

THE NEW BRUNSWICK FLOOD RELIEF PROGRAM OF 1973

BY

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NEW BRUNSWICK ARCHIVES

The annual spring freshet along the St. John River brought more than the usual minor rise in water levels to the Province of New Brunswick in 1973. Commencing in late April, the central river valley and the capital city of Fredericton were extensively flooded for several days, driving many persons from their homes and causing millions of dollars in damage. The flooding was unprecedented in intensity and brought problems to many government departments, including the Provincial Archives. Although its own physical plant was located on high ground and was unaffected by the flood waters, the responsibility for repairs and salvage of flood-damaged documents fell to the Provincial Archives because of its own intense concern for the papers affected and because of the potentially valuable "evangelizing" which could be done on behalf of its operation.

As the flood waters of the river receded, the nature and extent of the damage became clearly visible. Even before the "crest" of the flooding was reached, frantic efforts by persons in hip-waders and diving suits had been made to pull out immersed papers, but there were limitations on access and man-power. When basements were finally pumped out, there still existed many mounds of documents, thoroughly coated in mud and sewage. Among the more important groups which required attention were several from the Department of Justice: adoption files and orders, divorce records, chancery matters and decree records. These groups had long been maintained inadequately in the Department's basement because of the desire for confidentiality, control and rapid information retrieval. Several offers by the Archives Records Centre program had been declined. Other groups included records from the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. Private manuscripts were involved, including papers from the Provincial Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (I.O.D.E.) and papers of Mr. R.A. Tweedie, former government official and participant in many local social and cultural affairs. The Legislative Library suffered extensive water damage, as well, to some 10,000 to 12,000 books and governmental publications, and required the assistance and technical advice of the Archives staff. The Barristers' Society Library and the Provincial Law Library both suffered damage to some 3,000 volumes.

Various collections yielded some 1,400 damaged photographs. All in all, it is estimated that some 1,603,000 pages of documents and 15,000 books and pamphlets were water damaged and required immediate repair. The Provincial Archives had never before been faced with such a mammoth undertaking, and the certainty of quick paper deterioration, the presence of sewage in the flood waters, and the growth of paper moulds made time a very valuable and limited commodity.

Under these conditions, it was necessary that an efficient work force be put together which would enable a large amount of routine work, such as blotting, to be accomplished in the time available. The limited size of the Archives staff, as well as the fact that certain regular archival duties still had to be carried out, meant that an outside labour force had to be acquired. The gap was filled by university students from the Fredericton area, supplied from the Canada Manpower Office; by volunteer labour from institutions such as the Kingsclear Reform School; and for an initial period of about one week, by regular staff from the Department of Justice who trained the other labourers in the filing techniques necessary to that Department's records. At its peak period, the flood damage program paid some ninety-three persons. It was an agreeable discovery for the Archives to find that nearly all persons employed under the program quickly grasped the importance of the work they were doing, and proceeded efficiently with their tasks once they were shown how the work had to be done.

In order to set out the duties necessary, and to oversee the work's completion, Archives staff members acted in a supervisory position throughout the program. After some initial confusion as to proper procedure, work groups with student directors were established in certain specified areas. Each group was given one or two tasks and quickly established the most efficient manner of doing this. In this way, a common knowledge of the best procedures was built up among the workers and, when periodic student replacements came in, there was no disruption in work flow.

Certain special needs soon made themselves apparent once the work force was organized. A large refrigeration truck was hired to freeze all the damaged papers so that work could proceed at a proper pace, without fear of losing documents done weeks later. This alleviated the immediate prospect of mould growth, although for economic reasons, it was realized such an expensive unit could not be retained over a very long period of time. Papers were removed the day before the work on them started to allow them to thaw overnight. They were then separated by subject matter and directed to the proper rooms for processing; this involved separation, flattening, removal of all staples and metal clips, blotting twice and reassembly when dry. Blotting, of course, created a demand for huge quantities of paper towelling, the only economical drying paper available. The city of Fredericton was soon nearly cleaned out of this item and local wholesalers were hard-pressed to supply the amounts subsequently needed. An estimated 7,436,550 running feet of towelling was used. Other items required were de-humidifiers for use in the rooms where blotting was proceeding. Even with two or three of these machines operating in a large room, it was dif-

difficult to keep down humidity levels. Space was yet another requirement that soon exceeded the available supply. Large areas of the Provincial Archives building and the Records Centre were set aside for the program. It was found necessary to curtail public use of the building, and for approximately 2-1/2 months, researchers found the premises difficult to use for purposes of quiet reflection.

