

**Society of American Archivists  
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**DRAFT Issue Brief: Closing of Archives  
(Prepared by the Committee on Advocacy and Public Policy)**

This issue brief addresses the following priority within SAA's Advocacy Agenda, as adopted by the Council in June 2012:

**The Public's Need for Strong Institutional Stewardship of the American Historical Record**

The records found in our archives contribute to a more open and pluralistic society. Records are used by citizens in the pursuit of public accountability, transparency, civil rights, protection of corporate rights and responsibilities, continuity of civil operations, and good governance. To hold government accountable and to provide evidence of the diverse and complex elements of the human experience, it is essential that concerted efforts are made to preserve and make accessible a comprehensive and trustworthy American historical record.

**SUMMARY**

The records found in archives contribute to an open, pluralistic society that is capable of placing contemporary public issues and culture in a historical context. Public records are used by citizens in the pursuit of public accountability and good governance. Private records are equally important in ensuring individual and corporate rights and guaranteeing fiscal and legal accountability within business settings. Together, these records serve as important cultural documents used by policy analysts, historians, students, genealogists, and others to document and study a wide range of issues. These materials are cared for in national, state, corporate, and local archives. It is essential that concerted efforts are made to preserve and make accessible a comprehensive and trustworthy American archival record.

In times of fiscal austerity, many institutions with established archives consider closing the archive or curtailing its basic activities. The Society of American Archivists believes that a thoughtful analysis of the consequences of such actions will almost always lead to the conclusion that closing archives is not a wise decision.

**THE ISSUE**

The Society of American Archivists is deeply troubled by both the closure of archives and restrictions that curtail the public's access to archival services. The Society recognizes that in challenging economic times, institutions are facing severe budget deficits and, as a result, may

make deep cuts to programs and services. Even in a financial crisis, it is crucial that spending reductions take place within the context of the law and the institutional values that led to the creation of the archives. Spending reductions should not disproportionately reduce the funding to archival programs. Deliberation regarding the possible closure of an archive should be particularly cautious if private or donated historical materials are involved or if the archive has been supported in any part by grants, public funding, or volunteer work. Such factors can create potential liability for the institution. The reason for maintaining archival records can vary among institutions, but the reason for creating the archives itself was to meet a real need. A few examples help illuminate this point:

**Records protect life.** Following a 2002 accident at Quecreek mine in Pennsylvania, historic maps created by the state mine inspectors were used to identify closed tunnels in which nine trapped miners might have taken refuge. The miners had done just that, and the archival maps led rescuers to the men.

**Records document government.** Litigants in *State of Florida v. The American Tobacco Company et al.* used records from the state archives relating to the advertising and sale of cigarettes to support arguments for damages resulting from smoking and tobacco use.

**Records provide connections to the past in tangible, approachable ways.** Family history, genealogy, and cultural heritage are all areas of archival research that has blossomed in the past two decades. For example, Ancestry.com is a leading source for family history research. In 1997, the site went live with 80 searchable databases. In 2013, this website provides access to 31,389 databases with more than 12 billion historical records.

**Records document organizations and products.** Personal papers, wire copy, and governance records make up the materials in the Associated Press Corporate Archives. Records date to 1848 and document the distribution of news from the Pony Express to digital formats.

As institutional funding becomes more tenuous, it is tempting to target archival programs because preserving and maintaining access to records may appear to be simply a form of cultural enrichment rather than an essential service. As the examples above illustrate, this is simply not the case.

## THE SOLUTION

Today's fiscal reality requires creative solutions that make it possible for archives to continue to meet and fulfill the needs leading to their original establishment. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for every instance. Mobilizing archival advocates both within and outside an institution is essential. In addressing a possible closure or reduction of services, three components should be considered:

**A clear message defining the importance of the archives to the institution that created it.** This might include recalling how archives protect citizens' rights or build a

brand, in addition to ensuring that historical information and cultural memory remain accessible into the future. For example, in the fashion industry, designer archives are essential. In November 2013, Hamish Bowles, international editor-at-large for American *Vogue*, stated, “When a brand becomes global and a designer is managing a huge team, [archives] are needed for referencing. They are very, very useful to get a sense of your brand’s DNA.”

