

Using Archives

A Guide to Effective Research

by Laura Schmidt



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Introduction

Archives exist both to preserve historic materials and to make them available for use. This guide addresses the second purpose by outlining the functions and procedures of archives, and is designed both for first-time archives users and scholars who have already conducted research in archives. The content covers:

- How archives function
- How to identify appropriate archives for your research
- How to access historical materials and research at an archives

Repositories and their collecting scopes and practices may differ, but the principles in this guide should assist you in accomplishing your research goals at any archival institution.

Photos from left to right:

The Nelson Mandela Papers feature letters he wrote to family and friends while in prison. *Photo courtesy of Elizabeth W. Adkins, CA.*

LBJ howling with his dog Yuki while visiting with the U.S. Ambassador to England. *Photo courtesy of Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum.*

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum opened in 2010. *Courtesy of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.*

Steeplechase Pier and the Boardwalk, 1920. *Photo courtesy of Atlantic City Free Public Library.*

Archives preserve historic materials, including manuscripts and books.



Types of Archives

There are many varieties of archives, and the types of materials they collect differ as well. Defining your research topic and knowing what sorts of materials you are looking for will help you determine the appropriate institutions to contact. Here is a brief overview of repository types:

- **College and university archives** are archives that preserve materials relating to a specific academic institution. Such archives may also contain a “special collections” division (see definition below). College and university archives exist first to serve their parent institutions and alumni, and then to serve the public.

Examples: Stanford University Archives, Mount Holyoke College Archives.

- **Corporate archives** are archival departments within a company or corporation that manage and preserve the records of that business. These repositories exist to serve the needs of company staff members and to advance business goals. Corporate archives allow varying degrees of public access to their materials depending on the company’s policies and archival staff availability.

Examples: Ford Motor Company Archives, Kraft Foods Archives.

- **Government archives** are repositories that collect materials relating to local, state, or national government entities.

Examples: The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), the

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, the New York State Archives, City of Boston Archives.

- **Historical societies** are organizations that seek to preserve and promote interest in the history of a region, a historical period, nongovernment organizations, or a subject. The collections of historical societies typically focus on a state or a community, and may be in charge of maintaining some governmental records as well.

Examples: The Wisconsin Historical Society, the National Railway Historical Society, the San Fernando Valley Historical Society.

- **Museums** and archives share the goal of preserving items of historical significance, but museums tend to have a greater emphasis on exhibiting those items, and maintaining diverse collections of artifacts or artwork rather than books and papers. Any of the types of repositories mentioned in this list may incorporate a museum, or museums may be stand-alone institutions. Likewise, stand-alone museums may contain libraries and/or archives.

Examples: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum.

- **Religious archives** are archives relating to the traditions or institutions of a major faith,

denominations within a faith, or individual places of worship. The materials stored in these repositories may be available to the public, or may exist solely to serve members of the faith or the institution by which they were created.

Examples: United Methodist Church Archives, American Jewish Archives.

- **Special collections** are institutions containing materials from individuals, families, and organizations deemed to have significant historical value. Topics collected in special collections vary widely, and include medicine, law, literature, fine art, and technology. Often a special collections repository will be a department within a library, holding the library’s rarest or most valuable original manuscripts, books, and/or collections of local history for neighboring communities.

Examples: Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago, American Philosophical Society Library.

Photos from left to right:

A student dressed as Ptah (the chief god of the Egyptian city of Memphis) at a “Wind Up” party, circa 1930. *Courtesy of University of Texas School of Architecture Collection, Alexander Architectural Archive, University of Texas at Austin.*

Materials housed in religious archives sometimes exist only to serve members of the faith.

An advertisement for Ford Motor Company that appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, 1925. *Photo courtesy of Ford Motor Company.*



OPENING THE HIGHWAYS TO ALL MANKIND

Each of all the joys of the Ford Motor Company is this: to open the way to a better world for all the people of the world.

An organization to make our world a better one, to give us more and more of the things we need and want, to give us more and more of the things we need and want.

It is this thought that has been the inspiration and impetus to the Ford Motor Company's growth, that has been the source of its strength, its power, its success.

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Each effort has been made to make it possible for all the people of the world to have the same kind of life, the same kind of life.

The Ford Motor Company's vision is to make it possible for all the people of the world to have the same kind of life, the same kind of life.

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Ford Motor Company

Printing and advertising cost and other expenses, including, but not limited to, salaries, advertising, postage and other fees, are included in the price of the product.

Finding and Evaluating Archives

How do you locate archives that might have materials appropriate for your research? In addition to using online search engines like Google, here are some resources to consult:

- Consult **bibliographies** and works cited sections in books on your topic. Where did the information come from?
- Contact other **experts** in the field. Which repositories did they visit for their research?
- Look for **websites** dedicated to your topic. Do they list any archives?
- Talk to a reference librarian at your local library about accessing the **WorldCat** database, which includes listings for archival materials stored in libraries all over the world.
- Check **Archive Finder** at <http://archives.chadwyck.com/home.do>. This site contains listings from thousands of American and British archives (requires purchase or subscription).
- Check **ArchiveGrid** at <http://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/>. This database contains nearly a million collection descriptions from thousands of libraries, archives, and museums.
- Check **ARCHIVESCANADA.ca** at <http://www.archivescanada.ca/>. This gateway to archival resources from over 800 repositories across Canada

contains linked archival repository databases for each province.

