

Society of American Archivists Council Meeting Chicago, IL

Description Section: Annual Report (Prepared by: Betts Coup)

Year: 2024-2025

Current Rosters (Include full name, position title, and term end date for each):

2024-2025 Year

Chair: Betts Coup (term as chair ends 2025, Immediate Past Chair 2025-2026)

Vice Chair/Chair Elect: Max Goldberg (term as Vice Chair ends 2025, Chair 2025-2026, Immediate Past Chair 2026-2027)

Immediate Past Chair: Will Clements (2025)

Secretary: Mandy Lignelli (2026)

Member-at-Large: Melissa Haley (2026)

Member-at-Large: Corey Cherrington (2025)

Lead Blog Editor: Kate Madison (2025)

Web Liaison: Scott Kirycki (2028)

2025-2026 Year

Chair: Max Goldberg, (term as chair ends 2026, term on Steering Committee 2027)

Vice Chair/Chair Elect: Corey Cherrington (term as Vice Chair ends 2026, term on Steering Committee 2028)

Immediate Past Chair: Betts Coup (2025)

Secretary: Mandy Lignelli (2026)

Member-at-Large: Melissa Haley (2026)

Member-at-Large: Sarah Bush (2027)

Lead Blog Editor: Betts Coup (2028)

Web Liaison: Scott Kirycki (2028)

Council Liaison: Jillian Cuellar

PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

(Please indicate all projects and activities that your component group has completed this year, continues to work on, or plans to implement in the following fiscal year.)

Completed:

The Description Section hosted two online events online early in the calendar year. The first was a continuation of an in-person Bring Your Own Breakfast meeting organized in collaboration with the Visual Materials Section for the 2024 SAA Annual Meeting in Chicago last August. That session was well-attended and had a boisterous discussion, so much so that we wanted to give those interested in the topic another opportunity to get together. With the Visual Materials Section, we held a rousing discussion session on the description of visual materials, with crowd-sourced topics in February 2025. There were familiar faces from the in-person event but also many newcomers, and it became clear to all of us that the topic is one for which there continues to be hunger for continued conversation. This will take the form, at least for the moment, of a proposed new *Descriptive Notes* blog series to be launched in fall of 2025.

The Description Section also held a panel discussion of case studies on generative artificial intelligence (AI) and archival description in April 2025, which was attended by more than 280 people. The panel included:

- Enhancing Access to Oral History Collections with Natural Language Processing - Mara Gregory, Dartmouth Digital History Initiative Fellow at Dartmouth College
- Transforming Access: Leveraging AI for Efficient Metadata Creation - Ken Axford, Project Archivist and Hope Dunbar, University Archivist, University Archives, University at Buffalo
- Innovating Discovery: AI-Enhanced Search for Hanford's Unique Scientific Collections - Sridevi Wagle, Machine Learning Engineer, AI/ML Solutions and Nicole Critchley, Research Librarian, Research Information Services, Pacific Northwest National Laboratory
- Accessible AI in the Archives: Using ChatGPT for Archival Description - Liz Bloodworth, University Archivist & Special Collections Librarian, Illinois Wesleyan University

This is a topic that elicits a range of feelings and concerns around the introduction of AI and our work (and AI more generally), all of which are valid. Based on the response to the panel of case studies, however, with a discussion running even up to the last second, this topic will continue to be investigated and considered by this Section moving forward.

Ongoing:

The Description Section Steering Committee is responsible for two major ongoing initiatives: *Descriptive Notes*, the group's blog, and the Documentation Portal on the microsite. *Descriptive Notes* will wrap up its Audiovisual Description series early in the new SAA year and turn to a Visual Materials Description series. Ongoing series, including Inclusive Description, Conference Dispatches, and Section Updates, will continue to be posted.

The Documentation Portal of the Description Section is regularly updated by our Web Liaison, Scott Kirycki. The portal's Inclusive Description portion was a focus of the 2023-2024 SAA year, and the group turned its attention to calls for born digital description resources in 2024-2025. We will continue to call for additions to the Portal across all areas throughout the next year.

