

Appraisal Report on the Records of the WSVH

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I. Provenance

Records created and housed by the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped; transferred to the Wisconsin Historical Society in September 1963 following inventory by Historical Society staff in July 1963.

II. Agency History

Established as the first state institution in 1849 by a contingent of committed Janesville citizens dedicated to providing blind children with the opportunity for education, the Wisconsin School for the Blind opened its doors to an initial class of 8 children. Under the auspices of its first superintendent and instructor, J.T. Axtell, a graduate of the Ohio Institute for the blind, the school exhibited immediate success, impressing the legislature to draft legislation providing for the incorporation the school under the title Wisconsin Institute for the Education of the Blind in 1850, and creating a Board of Trustees to oversee its administration. This administration would later be transferred in 1881 to the charge of the State Board of Supervision of Wisconsin, Charitable, Reformatory and Penal Institutions, later the Board of Control. The school would eventually come under the jurisdiction of the State Department of Education, taking on the name of the Wisconsin School for the Blind in 1885.

Turnover at the superintendent level was frequent during the school's history—resulting in ever-changing policy. Major early figures in the school's administration here included the aforementioned J.T. Axtell; Alexander McDonald, 1851-5; W.H. Churchman, 1856-60; Thomas H. Little, 1861-73; Mrs. Thomas H. Little, 1875-91; Lynn S. Pease, 1891-2; H.F. Bliss, 1895-1901; A. J. Hutton, 1901-10; and J.T. Hooper, 1911-33. What was consistent though was a continued emphasis on the expansion of the

educational curriculum and vocational training. These practices were particularly evident in the administration of Howard Bliss and A.J. Hutton and their transformation of the school away from its perception as an asylum and towards the establishment of the institution as a preparatory, vocational and placement service. Shortly thereafter, the school rose to the top rank amongst similar educational institutions.

The general curriculum consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, English, history, natural philosophy and music. Later additions included spelling, composition, grammar, algebra and meteorology. Instruction was wholly oral, utilizing a variety of methods and tools to facilitate learning of such subjects as writing, arithmetic, algebra, geography and even natural philosophy. In 1867 the Braille point writing system was introduced. It was with these instruments and innovations, particularly the typewriter and the development of the alphabet and textbooks, that instruction significantly progressed at this and other institutions for the blind.

The teaching of a trade was also incorporated as a means of profitably employing students during their leisure. As early as 1853 the making of brooms was introduced into vocational training. Knitting, sewing and the manufacture of baskets were also later incorporated into the curriculum. All in all, these practices would evolve into a complex business and later workshop (1903) churning out a wide variety of manufactures, arts and crafts.

The first graduates of the school were M.A. McGalloway and Henry P. Kyberin in 1885. The following year produced 8 graduates. In 1891 superintendent Pease modeled the school on the graded bases of regular schools: kindergarten, primary, intermediate and high school.

1916 brought with it the provision for summer school attendance for both those wishing to supplement their education and those, particularly those who had become blind late in life, the means of obtaining an education, and, if possible, a livelihood. This was especially significant given the rehabilitation of persons in this later group, individuals often having lost interest and hope in life. With an initial class of 14, the ranks grew to a total of 450 summer school attendees by 1936.

Later years saw the expansion of efforts to reach out to, educate and provide for the health of the blind via the creation of the Agency for the Blind in 1919. Its first field agent, Elizabeth McCarty, did much to advance the cause of the blind and provide adequate resources for their educational and social mobilization.

Since these early days of the 20th century, the school has grown by leaps and bounds, still more or less sticking to traditional teaching and learning methods all the while incorporating ever changing technology into its education, service and stewardship of the blind in Wisconsin.

III. Bibliography of Related Records and Publications

Wisconsin Institution for the Education of Blind. *Annual Report of the Board of Trustees of the Wisconsin Institution for the Education of the Blind. 1850-1882.*

Wisconsin School for the Blind. *Biennial Report of the Wisconsin School for the Blind.*

1884-1936.

Wisconsin School for the Deaf. *Biennial Report of the Wisconsin School for the Deaf.*
1884-1940.

Wisconsin School for the Deaf. *Biennial Report of the Wisconsin School for the Deaf and the Wisconsin School for the Blind for the Biennium Ending...* (1942:June 20-1944: June 30).

Wisconsin School for the Deaf. *Report of the Wisconsin School for the Deaf, Delavan,*

WI, and the Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped, Janesville, WI, for the Biennium Ending...1946.

