

**Society of American Archivists  
Council Meeting  
September 23, 2020  
Virtual Meeting**

**Proposal to Form SAA Accessioning Section  
(Submitted by Rosemary K. J. Davis and Meaghan O’Riordan)**

**BACKGROUND**

The reality of archival accessioning is not accurately or entirely captured by its traditional definition: taking physical, legal, and intellectual custody of newly acquired collection materials. In contemporary practice, accessioning is a rich and varied hybrid of many discrete duties encompassing a wide spectrum of pre- and post-custodial work. The impact of effective accessioning within the archival lifecycle is a necessary step toward transparent stewardship practices that are both extensible and holistic, and yet there are no profession-wide best practices for accessioning, nor is there a formal community of practice within SAA. Even though accessioning is a collection of integral and foundational archival functions, individuals performing this work often find themselves isolated, under-resourced, and in a position of constantly justifying the necessity and complexity of their duties.

SAA’s Core Values include Access and Use, Accountability, and Responsible Custody, which are all values inherent in accessioning work. Accessioning plays a critical role in collection stewardship--it facilitates quicker access to materials, creates thorough pre- and post-custodial documentation, and helps ensure that collection material is ethically and efficiently treated within an archival organization.

To support the needs of individuals performing and managing archival accessioning work, we propose that an SAA Accessioning Section should be established.

**PURPOSE AND GOALS OF AN ACCESSIONING SECTION**

The purpose of a dedicated Accessioning Section would be to provide a forum for discussing issues and interests pertaining to all aspects of archival accessioning, including pre-custodial assessment, maintenance of donor and vendor relationships, transportation logistics, custody documentation, intra-organizational relationships with acquisitions and access services, collection stabilization and rehousing, baseline/initial iteration of arrangement and description, and collection/space management, among many other issues.

The primary goal for this section would be rooted in creating a space in which individuals performing accessioning work can find support--a community focused on making accessioning

work more effective, more visible, and more understood. In the absence of profession-wide standards, accessioning workflows are often either ingeniously cobbled together or painstakingly built from the ground up. Archivists performing accessioning often find themselves isolated, doing the job for the first time, and--beyond meeting colleagues via happenstance--without a structured way to become proficient in these complex archival functions, nor clear avenues to collaborate with a wider community of skilled individuals already performing accessioning. A section would help individuals find each other, share/build skills, and work toward creating more resources for doing accessioning well.

Another important thing to note: Archival accessioning is frequently performed by under-resourced and/or precariously-employed individuals. Though essential, this work is sometimes seen as “less professional” than other archival functions, due not only to its complexity but also to its lack of representation within professional standards and scholarship. Increased visibility for accessioning and support from our national organization highlights the diversity of practitioners and labor practices within our field, while also providing formal recognition of the value of this work.

## **THE NEED FOR A SEPARATE SECTION**

While many SAA sections focus on particular archival elements that overlap and intersect with accessioning, no section focuses on the unique confluence of diverse workflows required by effective and comprehensive accessioning work. Individuals whose primary roles or archival interests relate to accessioning often struggle to find a place in SAA sections whose membership and discourse address only a few facets of their work. Lack of an organized accessioning network results in a huge expenditure of energy trying to scavenge for appropriate resources, connections, and community.

For example, while the Acquisitions and Appraisal, Collection Management, Preservation, Archives Management, and Description sections are all vibrantly active groups, they only sometimes engage with issues related directly to accessioning; no single one of these sections can account for the full complement of varied work duties often performed by an Accessioning Archivist. There is tremendous value in these separate sections, but for many of us performing accessioning, they’re effectively serving as a piecemeal substitute in the absence of a group focused on our specific needs.

## **TESTIMONIALS IN SUPPORT OF FORMING AN ACCESSIONING SECTION**

Below is a selection of testimonial statements (presented here anonymously) from the 119 SAA members who signed our petition to form an Accessioning Section:

- This section would provide a community of practice that is often ignored, undervalued, and misunderstood.
- It would create a home for my core work function, which has always been part description, part acquisitions, part someone else’s problem. I’m biased, but I contend accessioning is a bedrock of sound archival practice and SAA would be serving its members well by creating a forum in which to support its understanding and advancement.

