

Selecting *and*  
Appraising  
Archives *and*  
Manuscripts



## ARCHIVAL FUNDAMENTALS SERIES III

Peter J. Wosh, Editor

- 1** **Leading and Managing Archives and Manuscripts Programs**  
Peter Gottlieb and David W. Carmicheal, Editors
- 2** **Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts**  
Dennis Meissner
- 3** **Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists**  
Kathleen D. Roe
- 4** **Reference and Access for Archives and Manuscripts**  
Cheryl Oestreicher
- 5** **Advancing Preservation for Archives and Manuscripts**  
Elizabeth Joffrion and Michèle V. Cloonan
- 6** **Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts**  
Audra Eagle Yun and Chela Scott Weber, Editors

Selecting *and*  
Appraising  
Archives *and*  
Manuscripts

*Edited by*

**Audra Eagle Yun &  
Chela Scott Weber**



**SOCIETY OF  
American  
Archivists**

CHICAGO

**Society of American Archivists**  
**[www.archivists.org](http://www.archivists.org)**

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 2025945447**

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-958954-20-1 (paperback)

eISBN: 978-1-958954-21-8 (epub)

eISBN: 978-1-958954-22-5 (pdf)



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## FOREWORD



# The Evolution of a Book Series



The Society of American Archivists (SAA) first conceived the notion of developing and publishing “manuals relating to major and basic archival functions” in the early 1970s. Charles Frederick Williams (popularly known as C. F. W.) Coker (1932–1983), a former US Marine Corps captain and North Carolina state archivist who recently had been appointed to head the Printed Documents Division of the National Archives and Records Services, edited the initial Basic Manual Series. The first five basic manuals, which appeared in 1977, illustrated the ways in which archivists defined and classified their core concepts at that historical moment:

- *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal & Accessioning* by Maynard J. Brichford
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Arrangement & Description* by David B. Gracy II
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Reference & Access* by Sue E. Holbert
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Security* by Timothy Walch
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Surveys* by John Fleckner

The entire series accounted for only 163 pages of text, which included numerous illustrations, graphics, sample forms, charts, and bibliographic insertions. Each 8.5-by-11-inch softbound pamphlet contained three holes punched down the left side for easy insertion into a loose-leaf binder that might be handily referenced at an archivist’s desk. Individual volumes sold for four dollars, though SAA members received a one-dollar discount.

Archivists operated within a far different cultural, legal, and professional framework during the early and middle years of the 1970s. In 1973, the same year that SAA began work on the Basic Manual Series, IBM introduced the Correcting Selectric II typewriter as its major technological breakthrough, thereby eliminating the need for such popular tools as rubber erasers, white-out correction fluid, and cover-up tape. This revolutionary product seemed destined to alter the nature of document creation forever. A few archivists during this period had begun grappling with the

challenges of something known as “machine-readable records,” but a bibliographer who surveyed this puzzling development could still confidently conclude in a 1975 *American Archivist* article that “only a few archival establishments” appeared to be “developing programs for accessioning” such materials. Other momentous—and occasionally unsettling—changes appeared on the horizon. A new Copyright Act, which had been enacted by Congress in 1976 and became effective New Year’s Day 1978, contained significant implications for how archivists would manage collections and serve researchers. Richard Nixon’s resignation prompted the promulgation of new legislation in 1978 that declared for the first time that presidential and vice-presidential records are public documents. Professionally, the archival landscape seemed to be shifting as well. The Association of Canadian Archivists launched an exciting new journal, *Archivaria*, in winter 1975/1976, a development destined to deepen the discipline’s intellectual discourse. Regional archival associations formed, became fruitful, and multiplied in the United States. And a new era in archival education began as library schools and history departments inaugurated archives-based graduate programs in the late 1970s, ultimately resulting in a highly credentialed and formally trained corps of professional practitioners.

