Local Archives: Responsibilities and Challenges for Archivists

by Kent M. Haworth

In 1935, the historian George W. Brown deplored the “past neglect and wanton destruction of irreplaceable records” revealed in a survey of the Canadian archival scene conducted by the Canadian Historical Review. In the various provinces, Brown continued, “the records in government departments, in municipal buildings such as court houses, in churches, and other private institutions . . . daily run the hazard of destruction by fire.”

Little has changed in the past forty years. Michael Swift, in his message to the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association in 1974, reported that only three Canadian provinces had an adequate records management programme and that the municipal scene presented an even more deplorable situation: only four Canadian cities had a systematic programme of records preservation. Swift’s assessment of the Canadian archival scene was distressingly similar to Brown’s, in spite of the intervening forty years: “there are vast quantities of records at the provincial and municipal levels in the country which have not been cared for in the past and which are not being cared for in the present.” For Swift, as it had been for Brown, the greatest challenge facing Canada’s archival profession was the preservation of local records. A brief examination of relationships existing between the dominion, provincial, and municipal archives, and an analysis of the strategies of other countries that have attempted to encourage the growth of local archives should illuminate the dimensions of this challenge.

1 This article is a revision of a paper read at the first annual meeting of the ACA at Laval in June 1976. I wish to thank Edwin Welch for his suggestions in the course of my work in its initial stages, and Mike Swift for his helpful criticisms of the draft. The opinions expressed are, of course, my own.
The literature concerning the history of archives development in Canada is striking for the centralist tendencies which are revealed. The original mandate of the Public Archives of Canada to collect virtually everything of historical significance to the development of Canada, though laudatory in that it recognized the only voice of concern in the archival wilderness, does not appear to have encouraged the advancement of archival and records management programmes at the provincial and municipal levels. Similarly, the maturation of many of the provincial archives, accompanied by the development of a desire to counter the national archives’ “dominance” in their respective jurisdictions, has resulted in numerous cases of indiscriminate procurement of local records. In the process, Canadian archivists, unlike their counterparts in such countries as Great Britain and New Zealand, have remained unconcerned about the state of municipal archives.

In New Zealand, an Archives Committee was formed in 1951 after an association of municipalities urged that “the attention of Local Authorities be drawn to the importance of preventing the destruction of local public records.” This Committee recommended the formation of local repositories responsible for archives of local interest, a concept reflected in New Zealand’s Archives Act of 1957 which affirmed the need for local archives by permitting the minister to give appropriate repositories the right to hold material of local significance. New Zealand has since approved nine such repositories, all of which meet three principal requirements: suitable fireproof and secure facilities, continuity of access, and properly trained personnel.

In Great Britain, with the passing of the Local Government (Records

4 Admittedly, the Canadian federal system places obvious impediments in the way of amicable relations concerning interventions by the Dominion government in provincial jurisdictions. However, it is also clear now that the original mandate of the Public Archives of Canada was rather ambitious, as it also is for many of the provinces attempting to serve huge areas.

5 For the purposes of this paper, the term “municipal” is taken to mean a city, town, village, or township, the inhabitants of which are incorporated. Also included under this heading are regional boards and regional municipalities such as the Greater Vancouver Regional District. See, for example, the Revised Statutes of Ontario, 1960, c. 249, s. 1 (Interpretation). The use of the term “local” refers to either municipal or regional bodies, whichever might be appropriate to a particular location.


7 Ibid. “Clause 19 enables the Minister of Internal Affairs to approve certain institutions to which public archives, which the Chief Archivist considers ‘in excess of or suitable to the requirements of the National Archives’ . . . may be transferred.”

Act in 1962, the Society of Archivists defined the "minimum standards . . . under which a local government archives service is required to operate" when it prepared its Recommendations for Local Government Archives Services. In November 1972, the Society issued a second report pursuant to Local Authority and Records Management Services in Metropolitan Areas. The Local Government Act of 1972 initiated changes in the administrative structure of some local authorities while placing "an unequivocal duty on the new authorities to make proper arrangements for the custody of records in their care." The 1972 report emphasized that "public library systems cannot provide the nucleus of a new archives and records management service in the future metropolitan counties." Thus, in Great Britain and New Zealand, some effort has been made by government and professional associations to foster local archives and to work toward the coordination of their activities within an archival context.

