

Introduction

American Municipal Records

Neglect has long characterized the condition of municipal and local government records. Richard J. Cox in his 1983 study of local government records situations in different states across the nation found recurring problems in the use, storage, and availability of materials.¹ This is a serious problem because these records are essential sources for interpreting the history of people, localities, and the nation as a whole. Awareness of the need to preserve local government records has risen significantly within the last few years among archivists, historians, and local officials, but a great deal of effort is necessary to correct decades of dereliction.

While the Baltimore City Archives program is somewhat removed from perfection, substantial effort has been put forward since 1978 to preserve and make available the historical records of the city's government. This guide - one of only a handful devoted to the records of an American municipality - represents the culmination of our work through September 1983. Despite the relatively large quantity of historical records described here, work has only just begun. And although the primary purpose of the guide is to advertise our holdings, we also hope that this publication will contribute to improvement of the records situation of other localities in the United States.

History of the Baltimore City Archives

Baltimore was founded in 1729 and grew slowly during its first fifty years. Stimulated by manufacturing and trade, Baltimore quickly became Maryland's principal city by the end of the American Revolution; by 1800 it was the third largest city in the nation. This transition from a rural village to a major urban center spawned an increase in the size and complexity of Baltimore's government. During the eighteenth century, the state controlled most of the town's official activities. Beginning in the 1780s, residents sought more self-government, a movement that reached fruition in 1796 when the state granted Baltimore status as an incorporated city. The early government was limited to a mayor, a city council, and several other officials. After the War of 1812, the municipal government began to expand into a multitude of agencies that replaced the private individuals and voluntary associations that had traditionally performed the bulk of public services. In 1898, a new city charter established the forerunner of a modern administrative structure in response to the city's continuing growth and need for improved services. Charter revisions in 1925, 1946, and 1964 have shaped Baltimore's government into its present responsive and wide-ranging structure.

¹Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States (N.p.: National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, [1984]): 19-35.