

# Government Record News

The Newsletter of the Government Records Section  
Of The Society of American Archivists

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August 2001

## FROM THE CHAIR

July 16, 2001

Dear Colleague:

It appears that this will be another terrific edition of the Government Records Section Newsletter, thanks to the outstanding efforts of our editor Tim Johnson, and our contributors, including Merisue D'Achille of the National Archives and Records Administration, and Mr. Kenneth Winn of the Missouri State Archives.

I also want to encourage you all to attend the Government Records Section Meeting at the Meeting of the Society of American Archivists. On Thursday, August 30, 2001, at 8:00 am, it will be the great pleasure of the Section to welcome Dra. Stella Ma. González Cicero, Director of Archivo General de la Nación, Republic of Mexico. She

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## The Technical and Archival Implications of New Electronic Records Storage Media

**Merisue D'Achille**

National Archives and Records Administration

The world of electronic records is changing dramatically and rapidly. The 3480-class magnetic tape cartridge, once seen as more than adequate to meet the needs of preserving electronic records, has now been eclipsed by more durable, more versatile, and more efficient technology. As the archival world enters this new era of electronic records (which now includes not only traditional databases, but also word processing, email and optical image files), the 3480 cartridge now seems inadequate.

It is not always easy to determine when an institution's current electronic record storage media no longer meets its present and future storage needs. There is a certain amount of prediction required to identify the need to upgrade storage media. A preservation archivist must realize the future trends of electronic records, and identify if her current storage media is capable of meeting the needs created by these future records. In addition, the preservation archivist must be aware of the current storage media market.

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## Newsletter of the Government Records Section

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will be introduced by Mr. John Carlin, Archivist of the United States.

After Dra. González Cicero's presentation, the Government Records Section will hear from Ms. Nancy Smith, Director of the Presidential Materials Staff, and Mr. Sam Watkins, Project Director, Clinton Electronic Records. They will speak on "Moving the Clinton White House."

After the presentations, the Government Records Section will have a brief business meeting, including the election of new Steering Committee Members.

The Board of the GRS is seeking out three worthy individuals to replace outgoing members of the GRS Board. We need individuals from Local, State (Province), and Federal Government. This is a terrific opportunity to get involved in SAA, and to contribute to the educational endeavors and other activities of the Government Records Section. We still need nominees to serve as Federal and State Representatives on the General Records Section Steering Committee. Please consider contacting the Nominations Committee, which includes Jim Cassedy, Jelain Chubb, and Diana Banning via e-mail or telephone before the meeting. Our addresses and contact information are available at [governmentrecordssection.org](http://governmentrecordssection.org).

It has been an honor to serve as Chair of the Government Records Section for the past year. I've worked with a terrific Steering Committee, including Kimberly Cumber and Leonora Gidlund, who will be rotating off the Committee, and rising Chair Jelain Chubb, and Archie DiFante and Diana Banning, who will continue to be members of the Steering Committee. All have made valued contributions to our work.

It's also been a great pleasure to work with Timothy J. Johnson, the Sections Newsletter Editor. Tim has put together some outstanding newsletters. I think that as the American Archivist is now put out two times a year, the Newsletters of the various Sections will play an increasingly important role in communications among SAA members. Tim has set a high mark for SAA Editorship, and I deeply appreciate his efforts, and hope he will continue his good work.

Over the past year, Ms. Anita Doering has put together an outstanding new vehicle for communication among Government Records Section members – the Government Records Section Web Site ([governmentrecordssection.org](http://governmentrecordssection.org)). If you have not had a chance to look at this site, please do so. It contains much information, including connections to other related web sites, and listserves – including the Government Records Section listserve. This information is not just for Government Records Section members, but for archivists everywhere. Please bookmark this site, and thank you Anita!

The Government Records Section, and SAA, needs your assistance. Please consider the good examples of our colleagues, and join them as they work toward creating a stronger profession.

Regards,

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The media used by other archival institutions is important, as well as the ongoing research of new storage media options in both the technical and archival fields. In the end, an electronic records storage media must ease work procedures and appropriately store and preserve the integrity of the data – once the media becomes a hindrance to the program, it is time to change!

The general requirements for a new standard preservation media for electronic records are fairly easy to identify: an appropriate preservation media must be durable, transportable across different operating systems, and efficient to use (both in terms of byte size and copying speed). However, in addition to the question of how to integrate a new media within the existing technology used in some electronic records program (such as the 3480 magnetic tapes), other problems such as staff training, overall cost of both the media and operating systems, ease of conversion, etc. must also be considered.

There are many options in the electronic records storage media market. Certain options can be immediately discarded, as they do not meet basic requirements for an archival program. Archival storage media must be widely used and tested by other institutions (government, academic, archival). Well-defined standards for the storage media technology must be developed and accepted in the archival community. The storage media must meet acceptable levels of longevity, error rates and size. The technology must be one that is well-supported by the manufacturer. A durable, large and well-tested media is worthless if there is not a support system to turn to in cases of technical failures. For instance, holographic and etched-disk technology, while technologically advanced, pose great problems for use as archival storage media. Neither technology is well tested, as they are relatively new. Both technologies are incompatible with most typical operating systems, and there are not universally accepted standards for their use.

