THE WASHINGTON REGIONAL
STATE ARCHIVES SYSTEM:
A RESPONSE TO ISOLATION

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The Washington State Archives is, in fact, the Division of Archives and Records Management. As the archives of the State of Washington, the Division is responsible for assembling, preserving, arranging, describing, and making available for public use archival records from both state and local government agencies. The Division also is responsible for coordinating the review and approval of the disposition of public records and for assisting state and local agencies with records retention scheduling, as well as for other relevant facets of public records management. The Division’s overall goal is to carry out these functions so that they complement each other to make the total public records system accessible, usable, and cost-effective.

The Regional State Archives System is being developed as an extension of this operating philosophy. Each Regional State Archives serves as a repository and public research facility for archival records from local government and state agency field offices in its area. In addition, the regional archivists provide records management assistance to local governments.

The need for such a system is based primarily on geographic conditions. Because the seat of state government is not centrally located, citizens and agencies in many areas of the state are far removed from the State Archives and the services it is supposed to provide. This problem has been compounded by the state’s physical nature: it contains a number of natural barriers that make travel and transport difficult and expensive. Besides creating logistical problems, these barriers have spawned distinct regions. These regions have separate social, political, and economic
identities which often manifest themselves in fervent regional pride and sometimes in suspicion of remote state agencies and programs. The Regional State Archives System seeks to resolve these difficulties by making the broad range of the Division of Archives and Records Management's services more directly accessible to citizens and agencies in all parts of the state.

The foundation of the Division's public records management program is records retention scheduling. Not only does a retention schedule provide an agency with continuing authorization for the disposition of obsolete records, but it can also provide a comprehensive overview of the agency's entire records keeping system. When combined with an effective system for storing non-current records and with efficient records disposition procedures, it creates a flow between records creation and disposition which gives the agency the capacity to absorb the new records that are continually being created and which ensures that potentially archival records series are designated as such.

In addition, the information assembled in a records retention schedule can be employed effectively to apply technologies such as micrographics to the problems that they can most efficiently resolve, to control the impact of other technologies such as xerography and data processing which may actually create records management problems, and to focus the application of such techniques as forms management, reports management, and copier control.

Although the precepts of public ownership and access to state and local government agency records have been well established in state law, and although the basic principles and techniques for efficiently managing public records to achieve these ends have been developed by the Division of Archives and Records Management, their impact on agencies outside of the state capital area is far from complete. Correspondingly, the results, though gratifying in many cases, have been far from adequate. The Division's solution to this problem is to make its records management services more accessible to agencies in all areas of the state by extending them through the Regional State Archives System.

The archival records generated by public agencies at the state and local levels are extremely rich research sources, but are largely
unrecognized and under-utilized. The evidential properties of these materials are obvious. The background and detail they provide on specific events and actions of government can be found nowhere else. However, the informational value of public records is equally significant and much more diverse. The social, economic, and physical characteristics of states, regions, counties, cities, and towns are reflected in the records of the agencies that serve them.

For example, one researcher traced the occupations of a family over three generations from information contained in personal property tax assessment rolls. This family started with a small trading vessel, then went into farming and finally fishing. Another individual in the same county listed only a gun and a bank account which grew larger and larger through the years. In their entirety, these data set patterns for the area's economy, lifestyles, and aspects of family life having to do with the sharing of work, as well as the passage of property and trade skills between generations. Information gathered through other types of public records also can be used to describe and quantify different aspects of economic, industrial, environmental, and social conditions through time.

These research materials are of great value to many user groups besides professional historians, geographers, political scientists, social scientists, and genealogists. Other users include local historians, local historical groups, community and public interest groups, historic preservationists, archaeological historians, public planners, research analysts, attorneys, public schools, and the emerging non-academic professionals known as public historians. The public archives has much to offer these groups in terms of primary documentation.

However, while the awareness of these groups has been slowly increasing, their impact on the public archives in Washington and its impact on them are still latent factors. The root of the problem is lack of general information on the existence of the public archives, what it is, what material it contains, and the usefulness of that material. This problem can be solved by actively educating the public and by making the archives more physically available for public use.

