

Appraisal of Local Government Records for Historical Value

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Introduction

Appraisal is the process used to assess records and to select those to keep permanently. No simple, easy, foolproof rules exist for the appraisal and selection of records. It requires informed analysis and evaluation of potential records and their significance to the local government and the community it serves. The State Archives and Records Administration's Records Retention and Disposition Schedules (RRDS) begin the analysis by identifying which records to keep permanently for administrative, legal, or fiscal reasons. The schedules also attempt to identify records series that have statewide historical value. But retention periods do not always reflect the historical importance or value of the records to the local government or community. New York's local governments, and the records they create, are so diverse that SARA's schedules cannot determine local historical value for every record series. Appraising records for historical value is an activity local governments will want to undertake themselves. This publication is intended to help local government officials continue the appraisal process by providing information on how to identify records that have historical importance to their communities.

A local government record is historically significant if it provides important evidence of how the government goes about its business (how it functions and does its work), and/or if the record provides significant information about people, places, or events in the community. Since each community has its own unique history, the historical importance or value of record series may vary for each local government. Local governments themselves will want to undertake an appraisal of some records to determine historical significance.

This publication gives local officials a general understanding of how to identify, evaluate, and select records that have ongoing historical value.

It contains the following:

- A discussion of the process of appraising records for historical value
- Three charts - *Appraisal Scorecard*, *Summary of Important Time Periods*, and *Office Analysis* (Appendix A) - to help local governments with the appraisal process and gathering of background information
- An *Appraisal Checklist* (Appendix B) provides a narrative explanation of the step-by-step process and how to complete the *Appraisal Scorecard*
- Case studies (Appendix C) using two record series, **Journals** and **Subject and correspondence files**, to show how to conduct an appraisal using the Scorecard as well as how to complete the background information charts

What Are Archival Records?

Archival records are worthy of preservation and special care because of the continuing importance of the information they contain for legal, fiscal, administrative, or historical purposes.

Records, regardless of format, are information that local officials create or receive while conducting a government's business. Archival records are records that governments must keep permanently to meet fiscal, legal, or administrative needs of the government (primary value) or that the government retains because they contain historically significant information (secondary value).

In the normal course of business, a government creates a record for a specific purpose -to carry out a specific function. Records are created to meet:

- *Legal needs.* The records explain the government's responsibilities, protect the government's rights, or protect the rights of the citizens it serves. Examples include city charters, wills, and minutes of the chief governing body.
- *Fiscal needs.* The records establish fiscal responsibility, demonstrate accountability, and track the flow of revenue. Examples include budgets, general ledgers, and assessment rolls.
- *Administrative needs.* The records support ongoing, day-to-day, administrative affairs of the government. Examples include personnel files, policies, procedures, and student attendance records.

Once the record fulfills the purpose for which it was created, the importance of the record (its **primary value**) ends. For some records the primary value may be as little as six months; for others it never ceases.

Since records are created for specific reasons, they are normally useful only as long as they are needed for those reasons. SARA's Records Retention and Disposition Schedules specify the minimum legal length of time a government must keep records to satisfy the reason they were created -to meet the government's administrative, legal, or fiscal needs. As such, the schedules indicate when to discard the records. For example, internal statistical reports, created for administrative purposes, need only be kept for six years, and then they may be destroyed. Records with ongoing primary value have a "permanent" designation. The schedules generally address the primary value of a record, noting when the administrative, legal, or fiscal value has expired.

Because retention periods primarily address the fiscal, legal, and administrative values of records, they usually do not reflect the local historical importance or value of the record series. Where SARA has identified records as historically significant for all local governments, it has given them a permanent designation on the schedules. Other records that might have historical significance in some, but not all, localities are noted on the schedules by historical notes. However, SARA cannot identify all record series with historical significance for individual local governments. The people, places, or events in each community, and the unique circumstances of each government, determine which records are historically significant. Local officials must make the final decision, based on their own analysis and appraisal.

While a government creates records for specific legal, fiscal, or administrative reasons, it may, in the process, produce records with historical value. Such records are said to have a **secondary value**; they document things of interest to other people or organizations by providing

information about subjects, events, or people in the community. Records with historical value do not necessarily have permanent retention periods on the record schedules.

