

# Why Keep Archives?

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**A**rnold J. Toynbee said that history is, “A vision of the whole universe on the move in the four-dimensional framework of space-time....” In recognizing that parks do not exist in a vacuum, but instead are part of a complex and interrelated ecosystem existing through time, we at the National Park Service acknowledge our role in understanding and preserving this fragile web of interrelationships. To manage ecosystems we must be aware of how time and the larger world affects our parks, allowing us to control the effects where possible and mitigate them where necessary. The parks possess one powerful resource for tracking the ecosystem and developing and monitoring baseline data on plants and animals, and recording changes to both the cultural and natural resources over time—museum archival and manuscript collections.

The park’s archival and manuscript collections document the park natural and cultural resources over time; preserve the information concerning these resources at each stage of a park’s life; and foster the use of this crucial information for the research, protection, management, and interpretation of the park resources. The primary use of most museum archival collections is as a park resource, frequently for management purposes.

## Park Management and Archival and Manuscript Collections

Archives are a site’s memory. Without archives we lack a full understanding of what forces have shaped our site. An individual with no memory is dysfunctional. An organization that lacks a sense of itself over time is equally handicapped. Most obviously this handicap manifests itself as a lack of vision. Without a full picture of the ecosystem and how it has changed, the park staff can not deal with underlying causes of systemic problems. Like doctors in an emergency room, we find ourselves constantly dealing with immediate crises, as opposed to practicing preventive medicine. Our actions today are only part of the complex and interrelated web of cause and affect that have shaped the park site and the ecosystem. To fully understand the ecosystem we must understand it in the matrix of time through an integrated and holistic approach to information, hence archives.

The archival and manuscript collections are where essential information is recorded and maintained permanently. This information impacts every aspect of park life from routine maintenance activities that require access to architectural drawings to rescue activities that require aerial photographs of an area. Without master plans it is impossible to study the changing trends in park planning and how they have affected the ecosystem. Pragmatically speaking, without archives we are unable to judge what changes have occurred to the ecosystem. What plant and animal species were originally here? What peoples lived here and how did they survive? What evidence is there of

prehistoric cultures? What led to the park’s founding? What activities, events, processes, and personalities shaped the park? What individuals are associated with the park?

Changes to the park environment and landscape through time are also recorded, from paleobiological field notes on the prehistoric plants of the area to historic drawings and photographs of the landscape during the last 150 years. Certainly the human effect on the environment is best recorded by archival and manuscript collections. Some documents, such as architectural drawings, maps, and photographs illustrate telling design details of historic landscapes or architecture (i.e., interior, furnishings, and exterior) for renovations and restorations. Documents, such as photographs and diaries, can also serve as conclusive historical evidence of the functions of the structures, as well as recording the major activities and events which occurred on the site.

Many voices speak through these documents. There are records of all aspects and eras of recorded life in the park, from the archeological record of the site’s earliest inhabitants; handwritten letters of early site inhabitants coming to grips with the issues of their time; the diaries, correspondence, and photographs of early park staff and their neighbors; the glass plate negatives and lantern slides of early explorers and local photographers who recorded the local scene; accounts and minutes of the local citizens who served on committees and organizations that guided or supported the park; and field notes and drawings of the architects and craftsmen who built the structures we use today.

These archival and manuscript collections record the essential historical context that make it possible to effectively manage a park and to interpret, document, and comprehend a park’s history. These collections explain how the park functioned over time. Thus, park archival and manuscript collections are essential for architects, archeologists, curators, historians, interpreters, landscape architects, scientists, resource managers, and other park staff.

## Baseline Data in Park Archival and Manuscript Collections

Park archival and manuscript collections contain vital baseline data for understanding and interpreting park history. Archival and manuscript collections become critical for understanding the park’s management and development history, for they provide a context for the decision-making process followed by past managers and staff at the park.

If we lack this knowledge we have no baseline data from which to track what is happening to the historic landscape, the species, and the cultural and natural resources under our care. How can we monitor, restore, or study resources effectively if we lack knowledge to indicate if they are diminishing or flourishing; exotic or native? If we lack the basic documentation on our structures and landscape how can we restore it to its original appearance? How will we conduct studies of the long-term effects of any previous management decisions?

These archival materials may be either large site-related collections of acquired archival materials that form part of the park resource base or reference files required

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as baseline data. The former are key park resources that illuminate the site history—fully as valuable as the historic structures that house them. The latter provide essential information on species distribution, changes in the landscape and resources, records of changes to park structures, programs, and activities over time, which may also reflect the institutional or administrative history of the park.

These collections track policy and management decisions over time at the park and let staff know how these policies and decisions affect this sensitive ecosystem, as well as documenting the impact of changes in the larger world on the park. These records also document issues the park staff have been involved with in the areas of resource management, interpretation, research, land acquisition, and concessions.

Information in archival and manuscript collections is essential to current park managers and staff as they work to preserve and protect significant resources as their predecessors have done. These materials provide information critical for proposed and ongoing projects. An organized and well-managed archives is essential in order for staff to use these resources to benefit management decisions. Thus, these reference collections form part of the primary resources that the park managers are sworn to protect. These collections are the *raison d'être* of the park as much as the structures that hold them.

### **Secondary Uses: Attracting Researchers and Publicity**

Archival resources can serve a secondary purpose beyond management studies, site and museum object associated records, publications, park interpretation, administrative histories, exhibitions, and structural restoration. That secondary use is attracting scholarly researchers to the park. Professionally-managed archival and manuscript collections attract scholars interested in studying a park's cultural and natural resources. Such scholars often have their own funding and publishers. Their work can provide vital informational resources to a park forced to function with a minimal complement of scholarly researchers. Cooperative projects and shared endeavors are also possible.

