



Understanding and Using Archives

## Why Are Some Sources Archived and Others Not?

Citation: Knowlton, Steven A., "Why Are Some Sources Archived and Others Not?" in *Research Methods Primary Sources* (Marlborough: Adam Matthew Digital, 2021)

Text © Adam Matthew Digital 2021

Author(s): Steven A. Knowlton (Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey, USA)

### Author(s)

Steven A. Knowlton is Librarian for History and African American Studies at Princeton University. He has published articles in *Libraries: Culture, History and Society*, *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, *College and Research Libraries*, *Library Trends*, *Library Resources and Technical Services*, and *Raven: A Journal of Vexillology*, among others; has served on editorial boards of journals, advisory boards to projects gathering primary sources, and as editor of *Flag Research Quarterly* and *Vexillum*; and is a two-time winner of the Justin Winsor Library History Essay Award, as well as the Captain William Driver Award and the Whitney Smith Award. He holds degrees in history from the University of Michigan and the University of Memphis, and a master's degree in library and information science from Wayne State University.

### Abstract

Historical materials found in archives are by no means representative of the general human experience in the past. Certain people and activities are overrepresented, while others are hard to find in archives. This is partially due to the fact that the most commonly used historical records are created by literate people and saved by those with the motive and means to preserve them

for future use. Other reasons that materials may be included in or excluded from archives involve historical collecting practices, which for centuries favored governmental and institutional records, or materials useful for the types of historical research practiced in the nineteenth century. Although more recently archives have begun collecting materials from marginalized people and groups, paper objects that were at some point excluded from the archives were more likely than archived materials to suffer the ravages that time, disaster, and war can inflict on fragile paper. As well, archives can only contain materials that creators want to deposit, and there are many reasons a person or organization may want to keep their records away from the eyes of academic researchers. The processing of archival collection also results in the disposal of some records, due to policy or to limited scope and space for a collection. Finally, surrogates of archival materials—microfilm and digital editions—are created for the purposes of preservation, to meet demand, and to turn a profit; the competing logics of these purposes means that only some collections are reproduced, and those reproductions may not be the ones a researcher hopes will be available.

## Learning Outcomes

---

Students will be able to explain:

- Why archives were created, and the purposes served by archives in the present day
- The kind of materials that archives have collected in the past, and current trends in archival collecting
- What happens to materials when they are “processed” for the archives
- How all of these facts influence what materials are available for research in archives
- How and why materials from archives are selected for digitization by libraries and commercial vendors

## Introduction

---

The researcher looking for sources on a given topic may discover that the archival record pertaining to their interests appears to be a spotty, fractured, and warped reflection of the lives that were experienced by people of that period. It is an unfortunate reality of historical research that some people, organizations, and movements leave few records; it is a further misfortune for

the researcher that some records that are left behind are not preserved in an archive. Moreover, the records that are preserved may be unrepresentative of the actual records produced by the historical subject.

In order that the reader may better understand the nature of archives, this entry covers in broad strokes the nature of material that is archived, what happens to historical records after they are deposited in an archive, and the factors that archives and publishers consider when choosing which material to make accessible to users at a distance through microfilm and digitization. Armed with this knowledge, the researcher may be in a position to better judge the uses to which archival material may be put when collecting and analyzing resources for investigation.

## Who Makes Historical Records, and Why

---

Historical records, as many (especially Western) people think of them, are produced by literate people. Those who did not write could not leave records, in the sense of long-lasting documents accessible to anyone with the ability to read in the language and writing system employed by the creator of the records.

There are many other ways that historical information has been preserved. For example, the Inca of South America used a system of knotted cords called *quipu* to record data.<sup>1</sup> Coins can provide useful information about the iconography used by a ruling class and about problems of economic history.<sup>2</sup> In addition, material objects such as tapestries and vases can serve as “sites of memory”—“where memory crystallizes and secretes itself”,<sup>3</sup> which is to say, where a person with appropriate cultural knowledge, usually acquired by living within the same culture that produced the object, is prompted by an encounter with such an object to recall facts and feelings, even those which they received secondhand. However, objects of material culture are more likely to be preserved in museums than archives.

