THE SHAME OF THE CITIES: PUBLIC RECORDS OF THE METROPOLIS


BY SAM BASS WARNER, JR.


When Lincoln Steffens' famous phrase of indictment was proposed as the title for our session* I accepted it with enthusiasm because it seemed to neatly summarize our archival problems. We have been an urban nation at least since 1920, and save a few exceptions, the official records of our municipalities are ignored, neglected or systematically destroyed. Surely a civilized concern for informing the present with the experience of the past requires at the very least the ordering of these public records.

* This paper was presented at the 1971 Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists in San Francisco. [The same session also featured notable papers by Howard Zinn and Patrick Quinn, both published alongside Professor Warner's article in Midwestern Archivist 2:2].

—The Editorial Board
Yet the more I’ve thought about the problem of urban archives the more I’ve come to the conclusion that the public records per se are not the problem: the City Halls, county buildings, state and federal urban branch offices are not the place to begin, neglected though they surely are. We are the most prolific record-producing society in the history of mankind and a mere call for putting more of these records in order is an irresponsible social act. As I see it even if all the public records of our urban governments were organized into well-selected and well-managed archives I can’t think urban history would improve markedly. I am, after all, an urban historian so I bring to you my concerns for the output of archives, not the concerns of archivists themselves.

The urban history problem lies in the focus and habits of both the historical and archival professions. Until this focus changes and these professions are willing to take risks to provide the kind of history that the public demands and needs, no amount of archival funding will bring a desirable public result.

Steffens’ indictment is more apt than we originally imagined. He charged that the rich and comfortable of America commonly neglected their cities. They pursued their own selfish interests, if necessary purchased favors from politicians, and left the public services of sanitation, housing, transportation, health, and education, upon which the general public depended for their everyday life, to the corrupt and incompetent management of local bosses. It seems to me that historians and archivists have similarly made themselves comfortable with the classic concerns of famous politicians, leading families, reformers, and the patronage of high culture to the neglect of the essential issues that determine everyday life in American cities.

I am an enthusiastic supporter of Howard Zinn’s recent revival of the ideas of the historian Carl Becker.\(^1\) History should be a useful art, it should help people living today to understand the world they now face. I follow Zinn and Becker’s lead in their endorsement of the old American tradition that the useful is the good.\(^2\) Urban history should be useful, and so should the archives upon which professional and amateur historians depend. One need not go far to establish that our present performance is not much advanced along the path of social utility. As I worked on this paper I had before me two excellent books which attempted to put to use the current literature of urban history. The first was Dwight W. Hoover’s A Teacher’s Guide to American Urban History (Chicago, 1971); the second, Bureau of Curriculum Development, Board of Education of the City of New York, Grade 8 Guide to Urban Growth: Challenge of a Changing Society (New York, 1968). Both books scanned the current literature of urban history, geography, economics, and planning to find materials which would help young people get a reasonable focus on the world in which they lived. Both reveal the shortcomings of our efforts. In general the literature is very spotty over time: politics is covered in one era but neglected in another, labor comes forward in the late nineteenth century and fades in our own time, housing is either old slums or modern suburbs. Next, there is a general reform bias, suggesting that if only people voted a little more often and more carefully they would have humane cities. Finally there is a terrible gap between the leaders, institutions, and events of city life that are dealt with and their consequences for everyday life. School child, teacher, and general adult reader are entitled to say of the existing literature: “what has all that got to do with me?”
What I want to propose is that the historical and the archival professions consciously adopt as their guiding principle the goal of service to the public. Service with the records and interpretive histories which will help people understand the urban world in which they now live. We should say with Zinn and Becker that our job is to help every man make an intelligent history for his own personal use, and that, in so far as it is humanly possible, we abandon the pursuit of the classic subjects of American history and turn instead to the historical explanation of the major issues of our own time.

If this be our goal, then, what would be the subjects of urban history and what sort of archives would be necessary to make such a history possible? Let us begin where the public’s own perceptions are. If you go about the city asking people what is important to them you will get the following kind of response, at least from the men: first, jobs and family income, second, education for the children, third, housing, fourth, health. This is an intelligent assessment of how a family survives and prospers in the modern world, and I see no reason not to adopt these almost universal priorities as our own.

