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An Introduction to Archives for Librarians

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An Introduction to Archives for Librarians

Introduction

Although most people associate archives and manuscripts in some way with libraries, the archives profession is truly distinct from the library profession, with its own established theoretical background, history, and methodology. Many librarians have worked with collections of manuscripts or personal papers, business records, photographs, slides, artifacts, and other archival materials at some points in their careers. Yet, few librarians have received formal training in archival theory and practice as part of their training in library and information science.

One clear distinction between the library and archives fields is the focus on history in archives work. Most professional archivists practicing today have Master's degrees in library and information science or in history, with additional specialized training and courses completed in archives work. A significant number of archivists have received training and degrees in both history and library science, and these individuals draw frequently upon their knowledge of both fields to do archives work.

For this reason, the archives profession may at times appear wary of librarians who are attempting to do archives work. Archivists may feel distrustful of librarians who are in charge of managing archival collections without having received the proper training. Due to the smaller size of the archives profession in comparison to the library profession, and the resulting increased competitiveness for archives jobs, some archivists adopt the attitude that they are not

going to attempt to help guide librarians who are working with archival collections because this is the reason there are so few good archives jobs available. Often, administrators assume that librarians can do it all, and to save money they assign librarians to managing archival collections that archivists feel would be better managed by those trained to do so—the archivists themselves.

Yet, despite decades of this type of attitude prevailing within the archives profession, it is clear that due to financial constraints, there are still many librarians who are assigned archival responsibilities. Competition over administration of collections has resulted in disparity between the library and archives professions, with archivists often remaining silent and distrustful and librarians struggling to manage archival collections without access to the proper guidance. This disparity has negative effects on information access for everyone involved, especially the library users or customers who need to access the collections. If archival collections are improperly handled or stored, or original order is disturbed, or provenance is lost, it is ultimately the user of the collections who suffers by being expected to research, study, identify, and interpret materials out of context that do not adequately reflect the lives or activities of the records creator. Additionally, many archival or manuscript collections have never been made available to library users because of limited resources and the fact that archives by nature are difficult to catalog in traditional library systems. As a result, many collections remain “hidden” to researchers.

Archival collections are difficult to manage because by their very nature they are unique, often rare or valuable, frequently fragile, and difficult to decipher. Archivists are able to work with such collections, placing them in historical context and applying their knowledge of archival theory and practice, in addition to preservation of paper and other media to their work. They

arrange, describe, and preserve these types of materials every day. Librarians, on the other hand, are used to working mainly with secondary resources, such as books and serials, that can be arranged and described by the call number and cataloging information inherent in the book itself or available through bibliographic databases such as OCLC's WorldCat. Library catalogers can usually download catalog records for their book collections from these bibliographic utilities, and therefore usually have very little original cataloging to do as part of their everyday jobs.

However, archival materials are acquired without descriptive call numbers or assigned subject headings and titles. They usually do not exist in any other libraries, so copy cataloging is impossible and the materials must be described from scratch, often based solely on what can be gleaned from observing the materials themselves. Archivists have been trained to alter MARC records to fit their collections, to conduct historical research to learn more about the collection creators and relevant time period or events covered in the materials themselves, and to arrange the collections and create finding aids, or guides, to those collections so that they are easier to use. See Appendix 1, "Differences Between Libraries and Archives," for a summary of some of the primary discrepancies in arrangement, description, and access between archives and libraries.

Defining "Archives"

The term "archives" can be used in three different ways. Archives are: 1) the records, regardless of format, created or received by a person or organization during the conduct of affairs and preserved because they contain information of continuing value. Within an organization, the term "archives" refers specifically to the non-current records of the organization or institution, those records that are no longer required by employees to do their daily jobs, that document the

growth, activities, and accomplishments of the organization; 2) the building or part of a building where archival materials are located (archival repository); 3) the agency or program responsible for selecting, acquiring, preserving, and making available archival materials.

What Do Archivists Do?