In many societies, techniques of memorization of lineages and oral tradition are sufficiently effective that griots (a West African historian, storyteller, praise singer, poet, or musician) and their counterparts can accurately recount many centuries’ worth of events.<sup>4</sup> Oral traditions have, in the past, been discounted by Western scholars, but studies show they can be highly reliable; in fact, some archives now contain recordings or transcripts of oral histories. While oral histories are excellent supplements to records from literate people, oral traditions are essential sources for

those studying the history of West Africa, the Indians of North America, American descendants of slavery, Aboriginal Australians, and Pacific Islanders.<sup>5</sup> For example, oral histories from the Klallam people of what is now Washington state helped historians of seismology confirm that the source of a tsunami that struck Japan in 1700 was an earthquake off the coast of North America.<sup>6</sup> However, that oral history served a cultural purpose beyond being simply data. Klallam tribal member Arlene Wheeler noted that “we know that for our people that was an important place for them. For them to continue to come back and continue to build their village there, that showed the strength of the Klallam people”.<sup>7</sup> And Aboriginal Australians practice a sung form of oral history called “songlines,” in which melody and rhythm are used to retrace the paths of ancestral superhuman beings; they also serve to mark the traditional land claims of different groups, as changes in the music reflect the boundaries between territories.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, these accounts are not, strictly speaking, contemporaneous to the events they relate. The value of oral histories as sites of memory is well established; but as evidence of contemporary observation of historical events, they must be scrutinized in unique ways. For example, the memories reported in oral histories can be shaped by community consensus about events and their meaning, and by a desire for the interviewers to view the subjects in a positive light. These and other factors may subtly affect how oral histories reflect the events of the past, but the questions of how community and interpersonal relationships affect oral histories are a subject of historical research as well.<sup>9</sup> (Other questions of how oral traditions include and exclude sources of historical information are discussed in<sup>10</sup>). Historians consulting oral histories and material culture may find useful data that corroborates or elucidates archival or archaeological sources, and can also use an inquiry into how the cultural construction of memory around oral histories and objects functions to explore the context of the events they are studying.

Oral histories are often found in archives alongside archival collections sharing a theme (e.g., the University of Memphis houses a collection of papers regarding the 1968 sanitation strike, which includes a number of oral histories). Otherwise, they may be found in archives that make a specialization of collecting oral histories, such as Washington University’s African Oral History collection.

Stories of nonliterate people may certainly be encountered in the archive, but they are mediated through a literate person—at the very least, in setting down into writing the verbal account of the nonliterate person, and more likely in recording an encounter from the literate person’s perspective. The quite recent advent of audiovisual recordings provides those who do not care to

or cannot write about their experiences the opportunity to create primary sources that are contemporary to the events being discussed.

Regarding written records, it is important to recall that, in most cases, they are not produced for researchers' use. Rather, the records themselves served some immediate purpose in their own time. Letters were written to share or request information, to justify past actions, to build relationships, to persuade others, or to lodge complaints. Tax, financial, and census records were a means of holding bureaucrats accountable and enabling governments to prepare budgets. Drafts of published writings were essential to the preparation of the final product. Internal memoranda and reports were often prepared in response to demands from superiors but also served to help the writer advance an agenda within the organization.

And the collection of those records was typically not done with archives in mind. Rather, correspondence was retained so that future reference could be made to it; reports were stored for later use in analyzing the effectiveness of policies or programs; drafts were filed for comparison to newer ideas. And they were organized in ways that made sense to the originator—not in ways that would make historical research easier. So, in many cases, a record may have escaped the archives if someone in the past did not expect to make use of it again.

Nonetheless, evidence about people who did not leave their own records may be found in the archive. A practice called “reading against the grain”<sup>11</sup> can enable researchers to locate such evidence. The “grain” in this metaphor is the stated contents of the archive (e.g., the papers of a sugar plantation), likened to the grain in a piece of wood. As woodworkers know, it is easier to cut wood in the same direction as the grain;<sup>12</sup> similarly, it is reasonable to look in the papers of a plantation for information such as the price of sugar over time, or the expenses entailed in operating a plantation. Just as cutting against the grain is more difficult (and may require special tools), reading against the grain requires looking at the archives in a way that may reveal information that is not clearly labelled as among the archive's contents. Cutting against the grain exposes rough edges in wood. And looking carefully through an archive may uncover the experiences of people who did not leave their own historical records. For example, letters from a plantation owner may discuss interactions he had with enslaved people, or financial records may reveal the types of food enslaved people ate and the clothes they wore. The domestic life of working-class African American families may be revealed by examining the reports of adoption agency caseworkers who investigated their homes for potential placement of children.<sup>13</sup>

Archives of colonial officials who interacted with Indigenous people have been the subject of many studies that employed reading against the grain. As discussed above, archives are not made for history but for administrative or personal purposes; as such, they record material that the writers think will be relevant for their professional or private business. However, the process of fixing on paper the observations and justifications for decisions of colonial administrators can also reveal what was going on around the author. For example, a scholar can learn about resistance to forced labor by studying the papers of colonial officials reporting on their difficulties imposing a *corvée*-type system called *prestation* in Senegal; one must learn to interpret what a French officer calls “laziness” as something more like a “slowdown” or even “refusal to support the colonial government”.<sup>14</sup>

However, there are exceptions to the principle that the originators’ use shapes collections. Some people expected to be subjects of historical inquiry and saved all sorts of materials; US president Lyndon Johnson, who saved even materials that incriminated him in an extramarital affair, felt he had a duty to posterity to preserve nearly every paper that crossed his desk (they are now at the LBJ Presidential Library in Austin, Texas). Some deliberately shaped their collections with the intention of hiding documents that they feared would reflect poorly upon them (the poet T. S. Eliot burned the letters he had received from his one-time confidante Emily Hale). Also, in recent decades, many organizations have instituted record retention policies that prohibit the discarding of any materials in certain categories (for many institutions such as government agencies and universities, the policies may be publicly available for review).

