

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AND LOCAL HISTORICAL SOURCES

By CHRISTOPHER CRITTENDEN*

The records of our local history ought to be preserved. And if the public library does not do the job, probably it will not be done.

Throughout the United States today there are greater interest and activity than ever before in the field of local history. In North Carolina there are almost fifty local historical organizations—one for every other county in the State. The thousands of people in these groups, who pay part of the taxes that support the public libraries, want and need to study, write, and know their local history. Thus there would appear to be a special reason for preserving the source materials of that history.

What materials in this field may our public libraries appropriately collect and preserve? For one thing, there might well be included as complete as possible a collection of secondary works¹ on the history of the locality. This might encompass studies covering the area as a whole, or some geographical part thereof, or some period or phase of local history, or some church or school or corporation or other organization or group therein. Biographies of local persons would be included. As to form, the collection might comprise books, pamphlets, newspaper articles (which might be clipped for this special collection, in addition to the complete file of newspapers the preservation of which is suggested below), and even multicopied, typed, or sometimes manuscript copies of local history or biography articles such as might be presented to a book club or civic club. In other words, it is suggested that just about every type of secondary materials on the history of the area might suitably be preserved in the local public library.

As for primary source materials, one of the chief responsibilities would seem to lie in the field of newspapers. At the present time, Carolina, Duke, and the State Library all maintain large collections of North Carolina newspapers. None of these institutions, however, is keeping a complete statewide file. Sooner or later a complete or near-complete file may perhaps be kept in some central depository, but even then it would be well for the local library to have a security set. In all cases it would seem that such a library should preserve one or more complete sets of all local newspapers. For of all the sources of local history, covering in detail the many phases of the day-to-day life of the people, probably no other source contains information so much alive and so comprehensive.²

Other primary sources might include printed collections of letters relating to the locality. Diaries constitute a valuable source. Memoirs are usually not as reliable

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¹In the language of the historian, secondary works are those that are not based upon first-hand knowledge or observation. Primary sources, on the other hand, do involve such first-hand contact. For example, a history of such-and-such a county is a secondary work, while original wills, deeds, letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, and the like are all primary sources.

²We are all cognizant, of course, of the poor quality of modern newsprint, so that for permanent preservation our newspapers need to be microfilmed or otherwise reproduced.

but can nevertheless be useful. Accounts of travelers are often illuminating. Printed speeches may contain valuable information. Printed maps are frequently inaccurate but can be worth while, especially large-scale maps published in recent years by official agencies such as the State Highway Department and the United States Geological Survey.

Many of these primary sources are local imprints, and if not saved at the time they are lost forever. Among the most ephemeral of all ephemera would seem to be broadsides (what with modern means of communication, not now as common as in former years). Likewise programs of church services, of book clubs, of school commencements and other events, of theatrical productions, and of various other groups and activities are here today and gone tomorrow. Minutes of various groups, publications of chambers of commerce, and reports of local businesses are worth preserving. Menus of eating places are valuable historical sources.

Obviously we cannot preserve one or more copies of every one of these items. If we did, we would completely fill our stack areas and would have no space for anything else. But we can at least preserve samples and it might be well to draw up plans and procedures for this purpose. We could seek to preserve for a given year so many programs (only a few would be very much worth while) from such-and-such churches, so many menus, and so on down the line. If we could not do this every year, if we would do it at regular intervals, say every two or five or even ten years, we would be rendering a valuable service.

What about pictures? These, especially photographs, are among the most valuable of all primary sources of local history. Ordinarily the public library would seem to be the agency that should preserve them. Commercial photographers, camera clubs, and individuals would likely be glad to help.³

Almost every public library would seem to have an opportunity to build up one or more special collections on one or more persons or topics of local significance. For instance, Miss Margaret H. Ligon, Librarian of the Pack Memorial Library in Asheville, writes: "Asheville is the birthplace of Thomas Wolfe and this library has attempted to collect every item on or about Wolfe for a special collection. We have hundreds of photographs, his books in every language, and critical reviews. I think the collection today numbers almost three thousand items. All towns don't have a Thomas Wolfe, but other subjects could be developed. A city in the tobacco area could develop a collection on tobacco."⁴ Such a special collection would usually include both secondary and primary materials.

If the library does not have all the materials on local history, the librarian can render a service by supplying information as to where such materials may be found. Files of the local newspaper are often in the hands of the publisher, in another library, or elsewhere. Certain individuals may have useful collections. The official and unofficial manuscript sources are usually in courthouses, archives, or other libraries. Rare printed volumes are often in research libraries but, as we all know, some of these may be borrowed on interlibrary loan. Of course, in seeking to serve the public, a top-notch librarian suggests sources outside his own library.

