

WINDY CITY BLUES:
AN ARCHIVAL PROFILE
OF CHICAGO
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“Chicago is the most studied city in the world,” notes urban historian Richard Wade in his magnificent photo-historical narrative *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis*. The selective bibliography compiled by Wade and his colleague Harold Mayer on Chicago topics lists over 1,000 master’s theses and doctoral dissertations at the University of Chicago. A glance at this volume is convincing evidence that there is no paucity of literature relating to the city and its development into one of the world’s largest and most complex socio-economic formations.

The existence of this significant accumulation of literature pertaining to Chicago is all the more striking when one considers that Chicago was a veritable archival wasteland well into the 1960s.

Before pursuing this seemingly singular contradiction, we should also note that Chicago lacks anything approaching a definitive or comprehensive history. Indeed, the death of Bessie Louise Pierce, Chicago’s biographer, before the completion of the fourth volume of *A History of Chicago*, underscores the point. We are fortunate, however, to have access to a wealth of first-rate monographic literature, much of it recently produced by young historians such as Perry Duis and Glen Holt.¹ We can expect that some future scholar eventually will put together that elusive combination of audacity and tenacity required to complete what Bessie Pierce left undone.

For that ambitious future historian, determination and intellectual competence will not alone suffice, for it is here and now, in the 1970s, that we as archivists must lend a hand by insuring that our future historian will have ample grist for his or her mill. It is to this formidable challenge that this article is directed: first, by briefly outlining recent archival developments in Chicago; second, by providing an overview of the current holdings and collecting programs of the major archival repositories in the city; and finally, by posing some specific recommendations to improve the archival situation in Chicago.

In the process of preparing this article, yet another of those dreaded and ubiquitous questionnaires appeared on the desks of thirty-five colleagues in the Chicago area. To the twenty-nine who responded both condolences and appreciation are offered. This article draws freely upon the invaluable information, advice and counsel that these colleagues kindly provided.

CHICAGO'S PUBLIC RECORDS

It comes as a surprise to many archivists to learn that America's second largest city *does not have a municipal archives*. Nor has it ever has any program to insure the systematic preservation of its official records. Although the city has been in existence for over 140 years, prior to 1975 no provision has ever been made for the orderly retention of those official records that had sufficient administrative, legal, fiscal or historical value to warrant their permanent preservation. Over the years most of Chicago's official records were simply destroyed. Those records that have survived are scattered throughout a myriad of offices and storage spaces.

The deplorable state of Chicago's public records, however, is not an egregious anomaly. The situation in Chicago, unfortunately, conforms to the national norm. At the 1971 Society of American Archivists convention in San Francisco, Dennis East, then of Wayne State University, reported the results of his survey of the status of municipal records in the 25 largest cities in the country. Of the 25 city administrations surveyed, five did not respond to East's questionnaire. Chicago was one of the five. Of the twenty city administrators that did return the questionnaire, only eleven indicated that they had an operational municipal archives. Four cities had no archives of any kind. Of the eleven municipal archives that did exist, only five

were administered by a professional archivist. An earlier survey, conducted in 1964 by an *ad hoc* SAA committee, queried the administrators of 130 of the country's largest cities about the state of their records. Of the eighty-six who responded, only twenty indicated that their city had a municipal archives, and only ten of the twenty were under the supervision of a professional archivist.²

These appalling statistics reflect a situation which the historian Sam Bass Warner rightly characterized as "the shame of the cities," a situation which also occasioned sharp comment from former SAA President F. Gerald Ham in his presidential address given in Toronto in 1974.³ Ham, scoring the deplorable state of the nation's municipal records, cited the ambitious and imaginative program that had been begun by the then-new Houston Metropolitan Archives Center, and called for similarly imaginative approaches in other cities. He persuasively argued for the need to develop a whole new outlook and methodology in order to rectify the situation that Warner rued.⁴

Ham, of course, was right. Not only must we attempt to deal imaginatively with the problems presented by the current state of municipal records, but we must emulate, where applicable, the exemplary accomplishments of our colleagues such as John Daly, Illinois State Archivist, who successfully revitalized a moribund municipal archival operation in Philadelphia. We must also know more about recent developments in Houston, New York, Los Angeles, St. Louis and in the Canadian metropolitan areas. We, as a profession, must assign an urgent priority to salvaging the records of our cities.

