

Gustav Hendrich
Senior Archivist,
Western Cape Archives
and Records Service
and Research Fellow,
Department of History,
Faculty of Arts and Social
Sciences, Stellenbosch
University. E-mail:
gustavhendrich@gmail.
com

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150509/JCH42.v2.4>

ISSN 0258-2422 (Print)
ISSN 2415-0509 (Online)

Journal for Contemporary
History
2017 42(2):74-97
© UV/UFS



“A RICH STOREHOUSE FOR RESEARCH”: THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE WESTERN CAPE ARCHIVES AND RECORDS SERVICE

Abstract

Without the existence of archival repositories, or institutions responsible for the safekeeping and preservation of records, there will be no fundamental source for studying the past. The primary role of archives the world over is to preserve historical sources of information for the benefit of future generations. For understanding the South African past, particularly from its early beginnings at the Cape, the Western Cape Archives and Records Service (WCARS) in Cape Town, plays an instrumental role in the proper recordkeeping of some of our country's most valuable and irreplaceable records. Despite the centuries of possible hazardous influences such as water, damp and weather damage to the paper-based sources, the oldest records have largely remained intact. The aim of this article is to describe the efforts of archivists and record their pleas for more effective storage space/locations. It is also intended to shed light on the historical development of WCARS as a renowned research institution that today serves the interests of a wide spectrum of the public; most notably academics, historians, scholars and family researchers from not only the Western Cape region, but also from across South Africa and abroad.

Keywords: Western Cape Archives and Records Service (WCARS); Cape Archives Repository; recordkeeping; GM Theal; HCV Leibbrandt; CG Botha; archival holdings; Roeland Street Prison.

Slutelwoorde: Wes-Kaapse Argief en Rekorddiens (WKARD); Kaapse Argiefbewaarplek; rekordberging; GM Theal; HCV Leibbrandt; CG Botha; argivale versamelings; Roelandstraat-gevangenis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past century and across the world there has been a steady rise in public awareness of the critical importance and intrinsic value of archives to state and society. Factors which have contributed to the rising prominence of archives include heightened government and societal demands for records to be preserved for future reference, and the emergence of technology which has radically

transformed access to information. It is now possible to obtain information about almost any topic from virtually anywhere on earth. It is almost inconceivable that a state can be considered complete without fully functional archival services and institutions.

In 1924, Dr Colin Graham Botha, Chief Archivist of the Union of South Africa, emphasised the need for a public archives service with long-term preservation objectives. The government had by that time accepted the obligation of being public custodian of the archives, for preserving the records of state functions, and for providing the public and research and scholarly institutions with access to archival records. Botha stated that, “archives are great storehouses of material for the historian, the economist, the sociologist and the student of political science, as well as for the investigator of legal matters. Many of the records possess historical value, for though they are dead administratively, they are vital historically”¹. In the words of American archivist Randall C Jimerson, “archives can [...] serve society not merely as storehouses of past experiences, but as an active agent in today’s struggle for open government, accountability, diversity, and social justice”.²

It is unfortunate that the archival services and profession in sub-Saharan Africa has largely failed to meet the required standards of appropriate service delivery, or to reinforce the value of archives repositories in challenging the politics of power, knowledge and race on the African continent and abroad. Regrettably, the lack of financial support and a shortage of trained archivists resulted in a largely deteriorated and handicapped state of archival services. Cathrine Nengomasha of the Department of Information and Communication Studies in Namibia maintains that the basic reason for this was the move from colonialism to independence, and that some countries were left without adequate record keeping systems and “foundation for automation”; hence resulting in a poor state.³

Yet, after the collapse of apartheid in South Africa and its enormous state bureaucracy, and exclusiveness of archives to the white minority in 1994, the doors of the archives were opened to all race groups and made fully accessible. In addition, there was a greater awareness of the importance of archives as institutions. With the rise of determined groups of scholarship, platforms and associations such as the South African Society of Archivists (SASA), and particularly after the Eastern and Southern African Branch of the International Council of Archivists (ESARBICA) came into being, it stimulated critical debate

1 Western Cape Archives and Records Service (hereafter referred to as WCARS). JP199: C Graham Botha, *The public archives – their value to scientific research* (Presidential Address – Section F, delivered 11 July 1924), p. 126.

2 RC Jimerson, *Archives power. Memory, accountability and social justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009), p. 236.

3 CT Nengomasha, “The past, present and future of records and archives management in sub-Saharan Africa”, *Journal of the South African Society of Archivists* 46, 2013, p. 2.

surrounding archives. Together with internationally-funded projects, these groups and associations have contributed significantly to instilling a more effective and transparent archival service.⁴

As the oldest archival repository in South Africa, the Cape Town Archives (now the Western Cape Archives and Records Service (WCARS)) holds the country's oldest and historically richest documents. While war, fire, water damage or mismanagement had in some cases led to irreparable damage to, or total loss, of records in Europe, the archives in South Africa remained largely intact. To quote Botha who wrote in 1919, "In South Africa we are the proud possessors of a collection of archives which compares favourably with records of any other country. When the history of their preservation in early days is read, it is right to say that it is a matter of congratulation that they are so complete"⁵.

Ongoing demands from academia and civil society for the construction of an official archives repository provided support for the call for the archives to be professionally stored and managed. Although early archival recordkeeping was, especially after the French Revolution, still an emerging practice, it was instituted by European colonists at the Cape of Good Hope. Apart from the apparent primitiveness, the effects of weather conditions and possible damage to documentation created the need to preserve records for future reference purposes. These records, which are the only written documents available, were considered as irrefutable evidence regarding almost all aspects of state-societal relations and issues; for instance, the imposition of taxes, payments, legal cases on a local level, but also for the colonial motherland to control or regulate the progress and status of a particular colony under its jurisdiction.

It was particularly after the second British occupation of the Cape in 1806 that definite steps were taken to enhance the storing and accessibility of records. This provided the spark for the forthcoming development of the archives services. Concurrently with the appointment of an Archives Commission, the newly established archives service inevitably also faced severe problems, with the key problem being the provision of adequate storage space.⁶ A constant and persistent appeal was addressed to government by concerned individuals and those who became involved with the maintenance of archives. As the volumes of records increased substantially, a need for improved accommodation and recordkeeping methods occurred. These were good grounds for the motivation for the establishment of proper storage facilities for the archives in the Cape. It is the aim of this article to emphasise the plea for proper facilities to preserve

4 V Harris, *Exploring archives: An introduction to archival ideas and practice in South Africa* (Pretoria: National Archives of South Africa, 2000), p. 17.

