

THE FIRST CALIFORNIA STATUTE:

Legal History and the California State Archives

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Nineteenth century statutes rarely appear in California's historical literature. Most have long been superseded, and they are seldom examined unless they deal with contentious contemporary issues such as extending civil rights. The first statute of the first California legislature should be lauded, however, as it required the Secretary of State to "receive . . . all public records, registers, maps, books, papers, rolls, documents, and other writings . . . and the titles to bonds within the territory, or to any other subject which may be interesting, or valuable as references or authorities to the Government, or people of the State . . . and to classify, and safely keep, and preserve the same, in his office."

With that law, the archives of the fledgling state were initiated, the first legislature recognizing the enduring importance of key documents to the state's governance. What was to become the California State

* John F. Burns served as California State Archivist from 1981-1997. Nancy Lenoil is the current State Archivist, appointed in 2006. She first joined the Archives' staff in 1986. She is the first woman to serve as State Archivist in the state's history. All illustrations for this article are courtesy California State Archives.