**Both public and private archives should recognize the various stakeholders who are affected by the archives**, which may include users, internal departments, government agencies, friends’ groups, corporate resources, and foundations. In 2012, when the Georgia State Archives was threatened by closure, support arrived from a variety of groups. The Coalition to Preserve the Georgia Archives was formed and included Friends of the Georgia Archives, Association of County Commissioners of Georgia, Georgia Historical Records Advisory Board, Georgia Genealogical Society, Georgia Professional Genealogists, Association of Professional Genealogists (Georgia Chapter), Cobb County Genealogical Society, Troup County Historical Society, and Georgia State Society, Daughters of the American Revolution.

**Alternative funding source.** Grants, fundraisers, and corporate and foundation giving are all possible sources of alternative funding. Competition for such resources is intense, so the first step in securing funds is defining what makes an archive unique and important. Open houses, exhibits, guest speakers, and tours are just some of the methods that archives use to roll out the welcome mat. A program to highlight the importance of archives began in 1992 in New York through Archives Week celebrations. Soon, programs and celebrations grew nationwide. Today, activities aim to educate the public on the value of archives but, more importantly, activities emphasize the use of archives. In 2012, the Society of American Archivists launched a year-long event, *I Found it in the Archives!*, to give users an opportunity to share their quest for information within an archival repository.

Each institution should examine the benefits of active and organized records in their individual context. These may include:

- Personnel needs, such as military service and employment records that provide access to pensions and other benefits.
- University and college archives document student life and serve a variety of administrative, financial, and legal needs of institutions of higher learning.
- Corporate needs to document legal rights, defend against hostile lawsuits, or develop marketing strategies based on corporate history.
- Meeting community economic needs, such as the use of records to successfully document “attractions” for history tourism.

After careful consideration, should it still seem necessary to close the archives or significantly curtail operations, it is imperative that adequate notice be given to the archives staff to permit them to plan for an orderly transition.

A plan must be in place for physical protection of historical materials upon closure of the archives. Access to the materials must be strictly regulated and unauthorized or unsupervised access prohibited. A preliminary agenda of steps needed to reinstitute the archives also should be in place.

Closure may also lead an institution to consider donating its archives to a suitable repository for continued responsible care. Such a decision should result from a careful negotiation of both parties' rights and responsibilities.

Above all, the Society of American Archivists believes that the establishment and development of an archives creates an ongoing commitment to maintain the archives. Unlike activities that serve an immediate need or audience, such as an academic program that is no longer drawing enrollment and thus can be eliminated or a product line that is no longer selling well and thus is no longer profitable, an archives represents a commitment that transcends immediate concerns and is, rather, focused on preserving and making available information to future users, perhaps unanticipated or even unborn. For this reason, any decisions that may lead to closing an archives or curtailing its operations should be taken carefully and deliberately and should be made only as a last resort.

## **BACKGROUND**

“Archivists are viewed as quiet professionals, carrying out an admired but frivolous activity.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1984, the Society’s Task Force on Archives and Society examined a survey of 44 resource allocators about their perceptions of archives. The study revealed that resource allocators respected the work of archivists but saw their work as limited. They chose to give funding and attention to “real” problems and not archival work. Today limited support from resource allocators is compounded by tough economic times. Addressing this problem means, in part, addressing (and overcoming!) several stereotypical images of archivists and archives held by funding managers that were highlighted in the study and, in many ways, persist today.

*Stereotype #1: Archives are exclusively for “serious” researchers.*

For many, the terms “archives” and “archivists” are somewhat foreign. Unlike a library, a patron cannot browse the stacks and use is carefully monitored in a designated reading room. Archivists understand that these rules are for the protection of the material – to ensure their availability for current and future research. Material is placed in an archives because it is deemed to have enduring value and the records are often irreplaceable assets. This level of care is

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<sup>1</sup> Levy, Sidney J. and Robles, Albert G. *The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators’ Perceptions*, Prepared for Society of American Archivists Task Force on Archives and Society, December 1984. Available at <http://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Image-of-Archivists-Levy1984.pdf>

executed to protect the fundamental nature of archival records. Unfortunately, these boundaries often are perceived by non-archivists as barriers for general use.