5 WCARS. JP201: CG Botha, *Historical research in South Africa: With special reference to the Cape Archives* (Johannesburg: SA Association for the Advancement of Science, 1919), p. 179.

6 WCARS. 3/KWT 4/1/232, ZC/2/17. Archives Commission, 1937.

the archival holdings, and to describe the historical development of the Cape Town Archives as a renowned “storehouse” for primary sources and a centre for archival research.

2. RECORD KEEPING DURING THE EARLY CAPE PERIOD

After the Dutch arrival at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652, the settlement of colonists, their imported slaves and the indigenous people fell under the organisational and managerial structures of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC)). For the VOC, the Cape was simply a refreshment station and a trading post. It was not expected to become a colony. As time passed, the VOC put in place elaborate mechanisms for communication between the Netherlands, the Dutch East Indies and the Cape to promote the efficiency of their trading enterprise and the long sea voyages these business activities depended on.

After the erection of a fort and, later, the Castle, the Cape was governed by the VOC and its rules and regulations were imposed on the early settlement. Since both political and military functions were housed in the Castle, it became necessary to keep important records in safe custody. Under company rule, it was routine to keep a record of daily life, such as the *Journal of Jan van Riebeeck*. This was the means by which the government in the Netherlands could be properly informed regarding the Cape administration and the local authorities at the Cape could store those records for their own use or reference.⁷

Because of the long and dangerous voyages across the oceans, fraud and the potential loss of original documents, a regulation was put in place requiring copies of original documents to be sent to the Netherlands. Having duplicates helped to reduce the impact of original documents being lost, and the authentic original document remained at the local colonial offices. Because the journal (*Daghregister*) was one of the first documents at the early Cape and one of the most important, it was a principal target for preservation.⁸ Unfortunately, the early recordkeeping practices were rudimentary, making it difficult to properly preserve the journal and other important documents, such as the records of the Council of Policy.

The storage facilities at the Castle were not suitable for the effective preservation of VOC documents. Factors which contributed to the deterioration of some of these documents included mismanagement, rodent damage and water damage as a result of the Castle’s exposure to storms on the Table Bay coastline. It is unclear where in the Castle the VOC records were stored,

7 DB Bosman and HB Thom, *Daghregister gehouden by den Oppercoopman Jan Anthonisz van Riebeeck*, Part 1, 1651-1655 (Cape Town: AA Balkema, 1955), p. xxvii.

8 *Ibid.*

although historians agree that it was probably stored in the Secretary's office.⁹ The Governor's room and offices were too small to store records, and the basement was damp. Sources indicate that documents in the Secretary's office were also exposed to damp. A study by HB Thom and DB Bosman regarding the *Daghregisters* from 1952 to 1955 indicates that, "the original is no longer in a good condition. Age had caused the paper and ink to fade; the top and bottom of many pages have been damaged – presumably by dampness – and become so pulverized that often only portions of pages are in a good and readable condition. The result is that very often it is extremely difficult, and at most times quite impossible, to decipher the document"¹⁰.

In the absence of archival recordkeeping practices at that time, it was unavoidable that some records would deteriorate to the point where they were almost unusable. By the 1820s, initiatives were undertaken to publish copies of the *Daghregister*, "to save them from oblivion before nibbling mice destroys them".¹¹ Despite these poor conditions, the various collections of the branches of the VOC Government remained largely complete.

After the collapse of the Dutch colonial rule due to the bankruptcy of the VOC and the Batavian defeat at the Battle of Blaauwberg in 1806, the British occupied the Cape. The new authorities decided that the Castle would be used primarily as a military fortification, and that records would be moved to a more suitable location. The Slave Lodge was converted for the use of state departments, including the High Court, and to provide safe custody for government and legal records and the transferred records of the VOC.¹²

It is difficult to determine where the various records were stored during the time the High Court was used for storage purposes. Botha speculates that these were kept in one of the judge's rooms. The "Record Room" seemed to have been exclusively utilised by lawyers, judges or legal personnel conducting research relevant to court cases.¹³ Although the facilities and exterior appearance of the building were improved, no proper recordkeeping practices were put in place. A letter from the Surveyor General Skirrow to the architect Brink, dated 28 August 1833, describes the unfavourable conditions in the High Court for storing official records as follows, "the offices occupied by the Master of the Supreme Court [...] are not only uncomfortable, but in a state, which would be detrimental to the

9 Towards a New Age of Partnership Project (TANAP), *Resolutions of the Council of Policy of the Cape of Good Hope 1651-1795* (Cape Town: Nasionaal Archief en Sentrum vir Besigheids- en Taaldiens, 2008).

10 Bosman and Thom, p. xxx.

11 *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

12 O Geyser, *Die ou hoogeregshofgebou* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1958), p. 46.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 47; CJ Beyers, "Die huisvesting van die Kaapse Argief", *South African Archives Journal* 1, 1959, p. 46.

health of the occupants from being both cold and damp and liable to continual drafts in the winter season, and intolerably hot during the summer”.¹⁴

There were also complaints about the lack of space and lighting. This hampered the ability of people to consult the records. The High Court documents included mainly records of legal cases and VOC records. The rest were scattered amongst governmental departments, *Landdrosten* (magistrate offices) and *Heemraden* (town councils) across the Cape districts.¹⁵

3. THE DUTY TO COLLECT AND PRESERVE

As a result of continued pressure from historians, lawyers and concerned parties after the mid-nineteenth century, a concerted effort was made to improve the conditions of the archives. As the perceived value of archives in Europe rose, the British Colonial Office considered it important to collect and maintain numerous and voluminous collections of records.

The influence of this shift was felt in South Africa and in 1876 a commission with a number of prominent members was appointed to enquire into the state of the Colonial Archives.¹⁶ This was a significant turning point for archive development in the British colony. Amongst others, the Honourable John X Merriman, CA Fairbridge, WE Moore and A de Smidt were ordered, “to collect, examine, classify and index the Archives of the Colony”.¹⁷ The Commission found that many older records were, “damaged by worm and mildew”, while other papers were found to be irrecoverable. As a preliminary measure, the archives were moved to the office of the Governor-General and a distinguished historian, Dr George McCall Theal, was employed to take charge of these records.