Offering nearly complete coverage from 1850-11946, these reports offer a concise and comprehensive exposition of, among other things, the general history, administration, accounting and post educational employment of the students. Particularly well represented here are the fiscal summaries of accounts paid, disbursements, receipts—all listed according to type, not to mention similar such data in the Treasurer's and Secretary's Reports. Other financial records of import include payroll and wage summaries. In sum, all of this financial data has a direct bearing upon appraisal considerations with respect to the primary WSVH materials, establishing them in simple terms as redundant and obsolete, costly in terms of processing, conservation and preservation. Based in no small part upon said primary documents themselves, these published records are good enough to stand in for their primary brethren.

Aside from their clear evidential insight into the financial goings on of the school, this body of records also nicely summarizes the administrative aspects of the school, ranging from population tables and curriculum plans to demographic data on the nature, cause and age of onset of blindness among the student population—insights invaluable to prosopographical analysis. These aspects, too, bear upon appraisal decisions concerning

such series as the Population Reports and Budget Papers—again determining these largely superfluous and costly to transfer.

Aside from these negative considerations of the primary materials themselves, however, the published reports nicely complement some certain series while also demanding turning to other primary materials for further research. As a result, and although they certainly may replace or stand in for certain series, they nevertheless stand in certain other relations as either complementing or inferior to the primary sources themselves. As a result, these reports will serve as an invaluable tool in the appraisal process.

Wisconsin School for the Visually Handicapped. *Wisconsin School for the Blind, Janesville, Wisconsin. 1938.*

Equally illustrative of said financial, administrative and student affairs is the guidebook published by the school in 1938, chock full of great photographs and insightful text. Serving as a window into the school and life of the students, the guidebook provides clear and concise articulation of the organizational structure, history and administration of the school, ranging from faculty and student lists, to day plans and a school calendar. As evidenced specifically in the photographs, the work conveys an understanding of the lives of the students—a tool of significant consideration in the evaluation of primary materials in the WSVH series. What this means is that certain primary sources, for example the Population Reports, Payroll Calendar and various other financial materials are rendered unnecessary, providing a more convenient and accessible source of information for the interested researcher.

Wisconsin Blue Book.

A final important additional resource to consider in the appraisal of the WSVH series is the Wisconsin Blue Books. These annual volumes provide historical and evidential insight into the institution, as well as an overview of the operations, appropriations and educational aspects of its administration. Key fiscal and demographic data include total costs, yearly cost per capita, weekly cost per capita, average population, tuition, room and board and a listing of school officers. In short, these volumes provide poignant evidential information of the institution both at an instant and over time—a resource certainly to be taken into consideration when evaluating for example primary series such as the financial materials in the WSVH collection.

IV. General Description of Records**(A) Administrative Records**

Comprising 11 series, the bulk of WSVH materials reflect administrative initiative and function, chronicling the organizational structure, development, policy and planning apparatus and general conduct of the institution. Providing clear evidential value for the researcher, these series, i.e. the “Reports of the Principal and Board...,” Daily Population Reports, “Visitors’ Registry,” “Proceedings of the Board of Trustees...,” “Outlines...,” Superintendent’s General Correspondence, Superintendent’s Correspondence with the State Board of Control, Property Inventories, Budget Working Papers, and the Superintendent’s Letter Books, communicate the inner workings of the institution and its dealings with a variety of state and local bodies, as well as individuals and businesses. As a whole, the materials document a hierarchy of administrative

function from the very high (e.g. policy records) to the very low (e.g. routine house-keeping records), centering upon the actions and dealings between the superintendent and Board of Trustees.

(B) Financial Records

The second major grouping of series, namely financial records, incorporates 6 series of detailed materials tracking the institution's fiscal administration. The content of the series provide an almost complete accounting of the institution's transactions, accounts and sales of items on a monthly basis for much of the early history of the school. These series, i.e. General Journal, Ledgers, Steward's Check Register, Analyzed Statements, Cancelled Checks, and Cash Book, although offering evidential value of significant scope and content, contain information largely of little research interest, and, most importantly, are repeated elsewhere in the published record, particularly the Biennial Reports. As a collection, the data present a hierarchy of information arranged in a more or less database framework, with multiple access points and systematic linkage amongst series. It is for this reason, and when combined with the nature of the published reports itself, that seals the unfortunate fate of the totality of these records.

(C) Student Records

The smallest fraction of materials concern student affairs. Totalling three series, the Summer School Register, Pupil Enrollment Record and the Student Applications File offer the researcher a demographic portrait of the school. The data contained herein offer two distinct types of valuable information: enrollment data and application data. As a whole, the three series thus offer the researcher considerable informational import not

only regarding the student body, but also concerning the lives and education of the blind more generally. As a result, these series provide key access points for research into and linkage amongst the education and livelihood of the blind.

