

The Illinois State Archives celebrating 100 years of service

By David Joens

Illinois state government has seen a lot in the last 100 years, including a Depression, a World War, a new Constitution, changes in technology and even the election of one of its former state Senators as President of the United States. Chronicling it all for state government has been the Illinois State Archives, which officially turns 100 years old on June 20, 2021, the centennial anniversary of when then-Governor Len Small signed legislation creating the Archives.



Illinois was one of the first states to create a state government archives. A State Archives serves an important function in providing for open, honest government by making sure that government records are preserved and made accessible to the public. Ironically, the movement for professionalized state government archives arguably began in the South, where it was perceived as a way to preserve records that defended the “lost cause” of the Confederacy and, by extension, white supremacy. It was the writings of the Illinois first state archivist, Margaret Cross Norton, that helped place state government archives in the proper context, as a state agency that provides unfiltered information to government officials and the public.

Although not created until 1921, the Illinois State Archives takes its origin in the records of the Illinois territorial period, which began in 1809 when Illinois separated from the Indiana Territory. The Secretary of the Territory served as custodian of the



Archives building, 1938.

territorial governor’s archives. When Illinois became a state in 1818, the now Secretary of State became custodian of both the governor’s records and the General Assembly’s records.

During the early years of state government, records were neither numerous nor extremely complex. As the state’s duties, responsibilities and size grew, however, records became voluminous and complicated. After 1848, the Secretary of State’s office became an elected office, independent of the governor. However, it kept its duties as custodian of gubernatorial and legislative records.

In 1873 the Secretary of State’s office established a Division of Archives and Index. This department was to collect, arrange and index the records only of the Secretary of State’s office. Although some of the work involved keeping the historical records of the governor’s office and the legislature,



Margaret Cross Norton in 1948. Ms. Norton served as the first director of the Illinois State Archives and became a leader in the Archives’ profession.



Construction, November 27, 1936.

most of the work involved the day-to-day operations of state government. Gradually that work of filing correspondence, recording election returns, and publishing session laws and legislative journals led to dropping archives from the division's title and to this day it is known as the Index Department.

When today's State Archives was established in 1921, it was made a part of the State Library, a department under the Secretary of State's office. Its offices and storage areas were located in the basement of the capitol. Secretary of State Louis Emmerson appointed Margaret Cross Norton as the first state archivist.

Ms. Norton found that many state records were kept haphazardly throughout the capitol and she made it her mission to find and preserve these records. In describing basement storage areas in the capitol, Ms. Norton noted that the flooring "had never been paved; there were six inches of dust on the floor which sometimes was that much mud when it would rain." Besides the unfavorable environmental conditions, rodents and bugs were also a concern.

When searching for records in the capitol, Ms. Norton carried a pipe so "whenever a rat came and looked at me, I'd bang on whatever was nearest with that pipe and scare him off." Fortunately, for Ms. Norton, she did not have to work in these conditions for long, as in June 1923 the Archives Division moved to the newly opened

Centennial Building (now known as the Howlett Building), which was home to the State Library.

One of Ms. Norton's earliest accomplishments came in 1925, when the General Assembly approved legislation authorizing the Archives to accept records from all state officials. However, as soon as Ms. Norton had assembled a substantial volume of records, storage at the Centennial Building became a problem. Archives are heavier than library materials and floor load capacities in the Centennial Building were inadequate. Also, the building's temperature and humidity controls and its security levels were inadequate for the storing of permanent records. In addition, many state records were still housed outside of the archives.

Ms. Norton began to advocate for the construction of a building built specifically to hold the state's records. In 1934 the state arsenal at the corner of Second and Monroe streets in Springfield burned down, causing the loss of soldiers' World War I bonus application records which were stored there. Ms. Norton used this disaster effectively to lobby for a secure Archives Building.

At the 1935 session of the General Assembly, Secretary of State Edward J. Hughes requested funds for the erec-



Margaret Cross Norton at her desk in 1957.



Norton building, 2020.

tion of a State Archives Building on the grounds of the capitol complex. The funding bill passed and the General Assembly appropriated \$500,000 for the new structure. The federal Public Works Administration contributed an additional \$320,000 to the project. Ground was broken in 1936 and the building opened in 1938. This new Archives Building, constructed to Margaret Cross Norton's specifications, was the most modern archives building in the United States and only the third building in the country specifically built to be an archives.

