

INSURING THE FUTURE OF OUR PAST:

A Brief Guide to Selecting or Starting an Archival Program

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Foreword

Insuring the Future of Our Past: A Brief Guide to Selecting or Starting an Archival Program was originally published in 1995 by the State Historical Records Advisory Board (SHRAB) of North Carolina as a goal of the board's 1993 ten year needs assessment update on archival and documentary preservation programs, issues, and challenges. Financial support came from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the Randleigh Foundation Trust. The booklet proved popular, and a second edition was issued in 1998. This newly revised edition is a product of the SHRAB's statewide conference on records, "Charting Our Future," held November 2, 2001, and is a goal of the board's 2002-2004 planning grant received from the NHPRC. The chief purpose of *Insuring the Future of Our Past* is to provide a concise informational guide for individuals, institutions, organizations, and businesses with archival materials. It is designed to assist these records administrators in deciding whether to select an appropriate existing repository for their holdings or to develop their own archival program. Like the previous edition, this new edition will be available online as well as in printed form.

The State Historical Records Advisory Board hopes that this third revised edition will be useful not only to these individuals, institutions, and organizations, but to those already supporting archival and preservation activities, as well as a broader public interested in the collection, preservation, and use of historical documentation.

Jeffrey J. Crow
State Coordinator

I. INTRODUCTION

• Why Preserve Old Documents

For thousands of years mankind has sought to record and preserve its past, whether on the tablets and scrolls of ancient Egypt and Greece, in the books of Irish monks during the Dark Ages, or through the memories and stories of African, European, and Native American elders. With the introduction of the printing press in the fifteenth century, recording history became much more efficient and accessible. The electronic media revolution of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries promises even more innovative means of recording our past.

Our documentary heritage, in whatever format, tells us who we are, what we have accomplished or failed to accomplish, and helps define us as a people. In the United States, universities and state archives have led the way in preserving this heritage. In 1903, North Carolina was the third state to establish a state-sponsored archives, and, in 1934, again assumed a leadership role by providing the nation with its first national archivist, R.D.W. Connor.

• Preservation Today: Creating a Future for the Past

In the early twenty-first century archival preservation means much more than simply collecting and storing historical documents. In its publication, *A Long and Happy Life: Library and Records Preservation in North Carolina* (see Section IV, “Bibliography”), the North Carolina Preservation Consortium (NCPC) broadly defined library and records preservation as “all the measures we must take to assure appropriate life-spans for our books, records, and manuscripts” (p. 2). Preserving precious materials of historical, social, cultural, professional, personal, or legal significance requires understanding, commitment, and planning. Additionally, institutions and organizations are now creating numerous electronic records that require preservation.

• First Questions to Consider

Numerous North Carolina organizations, institutions, businesses, and individuals possess archival materials--old letters, books, diaries, estate papers, newspapers, maps, photographs, films, or, more recently, electronic/digital media, relating to the history of their activities, families, and communities. Because many of those who hold archival materials wish to safeguard at least some of these records, they need to address the question: should they place these records in an existing archival repository or should they create a new archive or archival program?

Most organizations and institutions as well as individuals will decide that they do not have the resources for starting and maintaining a proper repository, or that the size of the collection does not merit a comprehensive archival program. Moreover, established repositories may already specialize in the kinds of records they possess. The decision to develop an archives should be made when a collection’s size is relatively large, solid financial support exists, adequate facilities are available, and professional assistance is accessible. Otherwise, the organization should consider placing its archival records in an existing archive.

- Kinds of Records to Preserve

Archives collect many kinds of records and historical materials, whether they are on paper, on film, on tape, or in electronic form. These include:

- Association/organization/business minutes, correspondence, reports, ledgers
- Personal letters, diaries, speeches, reminiscences
- Photographs, maps, drawings, prints
- Religious records, bulletins, sermons
- Broadsides, posters, bumper stickers, buttons
- Videotapes, motion picture films, sound recordings
- Scrapbooks
- Periodicals, magazines, pamphlets, books

II. PRESERVATION ISSUES

- Threats to Records' Survival

Historical records face constant and continuous dangers. Those concerned with seeing that materials are given proper archival care need to place their materials in facilities that guard against several threats:

- **Climatic/environmental hazards:** records storage and stack areas need to have stable temperature (preferably 68° F maximum) and humidity (no greater than 50% relative humidity) since wide temperature variations stress paper, film, and tape. Records stored at temperatures above 70° F deteriorate twice as quickly as records kept in cooler environments, and records stored in high humidity often become infested with mold and mildew;

- **Lighting:** both natural and artificial light can fade and discolor paper and bindings. Lighting should be kept to a minimum (ultra-violet filtering for fluorescent lighting and windows in areas where records are stored and used is strongly recommended);

- **Chemical:** the acidic content of paper used over much of the last 150 years causes decay. Processes for reducing or protecting against the acid as well as proper, controlled storage will lessen the danger of document deterioration;

- **Housekeeping:** dust and airborne dirt particles abrade and discolor document surfaces. Food and drink must be kept away from manuscripts and documents since food particles attract pests, and spills will damage paper and make ink run;

- **Use:** repeated handling of original archival materials causes deterioration and disintegration. Deacidification, encapsulation, and other treatments, at best, offer partial solutions. Since the number of documents needing preservation treatment usually exceeds the capacity and means available to conserve them, archives often use other preservation strategies such as reformatting to microfilm.

