Staff members Christy Venham and Scott Schwartz examine survey archives in the Byrd Reading Room.

The West Virginia Historical Records Survey

Strange as it may seem, historians and genealogists owe a great deal to the Great Depression, particularly those concerned with West Virginia history. It was that era's rampant unemployment that led directly to the Historical Records Survey, the most ambitious archival program in American history.

Initiated in 1935 as part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, the Historical Records Survey's purpose was to provide employment at the white collar and clerical levels while improving access to state and local records nationwide. The Survey's ultimate goal was to produce published inventories of records depositories in each of the nation's 3,066 counties. While considerable progress towards this end was accomplished, a variety of factors inhibited the Survey's completion. Foremost was the outbreak of World War II, which abruptly ended the nation's unemployment woes and subsequently the Works Progress Administration. Secondly, as if the original project goal was not sufficiently ambitious, lobbyists for a variety of special interest groups and sponsors succeeded in continually broadening the project's scope. Eventually in addition to county records offices, the Survey was charged with embracing manuscript collections, church archives, and early American imprints, in addition to a variety of other "special projects."

Such diversity succeeded in creating jobs—a workforce of nearly 10,000 workers was in place in 1938—yet its breadth spread resources thin. Subsequently, despite vast amounts of field research only about twenty percent of the project's endeavors were completed before the Survey closed in 1942.

Survey results differed greatly from state to state despite the use of standard forms and procedures supplied by the national office. Field workers were hired in each of the nation's counties to survey local records depositories by completing a project worksheet for each volume or group of records encountered. The worksheets were forwarded to a state office where information was compiled into a draft inventory. The inventories were returned to the field workers for rechecking against the originals and the addition of indexes and introductory essays concerning county history, government and records systems.

While the county-based system was better suited to some regions of the country than to others, (New England surveys found "town" records inventories more appropriate) the survey was successfully extended throughout the United States. Yet, as mentioned above, relatively few inventories were actually published by the project's end. Most remained in manuscript, consigned to the back shelves and basements of offices and archives that they were intended to elucidate. One of the major failings of the Historical Records Survey rests in its failure to provide for the permanent improvement of national records maintenance and retention standards, and tragically, many of the records inventoried by the project have been discarded and destroyed, along with the unpublished Survey records themselves.

Ironically, while the Survey's eventual diversity clearly weakened the main thrust of the project, the various extramural activities undertaken in many states have proven to be more significant than the inventories
"Women" and "West Virginia University" are the combined topics that formed the subject of Patricia Lee Hankins' recent internship at the West Virginia Collection. A graduate student in the University's public history program, Hankins spent most of the spring 1987 semester poring over the Collection's photograph holdings in an effort to locate and catalog images of University women from their first enrollment in 1889 to the present. In addition to producing a published catalog to the photos, Hankins is also gathering information for the University's Center for Women's Studies for a West Virginia University Women's Centenary Celebration in 1989.

themselves. This is certainly the case with the West Virginia Survey.

The West Virginia Historical Records Survey officially began on April 17, 1936. Like other state surveys the emphasis of the first year's activity was on the preparation of county inventories. Field work was conducted in each county and inventory worksheets were forwarded to the state office in Charleston.

While embarkation upon special projects generally followed lengthy periods of concentration upon the county inventories, unique circumstances led to an early flowering of several useful undertakings in West Virginia. The Historic Records Project at West Virginia University actually got its start during the Civil Works Administration which preceeded the Historical Records Survey. Directed by Ernest Morris with the advice of Charles Ambler and Festus Summers, the West Virginia University project involved the physical transfer of county records to the West Virginia University Library where they were preserved and thoroughly indexed. Between 1935 and 1942, project staff procured the records of thirteen northern counties. Over a quarter of a million court cases were catalogued, conserved and thoroughly indexed, generating a card index of approximately three million names and subjects.

A second project adopted by the Survey was an index to vital statistics in county records up to about 1900. Sponsored initially by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, a special state Commission on Historic and Scenic Markers was formed for the purpose of locating and recommending appropriate sites around the state for placement of special plaques and monuments. In the course of their research fieldworkers began a series of transcriptions of nineteenth-century vital statistics—births, marriages, deaths and wills—which was eventually extended to all fifty-five counties.