- Check **Archives Wiki** at http://archiveswiki.historians.org/index.php/Main_Page. Sponsored by the American Historical Association, this page links to several archives from around the world and provides commentary about the archives from a researcher perspective.
- Browse the website of the **Library of Congress** at <http://www.loc.gov/index.html>. The Library of Congress is America's national library, and the world's largest.
- Visit the website of the **National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)** at <http://www.archives.gov/>. NARA oversees the preservation of United States federal government materials. There are two additional resources that can be accessed through NARA:
 - **AAD** (Access to Archival Databases) at <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/> is a search engine for some of NARA's holdings of electronic records.
 - **ARC** (The Archival Research Catalog) at <http://www.archives.gov/research/arc/> is an online catalog of NARA's nationwide holdings in the Washington, DC area, regional archives, and presidential libraries.

- Search the **National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)** at <http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>. NUCMC provides descriptions of manuscript and archival collections from a wide variety of American repositories. The information produced by NUCMC is shared with the WorldCat database (mentioned above).
- Check the **Repositories of Primary Sources** website at http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other_Repositories.html. This site lists over 5,000 links to archives around the world.
- Explore the **Smithsonian Institution Archives** at <http://siarchives.si.edu/>. The Smithsonian Institution Archives is the record keeper of the Smithsonian—collecting, preserving, and making available the official records of the Smithsonian's 19 museums, nine research centers, and the National Zoo.

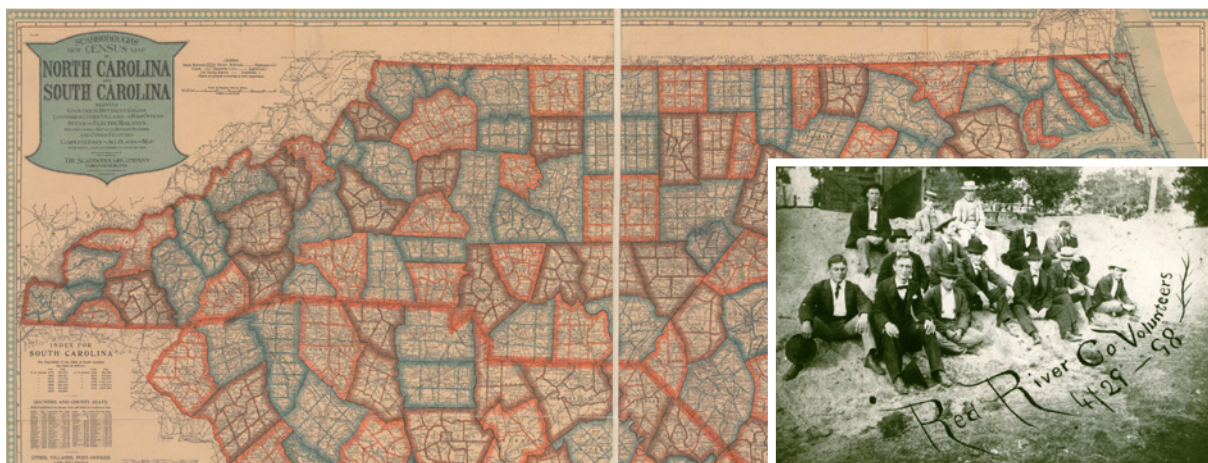
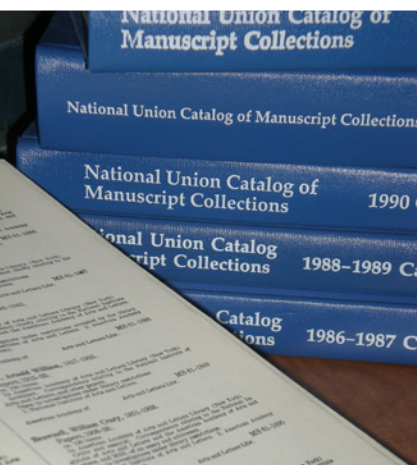
The next step is determining the extent of materials that suit your research needs in an individual archives. Since every

Photos from left to right:

The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections is a source for locating information on archival and manuscript collections held by U.S. repositories.

Scarborough's census map of North and South Carolina, 1911. Photo courtesy of the North Carolina State Archives.

Spanish-American War volunteers from Red River County, Texas. From the Red River Country Public Library Digital Collection.



repository is different (by size, funding, technological advancement, hours, collecting areas, regulations, etc.), even experienced researchers must familiarize themselves with how a given repository describes its holdings. Utilizing the tools listed below will help ensure a thorough evaluation of an archives:

- **Websites:** Check the website of the archives you are evaluating, which will often list the repository's main collection strengths and the topics the materials address. Monitor websites for updates such as new collection descriptions and the addition of digital resources.
- **Catalogs and Databases:** Determine whether the archives you are evaluating has a link on its website to catalogs or databases (similar to those in a library) allowing you to search holdings by subject, keyword, title, author, etc. Many catalogs and databases will link you to *finding aids* (see below), which will provide more detail about what a specific collection holds. If searching catalogs is new for you, ask a reference librarian at a local library for assistance.
- **Finding Aids:** A finding aid (sometimes called inventory, collection listing, register, or calendar) is a text document providing a description of the contents of a collection, just like a table of contents outlines the contents of a book. By using a finding aid, a researcher gets an understanding of a collection in its entirety, sees the relationships between its component parts, and locates the portions of a collection pertinent to research. Finding aids sometimes

provide narrative portions describing the background of a collection (how and when it was formed, how the archives acquired it, etc.), and how the archival staff has arranged or ordered the materials in the collection.

If the archives you are evaluating provides direct access to finding aids on its website, browse or search the finding aids for content relating to your research. See the Appendix of this guide for a sample finding aid with annotations.

Examples of a variety of finding aids can be viewed through these finding aid consortia websites:

- Arizona Archives Online
<http://azarchivesonline.org>
- The Online Archive of California
<http://www.oac.cdlib.org/>
- Northwest Digital Archives
<http://nwda.wsulibs.wsu.edu/index.shtml>
- Rocky Mountain Online Archive
<http://rmoa.unm.edu>
- Texas Archival Resources Online
<http://lib.utexas.edu/taro>

Note that finding aids come in all kinds of formats. Some archives just have paper copies to use on-site, while others have word processing documents, PDF, or HTML/XML finding aids that can be viewed on their websites. Downloading and print options vary by repository. Some archives may provide digital copies of finding aids upon request.