Beyond having the need or desire to keep records, historical figures must also have had the means to do so. Dedicated or co-opted space in which to store records is the first necessity for their preservation, and such space was generally available primarily to those with large homes or offices.

So, while many exceptions exist, most archives will contain primarily material created by literate people who believed the materials would have some use if retained, and who had a place to keep them.

## Archives and Their Collecting Practices

---

Historical records, by their nature, are fragile. Those made with acid paper (widely used in the late nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century) are prone to crumbling, while other types of paper may yellow with age, tear, burn, or become water-damaged. Professional preservation techniques can extend the life of historical records by placing the records in a stable environment, but in the absence of such environmental controls the records are highly susceptible to damage. Preservation techniques for paper involve maintaining materials at the temperature and humidity that promote their longevity, encasement of fragile items in boxes or envelopes to reduce wear from handling, and storage in darkness to reduce fading that occurs with exposure to light.<sup>15</sup> The longer records are kept outside of an archive, the more likely they are to be destroyed over time. Among the numerous types of records, audiovisual materials are even more perishable than paper. While many written materials are composed of the relatively stable substance of ink that has molecular bonds with paper, films and audio tapes are more fragile. Tapes have a thin layer of magnetized material that may flake off the base layer. Films have a thin layer of chemicals between plastic; the plastic may become fragile and break or tear.<sup>16</sup> Since the 1980s, more and more documents have been “born digital,” meaning they were created as computer files. Preservation of born-digital documents is proving difficult for many libraries. Unlike physical items, which can last a long time if simply stored in the right conditions, digital files quickly become inaccessible as file formats fall into disuse or incompatibility with the most current operating systems. Data must be regularly transferred into new formats, and each transfer carries a risk of distortion of the content. One approach that minimizes the need for file transfer is creation of “digital deep archives,” in which files are stored in an off-line server and delivered to researchers on demand. The digital deep archive is safer than other forms of digital preservation but limits the accessibility of documents by imposing a long wait time for their delivery.<sup>17</sup>

However, even the best-maintained archives are still susceptible to disaster, as when the Arno River flooded in 1966, damaging the State Archives of Florence (Archivio di Stato di Firenze), or when the Historical Archive of the City of Cologne (Köln), Germany, collapsed in 2009 due to nearby subterranean construction undermining its foundation. Warfare is especially hard on archives; national libraries in Iraq, Liberia, and Bosnia were destroyed by military action in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and the story of libraries in the Second World War is a tale of enormous devastation. The older the archive, the more likely some of its records have been destroyed through violence or by accident.

Despite their dangers, archives are perhaps the best place for records to ensure that they survive. The longer that records have been saved in an archive, the better chance they have had to be preserved. Knowledge of the general history of archives, then, can outline which materials are most likely to be available today for researchers to consult. The archive as currently conceived is an invention of the early modern era (circa 1500–1800 CE), when emerging nation-states centralized governmental record-keeping to allow for more efficient administration at the national level. Similar trends occurred at subnational governmental levels, and within dioceses. The records necessary to such efforts were the records preserved: primarily government accounts, diplomatic correspondence, petitions to the monarch and legislative bodies, and the like.<sup>18</sup> In the early twentieth century, academic libraries began to gather historical records beyond printed books, for the purpose of giving their faculty and students materials to study.<sup>19</sup> The priority in acquiring such collections was to support the curriculum, which meant that the materials were primarily those relating to the forms of history then pursued: diplomatic, military, and intellectual history, including the papers of “great men.” Archives were administered mostly by white men in a racist, sexist, and classist age, and their collecting policies showed all the expected biases toward the rich and the powerful and against the poor and the marginalized. Therefore, governmental records and the papers of powerful individuals and prominent institutions are the most common materials from the early modern period to have survived, but by no means the only ones. At many archives, especially those tasked with preserving the records of governments or corporations, the prevailing racial and sexual hierarchy of those organizations is reflected in the materials collected even today.

A separate but related problem lies in the description of collections. The same biases that informed collecting practices also animated the assignment of descriptive terms, such as the names given to collections, the subject headings assigned, and even the summaries of contents.<sup>20</sup> Biased language, omission of important contributors, and oversight of important topics addressed within collections have all been noted in the finding aids prepared by earlier generations of archivists. While efforts to redress these problems are underway at many libraries, the technique of reading against the grain can also be employed when scrutinizing descriptions and finding aids of archival collections.

