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Article Summary: The Society's State Archives Department collects and preserves documentary materials related to Nebraska's history. Legislation passed in 1969 provides for the Society's acquisition of state records. County and municipal records, scattered and often poorly stored, remain a problem.

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Photographs / Images: county courthouse vault in 1972 prior to the accessioning of records by the State Archives, Manuscripts Curator Donald Snoddy and Archival Assistant David Smith examining documents being processed, visitors viewing materials preserved on microfilm

## THE ARCHIVAL PROGRAM AT THE NEBRASKA STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

By JAMES E. POTTER, *State Archivist*

*This paper was presented at the Missouri Valley History Conference in Omaha on March 9, 1973.*

The State Archives is one of four departments of the Nebraska State Historical Society whose headquarters is in Lincoln. The Archives is responsible for the preservation of documentary materials relating to every phase of Nebraska's history—public records, manuscript collections, and Nebraska newspapers.

The Nebraska State Historical Society was founded in 1878, and became an agency of the state government in 1883. Soon after its organization, the Society began the collection of data about the state's pioneer period and in the 1890's began the systematic preservation of newspaper files. The Legislature of 1905 designated the State Historical Society as the official custodian of historical materials, but until 1932 there were no permanent facilities in which to house the growing collections.<sup>1</sup> During the early years the University of Nebraska provided some space for the Society's library and its few manuscript collections, but little or no consideration was given to the acquisition and preservation of historical records from state and local government.

Perhaps the first real attention to the condition of Nebraska's public archives occurred in 1901 when Addison E. Sheldon, who was head of the Legislative Reference Bureau and later Superintendent of the Nebraska State Historical Society, began an inventory of records in the statehouse vaults. This inventory was continued in the summer of 1903 and was later published in the 1910 Annual Report of the American Historical Association.<sup>2</sup> In his report Sheldon noted that the early records



*County courthouses throughout Nebraska in many cases contain unused and deteriorating records. This is a view of a courthouse vault in 1972 prior to the accessioning of records by the State Archives.*

had been poorly filed and many were in a deplorable condition. He was not optimistic about immediate improvement of the situation because, "in the crowding of the state house with new offices and boards during the past 20 years, there has been continual movement of archives from one part of the building to another and this process is still going on."<sup>3</sup> If one considers the history of Nebraska territorial and state government, the dislocation of the public archives is hardly surprising. On December 20, 1854, Omaha was designated the meeting place for the first Territorial Legislature, and when the Legislature convened that location was chosen as the site of the permanent territorial capitol. The archives, which had been in the custody of the governor, were housed in the two-story brick structure which served as the first capitol building. The records were later removed to a second capitol which was used until 1867 when Nebraska achieved statehood. In that year the capitol was relocated to Lancaster, now Lincoln, and the archives were hauled overland by wagon in the winter of 1868-1869 to the new location, where they were deposited in the newly completed statehouse. By the late 1870's this building was near collapse and a second state capitol was constructed over a period of years and completed in 1889. This was to be the

home of state and territorial records until 1932, when the third, and present, capitol building was finished. Although the present building is highly regarded architecturally, it is poorly suited for the storage and preservation of records. Exposed steam and sewer pipes run through many of the vaults and there is little or no means to control temperature, humidity, or dirt in the storage areas. In addition, the lack of adequate space in the capitol building continued to promote the decentralization of state agencies and their records which Sheldon noted in 1910.

The survival of many of the early state and territorial records can be credited to the secretary of state who had the responsibility for the preservation of the legislative records, the original state constitutions, and the official election records. The records uncovered by Sheldon's inventory remained in the vaults of the second, and later the present statehouse until only recently, when many of them were finally transferred into the State Archives. For the most part they have come to the Archives remarkably intact although certainly the worse for wear because of their several moves and their storage in hot, damp, and dusty vaults.

County records in Nebraska were virtually ignored until the Works Progress Administration Historical Records Survey of the 1930's inventoried the records of many of the state's ninety-three counties. Before the project was discontinued at the outbreak of World War II, six county inventories had been published and the remaining field survey forms were deposited with the State Historical Society. Like Sheldon's inventory of state records, the value of the county records survey was minimized by the long period of time which elapsed between the original inventories and the initial transfer of county records into the State Archives. During the intervening years undetermined quantities of valuable county records have no doubt been destroyed or have deteriorated in undesirable storage facilities.