This has yet to happen in Canada as is demonstrated by recent efforts to establish a city archives in Ottawa. The idea of having an archives for the City of Ottawa was accepted only in 1971. It was not until 1974 that Ottawa appointed its first City Archivist. Once the decision was made, the position of City Archivist had to be defined. The job description issued in 1973 by the city indicates that little assistance was provided by, or perhaps solicited from, the large archival community in Ottawa:

A B.A. (Honours) in History or Anthropology; or a lesser level of education combined with extensive experience in matters dealing with the City's development and history. Experience in library work and cataloguing are desirable attributes.

This description of the qualifications for the archivist of a large city discloses much of the true state of the archival presence in Canada and the lack of communication between archivists in large federal or provincial institutions and city officials in local government jurisdictions. The qualifications requested certainly cannot be held to be a judgement against the man who had to enumerate them.

In a city graced by the largest archives in the country, it might at first seem surprising that no thought would have been given to establishing a municipal archives in Ottawa. However, the very presence of the federal agency responsible not only for the records of the Canadian government

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9 Great Britain, Statutes, 1962, c. 56.
12 Ibid., p. 2.
13 Ibid., p. 3.
but also for manuscript collections of national significance apparently excused the city government from its archival responsibilities for some time. People in Ottawa wishing to place their personal papers in an archival institution seem to have considered the national archives to be the natural repository. Certainly the Public Archives of Canada could not be expected to abrogate its responsibilities by refusing to accept material of strictly local significance, for archivists are charged with the preservation of Canada's documentary heritage. At the same time, however, the attention of city officials should have been drawn to their own responsibilities for maintaining an appropriate local archive service. Indeed, this could become a major policy of the Public Archives of Canada: a programme designed to stimulate the growth of local archives similar to the programme of decentralization announced by the Canadian government in 1972 for its National Museums. The experience of other countries suggests that the national archives should perform this role and the Public Archives' own commitment to a national training course for archivists demonstrates a positive attitude to the promotion of an awareness of archival principles across Canada.

Similar reasons for the delay in establishing a city archives in the nation's capital can be discerned in almost any provincial capital city where there is, but a few blocks down the street, a large provincial archives apparently prepared to take responsibility for local government records. Why should the City of Victoria, for example, highly conscious of its history (which it exploits to great advantage for tourist dollars), consider implementing a records management programme to preserve the history of its own administration, let alone the history of its private citizens, when the provincial archives is located half a mile from city hall? University archives have also excused municipalities and large community organizations from taking responsibility for the proper management and disposition of their records. The City of Kingston knows that it has the professional services of an archivist at a cost of only one dollar annually, and a private institution, Queen's University, anxious to take custody of its records. Major archival institutions in Canada have often ignored and continue to

15 The National Museums of Canada policy as announced by the Canadian Government on 28 March 1972 stresses "decentralization and democratization" for Canadian museums to meet the objective of distributing the cultural resources of the country through special grants to regional or local museums, training assistance, cataloguing assistance and education and extension activities.

16 The City of Victoria is close to an important decision regarding the future of its archives. The Association of British Columbia Archives (ABCA) has submitted a brief to the committee of City Council currently considering the matter (see the appendix following this article). The brief points out responsibilities of the City for its records, and presents alternatives to consider in arriving at a decision. The action of the ABCA indicates the kind of initiative which must be taken by archival associations if local jurisdictions are to achieve an understanding of an archives service.
neglect their primary responsibility of servicing the records of the agency they represent by going off on a variety of collecting junkets of questionable relevance to the agency they ought to represent.

