

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Meeting  
August 13, 2018  
Washington, DC**

**Review of the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*  
(Prepared by Tanya Zanish-Belcher)**

**BACKGROUND**

I invited the Association for Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM) to a meeting of allied organizations at the 2018 Joint Annual Meeting in Washington, DC. Although unable to attend, ATALM Executive Director Susan Feller asked if the SAA Council would again consider approving the Native American Protocols, especially given that they have been approved by the American Library Association (ALA) and the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH). I agreed to bring the issue before the SAA Council for discussion.

The *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* (PNAAM) are available [online](#), hosted by Northern Arizona University.

According to background provided in the Final Report of the Native American Protocols Forum Working Group of SAA, the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* were developed in 2006 to identify best professional practices for culturally responsive care and use of American Indian archival material held by non-tribal repositories. As noted by Jennifer O’Neal, “There are hundreds of organizations in the United States that hold archival collections documenting Native American lifeways. While some collections have been gathered with informed consent of the tribal communities, a large majority have not.” The Protocols were to establish a foundation for archival practice in caring for and preserving cultural sensitive material.

In 2007, the Protocols authors requested endorsement from numerous organizations, including SAA. Then-SAA President Mark Greene responded by creating a task force to solicit SAA members’ opinions (which are available on the SAA website), as well as those of other interested parties, regarding the Protocols and report the results to the Council. The task force also was authorized to suggest possible next steps that the Council might take in response to the Protocols, of which they offered seven different motions for the Council’s consideration. In 2008, the Council decided not to endorse the Protocols and instead voted to create a three-session Forum at the next three SAA Annual Meetings (2009-2011) “to provide a formal structure through which SAA members can express thoughts and share opinions about the Protocols.”

## DISCUSSION

Given the amount of time dedicated to this issue in the past and length of accompanying materials, I would ask SAA Council members to thoroughly review the various reports and member comments available:

<https://www2.archivists.org/groups/native-american-archives-section/protocols-for-native-american-archival-materials-information-and-resources-page>.

Offered for SAA Council approval in 2008, the seven motions under consideration were:

- Endorse the Protocols.
- Endorse the “spirit” of the Protocols and the call for ongoing dialog but not the specific language found in the document presented to the Council.
- Endorse the “spirit” of the Protocols and the call for continuing dialog, with additional language submitted by task force member David George-Shongo.
- Endorse the need for dialog, using the document presented to the Council as the basis for discussion.
- Defer a decision to gather additional data and comments.
- Decline to endorse the Protocols but establish an SAA process to develop a best practices document for dealing with Native American archival material.
- Decline to endorse the Protocols and take no further action.

To further inform our discussion, I share the following comments from SAA Past Presidents Richard Pearce-Moses and Frank Boles. Boles chaired the task force and authored its report.

Richard Pearce-Moses:

*The Protocols for Native American Archival Materials offers the Society of American Archivists an important opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to diversity... The Protocols address a wide range of complex issues. They challenge some of the fundamental assumptions of the Euro-American archival tradition, often because they challenge non-Native understandings the concepts of privacy, property, tradition, and knowledge. The Protocols call on the profession to “recognize that the conditions under which knowledge can be ethically and legally acquired, archived, preserved, accessed, published, or otherwise used change through time.” To do that may require that centuries of tradition (especially legal tradition) be changed.*

Frank Boles:

*I believe the Protocols are less about the details of archival practice and much more about recognition of a wrong in need of righting. I believe its authors most fundamentally call to us, after the long night of oppression and disdain that American society collectively brought upon them, to make amends by acknowledging that their culture is of equal status with Western culture and that they, rather than we, have primary responsibility for the memory of their culture. The rest is secondary – means to accomplish these ends.*

*Having read carefully through the comments in preparing this report, I recognize that many of the objections raised to the specific components of the Protocols are valid. The means to implement justice proposed by the authors of the Protocols are not always practical. Terms are sometimes poorly defined. The Protocols propose novel legal concepts that are not imbedded in current American law or in some cases would cause archivists to violate the law. Archival theory and practice as we understand it is sometimes turned on its head...Furthermore, SAA cannot move forward in seeking justice without the cooperation of the authors of the Protocols, and more broadly all of our Native American colleagues. We must both, in fact and in spirit, meet.*

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Would Council members consider reviewing the Protocols again?
2. As the language has remained the same (and is not open for revision), the same concerns may remain. Would the Council like to have more information for review? (I am willing to do some of this work after the annual meeting, listing the areas of concern and a response to them, especially focusing on any legal issues if we need it.)
3. Would the Council consider once again seeking broad member comment? And would it consider possible action at the November 2018 Council meeting?