

Establishment of the Knox County Records Library

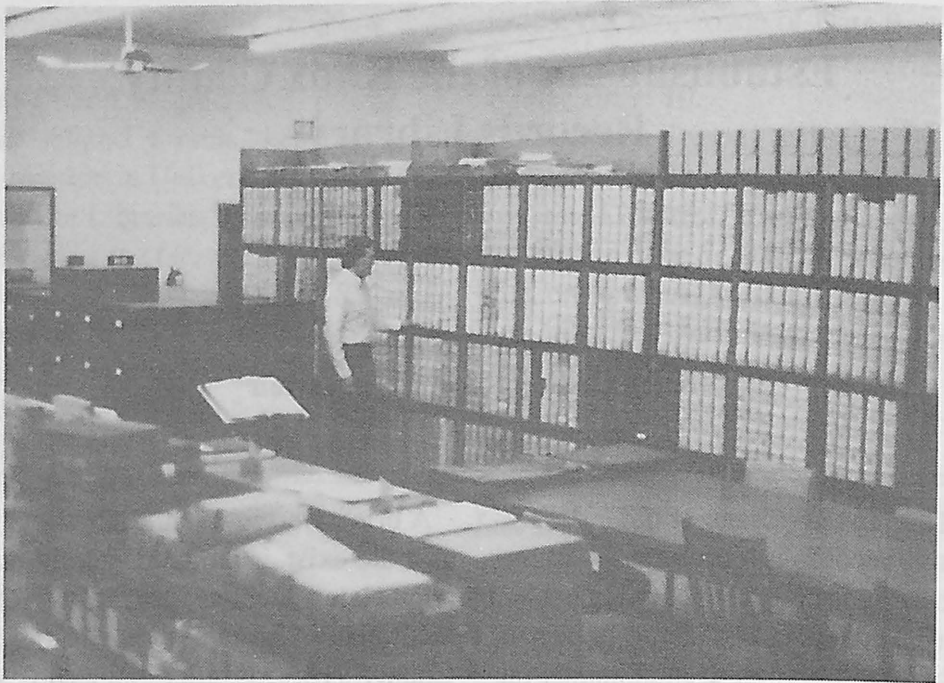
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The proper storage of older, less active records is a problem faced by most county governments. Inadequate space, lack of funds to properly maintain records, and apathy on the part of public officials are the major factors leading to the poor state of these materials in county courthouses. Records are often relegated to inaccessible storage areas under conditions that contribute to their deterioration and limit their use by genealogists and historians.