V. Appraisal of Series

(1) Series Name: “Reports of the Principal and Board of Trustees of the Wisconsin Institution for the Education of the Blind”

Disposition: Transfer

Discussion of Decision

Containing significant evidential and informational import concerning administrative policy and planning, particularly in regards to lobbying efforts and educational goals, the series offers clear access points for research into the school’s early administrative and pedagogical evolution. Furthermore, as a record of administrative reporting, the documents provide essential information on the social and cultural objectives of the involved parties as they bear upon the education and experience of the blind—information unique to these primary materials and not touched upon in the published record. When combined, these two facets bespeak of an important tool for current and continued research into this and similar institutions.

(2) Series Name: General Journal

Disposition: Destroy

Discussion of Decision

The General Journal offers little or no real research opportunity of a unique interest or of a sustained contextual matter. Although offering possible

linkage to other dependent financial documents concerning research of a longitudinal basis, the journal contains information repeated elsewhere and in a more usable or accessible manner (i.e. Biennial Reports.) In other words, the series offers little research utility (i.e. benefits) while presenting significant obstacles (i.e. costs) to its use. In short, pragmatic considerations of uniqueness and research potential indicate that there is no compelling reason for the retention of said series.

(3) Series Name: Daily Population Reports

Disposition: Destroy

Discussion of Decision

This series offers little real value to the researcher concerned with understanding either the evolution or informational import of associated primary materials. Although fairly complete and comprehensive in character, there exists little in the way of access points to linkage to external materials, little real research potential, little context or utility in the interpretation of such raw data. Most significantly, however, is the simple fact that the information contained herein is better represented and certainly more accessible in the published record of the Biennial Reports and Guidebook. As a consequence, simple pragmatics suggests that this series not be transferred.

(4) Series Name: Ledgers

Disposition: Destroy

Discussion of Decision

Much like the aforementioned General Journal, the three volumes of ledgers provide little if any real research utility either in the form of evidential or informational value. In simple terms, the voluminous financial data contained herein is superfluous, present in the derived Biennial Reports in a more concise and useful manner. One would also be wise here to consider the costs of processing, preserving and conserving such redundant data. Taking this multitude of arguments into consideration then, this series should not be transferred.

(5) Series Name: Monthly Payroll Record

Disposition: Destroy

Discussion of Decision

Lacking evidential value, this volume of payroll data offers a bare minimum of informational value, albeit of a secondary or even tertiary interest to the school itself. In other words, although the research potential exists for linkage to other materials, the resulting efforts would not be pertinent to the nature, function and workings of the school in general, or even the students in particular. Again, as with the two series listed previously, the primary concern seems to be here the fact that the information contained in the series is repeated elsewhere and in a more valuable, efficient and consistent fashion. Hence, simple considerations of uniqueness in the form of related published records prevent transfer of said series. The published Biennial Reports thus may stand in for such data, serving as a good enough resource not to warrant incumbent processing, preservation and conservation fees.

(6) Series Name: Visitors' Registry

Disposition: Destroy**Discussion of Decision**

Lacking clear context (i.e. reasons for the visits themselves) and thus both evidential and informational import, the registry quite obviously should not be chosen for transfer. Common amongst organizations, visitor registers provide little in the way of understanding either the institution or the visitor themselves. Without either, said series would clearly incur unnecessary work and its concomitant costs. Hence, this series can be disposed of without ado.

(7) Series Name: Summer School Register**Disposition: Transfer****Discussion of Decision**

Given the unique function and/or intent of summer school at the institution (i.e. education of the less than traditional student), a register of its attendees, particularly one including valuable demographic data such as this, demands inclusion in materials selected for transfer. Aside from the basic demographic data of these divergent individuals, the document contains insightful and unique student data such as age, nature and degree of impairment, and various certificates awarded. Existing nowhere else in the published record, the series is truly unique and, hence, significant for its derived research value. In sum, the series provides clear research opportunities into an interesting facet of the school and its educational outreach efforts amongst this unique population.

(8) Series Name: "Proceedings of the Board of Trustees of the Wisconsin Institution for the Education of the Blind."

Disposition: Transfer**Discussion of Decision**

This volume covering the years 1850-63 provides early evidential insight into the structure, function and policy apparatus of the school and its Trustees over this formative period. This important window into the highest of administrative levels thus demands retention both for its administrative documentation and unique character amongst primary source materials in the collection of series, particularly its inclusion of the original Charter from 1850—a document perhaps worthy of transfer for its intrinsic value alone. In particular, its various motions and individual appeals for policy change and/or creation offer clear opportunities for research into the highest functions and efforts of the WSVH.

