

Local Archival Repositories: The Case of the City of Vaughan Archives

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It is an unfortunate truism that all the travails besetting the ideal of a cooperative, integrated and balanced archival system in Ontario local archives,¹ or perhaps more accurately the lack thereof, have been a conspicuous weakness. Yet as unsettling and disheartening as the general lack of viable programmes may be, it would be wholly inaccurate to characterize the contemporary local archival scene as one dominated by apathy, inactivity and general stagnation, bereft of professional standards and practitioners, lacking in vision, and accordingly for the most part devoid of any large measure of success. Numerous local institutions have made tremendous progress and as such have done much to redress the imbalance. Witness the accomplishments of the Simcoe County Archives, Region of Peel Archives, the Stratford-Perth Archives, the City of Cambridge Archives and the City of Windsor Archives, to name but a few. Aspiring to enter these ranks is a relative newcomer: the City of Vaughan Archives.

The City of Vaughan Archives came into being as "Archives Vaughan," an administrative subunit of the City of Vaughan's Heritage Resources Division, through a resolution of the Municipal Council in 1988.² The Archives was given a wide-ranging mandate: it was empowered to acquire, preserve, conserve, arrange and describe, administer and make available for research not only permanently valuable records generated by its parent organization, but also fonds and collections of private provenance relating to all aspects of Vaughan's past.

A preliminary records survey had been conducted in 1986-87, in anticipation of the establishment of a municipal archival repository. It indicated the presence of numerous potentially valuable records series stored haphazardly in a variety of locations. The information gathered during this undertaking, which included the assignment of tentative appraisal values, was soon to prove of inestimable utility.

During the course of the survey, records judged to possess enduring evidential and historical or research value were slowly consolidated in one location: a relatively unused storage room. The conditions there were far from ideal, but it was deemed highly advisable to achieve some degree of physical control so as to preclude the surveyed records — due to an administrative oversight or the actions of an overzealous municipal employee

attempting to alleviate the omnipresent problem of space scarcity — being consigned to the terrible fate of fodder for landfill.

Ultimately, more than 100 linear metres of municipal records spanning the years 1849-1945 found their way to this somewhat inauspicious repository. Rudimentary accessioning procedures were established in order to assert physical and intellectual control, and to delineate custodial authority. This material was complemented by an influx of privately generated personal, family and corporate fonds from the Vaughan community once it became generally known that the Municipal Council had set up an "archives."³

It was not, however, until mid-1989 that a proper archival facility became available. Although hindered by a shortage of storage space from the outset — a major flaw which had been temporarily addressed by the utilization of mechanical shelving units — the new archives facility was able to boast climate controls, a conservation laboratory/processing area, a reading area, a microfilm/fiche reader-printer and limited reprography service. It was now possible to begin the work of organizing the archives in earnest.

By June 1989, it required barely more than a cursory glance to become aware of the magnitude of the task at hand. Yet, daunting as it all appeared, consolation was offered by the fact that the lack of formal procedures implied no need to confront such matters as retrospective conversion to prevailing descriptive standards, disrespect of provenance, or any of the plethora of trials and tribulations which are a natural corollary of institutional failure to adhere to accepted standards and to develop policy and procedures, with due consideration to local exigencies, but also in accordance with the basic principles of archival science: proven guidelines and practices common to numerous older and better-established archival repositories.

An analysis of the evidence at hand — the records in the Archives and their creators, the general evolution of Vaughan's municipal organizational structure and the latter's record-producing and record-keeping practices — coupled with factors such as estimates of user-frequency, composition of the local research community, etc., provided the essential background data necessary for the establishment of institutional policies and procedures.⁴ These were codified in the form of a manual, it being conceived of as a living document amenable to revision in response to the dictates of both local developments and those in the Canadian archival scene.

The particulars of the manual need not be delved into here; suffice to say that it delineates in considerable detail rules and guidelines to govern all aspects of the Archives' operation: acquisition, appraisal, reprography, reference, accessioning procedures, arrangement and description, special media, conservation, security, legislative requirements, etc. One feature worthy of special mention, however, is an integrated processing manual, a document that has consistently proved its worth as a means of expeditiously introducing volunteers and contract staff to this institution's arrangement and descriptive practices.

