

A LESSON IN ARCHIVAL REALITY: A COMMENTARY ON DONALD RATCLIFFE'S "THE MYSTERY OF OHIO'S MISSING PRESIDENTIAL RETURNS, 1804-1848"

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Public record archivists in Ohio should be grateful for Donald Ratcliffe's painstaking search for the missing presidential election returns for the first forty years of statehood. He has done a masterful job in delineating and unraveling the history of these records. His diligence obviously benefitted his research, Ohio archivists, and the state's electoral history as offered statistically by the secretary of state.

As the state archivist in Ohio at the time of Mr. Ratcliffe's quest for the early presidential returns, I well remember his obsession with locating the records and his dismay that they could not be found. No one in the archives-library division of the Ohio Historical Society could offer a definitive explanation of what had happened to the records.

Many factors have negatively influenced the survival of Ohio's documentary heritage: the relocation of the state capital from Chillicothe to Columbus; fires at the State House and in county courthouses; tornadoes; windstorms; flooded basements; leaky roofs; theft; riots; apathy; detrimental environmental storage conditions; the placement of records in local libraries and historical societies lacking resources to publicize and provide access to records; apathetic and careless records custodians; the lack of awareness about the value and uses of records; and the absence of any archival and/or records management program until well into the twentieth century. Such factors and conditions contributed mightily to the loss of Ohio's state and local records. That is archival reality. What is surprising, given over a century of neglect of public records in Ohio, is that so many records have survived. Under the circumstances that influenced the establishing of a state archives in Ohio, Mr. Ratcliffe and many, many other researchers should be thankful that records are available.

A little archival history may be relevant here. In 1904 the state took its first steps to improve record keeping and preservation, but this legislation hardly established an archival or records management program. The first call for a cen-

tralized state archives came in 1906—from historians. This initiative by historians to preserve the state's records has some relevance to Mr. Ratcliffe's mystery. In collaboration with the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association, Richard T. Stevenson, a history professor at Ohio Wesleyan University, conducted the first survey of the state's records in 1904. Stevenson noted "that the State of Ohio has not yet reached the advanced position of some other States in the establishment of a central agency for the care and use of its official archives."¹ The report stands as testimony to poor record keeping practices in the capitol building, noting it "is difficult for the student, not to say the regular official, to discover what he may want among the stored records of the State."² Many of the records Stevenson surveyed date after 1850. Even more records are undated. The Constitution of 1802 and material related to the War of 1812 are the only pre-1850 records Stevenson identified. He speaks of "several packages of letters, vouchers, county returns etc." as being in the secretary of state's office.³ Could these be some of the county returns—or a portion thereof—Ratcliffe seeks? Were these returns transferred to the Ohio Historical Society in 1927 or later when the secretary of state placed records at the archives? But there they are—a part of Stevenson's survey and another installment in Ratcliffe's mystery.

Continuing this abbreviated review of archival history, major enabling legislation affecting the preservation of public records came in 1927, 1945, 1953, and 1959. The legislation passed in 1927 (the Roman's law) authorized the Ohio Historical Society to negotiate for the transfer of state records to its custody. Public officials were given the option of placing records at the society and between 1927 and 1945, records from the offices of the governor, secretary of state, treasurer, and adjutant general came to the Ohio Historical Society. In 1945 the state created a records commission composed of public officials. Although excluded from representation on this body, the society had sixty days to claim any records believed to have archival significance. Between 1941 and 1945 several tons of records came to the society. Legislation enacted in 1953 established procedures for retaining and destroying county records, but neither funding nor serious effort was forthcoming to select and preserve records from local government. For the first half of the twentieth century, the state, while involving the society in preserving records, provided no funds for hiring staff to inventory and to process the tons of state records transferred to the society. In 1957-8, the state finally provided a specific building and an appropriation to the society for archival purposes. At this time, the state also formalized a records management program under its finance director. The society responded by creating a division of public records and hiring a superintendent of public records who set about planning an archival program. Those plans included inventorying the tons of accumulated records, selecting records to retain, and processing records to make them more available to users, among many other duties such as educating and advising state and local officials about records. No serious state supported effort to deal with neglected records in the counties, township, and cities began until 1975.⁴

The state's archival history is relevant to Mr. Ratcliffe's mystery and lament because as the "humble historian," he wishes that archivists "were more aware of the material they do not possess." Given the state's history of apathy in preserving records and the lack of funding and space to select, house, and arrange

and describe records to make them more accessible, it is not terribly surprising that personnel, presumably at the state archives, did not unravel the mystery of Mr. Ratcliffe's records. That is archival reality. Mr. Ratcliffe takes archivists to task for not knowing what it took him a long time to find out about the non-creation of presidential election results and informing him at the outset of his quest for those records. His unhappiness or distress over this situation is quite understandable. Perhaps with more funding to hire and train personnel, Mr. Ratcliffe's wish could have been fulfilled. The observation, made a century and a half ago, of Richard Bartlett, secretary of the State of New Hampshire, that providing for "the safe and perfect keeping of the Public Archives, is so obviously one of the first and most imperative duties of a legislature, that no argument could make it plainer to a reflecting mind," has relevance in the context of Mr. Ratcliffe's story.