Although the State Historical Society was charged with responsibility for preserving public records of historical value in 1905, and was given space in the new capitol building in 1932, major emphasis on the accessioning of public records and manuscript collections did not begin until the society occupied its present building. During the time that the Historical Society

was located at the state capitol building, most available storage was used for the museum and archeological collections, newspaper files, and the several large manuscript collections which had been donated over the years. Only cursory attention was given to the vaults full of state and territorial records in the basement of the same building. The 1905 law required the notification of the Society whenever government agencies had custody of historical material over twenty years old and no longer in active use, but the permissive nature of this legislation rendered it of limited value.

In 1953 the State Historical Society moved into its present building which included some 16,000 cubic feet of stack area for the storage of public records, manuscripts, and newspaper collections. Unfortunately space alone did not provide the basis for the development of a strong archival program. Although the Society acquired the services of an Archivist in 1951, he was hampered by lack of staff and the demands on his time for public relations and general reference activity. Limited time could be devoted to the acquisition or arrangement of archival and manuscript collections. Finding aids were few or non-existent, and the archival materials were sometimes mingled with the library holdings and recorded on the library accession record. In 1956-1957 state and county offices were contacted to remind them of the Historical Society's responsibility for historical records, but there was little or no response. This is probably fortunate for the Archivist, who would have been overwhelmed with records if many agencies had responded to the notice.

Only since 1963 has there been a systematic and well-defined approach to the acquisition of permanently valuable state and local records as well as continuing emphasis on the preservation of manuscript collections and newspapers. The past decade has seen the State Archives become increasingly beneficial to state and local government, to scholarship, and to the citizens of Nebraska.

The first important step in the creation of a sound archival program was the establishment of the Archives as a separate department of the Nebraska State Historical Society. This occurred in 1963 when there was a reorganization of Society

functions. The Archives also assumed direct supervision of the newspaper collection and the microfilm program which had been in operation since 1952. In November of 1963 Dr. Ernst Posner visited the Historical Society during the research for his important study of American state archives. Dr. Posner reported several major problems evident in the Society's archival program, among which were lack of sufficient staff; the mingling of public records and manuscript collections within the stack areas; and the failure of the State Legislature to fund the 1961 Records Management Act.<sup>4</sup> Considerable progress has been made during the last ten years toward a solution of these problems.

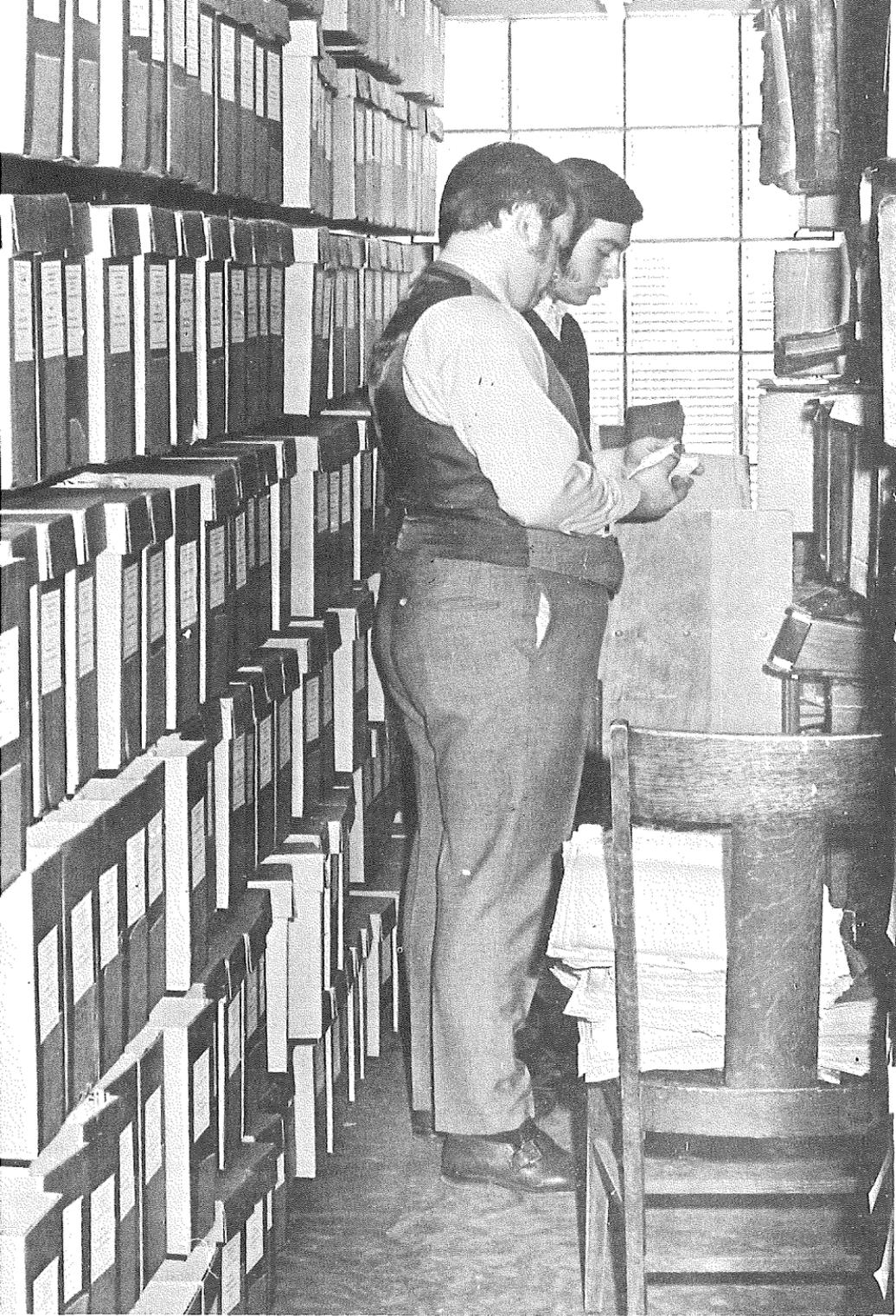
Our staff was increased by the addition of an Assistant Archivist in 1966 and a Manuscripts Curator in 1969. Physical separation of the public records and manuscript collections has been completed. Most important, an ongoing records management program is now a reality in Nebraska. The 1969 Legislature amended the original Records Management Law and for the first time provided funds for the operation of a Records Management Division of the office of secretary of state.<sup>5</sup> The Division, under the direction of Mrs. Bonnie F. Svoboda, has developed retention-disposal schedules for most state and local records with the cooperation of the State Archives and the State Records Board. Microfilm standards have been adopted and the Division provides technical services to state and local government and processes all requests for records action. The fact that the State Archives and Records Management Division are separate departments in Nebraska has not hindered the establishment of effective records management and archival programs.

