

Resources for Small Archives

This page provides information and resources for small repositories about managing archival collections as developed by the staff of the HCI-PSAR project. Contact information and links was accurate of as 2016.

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Archival basics

Crash course in archives

This forty-minute overview of archival theory and practice is targeted for practitioners at small museums and historic sites who lack archival training but find themselves stewarding archival collections. It covers archival theory, preservation, description/cataloging, and digitization. Originally presented by HCI-PSAR Senior Project Surveyor Celia Caust-Ellenbogen at the

2014 Small Museum Association Conference (Ocean City, Md). [View the presentation as a PDF](#) [1].

Archives for museums

This twenty-minute overview of archival theory and practice is targeted for practitioners at museums who lack archival training but find themselves stewarding archival collections. It covers archival theory, preservation, description/cataloging, and additional resources. Adapted from Celia Caust-Ellenbogen's presentation above and presented by HCI-PSAR Lead Project Surveyor Sarah Leu at the 2015 Mid-Atlantic Association of Museums Annual Meeting (Philadelphia, PA). [View the presentation as a PDF](#) [2].

Next steps for HCI-PSAR participants

This twenty-minute presentation suggests next steps for HCI-PSAR participating small repositories to advance in the care and management of their archival collections. It covers the following scenarios: new materials added to existing collection, new collection received, processing a collection, starting a digitization project, and establishing a collecting policy. Originally presented by Project Surveyors Celia Caust-Ellenbogen and Sarah Leu at a symposium for Bucks County HCI-PSAR participants (Mercer Museum, October 2014). [View the presentation as a PDF](#) [3].

Archival theory and practice

The overview of general archival information and resources that is included in the HCI-PSAR survey report can be downloaded in PDF format [here](#) [4].

Archivists think about the materials they manage primarily in terms of *collections* rather than individual items. Understanding archival holdings in larger groupings makes it easier to summarize the entirety of the materials, and also helps maintain the connections between interrelated items. Archivists define collections according to the *principle of provenance*, which is one of the primary tenets of archival theory. Provenance asserts that the basic defining element of a collection is its creator, which could be the individual, family, or organization who created or received the items in a collection. Materials created or collected by the same individual or group should be kept together. Therefore, the creators or collectors of the materials should determine the various collections in your repository. Repositories can acquire provenance-based collections from creators or third parties, or they can create collections themselves by assembling materials from different sources together by format or subject (e.g., "Photograph collection," "Civil War collection"). In the latter case, the repository is the creator of the collection (e.g., the "XYZ Historical Society photograph collection").

It is important to maintain a record of when and from whom a collection was received. If a collection is donated, a signed [deed of gift](#) [5] should be kept on file recording the donor name, items donated, date of gift, and any legal or access issues with the collection. Likewise, if a collection is acquired by purchase or other means, a file should be maintained documenting the particulars of the acquisition. Any work that is done on the collection (conservation, processing, reformatting, etc.) as well as any changes to the collection (de-accessioning, disposition of certain items) should also be documented in the file. This "control file" is generally for internal use only, but can be made available to others working on the collection.

Archivists' organizations

The Philadelphia area boasts a strong and supportive community of archivists, many of whom are members of the Delaware Valley Archivists Group (DVAG) [6]. A small membership fee grants access to quarterly meetings, an online newsletter periodic workshops, and a listserv (electronic mailing list).

The Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference (MARAC) [7] is a regional archivists' group with a broader membership base, from New York to Virginia. In addition to biannual conferences and a periodic newsletter, MARAC hosts workshops and a listserv.

The Society of American Archivists is the national association of archivists. Its website maintains a standards portal which promotes best practices and guidelines on archives topics varying from management to appraisal to description and numerous other topics: <http://www2.archivists.org/standards> [8].

Learning opportunities

Books on archival practice are available from the Society of American Archivists (SAA) [9] and American Association of State and Local History (AASLH) [10] bookstores. Some books targeted specifically for small organizations include:

- Zamon, Christina. *The Lone Arranger* [11]: *Succeeding in a Small Repository*.
- Hamill, Lois. *Archives for the Lay Person* [12]: *A Guide to Managing Cultural Collections*.
- Carmicheal, David W. *Organizing Archival Records* [13]: *A Practical Method of Arrangement & Description for Small Archives*. 3rd edition (2012).