Examples of records that are not permanent on the schedules, yet may have historical value, include:

- Audio or videotapes of public hearings and meetings (retention: 4 months after transcription) can record discussions of significant matters, such as public debates over the development of a municipal airport in a wetlands area.
- Medical case records of hospital patients (retention: 10 years after death or discharge) can be used to research the spread of communicable diseases such as AIDS and tuberculosis.
- Student attendance registers (retention: 6 years) can be used to document dates of birth and Social Security benefits when vital statistic records are not available.
- School census records (retention: 6 years) provide valuable information on the number of students, their ages and ethnicity, teacher salaries, and the number of books in the classroom.

The Records Management Officer may wish to take a second look at all records, whether permanent or nonpermanent, to decide if they are historically important. Governments should assess records with nonpermanent retention periods for potential research or historical value before destroying them. Local governments can also use the appraisal process as a planning tool. Records with historical significance can be given a higher priority when arranging and describing records, when ordering archival storage materials, or when housing in better environmental conditions.

What Makes a Government Record Historically Important?

A local government record is historically important if it:

- Provides significant evidence of how the government goes about its business (how it functions and does its work) or
- Provides significant information about people, places, or events with which the government is involved

Government records contain important information about the people, places, and events within their jurisdiction:

- Information **about people** - their economic conditions, their values and concerns
- Information **about places** within the local government's borders the buildings, infrastructure, and land use of the area
- Information **about events in the area** - from national events (such as the impact of the Civil War or the Great Depression) to significant localized events (such as the closing of a military base, the displacement of people due to the construction of a reservoir, or the development of a thruway system)

The historical importance of records is shown every time a class studies the impact of the construction, of a reservoir, dam, or thruway on their town; local governments receive federal funds to renovate their historic buildings, sewers, and subways; citizens successfully conduct historic house research; or local entrepreneurs undertake land use studies for a proposed development.

The information in the records about people, places, and events is only important, however, if the information itself is *significant*. Significance depends on:

- When the records were created
- What kind of information the records contain
- Who created the records
- What other records exist (in the municipality and elsewhere in the state or country)
- The unique history of the local government or community

The historical importance of records will vary from local government to local government and from region to region. The people, places, or events in each community, and the unique circumstances of each government, determine which records are historically significant.

Local officials should consult with others when determining which records are historically significant to ensure that all perspectives are addressed. Records Management Officers are encouraged to seek advice from:

- The county or municipal historian
- People familiar with the government and community -longtime employees, former officials, etc.
- The government's records advisory committee
- SARA's Regional Advisory Officer

Conducting the Appraisal

Records are appraised as series, not as individual documents. A record series is a group of records that result from the same activity. The records in each series are managed together, filed together, indexed together, and disposed of together. Examples of series include **minutes**, **building permits**, **purchase orders**, and **general ledgers**. Since record series are kept and managed together, they can also be appraised together. Occasionally a few items within a series are worth keeping while the rest can be destroyed. However, in most cases, the records are appraised as a whole series.

Appraising record series to decide if they have significant historical information involves:

- Asking certain questions about the records, and then
- Deciding to keep or dispose of the records *based* on the answers

Appraisal questions fall into four general groups:

- 1. When were the records created?**
 - A. Are the records from an important period?
 - B. Are the records scarce?
 - C. Are the records old?
 - D. Do the records cover a long or short time period?

- 2. Why were the records created?**
 - A. Which office created the records?
 - B. What are the principal functions of that office?
 - C. Do the records document the principal functions of the office?

- 3. What is in the records?**
 - A. Do the records cover important activities?
 - B. Are the records an important source of information on the topic?

- 4. Who created the records?**
 - A. Do the records reflect a routine or an individual point of view?
 - B. What was the official position of the person who created the records?
 - C. Was the records creator personally involved in the events recorded?
 - D. Did the creator have the necessary expertise to understand the events recorded?
 - E. Does the creator exhibit a bias?

This checklist provides a framework for making informed decisions about which record series might have historical importance. SARA has gathered these questions into a chart, *Appraisal Scorecard* (Appendix A). By answering the questions on the *Appraisal Scorecard*, local governments can evaluate the historical significance of their records consistently from series to series. A narrative explanation of the *Scorecard* is presented in Appendix B (*Appraisal Checklist*) in a step-by-step narrative; two case studies (Appendix C) demonstrate the process.

