

TO: Miss Adams

May 26, 1955

FROM: M. Burnett

SUBJECT: Visit on May 24 to Municipal Archives & Records Center (N.Y. Public Library)

The Municipal Archives and Records Center occupies space in a large old warehouse at 238 William Street, covering two floors at least, in two connected buildings, with further space allotment in prospect. It is the largest records center in the eastern United States and it is very well organized, although much remains to be done when an increase in the staff can be obtained.

Its fame has spread so that visitors come daily from all over the country, especially representatives from municipalities and private concerns who wish to set up similar archives.

A recent inquirer from the industrial field was the Socony Vacuum Co. which is erecting a new building at Lexington Avenue and 42d. Street. It is interesting that the company is making provision for its archives right on the premises in sub-basements. They wished to get advice on estimating space requirements, i.e. cubic footage of records per square foot, on kinds of equipment, boxing, control records, etc.

Thus a system of instruction through lecture and conference is going on almost continuously here, in addition to an in-service training class for representatives of some 92 departments of the city who are responsible for the records of their respective departments.

In establishing the system five pilot projects were undertaken in 1950 by the National Records Management Council. The present supervisor, Mr. James Katsaros, and his first assistant, Miss Eilerman, whom I interviewed, were in on the project from the beginning, thus ensuring continuity of policy.

There are two distinct projects here, though under the same management, one called the "Records Center" and the other the "Archives".

Archives (cont.)

An important acquisition by the Archives were the administrative records of the mayors of New York City 1892 to date. These were rescued from the basement of City Hall where they were scattered all over the floor and some even chewed by rats. These have been given a quick arrangement by dates and thus are usable for reference even now, if a person has a date clue. Eventually they will be classified and indexed properly.

Another long series is the Coroner's records prior to 1900. The Tax Department also turned over its tax assessment records for all wards in Manhattan and Richmond dating from 1808.

A big picture collection arrived recently from Grover Whalen, covering all his years as the official City Greeter for distinguished visitors.

A sort of distant control over what goes into the Archives is exercised by Mr. Katsaros, the Supervisor, and Mr. Carnival(?) at the N.Y. Public Library, who go out in advance to inspect collections offered to the Center. Thus, much unsuitable material can be eliminated at the source.

Comments

As an example of storage arrangement on a large scale the set-up was an impressive demonstration.

But what especially struck me was the enthusiasm and dedication of purpose displayed by Miss Eilerman, chief assistant to the supervisor. She told me she didn't have to work and her mother urged her to retire, but she had been there now five years and just could not leave the project. In spite of what seemed like prodigious difficulties and problems, and a jugged daily schedule she radiated enthusiastic pleasure in being able to rise to all challenges. She considers archives management a wonderful new field and apparently has aroused in members of her staff the same high interest. One girl abandoned her intention of becoming a lawyer in order to take night courses in records management and others are doing the same. It was very refreshing to find such enjoyment of one's job in what seems to the uninitiated quite unprepossessing surroundings.

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Records Center

The Records Center houses the inactive operating records of 40 city departments and functions as custodian for them, since the records belong to the departments, which specify retention periods and classifications. However, as a matter of fact, the advice of Mr. Katsaros is sought on these matters and his decisions usually prevail. He pointed out that this is a matter of expediency, since he holds the whip hand in his authority to refuse to accept future records from that department if necessary. He is chairman of the Mayor's Archives Committee, consisting of some dozen members, including City Commissioners, which decides policy matters. While retention schedules are ostensibly set by the departments these are constantly brought up for review and revision, and many records are authorized for destruction after consultation with Mr. Katsaros.

This collection is not open to the public since it consists of official city records. However, search will be made by the staff to answer certain legitimate inquiries from outside.

Archives

The archives collection is in a different category and its contents are more of an historical character. Everything here has been turned over to the Mayor's Committee as its property and nothing can be reclaimed later. This committee decides whether a collection has historical value, e.g. a picture collection of a city official who has died. Eventually, when properly arranged and cataloged the archives will be opened to the public, and it is considered a part of the N.Y. Public Library system, just as any other branch.

Much of the material here is similar in nature to the Records but there are other miscellaneous series, such as long bound files of the N.Y. Times and Tribune going back 100 years or so, which were crowded out of their original home in the Hall of Records.