

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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STATE ARCHIVES: THE MAINE EMPHASIS

An Address

By

Samuel S. Silsby, Jr.

Delivered at the Annual Meeting
of the
Kennebec Historical Society

April 30, 1965

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An Address delivered Friday afternoon, April 30, 1965,
by Samuel S. Silsby, Jr.
at the Annual Meeting of the Kennebec Historical Society

President Beck, Fellow Members and Honored Guests:

I suppose that you are all quite curious, as I
am myself, as to why I happened to be drafted to speak
at the annual meeting of this august body.

The only real explanation I can offer is that I
was so dumbfounded at being asked, by President Beck,
that the momentary loss of my faculties, in such a
pressing situation, was taken as assent.

I assure you, however it may be, as one who hasn't
uttered a peep at any public gathering since my Zoology
Seminar in 1949, that only President Beck has succeeded
where everyone else has failed. You are not to draw any
inferences from my present occupation as to the outcome
of that particular presentation!

The most immediate product of the transaction was

the equivocal title of this address. May I say here,
to avoid any further prospect of another, that I hope
it will measure up to that!

The fact of the matter is that because time was
short for issuing the call, and for my lack of good
judgment in not giving the matter further consideration,
I supplied the title hoping that I could come up with
something credible.

I must begin by pointing out that I am, of course,
not a professional Archivist----and I sincerely hope that
none of you here today are either!

The purpose of preserving records is for their
future use whether it be tomorrow or a hundred years
hence or whether it be for a private or public purpose.
Research is directed toward the development of informa-
tion from the record resources of the past and present.

The word "Archives" is of Greek origin and may

refer either to the public records themselves or to a place in which they are kept. It is also used today to refer to records of organizations, such as "Church Archives" or to the type of records, such as "Family Archives" or "Business Archives."

The term "Archives," in the sense I shall use it, will mean "State Records," or "all written or printed books, papers, letters, documents and maps made and received in pursuance of law for the public offices of the State . . . in the transaction of public business." Some of you may prefer the definition that "State Archives are its records of permanent value." A simple overall definition, which I like to think of as my own, defines "Archives as the documentary product of government." It logically follows, that there are "State Archives," "County Archives," and "Municipal Archives," according to the level of government which is under consideration.

Without making any particular reference to "Archives," at the moment, I would like to point out that the process of research can be variously described and may be highly specialized or general in its objectives and in the methods used. It is rarely done today in the classic sense of a search for "knowledge for the sake of knowledge." It is usually accomplished with such a degree of flexibility that any standard method of procedure is automatically ruled out.

There are certain phases, however, that will be found common to any type of research. For example, during the first stages, you will make every effort to "saturate" yourself with all the information you can find on the general subject so that you will gain the necessary perspective to determine the particular emphasis of your subsequent investigation and how to reach your goal.

This will be generally followed up with a thorough examination of the materials you have already collected and by a more intensive search for more detailed information in those areas which you feel are necessary.

Lastly, there will be the overall evaluation of your information for its relationship, meaning and value with reference to your subject to bring your work into a "tight focus." The end result of your research, of course, is to pull your material into a single, coherent and easily reviewed body of information for future use.

The foregoing resume describes the research process so far as routine investigations from secondary sources are concerned, but represents an entirely inadequate definition when one considers the labor and effort (not to mention imagination and resourcefulness) in developing information from State archival sources.

The reasons are not very hard to discover if your investigations require an examination of unpublished State records.

During the last 10 years I have worked for the State as Assistant Director of Legislative Research, I have spent a considerable amount of time in gleaning information from the so-called "State Archives." A great deal of this work was done in connection with special projects or for furnishing a historical connection or basis for research studies assigned by the Legislature.

Until fairly recently, I felt that Maine had, at least, a quasi archival establishment in which State documents were reasonably well housed and preserved. And for all of that, the constitutional mandate of Article V, Part Third, Sections 2 and 4 which require the Secretary of State to keep and preserve the records

of the State was being met. Of course, there was always the slight inconvenience of determining whether particular records were available, and where they might be located, but this was not an insurmountable obstacle if one has sufficient energy and leisure. In fact, from a gentleman's viewpoint, such an arrangement would often provide a few fleeting moments of pleasure when assisted by some accomodating secretary in the lamented elevator shaft.

The point here which I wish to make is that for a long time I felt that much could have been accomplished by the various Secretarys of State if they had chosen to act administratively in collecting the State's records in a central location and to make them accessible to the public.

The article on statutory law that I supplied for the Committee on the Revision of the Statutes, for use in the Maine Revised Statutes Annotated, completely changed this notion.

The difficulty is not so much because of any particular failure in administration by the Secretaries of State, but because of a long continuing indifference on the part of the public and the Legislature concerning the need for an efficient archival program.

There should be absolutely no question that the State needs a direct, positive approach to the handling of its current and non-current records; one which will provide the type of personnel and skill required to promote more efficient record keeping of current records, as well as provide for the collection, preservation and care of its non-current records.

The inadequacies involved in undertaking any type of comprehensive research under the present system of administration practically guarantees the existence of latent errors. Without a full and complete inventory of the records available, no one can be certain of

having exhausted the sources of official information in dealing with State activities; and no such inventory, of recent origin, exists.

To spend precious weeks and months developing the information necessary to author and publish a work, only to find your labor undone in the next breath by the subsequent unearthing of previously undiscovered information is truly frustrating to anyone who has undertaken a scholarly investigation of the past.