- I recently accepted a position as an accessioning archivist and I would appreciate having a dedicated community/space to learn from peers and discuss the pre and post custodial workflows related to accessioning. Current trends and literature stress the importance of accessioning as a tool to provide access and decrease backlogs, however, none of the current SAA sections are dedicated to this job function. Creating a new accessioning section could bridge the gap between theory and practice.
- As a new accessioning archivist at an institution building this program, having an SAA section that focuses on accessioning and where I can go to ask questions, bring up issues and stay connected to a larger group of professionals doing the same work would be truly beneficial.
- Accessioning is a core archival function, and impacts all other aspects of collections care. For repositories with few resources, accessioning may be the only step that can be taken to establish physical and intellectual control of collections. Formalizing a community of practice for this foundational activity in archival work will benefit our profession. I would further like to see SAA acknowledgement and support of this work -- it is critical that invisible labor be made visible, and that we have broad professional understanding of the issues and challenges that are part of accessioning work. Thanks!
- Accessioning is so important! We wouldn't be able to do what we do without it. We need to give it the space to connect archivists who do this work to discuss issues, share ideas, and have a community for their work.
- This function has indeed expanded in value and in scope in recent years; there would be great gain from being able to enter a discussion, skip the introductory self-explanations, and get down to work, as do other sections. The "rising tide floats all boats" idea applies to accessioning--we are often making up what we do in isolation and would benefit hugely from sharing practices, theories, and resources, as would our institutions and the profession.
- I'm a collections manager in a university archives and special collections. I believe this would be very useful to myself and many other archivists.
- I have questions about accessioning that I would like a space to ask my peers!
- There is no designated space within SAA to not only learn more about and discuss accessioning, but to build community with colleagues whose positions' primary roles are related to accessioning.
- I came into my first full time archivist position quite quickly and without practical accessioning experience. Within my organization (a small, local historical society), no other staff members did actual archival accessioning. It became apparent very quickly how little I knew and I actually felt uncomfortable doing that work in the beginning. Some of my early missteps were related to accessioning. The Purpose and Goals of the Accessioning Section would be to discuss "...pre-custodial assessment, maintenance of donor and vendor relationships, transportation logistics, custody documentation, intra-organizational relationships with acquisitions and access services, collection stabilization and rehousing,...." I would have benefited massively from this section if it would have existed in 2017. In my current position, my accessioning duties are more limited, but I still would want to be a part of this group and contribute to help others if I could!
- As the head of a repository with very few staff trying to do everything, the point of accession stands out as one of the most important points of stewardship. It's an area where my institution is always trying to improve. This section's focus would be beneficial for organizations like mine.

- I conduct processing and would like to see the same attention paid to accessioning as processing since it feeds into the processing workflow.
- Accessioning is at the fringes of the activities of various groups such as acquisition and collections management but doesn't ever get to be the focus of a group's work. I think this group would be very useful.
- Accessioning builds the foundation for any future access and/or processing of archival collections. Communal discussions specifically about accessioning could help us make better, more sustainable decisions for the future.
- Although I wear many hats at my institution, putting good practices in place for accessions is what I'm most passionate about and whether coworkers realize it or not, it's what is most needed. Concerns about sustainability and long term resource use should be considered from the start, accessions is the best place to advocate for this. There is great work being done in many institutions in recent years but I find it difficult to keep up and stay motivated to keep my head above water as I am the only person doing accessions. Some have found it strange that I have chosen to focus on accessions vs born digital efforts and professionally I have been aware of the risk in this (less money and less respect) but I know it is where I can do the most good for the collections in my time at my library heavy institution. To have an explicit professional community to join and learn from would be amazing! I have thought to join registrars' prof groups to find support but would rather find it in SAA. A big thanks to organizers - I'm thrilled that this may be happening!
- In my role of university archivist, I am responsible for the functions that are described in the proposed section: both for physical and for digital materials (as described in the PAIMAS Standard). I agree that having an SAA Section dedicated to discussion, working on projects, and standards and practices of Pre- and (during) Accessioning work would be very useful and a meaningful part of my membership in the Society.

**Of note:** Of the 119 SAA members who signed our petition, **100** said they would want to be added to the section upon creation.

A number of non-SAA members (12) also signed our petition and shared their thoughts. We want to highlight them because their voices count too! In particular, several people expressed that the existence of an Accessioning Section could motivate them to rejoin and actively engage with SAA:

- I was so excited to see this proposal pop up, and agree 100% that a community of practice specifically for those who do accessioning work would fill a gap. While my SAA membership has lapsed over the past year, the creation of this section and the ability to become more involved with its community would be a hugely motivating factor for me to renew.
- As a new archivist/librarian, I entered my College Archives with limited knowledge on accessions and deaccessions. I would love to see this group active because I would finally have a core group to discuss the challenges and benefits of these much needed archival responsibilities.
- Accessioning is the linchpin of archival work and is often undervalued and misunderstood. It's important for institutions to get clear on what they mean by accessioning and what is meant to be accomplished at the end of the process. It's also very collaborative work by nature, and often relies on thorough and accurate work by curators, etc....

- I would be more likely to rejoin SAA if an Accessioning section existed! It would be great to have a shared space to discuss important issues with intake and gaining initial control over archival collections.

## CONCLUSION

Within the last several years, more institutions have started to create positions focused solely on accessioning. In the near future, SAA will be publishing a volume of scholarly texts (by Audra Eagle Yun with contributions from many other professionals) devoted to accessioning. Slowly, awareness about the importance of accessioning is rising within our field. And yet, we see no substantive, specific representation for those performing accessioning within our national organization. There is a tangible, growing need for community that SAA can help address.

This is a chance to create a group where accessioning archivists can learn from each other, develop best practices both individually and programmatically, and be strengthened by communal connections. As the above testimonials show, there is ample, enthusiastic support from SAA members who say this section would provide a meaningful and productive opportunity for professional engagement. An Accessioning Section would encourage systemic improvement, individual reflection, and direct engagement for those doing accessioning and for all engaging with collection stewardship.