SARA also has developed a number of background charts for use during the appraisal process. These charts, *Summary of Important Time Periods* and *Office Analysis* (Appendix A), provide information needed to answer the appraisal questions. The charts are discussed and demonstrated in the case studies (Appendix C).

Archival records can be identified anytime during the life cycle of the records. As a local government develops a strong records management program, the time of archival records identification will move from the initial inventory phase to the creation or active use phase. By identifying archival records' early in their life cycle, records managers can take appropriate steps to ensure their completeness and proper care. This is particularly critical with electronically created information, for which identification of archival records should be undertaken as records are created.

Managing Archival Records

Identifying archival records -both records with historical importance and permanent records with ongoing primary value -is an important first step toward managing them. Appraisal becomes not only a means of identifying archival records but also a planning tool so that local governments can appropriately budget staff time and resources. Governments might give archival records with historical significance preference when considering space allocation; when setting priorities relating to rehousing, conservation, or descriptive work; when ensuring the migration of archival electronic records; or when preparing for or recovering from disasters.

Archival records can provide critical information for local government officials to help them in making decisions and accomplishing ongoing operations. Archival records document policies, decisions, and ways of conducting government business; they can be used to reconstruct the past and plan for the future. They also contain valuable information that help citizens address contemporary issues and solve current problems. They serve as the "community memory" for local citizens, teachers, students, community groups, and researchers. It is an important part of the overall records management program and information service function of a local government to ensure that its archival records are used in ways that benefit the local government, the taxpayers, and the community. Identifying which records are archival is an important first step in managing them.

Once archival records are identified, governments must make an effort to plan for their future. The usefulness of archival records depends on the government's ability to retain them, extract the information they contain, and make that information available to researchers. Care of archival records is usually handled as part of the local government's records management program and incorporates the following core activities:

- Identifying archival records
- Providing storage and a stable environment
- Preserving records for the future
- Arranging and describing records
- Making the records available

Further assistance in developing and maintaining these core archival activities can be obtained through SARA's local government records workshops, through SARA's technical publications (including Technical Information Series No. 40, *Fundamentals of Managing Local Government Archival Records*), or through consultation with Regional Advisory Officers and with staff of Local Government Archival Advisory Services (518-474-4372).

For More Information and Assistance

The New York State Archives and Records Administration provides records management and archival advisory services to local governments, including technical advice and assistance, publications, training, presentations and consultations with local officials concerning records and

information management issues. SARA has records specialists in Albany and in regional offices throughout the state to provide advice. These services are supported by the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund. For further information, contact your Regional Advisory Officer or:

Local Government Records Services
State Archives and Records Administration State Education
Department Room 10A63
Cultural Education Center Albany, NY 12230
(518) 474-6926

Appendix A

- **Appraisal Scorecard**
- **Summary of Important Time Periods**
- **Office Analysis**

The following three charts -*Appraisal Scorecard*, *Summary of Important Time Periods*, and *Office Analysis* -were developed to help local governments with the appraisal process. The appraisal questions discussed in the narrative have been organized into the *Appraisal Scorecard* chart. By answering the questions on the *Appraisal Scorecard*, local governments can evaluate the historical significance of their records consistently from series to series. A narrative explanation of the scorecard is presented in Appendix B (Appraisal Checklist), and the process is demonstrated in two case studies (Appendix C).

SARA has also developed two accompanying charts for use during the appraisal process. These charts, *Summary of Important Time Periods* and *Office Analysis*, provide a mechanism for gathering background information that will be useful in answering the appraisal questions. They are discussed and demonstrated in the case studies (Appendix C).

Appraisal Scorecard

NAME OF SERIES:	
Step 1: When Were the Records Created?	
1A: Are the records from an important period?	
1B: Are the records scarce?	
1C: Are the records old?	
1D: Do the records cover a long or short time period?	
Step 2: Why were the records created?	
2C: Do the records document principal functions of the office?	
Step 3: What is in the Records?	
3A: Do the records cover important activities?	
3B: Are the records the only source of information?	
Are the records the best source?	
Do the records dispute other records?	
Do the records contain unique information?	
Step 4: Who Created the Records?	
4A: Do the records reflect a routine or an individual point of view?	
4B: Was the records creator(s) a high-level manager?	
4C: Was the creator(s) personally involved in the events?	
4D: Does the creator(s) have the necessary expertise?	
4E: Does the creator(s) exhibit a bias?	
Adding Up All the Evidence	
Will you keep the records?	

