

2001

Local Government Records in Mississippi: A Status Report

Bill Hanna

Mississippi Department of Archives and History

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/theprimarysource>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hanna, Bill (2001) "Local Government Records in Mississippi: A Status Report," *The Primary Source*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.18785/ps.2302.02

Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/theprimarysource/vol23/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Primary Source by an authorized editor of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

Local Government Records in Mississippi: A Status Report

by Bill Hanna, Local Government Records Office,
Mississippi Department of Archives and History

In the second annual report of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in 1903, one year after its establishment, Dunbar Rowland noted that:

"whenever my official duties would allow I have considered it expedient that I should acquaint myself with the official and unofficial records of the various counties, cities and towns of the state...."

Rowland's visits to acquaint himself with the county and municipal records around the state apparently made an impression. In the subsequent annual report he stated:

"With the exception of land records, the oldest county archives are not in use, and in many instances have been boxed and stored away in unused rooms of the county court houses, where they are in constant danger of being destroyed by the dampness, mildew and fire."

Reviewing annual reports during the twentieth century yields persistent references to the concern over the condition of records of local governments throughout the state. Attempts were made on several occasions to address this concern. The earliest response of the Department of Archives and History came in the first decade of the Department when selected county records were loaned for transcribing. A large inventory project was undertaken during the 1930s and early 1940s as a part of the Historical Records Survey Project of the Works Projects Administration. In the early 1970s, the Department initiated microfilming of county records in seventy-nine of the eighty-two counties as a follow-up to microfilming project of the Genealogical Society of Utah. As the Department of Archives and History initiated legislation for a comprehensive records management program in the late 1970s and early 1980s, success was accomplished only in the area of records of state government. Language including the records of local governments was removed in an effort to obtain passage of the bill.

Concern regarding the condition of local government records continued and was evident in the 1981 study undertaken as a part of the State Historical Records Assessment and Reporting Project funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and administered by the Department of Archives and History. The project studied four major areas of historical records in Mississippi, including local government records. Among the findings were inadequate storage and lack of retention guidelines and authority.

In 1995, the Mississippi Legislature established the Advisory Commission on Local Government Records which submitted recommendations to the Mississippi Legislature in January 1996. Subsequently, upon these recommendations, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 2832 establishing the Local Government Records Committee and Local Government Records Office within the Department of Archives and History.

There have been significant gains made in the management and preservation of records of local governments since the implementation of the Local Government Records Law in 1996. Although the progress achieved has not been realized in all local governments, there are concentrated efforts underway in at least one-quarter of the state's eighty-two counties to establish a clear records management and

archives function within county government. The same type of effort found in the larger municipalities within the state.

Retention Guidelines

The most positive result of the 1996 law establishing a records management program for local government is the availability of records retention guidelines. Currently there are retention guidelines for nearly 600 records series in a total of sixty-three approved retention schedules for county, municipal and school district offices. Before the passage of the local government records legislation, only twenty-five series had clear retention instructions available (through state law). The benefit of the availability of retention guidelines has been to clear unusable storage areas of useless records. The results have been two-fold: providing additional storage space for temporary records and, more importantly, making the effort to preserve and make available permanent local government records more manageable and feasible. The Local Government Records Office has provided assistance to numerous counties in all areas of the state in inventorying records and identifying those eligible for disposition as well as noting those with permanent value.

Notable Progress

As mentioned earlier, there are many counties and municipalities that are making real progress in the management and preservation of their records. Lauderdale County and the City of Meridian have been leaders in local government records management since the early 1980s. Their cooperation and support in the establishment of the Lauderdale County Department of Archives and History has been integral in the success of their programs. The City of Jackson established a municipal records management program in the early 1990s. Harrison County, under the leadership of Chancery Clerk John McAdams, has made an intensive effort and commitment to the establishment of a records management program (see article in this issue). Adams County, with the leadership of Chancery Clerk Tommy O'Beirne and the assistance of the Historic Natchez Foundation (see article in this issue) has, as well, taken steps to insure the preservation of the permanent records of the county. Numerous other counties such as Tate, Oktibbeha, Lincoln, Jackson, and Pike have committed resources to establishing an on-going records management program and archives recently. Many other counties are, for perhaps the first time, committing time and resources toward addressing issues associated with the management of their records. For these and other counties, the future appears bright for the preservation of local government archives.

Difficulties facing local governments

In spite of this optimistic outlook, numerous problems still face local government in the management and preservation of their records. Resources of local governments, particularly the smaller counties and municipalities, are limited. As local officials face the priorities of providing basic services to its citizens, records preservation simply takes a back seat to law enforcement, access to health care, patching streets, providing utilities, and the numerous other services that are essential in our society. Even with the opportunity to avail themselves of the additional filing fee for records management purposes as provided in the local government records law, the resources are not adequate to make a significant advancement in management and preservation of records for these local governments.

The Future

There are no "one size fits all" answers to local government records problems in Mississippi. While we have advanced significantly in most areas of the state in the recognition of the need for addressing these issues, law enforcement, potholes, and other issues will still occupy the seat of attention. However, the successes of the past few years do provide us with some areas in which we might focus our attention.

Many of the successes that we have witnessed since 1996 have been achieved because of strong

interest and active involvement of local historical and genealogical groups providing both motivation and assistance to local officials in local government records issues. A good example is the Tate County Genealogical and Historical Society, which now operates the Tate County Archives adjacent to the Tate County Courthouse. This local society provides much time and effort and has transformed stacks of unusable piles of records into a county archive. Although much work remains to be done, Tate County, along with several others around the state, has found this type of partnership to be the answer to responding to records needs with very limited resources.

There have been only a few attempts made related to regional archives in the state. Although this type of response has not received significant support at the local level, it remains as a valid solution to the limited resources available to respond to the management and preservation of local records and is an alternative that must continue to be discussed in the future.

Much work remains to be done. Many of the problems that faced those dealing with local government records in the early 1900s during Rowland's efforts, during the 1930s with the attention of the W. P. A., during the 1960s and 1970s in the microfilming efforts, in the 1980s at the time of the needs assessment survey work, and in the mid-1990s at the passage of the local government records legislation are still facing local officials. But progress has been made. If we continue to focus on assistance to local governments through records management guidelines, the interest and support of local societies, and recognition of the achievements in addressing records storage and preservation problems by the many local governments that are successfully addressing them now, the future for the preservation of this significant source of political, social, economic, and genealogical history will be brighter than ever before.

For more information, retention schedules and instructions visit the Records Management page of the MDAH website at <http://www.mdah.state.ms.us/locgov/localgov.html>

Bill Hanna, the guest editor for this issue, began working with the Department of Archives and History in 1974 as County Records Archivist. Since then he has served as Manuscript Curator, Head of Special Collections, and Director of the State Records Center. From 1993 - 1997, he also served as Records Manager for the City of Jackson. Currently, he is the Director of the Local Government Records Office. He can be contacted at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Local Government Records Office at 601.359.6894, by at fax 601.359.6964 and by e-mail: bhanna@mdah.state.ms.us