The building measures one hundred and fifty-two feet in length, sixty-seven feet in depth, and about one hundred feet in height. Since the building is a records storage building and not an office building, the considerable weight of the records was given serious consideration. The building is carried on caissons sunk thirty-five feet to bedrock with the rear vaults built on their own caisson foundations. Architecturally, the building harmonizes with other buildings in the capitol complex, especially the Howlett Building. It is constructed of solid masonry faced with Indiana limestone.

All space not required for archival

administration is devoted to vaults designed to give maximum protection to records. There are no windows in any of the vaults, which occupy the center rear and the upper floors. The building contains twelve stack levels with a total storage capacity for more than 80,000 cubic feet of records. Commercial-type steel filing cabinets and standard library-type steel bracket shelves are used for storing records. The six-drawer high steel filing cabinets, designed specifically to meet Illinois requirements, were purchased after exhaustive factory tests conducted under the personal supervision of Ms. Norton. The fact that the Illinois State Archives Building is considered exceptional in terms of security and fire safety was made evident by the National Archives' contingency plans during World War II. If the nation's capital had to be evacuated, the National Archives planned to send its most valuable treasures to the Illinois State Archives.

In 1995, the state honored Ms. Norton by naming the Archives Building the Margaret Cross Norton Building, making it the first building on the capitol complex to be named after a woman. At a time when very few women were in the field, Ms. Norton became a leader in the

Archives profession. She helped found the national Society of American Archivists and served terms as both its president and journal editor. A book of her collected writings on Archival theory and practice published after her retirement became a standard textbook in archival classes at colleges and universities throughout the country.

Ms. Norton's last great accomplishment as head of the Illinois State Archives came with her assisting in the General Assembly passing the 1957 State Records Act. This act placed the Archives in charge of records management for state agencies under both the Executive and Judicial branches of government, giving it an important role in deciding what state records had permanent value and had to come to the Archives. The legislature passed a Local Records Act in 1961, which gave the State Archives similar responsibilities over units of local government.

The State Records Act allowed the Archives to create a micrographics section to microfilm (and now scan) records for state agencies. The act also allowed the Archives to open a records center, to provide state agencies with free storage space to keep their long-term, but not permanent, records. The State Records Center, located in Springfield, now houses more than 120,000 cubic feet of records, or about 60% more material than the 75,000 cubic feet of records now housed at the Margaret Cross Norton Building.

In 1976, under the leadership of Archives director John Daly, the Archives created the Illinois Regional Archives Depository (IRAD) system, which allows participating units of local government to store their permanent records off-site at one of seven state universities. The Archives hires graduate students at each of the schools and trains them in archival methods. These student interns provide archival maintenance to the records and reference services to researchers. Originally opened at Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western, Sangamon State (now University of Illinois at Springfield) and Illinois State universities, the program expanded in 1990 to include Northeastern Illinois

University in Chicago.

Beginning in 1975, the State Archives began serving as the coordinating agency for the newly created Illinois State Historical Records Advisory Board (ISHRAB), which assists the National Archives in providing grants to Illinois archival institutions. In this role, the State Archives has assumed a leadership position in the state's archival community. The members of the ISHRAB also serve as the advisory board for the Illinois State Archives.

Today the Illinois State Archives holds more than 78,000 cubic feet of records. All three branches of state

government house records in the Margaret Cross Norton Building and copies of many of these records or indexes to these records have been placed on-line on the Archives' website. In 2018, in honor of the state's 200th anniversary, the Archives created an on-line exhibit entitled the "100 Most Valuable Documents at the Illinois State Archives." The exhibit showcases some of the many valuable records held by the State Archives while also telling the history of the state.

The Illinois State Archives has records series from more than 190 different offices, departments, divisions, institutions, and boards, including the

legislature, the Supreme Court, and several federal agencies. The functions of these records were both practical and varied, and as a consequence the subjects with which they dealt are extremely diverse, making the Illinois State Archives a great research resource for genealogists, lawyers, historians, surveyors, state government officials and many others seeking to learn and write about this state's history.

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Mission Statement

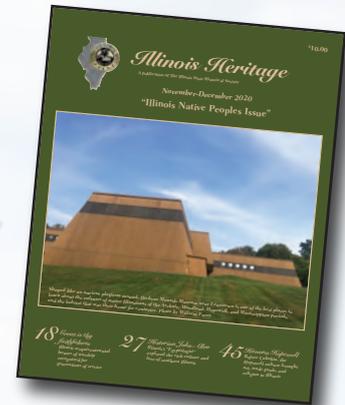


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