

Stewards of Your Past: Placing Your Organization's Records in an Archives

Your organization's history is important to its continued existence. Just as a person without memory is functionally impaired, so too is an organization without a link to its own past. To a large degree, your organization's memory lies in its records--the original letters, minutes, photographs, publications, and other documents that its officers and members have produced and collected over the years. These documents give vital and unique testimony to the life and achievements of your organization.

Your organization's history may be important to your community, too. No matter what its purpose, it has shared in the heritage of a certain place and time. Your organization's records, then, can also be part of your community's collective memory.

Most groups lack the resources or expertise to properly preserve their own records. 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 organization's records are deemed appropriate for an archives' collections, you stand to gain many benefits. An archives can provide the records with environmentally controlled storage, freeing up your own space. It can safeguard the records by overseeing their handling and use. More important, it can provide research access to the valuable information the records contain, both to members of your organization and to the scholarly public. By placing the records 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 by an organization are significant. An archives is interested in the documents of enduring historical value, those that **best** illustrate the activities of your organization. Most often, such documents represent an "end product"--a final report, for example, instead of a draft. In any case, they should be **inactive**--that is, no longer regularly used for routine business. Some of these documents may include:

- Architectural records
- Articles of incorporation
- Audio recordings
- Awards
- Budgets
- By-laws and revisions
- Certificates

- Clippings
- Constitution and revisions
- Correspondence of officers
- Directories
- Handbooks
- Histories
- Financial reports
- Legal documents
- Memoranda
- Minutes of meetings
- Motion picture film and videotape
- Newsletters and other publications
- Organizational charts
- Pamphlets, brochures, flyers, etc.
- Photographs
- Planning documents
- Press releases
- Reports (annual, committee)
- Rosters
- Scrapbooks
- Speeches
- Surveys
- Subject files

The archives staff can help you determine what to choose. To protect the privacy of your members, restrictions on access may be negotiated if necessary. And if the archives is affiliated with a museum, it may also be interested in artifacts from your organization's past, such as uniforms 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 organization's records, whether you decide to place them in an archives or not. They can discuss with you the historical value of your records, further explain the benefits of depositing them in an archives, and advise you on which archives would be best for them. In addition, the archives staff will be responsible for the care of the records, and will continue to work with you as you use the records and periodically add to the collection.

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 will generally welcome the opportunity to become your organization's official repository. To assure regular contact, your organization can add the periodic transfer of inactive records to the duties of one of its officers. You may even want to enter into a contract with an archives, spelling out the conditions of the relationship to the mutual agreement of all involved.

- * Most archives are not-for-profit operations. Any financial contributions your organization can make to help defray the costs of preserving its records would be appreciated.
- * It is best to make planned, periodic donations of records. Annually, after a change in officers or at the end of a fiscal year, is usually a good interval.
- * 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 records, thereby limiting its ability to properly care for it. It is usually in the best interests of both parties that the records become the actual property of the archives.
- * The goal of an archives is to preserve your organization's records 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 fully 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 records to donate, but staff members are always willing to give specific advice.
- * An archives maintains and enforces policies on access and use of its collection, even where they concern your organization's records. These policies exist for the protection of all of the materials in the archives' care.