstances, the archives staffs are typically too small to be familiar with the work of every agency they service before assisting each with its records, and they lack the time to acquire this knowledge on the job through frequent informal contacts at all levels with agency personnel: site superintendents, regional managers, and central office policymakers. This means that few if any nonarchival agency personnel--and then usually only some from the central offices--get to view the archivists as open-minded, trustworthy friends and not as indifferent strangers who only care about records. The latter perception, correct or incorrect, helps establish an adversarial relationship, with or without hostility, between many administrative agencies and professional archives that wish to serve them.

This entire situation may, at first, tempt an agency to ignore professional archives and try instead to provide its own archival services. When this effort results in dismal failure, the agency may realize that it needs the professional archives to act as its repository, but may insist on hiring its own archivist who would learn its history, mission, and operations; inventory and appraiser its records; recommend dispositions; and process and describe those records designated for archival deposit. However, as Maynard Brichford recently suggested, the archivist "in mission" may find his professional judgment distorted or compromised by institutional loyalty and himself thus losing overall perspective. The Illinois Department of Conservation's Division of Historic Sites faced this very predicament in July 1980 when it hired the author as temporary archivist.

As discussed below, this agency and the Illinois State Archives finally cooperated to resolve the dilemma and saved valuable records by sharing archival and records management tasks instead of fighting one another to monopolize them. The key to success was a process of negotiation within the administrative agency and between it and the archives. In this case, an in-house archivist was
needed to facilitate negotiations by making a historical agency's informational needs more intelligible to fellow archivists and records managers, while teaching that agency the benefits of cooperating with a professional archives to implement improved archival and records management techniques for controlling its records. Although Frank Burke correctly observed that cooperation should be "a process of speaking familiarly with colleagues without need for translation," \(^2\) this particular case illustrates the necessity and usefulness of an interpreter when collegial familiarity is, in fact, lacking between the staffs of a professional archives and a nonarchival agency, despite common intellectual interests in the documentary remains of the past.

Illinois's system of historic sites began during the 1860s and 1870s when the state purchased land and appointed commissions to construct and maintain the Stephen A. Douglas Tomb in Chicago and the Abraham Lincoln Tomb in Springfield. During the next thirty years, similar commissions were formed for Lincoln's Home in Springfield, monuments to three of Illinois's early governors, and five Civil War memorials to her soldiers, including two at the Gettysburg battlefield in Pennsylvania.

In 1909, the state began linking its historic sites and parks into a centralized system with the appointment of the Illinois Park Commission, which became responsible for managing Fort Massac, Fort de Chartres, and Starved Rock Park. With the replacement of commissions in 1917 by executive agencies under the governor's direction, all of the state's parks and historic sites were placed under the control of the Department of Public Works and Buildings. During the next sixty years, Illinois's system expanded enormously with the acquisition of many more parks and historic sites and was responsible for Joseph Booton's reconstruction of Lincoln's New Salem during the 1930s and Richard Hagen's interior restoration of the Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, and Pierre Menard homes during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1952, the parks and historic
sites were transferred to the Department of Conservation, but this did not change a managerial philosophy which subordinated historical to recreational considerations until 1975. In that year, a separate division within the Department of Conservation—the Division of Historic Sites—was created to upgrade the development of the state's historic sites as cultural properties while also managing the federal and state historic preservation programs in Illinois.

For administrative purposes, the sites were clustered into geographical districts under the management of historical museum professionals who initially had considerable autonomy. In 1977, the division's central office became more actively involved in the details of research, restoration, interpretation, staffing, and general operations. This development met resentment and opposition from field staff who believed that they were more knowledgeable than the central office policymakers about the condition and potential of their sites and the expectations of their clientele, especially the local residents. While asserting its authority, the central office became increasingly aware of the need for an archival program, especially for the agency's older records of enduring value. This view was not shared by at least some field staff, who feared that an archival program would only deny them and their local communities access to important records still at their sites, while requiring no similar sacrifice from the central office, which would be gaining additional information and thus increasing its power to meddle even further in field operations.

