

Guide to Donating Your Personal or Family Papers to a Repository

For millennia, written records have provided essential clues to the past. Through letters, diaries, and unpublished writings of many types, and also through the audible and visual records of recent times, researchers have been able to study and understand much about the history of particular families, communities, businesses, and organizations, the history of specific events and broader societal trends, and the history of the United States in general.

Letters, diaries, photos, and other material collected over the years give vital and unique information regarding your life or the history of your family. And while these papers obviously matter to you, they may be important to your community, state, or nation, too. Whether or not members of your family attained a degree of fame, they have contributed to the heritage of a certain place and time. When you donate your personal or family papers to a manuscript repository, your family history becomes a part of your community's collective memory.

What is a Repository and What Can It Do for You?

Manuscript repositories—also called archives, historical societies, and special collections libraries—carefully preserve collections of written, visual, and audible material created by private citizens both past and present. Such repositories ensure that these personal and family papers will be available for research by generations to come.

A manuscript repository is run by professionals - archivists, curators, or librarians - whose first priority is the preservation of historical materials. They can discuss with you the historical value of your papers, and advise you on which repository would be best for your papers. In addition, once you donate papers the staff will continue to work with you as you locate or identify other materials to donate.

If your personal or family papers are deemed appropriate for a repository's collections, and you agree to donate those papers, you stand to gain many benefits. A repository can provide the papers with environmentally-controlled, secure storage and can oversee their proper handling and use. Equally important, it

can provide research access to the contents of the papers, both to you and to the scholarly public. In future years, researchers - including students, professors, genealogists, journalists and many others may thus find your papers both interesting and of value to their work.

What to Preserve

Most repositories accept donations of as little as a single item and as large as dozens of boxes. Material need not be organized; it need not be "old"; and it need not relate to a famous individual, event, or organization in order for it to be historically significant. Generally, however, repositories are more interested in a coherent body of material rather than individual items; photos, tapes, and films should be identified. Repositories usually ask that historical material itself not be mailed or dropped off without first consulting with the staff; a repository must evaluate all material offered and ask the donor to sign a donation agreement.

Do you need to "cull" the papers or reorganize them?

Archivists are experts in identifying materials that should be transferred to a repository or manuscript library. Because the research value of records may be diminished if items are removed or if the records are rearranged, donors are encouraged to contact the repository staff before weeding, discarding, or reorganizing their papers and records.

Examples of historically valuable material.

While it is important that the archives staff be permitted to survey papers or records in order to determine which materials have enduring historical value, listed below are types of materials that are often valuable to a researcher. These lists, which are suggestive and not definitive, illustrate the wide range of documentation often useful for historical and administrative research.

Among the types of materials in personal and family papers of interest to researchers are:

- * letters
- * memoirs/remini scences

- * diaries
- * scrapbooks/photo albums
- * professional papers
- * genealogical information
- * speeches/lectures
- * business records
- * subject files
- * legal documents
- * minutes/reports
- * brochures and flyers
- * photographs (labeled)
- * films/videos/audio tapes (labeled)

Also of interest are files relating to the individual's civic, business, religious, political, and social activities.

Churches, political organizations, businesses, economic interest groups, community groups, voluntary associations, professional associations, and other collective enterprises all produce records which document their purpose, policies, and activities. An individual or family may hold the records of such a business or organization, and this material, too, may be significant. In addition to papers and records, some archives (or their affiliated museums or libraries) also collect artifacts, art, books, maps, and music.

Will a repository take everything you offer?

Although a repository cannot accept everything that may be offered (whether because of staff and space constraints or because the papers are not within the collecting mission of the particular institution), it welcomes the chance to review material; if it is not appropriate for one repository, there may be another one to which it could be referred. Some material, though, may be of more sentimental than historical value, and should be kept by the individual or family itself.

Donating Personal or Family Papers to a Repository

Archivists can best assist you if you make an appointment in advance. If you are unsure how to contact a repository in your area, you may wish to begin by speaking with someone at your state historical society or state archives. The Society of American Archivists (info@archivists.org) can also provide you

with suggestions.

Donations.

Most archives can only invest materials and labor in the preservation of items which they own. Therefore, most archives accept donations of individual or family papers, but will not accept such material on deposit or on loan. Donors are asked to sign a donation agreement, which formally signifies that the papers become the actual property of the archives.

Access to Collections.

Once material is donated to a repository, it does not circulate – in order to insure that it is preserved as long as humanly possible. Access to donated papers is governed by the repository's written policies regarding availability, photo duplication, and publication. A prospective donor should become familiar with such policies and discuss any special needs or concerns with the curator before completing the donation agreement.

Restrictions on Access.

Sensitive material that may exist in individual or family papers should not be removed by the donor. Instead, the donor should discuss with the archivist the possibility of restricting part of the collection to protect the privacy of the donor or others. While archives desire to make all papers freely accessible to researchers, they normally will agree to reasonable and equitable restrictions for limited periods of time.

Copyright.

Assignment of copyright is often complex, and you should work with the repository staff to clarify issues of copyright ownership. Generally, copyright belongs to the creator of writings and other original material (such as photos and music), but can be legally transferred to heirs or others. Moreover, ownership of copyright is separable from ownership of the physical item (the letter or photo). Curators often ask donors to donate not only the physical papers but also any copyright in them that the donor might own. This request is

made to make it easier for researchers to use quotations from the papers in their work.

Conditional Gifts.

A repository usually is not able to promise that donated materials will be placed on exhibit or used in some other specific fashion as a condition of accepting the gift.

Monetary Appraisals for Tax Deductions.

In certain circumstances, it may be possible for a donor to take a tax deduction for the donation of a manuscript collection to a repository. Donors are encouraged to speak with their tax accountants or attorneys about this possibility. Curators cannot give tax advice, nor are they permitted to appraise the monetary value of a collection. The curator may be able to provide donors with a list of local manuscript appraisers who can (for a fee) make monetary appraisals for the donor. It is up to the donor to arrange for and bear the cost of any such appraisal, although the repository will make the collection available to an appraiser hired by the donor.

Monetary donations.

Most repositories are non-profit organizations. Preparing papers for use by researchers is the most expensive operation in a repository. Although such grants are rarely a prerequisite for the acceptance of a collection, donors who are able to assist repositories by making grants toward the arrangement, cataloging, and conservation of their donations of papers are encouraged to do so.

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