Whenever the question of why Chicago has never had a municipal archives arises, the all-too-facile answer has been: the "machine," of course. Nobody in the machine wants do-gooders, reformers, political opponents or reporters mucking around in the files looking for evidence that could embarrass city officials. Upon closer scrutiny, however, this thesis, while convenient, appears to be only partially valid. It is true that public access to official records has recently afforded citizens' groups, investigative reporters, and zealous prosecutors an unprecedented opportunity to expose malfeasance in office and resulted in a torrent of indictments. But fear of such exposure appears to have been only one factor behind the failure of various city administrations to establish a city archives. Anyone familiar with politics in Chicago is well aware that most important political transactions occur in personal contacts or over the telephone. Rarely have

decisions of this sort been committed to paper. Surely, this time-honored tradition will be further reinforced by the recent flurry of jail sentences for public officials. Another plausible and less romantic explanation for the absence of a municipal archives is, very simply, a consistent lack of historical consciousness and concomitant lack of appreciation for the historical value of official records that has pervaded virtually every administration in the city's history. Moreover, it seems that the *administrative* value of having a city archives has never been appreciated by city officials.

Endless speculation about additional reasons is possible, but the fact remains that the city's mayors never established a municipal archives despite numerous attempts over many years to persuade them to do so. Three recent attempts deserve mention. In the late 1960s, a committee consisting of Richard Wade, then of the University of Chicago, Melvin Holli of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, Robert Wiebe of Northwestern University and a number of other Chicago area academics was appointed by Mayor Richard J. Daley to advise him on the question of creating an archives. Mayor Daley apparently lost interest in the matter shortly thereafter. In October, 1972, Clement Silvestro, then director of the Chicago Historical Society, again raised the question with the Mayor. Silvestro provided Daley with a carefully reasoned proposal prepared by Robert Brubaker, Chief Librarian at the Chicago Historical Society, arguing the case for a municipal archives. Daley's response appeared to be encouraging: "Please be assured," Daley wrote Silvestro, "that I welcome the suggestion of the Chicago Historical Society and the statement you enclosed with your letter will be given serious consideration." There the matter languished until 1975 when, largely through the patient and persistent efforts of Joyce Malden, director of the Chicago Municipal Reference Library, the city finally advertised for an archivist. Eventually, however, a records manager was hired instead and a modest records inventorying and scheduling program began.⁵

Whether a functioning municipal archives will evolve from this welcome but inadequate beginning is problematic. What is certain, though, is that it may well become necessary to mobilize the support of the entire archival community, at the appropriate time, in a sustained effort to persuade Chicago officials of the need to establish a municipal archives—much as archivists mobilized in support of our beleaguered colleagues in Maine when the State Archives faced elimination.

PRESERVING CHICAGO'S PRIVATE PAPERS AND RECORDS

The characterization of Chicago as an archival wasteland remained valid until the mid-1960s. Prior to that time only one major repository, the Chicago Historical Society, possessed a mandate to collect archives and manuscripts relating to the city and its people. A lack of adequate staff, funds, and space, however, severely constricted the Chicago Historical Society's collecting program. Other repositories, to be sure, also existed, including the Newberry Library, the University of Chicago Library's Special Collections Department, the Northwestern University Library's Special Collections Department, and the Chicago Public Library and several of its branches. But most of these repositories were primarily concerned with specialized collections of national and even international scope. While they did attempt to acquire Chicago-related archives and manuscripts, this, with the exception of the public library branches, was not their primary mission. It was in this context that several archival institutions located outside Chicago attempted to fill the breach. Both by default and through a concern for the preservation of the historical records, institutions such as the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and Wayne State University sent field representatives into the Chicago area to acquire collections. This is to their credit, since they undoubtedly salvaged invaluable records that would otherwise have been consigned to the dust bin. Even earlier, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin had acquired, largely by default, the McCormick Collection, perhaps the finest extant archival collection pertaining to Chicago business and family life.⁶

Two events in the mid-1960s played a decisive role in transforming the wasteland into a modest archival oasis: the appointment of Clement Silvestro as director of the Chicago Historical Society, and the construction of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle where the efforts of Melvin Holli, Gilbert Osofsky and, later, Mary Lynn McCree led to the development of a manuscript repository.

Silvestro, drawing upon his previous experience as director of the American Association for State and Local History, began a campaign to revitalize the Chicago Historical Society's manuscript collecting program. Archie Motley, Curator of Manuscripts at the Society, reinforced with staff and financial support, gathered a number of large and significant collections into the Society's fold. Gradually the Society's Manuscript Division transformed itself from an antiquarian's delight

into an active and respected urban research center.