In addition to funding the Records Management Program, the 1969 legislation contained several provisions of direct importance to the State Archives. First, the archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society was recognized as the official State Archives of Nebraska. Second, the State Archivist was made a permanent member of the State Records Board with authority to review all public records prior to their disposal or transfer. Finally, the State Archivist was given the authority to petition the State Records Board for the transfer of public records into the archives whenever he determines them to be in danger of

destruction or deterioration.<sup>6</sup> LB 224, passed by the current session of the Unicameral will bring additional permanently valuable records under the jurisdiction of the State Records Board and allow for their transfer into the State Archives. These records include county and municipal board minutes and certain records of the Nebraska legislature. In addition the bill provides a penalty for the willful or negligent abuse of public records and will contribute to the effectiveness of the present Records Management Law.

For the first time, the State Archives has a firm legal basis for the acquisition and preservation of public records. Since 1969 considerable progress has been made in the inventory of the various records of permanent value within the statehouse vaults, and many have been transferred for preservation within the State Archives. Records of the major constitutional offices of governor, secretary of state, the Legislature, the state auditor, state treasurer, attorney general, and state railway commission are well represented. Most of the early records of such agencies as the adjutant general, the board of educational lands and funds, and the department of insurance are now available in the State Archives. We have been fortunate that most of our twentieth-century governors have chosen to deposit their official files with us, although it has not yet been determined whether they are legally obligated to do so under the provisions of the Records Management Act. So far none of our recent chief executives has refused to place his files in the Archives. The records of the territorial and early state governors are quite limited, and it must be assumed that in some cases they simply took their files with them when they left office. Some may have been lost in the moves from one capitol building to another. Even so, the sources for a political history of Nebraska are available, should someone choose to undertake this task. Studies of individual agencies or offices might well be profitable as well and would offer new insight into the development and operation of government in the state.

County and municipal records remain a problem of substantial proportions. The State Archives has accessioned permanently valuable records from less than one-third of Nebraska's ninety-three counties. Municipal records remain virtually an unknown quantity, and recent efforts to acquire these materials



*Manuscripts Curator Donald Snoddy (front) and Archival Assistant David Smith examine documents being processed for use by scholars.*

have been limited primarily to rescue operations. Some counties and a few municipalities have begun microfilm programs because microfilm is now accepted as a legal document and it offers security for the original records. However, many local subdivisions probably will not have the financial resources to microfilm their records in the foreseeable future, and at the present time neither the Archives nor the Records Management Division is able to undertake extensive filming of county and municipal records.