The records themselves were scattered randomly throughout Illinois and were relatively inaccessible and often unknown to the division's policymakers in the capital. Frequently, personnel at the sites and offices housing the records were aware only of those that pertained to their own duties. Also, records pertaining to a particular site had often been scattered to several different locations for long forgotten reasons, for example, administrative
changes, including moves of offices or shifts of personnel. The combination of these factors often left field personnel at one site ignorant of pertinent records at other locations. Furthermore, historical manuscripts and other materials requiring careful archival storage were generally housed in dusty places with improper lighting, fire hazards, dripping air conditioners, poor ventilation, and no temperature and humidity controls, because the agency's buildings and staff were not legislatively intended for archival purposes. By correcting this situation, the Division of Historic Sites hoped to preserve its corporate memory and thus avoid repeating costly research already documented in its inaccessible records.

At that time, the state archives held a legislative mandate to provide an archival remedy through several statutes, especially the State and Local Records Act of 1976. This legislation obligated the state's administrative agencies to follow carefully outlined procedures for cooperation with the state archives in the voluntary retirement of their records. However, before the hiring of an in-house archivist in July 1980, cooperation between the state archives and a historical agency like the Division of Historic Sites was impeded by conflicting interests and misunderstanding. The state archives seemed insufficiently sensitive to the research needs of historic sites managers who were desiring safe storage but easy access to records consulted sporadically. The site managers did not understand the records management principles which justified and motivated recent changes in the archives's procedures and policies, especially greater selectivity in records accepted for permanent archival deposit. Also, even if the division understood the validity of the state archives's strong preference for storing massive record groups on microfilm when possible, neither agency could recognize the other's budgetary constraints that made it impossible for either to subsidize the filming. Moreover, at this time, the state archives was reversing a longstanding policy
that had permitted the state's administrative agencies to place hundreds of cubic feet of uninventoried records in its vaults on security deposit without any restrictions on quantity, with easy withdrawals and no deadlines for removing them permanently or surrendering control.

In the absence of an in-house archivist or intermediary who understood the methodologies and concerns of both agencies, the Division of Historic Sites avoided the retirement of its records and began in 1977 to establish an internal archives separate from the state archives. Three years later, few records from the field had been collected or inventoried and, instead, many records from the central office dating from the 1930s to the 1960s had been dispersed around the state to various sites and regional offices. Little more had been accomplished than the rough sorting and microfilming of incomplete record series deposited in the state archives twenty-five years earlier and some work on an elaborate subject classification scheme to arrange a few of the old records that were already in the division's research office in Springfield. These results were achieved by one sporadically assisted staff member, who could devote little time to archival tasks.

After the division had recognized the failure of that experiment, it hired a full-time archivist on 1 July 1980 to strengthen its programs for research, restoration, and interpretation by devising and implementing an archival plan to preserve, centralize, and organize its relevant records in cooperation with the state's three archival and library agencies: the state archives, the state historical library, and the state library.

Although the Division of Historic Sites could have resorted solely to assistance from the state archives in solving its records problem, the administrative agency believed that its own archivist would learn its mission, history, and operations from its own personnel and thus devise a program better attuned to its needs. At that time, the division
viewed the state archives as a collector and guardian of important but immediately useless records and remained virtually ignorant of its records management function. Even if it had thoroughly understood the archives's capability and legal responsibility for solving its records problem, the division would have been unwilling to let outsiders appraise, plan, and execute the retirement of its records, which affected its work, without displaying a good knowledge of its staff and operations at all levels. In order to demonstrate that particular competence to the division's satisfaction, the state archives's records management experts would have had to take time through frequent contacts to become known to the division's staff personally and professionally as individuals genuinely interested in them and their work. Unfortunately, the state archives's records management staff was too small and swamped with requests from many state agencies to have that kind of time to spend with just one of them. In contrast, an in-house archivist would be at the beck and call of only the Division of Historic Sites and would have the time to establish a close working relationship with field as well as central office personnel through on-site visits, numerous phone conversations, informal and sociable encounters, collaboration on small projects, and attendance at meetings to observe candid discussions of the agency's programs, procedures, achievements, and problems.

As a preliminary step in devising a records program, the division's archivist travelled the state from Galena in the north to Fort Massac in the south and inventoried the records at all but two of the division's nineteen staffed sites (Shawneetown Bank and Douglas Tomb, whose pre-1970 records were received later) and the two central offices in Springfield, including the Office of Research and Publications. This archival material consisted of historical manuscripts, photographs, maps, architectural plans and drawings, archaeological field notes, in-house historical and archaeological research reports, and research and administrative
files. Many of those documented the conservation department's cooperation with the federal government and the private sector in identifying and preserving sites of archaeological, historical, or architectural significance listed on the National and Illinois Registers. Fortunately, a good representative sampling of the material in the field was already in the division's Springfield offices. In between trips to the various sites around the state, the archivist examined this sample very carefully in order to devise a tentative scheme for arranging all the site-related records. This was easily revised upon completion of the records survey in November 1980, just in time to be incorporated into a major grant application.

