

## *Notes and Communications*

### *Documenting Our Side of the Detroit River: The Municipal Archives, Windsor Public Library*

by MARK WALSH

In 1976 Kent Haworth commented in *Archivaria* that little had been done in the previous forty years to acquire, preserve, and make accessible local archival materials in Canada.<sup>1</sup> A decade later small but significant gains can be reported in the number and quality of repositories responsible for municipal records across the country. One such example is the Municipal Archives at the Windsor Public Library.

The story of the Municipal Archives starts in the late 1970s with the development of history courses at the University of Windsor — notably in architectural conservation and local history — which required access to the primary source documentation found in municipal records. Grant projects between 1979 and 1983 permitted many record series to be located and inventoried. Discussion between municipal officials, concerned academics, and representatives of the Windsor Public Library resulted in a commitment from the city to maintain custody of its records. Offers from both the University of Windsor and the Archives of Ontario to undertake this work were refused. It became city policy that municipal archival records would not be released to other than a municipal agency, a requirement which was satisfied when the Windsor Public Library agreed in 1983 to undertake the establishment of a municipal archives. The position of municipal archivist was advertised in the fall of 1983 and occupied on 1 March 1984.

Thus an “archival beachhead”<sup>2</sup> was established in Windsor. The city was by no means barren of archival materials — as the purchase of the Duck diaries by the Archives of Ontario late in 1983 indicates. Clarence Burton had early in this century discovered the richness of the area’s documentary heritage when he carted off the Askin Family Papers

---

1 Kent M. Haworth, “Local Archives: Responsibilities and Challenges for Archivists,” *Archivaria* 3, (Winter 1976-77), p. 28.

2 The Provincial Archivist of British Columbia, John Bovey, used this phrase to describe the opening of the Manitoba Archives Building in 1974; see *Annual Report of the Legislative Library and Provincial Archives of Manitoba* (Winnipeg, 1975).



*The Municipal Archives is housed in the Windsor Public Library. Courtesy: Leo Roach Photography.*

to Detroit. They are now part of the local history collection which bears his name at that city's public library. A good deal of early documentation on the area, which was the first part of Ontario to be settled by Europeans, went to the Archives of Ontario and the Public Archives of Canada and, in addition to Detroit, as far away in the United States as Wisconsin.

The first task for the Municipal Archives was to establish clearly its mandate. Although French settlement of the area dates to the mid-eighteenth century, it was decided that the primary responsibility of the new repository would be municipal records and private manuscripts related to *municipal affairs, largely dating from Windsor's incorporation as a village in 1854.* Contacts made with the University of Windsor Archives which, although inactive in collecting due to financial constraints, indicated its interest in local private sector records, particularly those from commercial and religious institutions. Thus a cooperative relationship between the two archives was possible which has had a very beneficial effect on archival development in the area.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> The best evidence of this cooperation has been in reference services. By exchanges of guides and through frequent contacts, staff at both archives are able to refer patrons to the appropriate institution. Support of the goals and activities of the Southwestern Ontario Archivists Association by both archives has also helped to raise public awareness of the archives in the community.

A second institution in Windsor which required consultation was the Hiram Walker Historical Museum. The centre of local history studies for more than a quarter century, the museum had been the recipient of a number of manuscript collections, some of which related to municipal affairs or city agencies.<sup>4</sup> Owing to the lack of space, the museum deposited the original materials in the Archives of Ontario in exchange for microfilm copies. Also operated by the Windsor Public Library, the museum has used its established position in the community to direct archival materials to the Municipal Archives. Similarly, artifacts included in archival collections are transferred to the museum. The result of this arrangement has been to place materials in the proper institution and to keep original records in the city.