³It is suggested, however, that very large collections of pictures, especially if they cover a broad area, be sent to an agency that is specially equipped to handle technical problems such as classification, cataloging, and reproduction. The State Department of Archives and History is a suitable depository for such collections.

⁴Letter to author, March 12, 1957.

And speaking of assistance to the public, how can the librarian advise the person who wants to know how to go about preparing, writing, and publishing a county or other local history? A useful brief pamphlet on the subject is by Dean Daniel Jay Whitener of Appalachian State Teachers College and is titled *Local History: How to Find and Write It*. (Order from the Secretary, Western North Carolina Historical Association, Box 5150, Asheville, N. C., 75 cents.) Another useful brief study in the field is *Writing Local History Articles*, by Marvin Wilson Schlegel. (Bulletins of the American Association for State and Local History, Vol. II, No. 2, May, 1949. Order from the Secretary, Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge, Mass. 50 cents.) More detailed but perhaps a little advanced for some amateur local historians is *Local History: How to Gather it, Write it, and Publish it*, by Donald Dean Parker. (Social Science Research Council, 231 Park Avenue, New York. \$1.00.)

A number of positive suggestions have not been made as to what local history materials our public libraries may appropriately collect. Perhaps it will clarify the situation if we suggest that on the negative side there are certain things that we would not ordinarily expect of them. Public libraries would not normally be expected to handle archives—the official records of the United States government, the states, the counties, or the municipalities. Such records under the law are provided for at one or more of the various levels of government and usually need not concern the public librarian—except that he should know the location of the different series that bear most directly on the history of the locality. Ordinarily, too, our public libraries are not expected to maintain collections of private and unofficial manuscripts—certainly not extensive ones. The manuscript field is highly specialized and usually would seem to be best left to the large research institution. Should the librarian learn of valuable collections of manuscripts that might be placed in a depository, it is suggested that he get in touch with the State Department of Archives and History, Raleigh; the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; or the Manuscript Collection, Duke University Library, Durham. Ordinarily we would not expect to find large numbers of government documents in most of our public libraries, though the librarian might appropriately seek copies of such documents as bear directly on the history of the locality—and there are far more of these than one might at first suspect.⁵ Likewise, most of our public libraries would not be expected to have extensive collections of general histories of the world, of Europe, or even of the United States—though probably there ought to be at least one good work in each of these fields.

It is realized that not all of what has been said above will apply to every one of our public libraries. The libraries in some of our larger cities are in a better position to build up research collections than is the case with libraries in most smaller communities. Proximity to large research collections is a factor to be considered. For example, there would seem to be less reason for the public libraries in Durham or Raleigh, close as they are to the research centers of Duke, Carolina, and the State Library, to build up research collections than for the public libraries of Wilmington or Charlotte to do so, since these latter are not so near to large research collections. Then too, we should of course think twice before duplicating the collections of institutions other than libraries. If a local historical museum, for instance, has a good collection of local history photographs, it would hardly seem necessary for the public

⁵See David Stick, "History in Your Own Back Yard," an article soon to be published in *The North Carolina Historical Review*.

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library also to enter this field. Thus the situation varies considerably from one community to another, and what will work in one will not work in another.

There are fine possibilities for cooperation between public libraries and local historical societies. The former can devote particular attention to local historical materials, with perhaps a special library section assigned for the purpose, while the latter can be of assistance in collecting the materials to be preserved. It is suggested that librarians call on the societies for such assistance. If the library facilities are inadequate, such societies can serve as a strong source of support in securing more adequate facilities and personnel.

In conclusion then, undoubtedly the sources of our local history ought to be preserved, and the agency best suited to perform this function is the public library of each locality.

CHECKLIST OF LOCAL HISTORICAL SOURCES THAT MAY BE COLLECTED BY THE LOCAL PUBLIC LIBRARY

Secondary Works

The locality as a whole	Schools
A geographical part of the area	Corporations
One or more periods of local history	Other organizations
One or more phases of local history	Biography
Churches	

Primary Sources

Newspapers	Broadsides
Letters	Programs
Diaries	Business Reports
Memoirs	Chamber of Commerce publications
Travelers' accounts	Menus
Addresses	Minutes
Maps	Pictures

Special Collections

These may include many of the types of materials listed above, both secondary and primary, relating to one or more subjects of special local significance.