In the face of the centralizing tendencies of Canada’s larger archives, there is still the need to establish an archival presence in every community in this country. As a result of a growing and zealous interest in local history, archivists are increasingly being pressed to establish local archives. Particularly in the last decade, with the growth of urban studies and citizens’ leagues intent on studying their local governments and demanding information from them, a greater onus has been placed on the keepers of municipal records not only to manage municipal records for purely in-house purposes, but also to produce their records for scholarly research and citizen reference. The traditional role of the city archives, preserving the locale’s documentary heritage and making it available to both student and scholar, is best combined with a satisfactory programme of records management which benefits both the researcher and the local government. Management of public records must be a function of local archives and if it is true, as has been suggested, that permanently valuable records at the local level are of a “greater relative volume than they are in [senior] government jurisdictions or in business,” then it is essential that archivists in every province encourage municipalities in their jurisdiction to establish a programme of records management.

The growth of interest in local history also derives in some measure from historians disenchanted with the study of history “from the top down.” In many instances, the impetus for the establishment of municipal archives has come from scholars anxious to gather evidence “from the bottom,” i.e. at the local level, in order to provide a more balanced perspective on our history. The responses from archivists to these needs, and from municipal clerks facing severe problems in records management, have not been encouraging. Perhaps the history of Canada has been written largely from the top, at the national level, because that is where most of the archivists and documents have been concentrated. What is needed now is a concerted effort on the part of both the national archives and the provincial archives to establish an independent but coordinated archival presence at the local level.

Discussion of decentralization among archivists inevitably leads into the sensitive realm of acquisitions policy. Whenever archivists come together to deliberate the acquisition of records and private papers, lip service is paid in a patronizing manner to the principle that records of a

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17 T.W. Mitchell, “Municipal Archival Programs,” *American Archivist*, XXIII, No. 2 (April 1960), p. 181. It is also significant that recently many local governments have lost legal cases, sometimes at considerable cost to the taxpayer, because essential documentary evidence could not be found.
particularly local significance should remain in that place. At the same
time, note is taken perpetually of the absence of adequate facilities and
lack of trained staff at the local level. In some instances, this note seems to
be more of an excuse for spiriting away local records and private archives
than a sincere justification for not leaving them in the community.18 By
denying communities the right to preserve their public records and private
archives, a great disservice is done to our profession in terms of raising
public consciousness of archival concerns. The future of archivists
depends in large measure upon local acceptance of the important role
archives should play in each community. An archivist working out of a
provincial or national capital can do very little to sensitize citizens in a
small community to the importance of their documentary heritage by
flitting in and out in one day. Each “big city” archivist who has ventured
into the countryside is soon aware of strong sectional interests at work.
Arguing the virtues of “better trained people” and “better and bigger
facilities” to house locally cherished manuscripts often only antagonizes a
community against the centre. While some archivists have long recognized
this situation, they have failed for just as long to do anything about it.

For too long the national and provincial archives have failed to
recognize and to exploit the benefits to be derived from encouraging the
growth of local archives in Canada. It is convenient for researchers to have
their research materials stored in a central location, but the substantial
advantages which could accrue to a researcher from the establishment of
municipal archives with records management programmes and a coordina-
ted policy of acquisitions of local historic archives, would also be useful to
both national and provincial archives. Where at present most provincial
archives can only collect local materials haphazardly, the existence of
municipal archives would permit these centrally located institutions to
acquire copies systematically or to provide copies of material which might
otherwise have escaped their notice. Further, municipal archives will
stimulate cultural and educational interest not only in local history, but
also in archives. The latter advantage seems to be the most obvious, yet
perhaps the most ignored. An archivist established in the community or a
region will communicate his role to local citizens and the benefit to be
derived for all archival institutions, and for the archival profession in
Canada, will be substantial. Communities which are highly aware of the
role of an archives are more inclined to deposit their documentary heritage
with an agency in which they have confidence through easy and immediate
contact.

What can be done to hasten the institution of local archives in Canada?
The Association of Canadian Archivists must support regional associations

18 See comments by Donald McOuat in “Acquisitions Policy: Competition or Co-
in presenting programmes to appropriate government officials who promote coordinated activity and continuity in the development of regional archival networks. Perhaps the resolution passed at the last Annual General Meeting of the ACA relating to Local Archives Service will facilitate the execution of such programmes.\(^{19}\) Precedents exist, both in Canada and outside, to provide guidance for the development and application of a comprehensive strategy for the encouragement of local archives programmes. Furthermore, strategy and administrative frameworks are already in place in many of the provinces to facilitate coordinated yet independent archival programmes at the local/regional level. For example, as in Saskatchewan and Ontario, the Municipal Act of British Columbia clearly states that the duties of the municipal clerk include being "responsible for the preservation, maintenance and safe preservation of the minute books, [by-laws] and other records of the transactions and other business of the Council and its committees."\(^{20}\) Unfortunately, most municipal clerks have failed to understand the implication of these duties in an archival context just as archivists have failed to demonstrate that application of these duties is a function of an archival programme.