The records of city agencies and those related to municipal affairs fill many gaps in the history of the Windsor area. Windsor is one of the best examples of the relationship between archives and published history. Much has been written on the area in terms of loyalist, military, native, and land-use history for the period prior to 1854 because materials were available at the Public Archives of Canada, Archives of Ontario, Burton Historical Collection, and other institutions. Only with access to municipal records have comprehensive studies of Windsor since 1854 been undertaken.<sup>5</sup>

Limited space and staff have necessitated care in acquisition work. Given the limited scope of collecting, namely records of the city and collections documenting municipal affairs, the task was made somewhat easier. A hierarchical approach to documentation has been used, and it became important to identify those departments most clearly responsible for administrative functions. The Municipal Archives made arrangements for the systematic transfer of non-current records with the offices of the City Administrator and City Clerk and the Finance and Legal departments. A pilot project in records management has been undertaken with the Department of Finance and Personnel. A commitment has been made to initiate a city-wide records management programme on a department-by-department basis, one result of which will be to identify and ensure the preservation of archival materials. A selective acquisition policy and a good relationship with the University of Windsor have allowed the Municipal Archives to grow at an acceptable rate. The archives is neither being overwhelmed by its acquisitions nor is it without significant documentation on the city.<sup>6</sup> The following lists detail the holdings of the Municipal Archives:

Municipal Records (with dates of catalogued records)

- RG 1 City Administrator, 1957-1985
- RG 2 City Clerk, 1854-1978
- RG 3 Department of Finance, 1855-1970
- RG 4 Building Department, 1911-1953

---

4 For a list of the holdings of the Hiram Walker Historical Museum, consult the *Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories* under number 20.

5 One such example is the volume on Windsor in the Institute of Urban Studies *Canadian Cities* series by Professors Larry Kulisek and Trevor Price. They were responsible for a number of archival research projects and pressed for the establishment of a municipal archives for Windsor.

6 Primary importance has been placed on the acquisition of records of evidential value. The three most important municipal records series — council minutes, by-laws, and assessment rolls — are also of great informational value.

RG 5 Amalgamated Towns — East Windsor (Ford City), 1919-1935; Ojibway, 1913-1947; Riverside, 1921-1966; Sandwich, 1878-1935; Sandwich East Township, 1864-1966; Sandwich West Township, 1957-1966; Walkerville, 1890-1935.

#### Manuscripts

- Ms 1 Walkerville Arts and Letters Club, 1921-1943
- Ms 2 George F. Macdonald Collection, ca. 1831-1961
- Ms 3 Neil Morrison Papers
- Ms 4 A. Douglas Waddell Collection, ca. 1918-1948  
(1st Battalion, Essex Scottish Regiment)
- Ms 5 Hallam Collection, 1884-1973  
(J.C. Patterson Collegiate Institute)
- Ms 6 W.F. Herman Papers, 1910-1947
- Ms 7 Hon. James Baby Chapter, IODE, 1921-1975
- Ms 8 J. Lewis Robinson Collection, 1942
- Ms 9 Wallace Renaud Collection, 1928-1933
- Ms 10 Guillot Family Papers, 1899-1957
- Ms 11 Mason Collection, 1837
- Ms 12 Records of the Children's Aid Society of Essex County, 1899-1980
- Ms 13 Langlois Family Papers, 1738-ca. 1930
- Ms 14 Drouillard Family Papers, 1886-ca. 1980

Many of the manuscript collections were donated to the Windsor Public Library prior to the establishment of the Municipal Archives and before the present relationship with the University of Windsor was established. Others, such as the Renaud, Guillot, Langlois, and Drouillard collections, document the activities of municipal officials and their families. The Children's Aid Society records document significant contributions to social services provided for city and county residents. The fact that prominent municipal figures have served on the society's board of directors is an additional reason to conserve its records. The Municipal Archives has been designated as the society's official repository. Materials not yet processed include the mayor's correspondence of 1984-85 regarding the Royal Visit to Windsor, records of the Windsor Utilities Commission (1889-1940), Legal department records (1864-1973), assessment rolls (1853-1970) and plans (1912-1980) from the City Clerk's Department, and Finance department correspondence (1974-1985) and collector's rolls (1854-1935).

In addition to archival and library holdings, the Municipal Archives has small collections of photographs, posters, prints and drawings, pamphlets, 8 mm films, and printed ephemera. It is anticipated that these collections will remain relatively small owing to the nature of municipal records. EDP records, though not yet a large component of municipal records, are increasing, and the archives will be forced to become familiar with the processes involved in electronic records keeping. Records management in particular can only be properly implemented when the various technologies in use are understood. In terms of the Municipal Archives own needs, entering information into a minicomputer should be a routine step in processing materials in the near future.