Introductory archives workshops are periodically offered in the Philadelphia area by The Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts [14] ("Understanding Archives: An Introduction to Archival Basics") and the Pennsylvania State Archives [15] ("Archives Without Tears"). The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) [16] offers an online webinar "Basics of Archives" several times a year.

Preservation

The overview of preservation information and resources that is included in the HCI-PSAR survey report can be [downloaded in PDF here](#) [17].

Preservation basics

Controlling the environmental conditions in which your archival collections are housed is the single most important step you can take to ensure their preservation. Try to maintain moderate, constant temperature and relative humidity levels 24 hours/day, 365 days/year. Ideal levels are 65-70 degrees fahrenheit for temperature and 40-50% for relative humidity. Most importantly, try to avoid extreme fluctuations in these levels. Exposure to light, particularly sunlight, should be kept to a minimum.

Use archival-quality storage materials, such as non-acidic boxes, folders, and sleeves. These archival enclosures work to create a "microclimate" that helps to protect collections from temperature and humidity fluctuations. When filling boxes it is important to not over- or under-fill them, as this can warp materials. Spacer boards constructed of acid-free corrugated paperboard should be used to provide extra support in under-stuffed boxes. Established

archival suppliers include [Gaylord Brothers](#) [18], [Hollinger Metal Edge](#) [19], [Light Impressions](#) [20], and [University Products](#) [21].

Resources for more information

Many preservation resources are freely available online. Some recommended resources are:

- Connecting to Collections Online Community is oriented specifically for smaller museums, libraries, archives, and historical societies. Its website features [links to resources](#) [22] by object type as well as [archived webinars](#) [23].
- Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts (CCAHA) fact sheets: <http://www.ccaha.org/publications/technical-bulletins> [24]
- Northeast Document Conservation Center's free resources at <http://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/overview> [25] include [preservation leaflets](#) [26], online [Preservation 101](#) [27] course, and disaster [preparedness](#) [28] and [response](#) [29] assistance.
- Regional Alliance for Preservation bibliography: <http://www.rap-arcc.org/publications-resources/bibliography> [30]



[31] At the April 13, 2013 symposium for HCI-PSAR participants from Philadelphia and Montgomery Counties, independent conservator and collections consultant for archives and art on paper Susan Duhl (SusanDuhl@verizon.net [32], 610-667-0714) offered a presentation on *Creative Solutions for Collections Care*.

- Overview of presentation with links to resources and contact details for [Susan Duhl](#) [32] and [Art Conservators Alliance](#) [31] [[click here to view PDF](#) [33]]
- Powerpoint presentation slideshow [[click here to download as a PDF](#) [34]]

Facilities planning

If you have the opportunity to build or relocate to new facilities, there are important issues to consider. Many of these concerns are common to library and museum facilities as well, but since paper is a particularly vulnerable medium and archival materials are often irreplaceable, one-of-a-kind items, they have special storage needs.

- *Temperature and humidity should be kept as consistent as possible in archives storage spaces - ideally 65-70 degrees Fahrenheit and 50-60% relative humidity.* These levels should be maintained 24 hours/day, 365 days/year. If possible, the archives storage space should have a separate HVAC system.
- *Minimize natural and fluorescent light.* A room on the north side of the building with few windows would be best. Any windows should have UV filters and/or light-blocking shades. Avoid fluorescent light bulbs, but if such bulbs are necessary, cover them with UV-blocking sheaths.
- *The area should be secure.* Separate locks and an alarm system for the archives are recommended.
- *The area should be protected from flooding, fire, and pests.* Avoid locating archives storage spaces next to bathrooms or kitchens, or in basements. Shelving to store archival materials should be positioned at least 6" off the floor. Storage areas should be equipped with appropriate fire detection and suppression systems.

