

City's Records Center Compiles a History of Neglect; Documents Lie All but Ignored In Dingy Building

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

[Clarence Davis] joined the District government in 1974 – the first year of home rule – and worked his way up through the Office of the Secretary of the District of Columbia, which oversees the archives. He succeeded Ogilvie in 1997 after Ogilvie retired for health reasons. Asked whether he feels that the archives have been neglected, Davis paused and took a deep breath. "It should be a priority," he said. "This whole facility should be a priority, because it preserves the legacy and historical records of our city."

The lack of coherent policies goes all the way to the top. Davis said the city holds only about 70 percent of the permanent papers of its four modern mayors. Sharon Pratt, mayor from 1991 to 1995, donated her papers to Howard University. There was an effort to deposit the papers of [Marion Barry], mayor from 1979 to 1991 and again from 1995 to 1999, at George Washington University, but Davis said he stopped it.

FULL TEXT

Behind the brick walls of a former horse barn and trash-truck garage, on a U-shaped alleyway so narrow that it does not appear on current maps, the history of the District of Columbia is slowly crumbling away.

Many of the permanent records of the city since 1792 – birth and death certificates, property and tax records, children's guardianship files and other records – are slowly deteriorating on creaky metal shelves and in torn cardboard boxes and dusty assessment books. Among some 2 million pounds of papers that fill the District's municipal archives are the original wills of Dolley Madison, Francis Scott Key, Frederick Douglass, Henry Adams, Woodrow Wilson, Alexander Graham Bell and Louis D. Brandeis.

Conceived 18 years ago as a symbol of home rule and civic pride, the D.C. Records Center, as the archives are formally known, is a dream unfulfilled.

A skeleton crew has kept the archives going for more than a decade in a windowless building whose stucco facade is pockmarked with graffiti and soot from two recent fires in abandoned cars stashed outside. Across the cobblestone passageway from the building, at 1300 Naylor Court NW, are a used-car repair shop, a Salvation Army facility and a decrepit dwelling.

The archives have no security beyond the corrugated metal gate that is pulled down over its entrance when the three-member staff leaves each night.

The archives have no preservation and conservation program. The supply budget is so limited that employees have had to bring their own toilet paper.

The archives have no temperature or humidity controls, because of the lack of replacement parts for the failing heat, ventilation and air-conditioning system.

The agency's budget is roughly \$450,000 today, down from \$750,000 in 1991.

Trained historians find the facility inaccessible and impenetrable, because there are printed guides to only parts of the collection, and no new ones are being developed.

"It was horrible," said Lucy G. Barber, an archivist and historian at the California State Archives in Sacramento, who examined police files at the D.C. facility for a book published last year. "It just seemed truly stunning that it had been so completely neglected," Barber said. "I just had the sense of history being lost."

Some residents recruited to help the archives won't even come near it. "I just don't think it's very safe," said Barbara Dodson Walker, a member of the D.C. Historical Records Advisory Board, a panel of volunteers appointed by the mayor, and a founder of a local African American genealogy association. "It's like a smack in the face to me that they would even have put it on an alleyway."

The president of the 3,000-member Society of American Archivists, the profession's largest and oldest association, said the preservation of records is essential in a democracy.

"It's tragic that the city government allows an archives with such a minuscule level of support to keep it going," said Timothy L. Ericson of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. "Archival records preserve people's rights: voting rights, property rights. They document marriage, educational achievements, all sorts of things that are important to people in their everyday life."

Sherryl Hobbs Newman, who since April has supervised the archives as the secretary of the District, said the archives have not been a priority and "absolutely" need more staff and money.

"I was very disappointed and concerned when I got here," she said. "Our records are not only District of Columbia records, but they are national records, as well. We need to be willing to step up."

Directly inside the archives, in a dimly lit reception area with a faded couch, hangs an oil painting of Alexander R. "Boss" Shepherd, the District's powerful territorial governor from 1873 to 1874. The portrait, a rare relic of the short-lived government that preceded a century of direct federal rule over the District, was salvaged a decade ago from the basement of the District Building.

