

Archives

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Introduction

Archival resources are also known as primary sources or manuscripts, and they come in a wide variety of formats. These sources are original, unique, and rare items that we can use to understand the past, document the present, and invent the future. This guide will talk about why these materials are important, how to identify and preserve these items, and share resources about institutions that may be able to support your preservation goals.

Why Should You Care About Archives?

Archives are all about visibility and erasure – people can't be transformed by things that they have never had access to or experienced. There are innumerable reasons why people create archival collections, but they fall into three big categories:

Affective: Many folks archive because it feels good. They keep quilt collections because they remind them of their grandmothers. They record oral histories at a family reunion because they don't want to forget the inflection of a favorite uncle's voice. They keep recipe collections, because they want the macaroni and cheese to taste the same for every generation. These acts of archival agency are not complicated and carry enormous weight in understanding who we are and where we come from.

Advocacy: Other folks archive because they need support and resources to make change. Oral histories that document the impact of environmental racism can make a difference in court cases and legislation. Documentation of property borders and land deeds, especially from disenfranchised communities who can't rely on the veracity of public records, can slow down over zealous developers. Grassroots archival projects with a specific objective are critical for understanding the complicated history of a place

Awareness: Most formal archival collections exist to make us aware of how a person did their job or lived their lives; or how something came into existence. The local mayor's archive may include his correspondence, his proclamations, and campaign materials. A museum's archive may include architectural drawings and budgets for a new exhibition hall. Most companies and governments have mechanisms for preserving this content, but it is an important exercise for communities, families, and individuals to think about what they are creating that they may want future generations to be aware of.

How Do You Identify and Protect Your Archival Materials?

Once you've decided why you are creating a collection, it can get easier to determine the "containers" for that information and what kinds of actions you need to take to keep the materials safe and accessible. Here are a few common examples:

Papers: Handwritten or typed information on paper is a very stable archival material type. Common examples include speeches, certificates, letters, inventories, recipes, poems, novels, etc. Transcriptions can be helpful if the handwriting is hard to read. This material can usually be gathered into intuitive groupings and placed in archival folders with appropriate labels.

Photographs: Photographic prints and negatives are susceptible to extreme heat and humidity. Finding archivally sound enclosures on which you can write any descriptive information is ideal. There are many sub-genres of photographic material, daguerreotypes, glass plate negatives, slides, etc. – speaking to experts in these mediums is the best way to protect your items

Digital Files: Anything that requires a computer to access, is considered a digital file. Example file extensions (formats) include .pdf (documents), .mp3 (audio recordings), .mp4 (video recordings), .jpeg (photos), and there are many more. Due to the volume and fragility of these files, it is best to focus on the ones that matter, giving clear file names, making copies and storing in several different locations (computer, external hard drive, and cloud storage)

Artifacts: Three-dimensional objects like trophies, quilts, paintings, furniture, or large signs won't always have a set of clear cut guidance for preservation, but it is nice to keep them on your radar. Important artifacts can be paired with other archival formats, like an oral history or photographs to help future generations understand their value and keep them safe over time.

Audio/Visual Materials: These materials (VHS tapes, open reel, cassette tapes, vinyl records, wax cylinders, etc.) can be referred to as analog media, as opposed to the more contemporary digital media files. In most cases, the “players” will break down before the items do. It is a safe bet to transfer these items to a digital format, to avoid over-using the players or over-handling the items. Similar to photographs, consulting with an expert would give more specific advice about the storage and use of unique formats.

Oral Histories: While technically an oral history can be preserved as a digital file or an audio visual item, the level of intentionality required for their creation merited its own category. Identifying a person, writing out some questions, preserving the recording, summarizing or transcribing the content are the sample workflow for conducting oral histories.

Who Can Help You With Your Archives?

There are resources online and in your local library to help you with your collection. Here is a quiz you can take to get an idea of how you might like to see your materials managed:

<https://www.onlineassessmenttool.com/what-do-i-want-to-do-with-my-family-s-collections-of-photographs-and-more/assessment-69024>.

The world of known archival collections is a complicated landscape, informed by systems of power and oppression. We want to ensure that all communities can make informed decisions about their legacy and feel that their stories belong in the cultural heritage landscape. Once you have taken the time to prioritize, define, and understand your collections; librarians and archivists will be eager to hear about your materials and help you reach your goals for long-term access and preservation.

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