- *Collections should be stored on archival-quality heavy-duty metal shelving.* The shelving should have a powder-coated finish, which limits damaging off-gassing. Archival/museum shelving vendors can assist in designing the shelving system.
- *Allocate sufficient space for storage and use of collections.* When calculating space needs, plan for your collections to grow. Consider special storage equipment that might be necessary (such as a flat file). Allow space for collections processing and administration, as well as for researchers to use the materials. For security reasons, researchers should not have access to collections storage areas, but should use the collections in separate reading areas, under supervision.
- For further guidance, consult the book *Planning New and Remodeled Archival Facilities* by Thomas P. Wilsted (Society of American Archivists, 2007).

Description and cataloging

Theories of arrangement - As noted above, the basic defining element of a collection is its creator. The principle of provenance asserts that important information is embedded in the contextual relationships between materials within a collection, and therefore materials created (or accumulated) by different entities should be kept in distinct collections according to creator. Within each collection, archivists use hierarchy of materials as a strategy for description. Describing collections "from the top down" in terms of downward groupings of the materials into series, subseries, and other organizing units is efficient and reflects the interrelated nature of items within a collection. The most common levels of hierarchy are: collection, series, subseries, file, and item.

Example of hierarchical arrangement:

Collection: John Doe papers, 1920-1960

Series I. Correspondence, 1930-1953

Subseries A. Letters from Jane, 1930-1945

File: College years, 1930-1934

File: 1934-1941

File: War years, 1941-1945

Subseries B. Family correspondence, 1920-1953

File: Correspondence with mother, 1920-1953

File: Letters to father, 1925-1935

Series II. Financial records, 1934-1960

Subseries A. Bank statements, 1930-1960

File: College Credit Union statements, 1930-1934

File: First National Bank statements, 1945-1960

Subseries B. Property-related records, 1945-1960

Item: Deed, 1945

File: Mortgage statements, 1945-1960

Processing Archival Collections

This presentation was created by Holly Mengel, Manuscripts Cataloging Librarian at the University of Pennsylvania's Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts. Holly breaks down the processing of archival collections (i.e. the arrangement, re-housing, and description/cataloging of archival materials) into five steps. This presentation

was originally given at the processing workshops coordinated by HCI-PSAR as part of our Small Archives Forums. The slideshow is targeted towards those without professional archival training. Click [here](#) [35] to view the presentation as a PDF.

Electronic cataloging and content management programs

PastPerfect - Archival description is different from library or museum cataloging in that archivists view collections as discrete units and desire the capability to describe multiple levels--such as series, subseries, file, and item--within the hierarchy of each collection. Many small historical organizations use the museum cataloging software PastPerfect [36] to describe their object, book, and/or archival collections. However, this software is not designed specifically for archival description and does not easily allow hierarchical description. If your organization uses PastPerfect for archival description, there are strategies you can employ to optimize its capabilities. These strategies were outlined in a presentation given by HCI-PSAR Senior Project Surveyor Celia Caust-Ellenbogen at a symposium for HCI-PSAR participants from Philadelphia and Montgomery counties (Highlands Historical Society: April 13, 2013) that is available here.

- "*PastPerfect-ion*": *Optimizing PastPerfect Museum Software for Archival Description*
 - Powerpoint presentation [[click here to download PPT](#) [37]]
 - Hand-out with quick-start guide, 2 pages [[click here to view PDF](#) [38]]
 - Step-by-step manual, 27 pages [[click here to view PDF](#) [39]]

Electronic finding aids - It is possible to create a standard archival finding aid in a simple word-processed document. However, if the finding aid is to be added to a computerized catalog--such as the consortial finding aid website [40] to which the HCI-PSAR project contributes--it must be encoded in a standard computer mark-up language. Encoded Archival Description (EAD [41]) is the standard developed by archivists for finding aids. Several programs exist to help write EAD-compliant finding aids with a relatively simple interface.

- Detailed instructions for navigating the website with HCI-PSAR finding aids were presented by HCI-PSAR Project Surveyor Faith Charlton at a symposium for HCI-PSAR participants from Philadelphia and Montgomery counties (Highlands Historical Society: April 13, 2013). *Finding the Finding Aids: Navigating the PACSCL Website* [[click here to download Powerpoint \(PPT\)](#) [42]]

Archivists' Toolkit and Archives Space - Archivists' Toolkit [43] is one of the most commonly used archival collections management programs. In late 2013 it was superseded by ArchivesSpace [44]. Both programs are free and open source. More information is available [here](#) [45] and on their respective websites.