## **The Missouri State Archives and the St. Louis Circuit Court Project— Creating Partnerships that Rise to the Occasion**

**Kenneth H. Winn**

Missouri State Archives

The necessity of forming partnerships has become a cliché of the archival world, but no less true for that. While the Missouri State Archives has a number of ongoing partnerships, probably the most prominent is its work with the St. Louis Circuit Court, Washington University, and the University of Missouri—St. Louis. This work first began with a single agreement between the State Archives and the Circuit Clerk's office. In August 1999 representatives of the Archives met with the Circuit Clerk and offered to include his office in the Archives' local records program. The Clerk accepted the offer and by September the project was underway. When the project is concluded it will result in a significant rewriting of parts of early St. Louis history, Missouri history, and even American history. The early legal records of St. Louis are historically rich, voluminous in quantity, and almost entirely unexplored.

When our archivists delved into the records they discovered the largest single collection of historically valuable records in the state of Missouri that had never been systematically examined by historical researchers. The earliest of the records are in French and Spanish and date from 1796. To make the initial project manageable, archivists decided to restrict their work to documents created before 1875, the year a new constitution made St. Louis an independent

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Optical technology and magnetic tape both offer viable options for electronic record storage media. Magnetic tape is widely available, a popular choice among archival institutions, and has been used successfully in the past by archival institutions across the world. There are well-developed standards for archival use of magnetic tape. As an example, upgrading from the 3480 tape cartridge to the 3590 cartridge provides a situation that would minimize the disruption to current operating systems and hardware requirements. The use of optical technology continues to grow, and standards are continuing to form. The choice of the magnetic tape, such as the 3590 tape cartridge, is obviously not a permanent solution. In another 20 years, perhaps sooner, archival institutions will again face this same question. By then, there will be new media options on the market, and then perhaps optical disk may be the perfect choice. This decision of a new storage media is neither definitive nor clear cut. Technically, it is impossible to find a "perfect" storage media for an archival preservation program. What must be realized is that a "best-fit" choice must be made.

Archivally, there are certain implications to consider when choosing a new storage media for electronic records. There are monetary costs, as well as other economic costs such as new training for employees, redevelopment of current work processes, and transition of records from old to new media. If a storage media is chosen which is a different shape and size from the current media, shelving and space concerns must be addressed. Grouping, cataloging of records and reference services will also be impacted.

Adaptability and a well-thought out methodology that addresses these issues must be in place before the new storage media is purchased. The implications of this change are far reaching. Preservation policies (such as recopying procedures and grouping of records together on one media unit) and reference ordering systems will need adjustment to reflect the changing face of archival holdings.

Listed below are 20 questions which, at a minimum, must be examined and fully answered when investigating new storage media. These questions reflect the unique technical and archival needs of preserving historical federal records. Using these questions as a guideline for examining storage media will help bring structure to an otherwise complex task.

1. Is this new storage media technology compatible with the existing storage media currently in use to preserve electronic records?
2. What is the cost of this storage media?
  - Per unit
  - Per byte
  - Any costs associated with changing system (operating systems, new drives, space for drives, retraining staff, etc.)
3. What amount of staff training will be needed?
4. What is the effect on current stack space? Will shelving need to be altered?
5. Can this new storage media operate with the existing systems (operating, cataloging, etc.)?
6. What is the value added, in terms of byte size, speed, ease of use, etc?
7. How durable is the new media?
8. What is the expected life of the media (how long can staff be sure that the integrity of the data is not compromised)?
9. How popular is this media? Is it an accepted form of archival preservation media?
10. Does this media comply with current technology standards?
11. What are the views of this media from the archival community?
12. When is this new media needed? Is this an immediate need?
13. How easy will the migration of data from current to new media be?
14. How reliable is this media? Have there been any documented cases of data loss or difficulty in using the media to recover data?
15. Is technical support available from the provider?
16. What is the future need for the archival institution? Can it be predicted that this media will adequately serve their archival needs for preserving electronic records for many years into the future?
17. What media is currently used by other archival institutions?

18. How will the new media affect current work processes (cataloging, grouping of records on one unit of media, etc.)?
19. Does switching to a new media in any way impact (positively or negatively) the archival institution's mission?
20. Are there currently storage media developed and in use which are compatible with the new storage media?

This list of criteria established above is merely the framework to use when researching the electronic record storage media market. These questions are useful to first determine if a switch is indeed necessary at the time. From that point, identifying the answers to these questions can help to narrow the realm of storage media to a more manageable choice of perhaps two or three different technologies. It is unlikely that, after answering these questions, one storage media will emerge as the option perfectly suited for the archival institution's current needs. Therefore, these criteria must be prioritized in order to assist in accurately choosing a new storage media that will best serve the electronic records storage needs in the present and into the future. For instance, it may be determined that priority should be given to storage media which is made with well established technology, has solid technical support, is developed in line with currently accepted technology standards, and is well-tested in the archival community. In general, it is usually not the goal of an archival institution to maintain its electronic records holdings on technology which is considered "cutting edge." An archival preservation program does not need the biggest, fastest or newest storage media. It needs reliable, durable and proven storage media.