The desire to provide researchers with the actual data rather than just inventories to the sources continued to guide the West Virginia Survey. In 1937 the state supervisor authorized a state-wide program of cemetery readings with the goal of publishing a series of inventories and indexes covering every cemetery and grave marker in West Virginia. Like virtually all the Historical Records Survey programs, extensive fieldwork was done but relatively little data reached publication.

By the close of the Historical Records Survey, the state survey had published approximately three dozen volumes, including twelve county inventories, guides to the papers of five West Virginia governors, inventories of federal archives in West Virginia, inventories to the archives of the Presbyterian and Episcopal churches, a checklist of West Virginia imprints, and other volumes including cemetery readings, wills, and vital statistics. The bulk of the survey, however, remained in manuscript.

Owing to a unique wealth of historical and genealogical data unlike that of any other state, the West Virginia Historical Records Survey has retained its significance over the years. Deposited at the West Virginia University Library in installments from the 1930s to the 1950s, the Historical Records Survey archives continue to serve as a fundamental research resource for genealogists and historians alike.
Inventory to the Historical Records Survey Archives on Microfilm.
West Virginia and Regional History Collection, West Virginia University Library

Barbour County
Reel 1 Building Forms; History of Barbour County; County Office Records Inventories
Reel 2 County Office Records Inventories (continued); Order Book #2, County and Circuit Courts, 1847-1848
Reel 3 Births 1853-1860, 1865; Wills 1807-1899; Marriages 1843-1847, 1853-1892; Church and Parish Rolls 1832, 1887; Cemetery Register 1804-1899; Deaths 1853-1874; Minute Book #1 1843
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Reel 5 Minute Book, County and Circuit Courts, 1843-1847, pp.189-792
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Reel 8 County Office Records Inventories (continued); County Court Order Book 1772-1773
Reel 9 Abstracts, Minute Books I & II, 1772-1774; Land Owners Record 1784-1794; Marriage Licenses 1864-1899
Reel 10 Marriage Bonds 1816-1852; Wills 1772-1899; Inventories and Settlements 1865-1899
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Braxton County
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Reel 22 Order Book (1797??) pp.12-19; List of Records in WVU Library; County Office Records Inventories; Order Book (1797??) pp.1-12; Inventories 1813-1899; Marriages 1799-1900; Wills, Inventories, etc. 1800-1892; Deaths 1854-1899

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Reel 24 Circuit Court Inventory of Records; Births 1865, 1879-1887; County Court Inventory of Records; Index to Surveyor's Record 1809-1840
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Reel 27 Births 1855-1858, 1865-1867, 1878-1879; Marriage Licenses 1865-1876; Deaths 1855-1859, 1865-1867, 1878-1881; Wills 1861-1904; Estate Appraisals 1857-1899, 1880-1904

An abridged microfilm edition of the Historical Records Survey archives was filmed at the Library by representatives of the Genealogical Society, Salt Lake City, during the summer of 1961. The Library’s microfilming facilities were at the time situated in the building’s basement.

Clay County
Reel 28 History of Clay County; Building Forms; County Office Records Inventories; Births 1858-1899 (Moore-Mullins missing); Cemetery Register 1830-1896; Marriages 1859-1899; Wills, Inventories, etc. 1858-1890; Deaths 1858-1899

Doddridge County
Reel 29 History of Doddridge County; Building Forms; County Office Records Inventories
Reel 30 County Court Minute Books 1845-1854
Reel 31 Births 1853-1874; Wills 1827-1899 (Date of Probate); Deaths 1853-1882; Marriages 1845-1884; Births 1875-1882; Wills 1849-1902

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Reel 33 Town and City Inventory of Records—Mount Hope (pt.2), Pax, Ansted (pt.2), Oak Hill; County and Circuit Court Inventory of Records; Minutes, Jan. 28, 1939; Births 1866-1874, 1876-1893
Reel 34 Marriages 1853-1854, 1861, 1865-1899; Deaths 1866-1899; Wills, Inventories, etc. 1832-1899