- **Digital Collections:** Many archives digitize materials (photographs, meeting minutes, reports, letters, audiovisual recordings, etc.) from their collections and make them available on their websites. Digitization enables the researcher to view materials without visiting the archives in person. Some digital content is full-text searchable, allowing you to enter words pertinent to your research (such as names or terms) into a search box and then search the document to see whether instances of those words appear. Examine the repository website, catalogs, databases, and finding aids to see whether links to digital collections exist. *However, be aware that digital collections often reflect just a fraction of the total holdings of a repository.* There may be nondigitized materials at the same institution that are also pertinent to your research. Search holdings listings carefully and ask the archival staff for assistance in accessing nondigitized content.

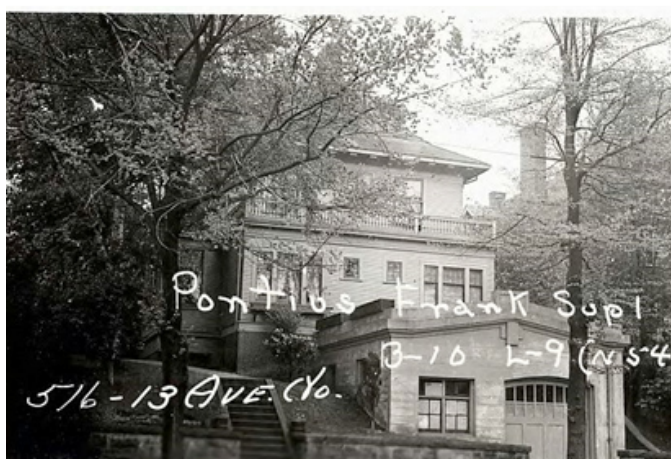
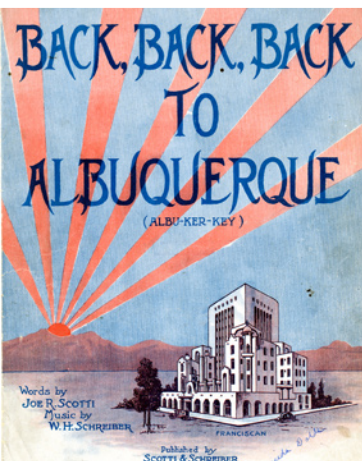
Note that when searching digital collections online it can sometimes be unclear whether the items you are viewing represent a complete collection or are part of a larger collection. Try to determine the

Photos from left to right:

Sheet music cover from the Southwest Travel Literature Collection, Center for Southwest Research, University Libraries, University of New Mexico. *Photo courtesy of the University of New Mexico.*

In 1961 Stanley Ann Obama lived with her infant son Barack in a second-floor apartment in this Capitol Hill home in Seattle while she attended the University of Washington. *Courtesy of Washington Digital Archives.*

Three skaters circa 1920. From the Stuart Thomson fonds, Hikeilla & Hind-Connaught Skating Club Arena, in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. *Photo courtesy of the City of Vancouver Archives.*



highest collection level for the most complete overview of related items.

Examples of digitized collections may be viewed on the Minnesota Digital Library website at <http://www.mndigital.org/reflections/>.

- **Archival Staff:** One of the most important ways to evaluate the holdings of an archives is contacting an archival professional who oversees the collections. Archival staff can point you toward resources you may have overlooked. Job titles for such staff positions include archivist, librarian, reference archivist, reference librarian, curator, and records manager. After you have examined the catalogs, finding aids, and website of an

archives, call or email the repository to confirm your findings and conclusions. If you find specific materials that seem particularly important during your search, write down the titles, call numbers, or other unique methods of identification from those materials and share them with the staff.

Inquire whether you should set up an appointment time to visit and view the materials.

Example: "I am doing a research project involving [describe the purpose, background, and context of your project]. I have already viewed the following [finding aids, catalogs, etc.] on your website, and thought that these specific resources would be useful for my research: [List

finding aid or collection titles, book titles, etc. that you have found. Be as specific as possible.] Do you have any recommendations of other relevant materials in your collections? May I visit your repository next Wednesday afternoon to view these items?"

In the case of an archives that does not list collections on its website (or does not have a website), contacting the staff is the only way to ascertain its holdings. Inform the staff of your research project and intent, ask them to clarify what materials are held at the repository, and ask how materials are accessed by researchers. If you are not getting the help you need from one staff member, try another one at the same institution.

Requesting Materials Remotely

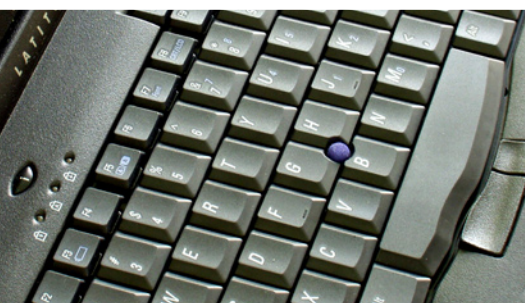
Once you have identified materials that will aid your research, the question then becomes how to access them. Policies regarding access vary among archives, but here are some questions to ask yourself, or the archival staff, to determine whether you can obtain access to materials without visiting the archives in person:

- Are the materials you want to see available through **interlibrary loan**, meaning that the archives would send them to a library near you where you could view or borrow them? Some archives do lend out select materials (such as printed materials or microfilm), but rarely loan primary or original documents.
- Are the materials you want **available through libraries** other than the

repository at which you found them? Especially in the case of published and printed materials, other libraries might own the same materials and allow them to be loaned. The WorldCat database (mentioned in the "Finding and Evaluating Archives" section of this guide) is an excellent resource when looking for alternate lending libraries.