Starting around 1900, standalone archives began to be established that specialize in materials outside of the nineteenth-century model. They include the papers of labor unions, women, poor people, sexual minorities, people of color, and other voices traditionally underrepresented. Most



academic and research libraries now actively acquire similar materials. But, as attention has turned to such materials only in recent years, many records have been lost before they could be preserved. For example, in 1562, Spanish bishop Diego de Landa burned almost all the Mayan manuscripts that had existed prior to the arrival of Cortés in Mexico, because he believed their existence undermined the Christian faith of the Maya who had been evangelized but later reverted to the traditional religious practices of their people.<sup>21</sup> And in a 1962 survey about one-third of labor unions routinely discarded their files instead of depositing them in an archive, because the unions regarded them as “no longer valuable”.<sup>22</sup>

One reason that it is important for archives to contain materials representing many facets of historical experience is that the presence of a record within an archive lends it importance as a primary resource. First, the relative ease of consulting records in an archive (where the records are organized, accessible to approved visitors, and professionally curated) means that archived materials are more likely to be used by historians, and therefore are more likely to shape collective understandings of the past. Second, the archive lends an air of authority to records. While, as discussed earlier, archives have a long history of bias in their collecting, they nonetheless represent an institutional effort to preserve “important” documents; many readers therefore interpret the presence of records within an archive as an endorsement of their being valued above other unarchived records. While diligent researchers must resist this fallacy, it is tempting to think that way. Archival documents, like any other document, present only a part of the story; evidence from contemporary news reports, memoirs, and oral histories can provide useful context and perspective without which a historical analysis will be incomplete. Furthermore, all documents—archival and otherwise—should be scrutinized by the researcher. The Library of Congress<sup>23</sup> suggests that asking the following questions can help the researcher think about the source critically: “Where do you think this came from? Why do you think somebody made this? What do you think was happening when this was made? Who do you think was the audience for this item? What tool was used to create this?”

For various reasons, people and organizations may wish to keep their records private. Businesses, for example, may wish to restrict access to avoid patent infringement or potential litigation.<sup>24</sup> Countercultural, minority, and Indigenous organizations may distrust the institutions of academia due to universities’ long record of participation in oppressive and exclusionary societal practices.<sup>25</sup> Living people may wish to protect themselves and their family members from scrutiny and potential embarrassment. Recent regulations, including the European Union’s General Data

Protection Regulation, call for archivists to omit from their collections personal data that are “likely to cause substantial damage or substantial distress to a data subject”.<sup>26</sup> In a few cases, the owners of historical material are seeking a price for their records which no archive is willing or able to pay; this phenomenon usually is corrected with the passage of time as the owner decides to settle for a lower figure or the collection passes on to another owner with a different valuation for the collection.

In the twenty-first century, an alternative to the deposition of records in an archive controlled by a library or government entity has arisen. Community archives are centers for research that are created and controlled by people who wish to remain independent. Examples include members of racial or ethnic minority groups, and residents of particular neighborhoods. Community archives may be organized and operating along principles that diverge from professional archival standards. For example, metadata may include terms for ideas that are expressed in indigenous languages, and syndetic structures that reflect ways of knowing other than traditional Western logic. Materials on deposit may include artifacts and other items that extend beyond written records.<sup>27</sup> Two examples are the People’s Archives of Police Violence in Cleveland (<https://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/about>) and Documenting Ferguson (<http://digital.wustl.edu/ferguson/>). These online archives allow for community members to submit their own narratives and testimony, as well as photos, recordings, and video, regarding experiences with police violence, or the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, that followed the police shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. Items in the collection are “tagged” with keywords by their submitters, rather than organized according to an archival standard.

It is crucial to note, as well, that archives can only collect those records that their creators want to deposit. In most cases, a collection called “The papers of” a person or organization comprises *selected* papers. As discussed later in this essay, post-acquisition processing can eliminate some records, and depositors may discard some papers before sending them to the archive. Often, the materials omitted are considered trivial or ephemeral by the depositor—when university administrators deposit their papers (and now emails), they routinely discard lunch invitations—but that is a judgment that presumes future researchers will be uninterested in mapping the social networks of lunching academics. In other cases, depositors deliberately omit or destroy materials for the sake of keeping future readers from knowing particular information. US president Chester A. Arthur, for example, burned about two-thirds of his presidential papers (in the nineteenth century, such papers were considered the personal property of the president when he left office);

the rest were scattered among his heirs and collectors and were not reunited in the Library of Congress until the 1970s.<sup>28</sup>

Historical records, then, may have escaped archives because they were destroyed before an archive collected them, because the archive itself suffered the depredations of war or disaster, because their owners did not wish to deposit them, or because screening of materials occurred before the records were acquired. A consultation with a librarian specializing in history can help researchers identify where collections are housed, but there is no systematic catalog of the records that are not housed in an archive.