Archivists evaluate records for permanent value, appraising them for disposal or retention. They also frequently serve as historians for the organization or institution that created the records, preserve and protect the records for ongoing use, and ensure legal compliance regarding retention periods and accessibility of the records (financial and certain other types of records are required by law to be kept for a certain period of time; some types of records, such as personnel files, contain confidential information and are restricted due to privacy laws). Archivists arrange and describe the records according to existing archival description standards and best practices. They also assist users in accessing collections. In this way, archivists often wear many hats, including those of historian, manuscripts or special collections curator, reference librarian, cataloger, and records manager. Archivists also often manage oral history projects and sometimes digitization projects as well. They place special focus on securing original and rare materials from theft or disaster, because they know that if their collections are destroyed they can never be replaced. They monitor the storage environment for their collections, ensuring the proper temperature, humidity, and light levels for the extended life of the collections. Archivists often seem very strict in regards to use of collections, and this is due to the heavy responsibility they bear in stewarding collections that are one of a kind. It is a much heavier burden to know that if your collection is lost to fire, theft, mold, etc., it is gone forever. With books and serials, there is at least the possibility that because these are mass produced they could be purchased

again and the library could be rebuilt; with archives, once gone the collections are gone forever. Because archives typically contain information not found in books, journals, and other secondary sources the outcome of a loss of archival materials is particularly devastating and can result in a loss of cultural or historic evidence of the past.

Archival and Non-Archival Records

Archivists are trained to appraise records for their short-term or long-term value. Only records with long-term or permanent value are considered “archival.” Records that are archival are kept permanently for current and future research needs. Items with short-term value are non-archival and are typically not kept in the archives repository, although in institutions where the archivist is also the records manager, he or she may be responsible for the short-term storage and management of non-archival records until those records are no longer needed, at which time they are usually disposed of and/or shredded, depending on the information they contain.

Examples of archival records generated by an organization include: policies and procedures; meeting minutes; annual reports; significant correspondence; events documentation; photographs; audio/video materials; legal papers; artifacts; architectural records and blueprints; scrapbooks; and ephemera (printed materials usually created for a specific use and not intended to be kept, such as tickets to events, posters and flyers, invitations, etc.). Examples of non-archival records include duplicate materials; draft papers and/or proofs for publications; calendars and appointment books; phone message books; blank forms; to-do lists; and receipts, invoices, and purchase orders (typically financial information is summarized in a ledger or annual budget).

Distinguishing Between Archives and Special Collections

Although the term “archives” can be applied to any recorded documentation with permanent value, in general “archives” are the records of an organizational entity, whereas the papers documenting the lives of individuals or families are referred to as “manuscripts,” “personal papers,” or “family papers.” Often, archivists, manuscripts curators, and/or special collections librarians work with a mixture of types of materials—institutional records or archives; manuscripts and personal papers; and rare books. The term “special collections” is generally applied to collections that include materials other than the institutional archives, such as manuscripts and rare books, although “special collections” can be used as an umbrella term to encompass these types of collections in addition to institutional archives. In some large institutions, such as major university libraries, there may be a university archives department that manages the records created by the university and is separate from a special collections department that may include the personal papers of individuals and the institutional records of other entities such as local clubs and organizations. In some cases, the institutional archives and the special collections department are combined; the wide variety in organizational structures and reporting lines contributes to some of the confusion in users’ abilities to distinguish between archives and special collections.

GETTING STARTED

Often librarians are given responsibility for caring for archival materials without having received the appropriate level of guidance and training. In some instances, librarians are in charge of

creating institutional archives where they did not exist before. Here are some tips on how to proceed if managing archives are part of your job duties:

1. Obtain Training in Archives Work

The Society of American Archivists and regional archives organizations such as the Society of Indiana Archivists and the Midwest Archives Conference provide training and continuing education for individuals working with archival collections. The Academy of Certified Archivists also provides testing for archival certification, requiring individuals to pass a multiple-choice exam in archives work and methodology in addition to logging a required amount of archives experience and education prior to taking the exam.