Such transformations, and many others too numerous to mention here, convinced the Society of American Archivists that only an active publications program that regularly refreshed the existing literature could provide its membership with easy access to rapidly changing trends and best practices. SAA accordingly published the Basic Manual Series II—a second set of five volumes—in the early 1980s:

- *Archives & Manuscripts: Exhibits* by Gail Farr Casterline
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Automated Access* by H. Thomas Hickerson
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Maps and Architectural Drawings* by Ralph E. Ehrenberg
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Public Programs* by Ann E. Pederson and Gail Farr Casterline
- *Archives & Manuscripts: Reprography* by Carolyn Hoover Sung

Over the years, scores of other titles published by SAA followed, each illustrating the rich diversity of archival work: administration of photo collections, conservation, machine-readable records, law, management, a basic glossary, collections of readings on archival theory and practice, and books specific to archives in a variety of institutional settings (i.e., colleges and universities; businesses and corporations; religious, scientific, and governmental institutions; museums; historical societies, etc.). Even with the proliferation of publications, the bedrock of archival practice rested on the core knowledge represented in the basic manuals, which were reconceptualized and rechristened between 1990 and 1993 as the Archival Fundamentals Series:

- *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* by James O’Toole
- *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* by Fredric M. Miller
- *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories* by Thomas Wilsted and William Nolte
- *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* by F. Gerald Ham
- *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler
- *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Jo Pugh
- *The Glossary of Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers* by Lynn Lady Bellardo and Lewis Bellardo

A second iteration of the seven books in this revamped series appeared roughly fifteen years later as the Archival Fundamentals Series II:

- *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* by James O’Toole and Richard J. Cox
- *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* by Kathleen D. Roe
- *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories* by Michael Kurtz
- *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* by Frank Boles
- *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler
- *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Jo Pugh
- *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* by Richard Pearce-Moses

Mary Jo Pugh and Richard J. Cox respectively edited these multivolume compilations, which almost instantaneously became required texts in archival education courses and necessary additions to archivists’ bookshelves. The Archival Fundamentals Series I and II differed in scope and scale from the initial Basic Manual Series. John Fleckner’s comprehensive treatment of surveys, for example, did not appear in need of revision and dropped out of the series. Security became incorporated into a broader manual on preservation. SAA commissioned an introductory overview of the field, added a new book that focused on managerial issues, and developed a glossary that sought to define and historicize key archival concepts. Both Archival Fundamentals Series I and II incorporated and delineated the evolving descriptive standards that defined professional practice beginning in the 1970s, dissected the contentious debates surrounding appraisal and deaccessioning that enlivened archival discourse in the 1980s, and reflected the growing emphases on an expanding user base and more complex reference services that revolutionized reading rooms and repositories in the late twentieth century.

This third edition—Archival Fundamentals Series III—contains important continuities and significant departures from its predecessors:

- An addition to the series, *Advocating for Archives and Manuscripts* by Kathleen D. Roe, reflects an increased understanding that these functions undergird all aspects of archival work.
- The management volume, *Leading and Managing Archives and Manuscripts Programs* edited by Peter Gottlieb and David W. Carmicheal, has been reconfigured to focus especially on leadership and to provide readers with opportunities to explore their individual managerial styles.
- *Advancing Preservation Programs for Archives and Manuscripts* by Elizabeth Joffrion and Michèle V. Cloonan addresses digital challenges and focuses on such current issues as risk management, ethical considerations, and sustainability.
- *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* by Dennis Meissner, *Providing Reference and Access Services for Archives and Manuscripts* by Cheryl Oestreicher, and *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* edited by Audra Eagle Yun and Chela Scott Weber may appear familiar topics to readers of the previous two series, but each book illustrates the innovations in thought and practice that have transformed these archival functions over the past twenty years.

One contribution that constituted a cornerstone of the previous series has been reformatted to maximize its currency and usability. Although not part of the Archival Fundamentals Series III, the *Dictionary of Archives Terminology* ([dictionary.archivists.org](http://dictionary.archivists.org)) will replace *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* and will be maintained and updated as a digital resource by SAA's Dictionary Working Group.

We hope that undergraduate and graduate students, new professionals, seasoned archival veterans, and others in the information science and public history fields will find the volumes in the Archival Fundamentals Series III helpful, provocative, and essential to both their intellectual life and their daily work. As Richard J. Cox observed in his preface to an earlier edition of the series, the time has long passed “when individuals entering the archival profession could read a few texts, peruse some journals, attend a workshop and institute or two, and walk away with a sense that they grasped the field’s knowledge and discipline.” This series provides an entry point and a synthetic distillation of a much broader literature that spans an impressive array of academic disciplines. We encourage you, of course, to do a deeper dive into each of the individual topics covered here. But we also remain confident that this series, like its predecessors, provides an honest and accurate snapshot of archival best practices in the early twenty-first century.