HCI-PSAR finding aid worksheets - As a simpler alternative to these complex database programs, HCI-PSAR project staff developed a worksheet that outlines the types of information recommended for a basic, collection-level description. It is available in two formats, XLS (Microsoft Excel) and DOC (Microsoft Word), both of which can be saved as a PDF and printed for use as a finding aid. The DOC/Word format features a suggested format for an inventory list. The XLS/Excel format does not have an inventory list option, but it has an additional capability: it takes the data from the worksheet and automatically formats it in EAD (Encoded Archival Description, the standard XML mark-up developed by archivists for computerized finding aids). If desired, the EAD version of the finding aid can be imported into a more sophisticated program (like ArchivesSpace or Archivists' Toolkit), or it can be ingested

into a finding aid catalog (such as the [PACSCL finding aid site](#) [40]).

- [Download the DOC](#) [46] (Word) version of the HCI-PSAR Finding Aid Worksheet, featuring an inventory list option
- [Download the XLS](#) [47] (Excel) version of the HCI-PSAR Finding Aid Worksheet, featuring an EAD conversion capability. Click to the second tab at the bottom of the screen, "worksheet," to begin working on your finding aid.

Custom Microsoft Access database - Archivists at the Senator John Heinz History Center created a custom database in Microsoft Access that is tailored for archival description and produces EAD finding aids. It is available for download [here](#) [48].

Digitization

Digitization at Small Repositories

This 15-20 minute presentation provides an overview of basic concepts and practices of digitization at small repositories and covers topics such as: what to consider before digitizing materials, selection of materials, scanning, metadata, and programs through which to share your digitized materials. Originally presented by HCI-PSAR Lead Project Surveyor Sarah Leu at a digitization panel held at Historic Yellow Springs (Chester Springs, PA) in September 2015. [View the presentation as a PDF](#) [49].

Audio Digitization at Small Archival Repositories

These slides include information on the components of an audio digitization project, including file formats and equipment. They also address how to know when it is time to call a professional. The presentation was created by Alex Ball of Ameryn Media as a part of our Small Archives Forum, "No Need to Rewind: An Introduction to Digitizing Audio Collections," originally presented in December 2015. [View the Presentation as a PDF](#). [50]

Other Things to Consider When Working With Oral Histories (And Other Audio Media)

This short presentation provides a brief overview of important things to keep in mind when working with audio materials and oral histories, including digitization, transcription, legal issues, and preserving original formats. Originally presented by HCI-PSAR Surveying & Outreach Archivist Anastasia Matijkiw at our Small Archives Forum, "No Need to Rewind: An Introduction to Digitizing Audio Collections," in December 2015. [View the presentation as a PDF](#). [51]

No Need to Rewind: An Introduction to Digitizing Audio Collections Helpful Resources

This handout consists of a selection of resources relating to oral histories and audio collection preservation. [View the handout as a PDF](#). [52]

Institutional advancement

The [American Association for State and Local History \(AASLH\)](#) [53] is a national membership organization. It hosts face-to-face workshops across the country as well as webinars. Its popular StEPS program (Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations) guides small- and mid-sized history museums, historic sites and houses, including all-

volunteer ones, through assessing policies and practices, managing daily operations, and planning for the future.

Sustaining Places ^[54] is a resource hub for small museums and historic sites, providing guidance on management-related aspects such as governance, finance, and fundraising, as well as history-specific functions such as exhibitions, education, and collections care. In addition to videos and articles available online, Sustaining Places periodically holds low-cost workshops in the Philadelphia area and maintains a lending library of media and collections care equipment. Sustaining Places is a collaboration between the University of Delaware's Museum Studies Program and the Tri-State Coalition of Historic Places.

Resources for Individuals Caring for Family Papers

Protecting Your Family's History

This presentation was created by Lynda Kachurek, the Head of the Rare Books & Special Collections Department at the University of Richmond, as part of a course she offers on family history. This slideshow is targeted for individuals who are caring for their family's papers without the aid of an institution and offers tips on collections care that can be done at home. Click [here](#) ^[55] to view the presentation on SlideShare.