Before placing historical materials in a repository, potential donors or depositors may wish to assure themselves that the archive or library deals with such issues appropriately. One does not have to be an expert to ask questions that determine whether a repository adequately, professionally, and responsibly cares for records. The NCPC

offers valuable advice and assistance in these areas of concern (see Section IV, “Sources of Assistance”).

- Security and Access

Security and access also are basic issues for any archives. Both potential donors or depositors and those beginning archives should consider the following points:

(1) The repository has a central alarm and/or monitoring system for fire and theft protection;

(2) The repository appropriately regulates access to and use of documents.

Institutional policies should permit access but must also protect against vandalism and theft as well as against kinds of access or use prohibited by either donor agreements or law.

- Disaster Preparedness

Every archival repository should have an emergency response policy. Disasters come in many forms: floods, fires, vandalism, theft, air conditioning failure, burst pipes, and other hazards, both manmade and natural. Good management minimizes these risks. Potential donors or depositors may wish to consider, therefore, whether a repository:

→ Has a written, approved **disaster preparedness plan**, including response measures, emergency procedures, special telephone numbers, special emergency consultants, and staff designated to perform specific tasks during an emergency.

→ Offers periodic **staff training** to meet emergency situations. The NCPC may provide advice and support in this area.

→ Has up-to-date **insurance** coverage.

Anyone planning or starting an archives should address these points as well.

III. ORGANIZATION OF A COLLECTION

Even if one is giving or depositing historical records rather than starting an archive, it may be helpful to have a basic understanding of how professionally run archives handle private (that is, non-governmental) records, whether of a family, a church, or a business.

- Collection Policy

Every archival institution should have a collection policy--a cohesive strategy for determining what either to collect or, just as importantly, not to collect. Such a policy should be well-defined, written, and reflect a clearly defined collection emphasis. Potential donors and depositors as well as archival planners need to remember that a small repository cannot collect widely or usefully on every subject. Its historical and/or institutional affiliation or nature may help determine collection policy. For example, a county historical museum will most likely want to collect materials related to the history, culture, and society of that county. Similarly, a religious institution may be better equipped to concentrate on aspects of denominational or congregational history.

Historical materials are more used and more useful if they are housed in a repository maintaining related documentation. Placing materials in a repository where they are out of scope does both potential researchers and the history documented a disservice. Splitting a collection between archival repositories is highly undesirable and should be avoided.

Non-governmental repositories should not accept public records, which are covered by state law (public records are defined in *General Statutes* 132-1 through 9). (An excellent discussion of North Carolina's public record law is found in David M. Lawrence, *Interpreting North Carolina's Public Records Law*, Chapel Hill, NC: Institute of Government, 1987.)

Repositories normally receive non-public records through deposit agreements, contracts, deeds of gift, or bequests from private individuals, foundations, or organizations. Legal instruments should record such transactions so that promises are not forgotten or commitments misinterpreted. Restrictions on access and use are sometimes written into such documents at the request of the donors or depositors. (Gary M. and Trudy Huskamp Peterson's volume, *Archives & Manuscripts: Law*, Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists (SAA), 1985, provides not only a good summary of donation and purchase procedures, but also includes helpful model agreements and deeds in Section 2, "Donations and Purchases," pp. 24-38.)

- Archival Functions: Dealing with Accessions

Operating a successful archival program has several essential elements. Since the collection, preservation, and use of records, manuscripts, and other archival materials are the primary purposes of any such institution, managing records effectively is essential. Potential donors and depositors as well as initiators of archival programs should keep in mind the complexities of this work. Briefly, handling a group of records requires six major steps:

- (1) Survey: Before deciding what to keep or accept, archives normally survey the records to determine sources, historical background, and any particular conditions that require attention, as well as the nature, purposes, and contents of the materials.

- (2) Establish a System: After surveying a group of records, archivists normally draft a tentative arrangement system for records into records series, if they plan to retain the records. A record series is defined as a body of records that has been created or brought together to document a specific activity or office or interest. After records series have been determined, they sometimes are subdivided into subseries.

