

The History of Records Management in Canada

According to Dr. Mark Langemo, CRM, FAI, records management originated in the US Federal government during the late 1940s and evolved from the U.S. archival profession (Langemo, p.2-3). The US National Archives was established in 1934 to handle the increasing volumes of records generated by the US federal government. In fact, the National Archives inherited over one million metres of contemporary federal records growing at 600,000 metres annually by World War II (Miller, p.) In response to this growth President Harry S. Truman established the Commission on the Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, which became known as the Hoover Commission in the late 1940s. A Task Force on Paperwork Management was established and Emmett J. Leachy was selected as chairman.¹ The Hoover Commission defined the term “records management” in the late 1940s. It is important to note that this is the first time this term was used, prior to this time what we know to be records management, was referred to as “paperwork.”

In Canada records management also derived from archives. To understand the origins and development of records management requires an understanding of the development of the Canadian archival tradition. And in Canada the responsibility for collecting and copying its historical records fell to the government.² In other words, collecting Canadian history and the records that documented it was viewed as a public responsibility.

The first efforts to acquire archival records originated from the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, established in 1824. Following Confederation a more formal arrangement was desired for Canadian historical records and in 1872

¹ Dr. Mark Langemo, *Winning Strategies for Successful Records Management Programmes* (Information Requirements Clearinghouse: Denver, 2002) p 2-3.

² Ian E. Wilson, “A Noble Dream”: The Origins of the Public Archives of Canada, *Archivaria*, 15 (Winter 1982-83) p.

Cabinet established an “Archives Branch” in the Department of Agriculture (which was responsible for arts and statistics).³ The journalist Douglas Brymner was appointed the first archivist. The Archives Branch emphasized collecting and copying. While each department looked after its own records, “the bulk of records created since 1867 lay in the attics or basements of government buildings on and around Parliament Hill.”⁴

Interestingly, and almost at the same time as the Archives Branch was created, the Department of the Secretary of State, which was responsible for “keeping all State records and papers not specially transferred to other Departments” created the Records Branch of the Department of Secretary of State which was concerned with the government’s administrative records.⁵ One of its duties was “The safe keeping and classification of the archives”⁶ and Henry J. Morgan became Keeper of the Public Records. Each represented the traditional concern of government to preserve its essential records for administrative or legal purposes, whether or not these were every made available for public research.”⁷

While for thirty years these two departments rivaled each other. Historical records were acquired but there was little attention to current government records. Atherton 86 There are few reports from the Records Branch and nor did it evolve into an active public records office. Wilson p. 22

In England the Public Records Office is the national archives and it covers the supervision of records management of current or semi-current records in departments and archiving & access. The division between current & historic records is governed by administrative practice, a decision usually based on the lessening use of the record in everyday work. In the US the two activities are

³ Jay Atherton, “The Origins of the Public Archives Records Centre, 1897-1956,” *Archivaria*, 8 (Summer 1979) p. 85

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.87

⁵ Wilson, “A Noble Dream”: The origins of the Public Archives of Canada”, p. 22

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⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22

more distinct. Tyacke, p.4 In Canada – National Archives designed to help build a national identity. From its inception in 1872 it collected archives about Canadian life, in addition to government records, and to promote Canadian identity and nationalism thru dissemination of a common history. It was not until 1966 Public Records Order which set up the government records programme (i.e. a records management for government departments, that the authority of the Archives was confirmed in this area. In 1986 the mission of the archives thru its government records management service again expanded continuing the historical/cultural service to the public & address present preoccupations of all Canadians to find out about their rights re archives which provide legal evidence to give citizens assurance or evidence of their rights. Tyacke. P.19

According to Jay Atherton, the first department to come forward with a specific records management” issue was the Post Office. The Postmaster General contacted Cabinet asking for

... a standard five-year retention period for certain routine financial documents. At the request of Cabinet, the Department of Finance sought advice on practices in use in Britain for “weeding of public documents”. As a result the Post office schedule was amended “so that the more valuable [documents] should be retained for a longer period and those of lesser value should not be kept so long.” Cabinet authorized “the destruction of the records mentioned in this amended schedule after their retention for the number of years set opposite each class of documents...” thus approving the first records schedule in the Canadian government.⁸

The first archivist was Douglas Brymner, a journalist, who collected historical papers, old manuscripts and records in St. John, Fredericton, Quebec, Montreal

⁸ Ibid., p. 87

and Toronto. His successor, Arthur Doughty also collected and both approached the federal government to provide a building to house the growing collection of historical records. A growing concern was the care of these records especially since "...several spectacular fires in the 1890s destroyed valuable public property."⁹ In fact, in 1897, Under-Secretary of State, Joseph Pope urged the government to protect all records, including government records. Ironically, five weeks later a fire broke out in the West Block on Parliament Hill.¹⁰

Interestingly, while the Archives Branch in the Department of Agriculture it was the Secretary of State that had special responsibility for public records and those records not specifically transferred to other Departments while a special committee, the Treasury Board, managed the public expenditures and the flow of public business. And according to Jay Atherton, it was gradual evolution of the

⁹ Laura Millar, "Discharging our Debt: the Evolution of the Total Archives Concept in English Canada," *Archivaria*, p. 109

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109

Treasury Board that provided “...an important thread for the development of a central control over records management in the federal government.”¹¹

Re curren records.¹² (Copied information to these archivists held the same historical power as originals, private was as important as public, and the quest for information trumped the importance of the records context¹³

So what was going on that should bring impetus to RM in Canada – office automation, management science, technology, efficiency, effectiveness

¹¹ Ibid., p. 86

¹² Laura Miller, “Discharging our Debt: The Evolution of the Total Archives Concept in English Canada”, *Archivaria*, p. 103

¹³ Millar, p. 109