Caring For Your Family Collections: Documents, Scrapbooks, and Books

This presentation offers tips on collections care and storage for various types of paper materials. Originally given at the William Way Community Center as part of a DIY archives workshop, October 2015. View the presentation as a PDF [here](#) ^[56].

HCI-PSAR Project Manual and Other Resources

HCI-PSAR Project Manual

Are you interested in starting your own small repository survey project? The HCI-PSAR project manual describes our methodology and process. Click [here](#) ^[57] to view the manual as a PDF.

Links

- [1] http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/archives-crash-course_sma.pdf
- [2] https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/maam_sarah_online.pdf
- [3] <https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/nextstepshcipsar.pdf>
- [4] http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/hcipsar_generalarchivalresources.pdf
- [5] <http://www2.archivists.org/standards/museum-archives-guidelines/6-acquisition-policy-for-collected-materials-examples-of-policies-and-deeds-of-gift>
- [6] <http://dvarchivists.org>
- [7] <http://www.marac.info>
- [8] <http://www2.archivists.org/standards>
- [9] <http://saa.archivists.org/store/items/>
- [10] <http://marketplace.aaslh.org/bookstore/>
- [11] <http://saa.archivists.org/store/the-lone-arranger-succeeding-in-a-small-repository/2526/>
- [12] <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780759119710>
- [13] <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780759121706>
- [14] <http://www.ccaha.org/education/program-calendar>

- [15] http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/state_archives/2887
- [16] <http://learn.aaslh.org/calendar/>
- [17] http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/hcipsar_archivalpreservationresources.pdf
- [18] <http://www.gaylord.com/>
- [19] <http://www.hollingermetaledge.com/>
- [20] <http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com/>
- [21] <http://www.universityproducts.com/>
- [22] <http://www.connectingtocollections.org/all-topics/>
- [23] <http://www.connectingtocollections.org/topic/recordings/>
- [24] <http://www.ccaha.org/publications/technical-bulletins>
- [25] <http://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/overview>
- [26] <http://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/overview>
- [27] <http://unfacilitated.preservation101.org/loggedin.asp>
- [28] <http://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/dplan-the-online-disaster-planning-tool>
- [29] <http://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/disaster-assistance/emergency-phone-assistance>
- [30] <http://www.rap-arcc.org/publications-resources/bibliography>
- [31] <http://www.artconservatorsalliance.com/>
- [32] <mailto:SusanDuhl@verizon.net?subject=April%2013%2C%202013%20presentation>
- [33] http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/duhl_hcipsar_creativesolutionsoverview.pdf
- [34] https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/duhl_hcipsar_creativesolutions.pdf
- [35] <https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/processingwkshp.pdf>
- [36] <http://museumsoftware.com/>
- [37] http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/optimizing_pastperfect_for_archival_description.ppt
- [38] http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/pastperfect_hand-out.pdf
- [39] <http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/pastperfectarchivesmanual.pdf>
- [40] <http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/pacscl/index.html>
- [41] <http://www.loc.gov/ead/>
- [42] http://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/pacscl_website_april13symposium_0.ppt
- [43] <http://www.archiviststoolkit.org/>
- [44] <http://www.archivesspace.org/>
- [45] <http://hsp.org/archivists-toolkit-and-archivesspace>
- [46] https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/hcipsar_findingaidworksheet.doc
- [47] https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/hcipsar_findingaidworksheet.xls
- [48] http://practicaltechnologyforarchives.org/issue2_strauss/
- [49] <https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/digitizingatsmallrepositories.pdf>
- [50] https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/digitizing_audio_at_small_archival_repositories.pdf
- [51] https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/other_things_to_consider_final_with_notes.pdf
- [52] https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/digitization_panel_handout.pdf
- [53] <http://www.aaslh.org/>
- [54] <http://sustainingplaces.com/>
- [55] <http://www.slideshare.net/LKachurek/protecting-your-familys-history>
- [56] <https://hsp.org/sites/default/files/images/HCIPSAR/caringforyourfamilycollections.pdf>
- [57] <https://hsp.org/sites/hsp.org/files/images/HCIPSAR/srpmanual.pdf>