

Why Are We Collecting?

by Melissa Mannon

(This column continues our December, 2007 thread "Have You Justified Your Archives Lately?")

Whether we represent a professional repository, a volunteer based archival center, or are an individual collecting family papers, we all share the burden of safe-keeping our culturally significant resources to document history. It is important to define exactly what we are collecting in collaboration with others, but we first must understand why it is important to collect at all. Without an understanding of the overall significance of our collecting mission, we cannot explain to others the value of our work. Our efforts to save our history must not be reduced to collecting for the sake of collecting itself, but must be explained in the context of preserving society's



Retaining personal histories

Use of Records: Reasons for Collecting Historic Documents

- Ensure a smooth running society by holding public officials accountable by requiring organized public records that can be viewed by citizenry.
- Retain legal, financial, and administrative documents that ensure the continuance of an institution.
- Use recorded materials to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past and to plan for the future using the successful ideas of others that have been committed to record. (For example, use original documents such as maps to plan for building projects and town growth.)
- Foster a sense of community* based on the documentation of a common history. Evaluate the role your community played in historical events on a state or national scale based on documentation. Develop a sense of pride.
- Market your community and promote tourism using a deep knowledge about your community's history and strengths.
- Facilitate research and the study of a particular subject or subjects.
- Retain community memory to support personal histories that help us better understand who we are and how we got here.

** Your "community" here means a group of individuals with a common association — whether a town, group, business or family.*

knowledge and community identity.

In this age of decreasing funding, it is especially important to be able to define why you are collecting. Many of our records will not wait for years, frozen in time

and preservation state, because money is not available now for their care. Organizations should promote a greater understanding of the role of archives and museums in preserving history and why this task is important. This will enable them to justify their expenditures and their very existence through lean times.

Why Are We Collecting?

Rather than just collecting for the sake of gathering interesting resources, we should come at the collecting task with the thought "why are we collecting?" Using tools to assist with collection development and planning, we can become more adept at collecting to preserve society's knowledge and community identity. Such tools and attentive collecting will also help prevent society from losing historical resources due to neglect.

Finally, we are not collecting to just preserve materials. We need to share them. Records are only useful when they are used. It is

important get out the word using a thoughtfully laid out outreach strategy. I continually repeat that every Archives must develop comprehensive plans for the manage-

ment of their records. It is easiest to express why we are collecting when we are prepared to provide a professional presentation to outsiders looking in.

What are we collecting?

Cultural resources include documents, artifacts, publications, and structures that embody cultural knowledge and shed light on the functions and functioning of society. Archives are one form of culturally significant resources and fall under the category of documents. They are original, unique documents created by the participants in an event or activity rather than someone trying to interpret the experience. They include manuscripts (original written records), ledgers, diaries, photographs, original recordings including audio and visual formats (CDs, tapes, records), digital material (e-mail, archived web sites, CD-ROMs, etc.). Archives are not published materials, are not necessarily old, and are not always produced by well-known people.

Recommended Reading



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Please send questions and comments to melissa@mannon.org.

For more information about her work and for access to past issues of this newsletter see www.archivesinfo.com

Archibald, Robert. *A Place to Remember: Using History to Build Community*. CA: AltaMira Press, 1999.

ed. Cox, Richard and David Wallace. *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002.

Ouch! Is This the Direction Our Museums Have to Go?

http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article742447.ece (This is a very thought provoking article. Please take a look. I would love to hear what you think about it.)

