

The Diocese of Olympia Archives:
A Great and Growing Harvest
By Diane Wells

"The proceedings of the Convocation...are of permanent value and interest in our Missionary annals. They are the first fruits of a great and growing harvest."



The Rt. Rev. Thomas Fielding Scott, 1st Missionary Bishop of Oregon and Washington Territories, "Spirit of Missions," October 1854.

"A great and growing harvest." What a wonderful way to describe archives. Archives are organic. They grow as their creating body grows and they tell the story of that growth. It is in that story – or history – that their permanent value and interest resides.

While the Diocese of Olympia Archives was officially established on April 15, 1976 by Bishop Robert Hume Cochrane, it had its beginning 122 years earlier when Bishop Scott recognized the permanent value of those first convocation proceedings.

Since that time, the Archives has grown to include all the Journals of Convention, the papers of thirteen bishops, the records of every diocesan department, program, council, board, commission and committee, affiliated and special ministry, parish and mission, etc., with record formats varying from paper and microfilm to electronic. Collections of photographs, slides, video and audio recordings, CDs and DVDs, scrapbooks and architectural drawings are included among the Archives' holdings. The position of Archivist has also grown from that of a volunteer Registrar whose care of the Archives was a relatively minor duty to that of a paid professional Archivist and Records Manager who actively manages the Archives and provides research and outreach services.

Growth, however, is not without its fits and starts and just as the Diocese of Olympia sprang from a lean, frontier beginning experiencing varying degrees of expansion and development – so too the Archives.

The first Registrar was appointed in 1860 and clergy and members of the Church were requested to "furnish him with any information within their possession." In 1867 a "diocesan" library was begun with Bishop Scott donating materials which he had collected and a resolution appointing a Conservator of Public Documents was passed at Convocation.

As maintaining church records was standard practice in the Episcopal Church, western bishops and clergy were well aware of its importance but given the rustic frontier conditions under which they labored, conducting such practice in any continuous or systematic way proved next to impossible. Lack of personnel, lack of facilities and lack of money all contributed to the very sketchy way in which early records were kept. Territorial subdivisions also contributed to the general disorder.

The Missionary Territory of Washington was separated from the Missionary Territories of Oregon and Washington in 1880. Subsequently, in 1892, Washington was divided into the Missionary Districts of Olympia and Spokane with the Missionary District of Olympia becoming the Diocese of Olympia in 1910.

As the first missionary bishops made their headquarters in Portland, Oregon that was where the earliest records were kept. When Washington became a separate missionary territory, it became necessary to start collecting records anew.

Washington's first Registrar, the Rev. Dr. Reuben Nevius, was elected in 1881 and in his report to Convocation the following year, he recounted that he had "secured only an imperfect suite of the Journals of Convocation" and that he would like to be informed of the "existence of any other interesting documents." In 1883 he reported on "incomplete but growing files" all of which were stored in the Chapel of All Saints Church in Spokane Falls."



The Rev. Reuben D. Nevius, D.D.

In 1885 Nevius left Spokane Falls and his missionary duties in eastern Washington and moved to Olympia in western Washington. As he reported on materials he had "in hand," it can only be assumed that he brought the files with him from Spokane Falls. This assumption is reinforced when Nevius's successor as Registrar, the Rev. M.D. Wilson of Vancouver, reported that money provided for his use (a \$5 donation from the Hon. E. P. Ferry, territorial governor & vestryman at St. John's, Olympia) had been used for "payment of charges on packages of papers and books from Olympia (to Vancouver.)"

These events highlight the fact that the early registrars were first and foremost missionaries who moved frequently. Consequently, the records in their keeping moved as well – often with loss along the way.

Finally in 1892, upon the creation of the Missionary District of Olympia, it was determined that the papers be kept at St. Luke's Parish House in Tacoma under the care of the new Registrar who was also the Rector of St. Luke's. Though this meant that the records were moved once again, it also established the idea of a permanent location for the "Archives" and brought them into the Bishop's purview as Tacoma was his city of residence and St. Luke's his pro-Cathedral.

In 1903, newly appointed Registrar, the Rev. J.B. Alexander reported, "I find various lots of printed matter piled up in a loft in the Parish house of St. Luke's Church, Tacoma, and have received a parcel from a parish in Seattle, and I am told that similar lots are in the keeping of two or three other parishes, as well as at the Bishop's House. A suitable place will shortly be found where these records, etc. can be kept securely; in the meantime, I would ask the Clergy throughout the District to collect data which they think interesting and worthy of record, relating to the history of the Church in the several places where their work takes them, and forward to the Registrar at their convenience."

However, a suitable place was not "shortly found" and the records stayed where they were.