Theal described the appalling state of the records as follows, “they have until quite recently been scattered about in many buildings and are not even collected in one apartment. In Cape Town much of what was most valuable in some classes of documents [...] was lost or destroyed through carelessness and indifference of the Government”¹⁸. The Commission reported that it was not necessary to make these sources accessible since hardly any member of the

14 WCARS. Colonial Office (hereafter referred to as CO) 413: Letters and papers received from Surveyor General and Architect, 1833, no. 119.

15 Geyser, pp. 46-47.

16 CG Botha, *A brief guide to the various classes of documents in the Cape Archives for the period 1652-1806* (Cape Town: Cape Times Limited, 1918), p. 5.

17 *Ibid.*; PA Myburgh, *Die geskiedenis van die staatsargiefwese in Suid-Afrika, 1876-1910* (MA, University of Pretoria, 1993), p. 10.

18 GM Theal, *Chronicles of Cape commanders, or an abstract of original manuscripts in the archives of the Cape Colony, dating from 1651 to 1691, compared with printed accounts of the settlement by various visitors during that time.* (Cape Town: WA Richards and Sons, 1882), Preface.

public consulted the records, and that the employment of an archivist would be too costly.¹⁹

In 1881 the Government approved the official appointment of Rev. HCV Leibbrandt as the first Keeper of the Colonial Archives. Leibbrandt was determined to preserve the archives and made every effort to communicate the urgency of conserving the archives.²⁰ He immediately ordered the removal of records to the South African Public Library, but maintained, “many valuable public records [that] are still left in the offices with which they are naturally connected, ought certainly to form a portion of the Archives”.²¹

A strong appeal was made to the colonial government for greater co-operation and assistance in securing the existing archives. Inadequate storage capacity and a general lack of expertise remained stumbling blocks. In an official report in October 1881, Leibbrandt’s view of the dilapidated conditions of the archives was evident, “I believe it had been the intention of Parliament and of the Archives Commission, and as it is my object to make the record office a credit to the colony [...] I trust that the government will bring in a bill during the next session of Parliament to remove the difficulties in the way of my office being placed in possession of the documents which naturally are to be preserved in it. Every day’s delay adds to the danger of losing more valuable documents which already is a very serious fact and must become even more so, if the matter be left in its present condition”.²²

Initially his appeal for a larger area for preservation was rejected outright, but due to his persistence, he succeeded in obtaining the use of the basement of the Houses of Parliament in the Cape in 1886. The lack of suitable storage conditions nevertheless remained a problem. Myburgh describes the lack of storage and problems such as leaking pipes, insufficient lighting between the shelves and health dangers.²³ Despite the fact that the archives were kept at Parliament, politicians did not adopt a clear stance, or took action to render aid in respect of the maintenance of the facility. As the physical quantity of government records steadily increased, the storage problem made the rendering of managerial and archival functions very difficult.

In later reports, Leibbrandt tried to persuade the Government to provide more storage by saying the destruction of less valuable archives would have to take place if no action was taken. In 1902 he declared in his report to the Colonial Secretary that, “a considerable number of volumes, containing merely ‘citations’ or summonses, which have now no longer any value, is greatly in my

19 Myburgh, p. 17.

20 CJ Beyers, “Die huisvesting van die Kaapse Argief”, *South African Archives Journal* 1, 1959, p. 47.

21 WCARS. G.50: Report of the Custodian of Colonial Archives, 1881, par. 5-7.

22 WCARS. CO 4216, L63: Memorials K-N. Archives in Registrar’s Court, Supreme Court, Rev. Leibbrandt, 30/31 October 1881.

23 Myburgh, pp. 34-36.

way, and should be destroyed to make room for more valuable papers”.²⁴ In fact, this remark was the opposite of what Leibbrandt really thought – he believed that collections of archival records should be complete. There was no response to his plea for more storage space. In 1906 Leibbrandt started securing the content of past records by compiling *Précis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope*, so as to reduce physical consultation and other handling of original records.²⁵

In 1895 Parliament appointed a select committee to report on the state of the archives. This was a sign that recognition of state responsibility to preserve the Colonial Archives was starting to take root. The Committee recommended the compilation of catalogues and indexes, and the construction of fireproof storage. It further recommended the establishment of a Public Record Office along the lines of the Record Office in London.²⁶

By the time Leibbrandt retired, the archives had been arranged in an orderly way, but there was still a dire shortage of acceptable storage facilities. In November 1909 a notice appeared in the *Government Gazette* urging the public to pay attention to an appeal made by the Archives Commission to submit documents of historical importance for collection. The official statement read, “any [documents] referring to matters of importance or interest in connection with the history of the Colony generally, or of local incidents of development which may be lodged in any public office, or in the custody of any public official, should be made accessible to the Archives Commission, or if necessary, deposited for safe custody in the Archives Vaults”.²⁷ The initial response was disappointing due to financial constraint and ignorance on the side of Government, but at least the issue had been brought to the attention of state departments and members of the public.

4. ACCOMMODATING THE ARCHIVES

After the unification of South Africa in 1910, the political landscape, as well as the archives service, changed rapidly as each of the provinces obtained their own archival repositories. In the administrative capital, Pretoria, the majority of public records concerning the government were relocated to the newly established South African Archives (SAB). While the Cape Archives had lost its status as the main archival repository in South Africa, it was nevertheless acknowledged for its cultural-historical sources and vast range of collections. As the Cape Archives

24 WCARS. CAD 1: Keeper of the Archives, Letters received, 1898-1904.

25 Myburgh, p. 40.

26 Botha, *A brief guide*, p. 6.

27 WCARS. T1216, 5241: Cape Colonial Archives: Old ledgers of the various government departments to be kept in custody in the archives vaults. Includes circular re appointment of a commission to enquire into matter of the Cape Archives, 1909–1910, 23 November 1909.