In response to this issue, archivists have worked diligently to connect with communities. Open houses, exhibits, guest speakers, and tours are just some of the methods that archives use to welcome customers. Advances in delivery services and reexamination of descriptive practices have resulted in greater amounts of information reaching greater numbers of researchers. In 2013, the Council of State Archivists reported that state archives website visitors total more than 65 million annually. The National Archives reports that about 11,000 registered visitors made 64,000 visits to its main facility in Washington, D.C., from January 1 to September 30, 2013. Other types of archives that welcome users are city archives, college and university archives, business archives, and church archives.

Clearly archives are not exclusively for “serious” researchers and their contents are as varied as their users. It is important that archivists continue to educate all members of the public, with a special focus on resource allocators, about this point.

*Stereotype #2: Archives’ needs are minimal, allowing resource allocators to focus on “real” issues.*

On September 13, 2012, in response to a state budget crisis, Georgia Secretary of State Brian Kemp announced the all-but-complete closing of the Georgia State Archives. Secretary Kemp stated that seven of the ten employees would be terminated and the facility would be open only two days a week by appointment. As a result, Georgia would become the first state in the country without an archives open to the public on a regular basis. The Georgia Archives had been facing budget cuts prior to this. Since 1992, the State Archives staff had decreased from 54 to 10. Secretary Kemp acknowledged the difficulties in the budget decision but noted, “As secretary of state, it is my job to ensure that budgetary decisions strategically reflect our highest priorities and affect as few Georgians as possible.” The reaction from citizens of Georgia and friends in the larger archival community was shock. David Carmicheal, former director of the Georgia Archives, noted, “The state archives is not a superfluous function of state government. It plays a vital role in Georgia's civic health and economic vitality.”

Friends and supporters of the State Archives mobilized into action. Dianne Brown Cannestra, president of the Friends of Georgia Archives, explained:

A Coalition to Save the Georgia Archives was formed that consisted of all major organizations who are passionate about the Archives, including Friends of the Georgia Archives and History (FOGAH), and we all leapt into action. An on-line petition, a Facebook page, and Twitter account were started, and countless emails, letters, and phone calls were being sent to the Governor and all Georgia representatives and senators. As an example of the passion, within a week of the Secretary of State’s announcement, there were over 10,000 signatures on the on-line petition. Within two weeks a rally was held at the State Capitol. Around 300 supporters attended. Outside the capitol a number of supporters carried placards and picketed in front of the capitol. The media covered both events extensively.

In another instance, the archival stars aligned. The week following Secretary Kemp's announcement, Governor Nathan Deal held a previously arranged proclamation signing ceremony, designating October as Georgia Archives Month. The irony of honoring archives when the State Archives was about to close was not lost on supporters. The proclamation signing provided a public opportunity to impress upon the governor what a great loss would result from closing the State Archives.

Efforts at the state level were supplemented by communications from national groups, including the Council of State Archivists, the Society of American Archivists, and the National Coalition for History.

The movement to save the Georgia Archives was impressive and, more importantly, it was successful. On October 18, 2012, Governor Deal announced that \$125,000 would be added to the Secretary of State's budget, allowing the State Archives to remain open through June 2013. Supporters then turned to government affairs advisors who helped advocates of the repository navigate the legislative and budgetary issues for the future of the Archives. These partnerships allowed supporters to translate their passion for open and accessible records to resource allocators in terms of dollars and cents. Friends groups, user communities, and social media made the difference in raising the visibility of this case. The Georgia Archives was transferred to the University System of Georgia as of July 1, 2013, and received an additional \$300,000 appropriation to restore service hours and some staff. On July 31, 2013, the Archives would be open to the public four days a week and two archivists and a conservator were added to the staff.