The Municipal Act established 28 regional districts in British Columbia to simplify the once complicated local government puzzle by providing "a federated approach to local control over problems transcending municipal boundaries in either a metropolitan area or in a non-metropolitan trading area."\(^{21}\) The regional district framework has been incorporated into the administrative systems of extra-governmental organizations, notably the provincial library commission, and it could be applied to establish a coordinated archival heritage programme emphasizing local requirements. One of the distinctive features of the regional district plan is that a member area can decide whether it wants to participate in any function. Moreover, the costs of any programme initiated by a regional district are borne only by those communities which participate.\(^{22}\)

The Municipal Act empowers regional districts to engage in regional and community planning as well as to provide grants-in-aid, local works and services to electoral areas within each regional district. Given these functions and services, it should be feasible to work within the regional

\(^{19}\) "Resolved that: the executive of ACA, at the next annual meeting, present recommendations for a rational program of local archives service: a program including guidelines defining minimum standards under which a local service should operate and prototype legislation that may be presented to governments for their consideration, keeping in mind the need for continued safeguards of the autonomy of established local archives." Archives Bulletin. I, No. 3, p. 5.

\(^{20}\) Revised Statutes of British Columbia, 1960, c. 255, s. 183.

\(^{21}\) British Columbia, Department of Municipal Affairs, Statistics Relating to Regional and Municipal Governments in British Columbia, June 1975, p. 7.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
district framework in establishing a coordinated programme of archival
development similar to that embarked upon by our partners in information
services, the librarians.

In 1970, the Library Development Commission of British Columbia
struck a committee to present a plan for the development of library services
in the province. Their report, "A Proposal for Province-Wide Organiza-
tion of Library Services in British Columbia,"23 recommended a system
of library service, both federated and integrated, using the regional district as
the basic unit of administration. Contained within each unit there was to be
an area resource centre and a central headquarters serving local libraries.
In addition, the committee urged the adoption of library standards as a
prerequisite for provincial aid, and that financial support for a library
system come from the community as well as from the provincial
government. This committee's recommendations, together with those of
two library consultants, have provided the basis for a programme of library
development in British Columbia. Objectives of the programme have been
delineated and an administrative framework suggested. Priorities for the
first five years of the programme's operations were also outlined.24

The efforts of British Columbia's librarians to create a programme of
planned library development should be studied by archivists eager to have
archival activities coordinated and extended. The Symons Report,
particularly the chapter on "Archives and Canadian Studies," gives
whole-hearted support for the establishment of regional archives by
emphasizing two basic and inter-related challenges facing archivists. The
first concerns the responsibility of archivists in making the public aware of
the importance of archival resources and the need for providing properly
qualified persons to care for these resources. The second task entails a
comprehensive "national and regional plan to coordinate archival activity,
to serve as a framework for archival diffusion and to promote collections
development in a rational manner throughout the country."25 While there
are serious questions about the dominant role the Report gives to
universities in the operation of such a regional plan, the general direction
suggested for fundamental changes in our approach to the development of
archives at the local or regional level should not be ignored.26 How

23 British Columbia, Library Development Commission, Committee on Library Develop-
ment (Victoria: Queen's Printer, 1971).
24 British Columbia, Library Development Commission, Programme for Library
Development in the Province of British Columbia (Victoria: Queen's Printer, 1973),
25 pp.
25 Thomas H.B. Symons, To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on
Canadian Studies, "Archives and Canadian Studies" (Association of Universities and
Colleges of Canada, 1975), I, p. 69. The emphasis is the author's.
26 A response to the Symons Report will be published by the Association of Canadian
Archivists.
Archivists respond to such challenges will in large measure determine the future development of Canadian archives.