now resorted under the Union Government, measures were taken to improve its preservation practices and storage facilities.²⁸ In April 1912 the Government appointed a new archivist, Dr Colin Graham Botha, who gradually improved the functionality of the archives, and advocated for government to provide better facilities. He introduced a less restrictive access policy and stated that, “the collection is open to the public for inspection and research work between certain hours and every facility is afforded students making use of the documents”.²⁹

In a similar vein to earlier pleas from Theal and Leibbrandt, the new Chief Archivist expressed his hope, “that any reader of this book who may be in possession of an original document which formerly belonged to the records of the past will be inspired with a public-minded spirit and present the Archives with such document so that the collection may be as complete as possible”.³⁰

According to Botha, the Cape Archives Office, as it became known, contained approximately 25 000 manuscript volumes of official documents. He said the records from the Cape Colonial Office now constituted part of the archival records, and he recommended greater accessibility, combined with careful handling of original sources. Botha insisted upon the publication of a portion of the archives to render it *verbatim et literatim* for public use. The Chief Archivist also suggested repairing damage caused by insects, and recommended proper treatment of files and the fumigation of the Records Department.³¹ Botha maintained that it was a, “good opportunity to draw attention to the lack of space in the Vaults” and sought an additional office and room for persons wishing to consult the archives.³² His persistent demands were not immediately addressed. Nevertheless, Botha made significant improvements by compiling inventories of manuscripts, printed volumes, alphabetical indexes and establishing card catalogues.

During the 1920s, work towards the development of archival services and, especially, their maintenance gained pace. The proclamation of the Public Archives Act in 1922 provided the first legal framework for archives in South Africa. As mentioned above, the heightened prominence of archives can be attributed partly to Botha’s efforts to persuade the Government of the significance of the archives and its value to research. He wrote and presented articles such as, “The public archives – Their value to scientific research” and “Historical research in South Africa: with specific reference to the Cape Archives” to cater for the new interest in archives. Despite the initial reluctance to provide substantial support, Botha confirmed that the Government accepted

28 Botha, *A brief guide*, p. 7.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

31 WCARS. CAD 1/1/1, 3: Correspondence archives. Miscellaneous (1912-1913), CG Botha, Report, Cape Town Archives, 1912, p. 5.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

its responsibility to instil constructive transformation in the archives services. In the latter article Botha asserted that, “The Government has recognized to some extent its obligation as public archives and their proper administration has led to archival reform”.³³

The second report of the Senate in March 1921 contains the first political remarks concerning the state of the archives, “[The Sessional] Committee deeply deplores the present unsatisfactory housing of the Cape Archives which it considers is inadequate in accommodation, unsuitable for purposes of research and does not provide the best conditions for the preservation of what constitutes the oldest and most valuable historical records in South Africa”.³⁴

The Committee was so concerned about the deplorable state of the archives that it suggested referring the matter to the Prime Minister. In his capacity as Chief Archivist, Botha continued to send correspondence to the Government urging it to commission the construction of a suitable building or procure an existing one for the purpose.

In 1923 Botha dispatched a memorandum on the specifications of an ideal archive building as follows; firstly, that, “security of the Archives lies in the building in which they are housed”, and, secondly, that, “chief factors to be borne in mind in putting up such a structure are immunity from fire and damp, plenty of light and air; economy of space, adaptability to enlargement, and the methods of storing, using and controlling the Archives”.³⁵ In 1927 Botha stated that the storage space had become so congested that the situation was untenable. Furthermore, the increase in utilisation by academics and students had revealed administrative deficiencies, such as a lack of staff assistance. Once the storage of records previously under departmental custody became centralised in the archives, the problem became even more serious. Botha reported, “I am unable to take any more for the want of space”.³⁶ In 1929 the Senate’s Sessional Committee once again debated the matter and stated, “Your committee therefore recommends that the Government be informed that it will not be possible for the Archives Department to remain in the Senate Basement after next Session as the space is urgently wanting [sic] for Senate Records”.³⁷

In July 1929 some 17th and 18th century records were damaged by flooding. The *Cape Argus* newspaper reported that a water drain pipe had burst, causing a number of documents to be partially soaked and that, “many pages written in

33 CG Botha, *The public archives – Their value to scientific research*, p. 120.

34 WCARS. CAD 1/2/3, 2/1/1: Parliament of the Union of South Africa, The Senate, Second report from the Sessional Committee on the Library of Parliament, 15 June 1921, p. 2.

35 WCARS. CAD 1/2/3, 2/1/2: Memorandum on the requirements for an archive building, 26 February 1923.

36 WCARS. CAD 1/2/3, 2/1/24: Archives Department, Letter CG Botha – Secretary of Interior, 13 May 1927.

37 WCARS. CAD 1/2/3, 2/1/43: Parliament of the Union of South Africa, The Senate, 1st and 2nd Reports from the Sessional Committee on internal arrangements, 8 March 1929.

ink have become discoloured. Immediate steps were taken to dry the dozens of affected volumes to prevent their disintegration and growth of mildew among the damp pages".³⁸ Restoration work began in earnest. Two weeks before, a fire broke out in one of the offices of the Houses of Parliament and caused alarm at the archives. These incidents brought the issue of accommodation to the attention of the authorities.

The opportunity to obtain a dedicated archives building came when the University of South Africa decided to sell its buildings in Queen Victoria Street, Cape Town. The Archives Commission immediately purchased the building. After a parliamentary debate and negotiations with the Minister of Interior, Dr DF Malan, the allocation of the necessary funds, including £10 000 for alterations to the building, was approved.³⁹ Botha said, "I hope that the Public Works Department (PWD) will see their way to make provisions for the most essential requirements to render it as free from the dangers of fire and water as possible. My hope is that when the Cape records are removed to their new home there will be no loophole for criticism that every care has been taken to render it safe from destruction"⁴⁰.

On 15 March 1932 the Union Government bought the University Building for £45 000. Many changes were planned, including the upgrading of the main hall. Botha studied the construction plans and even discussed the conversion of the building with foreign archivists. His "Report of a Visit to Various Archive Centres in Europe, United States of America and Canada" in 1921 specifically dealt with the conversion of existing buildings into archives repositories.⁴¹ In 1934 archive staff members moved into the new building in Queen Victoria Street. The archives repository contained nearly 120 000 records and official publications on six miles of shelving space.⁴²

5. PROGRESS AND THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD FOR THE CAPE ARCHIVES REPOSITORY

After the inauguration of the picturesque university building as archives repository for the Cape Province, a period of gradual progress and development ensued in archive services to state and public. The new building enabled the records to be professionally stored and, above all, brought the archives to the forefront of public attention. In 1937 the Archives Commission suggested a general survey of

38 WCARS. CAD 1/2/3, 2/1/58: "Cape Archives endangered", *Cape Argus*, 12 July 1927.

39 WCARS. CAD 1/2/3, 2/1/68: The Senate, 7 March 1930; *Cape Times*, 8 March 1930, "New archives in Queen Victoria Street".

