Success for the Records Survey

FIRST HISTORICAL ARCHIVES INVENTORY SOON TO BE PUBLISHED

by

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WITHIN the next week or so a little book containing the first fruits of the Historical Records Survey, which has been in progress in Maryland for a little more than a year and a half under the Works Progress Administration, will come off the press.

Several hundred copies of this publication which inventories the archives of Allegany county, will be issued. Of this number, one hundred will be sent to the headquarters of the Works Progress Administration in Washington, fifty to the County Commissioners of Allegany county, and the rest will be distributed among public and school libraries and State offices.

PREPARED by the Division of Women's and Professional Projects under the general supervision of Dr. Emma F. Ward and Walter F. Meyer (the latter State director of the survey), and edited by Dr. M. L. Radoff, this inventory will be the first of a series of cataloging, indexing and classifying the written records Marylanders have made of their legal and governmental activities from the time a handful of freemen in queer-looking clothes met purposefully together in a little cabin on the banks of the St. Mary's river to the present day. Twenty-two other volumes, duplicating for each of the other counties of the type of work just completed in Allegany, will be issued as the data are ready, and a special catalog will be made for Baltimore city.

Another will be devoted exclusively to State records, and there will be still another for church records. Finally, there will probably be a State index of historical records which will make possible the instant location of any record extant in any Maryland depository.

THE PRACTICAL USES of this catalog, according to Mr. Meyer, are numerous and important. It will, he believes, assist in preserving the opening chapters of Maryland history now in grave danger of being lost, and will open up to historians whole new fields which have been neglected because no one knew where to look for data on the subject or whether, in fact, any such data existed. It will be used by students of government, the United States census, the Department of Labor and other governmental agencies. It will promote civilization by making more people aware of the richness of their common heritage.

Like the Allegany county survey, each of the forthcoming volumes will contain, in addition to an inventory of archives, indexed and cross-indexed, a succinct account of the form of government maintained by the unit with which it deals, and will trace its development, often devious and frequently curious, from its origin in Colonial days. The secular history of each county, city and town will be summarized in its various ramifications and with the picturesque detail that whips up dry-as-dust facts into a tale of adventure.

THE ARCHIVES OF MARYLAND, voluminous as they are, unfortunately are far from complete. Priceless documents have been burned, purloined and sold by persons who had access to them; lost by careless officials; expropriated by souvenir hunters; damaged by floods, steam pipes, birds, worms and termites. The condition of some, particularly in the older courthouses, has turned Dr. Radoff and others interested in their preservation from normal sleepers into confirmed insomniacs. In Cecil county, for instance, there is a horde he really would rather not know about at all.

"Some of them," he says, "are of great value and have virtually no protection against the unscrupulous connoisseur. Early plats and maps, oaths of allegiance, discharges from British and German armies, deeds and wills lie all together in a heap, fellows in forgetfulness.

"The records housed on the fourth floor of the Baltimore City Hall, many of them old Baltimore county documents, have been similarly neglected for years and are only now being cataloged and placed in boxes by Mr. Frank Seebald, whose work is being furthered by WPA assistants. In one county courthouse we found an attic where the oldest records had been forced to share possession with a flock of pigeons for more years than the oldest inhabitant could remember. The pigeons prospered and waxed fat, but the state of the records was rueful.

"UNDER present conditions there is no way to protect the records in the Baltimore City Hall. Nothing but a new fireproof building like the Hall of Records in Annapolis would serve the purpose. Some day a match will be thrown down in the building and in a few hours most of its records will have gone the way of too many others in Maryland. Similar conditions obtain at Hagerstown and in other places too numerous for comfort.

"The warning furnished by Calvert county, where not a line exists prior to 1881, though the county was formed in 1654. The rest was lost when the courthouse was burned. The courthouse at Cumberland has been through one fire and two disastrous floods and the city hall in that town was razed in 1911. What is lost is lost irretrievably in the case of government records for they are, almost without exception, unique."

In many places in Maryland the mishandling of old records unquestionably can be traced to lack of interest on the part of custodians but this, Dr. Radoff believes, is rare. He points out that, when a clerk of the Circuit Court, for instance, inherits his office he has no way to tell what he has in his basement vault and what he has not.

