

## The Preservation of Local Archives

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# ANNALS OF IOWA.

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## EDITORIAL DEPARTMENT.

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### THE PRESERVATION OF LOCAL ARCHIVES.

A destructive fire in the heart of the business district of Des Moines recently made many property owners of the capital city appreciate the benefits of fire insurance. Some because they had been forehanded and had secured themselves amply against losses; others, alas, because they had not been thus prudent and their losses were total and in many cases beyond reparation. The losses of tangible property, such as buildings, stocks of goods, office furnishings, were, of course, grievous to those sustaining them. But the losses most deplored by those afflicted, we suspect, were those that involved book accounts, valuable papers, securities and vouchers, and especially precious heirlooms, mementos, paintings and statuary. Many of the latter were held in esteem by their owners above price; and their loss was absolutely irreparable. This was notably true of a number of paintings owned by one who was both a collector and connoisseur of pictorial art.

The anxious, hopeless air of the man searching for valued heirlooms and records and securities in the debris of a building ruined by fire or storm and flood will ever and anon characterize the features of citizens of many a city in Iowa if they do not compel their local officers to exercise greater prudence than is now common in preserving township, city and county archives against damage through gross neglect, decay or reckless disposition, or their utter destruction by fire or flood.

Aside from the records in the offices of county recorders, who preserve for us the records of our titles to land and

tangible property and choses in action, we may doubt if any one can find in any considerable number of our local public offices the chief record books covering the official transactions of their pioneer periods adequately bound, numbered, indexed, cataloged and shelved in vaults proof against fire and damp. Further, excepting records in current use, there are few, if any, city or town halls or county court houses wherein the archives pertaining to affairs prior to 1880 are either completely or properly preserved. We probably should not do violence to the truth if we should say that the same condition is to be found down as late as 1890.

The county court houses of recent construction are doubtless fireproof, and in addition they contain fireproof vaults of greater or less capacity. The same may be said of some of the city halls in our larger cities. But, generally speaking, the protection of local archives against destruction by fire is meagre in the extreme. Many, if not most, of our city or town halls are firetraps, being old frame buildings or brick structures in constant danger from defective chimneys or from electric wiring hastily installed or poorly insulated. Most of the offices have, of course, what are alleged to be "fireproof" safes, of ancient construction, that seldom stand severe treatment; but these are utterly inadequate even if they afford real protection in time of fire, because they cannot possibly contain more than the record books and vouchers in current demand.

Another fact generally overlooked that greatly aggravates the dangers of loss of local archives by fire or dispersion is that even current records of towns and small cities are not always to be found in the safes or vaults of town halls. They are more often than not scattered about here and there in their several communities, in the desks or pigeon holes of bankers, lawyers, merchants, or real estate agents who act as clerks, or treasurers, or as chairmen of councilmanic or township committees. Some of these officials have fireproof facilities for safe keeping records, but it is rare that such is the

case. Besides the imminent danger of losses by fire, the likelihood of irretrievable loss by mutilation, or gross neglect, is notoriously increased by this common practice of scatteration.

But surprise rapidly develops into amazement if one examines into the sort of care given local archives in the quarters assigned them in our county court houses and city halls. Records of periods prior to 1890, and even of more recent date, are to be found in all sorts of places and in all sorts of conditions. In various county and city offices decent care is attempted; books and papers are properly bound, numbered, listed, classified, and filed in places fit for their preservation from vermin, mice and mould. But, except in recently constructed public buildings, this is not common. One is likely to find the "old" out-of-date records or files "put away" high upon shelves out of easy reach, their whereabouts forgotten, or in boxes in some old junk room unfit or undesired for other use, or in attics, cellars, closets or vaults, and sometimes in outbuildings. The books and papers are generally in greater or less confusion. It is the exception if they have not been tossed, dumped or kicked into their present place by reckless or inconsiderate persons, official and other. Dust and grime or mould make labels undecipherable. Pages of records are often so badly mildewed as to be illegible. Sometimes valuable books and files of letters and vouchers are found in indiscriminate, unsightly heaps on floors. Covers have been wrenched and torn; leaves have been badly jammed, mutilated, and pulled out, and the collection is the sport of bugs, rats and mice; an object of disgust to those who perchance stumble upon the heap, or must needs search through it.

If local records are worth keeping at all, and it is to be presumed that it is worth while, then such lack of fire protection is in and of itself the height of imprudence. Among a people so boastful of their native common sense and thrift this neglect is surprising.

A prudent business man who has valuable books, heirlooms, accounts, papers, policies of insurance, records, and securities, provides fireproof, water-tight deposit boxes, safes or vaults for their preservation. He does this as a matter of course. Even householders, if they have any considerable number of like valuables and do not possess adequate facilities for their safe keeping on the home premises, rent safe deposit boxes from their banker or trust company. Common sense and common prudence alike call for similar precautionary measures by counties and municipalities in the preservation of their local archives. The people of the State at large, and the legislature in particular, have for years exhibited an increasing interest in the preservation of the State's archives and historical records, documentary and general. The public has peremptorily demanded and secured more facilities for insuring due protection and care thereof. It is high time that the people of our cities and towns realize that their local official records are in grave danger of irreparable loss both by sheer neglect and by fire, and preventive measures should be instituted immediately and vigorously.

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#### FINE PRINTING IN IOWA.

There are few directions in which, during the past dozen years, more substantial progress has been made in Iowa than in that of fine book and general printing. There are several well known firms at the capital whose book and job printing has attained remarkable excellence. Our attention has been called to this subject more distinctly by learning that some of the large book sellers in eastern cities have come to Iowa for their best printing. In one instance one of our Iowa printers has manufactured a book which sells for \$20 a copy, for which he received the sum of \$10 for each one printed. Lately he informed us that he had ten books in hand which he was manufacturing for a distinguished firm in Cleveland.

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