40 WCARS. CAD 1/2/3, 2/1/85: Archives Department, Letter CG Botha – Secretary of Interior, 29 December 1931; Beyers, p. 51.

41 Beyers, p. 52.

42 Approximately 9,6km.

documents in order to prevent the loss of historically valuable records.⁴³ The aim was to gather as much documentation as possible from municipalities, divisional councils and other governance bodies to be kept in safe custody.

The Chief Archivist for the Union reported in December 1948 that, “the main Archives building is filled almost to capacity”, with space for shelving for only 2 000 more files. The report went on to say, “these strongrooms do not conform to all the requirements of the Archivist, and that the ideal would be to have all our records, or at least a much greater portion of them, in one properly constructed Archives building”.⁴⁴

In the post-war period, arrangements were made for additional strong room facilities in the Marks Building in Parliament Street, since this had become a matter of extreme urgency.⁴⁵ This measure only temporarily alleviated the strain on the archives. The archives service slowly recovered from the long-term impacts of the war, such as chaotic conditions and malfunctioning in the archives service. The lack of supervision had led to records being left unclassified, uncatalogued and in a dire state, as described in an evaluation report by the Assistant Archivist, JA Mouton.⁴⁶ Renewed efforts were made to enhance the effectiveness of the archives service and to pave the way for development in the decades which followed.

In 1930 Dr PJ Venter was appointed Chief Archivist at Cape Town and sought to develop the capabilities of archives and to instil professionalism among the archivists. The collection, arrangement and description of some incomplete or outstanding records were undertaken. His article on the destruction of records as a key function of records management services also indicated the emphasis now being placed on archivists having to exercise sensible judgement with regard to which records were worth keeping for the long term. Venter declared that reducing the number of ephemeral or temporary records, “brings us closer to the realization of our ideals, in other words, to get our records in such a condition that they will be known to us and consequently accessible to the public”.⁴⁷ He compared the archives service to a garden which has to be weeded in order to more effectively protect more valuable items.

43 WCARS. 3/KWT, 4/1/232; ZC 2/17: Archives Commission 1937.

44 WCARS. CAD 2/1/1/2, C 1/40: Report on archives accommodation, 17 December 1948, Housing, accommodation in four archives depots.

45 WCARS. CAD 2/1/1/2, C 1/14: Strongroom accommodation in Cape Archives.

46 WCARS. CAD 2/1/1/66: JA Mouton, “General survey of Cape Archives”, 6 January 1941.

47 WCARS. CAD 2/1/1/76, C7/6: PJ Venter, “Die vernietiging van rekords in Suid-Afrika”, *Argiefjaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis*, 1938, p. 9.

Image 1: Main strong room, Cape Archives Depository, Queen Victoria Street, Cape Town



Source: WCARS. E8514.

Annual reporting improved the functionality of, and communication within the archives service.⁴⁸ The Cape Province administration also experienced marked progress in expanding effective communication with almost all government departments. A regulation was put in place that records transferred to the archives repository had to be accompanied by an inventory, which enabled the archivists to rearrange and file the records appropriately. The continued influx of documents from the main state departments, such as the archives of the Attorney-General, Lands, Public Works, Agriculture and Forestry Departments caused the size of the various collections to increase substantially.

In October 1945, for example, the archives repository received nearly 2 000 volumes relating to land transactions from 1872 to 1905 from the Department of Lands.⁴⁹ Because the archival and communication systems had been developed, dealing with acquisition was a task that would have been considered almost impossible at an earlier time.

Efforts were also made to improve the usefulness of the archives to the public. During the early 1950s the amount of source material collected from abroad created the need for large scale microfilming. Prominent microfilm collections from places such as the Rijksargief in The Hague, the National Archives in Paris, the London Missionary Society, and others were copied and taken up into the repository.⁵⁰ One of the largest photographic collections, comprising nearly 14 000 images by the archivist Kathleen Jeffreys, was systematically bound into folders and shelved. This priceless and unique collection was consulted by numerous researchers. The Arthur Elliot collection of negatives also became one of the most remarkable photographic collections and its negative copies were made available for use to be duplicated for the State Archives in Pretoria. This renowned Cape Town photographer collected and photographed an enormous amount of photographs depicting the history of the Cape. A state memorandum of 1946 claimed that, “no collection of negatives in this country is stored in a neater way and catalogued more thoroughly than in this collection”.⁵¹

The Elliot, Morrison and other collections, which consisted exclusively of glass negatives, were reproduced photographically in their entirety and this added greatly to the 85 000 photographic collection. The Resolutions of the

48 PJ Venter, “Some of the developments in the South African Archives I have been associated with”, *South African Archives Journal* 1, 1959, p. 8.

49 WCARS. CAD 2/1/1/75: “Union Archives’ Acquisition”, *Cape Times*, 23 October 1945, “Land-departement skenk 2 000 boekdele aan argief. Van groot geskiedkundige waarde”, *Die Suiderster*, 22 October 1945.

50 SJ Schoeman, “Argiefbewaarplek Kaapstad: Twintigjaar in oënskou”, *Archives News XXXI(2A)*, August 1988 (Gedenk-herdruk), pp. 81-85.

51 WCARS. CAD 2/1/1/64, C16/8: Photographic section. The acquisition of the Arthur Elliot Collection; C16/14: Preservation of photographs: Enquiries from private persons and institutions, 1957.