If his duties are heavy, he will not have the time to go poking around among the steam pipes or fighting the pigeons for possession of piles of old papers in the attic. Furthermore, Dr. Radoff adds, when he does find his books and papers in bad condition there is little that he can do about it, for officials don't make a habit of appropriating money for the preservation of records, not even for very important ones.

CONTACT with both city and county officials made through the work of cataloging the archives of their various offices has revealed to Dr. Radoff and his associates a genuine interest on their part in the preservation of these documents and the utmost concern over present conditions. They have coöperated to the fullest extent with the WPA survey in its efforts, hampered by lack of funds, to repair damaged records, clean books, label and arrange them in such a way that they will be readily accessible. Money has been provided whenever requested to buy lumber for wooden shelves—at best only a temporary makeshift, offering no solution to the final problem, but decidedly better than nothing at all.

There are, however, certain bright spots in this study in gloom. The Hall of Records at Annapolis, where the records formerly in the custody of the Court of Appeals, the Land Office at Annapolis and certain other documents will be housed, is so perfect in its design and equipment that already it is regarded as a model by archivists all over the country. Nor could anything more be asked in the way of intelligent care and preservation than is to be found in Carroll county, whose courthouse has fireproof vaults in which all papers of importance are kept and to which there is an excellent index. All of the books are well bound, the heavy ones resting on steel rollers which reduce the wear and tear incident to their use.

PASSED through the catalogers' sieves, the flotsam yielded by cubbyholes, attics, dusty shelves and similar repositories has yielded some real finds. In Washington county, for instance, there has come through one disastrous fire a little book (kept by some forgotten register of wills) dated 1803 and entitled "Churches." This tiny volume will be of enormous assistance to the WPA worker compiling the history of Washington county churches for the forthcoming Maryland guidebook. The attic appropriated by the pigeons mentioned above contained a number of valuable nuggets, not the least of which was an excellent set of law books now back in daily use in the courthouse.

In custody of the clerks of the circuit courts, supplementing the records of the office itself, are the records of the old county courts no longer existent; records of manumitted slaves; land records often surprisingly rich in information concerning such things as manumissions, marriage records, bills of sale, chattel mortgages, records of births and deaths; all sorts of information, in fact, which, in many cases, makes it possible to reconstruct almost the entire life history of the landowner involved.

RICH LODES of material invaluable to economic historians and genealogists, much of which has been ignored because it never has been collected in bound volumes and indexed, will at least be located through the present survey. Material of this kind which has been filed subsequently to 1776 is in the custody of the registers of wills for the various counties and Baltimore city, but only experts know where to look for the earlier probate material, and even they are not always successful in finding it.

No good history of taxation in Maryland ever has been attempted, yet Dr. Radoff says there is a fund of information on this subject in the records of the levy courts, assessment books and collectors' books usually in the custody of the County Commissioners.

