State of State Documents

Susanne Caro
University of Montana, susanne.caro@umontana.edu
I
n 1870, New Mexico’s territorial governor, William A. Pile, wanted to use a room
that housed Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. territorial archives in the historic Palace of
the Governors in Santa Fe. Pile instructed the territorial librarian, Ira Bond, to clean out the
room. Bond did this by selling the documents to local shopkeepers for wrapping paper, giving
them to the prison, or tossing them out of a window. Bond’s actions drew outrage in 1870,
caused legal issues in the years that followed, and left modern researchers wondering what
documents were lost. Today, his actions seem extreme, but this was not the first or only time
unique state history had been lost.

State documents that are deemed to be of
long-term value must be organized, stored,
made accessible, and the spaces housing these
collections must be maintained. Changing
technologies and limited space pose similar
challenges with electronic materials. Over
time, many state libraries have collections of images,
which are evaluated for condition, and
stored. The more local the information is,
the less likely it is that any other institu-
tions will have a copy. It is important to save
internal reports, policies, records, and materials
showing the work of an agency because those
may be the only copies. If there is only one
copy, it must be kept safe.

Saving Tangible Materials

One danger for historical, print documents
like those lost in New Mexico is that they are
often the only copy. Before technology made
creating multiple copies easier, documents
were written by hand or printed in limited
numbers. A courthouse fire or a broken pipe
could wipe out years of history. For this reason,
it has been important for libraries to collect and
disseminate copies. Depending on the state,
agencies may be required to follow archival
retention schedules for documents or send cop-
ies to their state library, where documents are
then cataloged, organized, and properly stored.

State libraries with depository programs
typically send document copies to designated
collections and archives across their state.
When documents are spread to geographic-
dy different locations, access to users and
reduces the likelihood of losing all copies to
natural disasters. Libraries in a depository
or distribution program are usually a mix of
public and academic institutions that keep or
discard materials based on the needs of their
user communities.

Preservation requirements for paper doc-
uments involve keeping materials safe from
moisture, insects, fires, administrators, and
users. In 2013, a new court clerk in Frank-
lin County, North Carolina, investigated the
basement of the courthouse
and started a very necessary
project. The
basement had been used to
store broken furniture,
to old equipment,
boxes of legislative
documents, court
records, photos,
letters, financial
records, and more
dating back to the
1840s. The local his-
torical society was
engaged to inventory the
material, but due to mold
contamination, concern
regarding confidential documents, and mis-
communication, all of the records were sent
to the local humane society and incinerated. The
historical society’s treasure became the
county's trash.

Users can also cause loss of materials. In
June 2017, the Medford Mail Tribune reported
that employees at an oil company removed
materials relating to the Jordan Cove Energy
Project from libraries along a proposed pipeline
route. At the Coos Bay Public Library, an oil
employee had asked a librarian for permission
to take documents provided by the company.
The librarian asked that they wait for staff
before changes in administration, to capture
materials before they are deleted. Captured
pages are archived in local servers and made
available through services including the Way-
back Machine. State digital preservationists
have made similar efforts to collect state pages
before a transition.

Beyond administrative changes, a docu-
ment may be removed because of the content.
This removal may be for legitimate reasons,
such as a report on a state park providing
information on archaeological sites which
should not be made public, or for inaccuracies
like the advanced placement statistics on the
continued on page 20
The contents may not be available. Preserving digital materials requires an assessment of the materials and their formats, file monitoring, migration to updated formats, and use of emulation software, such as a program that acts like Windows 98 to access and migrate files. Even if the URL for a document is stored, changes to a website could make a link obsolete. To counter this problem, libraries build archives to keep persistent links, or PURLs. Ideally, PURLs should link to a document in a stable location such as a database.

Managing electronic records also requires checking files for changes that indicate data loss. Tools like checksums assign alphanumeric codes to files based on the content. If the code changes, this indicates changes in the file, which alerts managers to the issue. This technology still requires personnel to verify a problem and upload an uncompromised file. To maintain digital records, local governments in New York share a service called the Digital Towpath ([http://digitaltowpath.org](http://digitaltowpath.org)). This project was spearheaded by the Center for Technology in Government to help local governments manage electronic records and to comply with records retention policies and management laws. Record maintenance expenses are reduced by sharing the service. This is not a true archive for managing material for posterity but the model shows promise and meets the needs of the community, including deleting records in accordance with the law.

**The Greatest Threat: Funding**

When legislators are unaware of the importance of state library preservation efforts, libraries often seem like good places to save money. At the state level, budgets can be cut by the legislature or governor and are rarely restored. For example, in Michigan the entire collection of the state library was nearly dismantled by Governor Granholm’s Executive Order No. 2009-36 in 2009. The library had been a stand-alone agency in 2000 when it had a budget of $35 million. When the governor’s executive order transferred the agency to the Department of Education, the budget was cut by $24 million. In 2009, the state appropriated ten million for the library, and by 2010 the appropriations were cut by another million. The 2017 budget for the library returned to a higher level, but is still significantly lower than before the recession. Many state budgets cut during the recession have not recovered. An Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) survey found that most state libraries that suffered budget cuts during the 2009 recession have not had their budgets restored as of 2014. Positions were lost and departments cut or consolidated, so the work of preservation falls to fewer hands. Physical items are less likely to be recovered or stored in a way to prevent further damage. If information technology personnel are lost, digital files may not be properly managed and programs to collect born-digital items may be halted.

In the summer of 2017, the state of Montana experienced a revenue shortfall resulting in significant budget cuts. For the state library, this amounted to over $666,000 for fiscal year 2017, and more the following year. The library lost a quarter of its staff. To help reduce the financial loss and continue to provide vital services, the state librarian made the difficult choice to discard a large, historic collection of federal documents in order to rent space to another agency. Thankfully, however, most of the state documents are still accessible, as the extensive collection had already been digitized through a long-term project with the Internet Archive.

Modern-day libraries are unlikely to burn, but they may fade away as library workers are laid off and servers are not properly maintained. A legislator may decide that digital archives are not needed or have other uses for collection space. In a time when people assume that everything is online we lose more content each day. To prevent the loss of our local histories, state libraries, archives, and local governments must work together to develop solutions and plans to mitigate physical and financial disasters.

Endnotes