Finally, the archival institution must be committed to the change. Preservation of records to ensure their access by researchers is the primary goal of the archival world. By choosing an electronic records storage media which is durable, well-tested and easy to use both in the government and in the public, this goal can be met.

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city within the state and which also roughly marks the end of the post-Civil war period. Structuring the project in this manner meant tackling approximately four million pages of unprocessed, misarranged, and sometimes physically abused documents.

The agreement set into motion a fascinating intellectual adventure into life in early Missouri. The first day on the job the Archives staff found up twenty-six cases involving William Clark. Over the next four months they turned up six even rarer cases involving Clark's exploring partner, Meriwether Lewis. They have now uncovered 106 such cases. The crown jewel of the collection, however, is the original Dred Scott case, which took place in St. Louis's old Courthouse during the course of two trials between 1846 and 1852. This case has proved of great use in advertising the collection. The Dred Scott case, however, is just one freedom suit among many. Other important records are well in evidence, including many cases involving Missouri's greatest U.S. Senator, Thomas Hart Benton, St. Louis's founder Auguste Chouteau, along with many thousands of pages related to the early fur trade, steamboats, western travel, divorce, immigration, business, and the Civil War. Despite all of the well-known names, as all family historians know, the most important document, of course, is the one with your great grandfather's name on it.

In one sense the collection's quality has sold itself, but in another our good fortune simply underscores the adage that nothing succeeds like success. Each small victory has made the next hurdle easier. Shortly after the project had begun the Bar Association of Metropolitan St. Louis endorsed and became an official sponsor. UMB Bank in St. Louis made a lead donation to the project. With each endorsement other opportunities arose. Speaking engagements have come with great regularity from groups interested in the history of the Underground Rail-

road, academic and university alumni gatherings, and large family history conferences. In terms of the media coverage, the records are a gift that keeps on giving. To date we have had four press conferences and there will be more as we market our discoveries.

One media event resulted from the restoration work performed on the original Dred Scott papers by the Missouri State Archives' conservation lab. Upon the work's completion they were returned to St. Louis with great fanfare on Lincoln's birthday in February 2000. The St. Louis mayor, the Presiding Judge of the United States 8<sup>th</sup> District Court, state Supreme Court Judges, state Appeals Court Judges, and the Secretary of State, were featured speakers at the Old Courthouse ceremony. Happily, many of Dred Scott's descendents from across the country came for the occasion.

On July 7, 2000, President Bill Clinton officially designated these early court records an "American Treasure" and announced that the Missouri State Archives had won a grant, as part of the "Save America's Treasures" program to provide conservation work for the collection. The press release issued from the White House characterized "the St. Louis Civil Court Records [as]...a premier judicial collection documenting westward expansion during the territorial and early statehood period, 1790-1830...[which] illustrates broad themes of American intellectual and social history." In 2000 only forty-one projects won grants from across the country. The St. Louis Circuit Court project was Missouri's only winner.

These sorts of events and awards act as an imprimatur for the project and give others confidence to join us in our work. The early participation of St. Louis's universities encouraged more people to help us and when they responded the universities deepened their commitment. The connection between this project and Washington University first began in the fall of 1999, which led to an internship program in the fall of 2000. The University of Missouri—St. Louis began adding their students in the summer of 2001. In fall 2001 Washington University faculty will begin teaching a course based upon the court records.

Simultaneous to our work with students, meetings with representatives from Washington University's library system led to a deal in which the library agreed to digitize St. Louis Circuit Court records cases selected by a group of historians from the State Archives, Washington University, the University of Missouri—St. Louis, and others. The project began with the Dred Scott records as a pilot effort. On January 15 of this year the Secretary of State, the St. Louis Circuit Clerk, and Washington University Vice Chancellor for Information Technology and Dean of Libraries appeared at a joint press conference announcing the Washington University Internet initiative. The press conference was carried extensively by the local media. A special feature story by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* was subsequently picked up nationally on most major papers and online news sources. Hits on the website came from every continent in the world and in less than seventy-two hours of the press conference the number of visitors to the website climbed to a quarter of a million, coming from every continent. This project truly has a global reach.

Other plans are ahead. With soft money we have added two archivists and a conservator and hope to expand that effort. We plan the creation of a Friends group and a fundraising drive. We hope to include other St. Louis government offices in the project, as well as at least one other university and eventually locate and fund a permanent government records research center. We are proud of our success, but the underlying point is that the Missouri State Archives is no richer than other repositories of its type. Indeed, poorer than some. While it may be hard sometimes to keep track of all of the fingers, it still remains, many hands make light work—make work possible at all.

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**Newsletter of the Government Records Section**

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