

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Meeting  
February 16, 18, 2022  
Virtual Meeting**

**Recommendation to Approve Revisions to  
Museum Archives Guidelines  
(Prepared by: Kira Dietz, co-chair)**

**BACKGROUND**

The Museum Archives Section has completed its revision of the [current version of the Museum Archives Guidelines](#), last endorsed in 2003. The Standards Committee has reviewed the revised guidelines, as well as the submission package documenting the revision process, and voted unanimously to approve the revision be recommended for endorsement by Council.

Documentation provided to the Standards Committee (updated guidelines, history of the revision, comments and feedback) is available in [a Google folder](#), accessible to anyone with the link. See the Appendix for the final draft of the proposed revisions to the Museum Archives Section

The updated [Standards & Best Practices Resource Guide](#) referenced in the submission packet is already available online.

The Museum Archives Guidelines was revised in 2003. Current Standards Committee records and history from the Museum Archives Section indicated that there have not been any revisions since that time. In 2020-2021, a working group was established by the section to review and update the guidelines to better reflect the needs and challenges for museum archives, as well as to update the best practices.

**DISCUSSION**

The Museum Archives Guidelines was revised in 2003. A working group within the Museum Archives Section was formed in 2020 to propose a revision to the guidelines, following up on work that had begun in 2018. The revision proposal was approved in 2020 and over the last year, the working group has solicited feedback, held a webinar, shared a draft for comment, and revised the guidelines to better reflect current needs, practices, and challenges for museum archives. The revised guidelines provide some overarching best practices and considerations for museum archives, while understanding the complexities of museum archives and deferring to local practices as appropriate. In addition, the package for the Standards Committee includes a maintenance and review plan that will review the guidelines every 5 years, to keep up to date with best practices and needs.

Note the revised guidelines have taken a slightly different approach, as documented: “When the Guidelines were first written, the authors’ objective may have been to outline steps for the establishment of new, professionally-managed, museum archives. The updated version of the Guidelines does this but also aims to sustain existing museum archives and encourage them to thrive internally and within their communities. Thus the revised Guidelines follow a similar format to the earlier version and include many of the same categories, but mark a shift from focusing on the importance of establishing a museum archives, perhaps with one professional archivist at the helm, to advocating for a dynamic repository integrated into all museum functions, perhaps even with expanded functions.”

From a Standards Committee process perspective, we agreed that the working group met the requirements for revision, advertised and solicited feedback appropriately, and completed the submission packet (available in the [Google folder](#)) as required. While the Standards Committee is now having larger discussions about how to include diversity concerns and recommendations into revised standards, the working group had begun long before those discussions, it was not part of their initial proposal, and we did not feel it was an impediment to approve the revision. (The Standards Committee hopes to propose some guidance on how to incorporate diversity issues in the Procedures for Review and Approval of an SAA-Developed Standard in the future.) The working group did include new language related to diversity regarding policies and repatriation as well as, whenever possible, expanded access to museum archives. A new section also addresses technology, born-digital records, and their implications. In response to specific request for examples, the Museum Archives Section also updated their [Standards & Best Practices Resource Guide](#).

## **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

**THAT the SAA Council approve the proposed revisions to the Museum Archives Guidelines (see Appendix).**

**Support Statement:** Approving the revised Museum Archives Guidelines will allow the new guidelines to be posted on the Standards Portal, shared via social media, and be freely accessible to professionals who need them, while providing much needed, updated information to museum archivists and other staff.

**Impact on Strategic Priorities:** Endorsement of the revised Museum Archives Guidelines supports Goal 2: Enhancing Professional Growth and Goal 4: Meeting Members’ Needs, by providing updated information for an outdated standard. It also addresses, in brief, repatriation concerns, acknowledging more recent conversations in the archives field about diversity, this historical record, and issues of inherent sovereignty.

**Fiscal Impact:** The endorsement of the revised guidelines does not have any known fiscal impact on SAA.

## Museum Archives Guidelines

### *2022 Proposed Revisions*

*The Museum Archives Section of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) represents those who are responsible for the organization and care of archival collections located in museums. These guidelines have been created by the Section to assist all types of museums in the development and administration of archival programs. They outline the components of a successful museum archives program and should be used in conjunction with detailed information on the administration of archives that is available through SAA and other professional sources. Specific examples of museum archives documentation, particularly with regard to policies, are available in the [Museum Archives Standards and Best Practices Working Group's Resource Guide](#).*

#### **1. Introduction and Mission Statement**

##### **Introduction**

All museums should maintain an active, professional archives to systematically collect, organize, preserve, and provide access to organizational records of enduring value as well as the papers of individuals, groups, and topics associated with the museum. An archives program provides evidence, explanation, and justification for both past actions and current decisions. It is the role of the museum archivist to recommend policies and procedures for the creation, maintenance, and ultimate retention or disposition of current museum records in all formats, as well as to undertake the acquisition and stewardship of externally generated special collections. By supporting an archives program, a museum not only promotes its own history but ensures that its records are preserved and that information resources are readily available to support the work of its staff as well as to meet the research needs of scholars and the general public.

##### **Mission Statement**

The archives should have a mission statement, approved by museum administration and ratified by appropriate governing bodies, that defines the authority of the archivist within the museum and the scope of the archival program. The statement should explicitly recognize the archivist's role in the museum and in relation to its records management program. When possible, the mission statement should reflect and expand upon key aspects of the parent institution's mission.