The succeeding two-and-three-quarter years can best be described as a blur of activity: policy and planning, administration, refinement of acquisition strategy, appraisal, arrangement and description, outreach, grant applications, reference and research, etc. At the end of it all there emerged the infrastructure of a professional archival operation; one must hasten to add that however much still needs to be done, the mechanisms are in place and the Archives is fully operational.

The City of Vaughan Archives currently administers about 200 linear metres of material, the provenance of 85 per cent of which is the City of Vaughan and its predecessor agencies. Municipally generated records span the period 1849-1971, while the inclusive dates of records and papers of private origin are 1806-1985.

The vast majority of the Archives' municipal records are textual; a few small series of cartographic records are also held. In addition to their documenting the functions and activities of the Municipal Government/Civic Administration — and, as such, its evolution over time — the records evidence all aspects of the community's past.⁵ The completeness of the series constituting the fonds of the oldest of Vaughan's government agencies, moreover — namely the Vaughan Township Municipal Council, the Office of the Vaughan Township Clerk-Treasurer, and the Village of Woodbridge Municipal Government/Civic administration — is noteworthy. Indeed, one need only cite the presence of a series of working papers in the Vaughan Township Council fonds, 1849-1920, measuring 10.5 m in extent, to illustrate the point.⁶

Physical, administrative and rudimentary intellectual control has been established over all pre-1971 municipally generated records worthy of preservation.⁷ Moreover, the vast majority of these records — to be exact, eleven fonds possessing the highest degree of evidential and informational value — have been organized to various levels, and in addition to being included in a repository-wide index, have been described using either the preliminary or the standard City of Vaughan Archives Inventory format.

The fonds referred to above include the following:⁸

- RG 1 — Vaughan Township Council fonds, 1849-1970
- RG 2 — Vaughan Township Office of the Clerk-Treasurer fonds, 1849-1968
- RG 3 — City of Vaughan Clerk's Department fonds, 1968-1970
- RG 4 — Village of Woodbridge fonds, 1869-1970; (predominant 1882-1970)
- RG 5 — Police Village of Maple fonds, 1928-1970
- RG 6 — Police Village of Thornhill fonds, 1939-1970
- RG 8(A) — Town of Vaughan Cemetery Advisory Committee fonds, 1897-1986
- RG 8(B) — Vaughan Township Committee of Adjustment fonds, 1961-1970
- RG 8(C) — Town of Vaughan Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee fonds, 1977-1988
- RG 9 — Vaughan Township Police Department fonds, 1937-1965
- RG 13 — Vaughan Township Solicitor's Department fonds, 1950-1970

All municipally generated records transferred to the custody of the City of Vaughan Archives are assessed *vis-à-vis* the *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA)*. (This legislation does not apply to fonds and collections of private provenance.) Information relating to the access status of the records in question is incorporated initially into the accession record and summary preliminary descriptions, and then, upon formal arrangement and description, into the Archives finding aid system at all levels; for example, access restrictions would be noted briefly in the repository-wide index, restricted files being delineated in a preliminary or standard inventory. Strictly interpreted, those sections of the Act intended to protect the privacy of individuals are, as they bear upon legitimate research endeavours, extremely onerous and inflexible. Personal information cannot be disclosed without the express consent of the individual to whom it relates, or until thirty years after the death of the latter. Fortunately, recognition has been accorded in the legislation to the concerns of the research

community through the inclusion of a mitigating provision permitting municipalities and local boards to allow access for research purposes to records containing personal information if the researcher binds her/himself formally (through a written agreement) to refrain from identifying individuals in the work itself or in any other context. Accordingly, *MFIPPA*'s adverse aspects have but marginally affected the programme of the City of Vaughan Archives.

As noted earlier, certain interests in the Vaughan community had from the outset exhibited a commitment to the preservation of the area's documentary heritage. Thus, at the time of writing [June 1992], the Archives was able to boast a manuscript holding (fonds and collections of private origin) comprising 350 accessions ranging in extent from a few items to a few linear metres.⁹ The former reflects an acquisition policy which is at once sensitive to current research trends and local demands, but is also concomitantly directed to the provision of a comprehensive documentary representation of Vaughan's past, so as to preclude overspecialized acquisition activities based on anticipated future research trends; it is held that engaging in prophetic exercises of this kind, at least beyond the immediate future, is at best presumptuous, at worst disastrous.