- Will the archives provide **scans or photocopies** of the materials you wish to consult? What are the fees for those services? Are there limits on the amount of material that can be requested? Look for policies on photocopying and digital reproduction on the repository's website, or contact a staff member and inquire.

- Will the archives allow a **research assistant** to access materials on your behalf? Some archives may have recommended assistants or research services available to patrons unable to visit the archives in person. If not, hiring someone to help with your research can be a great option for remote access. Consider hiring a local graduate student or ask a friend living near the repository.
- Do you have a **simple question** that can be answered by having the archival staff view the materials on your behalf? Archivists routinely answer reference questions for researchers, so if the information you need can be retrieved in a short amount of time, there is a good chance they can relay it to you without having you come in person.



Planning to Visit an Archives

If you cannot view the materials you want via the repository's website or through the above-mentioned methods, you will need to visit the archives in person. Whether you are traveling a long distance to visit the archives or visiting a local one, it is always a good idea to plan ahead for your visit. Here are some arrangements to consider:

- **Inform the archival staff** of the date(s) of your visit and the materials you would like to see. The staff can notify you of any special circumstances where either the facility or the materials are unavailable. Many archives store materials in off-site facilities, typically due to space constraints. If the materials you are requesting are stored off-site, they may take several hours or days to retrieve. Alerting the staff to your visit and the materials you want to see may enable you to access those materials upon your arrival instead of having to wait for them.
- Confirm the repository's scheduled **visiting hours**. Are there any special closings on the dates you intend to visit? If the hours are too limited to accommodate your schedule, can any alternative arrangements be made? Many repositories lack the staffing and funding required for having extensive hours, but some may offer options to meet researcher needs. If a repository has weekend and evening hours, professional archival staff may not be present at those times. This may limit the services available (such as photocopying, material retrieval, etc.), so ask if any services are limited during those hours. Additionally, ask whether there are any **entrance fees** to conduct research there.
- Examine the available options for **accommodations, food, and transportation**. The archives may have special arrangements that researchers can utilize. Inquire about **parking** near the repository if you are bringing a vehicle with you.
- Check to see whether there are any **limits on the amount of materials** you may request or specific **request times**. Some archives may allow you to have multiple boxes of materials at a time; others only a single box, book, or folder at a time. The amount of materials you may access could impact your work flow and time spent at the archives, so it is best to inquire ahead about material request limits. The times when material requests may be placed can also vary by repository.
- Review **guidelines** for using materials at the archives. Look for these to be posted on the repository website, or ask a staff member. Typical repository guidelines will be explained in more detail in the next section, but guidelines between archives will vary.
- Examine the **reproduction policies** of the archives. Regulations and fees for requesting photocopies, scans, digital photography, microfilming, and reproductions of photos and audio-visual materials vary among archives.
- Ascertain whether the archives offers **Internet access** and accommodates personal **laptop computers**, and clarify the Internet access procedures. If Internet access is not available, determine the nearest location where researchers may access the web.
- Ask whether any materials in the collection **circulate** or are **loaned out**. Are there other libraries nearby that offer guest library accounts? Sometimes a local library will have resources to aid your research that are available for loan or accessible when the archives is closed.
- Inquire whether any opportunities for **research grants** or **funding** are offered by the archives. Extensive research projects may require spending a large amount of time at one or several archives. Some repositories (or related organizations or academic institutions) may offer financial assistance to researchers.
- Schedule some additional **time for the unexpected**. Discoveries and new questions unearthed during research may lead you down different avenues than you had originally anticipated. Certain tasks—like deciphering hard-to-read handwritten documents or researching primary materials—may take more time. Also, consider the option of a return visit to the archives in case you need to verify information, check additional materials, or pursue something you had not thought of earlier.

Photos from left to right:

The main reading room of the Center for Jewish History. Photo courtesy of the Center for Jewish History.

Spacesaver Corporation designed pull-out compact shelving for the National Archives to provide additional storage. Photo by Darryl Herring, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

The building entrance of the Center for Jewish History. Photo courtesy of the Center for Jewish History.

The reading room at the Schlesinger Library. Photo courtesy of the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.



Typical Usage Guidelines in Archival Repositories

Researchers may be surprised initially at how different it is to use materials in an archives versus a public or academic library. Archives have access guidelines designed both to help preserve materials and protect them from theft, thus ensuring they will remain available for future researchers. This section will list some typical usage guidelines found at archives and the reasons behind them. Guidelines will differ between repositories, so always check what guidelines an archives has in place.