Appraisal Scorecard

Appraising records involves asking a series of questions about the records, then making an informed decision to keep or dispose of the records based on the answers. The appraisal questions fall into four groups or steps:

Step 1. *When* were the records created?

Records created during times of momentous change, survive from a period when many records have been destroyed, or cover a long period of time tend to be more significant.

Step 2. *Why* were the records created?

Records that preserve evidence of the office's principal functions are normally more significant than those that do not.

Step 3. *What* is in the records?

Records which contain more in-depth information about people, places, or events in the community are more likely to be historically important.

Step 4. *Who* created the records?

Records which reflect an employee's perspective or individual point of view may be more significant.

Each step contains a series of related questions. This checklist provides a framework for determining which record series might have historical importance. Since appraisal is a process, the final appraisal decision will not be based on any single answer to these questions; instead, it will be gleaned from the responses as a whole. The appraisal process involves looking at all clues and then making an informed decision.

SARA has incorporated this checklist of appraisal questions into the *Appraisal Scorecard*. By answering the questions on the *Appraisal Scorecard*, local governments can evaluate the historical significance of their records consistently from series to series. A detailed explanation of the checklist and *Scorecard* is presented in Appendix B in a step-by-step narrative.

Summary of Important Time Periods

<i>Name of Government:</i>	
<i>The following periods are significant:</i>	<i>Because:</i>

Summary of Important Time Periods

Certain periods and events can affect the development of a government and the community it serves. They often parallel rapid changes in the region, such as increasing or declining population growth, industrialization, or commercial growth. Other significant times include years during the early settlement of the region or when the government was established.

Important single events can also dramatically affect a community and have lasting effects. Such events might include disasters (e.g., fire, flood), the division of a neighborhood by a new highway, the building of a major mall in an adjacent town, or the downsizing of a major local industry.

Local governments will find it helpful to use the *Summary of Important Time Periods* chart to draw together information on periods and events that resulted in momentous change in their communities. Since local government records created during these intervals can provide clues to how the events affected the people of the region, such records might be historically significant.

Determining which times and events to include in the chart can be a difficult undertaking. Frequently such intervals will have had a widespread effect on the community and a broad impact across several government departments. (Events and times that affect individual offices or departments should be recorded on the *Office Analysis* chart.) County or municipal historians can help local officials with identifying events and times that had significant impact. The *Summary of Important Time Periods* chart provides a standardized format for listing the periods and events that are especially important to the government or community. When completed, the chart provides clues that records created during these periods might be more significant.

Office Analysis

<i>Name of Department, Office, etc.:</i>	
<i>Principle Functions of Office:</i>	<i>Source of Information:</i>
<i>Historical Development of the Office:</i>	<i>Time Period:</i>
<i>Form Completed By:</i>	
<i>Date Form Completed:</i>	

Office Analysis

To make informed decisions about the significance of a record series, the appraiser must understand the office that created the records -its goals and mission, its duties and responsibilities, and how it has changed over time. The *Office Analysis* chart begins the process of drawing together information about the history and function of an office. It can supply critical clues for identifying record series that document the activities and purpose of the creating office. In addition to its use for appraisal purposes, the core information on the chart can be developed into an office administrative history.

The *Office Analysis* chart first addresses **the principal functions of the office**. Historically important records will show the primary functions or activities of the office -that is, they will preserve evidence of how a government does its business. Functions are not always readily apparent from the records, but may be discovered in interviews with staff, job descriptions, local laws, annual reports, minutes, and budgets. This information compiled in the Office Analysis chart must be updated periodically, since functions change over time.

The section entitled **historical development of the office** should note when an office was created, any changes in the name and duties of the office, and who its chief administrators were. It should also include information on any special events that affected or influenced the operation of the office and/or the retention of its records. Such events might include the destruction of previous administrators records, embezzlement of funds, debate over mosquito spraying, controversy over a deer bait-and-shoot program, or adoption of a Geographical Information System. Understanding the background information about the development of a department can help local officials decide on the significance of the records produced by each office.