By that time, the archivist had met with all concerned field personnel, and they and the central office concluded that, regardless of age, many of the records contained operationally vital information requiring immediate access on location at any and all times. This meant that they could not be removed to a safe repository miles away without leaving xerox or microform copies. Since the division could not fund the microfilming of all this material, the archivist consulted with the heads of the Illinois State Archives, the Illinois State Historical Library, and the Society of American Archivists in drafting an application for a two-year grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) to fund the production of one microfilm copy for the division's field staff, another for the central office, and a third for the state historical library and its scholarly clientele. This would have permitted the placement of originals according to their provenance in either historical repository; as prescribed by Illinois law, the retired government records would go to the state archives, and manuscripts of private individuals and organizations would be transferred to the state historical library.

Not until the plan was defined in writing and submitted for informal review did it become clear that there were two serious weaknesses which would
make NHPRC approval highly unlikely. The first, which was correctable, was the absence of explicit appraisal criteria defining the records requiring permanent archival preservation. This oversight occurred because a fledgling in-house archivist identified too closely with his agency and unwittingly adopted its generally undiscriminating attitude towards its records. The second flaw, which was fatal, was the impossibility of proving to NHPRC's satisfaction that a grant was necessary to save records when, in fact, no funding was required merely to have the records transferred to suitable public repositories. The purpose of the application was to obtain funding for microfilm copies. Although the Division of Historic Sites could not transfer old but operationally vital records without having accessible microfilm copy, the NHPRC's concern was not accessibility but endangerment through lack of archival facilities or personnel.

Unfortunately, when the archivist learned that the NHPRC was not a suitable funding source, there was no time left to apply to the only alternative, the National Endowment for the Humanities, because its earliest deadline for receiving applications was later than the division's for submitting a budget to the legislature. Although the division would not receive enough state money to microfilm all its important records, it could obtain funds for filming some of these, but only if it requested the money before it was allocated elsewhere. The division, at this point, could not afford to pass up a small amount of state money to gamble on receiving a larger federal grant. On the other hand, the division's central office could not hedge this bet by promulgating a modest archival policy based on smaller state funds and subsequently increase its scale radically upon receiving a large federal grant. Such a course would have damaged the central office's credibility with higher bureaucratic and budgetary authorities and especially with its field staff, who were still uneasy about the very idea of a records program.
Instead, the original archival plan was scaled down so that it could be completely executed by 30 June 1982 and financed entirely by the Division of Historic Sites. This gave first priority to the preparation of simple finding aids and the collecting, processing, and microfilming of only the division's pre-1970 administrative and research reports and files (which included many drawings and photographs) pertaining to its own historical properties. These records would be transferred to the state archives. It gave second priority to producing security microfilms of oversized architectural plans and drawings, large photographic collections unaccompanied by notes or correspondence, and other valuable pre-1970 material required for use on location in its original form by the division's field and central office staffs. However, architectural plans and drawings and archaeological field notes and photographs of work done at the sites by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the 1930s and 1940s were to be collected from the field, processed and described, prepared for microfilming, and deposited in the state archives. Such material was clearly too old to be relevant to ongoing field investigation—also, its volume was relatively small. In both respects, it differed radically from similar material generated during the 1960s and 1970s at Cahokia Mounds and Fort Massac, where considerable resources had been invested in major research and capital projects that were still undergoing critical evaluation within the agency. In short, under the new archival plan, the processing and microfilming costs were reduced by approximately sixty percent.

Moreover, from the standpoint of gaining the cooperation of field personnel, 1970 was a good cutoff point because almost all of them had been hired since that date, and thus, the records generated by their own work for the agency were temporarily exempt from mandatory collection. Operational friction was further reduced by the willingness of central office staff (namely, the Office of Research and Publications) to provide xerox
copies of any pre-1970 material needed immediately at the sites as long as the particular items or folders were specifically identified.

