

The history of Baltimore's government in terms of records creation and management is similar to that of most other large cities in this country. For most of the eighteenth century - when the government was small and its activity limited - comparatively few records were produced. Lack of a formal organizational structure also resulted in limited records retention. After incorporation in 1796, the municipal government began to assume an increasing share of responsibility, which in turn generated a growing amount of records. Agencies with permanent employees and separate offices also began to retain more of the records produced. As the years passed and the volume and complexity of municipal records expanded, problems of storage and access developed. There was also hardly any thought given to preservation of material for historical purposes.

In 1874, the municipality made a significant move toward better record keeping practices by establishing a city library. This office had, among other duties, responsibility for maintenance and preservation of the city's records. While little was accomplished during the library's first few years, it had by the 1890s done some limited collecting of material judged to be of historical value. The work of the library reached a zenith in 1903 when Wilbur F. Coyle assumed the post of librarian. Coyle gathered historical records, arranged and indexed them, and published a collection of significant eighteenth and nineteenth century documents. His resignation in 1920, however, effectively ended this kind of work.

During the late 1930s, employees of the federally funded Historical Records Survey (HRS) compiled extensive item indexes to what was then seen as the entire corpus of the city's historical records. While these indexes remain very useful today, the HRS failed to make the most of its opportunity. Few records were added to the archival collection, and little came of any records surveys performed.

By the early 1950s, the mounting problem of records storage and access grew too difficult to ignore. In 1954, the municipal government created a records management program to deal with the proliferation of current records. Although the new agency was given control of the archival collection, no worthwhile work was done with the municipality's historical records for nearly 25 years. The focus of the program was instead upon storing and microfilming routine records identified in a 1954 city-wide survey. The records management program exercised comprehensive authority over the municipality's records for only a brief period, however. Many agencies failed to make use of the program's services, and by the mid-1960s only a small amount of the municipality's records were under systematic control.²

²For a detailed discussion of the archives's past, see Richard J. Cox, "The Plight of American Municipal Archives: Baltimore, 1729-1979," American Archivist 42 (July 1979): 281-292.