In a modern frame next to the canvas is a copy of the February 1986 mayoral order that created the Office of Public Records, Archival Administration and Library of Governmental Information.

It was a grandiose name to match an ambitious vision.

The law that created the archives, the D.C. Public Records Management Act of 1985, was enacted during the second of former Mayor Marion Barry's four terms. Barry and other activists from the civil-rights era championed the idea as an extension of the home rule movement.

The District would take possession of nearly two centuries of historical records that had long been held by the

National Archives and Records Administration. It would also establish an "effective and economical" records management program for dealing with the mountains of paperwork created daily by a growing bureaucracy.

Philip W. Ogilvie, a former zoo director who had volunteered in Barry's campaigns, was chosen to implement the law. Appointed the city's first public records administrator, Ogilvie set up a temporary home for the office at the Recorder of Deeds building, a historic structure at 515 D St. NW, and set about finding a permanent location.

There was no money to buy or construct a building, so Ogilvie surveyed city-owned properties, including vacant school buildings and a former funeral home. None was sturdy enough to support the immense weight of tons of records – except for a forlorn building on one of the District's oldest surviving alleyways, a narrow corridor nestled within the block bounded by Ninth, 10th, N and O streets NW in Shaw.

"Here was this fortress of a horse barn on Naylor Court, with thick, thick walls," recalled Lucie A. Ogilvie, his widow. "He was always going into neighborhoods that scared the living bejeebers out of me. He loved it down there. The mechanics in the alley were his friends, the drug dealers and the prostitutes knew him, and they all loved him."

The building that would house the city's records had a lively history of its own. Designed by Diller B. Groff, the red-brick stable – 95 by 105 feet with nine bay door openings – was built in 1883 at a cost of \$5,000 and transferred to the District's ownership in 1905.

Part of the original 1792 grid plan for the city of Washington, the block contained a labyrinth of homes, stables and commercial buildings by the time of the Civil War, according to records from the stable's designation as part of a historic district in 1990.

The alley – named for Dickerson Nailor, a grocer whose last name has been spelled various ways – reflected the racial and social stratification of the era. Whites lived mostly in the residences facing the public streets, while working-class blacks lived on the narrow corridors in the back.

Joseph B. Reid, an architect who supervised the 1989 renovation of the building, said it was suitable for the archives because it had ample square footage, tall ceilings and floors strong enough to support heavy horses and garbage trucks.

Builders installed new mechanical and electrical systems and waterproofed the sanded stucco exterior. Inside the building, the brick floor had deteriorated from years of equine excrement and had to be cleaned.

The current custodian of the archives is Clarence Davis. A native of Port St. Joe, Fla., he received a history degree from Florida Memorial College in Miami before moving to Washington. He earned a master's degree in education from the University of the District of Columbia.

Davis joined the District government in 1974 – the first year of home rule – and worked his way up through the Office of the Secretary of the District of Columbia, which oversees the archives. He succeeded Ogilvie in 1997 after Ogilvie retired for health reasons. Asked whether he feels that the archives have been neglected, Davis paused and took a deep breath. "It should be a priority," he said. "This whole facility should be a priority, because it preserves the legacy and historical records of our city."

He paused again. "It's becoming better," he said.

Ogilvie's dream of transferring the District's papers from the Washington National Records Center, a storage facility in Suitland operated by the National Archives, to the newly renovated building was never realized.

The D.C. Records Center – all 26,000 square feet of storage – was filled almost as soon as it opened in 1990, according to Davis.

Today, about two-thirds of the three-story facility is used to store temporary records that belong to city agencies. Only one-third of the building contains permanent records that have been deemed historically valuable and that the public has a right to see.

The city still pays the National Archives nearly \$250,000 a year to rent about 110,000 cubic feet of storage space at the Suitland facility – money that could be saved if the District had enough space of its own.