The authors, of course, deserve full credit for their individual contributions. The Archival Fundamentals Series III itself, though, constitutes a collaborative enterprise that benefited from the work of SAA Publications Board members, editors, and interns throughout the past decade. These individuals helped to define the series parameters, reviewed proposals and manuscripts, and shepherded various projects to conclusion. Special shout-outs (in alpha order) are owed to: Bethany Anderson, Jessica Ballard, Roland Baumann, Cara Bertram, Mary Caldera, Amy Cooper Cary, Jessica Chapel, Paul Conway, J. Gordon Daines, Keara Duggan, Todd Daniels-Howell, Sarah Demb, Jody DeRidder, Margaret Fraser, Thomas J. Frusciano, Krista Gray, Gregory Hunter, Geoffrey Huth, Petrina Jackson, Joan Krizack, Christopher Lee, Donna McCrea, Jennifer Davis McDaid, Kathryn Michaelis, Nicole Milano, Lisa Mix, Tawny Nelb, Kevin Proffitt, Christopher Prom, Mary Jo Pugh, Aaron Purcell, Colleen Rademaker, Caryn Radick, Dennis Riley, Michael Shallcross, Mark Shelstad, Jennifer Thomas, Ciaran Trace, Anna Trammell, Joseph Turrini, Tawanna Whorley, Stacie Williams, and Deborah Wythe. In addition, I thank current and past SAA staff for their supportive presence and skillful guidance of this series: Nancy Beaumont, Teresa Brinati, Abigail Christian, Jacqueline Price Osafo, Rana Hutchinson Salzman, and Savannah Tiffany. It has been a privilege and great fun to work with everyone on this project.

PETER J. WOSH  
Editor, Archival Fundamentals Series III  
Society of American Archivists



# Introduction



**Audra Eagle Yun and Chela Scott Weber**

*It is morning in the temple. I place each item exactly where I think it ought to be. Stacks and rows of archival boxes stand like great columns of knowledge. History is sacred here. Many have come before me to uphold the traditions and rites of stewardship.*

*The room is cold and surveilled by cameras and staff. Entrance and exit are controlled by our guards. I unlock the door. Only those with permission may gain access, and those admitted must follow our systems and rules at all times. We impose order, protect what is ours, and require discipline from everyone who enters.*

*At my station, I wait for the first customer. Someone walks in, looking lost and confused, and asks for a menu. I try to understand what they want to eat, but they don't know the ingredients they need. I bring out a variety of sources, some in disarray, others unlabeled, but generally the right flavor. The customer looks overwhelmed; they want me to make a meal for them.*

*I look to my colleague for help and we try to remember what the previous chef told us about where we got these ingredients, how to use them, and what the farmer told her about how they were created. Who decided to harvest these? We look through our receipts, but it's written in a language we can't interpret. Some receipts are missing. Are we supposed to keep all of this? Why?<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> After Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Society of American Archivists, 2009).

## Purpose and Use of This Volume

Archivists continually make decisions about the significance and historical value of records, be it alongside a donor, in conversation with resource allocators or community members, in a digital exhibit, at the reference desk, or anywhere in between. The metaphors of archives as temple, prison, and restaurant are especially apt when we look inward at our selection and appraisal practices:

- Our decisions to collect and preserve are imbued with power and often venerated by our stakeholders.
- Our commitment to safeguarding history fosters an imperative to control not only records but those who access them.
- We interpret, narrate, and make meaning and value of the material of memory in both systematic and subjective ways when preparing records for our users.

In *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, we seek to provide a concise, introductory overview to the theory and practice of archival selection and appraisal for students, new professionals, and those looking to expand their understanding of the *what* and the *how* of this work. The guidance we present here centers intentional collecting, adherence to professional values, and responsible stewardship. It asks for critical examination of passive collecting, routine practice, and traditionally received wisdom in order to engage more effectively in diversifying the historical record. We hope this volume will help readers to feel confident and empowered to make thoughtful, principled collection-building decisions, and lay a foundation for continued growth and learning in their appraisal practice.

Audra Eagle Yun is head of special collections and university archivist at a land-grant university in Southern California, specifically on the ancestral lands stewarded by the Acjachemen people. She is a first-generation college graduate who was raised in a low-income household in rural Florida, in the Alachua region home to the Potano (Timucua) and Seminole peoples. She is also a white European American, cisgender female with an educational background in the humanities from elite higher education institutions, part of a heavily represented group in academic librarianship. She studied library and archival studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, including formative practical training related to archival collections care, local history, and community archives work. A number of mentors, particularly women of color, shaped her professional focus on elevating the perspectives and expertise of those who have been marginalized in historical narratives, fostering representational belonging, and building sustainable infrastructure that transforms archival work.<sup>2</sup> The theory of appraisal was part of her formal education, but like many archivists, her training focused on the more passive activity of handling other people's collecting decisions and navigating curatorial practice that reinforced narratives of white supremacy and wealth. Asking questions about the impact of poor accountability and transparency in selection and appraisal on collections care led to her research and writing on archival accessioning and extensible archival processing, as well as post-custodial, community-centered approaches to institutionalized archival stewardship.