Terms of access to the public records in the archives are as liberal as possible. Certain series, notably council minutes and by-laws, must be accessible to the public under the *Ontario Municipal Act*. Terms of access to departmental records, where access is neither

guaranteed nor restricted by legislation, are negotiated with individual department heads. Restrictions are primarily imposed to protect the privacy of individuals; however, certain documents are restricted for an agreed upon period of time owing to their confidential nature. Departmental records remain the property of the department and may be returned if necessary.

During 1984-85 staff limitations made it necessary to allow research by appointment only. In January 1986 the Municipal Archives moved from a five- to a six-day week with Tuesday, Wednesday, and Saturday as public service days. Research may still be conducted by appointment on Monday, Thursday, and Friday. It is a goal of the Municipal Archives to offer the same reference services as the rest of the Main Branch, which is open eighty-four hours per week. Access to information contained in municipal records, particularly those of recent years, is a high priority upon which greater hours of service will have a very beneficial affect. Wherever possible, the imposition of search fees is avoided.<sup>7</sup>

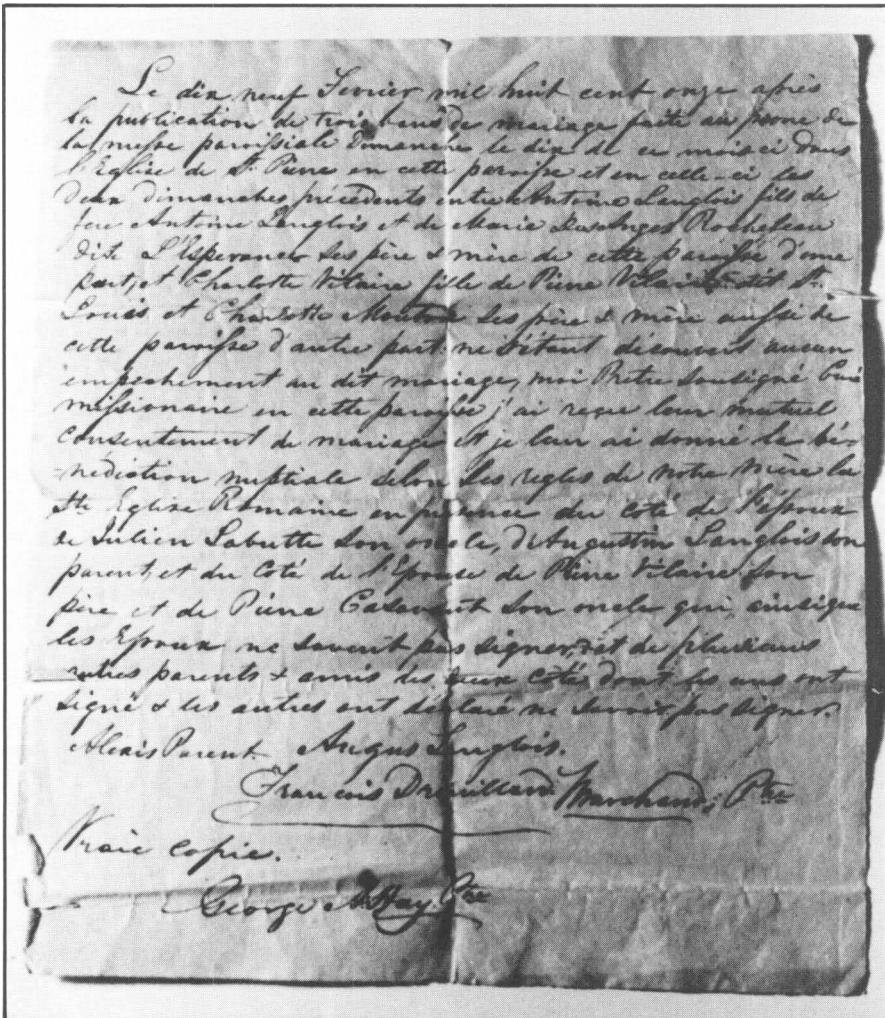
Acquiring materials through careful planning and making them accessible for research does not completely describe the services of the Municipal Archives. Arrangement and description of its holdings are required. An inventory of all collections and record series is completed as part of the accessioning process. Appraisal of materials for research value is reflected in their arrangement and description. In order to be cost-efficient, it is important that collections be processed to an appropriate level. Summary levels only are required for materials which may not receive high volume usage. Other records receive extremely detailed descriptions based on an assessment of their evidential and informational value.

