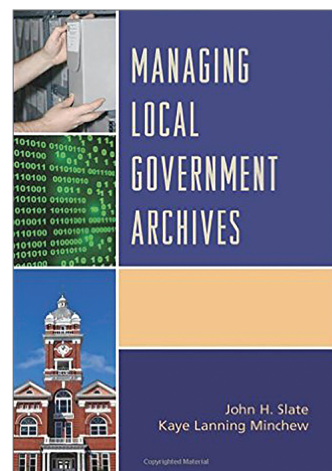


# An Attempt to Effect Change in Local Government Records

Richard J. Cox, Ph.D.

**B**ack in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, a resurgence of interest in local government records resulted in many new archives and records management programs and publications on the subject. Basic volumes appeared: *Local Government Records: An Introduction to Their Management, Preservation, and Use* by H.G. Jones in 1980 and *The Management of Local Government Records: A Guide for Local Officials* by Bruce Dearstyne in 1988. Then interest seemed to wane, although a lot of good work continued going on, quietly reported at conferences and other meetings.

This new volume, *Managing Local Government Archives*, by archivists John H. Slate and Kaye Lanning Minchew, both with considerable experience in local government archives, will be welcomed by many interested in the topic for its updating of the earlier manuals. The focus by the authors is on providing “practical information” on managing local government records. And with this they succeed.



## ***Managing Local Government Archives***

Authors: **John H. Slate and Kaye Lanning Minchew**

Publisher: **Rowman and Littlefield**

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[www.rowmanlittlefield.com](http://www.rowmanlittlefield.com)

## **Traditional Book for Undervalued Profession**

Slate and Minchew believe that most people holding responsibility for government records possess little formal training on how to deal with them (an indictment that what was going on several decades ago did not succeed, an issue they really do not address). In fact, in the initial paragraph of the book, they state, “While there is a long and proud history of local archives programs, it is a sobering fact that the vast majority of local government archives do not have the support of their governments, in spite of their incalculable value and worth.”

This book certainly provides lots of reasons why this is a problem and suggestions for how the problem can be resolved, but I am not sure it goes deep enough into the substance of the challenge. Following this purpose, the authors have written a very traditional book. The book includes:

- Background on the history of local government recordkeeping and records programs

- Types of local government archives
- How archives and records management relate to each other
- How to create local government records programs
- Aspects of managing analog records
- Basic approaches to appraising, arranging and describing, and processing these records (what they term “intellectual considerations”)
- The challenges of dealing with electronic records in local government (relegated to a separate chapter, a topic that perhaps should have been integrated throughout the book)
- Providing reference to these records
- The importance of outreach and exhibits for promoting the nurturing of local government archives

There is little that is omitted. Yet, at times, the book waffles between a basic practice manual and a call for action.

### Where it Falls Short

While the authors state that “this book is a whole-hearted attempt to effect change in the preservation and accessibility of local government records,” it is difficult to see how this particular book might be a tool for this

end. Perhaps more candid descriptions of successful local government records programs would have helped.

A chapter on how to use this book in workshops, undergraduate and graduate programs, and in the local government itself would be interesting and useful to have; the expectation that local officials are going to acquire and read the book on their own is a bit naïve.

Even more discussion about how other past national initiatives, variously led by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the American Association for State and Local History, and the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators would have provided the opportunity to learn from the past and plan for better and more sustained efforts to deal with these significant records.

The authors’ serious effort to avoid anything seeming to be theoretical also undermines the ultimate utility of the volume. Let me give an example. The authors provide brief descriptions of the various values of records, ranging from fiscal and historical value to potential monetary value; there are no surprises here. However, by studiously avoiding recent theory and debates within the archival field, they miss the value of archives for purposes such as memory, community identity, accountability,

social justice, and so forth.

It is within these debates that some of the most interesting and challenging developments have occurred, in some ways reshaping the nature of the archives profession and, to a certain extent, that of records management. And, it should be noted, all of these and more have strong connections to the nature and utility of local government archives; it is, after all, at the local level where government most intimately connects to citizens and vice versa. And, of course, archival knowledge consists of both practice and theory.

### A Hope for Book’s Impact

I am not writing a negative review. This book is a fresh statement about managing local government archives, one long overdue in the professional literature. However, it could have been better, and I am not certain it will have the impact the authors intended. But, I hope I am wrong. E



**About the Author:** Richard J. Cox, Ph.D., is a professor in archival studies at the University of Pittsburgh, School of Information Sciences. He has served as editor of the *American Archivist* and the *Records & Information Management Report*. Cox has written extensively on archival and records management topics and has published numerous books and articles in this area, winning the Society of American Archivists’ Waldo Gifford Leland Award for the best book on archives three times. Cox, who earned a doctoral degree from the School of Library and Information Science at the University of Pittsburgh and a master’s degree in history from the University of Maryland, was elected a Fellow in the Society of American Archivists in 1989. He can be contacted at [rcox@sis.pitt.edu](mailto:rcox@sis.pitt.edu).



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