#### **2. Collecting Scope**

The museum archives identifies and collects records of long-term and permanent research value, regardless of format. The collecting scope of a museum archives should be clearly outlined within the parent institution's overarching collections statement or maintained separately by the archives department. The materials described in the archives' collecting scope should add value to the museum's collections and exhibition programs and should reflect a commitment to diversity and inclusion.

A museum archives' collections may encompass:

1. **Organizational records.** These document institutional history and provide context for object collections. They may include, but are not limited to, records relating to programming, curatorial, administrative, legal, and fiscal activities.
2. **Collection records,** such as object, specimen, or conservation files. These may be part of the museum archives' collections or, if active records, kept in the curatorial, registration, or collections management offices. The museum archivist should advocate for and offer support for the stewardship of these records, including their potential transfer to the archives when appropriate.
3. **Special collections.** These may include papers of external and/or allied individuals and organizations as well as related topical collections that align with the museum's overarching mission.

### **3. Organizational Placement**

While administrative placement, structure, and governance will reflect institutional differences and cultures, the museum archives should be placed within the museum's organizational structure at the same level as all other collections departments, with the museum archivist maintaining the equivalent custodial and related authority delegated by the director of the museum, governing board, or parent institution. The archives department should also be an independent entity within the museum's organizational structure, though the museum archives may also be an administrative affiliate of a parent institution's archives, such as when a museum is part of a larger university.

### **4. Professional Archivist and Archives Staffing**

The museum should have a professionally trained archivist. If institutional resources do not permit the hiring of a professionally trained archivist, expert advice should be sought in the management of the museum's archives and archival training provided to the staff member(s) made responsible for them.

The responsibilities of museum archivists are to appraise, acquire, arrange, describe, preserve, and facilitate access to the records of the museum and collections of related materials acquired from outside the museum. These responsibilities may be divided among multiple archives staff members. Museum archivists may also provide archival instruction and training on how to utilize primary source material to parties internal or external to their institution. Performing outreach and advocating for the archival program communicates the value of the museum archives.

The museum archivist should be empowered to undertake strategic planning for the museum archives, assess its resource needs, and create policies and procedures that follow professional best practices and ethics. The museum archivist should also be responsible for hiring archives staff. Archives staffing levels should be aligned with staffing for other museum departments.

Hiring should follow a policy of nondiscrimination and equal opportunity and hiring activities should be implemented in a culturally competent manner.

## **5. Policies and Standards**

Museum archives should adopt existing institutional policies and standards in place at the museum when possible, refining as needed to suit archival practice. When such is not appropriate, archivists should create standalone policies for their repositories that draw upon professional archival [standards](#) and practices.

## **6. Records Management**

The museum archives should be responsible for, or maintain an active role in, the museum's records management program, including identifying records and scheduling their retention. The criteria for permanent records retention include:

1. Evidence of the structure, development, mission, and functions of the museum over time.
2. Documentation of the actions, decisions, policies, and fiscal and legal rights and responsibilities of the museum.
3. Research and informational value.

These criteria apply to records in all formats and on all platforms.

The museum archivist should be involved in the development of policies, guidelines, and records retention schedules pertaining to the maintenance, disposition, and preservation of all museum records, with the aim of avoiding records duplication and the retention of nonpermanent records. The museum archivist, as well as the records creators and general counsel, if applicable, should also approve the appropriate disposition of records that must be maintained temporarily for fiscal or legal purposes.

The museum archivist should be consulted for recommendations on the maintenance of permanently active records of archival value in noncustodial situations such as collection object or accession records under the care of a registrar, collections manager, curator, or conservator, as well as computer network backups managed by the information technology staff.

## **7. Infrastructure**

Well-supported and maintained physical and digital infrastructure is required to manage records in all formats within the museum archives. Robust institutional commitment as well as collaboration with other museum departments are necessary in building, implementing, and maintaining the museum archives' physical plant, storage areas, study rooms, and digital systems.

## **8. Access and Use**

Museum archives should provide access to all records that can be open to research use. Select holdings should be limited only by reasonable restrictions related to privacy, confidentiality, copyright laws, cultural sensitivity, cultural property rights, moral rights, and other purposes. Museum archives should provide equal research access to archival materials, regardless of the patron's status, affiliation, or intended use; however, it is typical for an institution's own staff members to have increased access to certain materials. Museum archives should also strive to provide intellectual and physical access through archival description and delivery of resources both in person and online whenever feasible.

## **9. Outreach**

Museum archives may organize exhibits, workshops, publications, presentations, instruction, tours, and other programming to promote collections and services, foster collaborative relationships, share and build knowledge, and advocate for financial support and resources. Museum archivists work individually and collaboratively with colleagues to create programs that are meaningful to their constituents and support the institutional mission and specific goals of the museum.

## **10. Repatriation**

Museum archives have an ethical responsibility to assist with the processes of repatriation and are encouraged to develop modes of collaboration, engagement, and partnership for archival or museum holdings that have problematic histories or unclear provenance. Archivists should strive to research, record, and make accessible as much information as possible regarding the provenance of the collections in their care and in the care of the museum. Establishing institutional guidelines to ensure consistent practices around releasing information is recommended. Museum archivists should aim to uphold rights and responsibilities that recognize the inherent sovereignty that affected communities have over their cultural heritage.