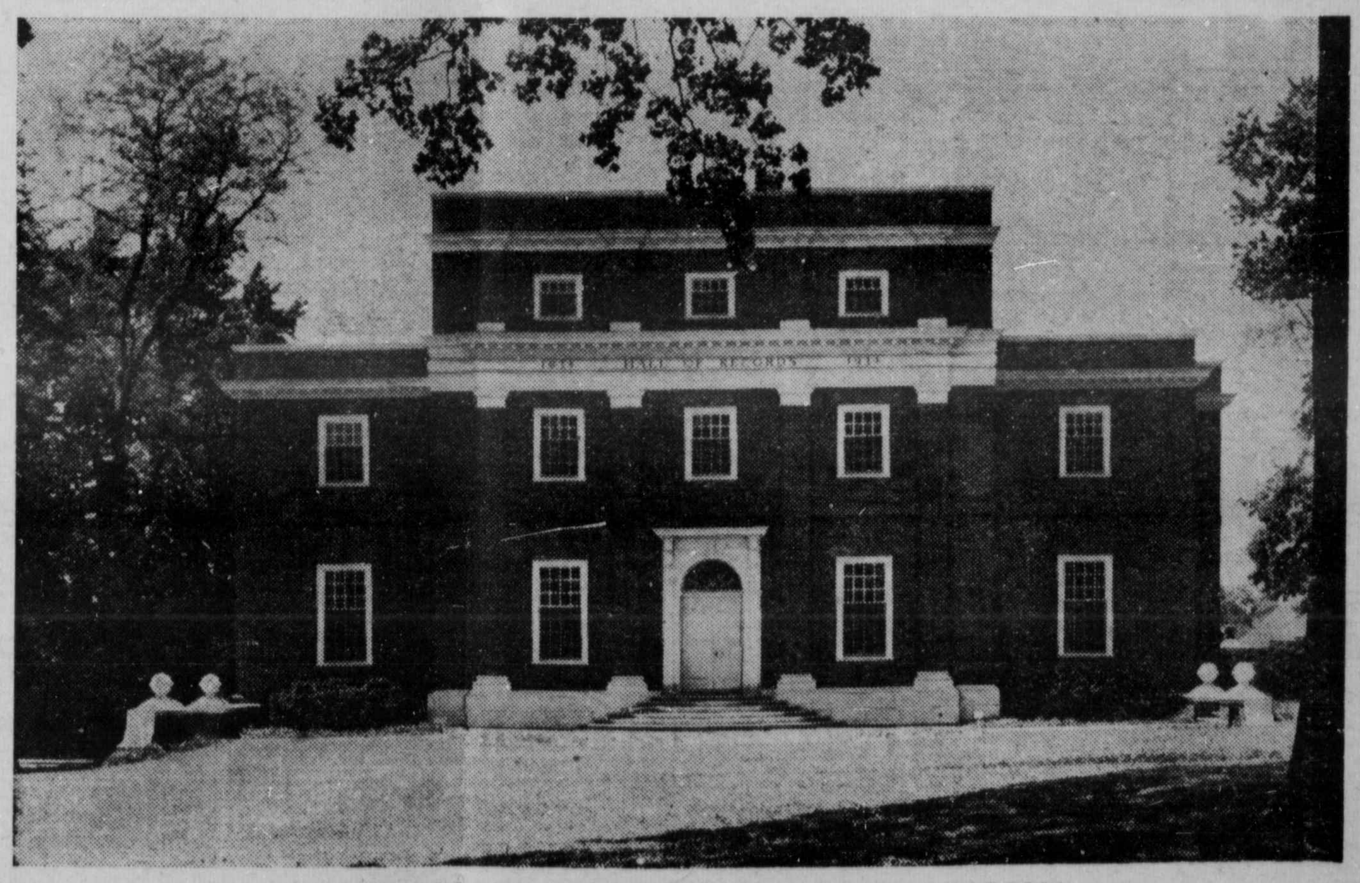
"In their minutes and proceedings and account books," he declares, "complete information can be found concerning the care of the poor, appropriations for health purposes, the history of roads and highways and public education. Our catalog will not be perfect. The job would be a difficult one even for expert bibliographers, and there are very few of them to be found, but it should bring about much greater use of the State and county archives than has been the case in the past and add much to the information Marylanders possess about their own State."

RESEARCH done in connection with the survey, and incorporated with it, has disclosed interesting and little known facts concerning county government. The earliest courts, inquiry developed, were composed of all the justices of the peace who, together with the Sheriffs, constables of hundreds and the coroner, were responsible for keeping the peace as well as for exercising restricted judicial powers (which varied from time to time) in law and equity and all local administrative powers. They drew up the levy, collected the tax and paid all the bills. It was not until 1790, almost twenty years after the Revolution, that the number of justices composing the court was restricted and "a man learned in the law" was appointed to serve on the bench in each county.

The ranks of the J. P.'s also produced the Sheriff, who was nominated by his confreres and appointed by the Governor. And in the early days "a mighty man was he," for the perquisites of his office, mainly derived from the percentage he was allowed to retain of the taxes he collected, were enormous and permitted him to lord it over most of his neighbors, whom he sometimes came to regard as composed of distinctly inferior clay. Retribution came, however, when the inferior clay passed a law limiting the incumbent of the office to a single term.

THE COLONIAL CORONER, ex efficio, was first deputy to the Sheriff. The Commissary General controlled all of the probate business later transferred to the Orphans' Court, and clerks usually were appointed to serve "during good behavior"—a revealing clause.

There is much in the index of Allegany county which will be useful to other counties of the State as well. From it, too, as Dr. James A. Robertson, State archivist, points out in his foreword to the volume, the discerning student will be able very largely to reconstruct the social and economic life of the community from its beginnings in 1789 and "to fit into its proper place the importance of Allegany as the gateway to the West."



THE MARYLAND HALL OF RECORDS AT ANNAPOLIS