The city's Records Center, which was never designed to accommodate the general public, each day receives just a handful of visitors. They enter by pressing a buzzer that loudly rings throughout the facility's first floor, where administrative offices and a small public reading area are wedged in among the stacks.

Instead of a separate reading room, there are two wooden desks placed back-to-back beneath fluorescent lights. On the concrete floor nearby, in front of the freight elevator, lies an 1898 sewer cover, one of several artifacts scattered around the building.

Researchers also can submit queries by telephone, fax or e-mail. Several dozen requests come in each week.

But most of Davis's time is not spent with historical treasures like Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's architect's registration, but on the mundane but important task of coordinating records management for dozens of city agencies.

The agencies are supposed to have a records-retention schedule that specifies which records are to be kept, where they are to be stored and for how long. Most documents are to be destroyed – usually incinerated – after a certain number of years.

But the system has never worked as intended. "We're at the mercy of the agencies," Davis said. Many agencies dispose of records on their own or file them away inefficiently – a mistake that can cost the city millions of dollars in unnecessary office equipment and storage space, experts say.

Dorothy S. Provine, who had been an employee at the National Archives before becoming the city's first archivist in 1986, gave a dozen years of her life to the D.C. archives.

The methodical Provine, who in graduate school had studied free African Americans in the District before the Civil War, inspected, surveyed, appraised and organized brittle documents, some of which had lain in storage for decades.

She painstakingly developed "finding aids" – detailed lists that are crucial for researchers – for wills from 1801 to 1950, children's guardianship records from 1802 to 1928, "free Negro registers" from 1821 to 1861 and other holdings.

"There is a tremendous amount of material relating to black history in the District that hasn't really been used," said

Provine, now retired and living in Virginia.

Ogilvie had envisioned a staff of more than a dozen employees, but within the first few years it became clear that neither space, money nor repairs would be forthcoming.

"Trash piled up in huge piles," said Larry Baume, who worked at the archives from 1988 to 1991 until he lost his job because of budget cuts. "It was months before somebody would come over and pick up the trash. It was months before bathrooms were cleaned. It was pretty awful."

In May 1991, a guard at the Records Center fatally shot a friend during an argument one evening. The guard, employed by a security contractor, was convicted of voluntary manslaughter.

Soon after, security for the building was eliminated. It has never been restored. There is no one to check bags or identification, although visitors are asked to sign a log when they enter.

Items go missing. Asked about Provine's guide to D.C. wills from 1921 to 1950, Robert S. Nelson, a member of the archives staff, said: "Someone walked off with it about five months ago."

As the city sank into fiscal crisis, the staff was reduced to three people, and money for vital supplies shriveled up.

Lucie Ogilvie recalled how her husband hung on. "Toward the end, he was having to haul file boxes around himself," she said. "He brought the toilet paper for the building." Provine retired in 1997. Ogilvie died last year.

Toward the end of Ogilvie's 12-year tenure, there was talk of asking the Historical Society of Washington, D.C., to take possession of the city's archives. The idea never advanced because the society would have needed funding to open the papers to the public, said Barbara A. Franco, its executive director.

Provine opposed the idea at the time, arguing that control of permanently valuable records is a vital role of a sovereign city. Now, she said, she believes there may have been some merit in the proposal. Usually, however, she tries not to think about the archives.

"In my view," she said, "it has been an absolute fiasco."

Clarence Davis was one of those laid off in 1996 during the city's fiscal crisis. For a while he consulted on historical projects in Florida and Alabama, before Kathleen E. Arnold, then secretary of the District, asked Davis to come back to succeed Ogilvie.

With an erect posture and courtly manner, Davis said he struggles to keep the facility going. The building is a major headache. Recently, he persuaded the city's Office of Property Management to do extensive repair work on the ventilation system, but all agree it needs to be replaced.