(9) Series Name: Steward's Check Register**Disposition: Destroy****Discussion of Decision**

This single accounting volume of checks written provides no evidential value and little if any informational value, not to mention little if any context beyond the function of simple record keeping itself. Furthermore, with no real explanatory context or record of what the money was used for, and, aside from say trying to link said items to the other collected fiscal series, the Check Register seems very unlikely to be used for research purposes. Furthermore, the financial data to be gleaned from such records, if at all, is available elsewhere (e.g. Biennial Reports) in much the same form and of a much more practical, efficient and

effective nature. In short, the series neither displays inherent research potential nor uniqueness considered against the published record—two clear reasons against its transfer.

(10) Series Name: Analyzed Statements

Disposition: Destroy

Discussion of Decision

Although quite detailed and certainly comprehensive in their run, this collection of monthly account invoices is largely of little real research value, not to mention summarized quite adequately in the Biennial Reports of the institution. As such, the statements simply demand too much in the way of time and effort in linking data to create a larger framework of financial administration, not to mention economic costs (e.g. shelf space), while providing little in the way of real benefits. Pragmatically speaking, the researcher would thus be well advised to consult the published record in searching for such data.

(11) Series Name: “Outlines of Work, Examinations Papers, Original Compositions, Etc.”

Disposition: Transfer

Discussion of Decision

This collected volume of curriculum plans, examination papers and original compositions provides a wealth of evidential and informational value concerning in the mission and educational results of the school during the early 20th century. As such, the volume demands inclusion for transfer based upon its magnificent depiction of both administrative educational policy, as well as unique

individual accomplishment in the form of particular representations of exams, papers and original compositions by the students themselves. Beyond capturing a particular portrait of students, the volume's curriculum and policy plans serve well to document the life of the blind more generally, not to mention education as a whole during this timeframe, speaking to a wide variety of issues, interests and needs. Hence, as simultaneously both a window into the educational pedagogy and evolution of educational practice of the times, the outlines provide innumerable access points to present and future research on a wide variety of administrative, educational and social issues.

(12) Series Name: Cancelled Checks

Disposition: Destroy

Discussion of Decision

The two boxes of cancelled checks covering the years 1852-68 offer nothing of real or lasting value to either the researcher or lay person. Lacking context and evidentially and information devoid, the checks offer no possibility of internal or external linkage and/or possible intellectual use. Hence, they demand immediate and swift destruction.

(13) Series Name: Pupil Enrollment Record

Disposition: Transfer

Discussion of Decision

These five volumes of student enrollment records covering the years 1891-1939 provide key demographic data representative both of the school's student body and of the blind more generally considered. Listing a variety of data,

including entrance date, parent's information, date of birth, age of onset, condition and cause of impairment, the records provide a window of opportunity for prosopographical analysis and the concomitant examination of related demographic trends. Although they do overlap somewhat with the Applications File examined below, the enrollment records offer unique data not otherwise summarized therein or spoken to in other series or published records.

(14) Series Name: Superintendent's General Correspondence

Disposition: Destroy

Discussion of Decision

Spanning some 42 boxes and some 28 years, this massive collection of incoming and outgoing correspondence is of evidential and informational value to the researcher interested in the administration and individual personality of the school's superintendents. Although largely mundane and of little interest when considered from the perspective of sheer volume, the materials do include valuable documentation and communication between the superintendents and state agencies, with students and alumni, with teachers and employees, and with various other interested parties. As a consequence, and although one would certainly be hard-pressed to posit the value of all the documents contained herein, the series demands inclusion for its uniqueness and insight into the administration, operations and activities of a variety of bodies both within and without the institution. In the future, though, it is recommended that considerable weeding take place to winnow the important correspondence out of the masses of worthless

communication, providing easier access and considerably less shelf space to work with.

(15) Series Name: Superintendent's Correspondence with the State Board of Control

Disposition: Transfer

Discussion of Decision

Comprising six boxes and covering some 10 years, the Superintendent's Correspondence with the State Board, much like the Superintendent's General Correspondence above, contains a significant amount of mundane, often intellectually unimportant and routine record keeping. As such, the collected correspondence yields little in the way of perceived research value. However, interspersed amongst this morass of evidential and informational import lies a body of correspondence with the chairman and other members of the Board that does display clear research value in regards to the administration, function and lobbying efforts of the school on behalf of both its students and the blind more generally. Also important here are a number of letters to the Governor concerning a variety of administrative decisions, i.e. appointments to the Board of Control, which are unique in nature and function amongst the WSVH materials. In sum, and again although largely of little historical value in proportion to sheer volume, the series does contain valuable nuggets of primary administrative and secondary evidential value to the interested research. Again, like the Superintendent's General Correspondence, it is recommended that future weeding occur to sift out these materials to facilitate access and conserve shelf space.

