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*Rose M. Mendonca* CLERK

Annual Report  
of  
The Division of Archives and Records  
City of Providence  
1981 - 1982

1981-82 has been an exciting year for the City of Providence as June 4, 1982 marked the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the incorporation of the city. In the past one hundred fifty years as a city and the preceding one hundred ninety-six years under the town government, Providence has enjoyed a rich and colorful history. The Division of Archives and Records is dedicated to the preservation of the records which document our city's past.

Concern for records is not new to the City of Providence. Although no official building was designated for town business until 1773, town leaders realized the importance of maintaining their records. Official documents were placed in the custody of the town clerk and were his sole responsibility. Further evidence of the early town leaders recognition of the value of records can be seen during King Philip's War, when the entire settlement of Providence was virtually wiped out. Town records were saved from destruction by the town clerk, John Smith, who threw the records into the mill pond.

This concern for documentation of the activities of government continued under the city government incorporated in 1832. On June 5, 1832, at one of the first meetings of the new City Council, it was ordered that the City Clerk "shall record in a book to be kept for that purpose, all notes, orders, resolutions, ordinances and rules and regulations made and passed by the City Council". But unlike the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the City Clerk was more concerned with the general operation of the new government than with the preservation of its records. Official records began to pile up with little concern for

their preservation.

Perhaps the greatest effort to care for city records came in 1891 when Horatio Rogers, George M. Carpenter and Edward Field were appointed Record Commissioners, for the purpose of "collecting, and printing the early records of the Town of Providence". Although untrained and serving without pay, they possessed great foresight, as they wrote: "with the modern equipments of public offices, has come a new danger...steam heat, gas and electricity are a constant source of danger to vital records". Their concern for the security of irreplaceable items led to the publication of twenty-two volumes of The Early Records of the Town of Providence, and the arrangement and preservation of the voluminous "Providence Town Papers".

The Record Commissioners were also concerned with the physical storage of city records, and in the 1920s plans were drawn for a proposed Hall of Records. These plans called for the centralization of all the major record producing offices of the city under one roof. Their ambitious idea was never realized however, as the depression of the 1930s put an end to their work.

Since the 1930s local records have been handled in haphazard and often careless ways. It was not until the 1970s that concern for the management of city records again began to surface. In 1978 the city was awarded a grant from the National Historic Publications and Records Commission providing for a survey of city records. A professional archivist was hired and the city made a commitment to continue the program after the grant period expired. This has been done and the Division of Archives and Records has now been firmly established in City government.

The following is a report of the Division's activities for the year 1981-82.

The Division of Archives and Records incorporates a broad records program including the operation of both the City Archives and the city's records management program. The primary objective of the Division since its inception in 1978 has been to preserve the valuable documentation of our city's past while at the same time overseeing a records management program which is efficient and cost effective for the city.

### ARCHIVES

In handling permanent records for the city, the archives engages in three basic processes: acquisition, processing, and public service. When we use the term acquisition we refer to the physical transfer of records into the custody of the Division. In the past year the archives has received two major accessions and several smaller ones. These include

45 cubic feet of City Council material from the City Clerk's office, consisting of minutes of committee meetings, records of militia enrolled and licenses, as well as several volumes of Johnston town records.

35 cubic feet of Probate Court material, consisting of administration accounts, Probate minutes, inventories, bondbooks and guardianships.

10 cubic feet of records from the Board of Canvassers, including records of votes cast in municipal elections, 1936; 1946-66, and voting lists, 1950-52.

3 volumes of Mayor Doyle's Police orders, 1866-1895, from the Police Department.

3 boxes of neighborhood and various planning reports from the department of Planning and Urban Development.

A 1857 Map of Providence showing the locations of drains in the city from the City Engineer's Office.

4 cubic feet of bond books and other legal papers from the City Treasurer.

The transfer of these records serves a dual purpose of clearing valuable storage space in overcrowded city offices while at the same time providing security for the records and access to information for those who need it.

The second function of the Division is to process material for use. The Division arranges records in its custody both intellectually and physically, and describes those records to potential users by means of appropriate finding aids. This process is comparable to the cataloging of books in a library. Since archival collections are unique, it is imperative that arrangement and description of these records be done in a way to insure the fullest possible access to the information by those who need it.

The most critical problem facing the Division is the vast amount of material which is physically housed in the archives but is not yet processed and therefore not available for use. To help alleviate this problem, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on processing in the past year with considerable progress being made. These collections include:

- Executive Department Incoming Correspondence (1857-1912).
- Executive Department Outgoing Correspondence (1855-1914).
- Executive Department Scrapbooks (1874-1906).
- Records of the City Hall Commission
  - Plans, Specifications and Contracts (1874-78).
  - Minute Books (1874-79).
  - Correspondence (1874-79).
  - Ledgers (1874-79).
  - Legal Papers (1876-79).
- Papers Relative to the Layout of Streets (1800-1856).
- Finished Papers of the City Council (1832-39).
- Enrolled Militia (1860-65; 1869; 1870-78; 1880).
- Licenses (1860-97, including: wagon, Pawnbrokers, junk, liquor, hack and omnibus, gunpower, tavern, eating house, and victualling house).
- Records of committees of the City Council, Board of Aldermen, and Common Council (1860-1960).