2. Secure Proper Storage Space

Having one secure, environmentally stable location for archival storage lessens the likelihood of misfiling records or losing access to valuable information. If more than one storage space is necessary, steps should be taken to ensure that each space is secured with very limited access, lights are covered with UV-filters, and any natural light coming from windows or skylights is covered with drapery, shades, or UV-filtering film. The Archives should be adequately protected from theft and natural disasters and should be located above ground without close proximity to water pipes, hot water heaters, or other materials capable of emitting light, heat, and/or liquids that will cause damage to valuable records. The storage area should, at the same time, be easily accessible to the archivist from his/her office and processing areas. Collections should be non-circulating, with access to the archives stacks limited to the archivist and any others that require access to the area in case of an emergency. Ideally, the space should be outfitted with security

cameras and a combination key card or code entrance. The archivist should always retrieve items for staff and the public without allowing users to browse the shelves, in order to ensure that items are secure and that the organization of the materials within the archives is not disturbed. Unlike library collections, the materials kept in archives are unique and permanently valuable; they cannot be replaced if lost or stolen, and significant time should be devoted early on to ensuring that the archives storage space is secure.

The Archives storage area should also be kept at a constant low temperature ranging from 65-70 degrees Fahrenheit, constant low relative humidity (35-45% RH), low light/UV levels, and fire and water detection and prevention systems should be installed. Shelves should be securely attached to the floor and the walls to prevent collapse in case of tornado, hurricane, earthquake, or other disaster. Archival materials should be stored in acid-free folders and sturdy, acid-free boxes. The archives storage area should be well maintained and monitored regularly for insect or mold infestation and fluctuations or extreme levels of light, temperature, and humidity. There should also be ample space in the archives to allow for future growth of the collections.

3. Appraise the Records

Collection evaluations or appraisals are the best way to identify the types of records in a collection and decide what should or should not be retained, what materials are confidential or should be legally restricted from access for a period of time, and what the space and storage needs of the collection will be. The following questions should be considered during the evaluation: What types of materials are in the collection? Do the files contain confidential/restricted information such as credit card numbers, Social Security numbers, staff

evaluations, etc.? Does the collection contain photographs, audio-visual materials, oversized items, or other materials that may need to be separated for preservation reasons? If you are starting an archives for the first time, you may need to conduct a records survey by interviewing staff in offices that create records for the institution. Ask them about the types of records they create, the amount of new records created each year, how frequently they refer to records after they are created, and whether the records contain sensitive or confidential information.

4. Consolidate Archival Materials

Archival materials with long-term or permanent value, once identified, should be carefully packed and transferred into a designated archives storage space, preferably separated from any materials that have only short-term value or will not be kept forever. A system should be established for assigning acquisition numbers and shelf locations to records so that they can be easily retrieved and re-shelved for reference purposes. Boxes should be clearly labeled according to department/office or author/records creator, type of files within the boxes, and a range of dates of the materials, along with a box number.

5. Establish Archives Policies and Procedures

Archives should operate with the following policies and procedures in place: Mission Statement that supports and reflects the mission of the governing organization; Access and Use Policy for staff and researchers; Collecting Policy that outlines what types of materials will be collected by the archives and what will not; Staff Records Policy that outlines how to deal with staff members' personal papers versus the official records of the institution or organization; Acquisitions Procedures that provide guidance to staff in what steps to take in establishing

physical and intellectual control over newly acquired materials; Records Transfer Procedures that guide staff in how to transfer materials to the archives; Processing and Description Procedures for training staff in how to organize the materials, preserve them, and create finding aids or inventories to the collections; and Policies and Procedures for Destruction of Non-Archival Records that address how to properly dispose of non-permanent records, including treatment of sensitive materials that require shredding. In addition, a deed of gift form should be created and used to document all gifts of collection materials; the deed of gift not only documents the date of donation and identifies the donor for each collection, it also is the legal document establishing transfer of ownership of a collection to the archives or library, and typically assigns or identifies the copyright and/or literary rights to the collection. When possible, donors should be encouraged to sign copyright over to the library or archives to allow researchers to more easily reproduce materials from the collection in scholarly publications.