- (3) Appraise: Unarranged and partially arranged records are appraised for their legal, evidential, and historical values for the collecting/depository institution.

- (4) Arrange and Describe: After surveying, roughly sorting, and appraising records, archivists arrange and describe in appropriate detail those portions of the materials they wish to retain. The system devised for arrangement and description dictates the operation of this process:

- Within each predetermined series, records are arranged chronologically, alphabetically, thematically, or according to another appropriate order. Archivists

normally try to preserve the original order in which the papers were kept by their creator or recipient.

- As archivists arrange the papers, they weed out extraneous and duplicative materials, remove staples, paper clips, and pins, and unfold and flatten documents before placing them in acid-free folders and boxes. When photocopying items, archivists are careful to use acid-free paper. Those considering starting archival programs may wish to seek advice, consultation, and assistance in these and more advanced conservation techniques from the NCPC, the Society of North Carolina Archivists (SNCA), and the North Carolina State Archives (all listed under Section IV, “Sources of Assistance”).

(5) Reference and Catalog: Archivists normally take notes on the materials while they arrange them. These notes not only form the basis for an inventory or finding aid of the collection’s contents, but also provide a written summary of the materials. Computerized versions of these summary descriptions and detailed inventories may be loaded into electronic databases for access via the Internet or Worldwide Web or in international bibliographic databases. Archives that go this extra step are making their holdings more accessible than repositories that do not take advantage of the information highway.

(6) Develop Procedures: Archives normally have policies and procedures regarding retrieval, use, and access to records, and mail order, email, and telephone requests. Potential donors and depositors may wish to know whether a repository charges researchers to come in, gives preferential treatment to particular groups, excludes some people, requires that researchers make appointments, or otherwise limits or retards access. Persons planning and developing archival programs need to consider what they wish their policies to be as well. There are many archival repositories in North Carolina that have such procedures, and it is likely that they would offer advice or examples in this regard.

IV. SOURCES OF ASSISTANCE

Various state and national professional organizations offer advice, consultation, and support for those beginning archival programs. Such organizations also offer training programs, seminars, and other activities for archival staff. For those considering donating or depositing materials in an existing archives, membership in such organizations is a good indication of staff professionalism.

- Organizational Assistance

On the national level, the Society of American Archivists provides advice and publishes very useful material for those interested in archival practice, law, and operations. The Special Libraries Association (www.sla.org), the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (www.nagara.org), and the Academy of Certified Archivists (www.certifiedarchivists.org) offer similar assistance.

North Carolina has a number of professional organizations that can offer assistance to potential organizers of archival/records programs:

- 1) The North Carolina State Archives is the official state agency charged with maintaining and preserving our state’s archival heritage. In addition, the State Archives

offers consultation and advice on archival procedures and records management to state agencies, local government units, and others. Address: c/o State Archivist, 109 East Jones Street, 4614 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, N.C. 27699-4614. Web address: www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/sections/archives/arch/default.htm.

2) The North Carolina African American Archives Group (NCAAAG) has as its special mission to serve as a link between the state's historically black institutions of higher learning and other documenters of the African American experience; provide advice and counsel to those initiating or fostering black archival programs/institutions; promote the documentation, study, and appreciation of African American history and life in North Carolina; and work with other professional organizations in the state and nation. Address: School of Library and Information Sciences, North Carolina Central University, Durham, N.C. 27707. Web information: www.upress.virginia.edu/epub/pyatt/.

3) The Society of North Carolina Archivists, the statewide association for the archival profession in North Carolina, offers similar services to all archival repositories in the state. The SNCA's activities are mainly directed toward information, education, and archival training. Special seminars and institutes, regular meetings, publications, and other joint ventures insure that archival professionals will have the benefit of the latest information and technology. Address: Post Office Box 20448, Raleigh, N.C. 27619. Web address: www.ncarchivists.org.

4) The SHRAB is the official state body representing and advising the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) in North Carolina. The SHRAB can offer advice to those making grant applications to the NHPRC. Address: c/o Deputy State Coordinator, State Historical Records Advisory Board, 109 East Jones Street, 4614 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, N.C. 27699-4614. Web address: www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/sections/archives/SHRAB/DescribeBD.htm/.

5) The North Carolina Preservation Consortium is a major statewide organization concerned with library and archival preservation in North Carolina. It offers a number of services and various types of consultation. Membership offers institutions the following:

- **Information support:** serves as a clearinghouse for information needed by archival institutions and libraries (for collecting, managing, disaster preparedness, etc.); provides a data base for preservation information, services, and source lists.

- **Educational support:** co-sponsors programs with library schools and archival stakeholders to insure that preservation issues receive proper attention.