Appendix B

Appraisal Checklist: Four-Step Process Using the Appraisal Scorecard

An appraisal checklist is a list of criteria in the form of specific questions against which every series is evaluated. Argument for or against the retention of the records is based on responses to the appraisal questions outlined in this checklist. The step-by-step process discussed here provides a framework for making informed decisions about which record series might have historical importance. By using the appraisal checklist, local officials will bring consistency to the appraisal process.

Appraising records for historical significance involves asking a series of questions about the records, then making an informed decision to keep or dispose of the records based on the answers. The checklist questions are arranged into four groups or steps:

- Step 1. **When** were the records created?
- Step 2. **Why** were the records created?
- Step 3. **What** is in the records?
- Step 4. **Who** created the records?

Each step contains a series of related questions. This appendix provides a narrative explanation of the four steps, examining component elements individually. To assist local officials, SARA assembled the checklist questions into the *Appraisal Scorecard* (Appendix A). The checklist also refers to two background charts (also in Appendix A): *Summary of Important Time Periods*, and *Office Analysis*. The *Summary of Important Time Periods* and *Office Analysis* charts are mechanisms for gathering information that will be useful in answering the appraisal questions. Case studies for the implementation of the process follows in Appendix C.

Since appraisal is a process, the final appraisal decision will not be based on any single answer to these questions but gleaned from the responses as a whole. The appraisal process involves looking at all clues and then making an informed decision. Hence a record such as **canceled checks** might be quite old (1870s) but have very little informational content (only the names of the organizations and nothing about the services or products purchased), and more extensive information may appear in other records (e.g., **general ledgers**). So, while the records may appear to be historically important because of their age, a more detailed analysis reveals that they are of little historical value.

Step 1: When Were the Records Created?

Many individuals associate archival records with age. But age is not the sole criterion for determining whether a record is archival. In fact, archival records may be of very recent vintage.

Records created yesterday, although housed and used actively in an office, can be as historically significant as records created 100 years ago. This step seeks to evaluate the records in a wider context than age alone.

There are four questions in this step:

- A. Are the records from an important period?
- B. Are the records scarce?
- C. Are the records old?
- D. Do the records cover a long or short period of time?

A. Are the records from an important period?

In the life of any government, certain periods are especially important to the development of that government or to the people it serves. Whether resulting from a single event or occurring over several years, the resulting impact is such that the nature of the government or community has changed significantly. Records created during these important times can provide clues about how the events affected the people of the region; therefore they are more likely to be significant.

Important times can include:

- Years during the early settlement of the region
- Years during which the government was established
- Any period of rapid population growth, industrialization, or commercial growth
- Any period that had a great impact on the future of the area, such as an extended period of severe government fiscal crisis or school board infighting, which lead to unstable services

Important events that have influenced the community might include:

- Disasters (e.g., fires, floods) that might reduce the number of existing records
- Controversial events that have affected multiple government departments, such as the building of an airport, the opening of a toxic waste site, labor strikes, or the downsizing of a major local industry

Local governments will find it helpful to use the *Summary of Important Time Periods* chart (Appendix A) to list the time periods and events that are especially important to their governments or communities. The chart provides a forum for drawing together and standardizing the relevant information about the government and the community it serves. The local historian may be interested in completing the chart, or helping the government with its completion. The chart should highlight periods of momentous change in the community -thus providing clues that records created during these periods might be significant.

B. Are the records scarce?

Even records that are recent may be scarce. If most of the records from a certain period have been destroyed in a fire, a flood, or through disposal, then the records that survive tend to be significant. For example, if a fire in the town clerk's office destroyed most of the government's records from 1935 to 1940, then remaining records from that period, though seemingly more routine, may take on more significance. Calamities are unique to each government or community. Therefore, which records are scarce will vary from government to government. (Information relating to scarcity may be gleaned from completed *Summary of Important Time Period* charts.) The scarcity of the records does not mean they are automatically significant, but it is a clue in the overall process of determining the significance of the records.

C. Are the records old?

The significance of really old records is that they tend to be scarce. Records written in the 1600s or 1700s are rare. Records from before the establishment of a government may be few. Because most records from earlier periods did not survive, remaining records tend to be more important. The information in them cannot be found in other records. The State Law stipulating that *local governments may not destroy any record created before 1910 without the written permission of the State Archives* was not created because the records were old but because their information is scarce. The 1911 fire at the State Capitol destroyed many of New York State's records. The scarcity of the State's records has added significance to the information in existing pre-1910 local records.

