

Stewards of Your Past: Placing Your Family Papers in an Archives

Your family's history is important to you.

Just as a person without memory is functionally impaired, so too is a family without a link to its own past. To a large degree, your family's memory lies in its papers--the original letters, diaries, photographs, certificates, and other documents that you and your relatives have produced and collected over the years. These documents give vital and unique testimony to the life and achievements of your family.

Your family's history may be important to your community, too. Whether or not members of your family attained a degree of fame, they have shared in the heritage of a certain place and time. Your family's papers, then, can also be part of your community's collective memory.

Most of us lack the resources or expertise to properly preserve our own family papers. Fortunately, there are places that are in the business of preserving history: the archives of your local, county, and state museums, universities, and historical societies. These professional institutions are the stewards of our past.

WHAT CAN AN ARCHIVES DO FOR YOU?

An archives is a place where historically significant documents are housed and cared for. If your family's papers are deemed appropriate for an archives' collections, you stand to gain many benefits. An archives can provide the papers with environmentally controlled storage, freeing up your own space. It can safeguard the papers by overseeing their handling and use. More important, it can provide research access to the valuable information the papers contain, both to you and to the scholarly public. By placing your family's papers in an archives, you take an important step toward their preservation--and you assure that the memories they contain will be kept alive.

WHAT DOCUMENTS SHOULD BE PLACED IN AN ARCHIVES?

Many of the materials produced or collected by a family are significant--but some are more sentimental than historical, and will have value only to the family itself. An archives is interested in the documents of enduring historical value, those that **best** speak of the heritage of the family and community. Some of these documents may include:

- Announcements
- Architectural records
- Audio recordings
- Autobiographies and memoirs
- Awards
- Business records
- Certificates

- Clippings
- Correspondence
- Diaries
- Drawings
- Financial records
- Interviews
- Legal documents
- Maps
- Memoranda
- Motion picture film and videotape
- Notebooks
- Pamphlets, brochures, flyers, etc.
- Photographs
- Scrapbooks
- Subject files
- Telegrams
- Writings (stories, poems, etc.)

An archives' curator can help you determine what to choose. And if the archives is affiliated with a museum, it may also be interested in artifacts from your family's past, such as clothing, furniture, and memorabilia.

HOW DOES AN ARCHIVES OPERATE?

An archives is run by people whose first priority is the preservation of historical materials. They want to help you in every way they can to preserve your family's papers, whether you decide to place them in an archives or not. They can discuss with you the historical value of your papers, further explain the benefits of depositing them in an archives, and advise you on which archives would be best for your papers. In addition, the archives staff will be responsible for the care of the papers, and will continue to work with you as you use the papers or discover more materials to deposit.

Feel free to contact the archives of your local or state museum, university, or historical society for details on its operation. Here are a few general points to keep in mind:

* An archives operates a great deal like other businesses in that it cannot invest materials and labor in the preservation of items which it does not own. Lack of ownership can severely restrict an archives' control over a collection of papers, thereby limiting its ability to properly care for it. It is usually in the best interests of both parties that the papers become the actual property of the archives.

* The goal of an archives is to preserve your family's papers as an historical resource and make them accessible to researchers. An archives may not be able to promise that donated materials will be placed on exhibit or used in some other public fashion. Such decisions often depend on the institution's schedule of programs, which are usually determined far in advance.

* While donations to a non-profit archives are tax deductible, an archives cannot give monetary appraisals of donated materials for tax purposes, or recommend an appraiser. Such a practice could be viewed as a conflict of interest. You may expect the archives to cooperate with an appraiser of your choosing by providing access to the donated materials.

* Archives staff can best assist you if you make an appointment in advance. This will help them plan their schedules, and will assure you of their undivided attention. Some archives may not have regular public visiting hours, and may also require appointments for using the collections.

* It is best to consult with the archives staff before you make a donation. The list in this publication can help you choose what papers to donate, but staff members are always willing to give specific advice.

* An archives maintains and enforces policies on access and use of its collections, even where they concern your family's papers. These policies exist for the protection of all of the materials in the archives' care.