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# Starting from Scratch: How to Create a Museum Archives

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## **Starting from Scratch: How to a Create Museum Archives**

By Sammie Morris, Managing Archivist, Dallas Museum of Art  
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### **Introduction**

Perhaps you have read David Gracy's article on museum archives ("Two Peas in a Pod: Archives for Museums," *Museline*, Spring 2001) and become convinced that your institution would benefit from a formal archives program. You may have already been gathering historical documents and photographs but are unsure how to identify, store, organize, preserve, and manage these materials. Maybe your museum has an upcoming anniversary to celebrate, or you may simply be interested in increasing efficiency within your organization by providing better access to information. Space can be an issue for many museums, and it is cost-prohibitive to store non-essential records. In the age of eBay and Antiques Roadshow, safeguarding valuable photographs, artifacts, and documents is another significant issue. This article, written for the non-archivist, will provide the nuts and bolts for starting an archives program in your museum.

### **Defining "Archives"**

The term "archives" can be used in three different ways. Archives are: 1) the records, regardless of format, created or received by a person or organization during the conduct of affairs and preserved because they contain information of continuing value. Within a museum, the term "archives" refers specifically to the noncurrent records of the institution, or those records required less than once every two to three months by staff to do their jobs, that document the growth, activities, and accomplishments of the museum;

2) the building or part of a building where archival materials are located (archival repository); 3) the agency or program responsible for selecting, acquiring, preserving, and making available archival materials.

### **What Do Museum Archivists Do?**

The museum archivist evaluates institutional records (and special collections, if applicable) for permanent value, provides guidelines for staff weeding and retention of files, serves as the museum's source for information regarding its history, preserves archival materials for ongoing use, and ensures legal compliance regarding institutional records (financial, personnel, and certain other types of records are required by law to be kept for a certain period of time). In this way, the museum archivist will often wear many hats, including those of historian, special collections curator, and records manager.

The museum archivist also appraises, arranges, describes, preserves, and makes accessible the permanent records of an institution or individual by performing the following duties: protecting and storing institutional records, organizing records according to standard archival practices, creating guides to the records for access, providing reference services to staff and the public, and conducting oral histories as needed.

The archivist seeks to identify all records kept in the museum, determine whether records are current or not, increase security of original, valuable records by placing them in the archives, consolidate and organize records for access, preserve records for future use,

create a plan for disaster response for archival materials, and promote the museum's archival resources to staff and the public.

### **Archival and Non-Archival Records**

The archivist is trained to appraise records for their short-term or long-term value. Only records with long-term value are considered archival. Archival records are kept permanently in the Archives for future research needs. Items with short-term value are non-archival and are not kept in the Archives.

Examples of archival records generated by museum staff include: policies and procedures; meeting minutes; department head correspondence; exhibition and event documentation; files of friends groups; photographs; audio/video materials; legal papers (including contracts, deeds of gift, wills and bequests, loan agreements, and invoices or other proof of ownership of objects in the museum's permanent collection); museum printed material such as brochures and catalogues; press releases; and architectural and building records.

Examples of non-archival records include duplicate materials; draft papers and/or proofs for publications; calendars/appointment books; phone message books; blank forms; to-do lists; and purchase orders (when originals are retained by Accounting Department).

## **Current Versus Non-Current Records**

Only *noncurrent* records are kept in the museum archives. Records are noncurrent when they are needed less than once every couple of months by staff to do their jobs. *Most* general administrative records over two years old are considered noncurrent and can be transferred to the archives. There are some exceptions to this rule, such as files documenting the museum's permanent collection. Such files are always considered current because they are needed by Registrar's and Curatorial staff on an ongoing basis to do their jobs. Institutional policy dictates whether collection files are managed by the archivist or by Registrar's staff, and this differs amongst institutions. Regardless of which department collection records fall under, steps should be taken to preserve and properly safeguard these files. It is important that the archivist works with Registrar's and Curatorial staff to accomplish this task for the overall good of the institution.

## **TEN STEPS FOR GETTING STARTED**

### **1. Locating Funding**

Numerous funding agencies provide start-up costs for archival programs. These are available from federal agencies, state archives programs, and even local historical organizations. The National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission both provide funding for preserving and providing access to historical information, primarily of national significance. The Texas State Library and Archives Commission makes recommendations for grants and helps locate funding for archival and preservation projects. The Institute of Museum and Library

Services is another agency that provides archives funding with a special focus on new technology. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation also provides funding to improve access to archival information of interest to scholars and art historians. The Summerlee Foundation provides funding for preservation of Texas history. Numerous local foundations offer funding to preserve local history, so it is a good idea to investigate sources of funding in your area. In particular, place special emphasis on foundations that have similar interests to those of your institution. Past the initial grant period, there must be adequate, ongoing funding to allow for the archivist's salary, equipment and shelving, and archival supplies in the museum's operating budget.