All of these records series have been properly arranged, stored, described and are ready for use, many have already proven to be valuable

resources to researchers.

In addition to the record series just described, there are several records still being arranged. Among these are:

Miscellaneous Plat Maps (ca. 1820-1890).  
Records of the Dexter Donation and Dexter Asylum (1827-1870).  
City Papers (1832-1870).

The third basic function of the Division is public service - making information available to those who need it. One implimentation made since September has been careful accounting of the use the Division receives from both city agencies and the public. Since September first there has been 728 inquiries, including written, phone and personal visits. This figure also includes 115 inquiries from city agencies and officials. Although there are no figures available upon which to base a comparison to previous years, both Mr.Chrostowski and myself would agree that there has been a considerable increase in use in the past year. Most notably this has come from professional historians who are making frequent use of city records in their study of urban history. The unique size, location and nature of Providence, as well as the completeness of its records, makes the city a prime candidate for such a study

. We are hopeful that this trend will continue as the Division continues to make its resources known to the historical community.

#### RECORDS MANAGEMENT

In addition to the operation of the archives, the Division has charge of the records management program for the city. The main objective of this program is to provide a cost effective means of handling records to eliminate needless records, provide storage and retrieval of infrequently consulted non-current records, and to establish

retention schedules for the systematic disposal of records once their usefulness has expired. Records must be maintained for their legal, administrative, and fiscal values even after they are no longer in current use. Maintaining these records can be an overwhelming burden on city officials as records consume valuable office space and require considerable staff time in the retrieval of documents. To aid in the efficient management of the city's records, a record center was established to house non-current records. The record center serves as a purgatory for records, a place where they can be efficiently stored and serviced until they receive their final judgement. Once the retention period for the records has expired they are appraised by the archivist. Those of no value are destroyed and those with historical value are accessioned into the holdings of the archives. Records are transferred to the records center in appropriate containers, are labeled and properly stored. They are retrieved efficiently and quickly when needed by the Division staff and are delivered to the requesting office.

Transfers to the record center in the past year include:

- Federal Office - 15 cubic feet
- Payroll - 45 cubic feet
- Controller - 15 cubic feet
- Retirement - 10 cubic feet
- Personnel - 30 cubic feet
- Mayor's Office - 35 cubic feet

In addition to the transfers that have occurred, 157 cubic feet of obsolete records were disposed of. Records inventories have been conducted in the Personnel office and the mayor's office with recommendations being made as to the appropriate handling of both current and non-current records.

## OUTREACH

An important task of any new operation is to spread an awareness of its existence and services so that those who have a need to consult its resources may do so. To promote this awareness, the Division has engaged in a number of outreach programs, in cooperation with several area institutions.

In the past year the Division has lent support to two major exhibits. The first entitled "Our Fading Memories" was held at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library from September 1981 to March 1982. The exhibit focused on the need for physical preservation of documents. Items lent by the Division graphically demonstrated the need for proper handling and conservation of paper records.

The second exhibit is one that has received national attention. Co-sponsored by the Rhode Island School of Design, the Rhode Island Historical Society and Brown University, "Buildings on Paper" is one of the finest exhibits ever produced in this area, featuring examples of Rhode Island architectural drawings dating from 1825 to 1945. A recently restored drawing of City Hall by its architect, Samuel Thayer, was loaned by the Division. This drawing which was one of the most spectacular on display was Thayer's original perspective for the building. It looks quite different from City Hall as we know it today. Thayer had originally intended to construct a large tower on top of the building, but lack of funding caused a later alteration to his plan, resulting in the dome that we have today. In addition to the Thayer drawing, the Division has loaned a Union Station proposal, seven drawings of pavilions for Roger Williams Park, and four drawings of the original gas light fixtures in City Hall, including the chandelier which once hung in the City Council Chamber. After completing a six week exhibition in Providence,

the exhibit has moved on to New York City where it is currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Later in the summer it will travel to Washington, D.C. where it will be displayed at the Octagon House, headquarters of the American Institute of Architecture Foundation.

Drawing from the expertise of the users of the archives, the Division sponsored a lecture by Dr. Jay Coughtry, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, and author of The Nortorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807. In his talk, which focused on Blacks in nineteenth century Providence, Dr. Coughtry drew heavily from the research he has performed using the city's resourses. The lecture was attended by over forty people, proving to be the most successful ever sponsored by the Division.

