Transportation heritage and conservation: Archival theory and practice in the Erie Lackawanna Historical Society Collection.

Scott E. Randolph
Curator, Erie Lackawanna Historical Society Collection
Assistant Archivist, Erie Lackawanna Historical Society
Doctoral Student, Purdue University Department of History

Transportation infrastructure and the mechanized movement of goods and people are fundamental features of modern life. What characterizes America most fundamentally is the distances of this broad land. Our struggles to knit a nation across the breadth of the continent are a deep part of the American myth. That struggle against what scholars call the “tyranny of distance” has altered and created communities both large and small.

In fact, most of you know this instinctually—having spent your professional lives addressing an innumerable set of questions, problems and solutions to the issue of “getting around.” For that matter, you have all had a part, whether you recognize it or not in writing the history of transportation in the state of Indiana. However, given the circumstances of local and state politics and the nature of the work you do, many of you stay firmly—and rightly so—planted in the present and the future.

Obviously, given my training as a historian and archivist, I firmly believe in the need for preserving the material and manuscript records of the past. What my job here today is, is to convince all of you of the need to preserve the transportation heritage of the state, but more importantly, laying out a theoretical approach to preservation using practical examples drawn from my work on the Erie Lackawanna Historical Society Collection at the University of Akron Archival Services in Akron, Ohio.

So, that said, we will approach this methodically—in three sections:

1. Why Transportation Heritage? Why should we preserve the material records of the past?
2. The sheer volume of records we generate marks Modern society perhaps most characteristically. Since we cannot save everything, what should we preserve?

3. Deciding what we should save is only one step. We must also develop the procedures, mechanisms and relationships to implement effectively a program of archiving important records.

In all three of these sections, I will emphasis the crucial role partnership plays in creating and sustaining a preservation program.

**Part I. Why should we care about preserving our transportation heritage?**

A. Saving physical objects, the material past, such as an antique bridge, or a steam locomotive or a stretch of original pavement along the Lincoln Highway is, in a way, easy. They are tangible, in many cases monumental, easily converted into tourist objects and generally have a broad popular support.

B. Saving manuscript records is a different issue, in part because it is harder to mobilize public support for such preservations. So why then, should we?

   1. Sentiment: The past once lost, is irretrievable. The classical Greeks believed that one moved through existence facing backwards, with the broad expanse of the past ever visible before you, the present evident in your peripheral vision as it swept into the past from both sides. Today we see ourselves as moving forward, facing forward, with the broad and infinite future before us, the past, dark and “remembered” and out of our field of vision. I argue we need to cultivate more of a classical Greek view. The present and past build from the past, they do not simply drop out of the clear blue sky.

   2. We cannot possibly know all of the issues and questions we will ask of the past in the future, especially if we do not take the time now to assess where we have been. By failing to
attempt to preserve the future, we rob the future of our ability to see change in a historical context and see the larger continuities and factors at work.

**Part II. What should we preserve?**

We will start this discussion with some negatives, some definite “no’s.” We will then follow that with a discussion of audience and some specific questions to keep in mind when reviewing records for preservation.

A. Identical Materials Preserved Elsewhere: A case from the Erie Lackawanna Historical Society Collection.

Any one railroad is, of course, part of an articulated network of railways. This was especially the case with financial relationships. One of the Erie Lackawanna Railway’s constituent railroads (the EL was formed by merger in 1960) was the Erie Railroad. From 1898 to 1940 the Erie controlled, but did not own, the New York, Susquehanna and Western Railway (NYS&W). Logically speaking, the Erie Lackawanna Historical Society should actively solicit, collect and accept materials relating to the history of the Susquehanna. However the NYS&W has a very active, well funded (in part by the railroad itself, which still operates) Historical-Technical Society. So while we will accept common material such as timetables, anything else we encourage donors to send to the NYS&W Technical and Historical Society. A similar situation for many local and county road commissions is duplicate records held by state or federal agencies.

B. Personnel Records.
Papers that contain private information such as social security numbers and payment records on individuals cannot be preserved for later public access. While there are circumstances under which such material could be preserved and made available, the legal implications and potential repercussions for failing to abide by privacy laws are too severe to risk. However, we should retain and preserve for posterity a picture of who worked in the transportation industry, how they worked, where they worked and so on. An example, I am currently working on a project concerning the meaning of work in relation to unemployment during the Great Depression using records, claim agent files in particular, abandoned by Conrail in the early 1980s and saved only by happenstance and eventually donated to the ELHS by an individual who recognized their value. They are now a literally priceless window into managerial and employee attitudes toward work in the 1930s.

C. Defining an Audience: The kinds of questions to ask and answer when creating an archival policy.

It is important to understand that with our transportation heritage, there are two broad audiences for those records, and they are generally interested in different kinds of records.

1. Buffs, local amateur historians and genealogists. This is actually the majority of the audience for historical documentation especially in the railroad history community. Similar groups exist with interests in automobile and highway history such as the Motor Bus Society and the Lincoln Highway Association. In the railroad history community this group is interested generally in photographs, general maps, engineering drawings, timetables, equipment records and right-of-way or Federal Valuation maps. However, local amateur historians are often the “grunts” of preservation, so this audience should not be slighted. They are often not as
concerned with larger historical issues or the current interpretative debates of the historical discipline, because they are more interested in “proximate” causes and outcomes.