Chela Scott Weber is an archivist and librarian who has worked in a variety of collection stewardship and administrative roles in academic libraries and cultural heritage institutions. Chela

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<sup>2</sup> Audra Eagle Yun, "Archives are People: Love, Hope, and Courage for Our Future," plenary for the Society of California Archivists Annual General Meeting, May 20, 2022, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/37z011gc>.

is a white European American, cisgender female raised in a middle-class household. She currently serves as a senior program officer for the OCLC Research Library Partnership. In this role, she works closely with archivists in research libraries across the United States and to a lesser extent Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Chela's undergraduate education spanned public community colleges and a land-grant university, as well as a private fine arts college. She studied library and information science and archival administration at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, a program heavily influenced at the time by the practical experience and perspectives of the labor archivists at the Walter P. Reuther Library. Chela received only a small amount of instruction in archival appraisal during her education and learned largely on the job, both through the mentorship of other archivists and through the trial and error of trying to do her best, working without a safety net in underresourced cultural heritage institutions. Many roles in her career have required her to deal with variably managed and documented collecting programs and appraisal decisions, which has influenced her interest in sound, well-documented appraisal and a resource-sensitive approach to collecting. She came up in the profession as the postmodern conversation about how archivists impact the historical record was gaining critical mass, and has spent much of her career complicating and renegotiating the ideas about archival neutrality received during her education.

Taking into account what we know and do not know, we sought to recruit chapter authors who have practical experience, expertise in a variety of institutional settings, as well as diverse backgrounds. This is decidedly not a work of archival appraisal theory but the practice-focused book we would have wanted to read as emerging archives professionals. It is also informed by our years of administering archival programs. This book takes a holistic approach to the work of selection and appraisal, situating it within and looking at the way it impacts the many functions of an archives.

We assume that the reader works (or will work) with a variety of formats—analogue and digital. When appraisal approaches vary greatly by format, such differences will be addressed, but this book does not segregate discussions about digital records from other formats. We encourage the reader to jump to chapters and resources that are most useful to them in their specific institutional context or that might support their continuing education in an area of practice that may be less familiar.

## What Are Archives?

The word *archives* is used interchangeably to describe archival collections, the building housing archival collections, or the organizational entity responsible for collecting, preserving, and making available archival collections. All three uses appear throughout this book, but this section focuses on archival collections. Archives are records that are being preserved because of their enduring value. Records are created for a primary purpose, whether to record a transaction, document an occurrence, communicate a message, or any number of other personal and administrative reasons. After records no longer serve their primary purpose, sometimes described as evolving from current to noncurrent or active to nonactive, they can serve a secondary purpose as archives.

Archives are often described with different language indicating that they are a specific type of document or created in a specific context. *Records* describe archives created by a government, corporate, or other institutional entity for administrative reasons. *Papers* describe archives created

by individuals or families in the course of their personal lives. *Manuscripts* describe either drafts or an author's copies of literary or unpublished works or a document written by hand, usually textual or music notation. These terms are used formally in cataloging contexts and are used more loosely and interchangeably in other contexts. For example, an archives that describes itself as a manuscript repository will often collect both personal papers and manuscripts.

Records are preserved as archives for a number of reasons:

- *Accountability*: Archives are evidence that can be used to protect people's rights and property by proving that a transaction, agreement, or communication took place.
- *Institutional history*: Archives document the history of business or government operations and decisions, ensure legal compliance, and promote business continuity.
- *Family history*: Archives document births, deaths, marriages, divorces, immigration, and other events that are important to genealogy and family history researchers.
- *Collective memory*: Archives document society, allowing people to connect to their cultural heritage and helping to shape shared narratives about past and present.
- *Supporting scholarship*: Archives allow researchers to use primary source evidence to make principled arguments about what happened in the past, which influences broader public understanding of history.

In the United States, there is an abundance of archival programs that collect and preserve archives for some or all of these reasons. There are two major types of archival programs, and an archival organization may include one or both of these programs. Institutional repositories collect the records of their parent institution. Government archives, corporate archives, and university archives are all institutional repositories. Collecting repositories collect the papers and records of other people, families, and organizations, and they often focus their collecting on a specific region, time period, subject, or set of subjects. Historical societies, public library archives, community archives, and academic archives are common types of collecting repositories.