#### CONSERVATION

Part of the Division's role in preserving the city's records includes the conservation of materials in its possession. During processing, all records are cleaned and flattened, staples and clips are removed, and documents are stored in acid free folders and boxes. Although a great deal can be done in-house to improve the condition of records, some require attention that is beyond the capabilities of the staff. To insure that these items are safeguarded, the Division has implemented an ongoing program for professional conservation of materials. A portion of the annual budget for the Division is allotted specifically for this purpose. This past year the Thayer drawing of City Hall, along with five water color drawings of gas light fixtures from City Hall were brought to the Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover, Massachusetts, where they were professionally treated. Though the cost of the work is expensive, the importance of such an ongoing project cannot be understated.

## STAFF

When the fiscal year began on July 1, 1981, the Division was forced to operate with only one staff person. Three positions, formerly funded through the CETA Public Service Employment program were discontinued. Despite the loss of staff, the Division maintained its services under the direction of City Archivist, Joseph A. Chrostowski. In August, Mr. Chrostowski resigned his position to take a job as a records analyst in private industry. I was hired to replace him in September, having served as the Assistant Archivist from November 1979 to the demise of the CETA program in the spring of 1981.

The Division has been fortunate in recruiting volunteer help from the Retired Senior Volunteer Program. Mrs. Lillian Wilcox, Mrs. Harriet Capron, and Mrs. Bertha Tierney, all faithfully dedicate one day per week to the task of transcribing documents, flattening papers, and at times serving as a receptionist for visitors and patrons. In addition to these three women, the Division has had the service of three high school students through the CETA-SYEP program for the past six months. Elsa Maria, Doreen Robb, and John Figuerito have all proven to be capable workers and have been a great assistance to the operation of the Division.

The staff have always made a concerted effort to become involved in professional organizations. This not only provides a more favorable climate in which we can work and cooperate with our professional colleagues, but it also tends to add recognition and credibility to the Division within the profession. Both Mr. Chrostowski and myself have been active members of the Society of American Archivist, New England Archivists, The Association of Rhode Island Archivists, The Rhode Island Library Association and the Association of Records Managers and Administrators. In August when Mr. Chrostowski resigned his post as

Secretary of the Ocean State Chapter of ARMA, I was elected to replace him. I have recently been reelected to serve as the Secretary-Treasurer of the organization for 1982-83.

In January 1982, a paper that I had written on the development of municipal archives, focusing on Providence, was accepted for publication in Current Studies In Librarianship, the professional journal of the University of Rhode Island Library School. When printed, this article should help to publicize the activities of the Division within the profession.

Training and development has always been a priority for the staff, and will continue to be in the future. In the past few years both Mr. Chrostowski and myself have received certification in archives administration. In addition, whenever possible we have attended seminars, workshops and meetings. In the past year I completed a five week genealogy course and have attended several workshops on conservation, archival security and disaster planning. In addition, I have continued my course work leading to a masters in Library Science.

#### PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

The Division has both long and short term plans to improve the management of records in the city. In the upcoming year the Division's primary goal will continue to be one of increasing access to information needed by city officials and the public. As an aid to providing that access, the Division plans to produce a descriptive inventory of the records of the City Clerk's office. The City Clerk, traditionally the record keeper of the city, has custody of some of the most valuable city documents. This descriptive inventory will provide intellectual access to these records. One of the priorities in processing will be the records series of early city papers, consisting of over twenty-

five cubic feet of documents which were tied in bundles and stored away for many years. The value of these records is just now being realized. When they are completely arranged and described, solid documentation of the activities of the first fifty years of city government will be available for research. In addition to these plans, the Division will continue to work with individual departments to aid in the control of inactive records, working to set retention schedules and standards for proper records management and control.

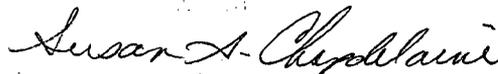
The growth in use of the archives and record center in the past few years has been tremendous. With this increased volume however, it has become apparent that the archives will soon outgrow its present space. One of the long term goals therefore is the establishment of a central records center and archives outside of City Hall. This would enable us to serve all of the overburdened agencies of city government. At the present time our storage capacity and inaccessibility limits us to the service of a select few departments within City Hall. By centralizing services, greater efficiency in records management will occur at a considerable savings to the city.

A second goal of the Division is to establish a centralized in-house microfilm center for the city. Although the initial outlay of funds for equipment may make one question the feasibility of establishing such a service, over the long run considerable expense would be saved. Such a system would not only guarantee the preservation of information, but would free the city from its reliance on outside service bureaus.

The Division of Archives and Records has come a long way since its inception in 1978, yet we have only begun to scratch the surface. Voluminous records which document the functions of city government are

still improperly stored, unorganized and totally inaccessible to the public. City offices continue to be overburdened by the occupation of valuable storage space by non-current and often obsolete records at a considerable expense to the city. Through the establishment of the Division of Archives and Records, the city now possesses the professional skill and knowledge to deal with the records, but administrative support, cooperation and adequate funding are necessary if the city's records program is to meet its full potential.

Having just past the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of our incorporation, we now look forward to the celebration of the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the city's founding in 1986 with optimism that the city's archives and records program will continue to make steady progress in the preservation and control of records and information for the city.



Susan A. Chapdelaine  
City Archivist

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