The age of a record should not be the sole criterion for determining whether or not it should be kept. Not every old record has archival value and therefore not every old record should be kept permanently. Little archival value exists, for example, in coal receipts dating from the 1890s. The archival values of old records need to be assessed with the same appraisal criteria as records created recently.

Another argument for keeping old records is that the records themselves are objects of historical significance. Older records tend to be those that people want to see in exhibits or use in the classroom. However, not all old records will be needed or are suitable for exhibits or educational uses. Many "old" records are hard to read, not visually appealing, in too poor a condition to be exhibited, or not interesting. Other factors must be weighed in the selection process.

D. Do the records cover along or short time period?

Records that cover a long period of time provide a more thorough picture of the government than those that cover only a brief period. Therefore, records that cover a long period of time tend to be more significant.

Step 2: Why Were the Records Created?

Records that preserve evidence of how a government does its business tend to be more significant. To make informed decisions regarding the significance of a record series, appraisers must understand the office that created the records. Understanding the office and its functions provides critical clues in identifying record series that document the activities and purpose of the creating office. Knowing why the records were created ensures that records which show the functions of the various offices are kept. The questions in Step 2 help identify those records. When government employees create a record, they do so as functionaries of a certain *office*. The questions in Step 2 are concerned with the creator of the records as the representative of a certain office. (Step 4 will discuss the creator of the records as an individual.) Step 2 questions include:

- A. Which office created these records?
- B. What are the principal functions of that office?
- C. Do these records document the principal functions of the office?

Questions 2A and 2B provide a context for the creation of the records and enable the appraiser to answer the last question, 2C. Therefore, the responses to questions 2A and 2B are appropriately recorded on the background chart, *Office Analysis*, rather than the *Appraisal Scorecard*. For this reason, appraisers will only find question 2C on the scorecard.

A. Which office created the records?

This question is usually easy to answer by looking at the records themselves. The records inventory will also show the office of creation. Be aware however, that the office that created the records may be different from the office that is storing them.

B. What are the principal functions of that office?

To decide the significance of, and accurately appraise the records produced by each office, the appraiser must know the functions of that office. Identifying those functions will show which record series provides evidence of the principal functions or activities of the office. For example:

- *Mayor's office*. Functions might include directing town departments and approving or vetoing legislation enacted by the town board.
- *Planning department*. Functions may include planning and encouraging the physical, economic, and industrial development of the county, and encouraging public involvement in the planning process.
- *School treasurer*. Functions of this office would likely include preparing and recommending an annual budget for the school board, maintaining fiscal and banking records of the school, and reporting annually on the fiscal activities of the school.

Since the creation of records results from a government's conducting its business, the records themselves will reflect the functions and activities of their creator. Functions are not always readily apparent from the records, but they may be identified through a variety of sources, including:

- Interviews with staff, especially department heads.
- Job descriptions
- Local laws
- Annual reports
- Budgets
- Published manuals
- Administrative histories, government directories, and *New York Department of State Local Government Handbook*.

The *Office Analysis* chart (Appendix A) is a helpful tool for drawing together information related to each department from various sources. Conducting the research and completing the chart may be delegated to staff, municipal historians, interns, or volunteers. This information must be updated periodically, since functions change over time.

C. Do the records document the principal functions of the office?

Historically significant records will document not how every employee did every small task, but how the office, overall, fulfilled its principal functions. Records that summarize and describe the activities of the office tend to be particularly significant.

For example, if the fiscal officer of the government created the records being appraised, the principal activities of the office (or person) might be to:

1. Prepare and recommend (to the chief legislative body) an annual budget
2. Maintain fiscal and banking records of the government
3. Report annually on the fiscal activities of the government

The series **Budget preparation files** preserves evidence of one of the office's principal functions: preparing the annual budget. The **Budget preparation files**, therefore, have an increased chance of being significant. However, duplicate copies of **Board minutes** do not preserve evidence of the principal activities of this office. This series is less likely to document how the office carries out its responsibilities -and therefore is less likely to be historically significant.

Step 3: What is in the Records?