Council of Policy, dating from 1700 to 1795, were duly photographed by the microfilming service to be utilised as duplicates and a backup source to the original documents.⁵²

In July 1957 the Chief Archivist in Pretoria requested Senior Archivist JA Mouton at the Cape Archives to complete a thorough questionnaire about the holdings and state of the archives repository. His response (Table 1) provides an indication of the wide range of sources and the storage space they occupied.⁵³

Table 1: Archival Holdings in the late 1950s

	Type of holdings	Appropriate bulk expressed in linear feet	Covering dates
Official (Originating from government departments)	Manuscript records	27 300	1651–1927
	Maps	70	1653–1941
	Archives Reference Library	468	1854–1957
	Blue Books and other official publications	3 761	
Private (Produced by private bodies or individuals in the conduct of their own affairs)	Manuscript records	270	1829–1938
	Newspapers	326	
	Photos	10 366	
	Negatives	17 421	
Local government	Manuscript records	254	1711–1932
Total		32 449	

Source: WCARS. CAD 21/4: General correspondence re preservation of documents, C.C.T.A. Questionnaire, 20 July 1957.

By 1958 the archives comprised almost 33 000 linear feet, again highlighting the lack of storage capacity. The Slotsboo Building, which was located on the terrain of the archives building in Queen Victoria Street, was constructed to provide additional storage space. Although it only served temporarily in the archives' demands, it became a valuable building for the immediate storage and retrieval of records.⁵⁴

During the 1960s the most significant event came with the declaration of the Republic of South Africa in May 1961. Thereafter, the main decision-

52 WCARS. CAD 2/1/1/64, C16/12: Eenheid van Filmdienste in Kaapse Argief. Foto-afdrucke van die resolusies van die Politieke Raad; Haagse Teks, 1958.

53 WCARS. CAD 21/4: General correspondence re preservation of documents, C.C.T.A. Questionnaire, 20 July 1957.

54 Over 10 000m.

making relating to archives was centralised at the National Archives in Pretoria. Nonetheless, the newly instituted Archives Act of 1962 stipulated that all the archives of the municipalities, town councils and divisional councils would be transferred to the respective archival repositories of the provinces.⁵⁵ The Director of Archives, Dr A Kieser, based at the National Archives, also instructed that the Cape Archives be allowed to take official public records into custody.⁵⁶ The Cape Archives Repository, which up to then only held the records of the colonial period, now received records from the state departments and local municipalities.

As a result of the state-politico changes and the sheer increase in the volume of records into the repository, the Cape Archives reached a turning point in 1964. In dealing with the massive information influx, the Cape Archives were necessitated to start a records management service. This service was to be extended by 1966 in that record managers had to conduct inspections of other state offices to regulate and ensure appropriate safekeeping of records, before being transferred to the archives repository. Thus, the very role of the archivist was changing, requiring massive projects of arranging and describing, as well as indexing the surplus publications or records acquired from the state departments. An influential archivist during the 1960s was Dr AJ Boëseken, who fulfilled an instrumental role in managing source publications and transcribing 17th and 18th century Dutch records of the Resolutions of the Council of Policy – thereby unlocking essentially unreadable information.

In the archives repository a room specifically designed for cartographic maps, and another for microfilm cabinets, were taken into use. By the 1970s approximately 9 000 maps of properties, human settlements, or places of geographical importance had been catalogued and preserved. The map collections are regarded as a vital source and an important subdivision of the archive’s collections. For the consultation of secondary source material, such as books and journals, a reference library was opened to enhance research efficiency, making the archives more useful.

Although the introduction of the computer in 1972 as a new method of unlocking data would radically revolutionise the working environment of the archive services, it was still in the embryonic phase. Effective data processing by means of computerised technologies in Pretoria was already under way and, in time, the Cape Archives would follow suit.

As a consequence of these progressive strides in the archival service and the more accessible and user-friendly stance, there was a large influx of researchers. SJ Schoeman, Chief Archivist at the time, indicated that the number of researchers increased from 735 in 1958 to 831 in 1978.⁵⁷ This

55 IJ de Klerk, “The changing role of the archivist”, *Archives News* IX(1), July 1966, pp. 9-10.

56 JH Cilliers, “Kaapse bedrywighede”, *Archives News* VII(3), November-December 1964, pp. 12-14.

57 Schoeman, p. 84.

directly led to studies, projects, or undertakings on a multitude of subjects for academic purposes. In addition to local scholars and students, the archives drew researchers from across the globe, which created international awareness of the Cape Archives. Schoeman described the 20-year period leading up to the 1980s with its marked progress in the delivery of services as the “renaissance period” of the archives. The archival profession and service were now well established, despite lingering problems and limited storage space.

6. THE RISE OF A MODERN ARCHIVES REPOSITORY

In 1954 a construction engineer of the Public Works Department evaluated the building. He advised that it would be better to replace the building with an entirely new one, as it presented, “nothing less than a risk for safety of the staff and public”.⁵⁸ Officials from the Weather Bureau expressed the opinion that “the strong rooms in this building were subject to great variations of temperature which would promote the disintegration of paper”.⁵⁹ It was made clear that the housing of archival collections had become such a critical problem that the Minister of Education, Arts and Sciences was requested to obtain special approval from Cabinet for extension. After approval was granted, the need for additional or separate archival depots to be developed was discussed. According to future predictions, the shelving space would have to be doubled to be able to accommodate the constant inflow of records.

In addition to a lack of space, the present building itself had serious shortcomings, according to a government report. The structural and functional hindrances were described in detail. It had become steadily more difficult to provide shelf space for incoming records. The height of the ceiling and elongated shelves were problematic and the lighting insufficient.⁶⁰ The large amount of wooden material used on the interior of the building made it a fire hazard.

Since there was no room for the archives repository to be expanded to meet the storage needs, thoughts turned to the possibility of transferring all of the vast archives to a modern building constructed in compliance with archival best practice. In 1970 the National Party Government suggested transferring the Cape Archives to Stellenbosch.⁶¹ A host of complaints and objections were expressed by academics and historians who signed a petition against the proposal. After the government received a concise memorandum stating that the plan was unjust and impractical in terms of transportation and accessibility for research purposes, the proposal was dropped.

58 WCARS. 3/CT, G.14/51/2: Archives, accommodation for Cape Archives, Facts relating to the proposed establishment of an archives depot at Stellenbosch, p. 3.