Scholars can be notified of collections through such scholarly tools as archival directories and databases such as the *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the United States*, the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections*, the *National Inventory of Documentary Sources*, the *Research Library Information Network*, the *National Moving Image Database*, and the *Guide to Photographic Collections in the United States*.

Outside scholars are frequently interested in conducting primary research on park cultural or natural resources. However, research by outside scholars is dependent upon two things. First, the park must have a fairly complete archival and manuscript collection that documents the full range of park activities including personal papers of site-related individuals, reference copies of official documents, and similar materials; and second, the collection must be well organized and accessible. Only with a well-balanced and accessible archival and manuscript collection will staff, visitors, and scholars find a complete picture of the history of the site and the

site's resources. Without such a complete and accessible archival collection, the research conducted must necessarily be of the shallow "snapshot" variety, not an in-depth study capable of tracking long-range trends. A review of the park's resources over time is not possible without archival holdings.

Most scholarly researchers approaching a park will be researching a particular topic over time. These archeologists, anthropologists, art historians, biographers, botanists, ethnographers, geologists, historians, mammalogists, paleontologists, and zoologists are interested in the park's archival and manuscript collections relating to their topic. In order for these collections to be useful to the scholars, they must be professionally arranged and described with good finding aids.

Scholars are often willing to undertake full archival research, which involves research by the collection's provenance. Provenance based research involves identifying which individual or group is apt to have created the sort of materials that the researcher would like to use. For example: for information on the history of mining in an area a researcher might look at the papers of the mining consortiums, the local unions, as well as family papers of families whose members were miners. For architectural drawings of a structure a researcher would consult the architects and builders who worked on the structure over time or the concessionaire who owned the building.

While the subject content and document creators are of great importance, the NPS collection are also unusually rich in a wide variety of archival processes and formats from correspondence, diaries, and ephemera; legal documents (treaties, marriage certificates, and contracts), correspondence, and prints; to business and management records. These formats and processes will be of interest to students of American material culture, including photographic historians and art historians, as well as cultural and business historians.

Therefore, NPS archival collections can serve as a powerful magnet to attract generations of researchers to the parks. These scholars' efforts in turn can become components in the park's knowledge base, swelling the park's archival holdings.

### **Attracting Resources: Monies and Partnerships**

Archival and manuscript collections serve as the raw materials for the grant-funded production of publications, exhibitions, cd-roms, and other outreach programs. The existence of archival and manuscript collections in a park can be the impetus to obtain grant funding for collection preservation, arrangement, and description and even new storage and research structures. Many private foundations, as well as a broad range of government programs, fund these activities. When such applications come from a non-federal partner such as an association or another affiliated non-federal organization, many doors open.

Non-federal partners can come from many sources. The search for new sources of park funding, including foundation funding, can serve as an inducement to set up cooperative programs, partnerships, and memorandums of understanding with local historical societies, libraries, museums, and universities. These external programs can

interface with federal programs to obtain monies from sources that NPS cannot ordinarily touch. Such interactions are also an incentive to set up internship and fellowship programs that allow the parks to use the knowledgeable student staff available from local universities.

On occasion these interns and fellows can undertake research and publications that contribute to the park knowledge base. In other cases, the interns and fellows can undertake some of the basic collections management work and supervise volunteers, thus freeing park staff for valuable research projects.

### The Challenge of Archives

If the park information base is to grow for future generations, the records of today's research management projects must be preserved. The easiest and least expensive way to do this is to produce these records on permanent and durable media, such as acidfree paper and black-and-white photographs, and to ensure that the records produced are managed according to the *Records Management Guidelines* (NPS-19) and the *Museum Handbook Part II, Appendix D*.

The NPS has a buried treasure in these archival and manuscript collections, which will prove extremely useful in conveying a lively and more first-hand view of history in coming years through informed management decision-making, more indepth research, and more accurate interpretative programs, publications, exhibitions, videotapes, films, and broadcasts. However, the collections in most parks are not yet fully useable.

The first steps necessary in most parks are to evaluate the collections against the *Records Management Guidelines*, NPS-19 and the park's Scope of Collections Statement to determine if the collection may be considered for permanent retention in the park museum collection. If the collection is non-official and may be considered for acquisition, it requires appraisal to determine whether or not it is appropriate for acquisition. If it is appropriate for acquisition, it requires accessioning, preservation rehousing, description, and eventual arrangement as described in the *Museum Handbook*. This work may be funded by either the park's baseline funding, by any of several curatorial management programs, or by an outside foundation.

Once accessible, the collection will provide a wealth of information for future management of the park, for outside scholars, as well as for park exhibitions, publications, and interpretation activities. The design and long-term maintenance of archival reference collections is, therefore, a crucial part of each park's ongoing program if the park is to operate as a well-organized, well-documented, and well-managed site with a coherent vision of both the past and the future.

In such parks, all serious research in the park, cultural and natural, should begin with the review of information currently in the archival and manuscript collection, and end with depositing copies of the results of that research (specimens and reports) in the park archival and manuscript collections. This type of systematic recording and preservation of baseline data for the park is basic to the tenets of the national park system.

These archival and manuscript collections are the results of decades of dedicated work by skilled man-

agers, architects, scientists, anthropologists, archeologists, curators, and historians. In the last century, the NPS has invested much staff talent and time in creating or acquiring these records. They are the institutional memory of the park and a major park resource for generations of future scholars and managers.

Whether one agrees with Oscar Wilde who stated that history is, "Merely gossip," or Thucydides who stated that history is "a view of events as they really happened, and as they are very likely... to repeat themselves at some future time—if not exactly the same, yet very similar..." there is no doubt that archival and manuscript collections are an essential component of National Park Service history and a crucial tool for our future.

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