Fonds and collections of particular note include

- M987.5 — Nashville Cemetery Company fonds, 1912-1971
- M989.80 — Vellore Women's Institute fonds, 1915-1982
- M990.2 — Woodbridge Agricultural Society fonds, 1876-1989
- M990.12 — Vaughan Township Historical Society fonds, 1868-1985
- M990.30 — Mary Wood Collection, ca. 1914-1989; (predominant 1929-1984)
- M991.19 — Vaughan Township Village of Woodbridge Political Office-Holders and Employees Photographic Collection, 1850-1970
- M991.34 — Vaughan Township Churches Collection, 1959-1986
- M991.41 — Patterson Collection, 1850-1990
- M992.6 — Isaac Baker fonds, 1929-1953

As is the case with municipal records, privately generated personal, family and corporate fonds are arranged and described to a level commensurate with their respective value. All fonds and collections, however, are entered into the Archives' repository-wide index.

The repository index itself is constituted of bibliographic descriptions compiled in accordance with *AACR2*, *APPM* and Elizabeth Betz's *Graphic Materials* wherever appropriate. Geographic, personal and corporate name headings, as well as uniform titles, have been composed in compliance with *AACR2* and *APPM*; topical subject terms are derived from *LCSH* and *Canadian Subject Headings*, while form and genre terms derive from *Descriptive Terms for Graphic Materials* and *Form Terms for Archives and Manuscripts Control*.

Advances in the profession are of primary concern to the City of Vaughan Archives, and thus developments in the North American archival scene are carefully monitored. This has been particularly the case with respect to descriptive standards, the evolution of *RAD* receiving special attention. Indeed, in April 1992 the Archives undertook its most ambitious project to date in applying *RAD* to an automated system. Since the former is based in part on the International Standard Bibliographic Description (*ISBD*), this data content standard is compatible with databases capable of handling a MARC-formatted

record. The software chosen to automate description is InMagic Plus, an improved version of the standard InMagic 7.2 software, which has been successfully adopted by a number of archives and libraries for use in a variety of functions in recent years.

All such efforts, however, come to naught if a municipal archives is unable to demonstrate to the powers-that-be an existing and indeed growing demand for the services which it provides, not only in the context of the parent organization but also in the community at large. With respect to the latter, the City of Vaughan Archives has been fortunate in that a cadre of concerned and interested citizens has been present from the creation to advocate its cause, spread the word of its existence, and utilize its resources. These individuals and organizations provided a firm base from which to pursue the ideal perhaps best articulated by Mark Walsh in a paper delivered at the 1989 Conference of the Ontario Association of Archivists:

We must daily demonstrate to our society the benefits of maintaining its documentary heritage. People in Ontario need archives. Why do they need archives? Because we can tell them who they are, where they have been and maybe help them see where they are going. This identity provided by Ontario's archival community is not the static, end-of-the-line product of some paper morgue but a vital, dynamic process of discovery and rediscovery of people and places, of events and ideas.¹⁰

To this end, the City of Vaughan Archives has over the years engaged in a variety of outreach activities. One hastens to add, however, that only recently has a multilevel strategic plan addressing a wide spectrum of prospective users and donors been developed, and initiatives to date have been ad hoc; getting the Archives up and running was the preeminent concern, outreach being relegated temporarily to the status of merely generating sufficient "numbers" to justify our corporate existence. Notwithstanding this somewhat mercenary approach, a combination of occasional tours, displays, exhibits, circulars, local-newspaper and periodical articles and awards ceremonies acknowledging donations of particular significance, have considerably exceeded the expectations of all concerned.

Reference requests as well as on-site research have continually increased as students (high school, college and university), urban planners, local historians, genealogists, archaeologists, lawyers, restoration architects, law enforcement officers and even real estate agents, in addition to City staff, avail themselves of the Archives' resources. Indeed, reference requests have been received from as far afield as Great Britain, Germany and Australia. It is certainly intriguing to speculate as to the prospects which a concerted and well-defined outreach programme might hold.¹¹

All told, it has generally been a very stimulating and, from a professional perspective, remarkably enriching three years. A good deal has been accomplished despite minimal resources, and although a great deal more requires doing — not the least of which is the crying need to increase the Archives' staff complement — a solid foundation has been laid.