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

61 WCARS. 3/CT, 4/1/11/282. G.14/51/3: Archives newspaper clippings, 1970.

As the attempts of the Government to move the archives to Stellenbosch were abandoned, other sites for the possible construction of a new archives building in the Cape Town area were considered. On 11 March 1971 the first mention was made of the possibility of using the Roeland Street Prison site in the northern part of the former District Six. Because the prison was earmarked for refurbishment, the attention of the Archives Commission was drawn to the possibility that this might be a suitable site. State departments and high-profile academics were mostly in favour of the suggestion. The Secretary of Public Works, A Howard, described it as, “an excellent position for an archive, being within walking distance from town and close to museums, libraries and other archives. As it was against the mountain, vaults could be built for storing valuable documents”.⁶² Prof. Eric Axelson of the History Department of the University of Cape Town added, “it is close to the South African Library, the Parliamentary Library and the museum. I would support anything to keep the archives in a central site.”⁶³

The decision to propose the use of the Roeland Street site for the archives repository was not based only on its central location, but also because the prison building had significant historical and architectural value of its own. The Roeland Street Prison had been in use since 1859 and was the largest prison in Cape Town until newer facilities were built at Pollsmoor and Goodwood. The Public Works Department and Vernacular Architectural Society agreed that the historic front façade of the gaol should be preserved at all costs. The façade architecture carried a degree of “historical merit” as a mid-19th century example of British colonial and international prison building styles.⁶⁴ The building was constructed during the administration of Governor Sir George Grey after the passing of Ordinance 24 of 1847, “[f]or improving the Gaols of the Colony”.⁶⁵ The result was a more beautiful building than might have been built at an earlier time. Robert Mair, Resident Clerk of Works, was ordered to construct the prison, using labour of convicts, immigrants or “convicted seamen”.⁶⁶ It is evident that these construction workers built a durable structure that could bear the harshness of the Cape weather. According to a study by DB McLennan, the striking architectural features of the prison were preserved because it was a landmark at the entrance of Cape Town.

There is little information on the actual building, although it is known that W Köhler, the architect who drew up the plans for the South African Library, also designed the prison’s façade.⁶⁷ The outer wall surrounded the prison itself, as well as the hospital ward. Except for the wall, façade and front ward rooms,

62 WCARS. 3/CT: “Roeland St. Goal to house archives”, *Cape Times*, 11 March 1971.

63 WCARS. G.14/51/2: Archives, accommodation for Cape Archives.

64 WCARS. 3/CT, 4/1/11/282: Archives building, Cape Town, Roeland Street gaol site, 25 September 1978. CEV Enslin, Secretary, Cape Provincial Institute of Archivists.

65 *Ibid.*

66 *Ibid.*

67 DB McLennan, “Roeland Street jail”, *Archives News* XXXIII(5), November 1990, p. 45.

all the other buildings would be demolished for the construction of the modern archives building.

Construction planning during the 1980s was a protracted process, since careful study of the proposed area had to be carried out. Discussions took place as early as January 1979 between CD van Niekerk and the Department's Chief Architect, JWD Kellerman of the Environmental Advisory Board. Kellerman indicated that detailed preliminary studies had been conducted in Europe and the United States of America (USA) on the design of archives buildings. The intention was to create an archives building with the most modern up-to-standard structures. Kellerman said that the archives building should be constructed above ground to prevent the risk of flooding and the detrimental impact of damp storage conditions of basement floors.⁶⁸ However, the installation of appropriate air-conditioning systems could avoid these risks.

The new buildings had to blend in with old structures, such as the façade and outer walls. The new additions should be aesthetically pleasing and not spoil the old buildings that would remain. According to the proposals, the form, proportions and general appearance of the archives complex had to be in harmony with the surrounding environment and with Table Mountain as a backdrop. The Advisory Board felt that the visual impact of the building should be minimised by expanding it laterally, or by building parts of the facility below ground. Because the building was intended to be nine storeys high, this would contravene the city planning scheme. The decision-making process continued throughout the 1980s. After approval was granted in 1986, an enormous amount of material, comprising 9 000 cubic meters of cement, 870 tons of steel and two million face bricks were needed for its construction.⁶⁹ A period of about ten years elapsed before the newly constructed archives building could be taken into use. On 13 November 1989, precisely 130 years since the old prison was built, the keys of the new archives repository were officially handed over by the Public Works Department.⁷⁰ The massive task of transferring the archives from Queen Victoria Street was started immediately by personnel, using two trucks.

68 WCARS. 3/CT, 4/1/11/282: New archives building, Cape Town. Roeland Street Gaol Site", Cape Town Environmental Advisory Board, 13 February 1979, pp. 1-3.

69 DB McLennon, "The new home of the Cape Archives Depot", *South African Archives Journal* 32, 1990, p. 67.

70 CG de Wet, "Die trek na Roelandstraat Argiefbewaarplek", *Archives News*, January 1990, p. 31; CG de Wet, "Die einde van 'n era in die geskiedenis van die Kaapse Argiefbewaarplek", *Archives News*, April 1990, pp. 4-6.

Image 2: Aerial view of the Cape Archives Repository, Roeland Street, 1989



Source: WCARS. AG 17110.

Image 3: An archival strongroom in WCARS



Source: Author's own photograph

The new archive building was impressive. It comprised three separate sections, namely the west wing for conference and security rooms; the left wing for the reception area, senior personnel offices and the photographic section; and the main building housing the reading room and strong rooms located in the centre of the complex. The 46 strong rooms were an especially remarkable feature. Each was fitted with the most advanced fire protection system, using carbon dioxide gas. The facility contained nearly 43 kilometres of shelving space, space for the bindery and preservation section, as well as a fumigation and delivery room.⁷¹ A control centre for security officers was positioned to allow for effective surveillance of the passageways and surrounding areas.

Finally, the archives repository also contained a library intended for the storing of secondary books and journal sources, directories and indexes which could be beneficial for research or reference by researchers and staff members. The staff operated in the new facility with pride and a strong sense of optimism.

7. PIVOTAL HOLDINGS AND CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS

The new archives building now had the capacity to accommodate the historical archival holdings of collections, series and additional sources of government documentation. Since its opening to the public, the archives have been consulted, researched and scrutinised by a wide spectrum of members of the public, most notably academics, scholars and family researchers from the Western Cape region, but also from across South Africa and from abroad.