The new University of Illinois at Chicago Circle Manuscripts Collection grew from an initial core of the Jane Addams and Hull House papers. The Circle repository later began acquiring significant collections, largely in the area of social welfare and social action organizations. During this same period, collecting programs and procedures at the Newberry Library, Northwestern University, and the University of Chicago were modernized and upgraded.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the establishment of a number of specialized archives in the Chicago area, including those at the American Medical Association, the International Harvester Corporation, and, more recently, at the First National Bank, the Northwestern Memorial Hospitals, and the Chicago *Tribune*. Religious archives also flourished, most prominently the Archives of the Archdiocese of Chicago and the Chicago Jewish Archives.

At present the archival situation in Chicago is as favorable as it is in any major American metropolis. That fact, however, is meaningful only insofar as it illustrates the tremendous progress that has been made over the past decade and places the rather discouraging situations in other cities in proper perspective.

What is more important, for our purpose, is that none of the area institutions is doing an adequate job of meeting the challenge of locating, collecting, and preserving, even selectively, the mass of documentation that currently exists and is generated every day in the Chicago metropolitan area. Chicago's geographic size and demographic complexity are but two overwhelming factors which combine with the current economic situation's adverse impact on staff and funding to pose a problem of vexing enormity for Chicago archivists. As it stands today, no single institution in the area is capable of resolving the problem of how to effectively identify, select and preserve the documentation that future historians will require.

THE FUTURE OF CHICAGO'S ARCHIVAL COMMUNITY

What, then, must be done? It is absolutely clear, in the first place, that a *collective* effort must be initiated if we are to come anywhere close to discharging our obligation. Some very modest suggestions on how to begin addressing the problem follow.

First, discussions on how to best mount a campaign for a municipal archives to house Chicago's public records are essential.

Secondly, attempts should be made to convince our colleagues at the National Archives and Records Service that the Chicago Federal Archives and Records Center is both understaffed and underfunded. Warning should be given that if the current situation continues and the present backlog of unprocessed records is left untouched, the effective functioning of the Records Center will continue to be inhibited and its value for historians and other scholars diminished. The General Services Administration's decision to locate the Federal Records Center in a relatively remote section of Chicago, far removed from an academic environment, is a striking example of the sort of bureaucratic folly on the part of the General Services Administration-National Archives and Records Service that H. G. Jones has so cogently criticized.⁷ This criticism is especially relevant because the General Service Administration had, in fact, a very real opportunity to locate the new Records Center building adjacent to a major educational institution, a decision which would have been of obvious and incalculable benefit to both scholars and the records center staff.

Third, our profession must continue attempts to persuade Congress to approve a broad and inclusive National Historical Records Act. This act must provide ample funds for the development of a decentralized national historical records program on a scale that would at least match, and hopefully exceed, both the scope of the W.P.A. Historical Records Survey and the efforts that led to the development of the National Archives in the 1930s.

Fourth, immediate steps must be taken to eliminate needless and counter-productive competition among Chicago-area institutions and at the same time to foster a spirit of co-operation and collective action among these institutions. This is not to suggest that Chicago is presently an archival "free-fire zone," where competing institutions are constantly taking pot-shots at each other or undercutting one another's collecting programs. Nor should Chicago's archival turf be rigidly carved up with stringently delineated divisions of collecting emphasis or subject areas. Arbitrary constraints need not be imposed on any single institution's collecting scope; there are plenty of records "out there" for everybody. Archivists, however, desperately need to survey what records do exist and develop methods to systematically select and collect these records on a much larger scale than ever before. It is also necessary to discuss general geographical and topical collecting guidelines which, of course, must be acceptable to Chicago area

repositories. These modest steps could contribute significantly toward eliminating costly duplication of effort and the consequent strain on each of our institution's budgets.

The founding of the Midwest Archives Conference in 1972 and its rapid growth has helped engender a very real comraderie and spirit of co-operation among Chicago archivists. Today, the Chicago "archival community" is much closer-knit than ever before. A good deal of discussion of common problems has occurred on an informal level. What is needed presently is a forum or vehicle that can transcend the hospitality hour and allow Chicago-area archivists an opportunity to formally discuss (and hopefully resolve) many of the problems posed. One means of meeting this need might be to initiate a series of regularly scheduled roundtables where Chicago archivists could focus upon such topics as the need for a city-wide records survey, discuss methods of funding such a project, candidly deal with the problem of needless competition, eliminate duplication of effort and establish a division of collecting responsibilities. Other subjects of interest could include the possibilities of a co-operative conservation lab, micro-filming facility or supplies purchasing program. Perhaps these roundtables could be held under the auspices of the Midwest Archives Conference or the SAA or both.

