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EDWIN WELCH

THE CITY OF OTTAWA ARCHIVES

Writing about the burning of Ottawa's City Hall in 1931, Dr. Lucien Brault, the city's Honorary Historian, said that the "valuable municipal archives were completely destroyed".[1] Fortunately for the future historians of Ottawa he was misinformed. The only serious loss of archives in 1931 seems to have been the property tax rolls before 1920, and even this was probably not complete because a few late nineteenth century volumes were accidentally discovered in a store last year. However the statement does underline the fact that no historian, either amateur or professional, has ever been able to systematically examine the city archives. There is evidence amongst the minute books that a few historical searches of an official nature have occured. There are markers and scribbled notes on such subjects as the first market building or the list of mayors, but nothing else. Most articles on the history of the city quote from local newspaper files or items at the Public Archives rather than the original sources at City Hall.

The chief reason for this failure can be attributed to the lack of proper facilities to consult at the City Hall archives, but there has also been a tradition of neglect in the past and a reluctance to allow members of the public to see the earlier records. The excellent condition of the mid-nineteenth century volumes is the direct result of this neglect, since they have not been subject to careless handling or loaned out as might have happened if they had been better known. On the other hand, neglect of their historical value has probably been responsible for more destruction than the fire of 1931.

Another reason why Ottawa City Council was slow to initiate a policy of public access to its records was the presence in Ottawa of other organizations collecting local history materials. The Public Archives of Canada has collected many local records in the past simply because it was the only possible way to preserve them. As a result it is still more convenient to look for Ottawa maps and Ottawa topographical photographs at

the P.A.C. Also available at the Public Archives are the Hill collection, the Sparks collection and other collections of important local families, as well as those of Charlotte Whitton, Ottawa's first woman mayor. They were all presented to the Federal Government before the City Archives were established. The National Library has the files of early Ottawa newspapers for the same reason.

This is no particular disadvantage because City Hall and the Public Archives building are less than two miles apart. Other important sources for local history are to be found in the Provincial Archives of Ontario in Toronto. The early Carleton County archives and the records of the Bytown and Nepean Road Company and the Pinhey family papers are all relatively inaccessible to the Ottawa local historian who might expect to find these papers in a local Archives. It is hoped that microfilm copies of these records as well as those of the Provincial Government which particularly relate to Ottawa will eventually be available in the City Archives.

Two local societies have rescued archives which might otherwise have been destroyed. The Ottawa Historical Society which owns the Bytown Museum has a considerable number of manuscript volumes and papers from the origins of Ottawa in 1826 onwards. The Institut Canadien Français has also played its part in preserving information about local francophone communities. Unfortunately neither organization has the resources to make its collections available to historians and others, even though they deserve great credit for their rescue of local archives.

For several years the Ottawa City Council debated the necessity of establishing an Archives. Its first appointment of a professional archivist came at the beginning of 1975. Although it is now official policy to make the older archives freely available and to encourage research, much remains to be done before the records are found and reduced to order. A year after the Archivist's appointment it was still impossible to say where some of the archives were stored and considerable quantities of useless paper awaited destruction.

The first town council of Bytown was established by Act of Parliament in 1847 - twenty years after the settlement began. Two years later the Act was vetoed by the British government and for three months Bytown had no council. In 1850 under a general Act Bytown was incorporated once more. In 1855 Bytown became the City of Ottawa, and two years later the capital of Canada. The council minute books are complete from 1847 to the present day. Until 1871 and for brief periods thereafter the minutes were kept in manuscript, but they were also printed from 1868, so that there are two overlapping series. Only a few committee minute books survive for the period before 1914, but this is probably because most business was transacted in full council. There is now a catalogue of all these volumes to 1970. The By-laws do not begin until 1850, but are available both as sealed originals and in manuscript or printed copy.

Minute books for the Waterworks Commission (1872-9), the Board of Health (1890-1968) and the Park Management Board (1893-1904) survive and there are a number of archives for municipalities absorbed by the City - Ottawa East (1898-1905) and New Edinburgh (1867-82). There are also a number of early twentieth century letter books and registers of local improvements. All these volumes and city directories, annual reports and accounts are already arranged in order at City Hall, but there is a vast quantity of volumes and files which remain in different storage places in the city, incompletely sorted and examined at the present time. Until there is space to collect together and arrange these records they cannot be easily consulted because important historical information is intermingled with useless paper.

In addition to preserving the city's own records the City Archives have already begun to collect other records of importance in the city's history. Perhaps the largest and most important were the papers rescued from an estate recently bought by the City Council. In two heritage buildings records dating back to the beginning of the nineteenth century were found in a state of complete neglect. Other, smaller collections have included old photographs of Ottawa and a collection of

household bills and papers more than a century old. In the future the City Archives hopes to receive many more groups of private archives.

Access to the City Archives is complicated not only by the disorganised state of many of the records, but also by the lack of any public reference room at City Hall. In addition some of the late nineteenth century volumes are in such poor physical condition that any use by the public would result in the rapid disintegration of minutes and by-laws for the period from 1880 onwards. Until the Ottawa City Archives has adequate accomodation, a proper conservation laboratory and sufficient staff all visits must be by appointment.

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1. L. Brault, Ottawa Old and New (Ottawa, 1946), p. 93.