

## Legacy Management Resource Portal

### Your collections are treasures, a piece of history

Many people have collections of extremely valuable items in their own home or at their organization and do not realize how significant they are. From photographs to letters to journals to recordings and more, these collections tell stories of the legacies of Black people all over Chicago who made important contributions to their family or larger community. Often, family members or other loved ones just throw away their books, documents, journals, and photos when someone passes away. This is a huge loss, as **these materials illuminate the legacies** of people who made a difference. Here at the BMRC, we want to provide a resource for those who wish to preserve those materials for future use either by researchers and students, or by others interested in this rich history. Oftentimes, there is confusion about what archives are and the purposes they serve. We hope this guide will answer your questions about how to best protect your collections either by storing them within your community or family, or by donating them to an archival **repository** such as a museum or library/archives.

### What are archives?

Archives, generally, are letters, programs, minutes, photographs, posters, newspapers, magazines, books, zines, tapes, CDs and DVDs, records, objects, and more that have **historical value or significance**. Materials in archival collections can also be digital, such as scans, digital photos, audio-visual recordings, and more. For individuals and repositories, what is considered valuable may vary widely. For repositories overall, **value is determined by how many of an item exists in the world's collections and if there are a limited number, the context in which it was created, and the historical representation**. When donating to a repository, the research value assigned to an item or collection is up to their archivists and their understanding of patrons and visitors to the archives, but when it is your own collection, it is up to you to decide what is valuable and what is not.

**Materials that were created for or that document significant events, contain any family history, or provide a narrative of the individual(s) who created them may be considered valuable to you, your family or community, or to an organization.** For example, these materials might include photographs or photo albums from ceremonies or other important events, on-going correspondence, diaries, essays and other writings, audio or video recordings, or scrapbooks. Materials do not have to represent just an individual or a specific family – **community organizations, religious institutions, and other active parties in local communities also create materials that can and should be archived for future use**. Organizations that fight for immigration justice, LGBTQ+ and women's rights, environmental justice, anti-racism, and more, as well as institutions like mosques, churches, temples, and other sites of religious and spiritual practices all create records and materials that can be archived. Whether or not they are housed properly, preserved for posterity, and/or made widely available is up to the owners and creators of these collections.

## Understanding archival repositories

Professional archival repositories like museums, libraries, university archives and special collections, community organizations or other research institutions have funding, staff, and training to provide the best storage, organization, description or cataloging, long-term **preservation**, and access to collections.

While there are many advantages to donating your collections to archival repositories, there are also reasons for which you might want to hold onto and care for your own collection.

### Reasons to house your own collections:

- **Physical Access and Organization:** You would **retain direct, physical access** to your collection, and you would be able to make your own important decisions about who can handle the materials, the way they are organized, and more.
- **Researcher Access and Use:** You can decide **how your collections are represented** to the public, **who can do research with them**, and to a larger extent, **what stories could be told** through their use.
- **Copyright and Ownership:** You can **retain ownership rights including copyright**, if you or your organization are the creators of the materials. However, **not all repositories require donors to transfer all copyright** in their collections.

### Reasons to donate your collections to a repository:

- **Archival Expertise:** You can trust the professionals at the institution of your choosing to **organize, describe, preserve, and provide access** to your collections.
- **Wider Visibility and Use:** More people will have access to your collection through the institution's **exhibitions, instruction, and public programming**.
- **Storage and Preservation:** Professional archival repositories have **access to funding for the proper materials and supplies** to protect materials from deterioration over time.

While you might want to keep your collections to yourself to have immediate access to them, it is worth considering whether you can responsibly hold and preserve collections. Archival supplies and storage can be expensive, so it is important to assess your capacities for archival holdings before deciding whether to keep or donate your collections. It is worth noting that many repositories make sure to provide ready access to acquired collections for donors whenever possible.

If you would like to house, preserve, and provide access to your own collections, visit our [Guide to Managing Your Archives](#):

<https://bmrc.lib.uchicago.edu/resources/legacy-management-resources-portal/guide-managing-your-archives/>

If you would rather donate your collections to a professional archival repository, visit our [Guide to Donating Archival Materials](#):

<https://bmrc.lib.uchicago.edu/resources/legacy-management-resources-portal/guide-donating-archival-materials/>

## Key Words

- **Acid-free:** paper that is distinguished from those that have residue from the acids used to break up wood fibers during its manufacture. Residual acid will destroy the paper fibers and make the paper more brittle over time. Preservation includes measures to minimize this deterioration as much as possible.
- **Archives:** records made or received by a person, family, or organization that are preserved because of their historical and continuous value.
- **Deed of gift:** an agreement transferring title to property without monetary compensation. May be for real, personal, or intellectual property. Deeds of gifts are usually contracts that establish conditions for the transfer of title to documents and placing any restrictions on access/use.
- **Finding aid:** a document describing the contextual and structural information about an archival resource or collection.
- **Historical significance/value:** the importance or usefulness of records that justifies their preservation because of administrative, legal, fiscal, or evidential information that helps with understanding the human past. This is not about whether the person, people, or organization that created the collection were/are famous, but about how they have contributed to their communities. Materials do not have to be old or perfectly organized.
- **Intellectual control/organization:** the creation of catalogs, finding aids, or other guides that help researchers locate materials relevant to their interests.
- **Preservation:** the protection of materials through minimization of chemical and physical harm, injury, decay, or destruction to prevent the loss of information and extend the life of cultural property with non-invasive treatment.
- **Processing:** preparing archival materials for use through the arrangement and description of the collection.
- **Repository:** a space or institution that cares for and stores archives.
- **Title:** the rights/privileges to control and dispose of property. Also, legal evidence of ownership.

These and more definitions are available at the [Society of American Archivists' Dictionary of Archives Terminology: https://dictionary.archivists.org/index.html](https://dictionary.archivists.org/index.html)

This resource was created by Tanya Calvin, BMRC Community Engagement Archivist, 2020.