

# SCHEDULING THE GOVERNORS' PAPERS

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**ABSTRACT:** The papers of governors have estrayed from official custody as the result of a lack of scheduled disposition. More often than not, the accession of gubernatorial papers is based upon tradition instead of sound records management practices. Efforts to regularize the disposition of executive office records are increasing, but problems still remain.

This case study examines the statutory authority and particular circumstances which resulted in a schedule for the records of Oklahoma's chief executive. Analysis of gubernatorial functions and records reveals that scheduling governors' papers is more a task of arrangement than of appraisal. Through comparison of records of several administrations, a listing of series descriptions was created.

Efforts to regularize the management of executive office records throughout their lifecycle have increased in recent years. George Bain's article, "State Archival Law: A Content Analysis" in the *American Archivist*, devises a means for evaluating, and points out inadequacies in, the statutory authority for state archival and records management programs.<sup>1</sup> The findings and recommendations of the National Public Documents Commission, the Presidential Records Act of 1978, and, most recently, the National Governors' Association publication, *The Departing Governor: Transition Out of Office*,<sup>2</sup> point to the need to systematize the disposition of papers of chief executives.

A recent survey conducted by the New York State Archives indicates that for many state archives the accession of governors' papers is based largely upon tradition.<sup>3</sup> Oklahoma's experience, which is the subject of this case study, resembles that of state archives across the country. Throughout its history, the Office of the Governor of Oklahoma had deposited records haphazardly in the State Archives (a division of the Oklahoma Department of Libraries), other state repositories such as university libraries, and even manuscript collections. In 1986, the Oklahoma State Archives saw a unique opportunity to initiate the practice of scheduled disposition of gubernatorial records. Such a scheduled disposition would have to conform with state records legislation.

In Oklahoma, an Archives and Records Commission has the "sole, entire and exclusive authority of the disposition for all public records and archives of state officers, departments, boards, commissions, agencies and institutions."<sup>4</sup> When records are no longer needed for the transaction of business, the state offices shall apply to the commission for authorization to destroy or transfer

such records and archives to the Oklahoma Department of Libraries.<sup>5</sup> Archives and Records Commission rules provide for records schedules created by the Oklahoma Department of Libraries with commission approval to serve as a state administrative unit's continuing legal authority to dispose of its records. The law was in place. It was time for the State Archives to act.

For the last four administrations, from the term of Governor Dewey Bartlett (1967-1971) until that of Governor George Nigh (1979-1986), the State Archives had accessioned the public documents of the Office of the Governor without interruption. This made good records sense in establishing an unbroken line of custody, in accruing records management cost benefits, and in meeting the archival concerns of preservation and access. Although these accessions were one-time authorizations for transfer, they established a pattern of habituation and convenience for the agency. The Office of the Governor had come to see the State Archives as a natural extension of its record keeping function.

Another circumstance leading to the creation of a records management schedule was the reelection in 1982 of Nigh, thus making him Oklahoma's first two-term governor. The records liaison, a top level administrative assistant to the governor, served in that capacity for the entire eight years. She had established a close, informal working relationship with her counterpart in the State Archives, based on her trust in the reliability and competence of the State Archives staff. In other words, as long as the Archives could produce the records upon request of the agency, and act with discretion, the Office of the Governor would entrust its records to the State Archives without question. The stage was set to regularize the records disposition function.

As the chief executive officer of the state, the Governor of Oklahoma directs the preparation of the state budget, serves as an *ex officio* member on several boards and commissions, approves or vetoes bills passed by the Legislature, grants pardons and paroles, and is charged with seeing that all laws are faithfully executed. Because of its extensive role in all three branches of government, the Office of the Governor covers all bases in the area of record keeping. If the Archives does not receive the records of another state agency, the gubernatorial papers may provide adequate coverage of that agency's activities.

Undoubtedly, the administrative records of the Office of the Governor have permanent evidential and informational value. Evidential value stems from evidence the records provide about the organization and functioning of the office. Informational value depends upon the content of the records regarding persons, agencies, problems, conditions, events, and other subjects with which the governor dealt.

Each administrative assistant to the governor acts as liaison to several state agencies, usually clustered by subject. For example, an administrative assistant might specialize in an area such as natural resources and thus act as liaison to the Department of Mines and the Conservation Commission. However, the assistant might also cover an agency totally outside of his or her area of concentration such as the one-of-a-kind Will Rogers Memorial Commission. Assignments are made based upon an individual aide's qualifications and preferences.

Specific functions and duties assigned to each administrative assistant change with turnover of personnel. Complicating the records situation is the use of central files by some administrations and not others. Central files commonly

include correspondence files and subject files, a hodgepodge of duplicate and original records of the governor and the administrative assistants. To add to the confusion, some governors set up special offices to deal with a topical concern, e.g., reorganization of the Executive Branch. And, to make matters worse, every four or eight years with an election, the departing governor and his staff pack up the office files lock, stock, and barrel and a new administration starts from scratch. Unlike other offices of state government, there is little continuity between succeeding administrations' personnel and their records.