Adequate legislation already exists in many provinces requiring municipal officials to fulfil basic archival duties, specifically the management and preservation of significant public records. Moreover, in some provinces, including British Columbia, legislation has created an administrative structure admirably suited to the institution of regional programmes such as those delineated in the Symons Report and already utilized in British Columbia by librarians to establish a network of regional libraries. Archivists and their institutions must respond to and act positively upon such possibilities, or leave Canada devoid of an effective presence at local levels.27

In short, while all provinces have the responsibility, many already have the legal structure and means for the development of local archives. Action by archivists based on a recognition of these factors will have far-reaching consequences for archives at every level of government, society, and for the archival profession in Canada. Nevertheless, large government bureaucracies are often reluctant to encourage activities which might apparently reduce their own roles, and it will therefore demand much effort on the part of the Association of Canadian Archivists and regional associations to force the development of local archives. Yet perhaps the archivist’s commitment and responsibilities will overshadow his function as a bureaucrat, and the archival institutions which have nurtured and which control the preservation of Canada’s documentary heritage will join the struggle without hesitation. What is needed to overcome our long history of neglect, as Michael Swift has suggested, is the will among Canadian archivists, particularly those at the provincial level, to act.

27 Perhaps some concrete developments will emerge from the Canadian Archives Congress possibly to be held in 1982. Dr. W.I. Smith, the Dominion Archivist, in a paper presented to the Royal Society of Canada’s symposium (1975) on the preservation of the Canadian heritage, said that the purpose of such a congress would be to devise a “national strategy for acquiring, preserving, making available and transmitting to future generations the archival dimension of our heritage.”
Appendix

**Brief of the Association of B.C. Archivists to the City Council of Victoria, 23 August 1976**

**The Association of British Columbia Archivists**

The Association of British Columbia Archivists was founded three years ago with the express purpose of promoting and advancing the collection, preservation and use of records of historical significance to the province. The members of the Association are both professional archivists and non-professionals concerned to preserve our documentary heritage. The Association is incorporated under the Societies Act of B.C.

**Occasion of This Brief**

The Association has taken great interest in the recent discussion by City Council of the future of the City’s Archives. In recent years, the Administration of archives has grown in complexity and sophistication. Archivists have, of course, been in the thick of those developments, developments which, it might be added, are not always smooth and not always a matter for general approbation in the profession. Hence, the Association believes that it might be useful to lay out the various elements seen by archivists to be in need of consideration by City Council in its deliberations on the future of the Archives.

**Justification of Archives**

There are usually several reasons adduced for the establishment of archives attached to a government. At least four reasons can be seen to apply to Victoria’s Archives.

1. The archives of governments usually have a statutory basis. Management of the City’s records and archives is clearly a municipal responsibility as the Municipal Act of British Columbia intends when it includes among the duties of the municipal clerk responsibility “for preservation, maintenance and safe preservation of the minute-books, [by-laws] and other records of the transactions and other business of the Council and its committees.” [R.S.B.C., 1960, c.255, s. 183]. In the first instance, the reason for the City to have an archives is nothing more than fulfillment of the statutory responsibility to preserve the basic records of City business. The rationale is also clear. A smooth-running administration must have access to the vital records that document its past actions.

2. There is an allied, legal reason for archives. The resolution of disputes that go to court will demand evidence, very often old evidence, of the actions of the City. It is known that several municipalities have had to forfeit legal actions because they did not have the documentation on which to make their cases. The more complicated our society becomes, the more citizens use our courts. The City may find a very practical and potentially money-saving use for its archives.

3. Archives also have a cultural purpose. Increasingly, Canadians want to know about their past. Archives preserve and make available the raw material for the study of our past. The benefits of increase in our knowledge of our past may be felt by students in our schools and by citizens of all ages. Archives are not only a place for old records. People of all ages and all walks of life may use them.
4. Allied to the cultural purpose of archives is the scholarly use of archives. Scholarly use of archives is little more than a refined cultural use. Scholars in all fields, not just historians, need the information which archives preserve. Their product increases our knowledge and often our well-being. Frequently, we only determine where to go by first determining where we have come from.

**Services of Archives**

The services provided by archives fall into three categories.