New:

The Description Section Steering Committee is already planning its first event of the new cycle, a workshop hosted by Regine Heberlein to give Section members the opportunity to work with Records in Context (RiC) in a Wikibase instance she has created. The event is planned for the fall (likely mid-October). There are two additional events that are tentatively in planning for later in the year, as well.

SAA STRATEGIC PLAN

(Please review the current [Strategic Plan](#) and indicate below how the component group has or plans to contribute to one or more of the four main goals.)

Goal 1: Advocating for Archives and Archivists

1.3 The Description Section has provided “leadership in ensuring the completeness, diversity, and accessibility of the historical record” by maintaining and adding to our Documentation Portal on our section micro-site. This is maintained and reviewed with regularity.

1.4 Through its blog, the Section provides a publication platform that allows archivists “to articulate the value of archives.”

Goal 2: Enhancing Professional Growth

2.2 The Section provides a publication forum through our blog, *Descriptive Notes*, about current and evolving descriptive practices in archives.

2.3 Through our blog and our Documentation Portal, the Section provides affordable and accessible information about archival description and descriptive resources.

Goal 3: Advancing the Field

3.1 The Description Section holds events that relate to advancements in the profession with regards to description, including our recent exploration of AI & archival description held in April 2025, as well as panels exploring redescriptive practices and approaches to description of visual materials.

3.2 The Section “foster[s] and disseminate[s] research in and about the field” through our blog and our Documentation Portal. We have committed to sharing updates from other archival groups - such as TS-

EAS, TS-DACS, and Dado-CM - through this blog platform, and providing these groups an opportunity to share about their work at our annual business meeting.

Goal 4: Meeting Members' Needs

4.1 / 4.4 The Section membership is regularly kept up to date on activities and opportunities to contribute via the Section's listserv. A report was made to membership at our annual business meeting, where we also invited members to come forward with projects and ideas. Steering committee members are available for questions and comments, and we have a shared email that is always open for suggestions for events, blog series or posts, as well as additions to our documentation portal.

SAA ANNUAL MEETING

Number of attendees: 87

Link to meeting minutes:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/128WGmHH9OgRMM7w5Q6XkGISR5W20Yc8GU_iuEQ1oC4A/edit?usp=sharing

Summary of meeting activities and highlights:

The Description Section Steering Committee provided updates to our activities of the last year and plans for the next, as well as updates from core collaborators (likely TS-DACS, TS-EAS, SNAC, as well as Dado-CM). The committee hosted a panel discussion regarding the descriptive quandaries that arise when archivists are faced with reprocessing legacy collections. Talks explored questions such as: What are the tradeoffs involved in repurposing existing description, especially when it conflicts with DACS? What are strategies for transparency in documenting collection context and processing decisions? What skills are necessary in successfully communicating with stakeholders not trained as archivists but invested in a collection? This sessions was intended to provide food for thought in navigating archival debt and establishing reasonable expectations for reprocessing.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

How would you describe the health or energy of the group, and how engaged are the members?

The Description Section remains one of SAA's largest groups. Though our annual meeting attendance was down some (perhaps due to the summer Friday afternoon scheduling), we had nearly 300 attendees and more than 100 at our events this year. We routinely receive regular submissions to *Descriptive Notes* and see a good amount of traffic via SAA Connect, demonstrating that members are engaged with the Section across its various platforms.

Did the component group's leadership encounter any challenges in achieving its goals for the year?

Bandwidth is always a challenge for volunteer groups, but the leadership this past year gave a great deal of their time and thought to pushing forward our events, blog, and general goals to be responsive to

member needs. One of the ways this challenge often presents itself is recruiting candidates for positions on the Steering Committee, but this was less of a challenge this particular year than it often can be.

What suggestions do you have for the SAA Council and staff that might help address these challenges in the coming term?

The challenges are more field-wide, we don't believe there is anything SAA Council can do beyond their great efforts to support Sections. Section leadership did notice that our current SAA Council rep, Jillian, came to many of our meetings and engaged with us, which was deeply appreciated and somewhat new for this particular Section over the past several years.

What questions or concerns do you have for the SAA Council and staff?

We do not currently have any questions or concerns.