(16) Series Name: Property Inventories

Disposition: Destroy

Discussion of Decision

This almost complete run of 49 bound property inventories spanning the years 1881-1941, offers minimal real administrative insight into the structure and function of the school, serving though perhaps somewhat the individual interested in longitudinal analysis. However, the data itself is of little evidential or informational value, consisting of raw data devoid of context. More to the point, large portions of similar data exist elsewhere in the published record, incorporating context and voice to the inventories via particular lobbying efforts and listings of needed improvements. Finally, given the sheer volume of the materials, some 49 volumes, simple economic considerations would seem to suggest that this would be a very expensive acquisition offering minimal benefit or return. Here, although one might attempt to purposively or judgmentally sample the series to record some sort of administrative record over time, I think it is intellectually sound to refrain from such efforts given the poverty of potential research, not to mention the very real and costs bound up with processing, preserving and conserving such documents. Following Green's utilitarian analysis, then, such a large series with low use should not be retained.

(17) Series Name: Budget Workings Papers

Disposition: Destroy

Discussion of Decision

This volume spanning the years 1943-53 offers a very basic evidential insight into the later administration and financial planning of the school. However, when one takes into consideration their rough nature, particularly their lack of context and/or administrative background (i.e. voice), not to mention their existence in concisely summarized published records (e.g. Biennial Reports), it would be wise to not include these materials for transfer. Again, although clearly relating to the formulation of administrative policy, such documents devoid of related administrative policy and operating records reveal little if any insight into the budgeting process itself. Moreover, with the final or published budget in hand, i.e. in the form of the Biennial Reports, the work papers are of little value.

(18) Series Name: Student Applications File

Disposition: Transfer

Discussion of Decision

These three boxes of applications and sometimes responses and/or physician testimonies from the years 1886-1918 offer particular evidential and informational value for the researcher interested in student demographics. Aside from the very basic demographic information such as name, address and date of birth, these applications include valuable research data such as age of onset, nature and cause of blindness, and general reason for attendance. So, aside from existing as markers of administrative value—i.e. indicating what the school sought or deemed important from students, the data also provide specific informational value for research into the blind or blind education in the late 19th-early 20th century. Here too, when taken into consideration along with the few

responses and physician testimonies, the documents provide an interesting illumination of the process of applying to and being chosen for acceptance into studies.

Now, one point to weigh carefully here is the aforementioned potential overlap with the above Pupil Enrollment record. However, given both their different coverage and general nature and function of documentation indicated above, it is safe to say that this data is largely unique, if only minimally repeated for a particular time span in a separate series. Therefore, the Student applications, like said Enrollment Record, deserves to be transferred according to the above established criteria.

(19) Series Name: “Cash Book” Recording Income from Manufactures

Disposition: Transfer

Discussion of Decision

This unique record of income from manufactures is of basic informational value for research into the products of the school’s educational mission, as well as into student livelihood more generally. With little or no mention regarding sales or particular demand for certain items or certain student’s works, this series might be of potential use in examining the unique skill and artistry of the students in question. Hence, one might say that the series offers clear access points for further research into the mission behind and consequences resultant from the school’s vocational training. In short, this volume offers a unique glimpse into the practicality and utility of vocational education—one of the primary goals of the school’s educational mission.

(20) **Series Name: Superintendent's Letter Books**

Disposition: Transfer

Discussion of Decision

These 11 volumes of letter copies of outgoing correspondence are an intellectual gem for the committed researcher. Offering insight both into general administrative operations, as well as student's lives more particularly, the letter books provide an invaluable opportunity to glean evidential and informational value from their pages. Covering a wide range of administrative, pedagogical and personal subjects, the letters offer perhaps the greatest potential research tool amongst the WSVH materials. Although one might worry about costs of preservation and conservation surrounding these delicate items, it might be possible either to make a photocopy or microfilm these volumes, although I would argue against the latter given the sheer costs associated with it. In any case, these volumes provide quick and fairly comprehensive access (i.e. in comparison to volume upon volume of actual superintendent correspondence) to administrative communication of a highly bureaucratic and social value. As such, they easily demand transfer and retention.

VI. Processing and Conservation Note

Preliminary series need to be redefined, especially correspondence and financial series, and records should be re-housed.