

Basic Archival Information and Resources

Hidden Collections Initiative for Pennsylvania Small Archival Repositories

<http://www.hsp.org/hcipsar>

Principles of Archival Organization

Provenance & Original Order

Provenance is the golden rule for organizing archival collections. The basic defining element of a collection is its creator. The principle of provenance dictates that documents created by different entities should be kept in distinct collections according to creator. Do not divide or disperse collections based on other factors, do not add materials from other creators into collections, and do not co-mingle materials from various creators.

A corollary to the principle of provenance is that of original order, which dictates that, to the extent possible, materials be kept in the order in which their creator kept them. Because the objective of archives is to reflect the activities, thought processes, and transactions of the creator, collections should ideally be left in the creators' original order. However, the archivist's principal duty is to render archives accessible and useable. In cases where there is no discernible original order, or if the original order is impractical, it is necessary to impose an order on materials in order to facilitate their use. Archivists must use their judgment in determining when and how to impose an order on a collection.

While the principles of provenance and original order should be followed wherever possible, the holdings of small repositories often have not been acquired or maintained as discrete provenance-based "collections." In many cases, groups of materials have been assembled according to subject, format, or some other criteria, and these groupings are convenient for those who use the materials. HCI-PSAR staff recognize that it may not always be possible or desirable for small repositories to maintain collections according to provenance, but recommend that the principle be followed where appropriate and to the extent possible.

Collection Documentation

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 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.

Collection location information should also be recorded. Shelf lists, inventories by room, and notes regarding what materials are stored in what storage equipment or furniture should be compiled to facilitate locating materials.

Such collection documentation and location information often resides “in the head” of staff or volunteers at small institutions and is not written down. It is highly recommended that organizations create collections files where this vital information is recorded and preserved in order to ensure that it is available for future stewards of the collections.

Archival Processing

Archival processing is the act of arranging, describing, and rehousing archival materials, whether the papers of an individual or family or the records of an organization. Essentially, processing entails organizing materials into a useful and appropriate order, placing them in archival (acid-free) enclosures, and creating a finding aid to facilitate their use by researchers. There are many levels of processing, from simple re-boxing and describing of materials at the broader collection level to more intensive item-level arrangement and description. Processing of collections should be done in consultation with a professional archivist. The processing manuals of Yale University and Moravian College are useful guides to processing work. (www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/manuscript/process/index.html) (<http://home.moravian.edu/public/arch/resources/manual.pdf>)

There are good reference books for archival processing available from the Society of American Archivists (www.archivists.org): *Organizing Archival Records: A Practical Method of Arrangement & Description for Small Archives* (3rd edition) by David W. Carmicheal, and *The Lone Arranger: Succeeding in a Small Repository* by Christina Zamon.

Archival Training

There are a number of training opportunities available for beginning and non-professional archivists in the Philadelphia area. The following programs are offered on an annual or periodic basis:

- The Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts (www.ccaha.org) offers an *Understanding Archives: An Introduction to Archival Basics* workshop as well as other training sessions on various aspects of archival work through its *Save Pennsylvania's Past* initiative (<http://www.ccaha.org/education/save-pennsylvania-s-past>)
- The Association for State & Local History offers an online *Basics of Archives* workshop (<http://aaslh.org/basicsofarchives.htm>)
- The Pennsylvania State Archives offers a two-day workshop *Archives Without Tears*. For more information contact Josh Stahlman at Jostahlman@pa.gov/717-772-3257 or visit the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission website: http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/state_archives/2887

Resources

Grant Funding

- The National Endowment for the Humanities' *Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions* offers grants of up to \$6,000 (with no matching requirement) for preservation projects for small organizations. Grants are awarded annually; the deadline is early May. For more information: www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/pag.html.
- The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission has in the past had a grant program for archival projects, although the program has not been active in recent years due to state budget cuts. Check the PHMC website for current status:
http://pa.gov/portal/server.pt/community/grants_and_funding.
- The Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts' *Philadelphia Stewardship Program* is designed to assist non-profit collecting institutions in achieving their preservation and conservation goals for their collections. Working with CCAHA staff, participating institutions learn about the preservation needs of their collections and buildings and develop long-range plans for addressing those needs. Institutions also have the opportunity to obtain assistance with emergency planning efforts or get support in updating, creating, or refining essential policy documents: www.ccaha.org/services/philadelphia-stewardship-resource-center/about.
- The Regional Foundation Center at the Free Library of Philadelphia houses the region's largest publicly accessible collection of print and electronic resources on fundraising, nonprofit management, general philanthropy and institutional advancement. The RFC also provides free access to the Foundation Directory Online--the most comprehensive database of U.S. grant makers and their grants. More information at <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/rfc/>
- Local sources - community foundations, area charitable organizations, and local businesses - often provide funding for local history initiatives.

Scanning Services

- The Athenaeum of Philadelphia's Regional Digital Imaging Center (RDIC) provides high-quality scanning and digital imaging services at discounted rates to Philadelphia area non-profits. As a sample of its work, the RDIC will do one complimentary scan for each non-profit in the area. This is an excellent opportunity for small repositories to have an archival item of particular importance digitized, especially large format items. More information at www.philaathenaeum.org/rdic/index.html.

General Sources of Information and Technical Support

- The Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations is the primary networking organization for museum professionals and volunteers in Pennsylvania. The Federation promotes standards of excellence and provides access to a wide range of services needed to advance the development and sustainability of institutions and their staff and volunteers. More information at <http://pamuseums.org/site/index.asp>.
- The Association for State & Local History's *stEPs* (Standards and Excellence Program for History Organizations) program is a voluntary assessment program for small- and mid-sized history organizations that helps organizations identify their strengths and weaknesses and begin taking steps to plan for positive change. More information at www.aaslh.org/steps.htm.
- The Pennsylvania Cultural Data Project is a free, powerful, online management tool designed to strengthen arts and cultural organizations. This unique system allows users to track their own financial and programmatic performance over time and to benchmark themselves against comparable organizations in specific disciplines, geographic regions and budget sizes. More information at <http://www.pacdp.org>.