## **ADDITIONAL REFERENCE SOURCES**

### **Archives and Archivists in Society**

Floyd, Barbara. "The Archivist as Public Administrator." *The Midwestern Archivist* 15, no. 1 (1990): 17–24. <http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1793/45362>.

This article makes the case for archivists to become more effective public administrators in order to advocate for their institutions' needs in a tough budget environment. It emphasizes the need for archivists to familiarize themselves with the management skills of public administration to be successful.

Greene, Mark A. "The Power of Archives: Archivists' Values and Value in the Post-Modern Age." *The American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 17–41.

Adapted from his 2008 SAA Presidential Address, Mark Greene discusses the value of archival work in our society. He argues that archivists themselves need to define their own identity as a group to engage in meaningful discussions of archives in society. In turn, this discussion will empower archivists to become better advocates for themselves and their profession.

Levy, Sidney J. and Albert G. Robles. "The Image of Archivists: Resource Allocators' Perceptions." Society of American Archivists, December 1984. <http://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Image-of-Archivists-Levy1984.pdf>.

A report prepared for the SAA Task Force on Archives and Society in December 1984. The study was requested by the Society's Task Force because of concern about the image resource allocators had of archivists and archives. The study was based on responses from 44 individuals in five urban areas.

Yakel, Elizabeth, Wendy Duff, Helen Tibbo, Adam Kriesberg, and Amber Cushing. "The Economic Impact of Archives: Surveys of Users of Government Archives in Canada and the United States." *The American Archivist* 75, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2012): 297–325.

The results of two studies that examined the economic impact of government archives in the US and Canada. Archives add moderate economic value to local communities by bringing visitors into an area for research. There are also other ways to measure archival impact in a community, such as the social and cultural values.

### **The Business of Archives**

The Associated Press. "AP's History." Accessed November 25, 2013.  
<http://www.ap.org/company/history/ap-history>.

The AP Corporate Archives is home to 40 record groups totaling more than 2,000 linear feet. Records housed are items created by the AP with enduring historical value. This includes the Saigon Bureau Records (1953–1972), featuring accounts of AP journalists covering the Vietnam War. Researchers can search for collection material online and a reading room is available for in-person research.

Cowan, Crista. "Major Milestones in Family History." Ancestry.com Blog, October 10, 2013.  
<http://blogs.ancestry.com/ancestry/2013/10/10/major-milestones-in-family-history/>.

In celebration of Family History Month, Ancestry.com blogger Crista Cowan shared with readers the recent milestones achieved by the site. "In the spirit of reminiscing," Cowan recalls the site's beginning in 1996 and follows the growth of the company, which now provides access to 12 billion searchable records.

Sherman, Lauren. "For Brands Big and Small, Fashion Archives Can Be a Powerful Asset." *The Business of Fashion*, November 18, 2013.  
<http://www.businessoffashion.com/2013/11/for-brands-big-and-small-fashion-archives-can-be-a-powerful-asset.html>.

A look into the work of "fashion archiving." In the 1980s, fashion brands became interested in archiving their collections. Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, and Tom Ford are major fashion houses that are archiving their collections. Through their archives, designers are building their brands and that is very valuable in this industry.

### **Funding Considerations in Archives**

Erikson, Paul, and Robert Shuster. "Beneficial Shocks: The Place of Processing-Cost Analysis in Archival Administration." *The American Archivist* 58, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1995): 32–52.

The value of an archive is easily calculated. It could be administrative and historic, but ultimately it depends on the individual needs of the users. The authors use cost-analysis, in terms of dollars and time, and apply it to an essential function of archival work—processing.

Field, Karen, Paul Basken, and Jennifer Howard. “How a Government Shutdown Would Affect Academe.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 30, 2013.  
<http://chronicle.com/how-a-government-shutdown/141987>.

On the eve of the government shutdown in October 2013, *The Chronicle* looks at the effects of such an event on the academy. The effects would be minimal initially, but would grow. Researchers, in particular those depending on government run-archives, would struggle.

Society of American Archivists. “Statement Concerning the Closing of Archives.” June 23, 1990. <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/statement-concerning-the-closing-of-archives>.