## What Is Appraisal?

Archival appraisal is the process of deciding which records or papers should or should not be included in an archival repository. Appraisal is a balancing act that takes into account the enduring value of the records being considered, the mission and collecting strategy of the archives and/or parent institution, the records' potential usefulness to scholarship and researchers, and the resources available to care for the materials.

In Figure 1, you will see definitions from the Society of American Archivists' *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*<sup>3</sup> for terms with a close relationship to appraisal. These terms are often used interchangeably and inconsistently throughout the past literature on appraisal. In this volume, we use *selection* to include all the actions and efforts that go into a thoughtful collection development program—from the high-level creation of policy, to the on-the-ground efforts to identify collections of interest, to the more granular work of deciding what within a collection should be transferred to the archives and what should be left behind. We use *appraisal* to mean decisions taken

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<sup>3</sup> *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, Society of American Archivists, <https://dictionary.archivists.org>.

with regard to a specific collection, whether to take or not take in a collection as a whole, or decisions at the series, file, or other level.

Appraisal is a central function in archives, which has only grown in importance in the modern age. At one time, archivists worked in an environment of records scarcity when documents were largely handwritten and anything that could be saved felt precious. In that era, archivists acted largely as keepers, accepting a custodial role for records selected and given to the archives by others including government officials, historians, and collectors. Today, we operate in an environment of records abundance, with far more documentary evidence created than can reasonably be kept, making thoughtful appraisal a vital skill for archivists. Archivists today must use appraisal to reduce the volume of records, make informed choices about the formats they are obligating their institution to steward, and decide what warrants inclusion in the archives based on intellectual, cultural, legal, and other types of value.

Archivists shape the historic record through their appraisal choices. It is important for archivists to try to recognize their own subjectivities and consider how they might impact their appraisal decisions. While previous generations of archivists believed in the idea of archival neutrality, the profession has more recently come to understand that the designation of value is subjective, and archivists will always bring their own worldview and biases to their work. These can be based upon gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religious belief, political identity, and/or the archivist's understanding of history.

Appraisal decisions have a downstream effect on all other archival functions. What is selected for inclusion in the archives, and how those decisions are documented, can impact other parts of the archival program. During accessioning and processing, archivists document and make sense of appraisal decisions and communicate them to users through archival description. These decisions must be well-documented so that public services can help researchers to understand the context of the records they are using, including what didn't come to the archives and why the material in front of them got included.

#### Definitions:

- Selection: n. 1. the process of identifying which records to retain because of their enduring value, “a process by which archivists identify, appraise, and accession records of enduring value that fulfill their institution’s legal mandate or other acquisition goals.”
- Appraisal: n. 1. the process of identifying materials offered to an archives that have sufficient value to be accessioned.
- Acquisition: n. 1. materials physically and officially transferred to a repository as a unit at a single time. n. 2. the process of seeking and receiving materials from any source by transfer, donation, or purchase.
- Disposition (also final disposition): n. 1. materials’ final destruction or transfer to an archives as determined by their appraisal.
- Records Management: n. 1. the systematic and administrative control of records throughout their life cycle to ensure efficiency and economy in their creation, use, handling, control, maintenance, and disposition.

Quoted material from F. Gerald Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Society of American Archivists, 1993), 2, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015029723759>.

**FIGURE 1.** Definitions of terms with a close relationship to appraisal from the Society of American Archivists' *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*

Taking in records with significant preservation needs commits an archives to resource-intensive work to live up to stewardship promises and ensure that the records can be used. Depending on available resources, this could mean a commitment to fundraising for new resources or making choices about how to use finite preservation or conservation time and talent. Similarly, fragile or obsolete formats may need to jump the digitization queue, and there may be an opportunity cost to your digitization program. In general, the volume of records brought in and their stewardship needs will impact the archival program across the board. All archival functions are affected when significant backlogs of un- and underprocessed and described collections are created.

## Why Do Archivists Select and Appraise Records?

The decision to collect archives is also the decision to select and appraise the stuff of history. The mission of most archival institutions is to ensure the preservation of historical information. Indeed, selecting and determining the archival significance of documentation in all formats is often a mandate. No matter the size or scope of the archives, archivists select and appraise because this work is built into the very definition of archives and the labor of the archivists working for them. At a more fundamental level, selection and appraisal are activities that ensure the long-term survival of the documentary heritage of our common humanity. By making decisions about what warrants preservation and access, archivists are also making decisions about the future of historical, genealogical, and legal research and the means through which we understand ourselves, our families, our communities, and our institutions. History is alive and happening now—archival appraisal helps determine what stories we are able to tell about that history.