Finally, it should be pointed out that there has existed, since 1966 in fact, a comprehensive Chicago records survey proposal which, if funded and implemented, could contribute immeasurably to improving the archival situation in Chicago. The "Proposal for a Survey of Manuscripts and Archives in the Chicago Area," drafted by Robert Brubaker under the aegis of the now-defunct Chicago Area Historical Records Committee, is, in essence, a master plan designed to identify and locate all those records in Chicago which warrant permanent preservation.⁸

This proposal is precisely what we need in Chicago. Further, it seems clear that it is the sort of proposal that the National Endowment for the Humanities has supported and will continue to support. Area archivists should arrange a meeting to work out both an acceptable mechanism for submitting the proposal to either the National Endowment for the Humanities or the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and an equally acceptable means of administering the project. Perhaps a consortium of interested Chicago-area institutions could be revived. Whatever procedure is selected must necessarily be acceptable to the two major repositories in

Chicago, the Chicago Historical Society and the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, and should optimally have the support of the other interested institutions, such as the Newberry Library, the University of Chicago and Northwestern University.

While the challenge facing us is indeed formidable, opportunities to meet that challenge are clearly present. We have a common obligation and responsibility to transcend the parochial interests of our respective institutions and act in concert to insure that the documentary record of our time will be preserved and made available to future generations.

EPILOGUE

Since this article was first written over two years ago a number of developments have occurred, both positive and negative, which have somewhat altered the archival situation in Chicago.

In January, 1976, archivists from the Chicago Historical Society, the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle and Northwestern University met to discuss the Brubaker proposal. Eventually the proposal, in a modified form, was jointly submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities by the Chicago Historical Society and the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. Unfortunately, the National Endowment for the Humanities ultimately opted not to support the proposal, partially on the grounds that the survey might lead to increased competition among local depositories without stimulating the sort of cooperation required for an undertaking of this magnitude. This opinion ignored the necessity of conducting a preliminary survey prior to the initiation of a large-scale cooperative collecting program. The survey still must be taken and the proposal should be modified to meet - where possible - NEH's objections and then resubmitted.

The city of Chicago has yet to establish a municipal archives and the prospects for such a development seem, at this point, even more remote than they were in 1975. Mayor Richard J. Daley's death in December, 1976, however, has created an entirely new situation which might lead to the construction of a repository to house his papers. It appears that at least one Chicago repository has been involved in discussions concerning this possibility.

The situation at the Chicago Federal Archives and Records Center has, unfortunately, improved only marginally.

The roundtables projected in 1975 never materialized and there has been no substantive progress in mitigating competition and duplica-

tion of effort among area repositories.

One potentially positive development, however, has been the formation in the spring of 1977 of the Chicago Urban History Group, a broadly based organization of individuals interested in various facets of Chicago history. It may well be that this organization, which includes archivists among its ranks, will, by default, fill the vacuum that has been created by the reluctance of Chicago-area archivists to come to grips with the urgent problems facing them.

On the whole not much has changed since 1975. Most of the suggestions offered then are still valid and if implemented could constitute a very positive step toward improving the archival situation in Chicago. It is especially urgent that the Brubaker proposal be revised and re-submitted to either the National Endowment for the Humanities or the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

Finally, unless we develop both a spirit of co-operation among Chicago archivists and a vehicle for the concrete application of that spirit, Chicago may well be in danger of reverting to its former status of an archival wasteland.

NOTES

1. Harold M. Mayer, Richard C. Wade, and Glen E. Holt, *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Perry Duis, "Saloon in a Changing Chicago," *Chicago History* 4 (Winter, 1975-76) 214-224; and Duis, "Bessie Louise Pierce: Symbol and Scholar," *Chicago History* 5 (Fall, 1976) 130-40.
2. The data cited in this paragraph was provided to the author by Dennis East of the Ohio Historical Society and is based on a survey he conducted in 1971.
3. "The Shame of the Cities," paper presented by Sam Bass Warner at the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists held in San Francisco in October 1971.
4. F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *The American Archivist*, 38 (January 1975):5-13.
5. Mayor Richard J. Daley to Clement Silvestro (November 13, 1972). Chicago Historical Society administrative files.

6. Margaret Hafsted, ed., *Guide to the McCormick Collection*. (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973).
7. H. G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation*, (New York: Atheneum, 1969): Chapter 11 "Why the Functions of the NARS Must Not Be Divided," pp. 237-252.
8. "A Proposal for a Survey of Manuscripts and Archives in the Chicago Area" (proposed by Robert Brubaker) for the Chicago Area Historical Records Committee. (1966).