Later, while the Division of Historic Sites was still considering the new plan, the state archives expressed its official approval. The state archives agreed to provide temporary storage and processing facilities in its vaults for the duration of the project. Also, at no charge to the division, the archives offered folders, boxes, other archival supplies, and the services of its paper conservator. In return, the division would commit itself to cooperate with the archives's staff in scheduling and accessioning any records brought to its building. The agency pledged that the historically valuable portion of the records would be transferred to the archives's custody, while the remainder would be destroyed immediately or after a specified time according to procedures defined by state law. This agreement protected the state archives from becoming a dumping ground for unprocessed material controlled by another agency. Finally, after consulting the field staff, the division's central office accepted this agreement in August 1981 when it endorsed the new archival plan without any modification.

Although the new policy required the field and central office staff to surrender only certain categories of pre-1970 records, several staff members voluntarily released records that were much more recent. While many of these consisted of timesheets, petty office vouchers, utility bills, personnel records, routine departmental memos, and other legitimately disposable material, some contained information of enduring administrative and scholarly value. For example, without having them microfilmed, the central office decided to transfer to the state archives several hundred National Register architectural and engineering drawings dating from 1969 to 1981. These provided an up-to-date structural record of Illinois's and especially Chicago's architecturally or historically significant structures, including a military ship from World War II.
Even before its formulation and official promulgation, the new policy's archival preservation objective had been gradually defined in a piecemeal fashion through the successful completion of several small-scale projects. This included cooperation with other state agencies in microfilming the division's records. For instance, the archivist arranged the microfiching of fifty-one of this agency's archaeological reports with the state library, Illinois's central library agency and repository for government documents and other printed works of interest to government employees.

These reports had been generated since the early 1960s by agency staff and outside consultants in the course of archaeological research at significant Illinois sites that would be affected by state or federal capital projects. Unfortunately, the reports were also occupying several cubic feet of coveted office space in the division's main office in Springfield. After consulting with the division's archaeologists, the archivist prepared a bibliography and coordinated the production of a microfiche edition through the state library's publication-on-microform program at no cost to the division. The completion of this small project made it possible to preserve the original copies of the reports in the state archives, while making them all available for the first time on microfiche around the state to the division's field and central office staff and to the general public. Also, the distribution of the reports and bibliography with a written request for further assistance encouraged field and central office staff to cooperate closely with the archivist in collecting, copying on microfiche, listing, and depositing thirty-two additional archaeological reports that were being kept mostly outside the central office. In short, this small project's success helped make the entire archival program look more worthwhile to staff throughout the division.

An important element of the final archival policy
involved cooperation with the records management personnel of the state archives in destroying records that had long outlived their usefulness. Long before any archival plan had even been formulated, this started with a request for help from a site superintendent. She asked the archivist to examine and remove twenty cubic feet of Parks and Memorials Division vouchers dating from 1940 to 1952. These were occupying badly needed space in a hot, stuffy, and humid attic. Upon careful appraisal, the archivist transferred one-half of a cubic foot of them to prepare for microfilming and deposit in the state archives, because they contained handwritten justifications for period furnishings purchased for several historic sites. By working with the state archives, the archivist secured legal authorization to destroy the remaining nineteen and one-half cubic feet, which merely documented fuel and petty office expenses.

Two months before the final archival plan became official policy, an important step was made towards implementing another feature: the security microfilming of pre-1970 material that had to remain at the sites. In June 1981, one month before the end of the state's fiscal year, the archivist was asked to suggest a small project that would make good use of contractual service funds remaining in the central office budget. Consequently, the archivist helped prepare the copy and index for a security 35mm microfilm edition of approximately 340 rare maps and architectural drawings documenting the restoration and development of Lincoln's New Salem from 1919 to 1975. The contractual service funds enabled a private micrographic firm to do the filming and produce three microform sets: a security negative roll, negative mounted aperture cards for convenient printouts of full-scale paper copies in Springfield, and positive microfilm rolls which New Salem field staff could use more handily than the fragile, original drawings.