The final process in the program, after the restoration of the documents to their original order, was microfilming. Because of the great legal problems which were involved with the adoption and divorce records from the Department of Justice, it was felt unwise to trust completely the original papers rescued in the program. Microfilm back-up copies were made for all these critical groups, and this microfilming meant a further expenditure of time and money. The Archives Microfilm Service was itself unable to accomplish the work because of its own regular program of departmental records registered under destruction schedules. It was possible, however, to offer supervision and training so that four additional student microfilmmers were able to work throughout the summer. This special microfilming was done on four new 16mm cameras ordered for the program.

A word should also be said in regard to the books and printed documents which were damaged. Archives generally attempt to avoid involvement with printed materials, as these most properly fall within the jurisdiction of libraries. The special administrative connection which exists between the Provincial Archives and the Legislative Library, even if only temporary, made action necessary on the part of both institutions. The bulk of the Legislative Library's damaged materials were Victorian literature, travel and government publications. Soon after the books were removed and unloaded in drying rooms, a process of "weeding" had to begin. Out of the thousands of pieces involved, only 2,000 to 3,000 volumes proved worth salvaging and the rest were destroyed. The percentage of government publications ultimately saved was much higher. The volumes were inter-leaved with paper towelling and closely watched for mould growth.

The books of the Barristers' Society and Law Library fared much worse. Most of these volumes were on poor quality paper of the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries, and no attempt was made to save these. A hideous pink and orange mould soon grew over whole rooms full of these books set out for examination. However, the Archives staff did discover some 100 to 200 volumes printed before 1840, bearing signatures and other indications of use in the Province. These were removed to the Archives building itself, were carefully dried, and will form the basis of an historic law book collection. The existence of these books was a pleasant surprise to all, because they had been hidden for years in obscure cellars.

The financing of the entire flood damage program can be called something of a miracle in itself. Historical resources programs, at least in New Brunswick, have always required more money

than has been available for their budgets, and the Archives budget for 1973-74 was no exception to this. The program might have placed impossible strains on the Archives operation had it not been for the very generous attitude which was manifested on all levels of the government. Approximately \$400,000. was made available under a special Federal-Provincial cost-sharing arrangement, and it is hoped that when all the bills are finally received, this amount will prove sufficient.

There are three points which can be made by way of conclusion. The first of these is that the experience with flood relief in New Brunswick underscores, above all, an argument which archivists have been making to government officials and the public for years. The failure of government departments to utilize Archives-sponsored records centre programs, with rationally conceived retention/destruction schedules, can only lead to disaster. The tremendous output of modern departmental "paper-mills" demands control, and the dictates of space will bring answers in one way or another. The fact that the New Brunswick departments affected by the flooding were the cause of their own problems, through intransigence to the Province's archival programs, despite their concern for control, secrecy, quick retrieval and economy, goes a long way in pointing out the necessity for greater reliance on archival institutions. These institutions should be adequately funded, staffed and armed with the legislative power to enforce records control.

Secondly, the experience with flood damage in New Brunswick points out the flexibility of a well-managed archival structure. The ability of scale down long-term projects in order to handle more immediate crises at considerable inconvenience, and then bounce back to regular routines proves the capacity of an archives to handle many different situations.

Finally, and most obviously, the experience in New Brunswick should make all Canadian archives take a serious look at the physical location of their own buildings, and those where major departmental and private documents are stored, in relationship to a wide variety of potential natural disasters. A little foresight can often save a great deal of trouble.