6. Learn the Institutional History

As the historian of the institution or organization that creates the archival records, the archivist should become familiar with the history of the organization that created the records. Sometimes this can be accomplished by reading published information written about the organization, when it exists. Other times talking to people associated with the organization is helpful, particularly long-time employees and retired staff. Keeping up with how the organizational structure changed over time, and which staff occupied significant positions for which time periods will prove to be very helpful when organizing the records later.

7. Visit Archival Repositories

Librarians who may be unfamiliar with archives work but have been placed in charge of archival collections should visit other archives to learn how and where their archival materials are stored, what policies and procedures they have in place, what retention requirements or records retention/disposition schedules they use for their records, what types of archival supplies they use and the vendors they prefer, how they access information about their collections, and what types of security, environmental controls, and fire protection systems they have in place.

8. Prioritize Processing

It is important for librarians to decide which archival materials to process first, depending on: frequency of use, research importance, historical significance, staff needs, and the physical condition or preservation needs of the materials themselves. Due to ongoing gifts, and inevitable space and staff shortages, there will likely always be a backlog of archival collections waiting to be processed, so it is crucial to identify the collections in most need of processing, normally by keeping statistics on which collections are most requested, and work on those first. It is also better to provide summary information about many collections, than it is to provide extremely detailed descriptions for only a few collections.

9. Provide Arrangement and Description of Collections

Arrangement and description of archival records requires professional archives training. Care must be taken not to disturb the original order of records as they come into the archives. Original order is crucial to understanding how the author or creator of the records related to the materials he or she generated. Provenance must also be considered—archival records from more

than one creator/office/department should never be mixed together, regardless of content or similar subject matter. Records groups should be established for each department or office, and inventories at the collection, box, and/or folder level should be produced to aid users in accessing information in the records. Often record groups are created based on function. For example, each separate department may be an individual records group within the overall group of the governing institution or organization. This type of arrangement serves to document the history, growth, and activities of each department while revealing changes within the organizational structure of the institution as a whole.

In regards to preservation and conservation, great care must be taken not to cause harm to the archival materials. Conservators who repair and treat documents, photographs, and objects are highly trained professionals familiar with chemical reactions of different solvents and adhesives to paper, emulsion, and other materials. They know best what types of repairs and treatments should occur; without proper training, librarians and archivists should never attempt to repair torn pages, brittle bindings, photographs adhered together, etc. Often more harm than good comes from such well-intentioned repairs, as any tape, glue, or other material that comes in contact with the collections will have its own chemical reactions and possible negative side effects on the collections over time. When in doubt, it is best to simply stabilize the damaged material in an acid-free folder, box, or enclosure.

10. Increase Awareness of the Collections

Many archival repositories choose to submit their catalog records to bibliographic databases such as RLIN, WorldCat, ArchiveGrid, and/or ArchivesUSA as a means of sharing resource

information with other archives and libraries. Numerous archives have begun providing finding aids and digitized materials from their collections on the Internet. Encoded Archival Description (EAD) is another means of providing full-text searching capabilities to archival finding aids, when paired with a database or search engine, and its use has begun to spread, primarily among academic archives. Due to funding and staff restraints, some archival repositories rely solely on in-house databases or even printed finding aids and/or card catalogs. Most archival materials, regardless of the type of institution they are housed in, are cataloged at the collection level—it is not common for archivists to catalog at the item level (creating a catalog record for each document or item in a collection), although some museums do, and this will depend on each institution's individual mission along with the amount of resources, particularly staff resources, available.

In addition to alerting researchers to your collections by submitting descriptions of archival materials to major bibliographic databases, and posting finding aids for your collections on the Internet, it is important to promote the collections in other ways to reach as broad an audience as possible. Providing exhibits of archival materials and digitizing collection materials and placing them online will increase support for and interest in your collections, hopefully resulting in monetary donations, increased gifts of collection materials, increased use of the collections, and, ultimately, higher significance placed on the archives by administrators, donors, and other stakeholders who play a role in the future growth of the archives.