Last month Davis submitted a \$3.2 million proposed capital budget for a new 350,000-square-foot records center to supplement the existing building. The new structure would relieve the need to rent storage space from the federal government.

"I have been submitting capital budgets since 1998," Davis said. "They haven't been approved. That's why we keep submitting them."

Last year Davis successfully revived the Historical Records Advisory Board, which reviews and submits grants to the federal National Historical Publications Records Commission, an arm of the National Archives.

Davis is drafting a mayoral order to require each agency to appoint a records officer to coordinate records management with his office.

The lack of coherent policies goes all the way to the top. Davis said the city holds only about 70 percent of the permanent papers of its four modern mayors. Sharon Pratt, mayor from 1991 to 1995, donated her papers to Howard University. There was an effort to deposit the papers of Barry, mayor from 1979 to 1991 and again from 1995 to 1999, at George Washington University, but Davis said he stopped it.

The archives inherited roughly 60,000 boxes of records from the closing of D.C. General Hospital and about 80,000 boxes – not to mention an electric chair and some used office furniture – from the shutting of the Lorton Correctional Complex. The volume is staggering: The Records Center has space for only 52,000 boxes, and it is full. The hospital and prison records are being analyzed and stored in rented space.

When the federally appointed D.C. financial control board became defunct in 2001, it left behind more than 350 boxes of records. "They were more or less dumped at the front door of the archives," said Nelson F. Rimensnyder, a member of the Historical Records Advisory Board. "The last time I was there, they were all over the place."

When it comes to the permanent records, perhaps the most urgent challenge is the lack of a preservation program.

Many priceless documents – including an original notarized copy of George Washington's will – were laminated years ago, a technique that is now out of favor because it cannot be undone. According to Ericson, the president of the archivists' society, the modern method of preserving fragile and brittle documents is encapsulation – the sandwiching of documents between chemically neutral polyester sheets that are held together with tape and an electrostatic charge. None of the archives' documents are preserved that way.

"Every time you photocopy something, little corners will fall off and little pieces will come apart," said Paul K. Williams, who uses the archives to conduct house histories for clients.

Provine said that many of the records "are torn, tattered and crumbling."

The lack of temperature and humidity controls, Ericson said, could be "devastating" to the archives' photograph collection, because fluctuations can cause the emulsion on photos to crack.

Ideally, Ericson said, there should be a separate public reading room at a warmer temperature, while the stacks are kept a steady 50 to 55 degrees, with constant air conditioning, and 40 to 50 percent relative humidity.

If for no other reason, the government should improve its records management program because of the "huge liability issues" that can arise if governments lack the evidence to document property and tax disputes, according to Timothy A. Slavin, state archivist of Delaware and vice chairman of the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators.

Howard Gillette Jr., a historian at Rutgers University in Camden, N.J., who looked at Redevelopment Land Agency records at the D.C. archives for a 1995 book, said the facility's sad state prevents the city from learning from its

past.

"If you are part of a community that has a history and you want the next generation to understand what that history is all about, you've got to have the records," Gillette said. "You can't have people only remembering what they want to remember."

"There needs to be an investment -- not just a fiscal investment, but an intellectual investment, a conscious effort by the mayor to acknowledge the city's sovereign history," said Ida E. Jones, a senior manuscript librarian at Howard University's Moorland- Spingarn Research Center and a member of the Historical Records Advisory Board. "We can't blame one administration or person. It's collective neglect."

As for Davis, he tries to stem the tide of neglect. But quite a bit of his time is spent on pursuits unrelated to the management of city records.

On a recent morning, he gave directions to a city repairman who was fixing the mechanical closing device on the facility's main door. Davis had to petition the D.C. Department of Transportation to limit parking outside the building, because people had been leaving their cars there for weeks at a time.

The city recently installed signs restricting parking outside the archives to three hours. But no one, it seems, has paid much notice.

Staff researcher Bobby Pratt contributed to this report.

DETAILS

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