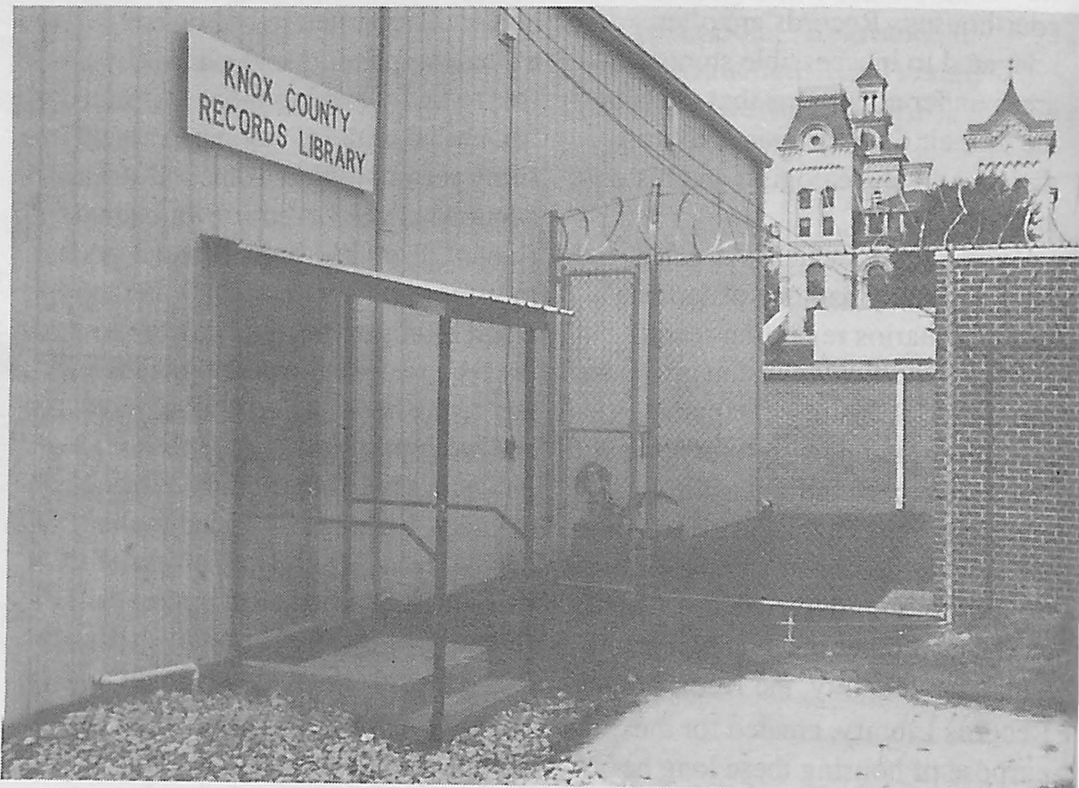
Knox county, which was organized in 1790, easily had one of Indiana's worst scenarios regarding record storage, a particular shame given the county's rich history. Happily, conditions that persisted for so many years have been eliminated in a dramatic way. Thanks to efforts of the local government and the Knox County Public Library, Knox County has observed her bicentennial year with a new facility, the Knox County Records Library, created for the purpose of housing these long neglected treasures.

A brief overview of the situation, as it did exist, is required to fully appreciate the change that was instituted. A large portion of Knox County's records, after being subjected to more than one move, came to be stored in a dilapidated old house on the block east of the courthouse. This structure had no controlled temperature and suffered from a badly leaking roof. Materials were piled with little organization in filthy surroundings. Some individual documents were even strewn on the floor. Others had been exposed to moisture and were molding. Perhaps worst of all, anyone wishing to use the records was allowed to obtain a key to the house, enter on their own, and work unsupervised. This lax policy not only contributed to the disorder, but most likely led to the theft of records. Only a portion of these materials had been micro-filmed.

The records involved here that were so poorly managed included both those of permanent historic value (court case files dating from



Librarian Brian Spangle in the new Knox County Records Library



Knox County Records Library, 1991

1796) and records only a few years old (commissioners' claims and tax receipts) that were still used for county business. These latter records are examples of those that have to be retained for a specified period based on a statute of limitations. Many had been retained needlessly and were merely taking up space. A time consuming search by county personnel, who often had to sift through mounds of loose files or reach a ledger on the bottom of a waist-high stack, was far from an effective means of information retrieval. The library was conceived as a repository for both categories of records, but salvaging the oldest was of highest priority.

Records were also stored in other locations, including the courthouse attic and the basement of the jail. Such a lack of consolidation made it even more difficult for specific records to be found. To the county's credit, some records of particular interest to genealogists, among them the marriage records, were moved to Lewis Historical Library on the Vincennes University campus some years before the new facility was contemplated. A number of these currently remain at that library.

Obviously, the need for change was great and many interested local persons had long rallied for a solution to the problem. Positive change finally commenced approximately four years ago with a very unique arrangement involving the Knox County Public Library. The president of the board of county commissioners, who also served as president of

the public library board of trustees, proposed a project aimed at preserving the records. An agreement was made between the commissioners and the public library board, whereby the county would set up a record storage facility, and a public library employee would act as staff, being directly involved with the initial work and later maintaining regular hours. Thus, the interest and initiative of one commissioner and the commitment of the public library, whose aid went well beyond supplying staff, were both key to establishing the Knox County Records Library.