## Processing of Collections by Archivists

---

No matter how complete a collection is when it is given to an archive, some of its records are likely to be removed before it is made available for the public. Archivists “process” collections in order to make them usable by researchers. Importantly, processing involves identifying the contents, “rehousing” materials in folders and boxes suitable for long-term storage, and inventorying and labeling the materials for easier access to specific items. Millar<sup>29</sup> provides a description of this process.

Another phase of processing involves the “weeding” or discarding of certain items. For example, if a mass-produced item is duplicated several times in the collection, only one or two copies will be retained. Records containing private personal information, such as medical records, checks and financial statements, and personal identification (e.g., driver’s licenses and passports) may be excluded as a matter of policy. Other material that may be weeded includes unlabeled photographs, greeting cards with uninformative inscriptions (Happy Birthday!), clippings from mainstream publications that are available elsewhere in the library, minutes and reports from organizations whose records are held in another collection, and routine memoranda such as office supply requests (which assume future researchers will have no interest in the procurement and distribution of rubber bands and staplers). Material that was originally deposited in the form of highly fragile paper (e.g., facsimiles, carbon copies, mimeographs, sticky notes, and dittos) may be duplicated on acid-free paper and then discarded. For an example documenting such process, see Dunham.<sup>30</sup>

Beyond such item-level weeding decisions, archivists also restrict their accessions to a defined “scope” for the collection. Many collections titled “The papers of” a public figure are strictly their professional records. The J. Robert Oppenheimer papers at the Library of Congress, for example, contain only papers relating to his work as a nuclear physicist and administrator; his correspondence with his family and his interest in Hinduism are excluded.<sup>31</sup>

In other cases, archives may include only a portion of certain types of records. The Adlai Stevenson papers at Princeton University Library<sup>32</sup> include most of his professional correspondence; however, as a governor and presidential candidate, he received many thousands of letters from constituents, and to save space the archivists who processed the collection selected what they believed would be a representative sample of those letters for future researchers to consult. Ideally, an archive should have published collection development policies that allow a potential depositor to understand which materials are likely to be retained.<sup>33</sup>

As well, certain portions of archived collections are present but off-limits to researchers. National security restrictions require that sensitive materials remain classified. For example, in the United States, classified materials are governed by Executive Order 13526.<sup>34</sup> In other cases, the depositors might require that their papers remain sealed for a number of years until it is likely that any party mentioned within them has died. The papers of US Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger at the College of William and Mary Libraries<sup>35</sup> have been sealed until ten years after the last justice who served with Warren E. Burger on the Supreme Court has passed away, or 2026, whichever comes later, at least thirty years after they were deposited.

Complicating access to archival materials is the fact that most archives have a backlog of materials that have been deposited but are not yet processed. This is simply a function of staffing being inadequate to address all the processing required. Decisions about which collections are processed first are based on a number of factors.<sup>36</sup> Typically, collections that are anticipated to have a great deal of use are prioritized—and stated patron demand also is considered in this judgment—but large collections may be put off for a “slow” period while a number of smaller collections can be completed quickly. Some collections are donated with the proviso that they must be processed within a certain time frame and may even have grant funds attached to them that are dedicated to paying processing costs. Collections which arrive in good order may be processed sooner than those in disarray. Collections of specialized material may not be processed until an archivist with subject expertise is available. Material in more delicate condition may receive priority of processing over more stable collections. Collections deposited by important

donors and friends of the library may receive priority consideration in order to maintain good relations with library stakeholders.

## Surrogates for Archival Records

---

A large number of archival collections have become available for users outside the walls of a library building. Starting in the 1930s, certain collections were duplicated in microfilm,<sup>37</sup> and from its start in the early 1980s, digitization has made many more archival collections available.<sup>38</sup> There are competing forces driving this duplication, and each has its own logic for determining which materials are to be reproduced.

One impetus for duplication has come from within the archives themselves. The microfilming, and later digitization, of archival materials serves two purposes. The first is preservation. Directing researchers to use a surrogate instead of original documents reduces the number of times a piece of paper is touched, thus reducing wear and extending its usability farther into the future. The second is accessibility. Allowing researchers who are unable to visit the archive to consult its holdings democratizes research, which is one of the goals many libraries try to pursue.