The main archival holdings remain of pivotal importance and the consistent demand for reference and in-depth research from the collection reflects how attractive and valuable these sources are. Although it is not the aim of this article to fully describe the main holdings, it is nonetheless important to take cognisance of the most voluminous and widely consulted archival collections. Aside from the original records of the VOC from 1652 to 1795, the Batavian Republic of 1803 to 1806, and the colonial period after the Second British Occupation in 1806, which are mostly consulted for socio-economic, political or financial purposes, the archives of the Master Office of the Orphan Chambers (MOOC) have been regularly consulted by genealogists for information pertaining to properties, intestate estates, the registration of wills and deaths of persons deceased at the Cape, and its administration under the British. Table 2 is a list of a few selected archival holdings and the periods they cover.⁷²

71 McLennon, "The new home", pp. 66-67.

72 *Guide to arranged archives in the Cape Archives Depot*, Vol. 1. State Archives Service, August 1995, 3rd edition.

Table 2: Major Archival Collections

Archival Collection	Period
Council of Policy	1649–1795
Court of Justice	1652–1843
Cape Title Deeds and Transfers	1652–1825
Attorney-General	1661–1910
Master of the Supreme Court	1670–
Colonial Office	1795–1911
Slave Office	1789–1845
Government House	1800–1910
Receiver of Land Revenue	1686–1828
Returns for Taxation Purposes	1692 –1845
Treasury Department	1795–1912

Source: *Guide to arranged archives in the Cape Archives Depot*, Vol. 1, 3rd edition. State Archives Service, August 1995.

The democratisation of South Africa after 1994 marked a critical turning point for the state archives, as well as the Cape Town Archives Repository. As the country was divided into nine provinces, it was deemed necessary to establish or proclaim new archive services that would serve the specific interests of the various provinces. The Cape Town Archives Repository became responsible for promoting and preserving the rich cultural heritage of the Western Cape. Once the Provincial Archives and Records Service of the Western Cape Act, 2005 (Act 3 of 2005) was passed, the formal transition from a national to a provincial archive could take place. The archives service officially became a provincial archives service on 1 April 2006; that is, it no longer fell under the jurisdiction of the National Archives based in Pretoria.

New and fundamentally important developments improved the accessibility of sources and the ability of users to refer to their contents. The archives service embarked on a number of projects which exposed it both locally and internationally. These included the Roeland Street Prison Oral History Project, launched in April 2003, as well as the Mutual Cultural Heritage Project (MCH). The MCH is a multilateral project initiated by the Government of the Netherlands to bring together the cultural heritage of countries which had a historical association with the VOC. Because the Western Cape Archives has in its possession one of the most complete collections of VOC records, it attracts a high level of research attention.

It remains the aim of the Western Cape Archives to safeguard damaged and deteriorating records from further decay by means of digitisation; that is, converting the material into a readable digital format. After consultation and negotiations with the Genealogical Society of Utah in May 2010, a partnership

was formed between the Society and the Archives. The digitisation of the records of the Slave Office (which were in a serious state of deterioration) was undertaken, and by July 2012 a total of 2 313 records, including records of the Master of the Supreme Court, Home Affairs Western Cape, and Muster Rolls, or *Opgaafrollen*, had been digitised.

An initiative of the Netherlands Government, the National Commission for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the National Archives of the Netherlands led to the launch of a project which emphasised how precious the VOC records are. During a ceremony, attended by Dr Z Pallo Jordan, the former Minister of Arts and Culture on 6 April 2005, the VOC collection in Cape Town was formally recognised through an inscription in the UNESCO *Memory of the World Register*.⁷³ This appreciation is a milestone in the history of the archives repository.

Operating within the “Towards a New Age of Partnership Project” (TANAP), the project seeks to preserve VOC archives all over the world. The principal aim of the project is to make the archives more freely accessible and to make largely unreadable documents more “understandable” to the researcher. Because the Cape Town Archives were considered a priority, definite strides were made towards mass transcriptions of the most important archival collections from the VOC period. After a successful agreement with TANAP, a panel of professional linguists and language practitioners was formed to conduct the transcription process. The transcription of archival sources, of which the TANAP team transcribed the Resolutions of the Council of Policy of the Cape of Good Hope, and the TEPC project the MOOC Collection, *Bandietenrollen*, VOC Muster Rolls and the *Medical Handbook* of Dr Johan Häszner, emphatically became one of the most extraordinary contributions to both the archives repository and the public as a whole.⁷⁴ After intensive transcribing between 2004 and 2008, the data was finally encoded onto DVD format and distributed.

Besides the transcriptions, the rapid progress of the digitisation project, commencing in 2015, was indicative of the marked change and progress in the archives service. The photographic collections were systematically digitised by beneficiaries of the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), and several archival groups are presently being scanned together with the necessary metadata by the Digitization Department located inside the WCARS, to make the collections available to the public. Research facilities in the reading room have constantly been improved and, coupled with the efforts to digitise key materials, this shows the inclination of the Western Cape Archives and Records Service to stay abreast of developments in technology, making the collection more useful.

73 WCARS. The official template with the inscription is located in the reading room of the archives repository.

74 TANAP and Cape Transcripts; TEPC – Two centuries transcribed, 1673-1834.

8. CONCLUSION

The Western Cape Archives and Records Service is a well-developed government institution with an established legacy as a “storehouse” for preserving historical sources of incalculable value. As such, it has become a haven for intensive archival research. The researcher is grateful for the efforts of early archivists who persisted in advocating for the establishment of a proper archives repository for the long-term benefit of both state and public. Their steady attempts to tackle problems and to overcome hindrances, such as the lack of accommodation, exposure to harsh climatic conditions, inefficiency, and government reluctance to address the issue, finally led to the establishment of the current facility. In spite of difficult conditions, the majority of the major archival records have been preserved through the centuries and were finally placed in the safe custody of the Western Cape Archives and Records Service for preservation.

The extent of the collection is immense, containing as it does an array of collections of archival sources pertaining to, especially, the history and development of Cape Town and the Western Cape Province. Apart from the official governmental records, substantial source information for genealogical or family research is also available. Ultimately, these records enable the researcher or investigator to reflect on the past, and, more importantly, to understand the circumstances of past realities. As the guardian of this vast collection of records, the archive is meeting its responsibility of safeguarding these records and making it progressively more accessible for current and future generations of the South African state and society.