
The History of Records and Archives

A Survey

The History of Records and Archives

“To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to always remain a child.

For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history”

Cicero, 106 – 43 BC

www.archivists.org/history.asp

First “Records” in Ancient Times

- Prior to writing memory was the record
- “Remembrancers,” individuals who functioned as a “mental recorder” of business transactions
- Memory enhancers

Emergence of the “Record” in Ancient Times

- Symbols, pictographs, alphabetic script were responses to the needs of active political and economic life
- Need to keep track of administration, financial transactions, and growth of government
- One media used to store transactional information – clay tablets

Clay Tablet Societies

- Mesopotamia (Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites) from the 4th century BC to approximately 40 AD
- Properties of clay – cheap, durable, plentiful, easy to store, maintain, destroy

Clay tablet Societies continued

- Circa 3000 BC created records which reflected the two fundamental sectors of public/private activity
 - Operational
 - Housekeeping
- Required educated persons to produce records
- Kings, priests, bankers, members of the ruling class began to keep clay records in record offices

Distinction Between Records & Archives

- Up to 200 years ago, the words “records” and “archives” were used interchangeably
- In North American terms, clay tablet records were records; in some European countries, they were considered archives
- In terms of history, records managers preceded archivists

Origin of the word “Archives”

- Archives – derives from the Greek
 - *Archeion* – (at one time) government palace, general administrator, office of the magistrate, records office, original records, repository for original records, authority.
 - *Archeio* – I command, I guide, and
 - *Arche* – origin, foundation, command, power, authority

Records in Ancient Greece

- Records were considered the arsenals of law, civil rights and democracy
- To be considered legitimate, all written transactions among citizens, all records regarding property and other rights had to be received and filed in the records office

Greek Records Office

- Secretary of the city council was the head of the records office
- Greeks made no distinction between current and non-current records
- Strong sense among citizens of the evidential value of records & the need to protect their integrity

Records in Republican Rome

- The *Aerarium*, was the first public records office in Republican Rome
- In 79 BC, the *Tabularium* was built which was more appropriate for the maintenance and use of records
 - The Tabularium was administered by 14 quaestores who served in this capacity for 1 year

Records in Imperial Rome

- Roman empire moved towards centralized power and Rome became bureaucratized
- Records management functions were in the hands of the notaries
- Records control filtered down to the lowest level of government

The Record in Medieval Times

- Changes to the management of records initiated by notaries
- Notaries began to standardize documentary language and form
- In 1185, the first university was founded in Bologna, Italy, offering a course called “notarial art” (records management)

Recordkeeping in Italy – a case study

- “The slaying of Tomasso da Tortona, an Italian record keeper, in the principality of Ferrara in 1385”
 - The role of records destruction during Renaissance

Medieval Records in England

- 1086, completion of the Domesday book
- Transition from orality to literacy
- The proliferation of forgeries
- The registry system

Pre-industrial Recordkeeping

- First treatise on subject of records management (archives), Baldassare Bonifacio, from Venice in 1632, on records creation and preservation
- Jean Mabillion's *De re diplomatica*, in 1681 – Diplomatics, the study of documents

The French Revolution

- Begins the modern era of archives and the records management distinction
- 1789, declaration, the principle of publicity of archives – national property

Development of Archival Principles in the 19th Century

- Concepts of:
 - Fonds
 - *Respect de fonds* / Provenance
 - Original Order

Record Keeping in the 19th Century

- Creation of the Public Records Office in England in 1838
- The Mechanization of the Office
 - Carbon paper
 - Typewriter
 - Vertical filing cabinet
 - Manila folder

Archives & Records Management in Canada in the Early Modern Era

- The public records concept in Canada followed the British central registry model
- 1872, Douglas Brymmer appointed as Archivist & in 1873, Henry J. Morgan, as Keeper of the Public Records
- Public Archives of Canada was created in 1912

Emergence of Records Management in the 20th Century: two views

- Records management as a creation of the evolution of theory and practice of management
- Records management as sharing in the theory of archives management or archival science

Sir Hilary Jenkinson

- Produced a major treatise, in the early 1920s, on archival theory and practice:
 - Archives are impartial evidence
 - Archivists are guardians of that evidence
 - The creator is responsible for appraisal

Development of Archives in US

- National Archives were established in 1934
- It inherited over one million metres of contemporary federal records growing at 600,000 metres annually by World War II
- The appearance of the term “records management”

Life Cycle Concept

- In 1944, Margaret Cross Norton, American Archivist, and Philip C. Brooks, from the US National Archives:
 - All records cannot be preserved; select records for preservation
 - Records created & actively used, then stored offsite when infrequently used; when operational use ceases, select as archivally valuable or declare non-archival and destroy

Emmett J. Leahy

- Former member of the National Archives staff, became chairman of the Hoover Commission's Task Force on Paperwork Management
- The Hoover Commission sponsored a law that for the first time defined the term "records management" in federal statute.
- Leahy is regarded as the father of professional records management

Theodore R. Schellenberg

- Records have:
 - Primary value – importance of records to creator (administrative, legal, fiscal, and historical)
 - Secondary value – the importance of records to researchers
 - Evidential value – the value of records
 - Informational value – the content of records

Records Management and Archives in the Post Modern Era

- Information Resource Management:
 - “...the totality of planned and directed activities within an organization which result in usable, accessible, timely, secure, integral, economical, and accurate information for that organization.”