

# An Introduction to Archives and Manuscripts

David B. Gracy II

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# An Introduction to Archives and Manuscripts

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## Introduction

On History tests, I used to ask students to identify and explain the significance of various events and terms. Invariably I would include the term "archives" in the list. The answers usually parroted one or more of the three meanings of the word.

First, "archives" are the noncurrent records of an organization or institution preserved because they possess information of permanent value. These days the word "information" is underscored. Data today are generally considered more important than the particular medium on which they are recorded. This is a rather recent trend, sparked by the incredible volume of records produced during the twentieth century. Archives come into existence to facilitate and record the activity of organizations as they conduct their business. Archives are not created to be archives. After the files have fulfilled their original purpose, and largely because they fulfilled that purpose, those of permanent value become archives: our documentary heritage, our recorded memory of ourselves.

Second, an "archives" is the agency in which archivists work. Their work consists of several related but distinct activities: accessioning, appraisal of historical value, arrangement, description, conservation and restoration of the physical document, and reference. Oral history projects, publications, and exhibits spice and supplement many archival programs. But were the archivist pressed to say which of these were the bedrock of archival work, which the professional archivist is specially trained to do, the answer would come quickly: appraisal, arrangement, description, and reference.

The third definition of "archives" is the building housing the agency.

Of all the answers on the tests, one was different from the rest. Its author scrawled: "Archives are places where records of the past are kept for reference in the future, if necessary." In a society as litigious as ours, a society clearly in the Age of Information, a society that sends more genealogical researchers into libraries than plain readers, the question no longer is whether to keep records. The question has become: "how?" and "how well?"

The goal of this introduction to archival work is to review the philosophy underlying the chief features of archival methodology. In the section titled "Principles," we review the basic facts that govern archival work, and consider the ramifications of each of these axioms. What archival work is, how it is done, and how it compares with and differs from librarianship are the themes addressed throughout. The section on "Procedures" lays out the course of archival work and describes general practices.

The difficulty in writing something this short, of course, is the danger of generalization. Sometimes concepts must be presented too directly, too

simply. Everyone with experience in an archives knows that little in the work is cut and dried, black and white. Everyone with experience in a library knows things are not as monolithic as they may seem to appear in these pages. The comparisons herein are drawn only to illustrate points. Of course, there are always exceptions. Always one more example would have clarified the nuances of a broad statement. Partly to meet these objections, a bibliography of readily available books, pamphlets, and articles concludes this booklet.

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# Glossary of Selected Terms\*

**Accession**—(1) The act and procedures involved in a transfer of legal title and the taking of records or papers into the physical custody of a repository. (2) The materials involved in such a transfer of custody.

**Archives**—See the three definitions in the Introduction. When the term denotes records, it is usually reserved for records actually in the repository. Thus the archives of the United States Government are those files in the National Archives. Records bound for the National Archives are just “records” until they arrive. Many persons conscious of the lack of a corresponding word for the papers of individuals and families stretch “archives” to include them.

**Archivist**—(1) The professional who works with archives (def. 1). (2) All who work in the field of appraising, obtaining, arranging, describing, and referencing of permanently valuable records, archivists and curators alike.

**Collection**—(1) In the informal, but more commonly used sense of the word, an archival record group in the hands of—collected by—an institution other than the archives (def. 2) of the creator. In a historical manuscripts repository, a body of papers is also often casually styled a “collection.” Various institutions, university archives in particular, collect record groups of other creators and papers to provide materials for research by academics, genealogists, and others. (2) The formal sense of the word (spelled with a capital C) means documents arbitrarily assembled, such as the autographs of signers of the Declaration of Independence, to serve a purpose other than documenting the person or organization whose papers the documents once were a part. Curators of manuscripts repositories used to create Collections around various themes, but have abandoned the practice as destructive of the integrity of the record groups and papers from which the various documents came.

**Creator**—The person or organization that produced a body of papers or records in the course of living and conducting business. The term is not applied to the assembler of a Collection (def. 2).

**Curator**—The professional who works with records and papers in a historical manuscripts repository.

**Document**—Any discrete item, whether printed or manuscript, whether a report, letter or photograph, whether produced by a government agency, business, or individual.

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\*Several of the definitions have been drawn directly from Frank B. Evans, et.al., “A Basic Glossary For Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers,” *American Archivist*, 37 (July, 1974), 415-434.

**Files**—A collective term usually applied to all records of an office or agency, and occasionally to the papers of an individual. The term implies the presence of a system and device (such as a folder) in which the records and papers are organized. Additionally the term is used to designate a group of file folders, usually when holding records of common origin or subject.

**Finding Aids**—The descriptive media, published and unpublished, created by an originating office, an archival agency, or manuscript repository, to establish physical, administrative and/or intellectual control over records and other holdings. The most common finding aids include inventories, annotated lists, guides, and indices.

**Historical Manuscript Collection**—(1) A collection of papers or records of enduring value. (2) A repository that collects, holds, and makes collections available for research.