1. Archives preserve records. The techniques of proper preservation are now highly developed. Knowledge of storage facilities, care of documents, restoration of documents and protection of documents from environmental and human threats to their preservation require an understanding of these techniques. The proper application of these techniques is no simple matter.

2. An archives arranges and describes (through guides, catalogues, lists and other finding aids) the records in its care. Without proper arrangement and description all is confusion. Archives store information. When people want or need that information, it must be got quickly and efficiently. In some cases, the City administration or Council will need to rely on the services of Archives.

3. An archives provides reference services to the administration and to users of all sorts. These services of course depend on proper storage, arrangement and description.

**Need for Trained Personnel**

The provision of the services necessary to run an archives requires trained personnel. The proper and efficient administration of archives is not something anyone can do. In the view of the Association, the provision of a trained and experienced person or persons to direct the archival services of the City is of vital importance.

**Need for Continuity**

As City Manager Bramely has correctly pointed out, a satisfactory archival program for the City must be sustained if begun. Decisions now to be made should be viewed in the long run. The Association wishes to stress the paramount necessity for an archives to have a firm foundation in a proper building and with its other needs of staff and financial support met.

**City Archives Elsewhere in Canada**

City Archives elsewhere in Canada may provide models that Victoria may profit from.

1. **TORONTO.** The important feature of the Toronto City Archives is that it accepts, preserves and makes available to public use only the records of the City. Since there are other places for private records, it might well be that Victoria may wish to follow Toronto's example and restrict its services to the City's own records. The additional costs of managing private archives is a matter to consider.

2. **VANCOUVER.** The City of Vancouver Archives accepts both private and City records. Vancouver has provided a modern building and trained staff to support its Archives, though funding is partly through private sources. Victoria may not be able to rival Vancouver's services, but the use of private sources of funding for initial establishment and certain sorts of capital expenditure may be worthy of consideration.
3. **CALGARY.** The City of Calgary has a records manager in its administration but has an agreement with a privately funded archives, Glenbow Alberta Archives, to store and service its archives. The essential point to recognize is that through its records management scheme Calgary in effect supports its archives through a regular transfer of records of archival quality. The arrangement with Glenbow merely makes efficient use of archives services already available in the city. Legal ownership and control of the records is still vested in the city government. This arrangement is of recent date, and it is not yet known what other financial support Calgary provides to Glenbow.

Ottawa, Edmonton, Quebec and several other communities have to some degree or other established an archival presence. Ottawa has recently hired a trained and experienced archivist as a beginning.

**Financing Archives**

The heart of the City of Victoria’s problem would seem to be financial. What can it afford? Perhaps, a prior step is to determine what basic archives services would cost under as many proposals as would meet the City’s needs. Then, the City can turn to the means of funding the Archives under each proposal.

The Association commends the proposal to form a society of public-spirited citizens who are willing to give their time and/or financial support to the Archives. However, in view of the need to provide a proper place for the Archives, trained personnel to run it and an assurance of its continuing operation, it would be unwise to expect that half-measures will provide a long-term solution. In the long run a modest beginning on the right principles is better than idle talk of grandiose schemes that cannot be supported.

The Association has no wish to squash any initiatives or proposals that may lead to the preservation and use of Victoria’s Archives. At this moment of decision, the Association offers its help and advice to Council and sincerely hopes that the Archives of the City of Victoria can be put on a firm foundation and assured of a future.

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**Résumé**

Selon l’auteur, les politiques centralisatrices des Archives publiques du Canada et des archives des provinces constituent une menace pour la préservation et la conservation d’archives d’intérêt local qui prennent de plus en plus d’importance non seulement pour les spécialistes de la recherche, mais également pour les communautés dont elles émanent. Comme remède à cette situation, il faudrait tirer meilleur profit des législations provinciales déjà existantes afin de favoriser la multiplication de dépôts d’archives locales susceptibles d’assurer la préservation des documents dans le milieu où ils ont été créés. L’Association of Canadian Archivists devrait unir ses efforts avec les associations régionales afin de présenter des programmes visant à coordonner les activités et à assurer la permanence des réseaux d’archives régionaux.