- **Funding support:** advises on joint funding strategies and provides consultation on funding initiatives. Address: 804 Old Fayetteville Street, Durham, N.C. 27701-3915. Web address: www.ncpreservation.org.

6) The North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) offers programs and services to libraries across the state involved in special collections activities. Address: 109 East Jones Street, 4646 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, N.C. 27699-4646. Web address: www.nclaonline.org/.

7) North Carolina Exploring Cultural Heritage On Line (NC ECHO) offers consulting, advice, and workshops to any institution or organization that maintains a permanent collection open to the public. While digitization is a major emphasis, NC ECHO staff travel the entire state to offer workshops and consultation in traditional

archival pursuits, including preservation. Address: 109 East Jones Street, 4646 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, N.C. 27699-4646. Web address: www.ncecho.org.

- Funding Sources and Grants

A major concern for existing as well as new archives is funding. Organizations such as the SHRAB, the SNCA, and the NCPC offer grant/funding advice for smaller and newer archival institutions. The publication, *North Carolina Giving* (published by the Capital Consortium, Inc., Raleigh, NC), lists various foundations and charities that one may contact concerning support. Repositories with a specific religious or historic organizational heritage may also wish to consult institutions and organizations centered in those traditions. Sometimes donors of materials offer, or are asked, to help pay for the processing and proper housing of their records.

- Archival Vendors and Suppliers

Archives are careful to choose proper equipment and supplies. The arrangement of a collection involves its removal from the previous filing environment and placement in more stable containers. Archives use acid-free folders and boxes. Archives also have sophisticated standards for photographic equipment and supplies and microfilm.

Although by no means complete, the following is a list of selected archival product vendors/suppliers:

1) Vendors specializing in storage boxes, containers, sleeves, and accessories

Archival Products, Inc.
2134 East Grand
Post Office Box 1413
Des Moines, IA 50305
Phone: 800-526-5640
www.archival.com/

Conservation Resources International, Inc.
8000-H Forbes Place
Springfield, VA 22151
Phone: 800-634-6932
Fax: 703-321-0629
www.conservationresources.com/

Gaylord Brothers
Box 4901
Syracuse, NY 13211-4901
Phone: 800-448-6160
Fax: 800-272-3412
www.gaylord.com/

Hollinger Corporation
9401 Northeast Drive
Post Office Box 8360
Fredericksburg, VA 22404
Phone: 800-634-0491
Fax: 800-947-8814
www.hollingercorp.com/

Polig Brothers, Inc.
Post Office Box 8069
Richmond, VA. 23223
www.pohlig.com/

University Products
517 Main Street
Post Office Box 101
Holyoke, MA 01041-0101
Phone: 800-762-1165
Fax: 800-532-9281

www.universityproducts.com/

2) Vendors specializing in scientific photographic and micrographic supplies:

Kodak film and supplies:
Advanced Micrographics Support, Inc.
Post Office Drawer 129
1127 Curtis Street
Monroe, NC 28111

Fuji film, microfilm supplies, film development, microfilm fixer and replenisher:
Microview
4020 West Chase Blvd., Suite 190
Raleigh, NC 27607

Photographic storage supplies, boxes, mylar enclosures, etc:
Light Impressions
P. O. Box 787
Brea, CA 92822-0787
Phone: 800-828-6216 (ordering and customer service)
www.lightimpressionsdirect.com

Scientific equipment and accessories, including hygrometers for registering temperature and humidity:
Fischer Scientific
Post Office Box 4829
Norcross, GA 30091
Phone: 404-449-5059
www.fischersci.com/

3) Vendors supplying acid-free paper and supplies, as well as bookbinding and framing materials:

Carriage House Paper
79 Guernsey Street
Brooklyn, NY 11222
Phone: 800-669-8781
www.carriagehousepaper.com

Daniel Smith, Inc.
Post Office Box 84268
Seattle, WA 98124
Phone: 800-426-6740
www.danielsmith.com

Dieu Donne Papermill, Inc.
433 Broome Street
New York, NY 10013
Phone: 212-226-0573
www.papermaking.org

ICOSA Studio and Paper Mill
Route 4, Box 279
Ellensburg, WA 98926
Phone: 509-964-2341
www.bookarts.com

Paper Source
232 West Chicago Avenue
Chicago, IL 60610
Phone: 312-337-0798
www.papersourceonline.com

Twinrocker Handmade Paper, Inc.
Post Office Box 413
Brookston, IN 47923
Phone: 800-757-TWIN
www.twinrocker.com

V. CONCLUSION

Selecting or starting an archival program is a major decision, involving numerous factors. Choosing whether to utilize a previously established repository or to start a new one requires understanding of what is involved in a modern archival program. Preparation and planning are fundamental to this process. Fortunately, there are organizations, practicing professionals, and consultants more than willing to assist in these endeavors.

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