Conclusion

Following the ten steps listed above will enable librarians to get started in archives work and begin to serve the archival research needs of their users; preserve rare historical collection materials for future generations; improve efficiency and productivity through timely access to information; reduce operating costs by decreasing storage space being used for unnecessary records that can be discarded, while also decreasing employee time spent trying to locate vital information mixed in with non-vital information; ensure the library is meeting its legal obligations for records retention; and reduce the risk of loss of vital records to theft or disaster. Perhaps most importantly, archives exist to document the creation, growth, changes, activities, and achievements of individuals and organizations. Ultimately, it is only by looking back and building upon our past that we can look toward our future, learn from past experiences, and continue to thrive and function into the future. Archives contain evidence of the past, and are significant primary source research materials; by following the steps above you can begin to provide research access to your archival collections, while also stewarding them responsibly to meet the needs of future generations of researchers.

Appendix 1: Differences Between Libraries and Archives

	Libraries	Archives
Nature of Collections	Published sources, primarily (replaceable)	Unpublished sources, primarily (irreplaceable)
Arrangement Methods	Predetermined call numbers (Library of Congress or Dewey Decimal)	Archivist must determine arrangement/organization, using original order and provenance, along with assigning shelf locations
Description/Cataloging	Predetermined subject classifications (Library of Congress); predetermined or self-evident author, title, dates; each book cataloged separately; records in online catalog and/or bibliographic databases	Archivist must determine subject headings, author or primary creator of the materials, how to describe them, and dates; description usually at collection or record group level, not each item; records may or may not exist in online catalog and/or bibliographic databases; full finding aids or inventories cannot be included in MARC records
Access	Users can browse shelves; users can locate materials in online catalog	Closed stacks; user often must consult with archivist or librarian on collections of interest (sometimes full finding aids are available online, sometimes they are only available in the archives); users request materials from archivist or librarian; rules for access are often stricter, requiring photo identification, signing of patron registration forms, putting belongings in lockers; some archives do not allow users to photocopy materials; no pens, food, drinks allowed.

Additional Resources

Recommended Introductory Books on Archives Work

Hunter, Gregory S. *Developing and Maintaining Practical Archives: A How-To-To-It Manual*.

New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 2003.

Society of American Archivists' "Archival Fundamentals Series" (texts covering the basics of archives work, such as arrangement and description of archives, a glossary of archival terminology, appraisal of archival materials, reference services, and management). All available from the Society of American Archivists: <http://www.archivists.org/catalog/>.

Yakel, Elizabeth. *Starting An Archives*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists and

Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994.

Recommended Online Resources

Archives Association of British Columbia. "The Archivist's Toolkit."

<http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/toolkit.html>

Archives Association of British Columbia. "A Manual for Small Archives."

http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/msa/0_table_of_contents.htm

Getty Information Institute. Introduction to Archival Arrangement and Description (Archivist's Primer). http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/standards/introarchives/

Pearce-Moses, Richard. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*. Society of American Archivists, 2005. <http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp>

Society of American Archivists. "So You Want to Be An Archivist: An Overview of the Archives Profession." <http://www.archivists.org/prof-education/arprof.asp>

Tulane University. "Ready, Net, Go! Archival Internet Resources."

<http://www.tulane.edu/%7Elmiller/ArchivesResources.html>

About the Author

Sammie L. Morris is Head of Archives and Special Collections at Purdue University. She has a Master's degree in Library and Information Science from the University of Texas at Austin with a concentration in Archival Enterprise, and is a Certified Archivist. She is an active member of the Society of American Archivists, the Midwest Archives Conference, and the Academy of Certified Archivists. She is also a past president of the Society of Indiana Archivists and is a member of the Indiana State Historical Records Advisory Board. Morris' writings have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *American Archivist*, *Archival Issues*, *Provenance*, and *Archival Outlook*.