We appreciate the time and effort it will take for the SAA Council to thoughtfully consider this proposal.

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Our ongoing archival accessioning research project: [accessioning.warmsilence.org](http://accessioning.warmsilence.org)

#	Name	SAA Member?
1	Katy Rawdon	Yes
2	Rose Oliveira	Yes
3	Rachel Searcy	Yes
4	rachel rosenfeld	Yes
5	Becky Briggs Becker	Yes
6	Jennifer Gunter King	Yes
7	Monika Lehman	Yes
8	Jasmine Larkin	Yes
9	Eric Sonnenberg	Yes
10	Jordan Jancosek	Yes
11	Melanie Wisner	Yes
12	Chela Scott Weber	Yes
13	Lisa Rickey	Yes
14	Johanna Carll	Yes
15	Carrie Hintz	Yes
16	Elizabeth Parker	Yes
17	Emily Higgs	Yes
18	Margaret Dodson	Yes
19	Adrienne Pruitt	Yes
20	Mary Bakija	Yes
21	Elizabeth Coup	Yes
22	Susan Brady	Yes
23	Dawne Howard Lucas	Yes
24	Stephanie Bredbenner	Yes
25	Faith Charlton	Yes
26	Eve Neiger	Yes
27	Matthew Daniel Mason	Yes
28	Jasmine Jones	Yes

#	Name	SAA Member?
29	Michelle	Yes
30	Benn Joseph	Yes
31	Jessica Tai	Yes
32	Alison Anderson	Yes
33	Maggie Hughes	Yes
34	Christy Bailey-Tomecek	Yes
35	Tanya Zanish-Belcher	Yes
36	Sheridan Leigh Sayles	Yes
37	Kate Dundon	Yes
38	Warren Sherk	Yes
39	Adriane Hanson	Yes
40	Elizabeth Peters	Yes
41	Sierra King	Yes
42	Rosalie Gartner	Yes
43	Kira Dietz	Yes
44	Kelly Bolding	Yes
45	Stephanie Bennett	Yes
46	Cassie Schmitt	Yes
47	Stephanie Mihalik	Yes
48	Victoria Jones	Yes
49	Katrina Cohen-Palacios	Yes
50	Alexandra deGraffenreid	Yes
51	Sarah Quigley	Yes
52	Kate Morris	Yes
53	Maureen Jennings	Yes
54	Elizabeth Carron	Yes
55	Liz Francis	Yes
56	Jean L. Green	Yes

#	Name	SAA Member?
57	Michael Rush	Yes
58	Nadia Dixson	Yes
59	Rebecca Hirsch	Yes
60	VivianLea Solek	Yes
61	Matthew Gorham	Yes
62	Rebecca Parmer	Yes
63	Ann Abney	Yes
64	Greta Suiter	Yes
65	Pamela Hopkins	Yes
66	Valerie Wingfield	Yes
67	Meghan Bailey	Yes
68	Megan McShea	Yes
69	Jennifer Mitchell	Yes
70	Brenda Lawson	Yes
71	Weatherly Stephan	Yes
72	Jessica Quagliaroli	Yes
73	Courtney Dean	Yes
74	Alexis Peregoy	Yes
75	Jackie Dean	Yes
76	Elena Martina Colón-Marrero	Yes
77	James Moske	Yes
78	Jennie Thomas	Yes
79	Emily Grubbs	Yes
80	Amelia Holmes	Yes
81	Tressa Graves	Yes
82	Jessica McQuain	Yes
83	Althea Topek	Yes
84	Elizabeth Miller	Yes

#	Name	SAA Member?
85	Tamar Dougherty	Yes
86	Michelle Farias	Yes
87	Shannon K. Supple	Yes
88	Mary Richardson	Yes
89	Marietta Carr	Yes
90	Jessica Chapel	Yes
91	Helen Edwards	Yes
92	Kara Adams	Yes
93	Dorothy Berry	Yes
94	Elisa Landaverde	Yes
95	Matthew Darby	Yes
96	Fletcher Durant	Yes
97	Lori Dedeyan	Yes
98	Chris Tanguay	Yes
99	Anne Cox	Yes
100	Jeanne Kramer-Smyth	Yes
101	Laurinda Weisse	Yes
102	Noah Huffman	Yes
103	Lynn Eaton	Yes
104	Stacie Williams	Yes
105	Janet Carleton	Yes
106	Marissa Friedman	Yes
107	Becca Morgan	Yes
108	Alice Sara Prael	Yes
109	Jane Kelly	Yes
110	Patricia Bruttomesso	Yes
111	Kari R. Smith	Yes
112	Melinda Isler	Yes

#	Name	SAA Member?
113	Amanda Strauss	Yes
114	Genna Duplisea	Yes
115	Amy C. Vo	Yes
116	Jennifer Betts	Yes
117	Anna Björnsson McCormick	Yes
118	Linda Hocking	Yes
119	Mark Dionne	Yes