The Society of American Archivists' statement on the "Core Values of Archivists" articulates the centrality of selection and appraisal in archival practice. First and foremost, this practical work includes "identifying and preserving essential records that document the cultural heritage of society."<sup>4</sup> The notion that your decisions as an archivist might help or dismantle the survival of our documentary heritage can be overwhelming, to say the least! Each of the core values of the profession relate back to archival praxis, providing guidance to archivists navigating the complexities of day-to-day decisions and actions. Many of these core values inform and are interwoven in the everyday work of selection and appraisal while making it less overwhelming, including the following:

- *Access and use:* The goal of wide use and access to records should be central to the decisions made during selection and appraisal.
- *Accountability:* Archives are evidentiary, as predominantly primary source records that document actions and the existence of individuals, groups, and organizations. Decisions made during selection and appraisal must take into consideration public interest, human rights, and the interests of various stakeholders seeking to hold our officials, leaders, organizations, and corporate bodies accountable. As stated, "Preserving evidentiary records for both public and private entities creates a

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<sup>4</sup> "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," Society of American Archivists, last revised August 2020, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>, captured at <https://perma.cc/6XR7-NQPM>.

mechanism to cultivate transparency within organizations and can help make power imbalances visible.”

- *Diversity*: “Archivists respectfully work to build and promote archival collections that document a multiplicity of viewpoints on social, political, and intellectual issues. . . . Building collections that reflect the diversity of humanity is key to preserving a historical record that encompasses the stories of all peoples, instead of just those who wield enough power and influence to ensure their lives are documented.” In essence, a robust and inclusive historical record requires intentional collecting.
- *Responsible stewardship*: Archivists follow recognized standards and best practices for the care and management of archival materials. Every repository will have capacity limits with regard to the labor required to meet those standards. An understanding of available resources is essential to selection and appraisal decisions.
- *Selection*: Archivists recognize and wield power as “active agents in shaping and interpreting the documentation of the past.” These decisions are informed by criteria that are developed ahead of time.
- *Social responsibility*: As stewards of cultural heritage, archivists develop and apply policies and procedures for selecting records that contribute to the greater public good.

From the very beginning of the American archival tradition, our field has concerned itself with reducing the volume of records that end up being placed into archival repositories. The practical origins of appraisal theory in the United States stem from the reality that people and institutions simply create *too many records* to manage, access, and store long term. Since the 1930s, American archivists have lamented the vastness of recordkeeping. With the advent of technologies such as photocopiers and printers, the duplication and redundancy of records significantly increased. The wide variety of formats used to record information in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries introduced the challenge of format fragility. Born-digital records further accelerate both these issues. Such a volume of records would overwhelm archivists and researchers alike, limiting our ability to understand our own history. To reduce volume to a manageable level and retain only records of enduring value, we must rely on best practices that empower archivists to deem which records warrant permanent retention. We simply do not have space for the bulk of records—neither physical nor digital.

Making thoughtful and intentional decisions when conducting selection and appraisal is also an act of care and consideration for the limited resources available for collection stewardship. No archival repository has unlimited physical or digital storage space, archival supplies, digitization equipment, digital media migration tools, or staffing. Collecting decisions are interwoven with the functionality of an archival repository; in other words, the existence of an archival backlog is an indicator of an imbalance between accumulation and stewardship. The amount of labor required for baseline stabilization, description, and access to an archival collection is directly correlated to the level of careful appraisal and selection decisions that came before acquisition.<sup>5</sup> Awareness of staff and other resource capacity is a central factor to incorporate into selection and appraisal.

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<sup>5</sup> Chela Scott Weber, Martha O’Hara Conway, Nicholas Martin, Gioia Stevens, and Brigette Kamsler, *Total Cost of Stewardship: Responsible Collection Building in Archives and Special Collections* (OCLC Research, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.25333/zbh0-a044>.

An untethered collecting program, lack of appraisal for accepted materials, or generally poor stewardship of archives puts materials at great risk. Security, environmental controls, and warehousing can only do so much to prevent the loss of records. Well-documented selection and appraisal reduces the risk of misfiling, theft, and destruction because those tasked with describing and stewarding these records will have a clearer picture of their significance and context. Additionally, archives run the risk of failing donors, colleagues, and other stakeholders if they inadequately care for materials according to established standards and best practices. Poor stewardship can result in the risks of reputational damage, eroded community relationships, and reduced trust in the archives themselves.