Needless to say the possibility of error exists in any work, but this is not generally for the lack of available published information. One can readily appreciate the difficulties experienced by the earlier historians of the State, such as Sullivan and Williamson, in attempting to sift out and track down the information and materials used for their histories. Truly, such a task, at any period, would require a tremendous effort

and persistency over a long period of time for its accomplishment; and the task for them must have been considerably more difficult.

Even as short an interval of time as 12 years was the object of complaint by Commissioner Goddard, when he wrote in his report to the statutory revision of 1883, that he could find no evidence in the "Archives of the State" of the adoption of an amendment to the Maine Constitution, purportedly accepted by the people in 1871. This situation has not grown better in the intervening 80 years, as a greater number of people are coming to realize.

The degree to which the future should govern the records of the present is not an easy thing to determine; and when the choice is between the interests of the present and those of posterity, there is usually little question as to priority. The argument that

little of real value has been lost is much less difficult to sustain than all that which has survived is valuable and should be preserved. It is entirely possible (and probably a fact) that there is a great deal of material which has survived that will never be used because it is basically worthless.

The Committee on Destruction of Old Records was never intended by the Legislature as the final solution to records control and during its existence has pretty much had its hands full in dealing with current records disposition rather than with records accumulated prior to its creation. There is little doubt, as with any program, that there must be an intelligent application of judgment in order to achieve maximum efficiency in operations. The power of selection in the preservation of records, while it may be disliked, cannot be avoided if the program is to meet future demands upon it as the repository for State records.

The extent of official State records, while astonishingly large, is an unknown quantity, and the problem is further complicated by the lack of adequate classification and indexing. The first and only inventory of State records, made by Professor Allen Johnson, of Bowdoin, in 1908, still remains the only practical means of digging into this mass of material, even though, at the time, it was never intended as more than a general survey of existing State records. The fact that no comprehensive survey has been made since that time makes it a must in attempting any detailed examination of the records. There are other indexes available for certain materials, such as Hasse's "Index to Economic Material in the Documents of Maine," and the "Index to the Maine Public Documents," compiled by the Maine State-Library. I might point out for your own information, that there is a partial checklist of

the miscellaneous papers of the Secretary of State which is available for use in his office. Even the materials that have been published, such as the House and Senate Journals, have often been published with their original indexes, which means making a closer examination of the text than might otherwise be necessary. The conclusion which one must draw from the use of such inadequate tools clearly points to the tremendous need to assemble and classify this vast accumulation of material.

Most of you are probably aware of the fact that there is a new climate in the State that augurs well for culture and cultural pursuits----a renaissance, if you may, in which the forces of interest in art, museums, libraries and archives, combined with the tremendous impetus for education, are at long last forcing a recognition of their needs. The fact that their

spokesmen have, thus far, responded to the forces of reason and practicality in pursuing the means by which their goals may become a reality is significant, especially when compared with the disorganization and impracticality which have characterized many former efforts.

As you doubtless know, the emphasis on archives, since 1900, has resulted in the establishment of the National Archives and in the formation of a State archives in every State in the Union, except Maine and Alaska. This state of affairs has not gone unrecognized in Maine, and since the introduction of Bill: AN ACT to Create the Bureau of Maine Archives, by Representative Jerome G. Plante, of Old Orchard, in 1959, such legislation has been regularly considered by each successive Legislature; only to lose final passage during the closing hours because of its small appropriation.

This has been only a minor set-back compared with the efforts of the first State Historian, Rev. Henry S. Burrage, to launch such a program during the period 1907 to 1914.

The Maine Archives Committee was created by Governor John H. Reed prior to the convening of the present session of the Legislature for the purpose of determining what was needed in the way of legislation to establish an appropriate archival program for the State. The Committee, under the able Chairmanship of Dean Ernest C. Marriner, completed the first phase of its assignment during February with the preparation of Bill: AN ACT Creating the Office of State Archivist (H.P. 768, L.D. 1012) which is presently pending before the Legislature.

The first progress report of the Committee, submitted to Governor Reed on March 23, 1965, provides

a realistic appraisal of the present situation.

Active assistance in promoting the adoption of this legislation has been provided on the basis of the publication of Dr. Ernst Posner's recent book "American State Archives" and by the Maine League of Historical Societies and Museums. While several societies in the State, including our own, for different reasons have not chosen to join this organization, the fact remains that a great deal of credit must be given to the efforts of the League in providing the combined support of 55 of our sister societies to promote the cause of archives in Maine.

In conclusion, may I point out the truth of the saying that, "What we do for ourselves dies with us, but what we do for others lives on."

The past belonged to our ancestors; the present is ours; but the future will belong to our descendants.

That future depends upon the present, for we are the guardians of the past and the moulders of the future.

The question for us to answer is whether we are willing to accept the responsibility for making a significant advancement for future generations by perpetuating the records of the State.

The connection of a State Archives with the past, the present and the future provides the keynote for present action. Let us entertain a hope that the time is ripe for undertaking the task of preserving these records for the future----so that obviously, as each of us should

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,

As the swift seasons roll!

Leave thy low-vaulted past!

Let each new temple, nobler than the last,

Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,

Till thou at length art free,

Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!

the significance of the task to us, as Maine citizens,
and its meaning to succeeding generations of the State,
becomes as one: THIS IS THE MAINE EMPHASIS!