The project was carried out in a very cost efficient manner. A section of an old warehouse, the interior of which was completely renovated, was used for the library. This building was already owned by the county and had been rented to a local business. It stood directly behind the house where the records had been held. County employees played a major role in the renovation, the bulk of which was completed in early 1987.

Not only was existing space used, but with the exception of lumber for shelves and some new file cabinets, the library was furnished almost exclusively with used items moved from other county buildings or taken out of storage. These included a massive twelve foot long work table. The metal shelves and cabinets that were holding records in the old house were, naturally, moved and utilized again. The public library assisted in this area as well, provid-

ing old shelves, lumber for new shelves, and other miscellaneous materials. All of these factors helped make the physical structure itself economically feasible.

It should be noted that the enterprise was not entered into blindly. Experts were consulted concerning correct procedures. Former Indiana State Archivist John Newman visited the site several times, offering guidance in many areas throughout the early stages of the effort. Mr. Newman drew a proposed floor plan for the new library and inventoried records, noting whether they were to be moved or destroyed. His help proved to be invaluable.

The first records were moved as soon as the basic work on the building was finished. These eventually came not only from those places already mentioned, but also directly from county offices. This helped unify records and freed up valuable space in the courthouse. Part of the warehouse adjoining the library was used as a point of transition. Files and ledgers were stacked there before being placed in their new home. County maintenance was responsible for constructing shelves and moving records, and public library staff (several in the beginning as their time allowed) cleaned the badly soiled records. One public library employee even helped with some of the carpentry. This illustrates the degree of cooperation that was evident as the project progressed.

Initially, the records were wiped with dry cloths in order to remove

years of collected dirt. Cleaning quarter-folded court case files was an agonizingly slow process since the contents of over 1700 4 1/2 x 13 1/2 inch file drawers (variations of the old Woodruff file drawers) had to be removed and dusted, and the drawers washed. The cleaning of ledgers offered its own problems. Persons working with these would soon find themselves covered with the brown dust of decayed leather bindings. There was neither time nor money to engage in precise preservation techniques at this point. More deliberate steps toward preservation were seen as long-range goals. What was important was to clean the records and situate them in a secure area.

Despite the tedious nature of the work, shelves and cabinets were gradually filled and a sense of organization did emerge. The moving, cleaning and organizing of records continued for over a year and a half. In that time the old house was also demolished and the ground in front of the building was leveled out for a parking area.

The library itself is made up of one large room measuring 46 x 48 feet, with a 12 foot ceiling. A small office and restroom are separate from this. Wooden shelves reinforced with steel, with four levels of compartments that are approximately 2 feet wide and little over 1 1/2 feet high, line the north and east walls. One freestanding shelf of similar dimensions runs parallel through the room. These were built to accommodate heavy ledgers and storage

boxes and are deep enough to hold long tax duplicates. Metal roller shelves hold ledgers horizontally on the west wall. Metal shelves, standard file cabinets, and a case of metal file drawers stand against the back or south wall. A combination of all of the latter, plus short wooden shelves and the large work table, are also placed in parallel rows through the room. Most metal furnishing were put on treated lumber platforms up off the painted concrete floor. Heat and air conditioning were, of course, installed and overhead fans provide air circulation.

The records are organized chronologically by series in five sections, based on the five major county offices that are represented in the library. These are recorder, treasurer, clerk, auditor and assessor. The wide variety of records from the office of county clerk consume the most space, while those from the county assessor require little room at all. Examples of some of the permanent records housed in the facility, with the dates they cover, include the following: deed records, 1814-1909; miscellaneous records, 1862-1933; tax duplicates, 1846-1987 (many missing volumes); probate records, minute/order books from 1790-1980 and varying dates for case files; civil and criminal court records from the 1790's through the mid twentieth-century; commissioners' records, 1823-1985; and county council records, 1899-1982. The most recent date for each type of record differs based on the preference of the officeholder. Those more recent

than the latest dates shown remain in the courthouse.