The Society of American Archivists released a statement regarding the closing of archives in 1990. Much, if not all, of the document echoes today’s issue of funding and archival services.

Taylor, Carolyn. “Thinking Out of the Box: Fundraising During Economic Downturns.” *Serials Librarian* 59, nos. 3–4 (October 2010): 370–83.

The fallout from the financial meltdown left most libraries with budget deficits. A major influx of funds is unlikely and Taylor implores libraries to explore multiple outlets for future support. This includes grants, fundraisers, and lastly, to think like an entrepreneur, crafting brands and products for long term financial stability.

Wiesand, Andreas. “The Financial Crisis and Its Effects on Public Arts Funding,” *Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe*, July 2011.  
<http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/compendium-topics.php?aid=174>.

This is an examination of European countries and the effects of the economic downturn upon its cultural heritage institutions. Two important conclusions are drawn and mirror the crisis in equivalent American institutions: 1) The financial downturn should not be used as an excuse to make above-average cuts to heritage institutions and 2) until the importance of such institutions is recognized by all, continued reductions in funding will continue even after the financial crisis subsides.

## **State Archives**

The Council of State Archivists. “The Importance of State Archives.” March 2013.  
<http://www.statearchivists.org/reports/Importance%20of%20State%20Archives.pdf>.

A document produced by the Council of State Archivists (CoSA) to identify the importance of state archives and their functions in the United States. Data from this report comes from CoSA’s biennial survey and CoSA membership. Statistics are from the FY2012 Survey of State Archives and Records Management Programs.



Huth, Geof. "Sustainable Funding for Local Government Archives: A Report to the Local Government Archives Task Force of the Council of State Archivists." Council of State Archivists, July 2007. [www.statearchivists.org/lga/documents/reports/Huth-report.doc](http://www.statearchivists.org/lga/documents/reports/Huth-report.doc).

Sustainable funding for local governments is an ongoing challenge and one without a simple solution. General strategies include networking for support and seeking funding alternatives.

Society of American Archivists. "Statement on the Importance of Supporting State Archival Programs." April 2003. <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/statement-on-the-importance-of-supporting-state-archival-programs>.

In 2003, the Society of American Archivists issued a statement on the importance of state archival programs. The statement argues against disproportionately reducing the funding of archival programs in state budgets during financial hard times. The Society believes the results of such cuts, the loss of archival records, will undermine the functioning of our democracy.

Ward, Christine W. "Documenting New York: Identifying and Saving New York's Primary Sources." *The Public Historian* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 99–115.

An overview of the state of New York's documentation process for preserving and ensuring access to important primary sources that document the state's history. The New York State Historical Records Advisory Board and State Archives led the charge in that task. This strategic work is necessary to document a balanced history. The motivations for New York's documentation program could be mirrored throughout the country.

### **Georgia State Archives Crisis**

Downey, Maureen. "Is Georgia Padlocking Its Past by Closing Its Archives?" *Get Schooled* (blog), *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, September 17, 2012. <http://blogs.ajc.com/get-schooled-blog/2012/09/17/is-georgia-padlocking-its-past-by-closing-its-archives/>.

Historian James C. Cobb of the University of Georgia examines the Georgia State Archives closing in comparison to other southern state archives. Limiting the ability of the Archives to perform its essential functions will send Georgia into what he describes as a "self-induced historical amnesia."

Oestreicher, Cheryl. "Provenance XXXI, Issue 1, Special Issue on Advocacy." *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 31, no. 1 (September 2013). <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol31/iss1/1>.

A comprehensive examination of the Georgia State Archives crisis. Each article presents a different facet of the campaign to save the Archives. Chapters include "Finding our Voices: Pleading the Value of Archives" by Richard Pearce-Moses; "The Georgia Archives Budget: An Unfolding Crisis" by David W. Carmicheal; "Georgia Archives Saga" by Dianne Cannestra; and "Georgia Archives Advocacy: Organization, Communication, and Education" by Vivian Price Saffold.