2. Professional Researchers such as historians, sociologists and lawyers. This group is not often animated by the “neat-o” impulse does not usually animate this group. They are generally interested in manuscript records such as correspondence, records of official policies and procedures within an organizations and specific projects. Some examples of records sought by this group from the ELHS collection:
   a. Grade Crossing Elimination projects, privately or publicly funded. Records from such projects help explain the political economy of transportation infrastructure.
   b. Financial records used in the preparation of annual reports to stockholders or regulatory agencies
   c. Managerial records concerning resource allocation

Now that we have established the audience, we move on to the question of deciding what is archival and what is not. We live in an age of limitless information, one that began with the typewriter. Information from the millennia before the 1870s is limited, in real terms; one generally saves all of it because of its scarcity. However, this is no longer the case.

Historians spend most of their time looking for enough records to make a coherent argument, however, for scholars working on issues after the mid-nineteenth century; their primary task is information management. In other words, developing mechanisms to sift through the volume of minutia and evidence to find what is meaningful without spending a lifetime at the process.
Thus, in order to determine what kinds of materials should be preserved one should ask the following questions of your records.

Questions to frame archival policy construction

1. How did general topography or lay-of-the-land influence patterns of travel? *

2. What were the initial forms of commercial transport? Sailing ship, river craft, stagecoach, canal boat or steam train? *

3. What factors, physical or otherwise, motivated or discouraged travel? *

4. How were the economy, culture and society altered in both positive and negative ways by changes in transportation? *

5. Did the community traditionally have good travel connections with the outside world? *

6. Did major community growth coincide with arrival of a particular form of transport? *

7. Did the appearance of the steamboat, canal barge, iron horse or the automobile cause instability in the social structure? *

8. Did transportation employees create social distinctions in the community, for example in housing, religion, values, marriages and political beliefs? *

9. How were individuals and communities shaped by the experience of travel (or staying put while others traveled)? *

10. How did changes in transportation infrastructure create, enlarge, diminish or otherwise alter patterns in the movement of bulk commodities and freight?

11. What are the remaining structures (toll houses, depots, trolley barns, air hangers and the like) that make up the historic fabric of local transport? *

12. Do sections of the community show the legacy of commercial transport? In other words, how does the transportation infrastructure impact the geo-political or spatial layout of a community?

13. When and how were public roads improved? What was the progression of materials? *

14. What factors influenced infrastructure investment? How have they changed over time and for what reasons?

15. What specific factors help explain the exact geographic placement of particular transportation infrastructure?

16. Did any one city, which enjoyed direct transport ties, dominate or have a strong impact on local cultural, economic and social activities? *

17. Who worked in the transportation industry? *

Part III: How should we preserve our transportation heritage?

Once you have identified what could and/or should be preserved, we proceed to the stage of implementation: How can we save our transportation heritage? The key to this process is two different, yet complementary approaches, in fact on may pursue both simultaneously. Both can be implemented incrementally into current work cultures if you create an archives policy.

A. Internal Preservation: Materials that will stay within the office or department wherein they were created. For that matter, some records should always stay internal if they will be preserved such as employee records and bidding application information.

   1. Identification of preservation candidate records
   2. Identification of human resources.
      a. Internal paid staff. Advantages: Individuals are already aware of the materials, are familiar with any pre-existing organization structures for those records.
      b. External volunteer staff. Advantages: Individuals bring enthusiasm to the project. Retired Staff bring the same advantages as internal employees; in addition, they are not a drain on financial resources. Co-Op programs for High School Students, College students and Senior Citizens.

B. External Preservation: Designated Materials will leave, either permanently – in which case actual ownership of the records is transferred to a third party or contractually – in which records are released to the custody of a third party for a specified length of time with the sending
organization retaining ownership. This is the relationship the Erie Lackawanna Historical Society has with the University of Akron Archival Services.

1. Identification of preservation candidate records

2. Identification of Third Party Organizations and Repositories
   a. National organizations such as the National Railroad Historical Society and its regional chapters, the Motor Bus Society, and the Lincoln Highway Association.
   b. Regional organizations such as the historical society of a particular railway company, state-wide organizations such as the Indiana Historical Society, which for instance has a strong collection of transportation materials, or the Mercantile Library of the University of Missouri, St. Louis which emphasizes the history of transportation in the Midwest/Great Plains.

3. Local organizations such as town and county historical societies. A fine local example is the Tippecanoe County (IN) Historical Society. Many colleges and universities maintain archives and special collections departments in the libraries.

C. Human Powered Resources: find individuals who need archival experience.

1. Masters in Library Science/Masters in Information Science. Students in these programs often need co-op credits; partnerships with governmental agencies are quite popular.

2. History or Political Science graduate programs. Students, especially those in public history tracks, need co-op experience and opportunities. For example, the Purdue department of History and the American Studies Interdisciplinary program recently inaugurated a Graduate Seminar in conjunction with the Tippecanoe County Historical Society to provide graduate students with invaluable archival experience and the Historical Society with a trained,
inexpensive labor pool with which to work through a backlog of donated, but un-cataloged collections.

3. Summer work for college and high school students. These individuals are generally well-motivated, looking for interesting work especially that which will make them stand out on a college application.

4. Internships and Co-Op opportunities for college and high school during the academic year. This is generally an underutilized resource in many communities.

5. Senior Citizens also provide a talent pool that is usually vastly underutilized. Many active seniors are eager to participate in volunteer work that has meaning or returns to the community.

All of these potential human opportunities are either free or very inexpensive, represent community service going in both directions and, more importantly, move forward the cause of historic preservation.