The project brought to light many interesting and long forgotten Knox County records. Among these are the following: tax lists and appraisements for the years 1802, 1804 and 1805; Register of Negroes and Mulattoes, 1853-1858; Record of Patent Rights Certificates, 1882-1920; and Enrollment of Soldiers, Widows and Orphans 1886. The location of the county's Negro register (in which Blacks were required to register as a means of enforcing the notorious Article XIII of Indiana's 1851 Constitution) benefitted one researcher early on. A gentleman from Bloomington came to Vincennes with the hope of finding this singular volume shortly after it had been discovered.

By October 1988, the majority of the records were in place and a complete list of holdings had been compiled. That month, an open house was held to mark the Knox County Records Library's formal opening. After the opening, regular business hours were started, roughly corresponding to those of the courthouse. Hours are 8:00-12:00 and 1:00-4:00, Monday through Friday.

Genealogists and historians have taken full advantage of the environment the library offers them. For Knox County researchers, cramped courthouse offices and officials too busy with daily responsibilities to give them needed attention, are virtually a thing of the past. County personnel also refer to the records frequently, as do local abstractors.

The first year saw over 600 individuals use the library.

Patrons may obtain photocopies of records at a cost of \$.25 per usage. The public library had purchased a new copier, so their old machine was put into use at the new building. This deferred another major expense. Public library funds also cover copier maintenance and a small amount was budgeted for supplies. Further, the library board has assumed a lead role in setting policy for the Knox County Records Library. For instance, the board requested that patrons use only a pencil when working with the records. The county commissioners, on the other hand, are responsible for utilities, general maintenance and other major operating costs, excluding staff salary.

While the county's most pressing needs were met when the new facility opened, work is ongoing today directed both at better preserving the records and making them easier to use and at improving the building itself. One future goal is to flatten the oldest quarter-folded court case files, so that they can be indexed and placed in acid-free folders and boxes. Other indexing projects have been completed or are in progress. The early court minute books and some documents dating from the territorial period have already been tucked away in acid-free boxes.

In addition, records continue to be brought over from the courthouse. Nearly 100 more court order books were moved from the clerk's office

earlier this year. There has been no problem at all with officials being overly possessive of their records. On the contrary, officeholders have been so anxious to create space that it has been hard to keep the library from becoming a dumping ground. Batches of obsolete records are also being destroyed each year, following proper guidelines and another year's worth are moved in to replace them.

Plans are currently in the works to pave the library's gravel parking lot and side the front of the building. Nothing had been done previously to alter the appearance of this extremely unattractive tin facade and it contrasts sharply with the clean, well lighted and very modern interior. New patrons are always pleasantly surprised upon entering. Genealogists, who are more often exposed to the neglect local records suffer and perhaps have a better appreciation for their value than the average person, are always extremely impressed. Many of them proceed to relate horror stories about the condition of records in other counties where they have done research.

Knox County was only the second county in the State of Indiana to create a facility specifically designed to house its records and make them accessible to the public. The first to do so was Bartholomew County. A Knox County delegation traveled there in 1988 to make comparisons. There are many differences between the two, as well as in the way they came into being. The fact that county officials and the public library board worked together, each assuming a

share of the burden, makes the Knox County venture totally unique. It very much shows what can be accomplished through a cooperative endeavor and reveals that libraries can make an enormous contribution where the care of local records is concerned.

Some may see this as an awkward arrangement, but if so it is one that got the job done. The Knox County model is not necessarily a model for record programs in other counties. Each county must use its own available resources in embarking on such a project. The first and foremost requirement is a resolve on the part of elected officials to implement change. Hopefully, initiative will be taken in more counties, regardless of how the final product is achieved, so that local history is preserved.

The Knox County Records Library is located at 819 Broadway Street in Vincennes. Group tours of the library are available during regular business hours, or at other times by prior arrangement. For further information, call (812) 885-2557.