Storage conditions in the archives are less than perfect. The documents are kept under the best possible storage arrangements rather than the ideal. Physical controls have been upgraded as resources permit. Prior to 1984, most of the city's dormant records of permanent value were in storage in City Hall or the City Market basement vault. The latter, in particular, exposed Legal, Finance, and Clerk's department materials of great value to mold, mildew, water damage, insects, vermin, dirt, and wide fluctuations in temperature and humidity. Relatively few documents were transferred to the Municipal Archives as it was anticipated that active mold would soon be airborne through the ventilation system and infect the entire holdings. In addition, while temperature in the stack area remains constant at sixty-nine degrees fahrenheit, humidity has been difficult to control. Steps are being taken to freeze and dryclean documents from the market vault and to use portable humidifiers to control the stack area environment.

The Municipal Archives has attempted to raise local public awareness of archives and issues related to archives. In cooperation with the Social Sciences Division of the Windsor Public Library, the Municipal Archives invited guest speakers to the Information Management Seminar. Concerns about access to information and privacy in federal and provincial records were discussed at those meetings in 1985 and 1986 respectively. A second library division, the Literature and History Division, sponsors a four-part programme with the Municipal Archives each year in October. Known as the Local History and Archives Programme, it is now entering its fourth year. In 1984 emphasis was placed on a general introduction to local history. The fiftieth anniversary of the amalgamation of East Windsor, Sandwich, and Walkerville with Windsor was marked in 1985, and the

---

7 Search fees were charged by some city departments and user fees have been approved as policy by the City Administrator. The Windsor Public Library, however, has resisted fees for services.



The French-Canadian presence in Windsor is documented in sources such as the 1811 marriage banns of Antoine Langlois and Charlotte Vilaire in the Langlois Family Papers. Courtesy: Steve Daigle.

one hundred and ninetieth anniversary of the surrender of Detroit to the United States gave cause to examine the development of Windsor and Detroit in the 1986 programme. Other programmes have included the fortieth anniversary of the 1945 Ford Strike and Rand Formula, appraisal of family documents for historical value, and documentation of labour history.

Displays and exhibitions have also played an important role in reaching the public. Located in the basement of the Main Branch, the Municipal Archives has an enclosed display case along one wall which separates the reading room from public areas. A new

display is exhibited in the case each month. Easily viewed from the public area, the displays often receive attention from groups using meeting rooms near the archives. Travelling exhibitions from the Public Archives of Canada are displayed in larger areas on the main floor. Community events, such as the centennial of the Essex-Kent Scottish Regiment in 1985 and La Semaine française in 1986, are often the occasion for displays. International Archives Week was celebrated in October 1984 with a truly international display — exhibits from three Detroit and three Windsor archives.<sup>8</sup>

The Municipal Archives is also the home of the Southwestern Ontario Archivists Association. It was formed early in 1985 by academics, genealogists, private collectors, librarians, museum curators, archivists, and others interested in preserving and making accessible the documentary heritage of Essex, Kent, and Lambton Counties. The SOAA was given two seats on the 1985-86 Ontario Archives Council. It brings the perspective of a developing region to the council. The association was formed in part to advance the development of archival facilities in the area as a means of stopping the exodus of important records from the three counties. Affiliated with the Ontario Association of Archivists, the SOAA has two elected representatives to the executive of the provincial association. Staff are not only encouraged to participate in professional and historical organizations at the local, provincial, and national levels in order to provide opportunities for professional development, but also to establish contacts for effective networking. The Municipal Archives holds memberships in a number of regional archival associations from Alberta to Newfoundland and subscribes to *The American Archivist* and *Archivaria*.