- **Registry and personal identification:** Many archives ask researchers to fill out an application, registry card, online form, or acquire a researcher card before they begin using materials. The forms typically include name, address, institutional affiliation, materials to be used, and a description of the research project. Photo IDs may also be requested. Such registration practices familiarize the archival staff with the researchers to better serve their research needs and interests, and may also be used to aid a criminal investigation in the event that theft is discovered. Some archives also require a note of recommendation or special permissions before admitting researchers.
- **Removal of coats and bags:** Another method used to discourage theft is requiring that researchers remove bulky outer clothing and store purses, bags, binders, and laptop cases outside of the research area. Many archives have lockers or other monitored areas that researchers can use to store personal possessions. If the only storage option is a nonsecure environment, such as a public coat rack, be sure to remove valuable items like keys and wallets from bags and pockets.
- **No food, drink, or gum:** This guideline is designed to help preserve the collections. Spills can irreparably damage documents or require costly repairs by a conservator. The presence of food may also attract insects or rodents that infest archival materials.
- **Use of pencil only:** This is a preservation practice in case accidental marks are made on archival materials; pencil can be erased while pen marks cannot.
- **Request forms:** Forms are used in a variety of situations, from “call slips” that specify the boxes or books a researcher would like to see, to forms requesting reproductions (such as photocopies). Some forms have very practical uses, like verifying that the correct materials are retrieved, calculating fees, or keeping track of usage for statistical and preservation purposes. By recording exactly which materials were used and by whom, forms can also serve as a theft deterrent. Finally, forms can be useful in notifying the researcher of any legal requirements to take into consideration for how materials are used. Example: Photocopies of unpublished materials provided for a researcher may require additional permissions before they are published. The researcher’s signature on the request form indicates that the signer has read and understood these stipulations, and that the archival repository has done its duty informing researchers that those conditions exist.
- **Gloves:** In most cases clean hands free of lotions or perfumes are sufficient for handling materials. Gloves may be necessary for handling objects or photographs in order to protect the materials from the oils and other residues left by hands. The archives should provide gloves if they are required.
- **Laptops, cell phones, cameras, recorders, and personal scanners:** Many archives allow the use of cameras, laptops, and other personal digital devices, but restrictions may exist. Materials may require permissions before they are reproduced, and the lights used by cameras and scanners can cause text and images on documents to fade if they are overexposed. Hence, guidelines in these areas are for security and preservation purposes, as well as for ensuring that all researchers can work in a relatively quiet, distraction-free environment. Archival staff may also ask to inspect any devices researchers bring with them before entering or leaving the research area.
- **Careful handling and maintaining order:** To ensure that materials are maintained for future use, all archives ask researchers to handle materials carefully. While older materials are generally thought to be more fragile, even new materials need to be handled with care so they remain available to the next generation of researchers. Archives may provide specialized tools like book pillows to help preserve materials during use.

It is also important that materials remain in the order in which the researcher received them so they can be located later and observed in their proper contexts. Misfiling or changes in order can lead the archival staff to assume that items are missing and inconvenience future researchers. Repositories generally provide place markers to help a researcher keep materials in order and to mark items requested for photocopying. An archives may have additional guidelines like removing one folder from a box at a time, leaving reshelving to archival staff, etc.

Notes on Copyright, Restrictions, and Unprocessed Collections

In certain instances, materials may not be accessed, or may have stipulations on use and access. Reasons for limited access to materials generally fall into three categories:

- **Copyright:** Copyright legislation in the United States protects authors of original works in any form, including literary, dramatic, pictorial, musical, etc. The copyright holder has the right to control the use, reproduction, and distribution of those works, as well as the ability to benefit from works monetarily and otherwise. Archives must abide by these laws, which can be complex. In other words even if the archives physically owns a particular document, the copyright of the document and stipulations on how it can be used may be managed by another individual or institution. While amendments to copyright law have been made to help archives and libraries better serve researchers, limitations still exist on what materials repositories can provide.

Archives may require donors to give both property and copyright to the archives upon donation. However, donors can only give an archives copyright to materials that they created, so many documents in collections remain under copyright. It is the responsibility of researchers to find the copyright holder in order to publish or cite from the materials.

Examples: Photocopying an entire copyright-protected book that a researcher can purchase or obtain through other avenues would be a violation of copyright law. Publishing an unpublished poem without consent from the author of the poem, or that author's estate, would also violate copyright law. Placing a copyrighted photograph on a website without the consent of its copyright holder would be another violation example.

- **Restrictions:** Restrictions come in many varieties, but they generally exist because an archives must serve the interests of some other group or entity and hence cannot allow researchers to access certain materials. Reasons for restrictions include:

- The **donor** who originally gave materials to the archives set a time limit or certain stipulations on how those materials could be used, generally due to privacy concerns or sensitive materials.
- **Laws or other legislation** exist which dictate how certain materials may be used.

Examples: The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA) protects the medical records of individuals. U.S. Census records are restricted for seventy-two years before they become available to researchers to protect personal information. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects the privacy of student education records.

- Materials may be considered **classified** if they endanger the security of a governmental body (such as the federal or state governments), or if they compromise the health of a profit-based company (such as the design plans for an automobile or the recipe of a commercial food product).

Most restricted materials will be made available for researchers to view once the restriction stipulations are no longer deemed necessary or have expired after a certain amount of time has passed. Researchers may, in some cases, gain access to restricted materials if they file a petition or request permission from the appropriate entity.

- **Unprocessed collections:** These collections contain materials that the archival staff has received—but has not yet examined, identified, and organized for researchers to use. The work that archivists do in preparing materials for research use is called “processing.” Here are some reasons materials require processing before use:

- Archivists need to **identify and describe** materials so that they can create the finding aids, database records, and other tools that will help researchers locate materials to aid their research.
- **Poor storage methods** may contribute to the rapid deterioration of materials, so archivists often remove rubber bands, metals, plastics, boxes, folders, and other items that are harming materials, replacing them with archival-standard enclosures (such as acid-free folders) that will support preservation needs.
- Contaminants that pose certain **health risks** to humans, like mold or chemicals, may be present in materials that arrive at archives. Archivists are trained to identify these problems and treat the materials so that they are safe to use.

Overall, the work of processing makes materials safe for researchers to use, and helps protect and preserve those materials for long-term use at an archives. There are repositories that may allow researchers to use unprocessed materials, depending on the individual collection and the policies of the institution. If you know of an unprocessed collection you want to use, talk to the archival staff as far ahead of your visit as possible and inquire about use policies.