The decision to bring in a collection can create positive effects, too. Acquiring a high-profile collection can lead to publicity or fundraising opportunities. Adding a collection with high research value that is closely aligned with collecting priorities and existing holdings can strengthen the repository's holdings as a whole, making it more attractive for researchers to expend the resources to come to the archives. Working with local community members or institutional units to bring their history into the archives can both enrich the historic record and support good community relations for the archives or parent institution.

Ultimately, a well-informed and consistent practice of selection and appraisal provides a service to the users of archives, who benefit from ease of access to materials that have been chosen for their historical, evidential, and/or research value. Collecting records without a strategy or policy to guide selection and appraisal is counterproductive to the goal of keeping records in the first place—for discovery and access. Archivists document their collecting decisions in order to make archives more easily understood and contextualized by those who encounter, discover, and use them. In this way, strategic selection and appraisal supports research that helps people understand the past and present, as well as recognize themselves and their communities in history.

## Who Else Selects and Appraises Records?

Archivists are not the only people who perform selection and appraisal. Any number of people can influence the contents of a collection before an archivist ever interacts with it. These appraisal decisions are important contextual information for the archivist to understand and document and should inform their own thinking when considering a collection.

In institutional settings, records managers create retention and disposal schedules that influence which records are kept and which are destroyed. A strong records management program can support later archival appraisal by providing information to help the archivist determine what warrants inclusion in the archives. Dealers (such as rare book sellers) can significantly shape a collection before it becomes available to archivists by working with the collection creator, estate, or surviving relatives to determine what material to bring to market.

Donors and collection creators of course also exert influence over what comes into the archives. They may have strong opinions about what is important, or they may want to exclude material for privacy, security, or reasons of personal sensitivities. Communities who work to collect their own history can appraise according to their interests, their values, and how they want to be remembered.

## When Is Appraisal Performed?

Appraisal is sometimes thought of as something that happens once, usually at the point materials are offered to an archives and before they are acquired. In reality, appraisal happens at many different stages. The earliest formal appraisal work in an institution takes place when a collection development policy is written and collecting priorities are agreed upon. The bulk of appraisal work happens at the pre-custodial stage, when an archivist is working with donors, dealers, collection creators, or records managers to consider specific collections or fonds. This is the ideal time to do appraisal, when you have access to the people closest to record creation and can ask questions and document information that will not be available in later stages of stewardship.

Further appraisal work happens at several post-custodial stages. Like the iterative approach taken in extensible processing, appraisal that continues through the course of collection stewardship enhances and improves on initial work. During accessioning and processing, appraisal decisions will often be refined as the collection is more closely examined. Reappraisal projects, in which a repository systematically assesses a portion or all of its holdings to consider if previous appraisal decisions still make sense, are becoming more commonplace as well.

## How Should an Archivist Approach Selection and Appraisal?

Is archival selection and appraisal an art or science, a theory or practice? The answer is *yes*. There are strong creative and personal elements to the act of deciding which records have the most enduring historical value, accumulating archives through our imagined connections between them, with the end result itself a product of humanity that can be at once beautiful, emotional, and even transformative. At the same time, many archivists apply subject knowledge, structured appraisal rubrics, and a systematic approach to sampling, verifying authenticity, and selecting records that represent or provide evidence of a designated suite of topics or formats. The theory of appraisal is long-standing and continually debated, navigating complex and intangible ideas such as objectivity and neutrality, agency and power, value and importance, and social justice—it challenges us to think about the *why*, but not always the *how*. Selection and appraisal are also skills that can be developed over time and acquired through practice; in fact, those with the deepest experience are considered masters of the craft.

The competencies necessary for an archivist to approach selection and appraisal are informed by the interweaving of knowledge and craft. Developing a certain level of familiarity with the guiding values and ethics of the archival profession is one of the best ways for an archivist to immerse themselves in the core ideas that inform archival work. No practical work can be done intentionally or sustainably without studying the theory and principles that undergird it. Competencies that improve selection and appraisal work include judgment and analysis, strong communication, cultural humility, topical and/or format expertise, organization skills, and an ability to think creatively and iteratively about a problem. To select and appraise material of enduring historical value is to act with care and consideration, applying techniques and technologies equitably in

the interest of the public good. As with any occupation that requires skills and knowledge, the practitioner is informed by their own intersectional identities, subject knowledge, and patterns of experience over time.