## **2. Hiring an Archivist**

The Society of American Archivists and The Society of Southwest Archivists are two organizations that provide training and continuing education for individuals working with archival collections. When hiring an archivist, your ideal candidate should have at least a Master's degree in Archives or Library Science with a concentration in archives work. Individuals possessing a Master's in History with a strong background in archives training and experience may also be considered. It is preferable to hire Certified Archivists who have passed an examination in archives work and methodology in addition to logging a required amount of archives experience and training prior to taking the exam.

Because the archivist must work with all museum departments regarding their records, in addition to working with donors, trustees, and the public in conjunction with oral history

and reference duties, it is essential that the archivist is provided with the authority to create and enforce record keeping and records access policies and procedures. Ideally, the archivist would report to the Director of the Museum; however, many museum archivists currently report to Head Librarians or Curators.

### **3. Outfitting an Archives Storage Space**

Having one secure, environmentally stable location for archival files storage lessens the likelihood of misfiling records or losing access to valuable information. The Archives should be adequately protected from theft and natural disasters and should be located above ground without close proximity to water pipes, hot water heaters, or other materials capable of emitting light, heat, and/or liquids that will cause damage to valuable records. The storage area should, at the same time, be easily accessible to the archivist from his/her office and processing areas. Collections should be non-circulating, with access to the archives stacks limited to the archivist and any others that require access to the area in case of an emergency. Ideally, the space should be outfitted with security cameras and a combination key card or code entrance along with a key necessary for entering the area. The archivist should always retrieve items for staff and the public to ensure that items are properly returned and that the organization of the materials within the archives is not disturbed. Unlike library collections, the materials kept in archives are unique and permanently valuable; they cannot be replaced if lost or stolen.

The Archives storage area should be kept at a constant low temperature ranging from 65-70 degrees, constant low relative humidity (35-50%), low light/UV levels, and fire and

water detection and prevention systems. Shelves should be securely attached to the floor and the walls to prevent collapse. Papers should be stored in acid-free folders and boxes. The storage area should be well maintained and monitored regularly for insect or mold infestation and fluctuations or extreme levels of light, temperature, and humidity. There should also be ample space in the archives for future growth.

#### **4. Conducting Records Surveys**

Records surveys provide thorough overviews of the collections that will eventually move to the archives. They are the best way to identify the types of records generated by your institution, seek out duplicate files in various offices, find out what staff needs are for file retention, and identify confidential records stored in the museum. Using findings from records surveys, you will be able to develop a plan to consolidate and transfer vital and historical records to the archives, restrict access to confidential information, and determine space needs for records storage areas. Perhaps most importantly, one-on-one records surveys between the archivist and museum staff allow for open communication between departments and serve to assure museum staff that the archivist is committed to providing continuous, timely access to information currently kept in staff offices—it is important to stress that the materials will receive proper storage and preservation while remaining secure and accessible in the archives. Sample questions to ask staff during records surveys include: What types of files do you keep? Who is currently allowed to access them? What types of security do your vital records have? Do your files contain confidential/restricted information such as art valuations, donor information, credit card numbers, Social Security numbers, etc.? How often are these records used? Do your files



contain photographs, legal papers, or other information that may need to be made accessible to other departments or separated for preservation reasons?

## **5. Consolidating Archival Materials**

Archival materials, once identified, should be carefully packed and transferred into the archives storage space. A system should be established for assigning acquisition numbers and shelf locations to records so that they can be easily retrieved and re-shelved for reference purposes. Boxes should be clearly labeled according to department/creator, type of files within the boxes, and dates of the materials.

## **6. Establishing Archives Policies and Procedures**

Archives should operate with the following policies and procedures in place: Mission Statement; Access and Use Policy for staff and researchers; Collecting Policy; Staff Records Policy (personal records vs. official museum records); Acquisitions Procedures; Records Transfer Procedures; Processing and Description Procedures; and Policies and Procedures for Destruction of Non-Archival Records.