Visiting an Archives

Once you have arrived at an archives, here are a few things to consider to maximize your time and efficiency, and to help the research process go smoothly:

- **Prioritize your requests:** What are the materials that would be most helpful for you to view? Make plans to see those first and ask the archival staff for them promptly to ensure you have time to see them. This is especially important for materials you would not be able to get anywhere else. Do you have any questions that need to be addressed before other work can be done? Tackle those first.
- **Balance your work flow with the policies of the archives:** After familiarizing yourself with the policies of an archives, you can better adapt your work flow to those criteria when conducting your research.
- **Examples:** Will certain materials take time to retrieve? Do photocopy requests need to be submitted twenty-four hours in advance? Planning to have some materials to view while you wait for others to arrive, and submitting your photocopy request the day before your departure, helps you meet your research goals and honors the policies outlined by the archives.
- **Ask for assistance:** The archival staff is there to help you. If you have questions, ask them. You are your first and best advocate for accomplishing your goals.
- **Bring appropriate supplies:** Have pencils, notepaper, and a pencil sharpener handy. Some archives may provide these things for you, but do not assume they will be provided. Carry a magnifying glass in case you run across difficult handwriting or need to examine some small detail. And since books and papers are better preserved in cooler temperatures, archives can sometimes be on the chilly side. Have a lightweight sweater on hand in case you get cold.
- **Take thorough citations:** While you are working, make sure to take full citations for the materials you are viewing, including any unique identification assigned to the materials by the archives such as the call number, collection title, etc. If you need to go back and reference something in those materials again, or if another researcher is later trying to track your sources from a published work, this will help the archival staff locate the materials.
- **Point out corrections:** Mistakes or omissions sometimes occur in finding aids, websites, and descriptions of materials. If you, the researcher, notice some of these errors or are an expert

in a particular area and can fill in some information gaps, point those out to the archival staff. If possible, cite another authoritative source to support your corrections.

- **Connect with other researchers:** Archives are unique places where specialists gather from all over the world. Introduce yourself to other researchers and see if anyone else shares your topic of interest. You never know what future benefits can come from a smile and a greeting. Also, inform the archival staff if you are looking to locate other researchers working on your research topic. They may be able to connect you with people who share your interests. However, note that archivists keep researcher names, projects, and material request records confidential and will not divulge such information without consent.

Photos from left to right:

Archives are institutions where specialists gather and preserve historical documents from around the world.

Adam Winger (head of special collections) and Stephanie Wilson (archivist) process the De Divina Proportione. *Photo courtesy of Adam Winger.*

Butler High School students examine manuscripts, bindings, and wax seals during a hands-on table talk at Morristown National Historic Park. *Photo courtesy of Sarah Minegar.*

Archives students explore documents at Dalkeith House during a visit to the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Manuscripts of Scotland. *Photo courtesy of Ellen Engseth, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.*



A Final Word

With good preparation and an understanding of how archives function, archival research can be very rewarding. Archives have incredible materials waiting for you to explore and archivists ready to help. Good luck with your research—wherever it takes you.

Here are some additional resources, organized by topic, that may be of interest:

The Archival Profession

The Society of American Archivists, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary>. A very thorough resource outlining the terms and definitions used in the archival profession.

“So You Want to be an Archivist: An Overview of the Archival Profession,” <http://www2.archivists.org/profession>. Information on what archivists do and a short video on “A Day in the Life of an Archivist.”

Fleckner, John. “Dear Mary Jane: Some Reflections on Being an Archivist.” *American Archivist* 54, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 8–13.

Access

Chute, Tamar G., and Ellen D. Swain. “Navigating Ambiguous Waters: Providing Access to Student Records in the University Archives.” *American Archivist* 67, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2004): 212–33.

Cox, Dwayne. “The Rise of Confidentiality: State Courts on Access to Public Records during the Mid-twentieth Century.” *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2005): 312–22.

Johnson, Catherine A., and Wendy M. Duff. “Chatting Up the Archivist: Social Capital and the Archival Researcher.” *American Archivist* 68, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 2005): 113–29.

Pugh, Mary Jo. *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005.

Ramsey, Alexis E., Wendy B. Sharer, Barbara L’Eplattenier, and Lisa S. Mastrangelo, eds. *Working in the Archives: Methods, Sources, Histories*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010.

From the conference Access to Archives: The Japanese and American Practices, held in Tokyo, Japan, on May 9–11, 2007:

David J. Mengel, “Access to United States Government Records at the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration,” http://www.archivists.org/publications/proceedings/accesstoarchives/07_David_MENGEL.pdf

Mark Greene, “Access to Institutional Archives and Manuscript Collections in U.S. Colleges and Universities,” http://www.archivists.org/publications/proceedings/accesstoarchives/08_Mark_GREENE.pdf

Richard Pearce-Moses, “Caught in the Middle: Access to State Government Records in the United States,” http://www.archivists.org/publications/proceedings/accesstoarchives/09_Richard_Pearce-MOSES.pdf

Becky Haglund Tousey and Elizabeth W. Adkins, “Access to Business Archives: U.S. Access Philosophies,” http://www.archivists.org/publications/proceedings/accesstoarchives/10_B-TOUSEY_E-ADKINS.pdf

Trudy Huskamp Peterson, “Attitudes and Access in the United States of America,” http://www.archivists.org/publications/proceedings/accesstoarchives/11_Trudy_PETERSON.pdf

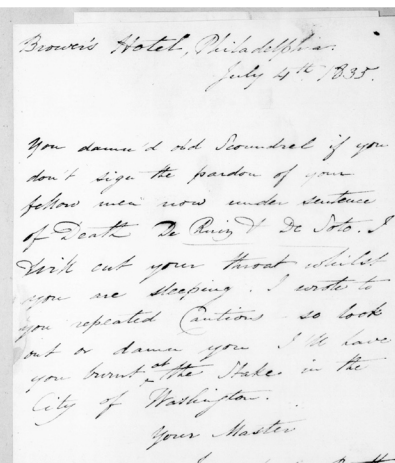
Photos from left to right:

A letter to Andrew Jackson from Junius Brutus Booth (father of the notorious assassin, John Wilkes Booth), July 4, 1835. *From the Andrew Jackson Papers, Vol. 91, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.*

Archivist Kim Mills (Tennessee State Library and Archives) examines a document. *Photo courtesy of Gwynn Thayer.*

Conservator Tony Teal (Tennessee State Library and Archives) scans an object for the *Looking Back at the Civil War* project. *Photo courtesy of Gwynn Thayer.*

Atlantic City Free Public Library Archivist Heather Halpin Perez assists with HBO’s production of the documentary, “Atlantic City: The Original Sin City.” *Photo courtesy of Heather Halpin Perez.*



Family History Resources

Merriman, Brenda Dougall. *Genealogical Standards of Evidence: A Guide for Family Historians* (Genealogist's Reference Shelf). Toronto: Dundurn, 2010. A best practices methodology guide to genealogy.

Christian, Peter. *The Genealogist's Internet*. Fourth edition. Surrey, England: National Archives of England, 2009. A book on how to utilize online genealogy resources.

Ancestry.com, www.ancestry.com. One of the world's largest online family history resources containing historical records, photos, stories, family trees and a collaborative community of millions of people (requires purchase or subscription).

Ellis Island Records, <http://www.ellisland.org/>. Online access to various immigration records.

FamilySearch, <https://www.familysearch.org/>. The largest genealogy organization in the world provided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

US Census Records, <http://www.archives.gov/research/census/>. Locate names, ages, origins, occupations, marital status, and more.

USGenWeb Project, <http://www.usgenweb.org/>. A group of volunteers working together to provide free genealogy websites for genealogical research in every county and every state of the United States.

Preservation

Ritzenthaler, Mary Lynn, and Diane L. Vogt-O'Connor. *Photographs: Archival Care and Management*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006.

Ritzenthaler, Mary Lynn, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*. 2nd ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2010.

Williams, Don, and Louisa Jagger. *Saving Stuff: How to Care for and Preserve Your Collectibles, Heirlooms, and Other Prized Possessions*. New York: Fireside, 2005. A reference book on preserving materials at home, written by a senior conservator of the Smithsonian Institution.

Conserve-O-Grams, http://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/conserveogram/cons_toc.html. Brief online guides distributed by the National Park Service that discuss methods of caring for all kinds of materials. See Conserve-O-Gram 19/3 for "Use and Handling of Rare Books."

CoOL (Conservation OnLine), <http://cool.conservation-us.org/>. Site sponsored by the Foundation of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (FAIC) covering a wide variety of conservation topics.

Northeast Document Conservation Center, <http://www.nedcc.org/home.php>. A website with information and resources regarding the preservation of paper-based materials.

Preservation 101, <http://unfacilitated.preservation101.org/loggedin.asp>. An online guide about preservation care for paper and media collections.

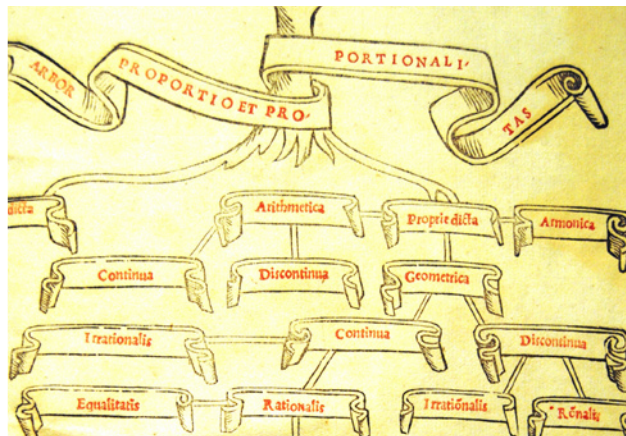
Stored Alive, <http://www.climatenotebook.org/games/storedalive.html>. An interactive website showing how time and storage environments impact different objects.

Photos from left to right:

One family history resource to search genealogy is www.familysearch.org.

The *De Divina Proportione* by Paciolo Luca from 1509 addressed mathematical and artistic proportion, and included illustrations by Leonardo da Vinci. *Photo courtesy of Special Collections Williams Library, Stevens Institute of Technology.*

Archives come in all shapes and sizes, and they hold incredible material waiting your to exploration.



Appendix

Sample Finding Aid with Annotations

Below is an example of a finding aid describing an archival collection. This annotated model is designed to help define the separate parts of a finding aid and the standard formatting of finding aids in archives. Not all finding aids will incorporate these elements, but this sample should reflect a range of options researchers might encounter in finding aid formats.

[Title Page: The beginning of the finding aid includes the name of the archival repository, the title of the archival collection, finding aid creation information, and a date range for the materials in the archive. "Bulk dates" refers to the date range where most of the materials in the collection originate.]



CORINTH HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Finding aid for Corinth Chamber Of Commerce Records

Date range: 1921–2005

Bulk dates: 1975–1997

Finding Aid created by Laura Schmidt, 2010

Copyright Corinth Historical Society

[Summary Information: This section lists the creator of the materials in the archive, the size and extent of the collection (in boxes and linear feet), call numbers and storage locations, language(s) represented in the collection, and a brief description (abstract) of the collection contents.]

Creator: Corinth Chamber of Commerce

Extent: 2.5 linear feet (2 boxes and 1 oversize scrapbook)

Abstract: The records of the Corinth Chamber of Commerce include correspondence, events files, meeting minutes, newspaper clippings concerning community projects, and a scrapbook of photographs.

Call number: 85741 PUm – 2nd floor and Oversize Section

Language: The material is in English

[Access and Use: If there are any restrictions placed on an archival collection, those should be noted here. Other information in this section includes how the archives received the collection, and copyright and citation notes.]