Appraisal and selection experience is often found through on-the-job opportunities, such as internships or fellowships within certain institutional contexts. Whether the archivist is still in training or very experienced, this work is informed by the specificities (and sometimes peculiarities) of our institutional contexts and what are or are not defined as job responsibilities. Approaching material for evaluation, archivists are expected to take into account the social, political, and/or resource priorities of their institution and its archives. An archivist working in a corporate setting will have responsibilities for selection that differ from those of an archivist working in an educational setting, for example. Although the responsibility for appraisal and selection is sometimes not clearly assigned, archivists must make decisions about what to keep when dealing with acquired or transferred materials.

To develop an approach to selection and appraisal, archivists must become familiar with our field's professional standards and the relevant responsibilities, skills, and abilities that are informed by these ideas. In doing so, we can more adequately recognize and document our own subjectivity and bias in decision-making around the inherently personal work of determining which records warrant long-term preservation and access. Much has been written about the intermingling of power and privilege in institutional archival settings that have resulted in misrepresentation, erasure, and even the maligning of underrepresented perspectives in historical records. It does not serve our stakeholders, local communities, or the future of our archives to represent the voices of the powerful alone. Archivists today are developing cultural competencies that inform proactive documentation efforts, incorporating the imperatives of social justice with the action of directing selection, appraisal, and collection stewardship that yields to the expertise and knowledge of the people and communities who have not been centered in the records that document or, perhaps, misrepresent them. In whatever work we do to make choices about the stuff of history, we must seek to be as transparent as possible, document our decisions, and take action in service to our varied stakeholders.

## What to Expect in This Book

Much of the existing literature on appraisal is theoretical in nature. In our own careers, we have struggled with the *how* of appraisal and have shaped this book to address that gap. In Chapter 1, Michelle Light offers a grounding in the arc of thinking and major ideas on appraisal in the archival literature of the United States. The American way is, for better or worse, a branch of archival practice that is rooted in the European tradition, and understanding this history helps explain how we got to where we are today. The chapters that follow are focused on praxis—practical ideas that are grounded in values, informed by the past, and intentionally moving the profession forward.

In Chapter 2, Jillian Cuellar unpacks the importance of collection development and acquisitions policies, including how to create them, as codified tools to guide selection and appraisal work. Readers will consider components and strong examples of these documents. The establishment of a thematic vision for collecting via a collection development policy is the backbone

of intentional collecting. It is a significant way to actualize the theory behind appraisal while also challenging the history of systemic erasure in the records we steward.

In Chapter 3, Maureen Cresci Callahan and David Staniunas delve into the methodologies, ethics, and strategies for selection and acquisitions in repositories that collect manuscripts, archives, and personal papers. Here, readers will be able to take into account the interpersonal and practical elements of collecting, including the value of hospitality and the development of trusting relationships with donors, colleagues, and our communities. Readers will be educated in the value of an intentional approach to collecting, including solicitation, site visits, and legal agreements such as deeds of gift. The authors continue into Chapter 4 with considerations of and approaches to the work of appraisal, specifically tools and methods for analyzing discrete bodies of records and documenting the resulting decisions. Readers will be provided with questions to help inform and empower them when applying various approaches, including functional analysis, macroappraisal, and the Minnesota Method.

Melissa Gonzales in Chapter 5 provides a comprehensive and thoughtful overview of appraisal and acquisitions in institutional settings, with a primer on records management programs and their role in institutional archives. This chapter will be especially useful for archivists seeking to understand records management concepts that can support a systematic approach to the selection and appraisal of institutional records.

Carrie Hintz ties it all together in Chapter 6, contextualizing selection, appraisal, and acquisitions within the overarching archival program. Readers will take into account the impact and implications of long-term stewardship, including priority-setting and potential use, and the central role of communication and estimating resource commitments. The book concludes with a look toward future directions in the archival field and provides an appendix of useful examples and templates.

We have crafted this book so that it can be read in a linear way in educational settings and as a quick reference in practical settings. We encourage you to read it in its entirety or jump to specific chapters as your situation warrants. Throughout this book, readers will find guidance on principles, standards, best practices, and approaches to the work of selection and appraisal from the perspectives of those with deep and varied backgrounds. We have learned, and unlearned, a great deal in working on this book. We hope it similarly sets you on the path to a greater understanding of how to enact acquisitions and appraisal in your unique situation.