All Over the Map: Building a Comprehensive Database of US Archival Repositories

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Abstract: How many archives exist in the United States and where are they located? It's a seemingly simple question best answered with "It depends and it's complicated." Until recently, the largest extant data set of US repositories were those listed by OCLC's ArchiveGrid, representing around 1200 locations. However, this data set is limited to research libraries participating in networked archival description efforts, and does not capture the breadth of many smaller and community archives.

The need for an improved comprehensive data set grew out of Ben Goldman (Penn State University) and Eira Tansey's (University of Cincinnati) previous work mapping the vulnerability of US archives to climate change. As we worked on that project using the ArchiveGrid data set, we realized that it only documented the risks to large research libraries. We were unable to assess "under the radar" archives that exist across the United States, as they were not represented in the ArchiveGrid data.

In 2017, Ben and Eira received a Society of American Archivists Foundation grant to build a comprehensive data set of US archives. With the assistance of Whitney Ray as our graduate research assistant, we contacted more than 150 archival organizations to request any lists, spreadsheets, or databases containing known archives in their purview. We received over 30,000 raw data points, and have spent much of this year cleaning and normalizing the data in order to establish a comprehensive data set to make available to the public. Our profession has historically had scarce geospatial data on the locations of archives, and this represents a major step forward. We anticipate that our data set will enable significant reuse projects, from identifying community archives to regional climate risk assessments to building visibility for the larger archives profession.

About the Author:

Eira Tansey is the Digital Archivist/Records Manager for the University of Cincinnati. She is responsible for the university's records management program and for electronic records. She has a BA in Geography from the University of Cincinnati, and an MLIS from San Jose State University, and previously worked at the Louisiana Research Collection at Tulane University. Tansey currently serves on SAA's Committee for Public Policy, and previously served in many SAA leadership positions, including chair of the Records Management Section, Nominating Committee, and the Communications Task Force. Her research areas include archives and climate change, and the relationship of recordkeeping to environmental regulation.