Each of these purposes dictates a different set of priorities for deciding which collections to duplicate.<sup>39</sup> Preservation needs call for the collections in the most fragile condition to be filmed or digitized first, while accessibility interests lead to the duplication of the most-used collections as a priority. (These are not mutually exclusive priorities: the duplication of the most-used collections extends the life of those records that would likely suffer more damage from frequent handling.) Another consideration for filming and digitizing materials is the ease with which it can be done. Records in large format, or whose meaning depends upon the use of color images, may have been left out of microfilm projects because the medium did not lend itself to reproducing them faithfully. Materials that were previously microfilmed can be digitized with greater speed and lower cost than materials which must be digitized from the original (digitized microfilm does have disadvantages in terms of legibility, however).<sup>40</sup> As a result of these competing interests, researchers seeking out filmed or digitized collections may be surprised to discover what has and has not been made publicly available. For example, at the Library of Congress the papers of Confederate States president Jefferson Davis have not been digitized, but those of his vice president, Alexander H. Stephens, have been. This decision was made because researchers have

easy access to the contents of the Davis manuscripts through the published editions of the papers of Jefferson Davis<sup>41</sup>, which includes material from other archives as well as the Library of Congress.

Commercial publishers of microfilm and digitized archival collections have different objectives than do libraries and archives. While their efforts have the effect of preserving collections, they are primarily aimed at earning money through the subscriptions and purchases of their products by individuals and libraries. The calculus employed by these firms (who work closely with archives in creating their filmed and digitized collections) takes into account the cost of creating the product and the expected return on the investment. A discussion of the factors that influence the costs of digitization is found in Zhang and Gourley.<sup>42</sup> Previously microfilmed collections have a low cost to reproduce. Well-organized and thoroughly described archival collections are also easier to make into a digitized set, as many of the descriptive data needed for online searching of the content are already available. The market for these commercial products varies from the audience for libraries' in-house projects; while the latter are prepared for the use of researchers accustomed to archival work, commercial products—with enhanced searching capability, explanatory essays that contextualize the material, and thematic organization overlaid on the archive's existing structures—are sold to libraries as materials that will make it easier for beginning researchers (typically undergraduate students) to access and understand the primary source material.

With that market in mind, publishers of commercially digitized archival collections concentrate on the types of materials they anticipate will appeal to researchers early in their educational careers. Because, comparatively speaking, academic libraries in the United States tend to have robust budgets, English-language collections are over-represented; social history, including entertainment, food, crime, and literature, are also well-represented, while sources on business history are scarcer. The advent of digital collections has, to an extent, pushed back against the bias in collection building of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as collections on women's history, the experiences of racial minorities and colonized people, and the lives of sexual minorities have been among the earliest to be digitized, with extensive coverage.

## Conclusion

---

Of the billions of people who ever lived, only a minority have left any trace of their existence in the archives. As members of communities, they have contributed to the collective memories that

inform understanding of oral histories and material objects as sites of memory. Study of those types of historical sources is an important part of the researcher's work. However, the ease of interpretation and the ready accessibility of textual documents have made them desirable sources for researchers, and archives tend to have a pronounced bias toward documents in their collections. The process by which a historical record makes its way into the archive is full of opportunities for the destruction or omission of materials, and it is instructive to the researcher seeking to do archival research to understand why some sources are archived and others are not.

To begin with, written historical records are created by literate people and are saved only by those with the means of preserving them. Furthermore, those who preserve records seldom do so for the sake of presenting evidence to future researchers. Rather, they file away documents with the expectation that there will be some need to consult them within their lifetimes. Many documents are destroyed shortly after their creation, because their creators do not expect to need them again.

Other records are subject to the ravages of time. Light, air, fire, flood, and war are the enemies of historical records. Human vanity or secrecy has resulted in the destruction of other records, as their creators wish to hide them from posterity.

Archives, with their orderly, safe environment, are the likeliest place for documents to have been preserved (although archives, too, have fallen prey to violence and disaster). From their inception in the early modern period to recent decades, the collecting policies of archives tended to prioritize government and institutional records, along with the papers of elite men and organizations. The records of minorities, the poor, the marginalized, and women were seldom considered worthy of saving in the archives. Although those patterns have changed lately, many records that were left out of archives perished for all the reasons outlined herein.

The mere fact that records were deposited in an archive, however, does not mean they have become accessible. For reasons of policy or space limitations, some records are weeded from collections during their processing. Other records remain sealed until some point in the future. Still others are physically present in the archive but are inaccessible to researchers because the collection is awaiting processing, or is sealed for some years to come.

The advent of microfilm, and later digitization, has made archival material accessible to millions who are unable to travel to archives. However, the selection of which materials to reproduce has been motivated by considerations beyond merely making the most desirable material available.

Necessity of preservation, ease of reproduction, limitations of technology, and expected return on investment all have shaped the supply of reproduced archival material.

In one sense, it is a minor miracle that any historical material has been preserved, let alone that so much has survived. As archival collecting practices formerly replicated the inequalities present in society, the material that remains available is biased toward representing the wealthy, the powerful, and the institutions of the past, although both reforms in collecting practice and the demands of the marketplace for digitized content have made much more material from marginalized people available. Nonetheless, with careful scrutiny of both the descriptive data and the actual contents of the archives, researchers can recover some of the experiences of those who lived in the past, even when they were not the people who generated the records.