Therefore, we must continue to promote the benefits of good record keeping in state and local government and encourage agencies and offices to give attention to their record materials. This not only benefits the government official but also the scholar or private citizen who may need to consult public records. In many offices it is almost impossible to find, much less use, government records. If they exist at all, they are often buried in dusty, poorly lighted vaults. Yet it is hard to blame an official who inherited a vault already bulging with old records and who is reluctant to take time from his other duties to dig out old volumes for the scholar or genealogist. Even though all state and local officials are kept informed of the provisions of the Records Management Act and their responsibilities for the preservation of materials, we have no real means to insure compliance with the statutes. Only when the permanently valuable records are transferred into the Archives or placed on microfilm will they be readily available for research and their continued preservation be assured.

At the Nebraska State Historical Society the State Archives also has responsibility for the extensive collection of Nebraska newspapers which dates from 1854. Beginning in 1952, a microfilming project has steadily reproduced significant old files which become more fragile with the passing years. To date, nearly 16,000 rolls of film have been produced, and in recent years we have been able to give more emphasis to microfilming selected public records and manuscript collections. In 1966-1967 several of our more important manuscript collections were microfilmed through a grant from the National Historical Publications Commission. These included the J. Sterling Morton papers, the Robert W. Furnas papers, the records of the Nebraska Farmers' Alliance, and others. During

the last few years such materials as the original field notebooks of the first U.S. Survey of Nebraska, burial records of the Grand Army of the Republic, county election records, and county atlases and plat books have been placed on microfilm. Business records, church records, and private manuscript collections are also filmed on a periodic basis. While only a few of our filmed holdings are available for loan, most of the collections can be purchased.

We have continued to accession and preserve manuscript collections through the efforts of a full-time manuscripts curator. These collections, which relate to every phase of Nebraska's social, economic, and political history, comprise over 4,000 cubic feet of material. Unfortunately, the period prior to 1930 is often marked by the lack of adequate manuscript sources for Nebraska political history. This coincides with the period when the Historical Society lacked a permanent facility in which to house the collections and this fact made it difficult to appeal to potential donors of manuscript materials. In recent years efforts to preserve the papers of state and national political figures have met with more success, and we hope to continue a broadly based approach to the acquisition of manuscript sources from all sectors of Nebraska life. Increased emphasis has been given to the accession of business and institutional records, and these efforts have resulted in the deposit of several important collections relating to the grain industry and trade, to stock raising and ranching, and to other commercial and agricultural activities in the state. Other areas where the manuscript collections are particularly valuable include public power and irrigation, railroad development, and Indian and military history. The manuscript division is also working toward the development of an oral history program though it remains in the formative stages. Initial reliance must be placed on volunteer efforts for most of the interviewing, and the manuscript division will provide a central repository where tapes may be collected and transcribed.

Guides to the Archives and manuscript collections have been issued periodically since 1965. These have included both public records and manuscripts, but since the creation of separate



*Microfilm is an important tool for preserving documents in small areas of storage space. Many Nebraska newspapers and more archival and manuscript materials are being preserved by this method.*

divisions for the administration of these materials, separate guides will be issued in the future. A "Comprehensive Guide to the Manuscript Division of the State Archives" is in manuscript form at the printers and will soon be available to the public. A guide to state and local records will be a major project in the near future. In 1969 a *Guide to the Newspaper Collection* was issued and is available for purchase.

There is a note of optimism for the future of Nebraska's Archival program. Some of our needs, such as that for well-conceived legislation regarding public records, have been fulfilled. Others remain to be realized. Public and scholarly interest in the functions and resources of the Nebraska State Archives continues to grow, and we have gained increased recognition and interest in the archival program on the part of state and local officials. However, if the State Archives is to continue to fulfill its legal and cultural responsibilities, additional storage facilities and increased professional staff must be acquired in the near future. Thousands of cubic feet of irreplaceable public records and manuscript collections are located throughout the state, many in a condition of present or potential deterioration. Only when they can be transferred into the State Archives will the future preservation of these historical materials be insured.

## NOTES

1. *Laws of Nebraska, 1905*, Chapter 157, 604-605.
2. Addison E. Sheldon, "Report on the Archives of the State of Nebraska," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1910*, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1912), 365-420.
3. *Ibid.*, 371.
4. Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 171-176.
5. *Revised Statutes of Nebraska, 1943*, 1969 cumulative supplement, Sec. 84-1202 to 84-1218.
6. *Ibid.*, Sec. 84-1214.01.