Scheduling governors' papers is more a task of arrangement than of appraisal. The problem is not so much a question of disposition, but rather of how to write series descriptions which make sense for a complicated, changing, records-generating environment. In consultation with the governor's records liaison, we set about writing a simple schedule with series descriptions flexible enough to represent the public papers of more than one administration while conveying important variations for the extant records in the office of a particular governor.

We reviewed the substantial record accessions in the State Archives from the three previous governors along with the first term of Governor Nigh. When we compared organizational structure and function over different administrations, we found that distinct patterns emerged. The administrative records of the Office of the Governor fall into the categories of Governor, Administrative Assistant, Central File or Special Office. These subgroups are subdivided into the following series:

*Agency, Board, Commission, Mini-Cabinet and Governor's Committee Files.* Usually arranged by governmental entity, these files may include meeting minutes and agendas, correspondence, and publications.

*Appointment Files.* Usually arranged chronologically and by name of appointee and agency, these files may include job resumes, and correspondence.

*Budget Files.* These files include correspondence, memoranda, statistical reports, and other documents dealing with House and Senate actions on budgets submitted by the Governor to the Legislature.

*Correspondence.* These files consist of incoming letters and copies of outgoing responses dealing with all facets of governmental operation.

*Executive Order and Proclamation Files.* These files provide background information on the official acts of the Governor and include copies of executive orders and correspondence.

*Legal Files.* Usually arranged by topic or style of case, these files include letters, memoranda, copies of court decisions and orders, and petitions pertaining to litigation involving the state. Topics include extraditions, pardons and paroles, public trusts, and stays of execution.

*Legislative Files.* Normally arranged by bill numbers, these files chart the progress of proposed bills and resolutions through the Legislature. Documents include copies and reference materials such as newspaper clippings and copies of executive orders.

*Minutes—Official.* These official minutes of Board or Commission meetings are essential records.

*Monthly Reports.* The record copy of monthly reports submitted by divisions, departments, or sections documenting activities fundamental to administration.

*Press Files.* These files include press releases, newspaper clippings, speeches, and photographs.

*Project Files.* Usually arranged by project type, these files contain correspondence, newspaper clippings, financial reports, and organization and work flow charts.

*Scheduling Files.* These files consist of correspondence, pamphlets, and other materials related to acceptance or rejection of invitations for visits and speaking engagements extended to the governor.

*Study Files.* Usually arranged by the names of particular studies, these files consist of correspondence, reference materials, final reports, and supporting workpapers and compilations of data.

*Subject Files.* These staff working-files contain correspondence, copies of the minutes of various agencies, boards, and commissions, newspaper clippings, brochures, and other reference materials.

We settled upon the following disposition for all of these series. They should be retained in office until no longer required for administrative purposes, then transferred to the State Archives, with authority to weed duplicate and ancillary materials for permanent preservation.

Financial records such as monthly details of expenditures, and personnel records such as employee leave requests are part of the general schedules for all state agencies. Since the office of record is the Office of State Finance, State Treasurer, or Office of Personnel Management, the Governor's Office copy of these records was authorized for destruction. The governors' schedule includes the series title and number of financial and personnel records as listed in the general schedules.

Next, we relayed our findings to the records liaison, who suggested only minor changes of typography. Subsequently, the schedule was signed by the governor as the agency head and approved unanimously by the Archives and Records Commission.

Although the schedule for the Office of the Governor could be circumvented or rescinded at some future date through statutory revision, its creation is testimony to an important, evolutionary process in the archival accession and preservation of the public papers of Oklahoma's chief executive. The deliberate simplicity in its description should provide enough flexibility to make the schedule relevant to new administrations with only minor amendments.

While circumstance played a part in making possible the scheduling process, it was by no means the *raison d'être*. Rather, writing a schedule of disposition for the Office of the Governor made good sense from the points of view of the agency, the archives, and the user.

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR:* Bradford Koplowitz is assistant curator of the Western History Collections at the University of Oklahoma. Until October, 1986, he headed the State Archives Division of the Oklahoma Department of Libraries. Mr. Koplowitz holds a masters degree in history from the University of Missouri-Columbia, and a masters degree in library science from the University of Oklahoma.

## NOTES

1. George W. Bain, "State Archival Law: A Content Analysis," *American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1983): 158-174.
2. National Governor's Association, Office of State Services, *The Departing Governor: Transition Out of Office*, State Services Management Note Number 3 (Washington, D.C.: National Governors' Association, 1986).
3. New York State Archives, "Report on the Disposition of Gubernatorial Records in Selected States," unpublished staff report (Albany, N.Y., February 1987).
4. 74 Okla. Stat. s. 564 (Supp. 1986).
5. 74 Okla. Stat. s. 565 (1981).



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