## Discussion Questions

---

1. What are some reasons that historically marginalized people are under-represented in the archives? How can researchers work around that problem to find the “voices” of such people in historical research?
2. List some reasons that a person or organization may wish to deposit their records in an archive, and reasons they would not. How can archive administrators make depositing records more attractive to those who are wary of doing so?
3. Having read this essay, how do you think researchers should discuss the nature of the evidence they use?
4. What are some of the challenges of relying only on records within archives when conducting research?
5. How do you think the use of digital surrogates for archival collections may influence future trends in historical research?

## Further Resources

---

Delsalle, Paul. *A History of Archival Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018.



Friedrich, Markus, and John Noel Dillon. *The Birth of the Archive: A History of Knowledge*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. Can the Subaltern Speak? In *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, edited by Rosalind C. Morris. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Thomas, David, Simon Fowler, Valerie Johnson, and Anne J. Gilliland. *The Silence of the Archive*. Chicago: Neal-Schuman, an imprint of the American Library Association, 2017.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

## Notes

---

1. Urton, *Inka History in Knots*.

2. Porteous, *Coins in History*.

3. Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*."

4. Hale, *Griots and Griottes*.

5. Thompson and Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, ch. 1 and 2.

6. Atwater et al., *The Orphan Tsunami of 1700: Japanese Clues to a Parent Earthquake in North America*.

7. Banse, *The Oral History Wasn't a Myth*.

8. Lilienthal and Ahmad, "The Australian 'Songlines': Some Glosses for Recognition."

9. Green, "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates."

10. Jones and Russell. "Archaeology, Memory and Oral Tradition: An Introduction."

11. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257.

12. Hansluck, *Working with Hand Tools*.

13. Potter, *Everybody Else*.

14. Tiquet and Tiquet, "Challenging Colonial Forced Labor? Resistance, Resilience, and Power in Senegal (1920s–1940s)."
15. Balloffet and Hille, *Preservation and Conservation for Libraries and Archives*.
16. Harvey and Mahard, *The Preservation Management Handbook*, ch. 10 and 11.
17. Traczyk, "Requirements for Digital Preservation."
18. Lindman, *Libraries and Archives*, ch. 3
19. Joyce, "The Evolution of the Concept of Special Collections in American Research Libraries."
20. Olson, "The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs."
21. Timmer, "Providence and Perdition."
22. Lewinson and Rieger. "Labor Union Records in the United States."
23. Library of Congress. *Analyzing Primary Sources*.
24. Hives, "History, Business Records, and Corporate Archives in North America."
25. Flinn and Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives."
26. National Archives (United Kingdom). *Guide to Archiving Personal Data*.
27. Bastian and Alexander, *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*.
28. Reeves, "The Search for the Chester Alan Arthur papers."
29. Millar, *Archives: Principles and Practices*, ch. 10.
30. Dunham, *Manuscript and Archival Records Processing Manual*.
31. Oppenheimer, "Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and Recollections (A)."
32. Princeton University Library. "Finding Aid for the Adlai E. Stevenson Papers."
33. Millar, *Archives: Principles and Practices* op. cit., ch. 10.
34. "Classified National Security Information."
35. William and Mary University Libraries., Warren E. Burger Collection.
36. Hackbart-Dean and de Catanzaro, "The Strongest Link: The Management and Processing of Archival Collections."

37. Veaner, "History of Micropublishing."
38. Xie and Matusiak, *Discover Digital Libraries: Theory and Practice*, ch. 1.
39. Harvey and Mahard, *The Preservation Management Handbook*, ch. 3.
40. Bogus et al., "Minimum Digitization Capture Recommendations," 34.
41. Davis, *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*.
42. Zhang and Gourley. *Creating Digital Collections: A Practical Guide*.

## Bibliography

---

Alice Kimball Smith, and Charles Weiner. eds. *Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and Recollections*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Atwater, Brian F., Satoko Musumi-Rokkako., Kenji Satake., Yoshinobu Tsuji., Kazue Ueda, and David K. Yamaguchi. *The Orphan Tsunami of 1700: Japanese Clues to a Parent Earthquake in North America*. Reston, Va.: United States Geological Survey, 2005.

Baloffet, Nelly, and Jenny Hille. *Preservation and Conservation for Libraries and Archives*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2005.

Banse, Tom, "The Oral History Wasn't a Myth. Tsunamis Hit this Tribal Village Five Times, New Study Shows," KUOW, May 7, 2019. <https://kuow.org/stories/the-oral-history-wasn-t-a-myth-tsunamis-hit-this-tribal-village-five-times-new-study-shows>

Bastian, Jeanette A, and Ben Alexander. *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*. London: Facet Publishing, 2009.

Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, edited by Arendt Hanna, 253–64. New York: Schocken, 1940 (1968).

Bogus, Ian, George Blood, Robin L. Dale, Robin Leech, and David Matthews. *Minimum Digitization Capture Recommendations*. The Association for Library Collections and Technical Services Preservation and Reformatting Section, 2013. <https://alair.ala.org/handle/11213/89>.

Chatwin, Bruce. *The Songlines*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

Davis, Jefferson. *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971.

Dunham, Elizabeth. *Manuscript and Archival Records Processing Manual*, 7th ed ed: Archives and Special Collections, Arizona State University Libraries, 2015.

"Classified National Security Information". Exec. Order No. 13526. 2009.  
<https://www.archives.gov/isoo/policy-documents/cnsi-eo.html>.

Flinn, Andrew. "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges 1." *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (2007): 151–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00379810701611936>.

Green, Anna. "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates." *Oral History* 32, no. 2 (2004): 35–44.

Hackbart-Dean, Pam, and Christine de Catanzaro. "The strongest link: the management and processing of archival collections." *Archival Issues* 27, no. 2 (2002): 125–36.

Hale, Thomas A. *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Hansluck, Paul N. *Working with Hand Tools: Essential Techniques for Woodworking*. New York: Skyhorse, 2014.

Harvey, Donia Conn, and Martha R. Mahard. *The Preservation Management Handbook: A 21st-Century Guide for Libraries, Archives, and Museums*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Hives, Christopher L. "History, business records, and corporate Archives in North America." *Archivaria* 22 (1986): 40–57.

Jones, Siân, and Lynette Russell. "Archaeology, memory and oral tradition: an introduction." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 16, no. 2 (2012): 267–83.

Joyce, William L. "The Evolution of the Concept of Special Collections in American Research Libraries." *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship* 3, no. 1 (1988): 19–29.

Lewinson, Paul, and Morris Rieger. "Labor Union Records in the United States." *The American Archivist* 25, no. 1 (1962): 39–57. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.25.1.m17ku8200452k95h>.

Library of Congress. "Analyzing Primary Sources". n.d. <https://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/>.

Lilienthal, Gary, and Nehaluddin Ahmad. "The Australian 'Songlines': Some Glosses for Recognition." *James Cook University Law Review* 23 (2017): 79–101.

Lindman, Tomas. *Libraries and Archives: A Comparative Study*. Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2012.

Millar, Laura A. *Archives: Principles and Practices*, 2nd ed ed. London: Facet, 2017.

National Archives (United Kingdom). "Guide to Archiving Personal Data". 2018. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/guide-to-archiving-personal-data.pdf>.

Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*." *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24.

Olson, Hope A. "The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26, no. 3 (2001): 639–68. <https://doi.org/10.1086/495624>.

Porteous, John. *Coins in History*. New York: Putnam, 1969.

Potter, Sarah. *Everybody Else: Adoption and the Politics of Domestic Diversity in Postwar America*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014.

Princeton University Library. "Finding Aid for the Adlai E. Stevenson Papers". n.d. <https://findingaids.princeton.edu/collections/MC124/c00652>.

Reeves, Thomas C. "The Search for the Chester Alan Arthur Papers." *The Wisconsin Magazine of History* 55, no. 4 (1972): 310–9.

Thompson, Paul, and Joanna Bornat. *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th ed ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Timmer, David E. "Providence and Perdition: Fray Diego de Landa Justifies His Inquisition against the Yucatecan Maya." *Church History* 66, no. 3 (1997): 477–88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3169452>.

Tiquet, Romain. "Challenging Colonial Forced Labor? Resistance, Resilience, and Power in Senegal (1920s–1940s)." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 93 (2018): 135–50. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547917000308>.

Traczyk, Tomasz. "Requirements for Digital Preservation." In *Digital Preservation: Putting It to Work*, edited by T Traczyk, W Ogryczak, P Pałka, and T Śliwiński, 3–13. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017.

Urton, Gary. *Inka History in Knots: Reading Khipus as Primary Sources*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017.

Veaner, Allen B. "History of Micropublishing." In *Microforms in Libraries: A Reader*, edited by Albert James Diaz, 14–17. Weston, CT: Microform Review, 1975.

William and Mary University Libraries. n.d. <https://libraries.wm.edu/libraries/departments/special-collections/warren-burger-collection>.  
<https://libraries.wm.edu/libraries/departments/special-collections/warren-burger-collection>.

Xie, Iris, and Krystyna Matusiak. *Discover Digital Libraries: Theory and Practice*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2016.

Zhang, Allison B, and Don Gourley. *Creating Digital Collections: A Practical Guide*. Oxford: Chandos, 2009.