Diocesan status, granted in 1910, did not change this situation but the new diocesan constitution and canons did formalize the Registrar's position as custodian of the archives and provided a much more detailed account of his duties. And for the first time since 1888, the Registrar asked diocesan convention for an appropriation so that "adequate provision" for the proper care of the archives could be made. In 1913, the Registrar reported "with especial satisfaction, that facilities are now offered, on account of an appropriation from the Convocation Fund of a sum a little less than \$20, for the convenient disposal and classification of the materials that comes into his custody" and that "a room in St. Luke's Parish House has been fitted with shelving and divided into many compartments, and when an index has been completed everything in the keeping of an office will be available for examination by those who may desire to consult its valuable collection of pamphlets and papers." Such an index was then, as now, wishful thinking!

The archives remained in Tacoma until 1925 when the Rev. S. Arthur Huston was elected Bishop of Olympia and moved his see city to Seattle whereupon the archives was transferred to Trinity Parish, Seattle, the Rev. W. R. B. Turrill, Registrar.



The Rt. Rev. S. Arthur Huston



The Rev. W. R. B. Turrill

Turrill's tenure is important because it was during his time that the outline of a bona fide archives began to emerge. Key archival precepts including record preservation, protection, selection, access and reference were all present. He reported that he had received a "great mass of material, chiefly of unofficial character" and that the Bishop had asked him to retain only certain relevant materials. Turrill also reported on the use of the archives for reference purposes and noted that the "Registrar stands ready at all times to furnish such materials and information as may be needed by any person requiring it and authorized to so obtain it," and that, "all material in the possession of the Registrar has been deposited in the fireproof room of the new parish House of Trinity Parish, Seattle."

In 1945, the archives made further progress when the Rev. Thomas E. Jessett was elected Registrar and Historiographer and \$300 was appropriated for his use. Jessett was not only a caretaker of the records, but an active user as well. An accomplished historian, he published widely with more than a dozen articles appearing in the "Historical Magazine," the publication of the Church Historical Society, upon whose Board he served. He also participated in professional associations, often making presentations which focused national attention on the Diocese of Olympia.

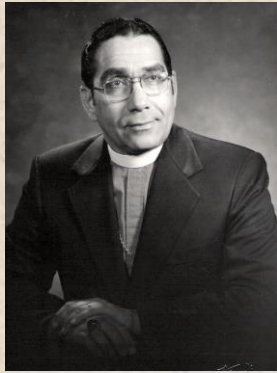


The Rev. Canon Thomas E. Jessett

As an active researcher, the importance of preserving historical documents was of prime concern to him and he was the first to microfilm such documents as a preservation measure. He investigated and answered historical queries, counseled parishes and missions to care for their own historical materials and encouraged the writing of local parish history. As his research and historical writing – not to mention his duties as a busy parish priest – took up most of his time, much of the Registrar's work was taken up by a succession of Bishop's secretaries and many files came to be housed in the Bishop's office in Diocesan House (the former Leary mansion purchased in 1948) including, at Jessett's instigation - a historical folder for every congregation in the Diocese.

Records continued to accumulate at Diocesan House and Jessett called, on more than one occasion, for the provision of a "proper storage space, fireproof and meeting the standards set by archivists for such material."

Then, in 1976, with Jessett in attendance, the National Conference of Episcopal Historians suggested that each diocese appoint an Archivist for the preservation of diocesan and parish records. Upon his return, Jessett made this recommendation to Bishop Cochrane who subsequently appointed Mrs. Peggy Hansen, Archivist for the Diocese of Olympia. She became the first person to hold this title - not to mention the first lay person and the first woman.



The Rt. Rev. Robert H. Cochrane



Peggy Hansen, Archivist

Within a year of Hansen's appointment plans were made for storage space in Diocesan House and she received training on archival management, arrangement and description. Materials were gathered from every nook and cranny of the House and those long records long stored at Trinity Parish were transferred to the new archives. Over the next few years policies and procedures were established, records organized, volunteers recruited and outreach to congregations increased. With growing collections and professional attention, the Diocese of Olympia Archives became firmly established.

Then, in 1987, a fire at Diocesan House threatened all the progress that had been made. The diocesan library was destroyed and parts of the House suffered severe damage – but though some archival records were lost – most survived. The fire, however, continues to serve as a reminder of what can – and often does happen – and of the importance of protecting these irreplaceable records.



Photo by Mark Swanson

After the fire, the archives was moved from its basement location to the third floor attics with office space in what was originally the billiard room in the former mansion – a location it continues to occupy. Peggy Hansen retired in 1994 after eighteen years of

dedicated service to the archival profession and I was hired in that same year as her successor.



Diane Wells, Archivist & Records Manager

Today, the archives plays an integral role in the work of the Diocese of Olympia. Its resources are used to actively support the ministry and community life of the Church and to safeguard its documentary heritage – that "great and growing harvest" upon which we rely to tell the on-going story of God's saving love.