The results of this project were far-reaching and valuable. The records preserved and microfilmed
constitute a wide ranging collection of data valuable for administration and disinterested scholarship. They include files and photographs documenting the 1950s restoration of Lincoln's Home by Richard Hagen and the involvement of governors and other state officials. They contain reports and administrative files providing archaeological data on the Cahokia Mounds civilization and showing the political problems of preserving and developing the mounds as a state historic site from the 1920s through the mid-1970s. Archaeological and historical data on the eighteenth century French, British, and American social and military presence in Illinois can be seen in the division's recently transferred files on Cahokia Courthouse, Fort de Chartres, and Fort Massac. These include reports, correspondence, drawings, photographs, and notes from WPA-sponsored historical and archaeological research during the 1930s and 1940s and from similar efforts in the 1960s and 1970s, which were funded through the Department of Conservation and executed by researchers at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

Among the most valuable papers transferred to the state archives are almost ninety historical reports generated from 1930 to 1982 for all the properties owned and operated by the Division of Historic Sites. These include 1970s transcripts of interviews with those responsible for restoring, furnishing, and developing the agency's historic sites during the 1930s and 1940s as well as reports relating specifically to each. The latter provide considerable insight into many topics including the social structure and values of Abraham Lincoln's New Salem, the lifestyle of Galena's mercantile and political elite during the commercial heyday of the 1840s and 1850s, the material culture of the mid-nineteenth century Jansonite Swedish communal colony at Bishop Hill, and the architectural and social significance of the early twentieth century Dana Thomas House in Springfield, which was designed along with its furnishings by Frank Lloyd Wright.

The preserved records are all in a safe
repository and accessible through concise, descriptive finding aids at the folder level. Information of scholarly interest and indispensable to long-range projects and ongoing operations is organized and available where needed instead of being scattered, hidden away, and stored where it can be forgotten or lost. An improved archival situation was achieved at the Illinois Division of Historic Sites when tight budgets convinced this nonarchival agency's leadership that no large organization could afford to waste money by repeating earlier mistakes, duplicating costly discoveries, or overlooking the effect of its past experience on its current policies and circumstances. It became clear that an archival program was needed to preserve an agency's corporate memory by identifying its records, classifying them in terms of comparative value, providing guidelines for retiring and microfilming different types, and establishing effective physical and intellectual control over those that would be permanently preserved in a central location. That conviction produced the necessary commitment from the division's leadership to provide adequate financial support for the program and to command full cooperation from staff throughout the agency.

The division's experience shows that there are several phases involved in a successful archival program. It begins with a survey of the records and discussions with the staff who are keeping them; this enables the agency to know what records it has, where different types or record series are located, and how important each type is to the agency's work. Before any policy towards these records is formulated, it is very likely that some of these will already fall under the archivist's control. In fact, from the beginning there will be small projects which will serve as building blocks to a full-scale program. Namely, there will be demands to relieve staff of unwanted records and to decide whether to deposit, microfilm, or destroy them. The completion of such projects is not a diversion from the main task of devising and implementing an archival policy.
Page 54 was not printed in the original issue.
essential. Within the Division of Historic Sites, this was accomplished by consulting field staff and accommodating them where possible in completing and executing the archival policy.

Between the agency and the state archives, a good working relationship was achieved through continuous contact and fruitful cooperation on small archival projects. This was reinforced by the division's commitment to respect the state archives's rights and procedures and by the archives's generous assistance to the division's archivist during the execution of the archival policy.

A successful archival program, however, does not always depend on the nonarchival agency's employment of an in-house archivist. Other large administrative agencies may be ready to rely solely on outside archival services because of a climate of trust and mutual understanding and the awareness that an archivist "in mission" tends to lose his critical perspective as he identifies more and more with the outlook of his employer. However, the willingness of an in-house archivist to take that risk proved essential to secure the active participation of the Illinois Division of Historic Sites in a records retirement plan in close cooperation with the state archives. Furthermore, in this case, the risk was minimized, because the division's archival interest had to be articulated in terms professionally acceptable to the state archives before any records could be transferred or legally destroyed. Indeed, the successful partnership of these two very different organizations in preserving important records suggests a more hopeful lesson: Through a system of checks and balances, the statutory or contractual involvement of an outside archival agency can ensure objectivity in the in-house archivist's judgment, while his superior knowledge of his own agency's personnel, operations, and history can guarantee full attention to its most vital archival needs.
Asa Rubenstein's experience as archivist for the Illinois Division of Historic Sites is reflected in this article. Recently, he completed and successfully defended his dissertation for a Ph.D. in history from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Special thanks go to John Daly of the Illinois State Archives, Richard S. Taylor of the Illinois Division of Historic Sites, and Maynard Brichford of the University of Illinois for their criticisms of an earlier draft of this article.

NOTES


3 Lincoln's Home did not become a National Park Service property until 1972, when the Illinois Department of Conservation transferred it to the federal government.