Gilmer County
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Reel 37 Order Book #1, 1845-1849 (pt.2); Index to Minute Book; Index to Order Book
Hancock County
Reel 38 Order Book #2, March-November 1849; Births 1853-1859, 1861-1862, 1865-1867, 1884-1899; Deaths 1853-1854, 1856, 1858-1859, 1861-1862, 1865-1866, 1884-1888, 1890-1893, 1895-1899; Wills 1845-1901

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Reel 43 History of Hampshire County; Inventory of Records; Building Forms; County Office Records Inventories; City and Town Inventory of Records—Romney, Capon Bridge; County Court Minute Book 1788-1789; Marriage Bonds 1827-1828; Marriages 1865-1899; Births 1865-1880
Reel 44 Deaths 1866, 1868-1894; Index to Wills, Inventories, etc.; Wills 1780-1840; Inventories 1780-1791; Appraisements 1780-1794; Bonds 1780-1794; Division of Land 1780-1791; Settlements 1780-1794; Wills, Inventories, etc. 1750-1899

Hancock County
Reel 45 History of Hancock County; Check List of Wills 1848-1912; Order Book 1848; Deeds, Wills, Inventories 1848-1899; Wills 1848-1890
Reel 46 Births 1857-1858, 1860-1862, 1864-1896; Marriages 1864-1874, 1877-1912; Wills, Inventories, etc. 1848-1899; Miscellaneous Copies of Deeds; Deaths 1865-1884, 1886-1891, 1893-1899
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Reel 48 Minute Book, County Court 1848-1857; [County Court Record Book?] Volume B 1864
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Harrison County
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Reel 79 Minute Book II, County Court, pt.2
Reel 80 Minute Book II, County Court, pt.3; Minute Book I, County Court, 1801-1803
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Reel 84 Inventories—Maps and Photographs; County Court Inventories
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<td>County Court Inventory of Records, pt.3</td>
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<td>County Court Inventory of Records, pt.4</td>
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<td>County Court Inventory of Records, pt.5</td>
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<td>County Court Inventory of Records, pt.6</td>
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<td>94</td>
<td>County Court Inventory of Records, pt.7</td>
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<td>95</td>
<td>History of Lewis County; Building Forms; Inventory of Records; County Office Records Inventories; City and Town Inventory of Records—Weston, Jane Lew</td>
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<td>96</td>
<td>Births 1900-1906</td>
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<td>97</td>
<td>Births 1906-1929; Marriages 1817-1899; Deaths 1853-1862, 1865-1899; Wills 1853-1888; Inventories 1852-1900; Minute Book 1819-1820</td>
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<td>98</td>
<td>City and Town Inventory of Records; Deaths—Cemetery Records</td>
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<td>99</td>
<td>Births 1872-1877, 1885-1886, 1888-1900; Marriages 1873-1900; Deaths 1872-1873; Wills (Books I &amp; II) 1915-1917; Wills 1866-1890</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>County Court Minutes 1873-1897</td>
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<td>101</td>
<td>City and Town Inventory of Records—Fairview, Farmington, Worthington, Mannington, Monongah, Rivesville; Births 1865-1899</td>
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<td>102</td>
<td>Marriage Bonds 1852-1899; Cemetery Register 1843-1929; Church and Parish Records 1886-1900; Deaths 1865, 1867-1900, 1903-1919, Wills, Inventories 1842-1899, Alphabetical Settlements of Estates 1845-1900</td>
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<td>103</td>
<td>Taxable Property 1842; Minute Book 1847-1859; Order Book 1842-1843; Wills 1842-1863</td>
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<td>Appraisals 1848-1850</td>
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<td>108</td>
<td>Appraisals 1851-1854, pt.2; Appraisals 1855-1865, no date</td>
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<td>Building Forms, pt.1</td>
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<td>Building Forms, pt.2; County Office Records Inventories; City and Town Inventory of Records—Glen dale, McMechen, Benwood, Moundsville</td>
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<td>County Office Records Inventories</td>
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<td>112</td>
<td>Family Records; Church and Parish Records 1851-1899; Births 1853-1859; Marriages 1835-1899; Deaths 1855-1880, Wills, etc. 1816-1899</td>
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<td>113</td>
