JANUARY 18, 1971, was a landmark date in the history of the Minnesota Historical Society's manuscripts collection. On that day, staff members responsible for processing, or arranging and describing manuscripts, moved from the Historical Building, where the function had been performed since 1917, to a newly-established records center. Located at 1500 Mississippi Street, St. Paul, adjacent to interstate highway 35E, the new center provides offices, a reading room, a processing room, and a storage area to house massive collections that far outstrip the capacity of the Historical Building.

The records center occupies part of a structure purchased by the state in 1969 as a multiple-purpose facility designed to meet some of the society's critical space needs. Since its establishment in 1849, the society has been acquiring a rich collection of source materials documenting the development of the state, region, and nation. By the early 1960s, the Historical Building, constructed in 1915-17, was filled to overflowing with museum objects, newspapers, books, photographs, tapes, films, and manuscripts. For want of space, many of the materials—particularly manuscripts and museum objects—were in dead storage, while personnel assigned to process them were working in stack aisles and other congested areas.

The manuscripts department's need for extensive storage space was a direct result of the changed nature of twentieth-century papers. From 1849 to the mid-1940s, the largest collection the society acquired was the papers of Jason C. Easton, Chatfield banker. The collection measures 216 linear feet. Collection size rarely exceeded 50 feet, and content, particularly in nineteenth-century papers, was usually concentrated and rich.

By the 1940s it was evident that population growth, a gradual revolution in communications, institutional...
ization, and other changes in American society had altered the characteristics of its paper output. In brief, groups of manuscripts, be they papers of individuals or records of organizations, were more voluminous, and to document the twentieth century adequately it was necessary to collect more groups than in the earlier period. To cite the most outstanding examples, the papers of one public figure measure more than 2,000 linear feet, and the magnificent records of the Northern Pacific Railway Company, spanning a century, measure 9,723 feet. The situation created by these changes required new standards of criticism, new processing techniques, and, above all, expanded facilities geared to the management of huge collections.

When it became evident that a new building to house the manuscripts operation and the society’s other departments was not immediately attainable, Russell W. Fridley, the society’s director, and John J. Wood, assistant director, began to work with state officials on plans for acquiring a low-cost building that would relieve immediate space pressures and continue to fill storage needs after the center was constructed. The McLean warehouse, located a few minutes by freeway from the Historical Building, met the requirements. In 1968, Commissioner of Administration Rolland F. Hatfield and the Legislative Building Commission recommended its acquisition, remodeling, and equipping for the Minnesota Historical Society. The 1969 legislature appropriated $550,000 for these purposes.

A one-story, cement-block structure erected in 1961 and situated on a 3.75-acre site, the McLean building was originally designed as a beer distributing warehouse. It measures 33,800 square feet, with a clear storage height of eighteen feet and a total storage capacity of 450,000 cubic feet. At the time of its acqui-
RUNNING the power lift required for storing and retrieving collections is David J. Weldon, warehouse services operator. John M. Wickre, cataloger, looks on.

A VIEW of the warehouse area of the records center before remodeling began. To the rear the emerging processing room can be seen.

by the state it had six offices, a receiving dock, a cooler, a garage, a lunchroom, and an extensive warehouse area.

In August, 1968, pending purchase of the building, the state leased from the owners — Johnson Brothers Wholesale Liquor Company — storage and office space for the society. The first people to move in were the assistant director, business office employees, and, on a temporary basis, the historic sites staff. Manuscripts, totaling some 3,000 linear feet, as well as museum objects and newspapers, were also transferred from the Historical Building. After purchase was completed a year later, historic sites personnel moved into offices that became available at Fort Snelling.

Major and minor modifications of the building then began. To continue the centralization of the society’s business functions that had been scattered in the Historical Building, the garage area was converted into a stockroom. Books and pamphlets issued by the society were stored there, and the area was equipped not only to fill orders for publications but to receive incoming materials. In the initial stages of modification, a beginning was made in adapting the cooler — 2,016 square feet — for storage of tapes, films, and microfilm negatives. A beginning was made, too, in removing large doors for truck access from three sides of the building and closing the apertures with cement blocks.

A major phase of building adaptation was the creation of a records center. The objective in space planning was to establish an efficient flow of material through the steps of receiving, dust removal, fumigation, temporary storage or staging, processing, shelving, retrieval, and use.

A 2,000-square-foot processing room was created by partitions. Prime features of the room, now completed, are a series of work zones equipped with sorting slots and tables in addition to traditional furnishings. The tables, designed by Mary Givens Bryan for the Georgia State Archives some years ago and now marketed commercially, can be assembled in horseshoe
shape or aligned end-to-end into a long sorting surface. Flexibility was maintained by using movable dividers, both for the processing zones and two offices. The room, currently occupied by five processors, is accessible to the stacks and temporary storage area through two doors, one of which is large enough to admit power equipment. The curator of manuscripts' office and the reading room also adjoin the processing zone.

The remaining warehouse area — 21,824 square feet — was equipped with storage racks. Arranged in three groups to facilitate the movement of materials, the stacks are convenient to the receiving dock and temporary storage, as well as to the processing room. The modular adjustable racks are eighteen feet high, with stackrows separated by wide aisles to permit passage of a power lift. Those designated for manuscripts storage are divided into fourteen levels of shelving adjusted to accommodate standard records storage containers. At floor level in a portion of the area, the shelving is spaced to house museum objects of variable sizes.

To facilitate retrieval of manuscripts by a power lift, a system new to the society was devised. Each records storage container is assigned a "locator," an alphabetical-numerical designation distinct from traditional catalog, box, and volume numbers. The locator indicates position by stackrow, section within the stackrow, shelf within the section, and item position on the shelf. As materials are shelved, summary sheets are prepared correlating locators with usual cataloging designations. Designed for computerization, the summary sheets contain the data for a comprehensive records center inventory that can be manipulated on a current basis to serve both as a shelf list and an abbreviated finding aid. When the manuscripts in the center are processed, the sheets will also serve as part of a series of forms that provide input data for computer printouts detailing container and folder contents.

Since approximately 7,000 linear feet of cataloged manuscripts remain in the Historical Building, reference service is provided there as well as in the records center. Most of the collections retained in the Historical Building are of moderate size, and many of them are used extensively by the public and the society's staff. However, the reference staff, which is located in the Historical Building, also guides people to material found in the center — chiefly the records of the Northern Pacific and large groups of papers relating to public affairs.

At this writing, much remains to be done to complete the records center, as well as other portions of the multiple-purpose building. Still unfinished are the receiving and staging areas, one zone of storage racks, and the cooler scheduled for tape, film, and microfilm storage. It is clear, however, that the center is already performing the function for which it was intended. Thousands of feet of important papers have become accessible, the processors are at work in well-arranged quarters, and the way is now open to unlock the latent cultural resources of a great collection.