Work conducted for associations and information received through institutional memberships assist in raising the profile of the Municipal Archives and local awareness of archives. The Windsor Public Library's on-line catalogue database for information on various geographic regions will display newsletters and publications of various regional bodies. These publications assist Canadian students enrolled in the University of Windsor/Wayne State University exchange programme in archival administration by keeping them abreast of developments which may affect career choices. The Municipal Archives has been designated as a suitable institution for the programme's practicum. Each student must write a term paper and process a collection. Up to three Canadian students each semester may complete the latter assignment at the Municipal Archives. Publications on archival theory, conservation, and related topics as well as guides to the holdings of other institutions are purchased as funds permit.

The Municipal Archives is also a participant in the Research Group for a Databank on the Windsor Economy. The Municipal Archivist chairs the Archives Subcommittee of the Research Group, which was formed to ensure that the University Archives receives appropriate resources to support research into the city's economy. A second task for the Archives Subcommittee is to pursue avenues of grant funding for possible databases related to local archival holdings. One record series being considered is the assessment rolls, which contain sufficient data on the local labour force, including a person's marital status, ethnic background, as well as other categories of information, to allow for the

---

8 Participants in the display were the Archives of American Art (a branch of the Smithsonian Institution which has repositories in San Francisco, Detroit, and Washington), Assumption University Archives, the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library, University of Windsor Archives, Wayne State University Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, and the Municipal Archives, Windsor Public Library.

statistical re-creation of the population from 1860 to the present. Participation in the Research Group provides an opportunity to demonstrate non-traditional uses of archival materials and has given a number of academics an exposure to archives which they might not have otherwise had.<sup>9</sup>

An ambitious publications programme has been launched by the Municipal Archives. It aims to make potential users more aware of available resources. Public lectures on the Municipal Archives or archival topics are welcome, and staff are encouraged to participate actively in conferences and seminars. The effect has been to inform genealogists, historians, urban studies specialists, fellow archivists, and others of the holdings and services at the Municipal Archives.<sup>10</sup> Feature articles on the archives have been published in the *Windsor Star* and in other community and university publications. Public relations remains a continuing priority owing to the fact that, in spite of efforts to the contrary, the Municipal Archives remains an under-used resource.

The facilities, staff, and public use of the archives have grown at an acceptable rate. There are a number of important reasons for this. Above all, the Municipal Archives is committed to establishing and maintaining high professional standards for the preservation and use of its holdings and conduct of its staff. "Public relations is fundamentally human relations,"<sup>11</sup> and maintaining good human relations at City Hall and in the library has produced a very good environment.

Many aspects of the development of the archives seem unsatisfactory. The archives should actually be under the jurisdiction of the City Clerk's department, and it should be more than a division within a branch of the library. The fact that there is a municipal archives in a city with no other full-time, staffed archival repositories is, however, notable. That it has flourished in an archivally underdeveloped area is truly remarkable and indicative of the support which archival activities have received from both the library administration and municipal government. The experience of the Municipal Archives also serves as an example of what can be accomplished with relatively small resources and high professional standards — whether in donor relations, arrangement and descriptive practices, reference services, or the many other areas of endeavour which an archives daily pursues.

Further information on the holdings or activities of the archives can be obtained by writing to the Municipal Archives, Windsor Public Library, 850 Ouellette Avenue, Windsor, Ontario, Canada, N9A 4M9 or by calling (519) 255-6782.

- 
- 9 Called together by University of Windsor President Ron Ianni, the Research Group includes a number of senior academics. Attempts to locate data on the Windsor economy revealed a serious lack of research on the city, research facilities oriented to local studies, and access to local "primary source data" — in other words, archival materials.
- 10 Participation at professional conferences by Municipal Archives staff has included archival associations' annual meetings at the national, provincial, and local levels. Library policy supports the principle of professional development through association and includes specific provisions aimed at allowing working level librarians and archivists to attend at least one conference each year. The Ontario Association of Archivists and Association of Canadian Archivists have scheduled their annual meetings for Windsor in 1987 and 1988 respectively. Both meetings will involve the staff of the Municipal Archives.
- 11 Robert C. Wheeler, "Effective Public Relations: Communicating Your Image," American Association for State and Local History Technical Leaflet 3, *History News* 28, no. 3 (March 1973).