## **7. Learning Institutional History**

As museum historian, the archivist should become familiar with the institution's history by reading published information written about the museum and its collections, talking to long-term staff, donors, and volunteers, becoming familiar with the museum's organizational chart, or perusing early records for bylaws, mission statements, founders, etc. This information will be crucial to the archivist when organizing records later.

## **8. Visiting Other Museum Archives**

Museum employees who may be unfamiliar with archival work but have been placed in charge of archival collections should visit other museum archives to learn how and where their archival materials are stored, what policies and procedures they have in place, what retention requirements they use for records, what types of supplies they use and the vendors they prefer, how they access information about their collections, and what types of security, environmental controls, and fire protection they have in place.

## **9. Prioritizing Processing**

It is important for the archivist to decide which archival materials to process first, depending on: frequency of use, research importance to the museum, historical significance, staff needs, fragility and/or condition of records. For example, an art museum would most likely want to process exhibition records first due to the number of reference requests relating to those records and the historical importance of the records to the museum. A museum planning a centennial celebration or publication of its history may want to focus first on founding documents and photographs.

## **10. Providing Arrangement and Description**

Arrangement and description of archival records requires professional archives training. Care must be taken not to disturb the original order of records as they come into the archives. Original order is crucial to understanding how the creator of the records related to the materials he or she generated. Provenance must also be considered—archival

records from more than one creator should never be mixed together, regardless of content or similar subject matters. Records groups should be established and inventories at the collection, box, and/or folder level should be produced to aid in accessing information in the records. Often record groups are created based on function. With museums, each separate department is an individual records group within the overall group of records generated by the museum. This type of arrangement serves to document the history, growth, and activities of each department while revealing changes within the organizational structure of the museum as a whole.

Many archival repositories choose to submit their catalog records to bibliographic databases such as RLIN and OCLC as a means of sharing resource information with other archives and libraries. Numerous archives have begun providing finding aids and digitized materials from their collections on the Internet. Encoded Archival Description (EAD) is another means of providing full-text searching capabilities to archival finding aids, and its use has begun to spread, primarily amongst academic archives. Other archival repositories rely solely on in-house databases or even printed finding aids and/or card catalogs. Most archival materials, regardless of the type of institution they are housed in, are cataloged at the collection level—it is not common for archivists to catalog at the item level, although this will depend on each institution's individual mission.

## **Conclusion**

Following the ten steps listed above will enable your museum to build an archives that can serve the research needs of your staff, scholars, and the public; preserve your

institutional memory; support better management by improving efficiency and productivity through increased access to information; reduce operating costs by decreasing storage space needed for unnecessary records while also decreasing employee time spent trying to locate vital information; ensure that your museum is meeting its legal obligations for records retention; and reduce the risk of loss of vital records that would be needed to help your institution recover and continue to operate in the event of a disaster. Perhaps most importantly, archives exist to document the founding, growth, changes, and achievements of your museum. Ultimately, it is only by looking back and building upon its past that a museum can look toward its future, learn from its experiences, and continue to thrive and function well into the next century.

### **For Further Information**

1. Archivist's Primer from the Getty Information Institute  
<http://www.getty.edu/research/institute/standards/introarchives/index.html>
2. Carlin, John. "Your Past is Disappearing: What Museums Should Know About the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Archives Crises." *Museum News*, Jan/Feb 1999
3. Deiss, William A. *Museum Archives: An Introduction*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1983 **[Note: New edition pending]**
4. Society of American Archivists (Has a separate Museum Archives Section)  
<http://www.archivists.org/>
5. Society of Southwest Archivists  
<http://info.lib.uh.edu/ssa/ssa.htm>

6. Smith, Bruce. "Archives in Museums." *Archives and Manuscripts*, May 1995
7. Yakel, Elizabeth. *Starting An Archives*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994
8. Yoxall, Helen. "Documenting Our Own Place: The Need for Archival Programs in Museums." *Museum National*, Vol. 3, No. 4, May 1995

### **About the Author**

Sammie Morris is the Managing Archivist at the Dallas Museum of Art. She has a Master's in Library & Information Science with a concentration in Archival Enterprise from the University of Texas, Austin. She is a member of the Academy of Certified Archivists, the Society of American Archivists, and the Society of Southwest Archivists, and is the editor of *Museum Archivist*, the newsletter of the Museum Archives Section of the Society of American Archivists.

### **Illustrations:**

1. Dallas Art Association Membership card
  2. Grace Leake Dexter, first President of the Dallas Art Association, 1903
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