The overall strategy of the City of Vaughan Archives in achieving the modest success which it has enjoyed may be summarized as follows: the Archives has been able to demonstrate the viability of its programme by expanding its resident support/user base, and therefore clearly to indicate to upper Municipal management and Council the need for a municipal archival repository in the community at large; concomitantly, through the

effective management of the Municipality's permanently valuable documentary heritage, it has impressed on City of Vaughan employees at all levels the indisputable benefit of a comprehensive, professionally administered archival programme which ensures the availability of corporate records for long-term reference and legal purposes, and for the protection of the rights of citizens. The underpinning of this basic strategy is a consistent adherence to accepted professional guidelines, practices and standards, thus facilitating the maximization of the Archives' conspicuously limited human financial and physical resources. In essence, it is a pragmatic and simple strategy remarkable for its lack of originality, yet one which has provided the city of Vaughan with a link to its own past, and by the same token has acted to bring the ideal of a comprehensive archival system for Ontario one step closer to realization.

Notes

- 1 The concept of an archival system for Ontario is well-articulated in a number of position papers in "Toward an Archival System for Ontario: Papers delivered at the 1989 Conference of the Ontario Association of Archivists," *Ontario Association of Archivists Discussion Paper 1* (June 1990).
- 2 The City of Vaughan Archives is currently an administrative subunit of the Cultural Services Division, formerly the Heritage Resources Division, Office of the Commissioner of Recreation and Culture.
- 3 Researchers were accommodated, even at this primitive juncture in the history of the City of Vaughan Archives — provided at least twenty-four hours' notice was given.
- 4 Since its compilation, *The City of Vaughan Archives Policy and Procedures Manual* has appeared in two editions; revisions to the second edition are in progress as the Archives undertakes the application of RAD to an automated descriptive system.
- 5 The City of Vaughan originated as Vaughan Township, which came into being as a corporate entity in 1850 as a direct result of the 1849 *Municipal Corporations Act*; in 1971 Vaughan Township and the Village of Woodbridge, the latter incorporated in 1882, were amalgamated to form the Town of Vaughan; in January 1991, the Town of Vaughan achieved city status. In recognition of the need to document fully the administrative evolution of its parent organization, the City of Vaughan Archives produced *The Administrative History Of the Township of Vaughan, 1850-1971* (Vaughan, 1990).
- 6 It is highly unusual for records of this type to have survived destruction as a matter of course. As is the case today, in general minutes, resolutions and by-laws were the constituents of early municipal council fonds most typically deemed worthy of preservation by originating agencies/bodies and early custodians.
- 7 Due to restrictions imposed by a lack of storage space as well as staff, the Archives currently administers municipal records documenting the history of the Vaughan Township Council and Civic Administration, and those of the Village of Woodbridge spanning the period 1849-1970. Post-1971 records are temporarily in the custody of the Records Management Section (Clerk's Department). As the Archives' arrangement and description programme proceeds, the 1970 cut-off date —archivally quite advantageous, for the administrative restructuring following the establishment of Regional Government and the amalgamation of Vaughan Township with the Village of Woodbridge in 1971 provides ample justification for the closure of a number of record groups — is being revised; indeed, in the case of certain heavily used fonds, it has proved expedient to disregard this terminal date and transfer to the Archives post-1970 records as well.
- 8 In the City of Vaughan Archives' provenance-based arrangement system, government records are organized into record groups, the latter being the fonds of municipal administrative units bearing responsibility for substantive programmes while at the same time exhibiting continuity, stability and autonomy. As of 1992, thirty-four such bodies, past and present, have been identified in the Corporation of the City of Vaughan.

- 9 The fonds should not be confused with an accession unit; they are not equivalent, a fonds often containing more than one accession, and accessions not uncommonly consisting of multiple fonds; see Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa, 1990), p. D-3 for elaboration.
- 10 Mark Walsh, "Beyond the Needs Survey: Where Do We Go From Here?," *Ontario Association of Archivists Discussion Paper 1* (June 1990), p. 17.
- 11 A comprehensive multilevel outreach programme, targeting a range of potential user and donor groups, is tentatively scheduled for the winter of 1992-93.