In Washington, part of this solution is the recently completed Historical Records Survey, which was planned and sponsored by
the Washington State Historical Records Advisory Board and funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. The survey covered private collections, groups, and businesses as well as public agencies and the public archives. The guides it produced provide comprehensive information on primary source materials of all kinds held within the state. The dissemination and promotion of these guides should have a significant impact on use of materials held by all types of repositories. However, the impact on the public archives and public records in general should be profound indeed, because they have not generally been viewed in an historical context up to this point.

The other half of the problem is physical accessibility. Housing all local government archives in the state capital, which is far removed from many parts of the state, severely undermines accessibility of most local government records and retards their use by the individuals and groups to which they are of primary interest. The Division’s solution to this part of the problem is to channel these materials back to the areas of their origin through the Regional State Archives System.

All of the Regional Archives, except one, are located on the campuses of regional universities. The relationship between the two institutions includes a number of aspects that are mutually beneficial. One is that the primary sources gathered in the public archives are directly available to scholars and other researchers who have a direct interest in the region they document. Beyond that, the regional universities are working towards becoming resource centers which provide information, technical assistance, and problem solving forums for agencies, groups, and citizens in their areas. Both the public archives and the records management services of the Regional State Archives fit into this context. The regional universities can give the Regional State Archives System the visibility that it needs to become a well used community resource. Correspondingly, the presence of the public archives enhances the regional universities’ own outreach programs. These shared interests form the foundation of a working relationship which should be an important advantage in building the strength and effectiveness of both systems.

The regional archivist holds the key position of a general
practitioner who must meld the professional skills of the archivist and the records manager. He is responsible for coordinating field appraisals, accessioning, arrangement, description, and public reference service. With his working knowledge of the holdings of the public archives, active records in government agencies in his region, and the data base generated by the State Historical Records Survey, the regional archivist actually has the capacity to serve as an archival outreach coordinator who can help an individual set up a comprehensive bibliography of primary research sources on a given subject from both public and private repositories. Thus, this regional system not only makes the public archives more directly accessible for public use within the areas of their origin, but it extends the Division's archival and research expertise to citizens across the state.

The Regional State Archives and the regional archivists in particular also enhance the Division's ability to develop its local government and state field agency collections. Because his responsibility is limited to a particular area and because of his proximity to the agencies within that area, the regional archivist is able to establish much closer working relationships and make more frequent contacts. Thereby, he is able to develop a more regular flow of materials into the public archives and is able to effect their transfer on a more timely basis. As a result, the strength of public archives collections, their usefulness, and their rate of use are enhanced.

The Division's records management program is also strengthened by the regional archivists. The close working relationship that they establish with the agencies in their areas is again the key factor. Their primary records management objective is to foster the development and regular use of records retention schedules. The regional archivist is also the liaison between local agencies and the Division's more specialized staff, including micrographics and other systems analysts. He can direct the agencies to other sources of technical support such as the State Forms Management Center and Data Processing Service Center. In pursuing these activities, the regional archivist solves a long-standing problem. Local agencies have traditionally been isolated from and unaware of technical services and assistance available from state agencies. This has aggravated many of their management problems. As a
coordinator and facilitator, the regional archivist should have a major impact on the resolution of this situation.

In terms of both its records management and its archival functions, Washington's Regional State Archives System is indeed a response to isolation. It addresses not only the isolation of the Division of Archives and Records Management from its client agencies but also the isolation of public records from the citizens of the state, to whom they actually belong. This isolation has to be dissolved before the Division's goal of a comprehensive public records system can be achieved.

While this comprehensive public records goal is real, the regional network which is supposed to facilitate its achievement remains largely an unfulfilled concept. The network's facilities are in dire need of renovation and equipment, and it is critically short of staff and resources. For the concept of the Regional State Archives to become a reality, these problems must be resolved. The resolution is not confined to money, manpower, and physical resources. It also involves education, recognition by other agencies, and firm policy level support.