Mr. Ratcliffe also needs to understand another aspect or two of archival reality. That is, archivists facing backlogs of unprocessed material, working under either a legal or institutional mandate, to collect more material, trying to provide reference service, and seeking to physically preserve records have little time to wonder about historical records that may or may not have been created. Likewise, few archivists take steps to reprocess records once they have been arranged and described and/or cataloged. Perhaps they should. Archivists recognize that certain records and collections need reprocessing and recataloging, but few have either the resources, motivation, or inclination to do so. Again, archival reality may help explain the circumstances Mr. Ratcliffe encountered in his search for the presidential election returns.

To be sure archivists should be aware of records provenance and the relevant laws and regulations that influenced the creation and custodianship of the records. They should convey that information to researchers. That, too, is archival reality. Such awareness may not have been present when the archivist received and processed the early election records. That the archivist failed to research and come to grips with the different local election returns and the circumstances of their creation (or lack thereof) may also be a function of time and training. Mr. Ratcliffe needs to understand the archival reality that local circumstances—lack of trained staff and other resources and backlogs of records to process among them—may have adversely affected the level and thoroughness of the processing and cataloging of the records that would have benefitted his search. Mr. Ratcliffe also tells us that an awareness of what "the records do and cannot contain" can influence the collecting and cataloging of records. He is quite right. Archivists should learn and convey as much information as possible about the records they hold to the researcher. That is basic. Mr. Ratcliffe's story amply illustrates the point.

The Schellenberg tenets that advise archivists to have descriptive programs that provide special and specific information about records are generally accepted and followed nowadays.⁵ Further, the record attributes that Schellenberg advocates including in a description of records have been embraced in most archival programs. Archivists should include information about the physical attributes (type, composition, volume, and form) of records as well as their substantive attributes (provenance, functional origins, time and place of production, and subject matter) in describing records.⁶ But while archivists may know these things, they are not always able to provide, because of lack of resources and

other commitments, the fullest description of all of their records or to ferret out why records may or may not have been created.

Concomitantly, Mr. Ratcliffe admonishes archivists to be more aware of "the significance of particular rare and scattered types of records," such as the presidential election returns he sought, and to be attentive to more detailed cataloging (arranging and describing) of same. Again, his point is instructive for archivists. As a general rule, archivists should give special and early attention to the processing and describing/cataloging of especially significant records. Mr. Ratcliffe, while operating in his own self-interest, feels aggrieved that the records he sought were not given the special attention they, and his work, deserved. His point should be well taken.

Mr. Ratcliffe is saying that archivists should have known at the time he began his research what it took several weeks, months, or years for him to learn about the township and county election returns he sought. He is also saying that because of the seminal importance of these records, archivists should have been more attentive to full and complete description of the extant records as well as the records that were not created. I believe his observations are quite relevant and timely. If the full story were known, a dozen or more reasons as to why the archivists did not know and tell researchers about the history of the presidential election returns could be offered. The fact remains they should have known. That is also archival reality.

And finally, the author opines that "the archivist ought not to be an historian, no more than the historian should be an archivist." Mr. Ratcliffe may have missed his own point with this statement. If it is true that the archivist should be more aware of the material they do not possess, it seems to me that the archivist, as historian, is more likely to fulfill Mr. Ratcliffe's wish. As a member of the old school, I believe archivists should be historians—not exclusively historians—but with a history background—a familiarity with the methodology and stuff of history as well as imbued with historical curiosity and interest. Archivists either so trained or educated may be more likely to possess, in my view, more awareness "of non-existent source materials" and especially significant historical records of research value. In the end, if historians and archivists collaborated more and talked more, an appreciation of each other's perspectives and circumstances could emerge and both parties would benefit. Archivists should be receptive to the views, ideas, and suggestions of all users, especially historians, of the historical records and papers. Equally important is that historians recognize the circumstances—historical and contemporary—that influence archival decisions and choices as well as the archivist's ability to collect, describe, and make available historical records. Mr. Ratcliffe's saga is instructive for the archivist, if only to identify yet another expectation historians have of archivists.

Mr. Ratcliffe's story is instructive in many ways. It reinforces the archivist's need to thoroughly, conscientiously, and diligently serve our patrons to the fullest. It tells us that archivists and historians should be communicating and trying to understand and appreciate each other better. The mystery that the author unravels is a lesson in archival reality. Such lessons are always instructive—to archivists as well as historians.

NOTES

1. *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1906*, II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908): 165.
2. *Annual Report...1906*, 165.
3. *Annual Report...1906*, 166.
4. For more information on the history of the state archives in Ohio see my article, "The Ohio Historical Society and the Establishment of the State Archives: A Tale of Angst and Apathy," *American Archivist*, 55:4 (Fall 1992), 562-77.
5. T.R. Schellenberg. *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965): 113.
6. Schellenberg, 119-143.



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