**Manuscript Collection**—See: Collection; Historical Manuscript Collection.

**Manuscripts**—(1) Single documents. (2) Drafts of a literary work. (3) One or more collections (def. 1)—in essence all nonarchival material.

**Noncurrent Records**—Records no longer consulted with any regularity by their creator in the course of business.

**Papers**—The archives of individuals and families. These bodies of material are quite different from organization records because they rarely exhibit the same careful structure, their contents normally are more varied and require extensive work to prepare for research use, no law mandates their existence or disposition, and of course their personal nature requires the archivist to be especially mindful of legal entanglements in their acceptance and use. Like the word “records,” the term “papers” is used both when referring to all and to part of the files of the creating person or family.

**Provenance**—(1) In general archival and manuscript usage, the “office of origin” of records, e.g., that office or administrative entity that created or received and accumulated the records in the conduct of its business. Also the person, family, firm, or other source of personal papers and manuscript collections. (2) Information of successive transfers of ownership and custody of a particular manuscript or group.

**Record Copy**—The one copy of a document selected for permanent preservation. Normally it is the original, but if the original is lost, it may be a copy.

**Record Group**—The records of a distinct organization held by an archives. If the files are not too voluminous, all the records of the organization are called a Record Group. For utility and convenience in cases in which the archives of an organization are very voluminous, the records of various independent, or at least distinct, administrations (office, bureau, agency) are designated Record Groups. For example, the files of the Headquarters of the Army constitute one Record Group. In this case, there is no single term for the body of records produced by the entire United States

Army. The term is used more commonly in the archives of the creator than in a manuscripts repository.

**Records**—The files, whatever their form—paper, machine readable, or visual materials—created by organizations in the transaction of their business. The word is used in referring to parts of a record group, and with a capital R as a synonym for record group. Thus minutes are records found among the Records of the Hydrographic Office.

**Security Copy**—A duplicate copy, usually on microfilm, of records. Normally these are housed in a different location from the original copy so that in case of a disaster one copy would survive.

**Series**—File units or documents arranged in accordance with a filing system or maintained as a unit because they relate to a particular subject or function, result from the same activity, have a particular form, or because of some other relationship arising out of their creation, receipt, or use.

**Subgroup**—A body of related records within a record group, usually consisting of the records of a primary subordinate administrative unit. Subgroups may also be established for related bodies of records within a record group that can best be delimited in terms of functional, geographical, or chronological relationships. Subgroups, in turn, are divided into as many levels as are necessary to reflect the successive organizational units that constitute the hierarchy of the subordinate administrative unit or that will assist in grouping series entries in terms of their relationship.

**Subseries**—An aggregate of file units within a series readily separable in terms of physical class, type, form, subject, or filing arrangement.

zation. Research repositories usually maintain a list of persons willing to do research for a fee.

The archivist who serves the researcher best, especially in a manuscript repository, commands two areas of knowledge. Archives—the system of arrangement and description used in the repository, as well as the records likely to be pertinent to the researcher's subject—is the more important. But the greater the archivist's acquaintance with the fields of study represented by the bulk of researchers using the repository, the better job he can do of relating the subjects being researched to the records as they are maintained on the shelves.

Every request to use material in the search room must be submitted on a form. After use in pulling the desired material and compiling statistics, the forms are kept for several years in case a theft is discovered. The forms can reveal the materials a given person used or the persons who had access to a given body of materials.

An essential facet of reference activity is insuring the integrity and safe handling of the material serviced to a patron. Search rooms are designed to provide stations for at least one staff member, preferably more, in the room. The staff assists and, equally important, watches the patrons. Patron consciousness that staff is present is the archivist's most certain defense against inadvertent misfiling of items by a patron or outright attempts at theft. To further discourage attempts at theft, the archivist restricts the personal belongings a patron can take to the research table. When the patron leaves, personal belongings and papers are searched. Those archivists whose repositories have been victimized advocate a prearranged plan for dealing with the emergency of theft, so that all staff members know how to react.

Most archives include with their rules and regulations, a copy of which is provided to each patron, a suggested form for citing material in the repository. This assists a novice unfamiliar with the technique of proper citation. The archivist hopes it will cause the researcher who publishes to include adequate information in citations, so that sources referred to by one person can be found by another. At a minimum, this information includes, in reverse order, the name of the repository, the title of the collection/record group, the series or place in the collection where the document(s) is located, and a description of the item(s) cited:

Bill Jones to John Doe, February 9, 1891, deed [information on the document], Legal Records [series], Robert Smith Papers [collection], West University Archives [repository].

Reference easily can become the tail that wags the archival dog. Patrons in the search room deserve service, even if it means pulling workers from processing to assist the search room staff. But pulling staff from preparing material for reference hampers equally essential processing work. Consequently, archivists try to maintain the pace of processing while serving every research request. By so doing, they strive both to meet the demands of the present and to prepare to satisfy those of the future.

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