Accordingly, historians and archivists of every metropolitan region ought to get together and choose one or another of these subjects as the focus of an urban archives. That is, San Francisco might establish a business archives, Detroit a labor archives, Los Angeles a housing archives, Boston an education archives, Atlanta a health archives, and so forth.

Specialization seems to me to be absolutely essential. The modern American city functions over a large metropolitan region, a region made up of many political and governmental units, so that the old local history approach which was rooted in the political boundaries of one or a few cities is bound to fail. Further, I see no likelihood of either big city or metropolitan resources being adequate to support what I would term a good all-purpose urban archives. Nor, if money were available, would it be desirable for us to propose such a consumption of public and philanthropic resources. There is insufficient variation among modern American cities to justify the repetition everywhere of the same sort of collection. A few well-managed and well-funded specialized archives which completely and aggressively cover their specialties for their own particular metropolitan region will suffice for historians to write accurate histories of the American urban experience. Finally, I have high expectations for these specialized archives and foresee a much more active and demanding role for archivists than would be compatible with the maintenance of a general urban archives.

If archivists are to escape being the prisoners of their record sources they must become aggressive collectors of current as well as past material. As Howard Zinn pointed out in his address at “The Archivist and the New Left” session at the 1970 SAA Annual Meeting, our current document sources do not represent the dissidents, they underrepresent the experience of ordinary people, and they hide official mistakes and unfair treatment. To combat this bias the archivist must become a historical reporter for his own time. I agree with Howard that we must seek the records and papers of the Panthers, Post Office strikers, welfare mothers, anti-school-bussing pickets, and so forth. Such people should also be interviewed and their responses taped. If the local newspaper hasn’t photographed them, the archivist should take their pictures.

There is a sound political and social science reason for adding this task to the archival duties. Politically such actions restore the balance of the archives. From a social science
point of view such movements of protest—whether they be from the right or the left, whether they be riots, strikes, shoot-outs, or angry protests—reveal the latent conflicts in our highly organized society. When a group of mothers, homeowners, unemployed blacks, prisoners, or disgusted truck drivers protest, they evidence the stored and generally repressed feelings of anger and frustration latent in the society. To record these people's actions, their ideas and publications, is to make available to the future the evidence of questions not asked in the surveys, of people not elected to public office, of those outside the official records of unions, trade associations, and political parties. Most Americans, most of the time live lives of quiet desperation, as Thoreau said; it is only in these small, often obscure and unattractive outbreaks, that we can discover the sources and content of that despair.

To this active collection and interviewing of present persons and events I would add two further archival tasks: sampling and photography. A metropolitan region embraces the experience of millions and some of this experience is recorded in giant record systems. The birth and death records, the school and hospital records, credit union files, welfare dossiers and the like cover large segments of the population. It seems to me that archivists and specialists in demography, health, education, and other subjects should form committees to establish sampling procedures for the preservation of historical series selected from these massive sources. If Rochester were the seat of an urban health archives then that archives should establish and maintain a sample which would tell as completely as possible the health experience of that region; if the St. Louis archives were concerned with employment then there should be a statistical panel of families which would tell of the work experience of that region. Each specialty and its associated record sources have unique sampling problems; there are as well issues of confidentiality which must be mastered, but such complexities can be dealt with by sustained scholarly effort.

Finally, many of the written records of an archives require photographs to enhance their full meaning. To get a sense of working class life in a city for any time period is now an immensely difficult task. To remedy such shortcomings, each specialized archives should both systematically collect and *take* dated and fully labeled photographs portraying the commonplace manifestations of its particular subject matter. The classification system of the Library of Congress for the Farm Security Administration photographs can serve as a model of how to begin. We need systematic photographic reporting of people at work, children and teachers in schools, vernacular architecture, women and children in their home activities, and so forth.