Acquisition Information: These records came to the historical society in 2008, deposited by the Corinth Chamber of Commerce (donor no. 1297). Future additions to the records are expected.

Access Restrictions: The record group is open to research.

Copyright: Copyright remains with the Corinth Chamber of Commerce.

Cite as: [item], folder, box, Corinth Chamber of Commerce records, Corinth Historical Society.

[Background Information: *This section details the history or biographical information relating to the collection and how it was created.]*

History: The Corinth Chamber of Commerce was established in 1922 and is dedicated to helping the businesses of Corinth grow and promoting the economic development of the region. The chamber is run by a combination of volunteers and professional staff. Local activities and events are also sponsored by the chamber. These records were created and deposited by the Corinth Chamber of Commerce.

[Scope and Content and Arrangement: *This section provides an overview of the types of materials in the collection and how they have been arranged. The different sections of the collection (series and subseries) organize collection content by type of material, format, topic, or some other filing system determined by the archival staff, and/or the original creator of the collection.]*

Scope and Content: The records of the Corinth Chamber of Commerce include correspondence, events files, meeting minutes, newspaper clippings concerning community projects, and one scrapbook. The strength of the collection is found with the correspondence, meeting minutes, and newspaper clippings series. These series give a historical overview of the involvement and impact the chamber has had in the city of Corinth.

The *correspondence* series ranges from 1921 to 1996 and includes correspondence from staff members, local business owners, and other civic leaders, arranged by date. Of particular prominence is the correspondence with Mayor Thaddeus Gladstone (1945–1959), who worked very closely with the Chamber on city improvements during his tenure.

The *events files* contain materials relating to various events sponsored by the chamber from 1965 to 2005, including the annual town Christmas play. Arrangement is first by date and then by event title.

Meeting minutes are from the Board of Directors quarterly meetings, filed by date.

The *newspaper clippings* series contains a wide range of articles on community projects sponsored by the chamber and chamber activities, filed by date.

The *scrapbook* was created by chamber staff and is stored separately from the rest of the collection. It contains photographs from 1926 to 1965 of town storefronts and events.

[Subject Terms: *This section includes a list of terms, topics, etc. covered in the collection and usually linked to a library catalog to provide the researcher with materials in similar categories.]*

Subjects:

- Boards of trade—Corinth
- Corinth—History
- Municipal government—Corinth
- Corinth—Social life and customs—20th century

[Related Materials: *This section of the finding aid points the researcher to other items in the archives (or elsewhere) that are closely related to the collection described in the finding aid. The items may be related by origin, subject matter, etc.]*

Related Materials:

Researchers interested in this archive may also wish to consult the following resources in the Corinth Historical Society holdings:

Corinth Community Park Project Records – A collection documenting a landscaping project partly sponsored by the Corinth Chamber of Commerce

Corinth Photograph Collection – contains photos of local homes and businesses

Other materials in the historical society holdings may relate to the topics in this archive. See the archivist for further research assistance.

[Contents listing: Sometimes also called “container contents.” This is a box-by-box, folder-by-folder listing of the materials stored in the collection. The level of detail in this section may vary depending on collection scope and individual repository practices.]

Folder # Description

BOX 1

Correspondence (1921–1996)

- 1 Correspondence, 1921–1931
- 2 Correspondence, 1932–1940
- 3 Correspondence, 1941–1955
- 4 Correspondence, 1956–1967
- 5 Correspondence, 1968–1975
- 6 Correspondence, 1976–1985
- 7 Correspondence, 1985–1996

Events Files (1965–2005)

- 8 Christmas play publicity, programs, and ticket stubs, 1965–1975
- 9 Christmas play materials continued, 1978–1993
- 10 “Party in the Park” Corinth Community Park dedication, 1994.
Includes publicity, a transcript of the speech by the mayor, and 6 photographs.
- 11 Main Street beautification project, 1994–1996. Includes planning documents, items from grand opening ceremony, and a piece of fabric from the ribbon-cutting ceremony.
- 12 Christmas play materials continued, 1995–2005

Meeting Minutes (1935–2005)

- 13 Board of Directors meeting minutes, 1935–1952
- 14 Meeting minutes continued, 1956–1963
- 15 Meeting minutes continued, 1964–1975
- 16 Meeting minutes continued, 1976–1984
- 17 Meeting minutes continued, 1985–1996

BOX 2

- 18 Meeting minutes continued, 1997–2000
- 19 Meeting minutes continued, 2001–2003
- 20 Meeting minutes continued, 2004–2005

Newspaper Clippings (1945–2003)

- 21 Articles relating to Chamber of Commerce events and activities, 1945–1963.
- 22 Articles continued, 1969–1975

BOX 2 (cont.)

<u>Folder #</u>	<u>Description</u>
23	Articles continued, 1976–1977
24	Articles continued, 1979–1985
25	Articles continued, 1987–1995
26	Articles continued, 1996–2000
27	Articles continued, 2001–2003

Scrapbook (1926–1965)

Contains photographs from 1926 to 1965 of town storefronts and events.
Stored separately from the collection in the oversize section. Ask archival staff for retrieval.

Visit the online guide at www2.archivists.org/usingarchives.



**SOCIETY OF
American
Archivists**

The Society of American Archivists was founded in 1936 and is North America's oldest and largest national archival professional association. SAA's mission is to serve the education and information needs of its members and provides leadership to help ensure the identification, preservation, and use of the nation's historical record. Visit www.archivists.org.

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**About the Author**

Laura Schmidt graduated with a master's degree in archives and records management from the University of Michigan's School of Information in 2005. She has served as archivist for six years at The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, and is also involved as a volunteer at a local historical society and as a church librarian.