

Caring for Active Association Records

by **Melissa Mannon**

One of the most interesting groups of local records are those maintained by local non-profit groups—local men’s and women’s service organizations, gardening clubs, art associations, mother’s groups, etc. These records give us valuable information about the history of our communities. Most of these groups keep treasurer’s records, secretary’s minutes, and event information at the very least. Records are often passed from one Board member to another with no centralized control over materials. They can easily be lost in the shuffle and are most certainly in jeopardy of destruction from the harmful environments in which they are kept. Local

archives repositories would do well to educate these groups and to encourage them to properly care for their materials.

I am currently serving on the Board of the Manchester Artists’ Association as their newsletter editor and historian. For many years the organization ran without an historian and when I stepped up to volunteer my services, considering my 15 years of experience as a professional archivist, I was told, “Well, what we really need is a newsletter editor.” So I accepted that position. In another six months when no one else stepped forward to be historian and I felt comfortably settled in my editor role, I volunteered to

be historian too.

The Manchester Artists are not unusual. Historical records are often given second thought to “more important” business. After all, many of these organizations have run for one hundred years or more without an historian. Why should they worry about their records now?

As historian, I explained that we need to keep our records centralized. Most Board members were glad to get rid of the bulk of the materials. The records were organized in different ways—some by date, some by subject. I received some in record boxes,

some in crates, some in Tupperware. Preservation has not been ideal and some of the records were water damaged and moldy. There are also many gaps in our history. For example, we don’t know the names of all of our past presidents as records about this were not retained.

The Manchester Artists’ Association now has a thorough plan in place (see page 3) to try to retrieve our lost information and to ensure that at the end of the year, the past year’s records are given to the historian. I am currently looking for a safe place to deposit our records because my guest bedroom is certainly not ideal. My challenge will be to find a repository that

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Special points of interest:

In the past, ArchivesInfo newsletters have focused on issues that arose during consulting projects. Past issues have included information about: mission statements, collaborative historic records projects, arranging and describing records, archives surveys and assessments, ephemera, working with record creators, donors, outreach, deaccessioning and provenance. I hope that you will find the re-emergence of the ArchivesInfo newsletter and our updated web site once again provide information that is valuable to the maintenance of your historical records. Please write to me with any questions you have about problems you encounter with your records and I will try to include answers here.

ArchivesInfo continues to work to encourage collaboration to preserve, organize, and provide access to archival material so that it may benefit cultural organizations, the patrons they serve, and the study of history and information. Additionally, we now offer services for small businesses interested in gaining better control over their records.

Caring for Active Association Records (cont.)

will accept these active records, allowing me to maintain the finding aid for the papers, and providing the access the association needs to its materials.

As an historical records repository, if your collections focus on local history, make sure you reach out to your local associations. You can probably obtain a list of these groups from your local librarian. Be armed with information about why organizations need to care for historical records. Make sure you are clear that you are not trying to “steal” records away from these groups. The efforts of local historical society’s and other repositories aiming to preserve history are often interpreted this way. Make sure your repository’s planning documents consider the needs of local organizations with active records. If you wait to

solicit materials until the records are inactive it may be too late.

When making contingencies to accommodate the materials of active associations, address the following issues:

- Who will pay for the maintenance of an association’s active records in your repository? Who is going to pay for preservation supplies? Who is going to create finding aids?
- Will these materials legally become a part of your collections? (Ideally, I believe you should accept these records “on loan” with a set date that certain materials will be transferred to your permanent collections. Other archivists may disagree with me on this point.)

- How will the association members gain access to their materials? Will they be allowed to take the materials off the premises? (Ideally, these materials should never leave their safe housing facility and instead policies should be set up for copying materials from the collections.) Will association Board members be granted different access rules than the general public? (Ideally not, but this will likely be a sticky point with the Board. Explain the need to adhere to your policies to ensure the safety of materials.)

Arrangements to house active historical records can work to the benefit of you and the associations that create them. They likely need a place to store their materials safely and you will help further your mission of preserving your local history.



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*For more information about her work
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newsletter see www.archivesinfo.com*

Tips for Maintaining Records

- Get out into the community to explain your mission. Educate organizations about the value of their records and the need to ensure the safety of these materials. If organizations or not currently willing to place records in your repository or if your repository can’t accommodate active records, developing a relationship now may encourage a future donation.
- If you are offered a new collection for your repository, make sure that your organization is the proper place for it. Review your mission statement and collection policies to ensure that the collection conforms to your goals. If it does not, help the potential donor locate a more appropriate housing facility. Do not accept everything that is offered to you because working to ensure that records find the home that best suits them strengthens the overall “historical record.” Your duty is to your institution and to history in general.
- Your mission statement and collection development policy are two of your most important tools. If you don’t have these documents, work to write them. Having well thought out policies can save you a lot of time, arguments, and long term headaches.

Manchester Artists Association Procedures for Maintaining Historical Records

At the end of each year, each general Board member must submit historical records to the MAA historian. These records will be properly preserved and maintained according to professional archival standards. (See attached sheet “Processing Archival Records.”) [processing sheet is not provided in this newsletter. See more information on web site]

The proper maintenance of records will:

- help us preserve our history
- help prevent duplication of efforts by allowing for easy retrieval of information related to past promotion, events, etc.
- help us more easily retain our 501C3 status
- help us in the event of an audit
- help us better advertise our organization by giving us easy access to newsworthy information

Records include:

- Year end statements / summaries about activities you conducted for MAA. Jotting down a paragraph about what occurred under your direction will create a better picture of what MAA is all about and will help future Board members better plan.
- Any financial records, publicity, statistics, membership or entrant lists, etc. that related to activities you conducted for MAA.
- Printed or digital records relating to your work with MAA.

Each Board member should retain records in the following way to help preserve them while in their care and for the long term:

- DO NOT keep records in damp conditions or in a place where conditions change drastically from hot to cold. This can and has caused permanent damage to materials in our collection. DO NOT store items in the basement, attic or garage. If you don't have room in your home for your current year's records, talk to the historian and make plans to move them to the historian's care ASAP.
- DO NOT staple records! Staples must be removed for long term preservation and this can be a difficult task. Use paperclips if necessary because they are easier to remove.