I think if one views archives and archivists in such a light then the old goals of extending a local history archives to cover a metropolitan region is clearly unfeasible. The task is just too large. Finally, some of the four subjects of popular priority are immensely difficult to handle. Employment and income cover a range of issues reflected in such documents as business records of executive decisions, personnel and engineering studies, union files, public employment studies and programs, Chamber of Commerce and bank attempts to attract new firms to the city, working conditions in large factories and offices and in the thousands of small shops of the city. Archivists, historians, and social scientists will clearly have to experiment with more than one form of archives to build a workable record in such a complex subject. Some of these experi-
ments will surely fail either for lack of funds or lack of use. As professionals we are
going to have to take chances on collecting the wrong material or arranging it in the
wrong way. As things now stand, history is unique among the social sciences in that
every scholarly effort is called a success—after all, every effort produces a history. So
too with archives, every collection in time becomes an archive. But this easy definition
is our irresponsibility: by freeing ourselves from any meaningful definition of failure
we call irrelevance success.

Now as professionals we do know that more is involved in the popular issues of jobs,
education, housing, and health than just archives so named. I would hope that in the
next decade a few cities would organize themselves specifically around each of the
named topics, but there will be need for additional specialties too. Despite the public’s
well-deserved distrust of politicians, we know that political and administrative deci-
sions determine much of the life and development of our cities. We will need archives
of urban politics. Such archives will have to be depositories for all official materials,
papers of the elite, and voting records just as we now assemble them. Such collections
should also include the materials of the reporting archivists who seek interviews and
papers from dissident groups, lawyers and businessmen who negotiate major contracts,
and the specialists such as engineers, and consultants who provided the rationale or
justification for official decisions.

Transportation and communications are obvious topics for the specialized urban ar-
chives. Such collections should include not only the background to official decision-
making, for example, public highway and utility hearings, protests and petitions by
citizens, but also such records as will allow a follow-up assessment of the consequences
of these decisions: the daily pollution indexes, the telephone traffic statistics, the flows
of cars and trucks, changes in land use and ecology. One of the very important needs in
the modern city is the information for the assessment of the successes and failures of
past projects and programs. For instance, for whom and in what ways are Los Angeles’
freeways a success? Who will San Francisco’s rail system serve and what will be the
consequences of this alternative investment? Such issues can only be evaluated by long-
time series analysis, and the long-time series is peculiarly the business of the historian
and the archivist.

Finally, I think of a whole list of specialties, each one of which casts an important
light on the sub-cultures of our cities: the blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans,
Poles, Jews, Irish, Germans, WASPs. An archives of high culture and another of popu-
lar culture, and archives on the family and one on women, should also be included
among these specialized archives.

To conclude, the basic strategy I propose to deal with the shame of the cities is as
follows:

1. That historians, archivists, social scientists, and librarians adopt as their goal pro-
viding city dwellers of America with the knowledge necessary to place their present
experience in a historical context and the knowledge necessary to assess the polit-
ics, programs, plans, and decisions of the present in the light of the past.
2. That we accept the idea that, with few exceptions, the modern city cannot be comprehended by its political boundaries and that urban archives should be metropolitan in scope.

3. To meet these objectives, the archivists and historians of each metropolitan area ought to meet together, canvass the potential of present collections, assess the particular resources and interests of their area and decide to concentrate their efforts on one, or in the case of very large metropolises, a few specialties.

4. The specialized archives should be built very aggressively and self-consciously with a great deal of emphasis on collecting material from groups normally left out, and on reporting, taping, photographing and systematic sampling of the present by the archives staff.

I realize that I haven’t dealt with the problems of the storage, management, and access to the legal records of the many jurisdictions that make up any American metropolis, nor have I touched upon the coordination of such specialized urban archival efforts with existing municipal, state and national archives. There are and would be, of course, important requirements for cooperation to link the new archives with the local, state and federal network. These seem to me issues which archivists would be more qualified to discuss than I. The point I want to leave with you is that archivists and historians must leave their narrow professionalism and seek more directly to serve the needs of the American urban public. There is a long-standing urban crisis in the United States and we, like all urban institutions and professionals, are part of the problem and not as yet part of the solution.

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