<td>Order Book 1835-1839, pt.1</td>
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<td>114</td>
<td>Order Book 1835-1839, pt.2</td>
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<td>115</td>
<td>History of Mason County; Building Forms; County Office Records Inventories; City and Town Inventory of Records—Hartford, Leon, New Haven, Mason, Pt. Pleasant, Henderson; Marriages 1806-1867, 1870-1871, 1875; Wills, Inventories 1829-1882</td>
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<td>History of Mercer County</td>
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<td>117</td>
<td>Building Forms; Bluefield State Teachers College and Concord State Teachers College; County Office Records Inventories; City and Town Inventory of Records—Bluefield, Athens, Bramwell, Mateoa, Princeton</td>
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<td>118</td>
<td>County Office Records Inventories; Maps and Photographs, Bluefield, Inventory</td>
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<td>119</td>
<td>Births 1853-1899; Deaths 1853-1899; Marriages 1853-1899, Alphabetical; Wills (A-W) 1853-1899</td>
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<td>120</td>
<td>Appraisals 1839-1870</td>
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<td>121</td>
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<td>122</td>
<td>Wills 1839, 1844-1845, 1849-1850, 1852-1854, 1858-1877, 1879-1884</td>
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<td>123</td>
<td>Appraisals, Book I, no date; Appraisals 1867-1873</td>
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<td>124</td>
<td>Order Book I, A &amp; B, Minutes of County Court, no date</td>
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<td>125</td>
<td>History of Mingo County; City and Town Inventory of Records—Elk Garden, Ridges, Piedmont, Keyser; Births 1866-1899, Alphabetical; Family Records; Marriage Licenses 1866-1899; Wills 1839, 1844-1845, 1849-1850, 1852-1854, 1858-1893, 1894-1895, 1896-1897, 1898-1899</td>
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<td>126</td>
<td>County Office Records Inventories; Official Bonds 1895-1902; Register of Physicians and Accouchers; Births 189-7; Marriages 1895-1899; Wills and Inventories 1884-1899</td>
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<td>127</td>
<td>History of Monongalia County; County Office Records Inventories; City and Town Inventory of Records—Sabraton</td>
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<td>128</td>
<td>WVU Library (W.Va. Room and Top Floor) Inventory; County Office Records Inventories; Waitman T. Milley Collection—Inventory; Historical Marker Records</td>
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<td>Land Entry Book 1780-1859, Alphabetical; Land Book 1788-1806; Index to Records of Commissioners for Adjusting Claims to Unpatented Lands 1770-1794; County Court Inventory of Records; Births 1867-1876; Deaths 1853-1863, 1865-1872</td>
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<td>130</td>
<td>Deaths 1873-1899; Cemetery Records—Arnettsville, Sunnyside, Wills, Inventory 1796-1902; Wills, Inventory—Incomplete copy; Wills 1793-1882; Wills 1798-1808, Estate Books, Index of 1-4</td>
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<td>131</td>
<td>Index to Wills; Will Abstracts 1796-1815; Calendar of Wills 1796-May 1800</td>
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<td>Calendar of Wills, Sept. 1800-1845; Appraisals 1809-Aug. 1818</td>
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<td>Appraisals, Aug. 1818-1823</td>
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<td>Minute Book 1800-1803</td>
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<td>140</td>
<td>City Recorder—Inventory of Records; Mayor—Inventory of Records; Order Book 1799; List of Sales 1804-1885; Reports to County Court of Accounts 1861-1864; Index of Wills, Inventories, Sale Bills, etc.; Births 1853-1855; Marriage Bonds 1799-1850</td>
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<td>Marriages 1799-1892; Deaths 1853-1860; Church Memberships 1840s-1890s; Burials 1830s, 1840s; List of Wills—Inventories 1799-1889; List of Inventories, Appraisals, Bill of Sale 1805-1831; Wills, Abstracts 1799-1823</td>
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<td>142</td>
<td>Appraisals 1805-1822; Wills 1824-1861</td>
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A group of West Virginia University women, disguised as “the Hezekiah Corniassell family,” pose on the steps of newly constructed Women’s Hall, 21 October 1921. The “family” won first prize in a costume contest during a “Country Fair” held in Ogley Hall. See page 2.