Because governments are constantly involved in the lives of people, their records may contain a tremendous amount of information about:

People who live within the government's jurisdiction: the conditions they live under, how they make their living, how they entertain themselves, their values and concerns

Buildings and sites within the local government's borders: the architecture, open spaces, and environment of the area

Significant events in the area: major displacements of people (urban renewal, etc.), settlement of immigrants, effect of industrialization and deindustrialization, etc. The records may contain information about the events themselves or about the decisions made in relation to them

Government records can reveal information about what people owned, about the attitudes and values of parents of schoolchildren, about how the construction of a new highway led to the demise of a neighborhood, or about how a community reacted to a military base closing. The information concerning people, places, and events can be very valuable to researchers, staff, and the public, but only if the information itself is significant. The records must have enough information to adequately document the people, places, or events recorded. (Step 1 evaluates whether a particular event itself is significant.) The only way to decide the significance of the information is by asking questions about the content of the records themselves:

- A. Do the records cover important activities?
- B. Are these records an important source of information on this topic?

A. Do the records cover important activities?

Records that document important government activities tend to contain more in-depth information about people, places, or events in the community. A clue to whether the activities are important is whether they are routine by nature. Records that result from routine activities are repetitious (e.g., **purchase orders, canceled checks**). The range of information provided by such records is limited in scope. School library book requisition orders are an example of routine records. The purchase requisitions document a housekeeping activity, and each requisition form is very much like every other form in style and content. Routine records tend to be insignificant historically.

Records that relate to important activities are usually not treated in a routine matter. For example, requests for the removal of books from a school library deal with the censorship of library material. While these records might look alike (each lists name of parent, book, and reason for request), the content of each will be unique. In a fire district, correspondence that discusses the need for a new fire station is not routine, and each document will be different from the others. If the record covers important activities, it is more likely to be historically important.

B. Are the records an important source of information on this topic?

The records may be an important source of information for any of four reasons:

1. If they are the only source of information on this topic

2. If they are the best source
3. If they dispute other information on this topic
4. If they contain unique information about this topic

Addressing these questions can help determine if a record series is an important source of information.

1. Are they the **only** source of information?

Consider the series **Requests for removal of book** which consists of forms completed by school librarians to remove a book from the library. Each form includes the name of the person requesting the removal, the reason for the request, and a description of action taken by the library and/or the school board. If this series is the only place that the information exists, it is more apt to be significant. However, it is likely that the **Minutes of the school board** also cover the topic.

2. Are they the **best** source of information?

If the **Request for removal of a book** merely duplicates information found in the **Minutes of the school board**, then only one series needs to be kept. However, if the removal request files add to the information in the school board's files, then they may be significant. Do the removal request files, for example, document instances of protests that never made their way to the school board? Perhaps the library staff resolved these disputes. If so, these records, taken with those of the school board, provide a more comprehensive picture of the issue than a single series of records alone could provide.

3. Do they **dispute** other information on this topic?

A record series also may add significantly to what is known about a topic by disputing what other documents record. For example, if the school board's minutes show very few complaints about books in the library, but the library's own files indicate that the librarians resolved many complaints without the intervention of the board, then the library's perspective on the issue may be meaningful.

4. Do they contain **unique** information about this topic?

The last way the records may add significantly to what is known about a topic is if they document a unique aspect of a phenomenon that is otherwise common. If, for instance, the library's files contain a few complaints about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or *Catcher in the Rye*, they might simply duplicate the files of thousands of school libraries in New York State and elsewhere. However, if the files contain a request to remove the Bible from the shelves, it might represent a unique instance of attempted censorship. The uniqueness of the record sets it apart from those of other governments, giving it a statewide or national significance.

Step 4: Who Created the Records?

Government employees often create records that reflect their own individual points of view. The employee's perspective may have a bearing on the significance of the record. Not all records, however, reflect an individual's particular view; many are routine. With routine records (e.g., **payroll reports, general ledgers, or employee time records**), the identity of the individual who created them is unimportant. Routine records are completed in much the same way by all employees.

Non-routine records are more likely to include important topics. This is most likely with unstructured documents, such as correspondence, narrative reports, or memoranda. Questions about the person who created them can help gauge the significance of the records.

The first Step 4 question determines whether the appraiser needs to answer the other questions in this step:

A. Do the records reflect a routine or an individual point of view?

If they are routine, then the remaining questions do *not* need to be answered.

If they reflect the point of view of the records creator, then ask the following questions:

- B. What is the official position of the person who created these records?
- C. Was the creator personally involved in the events recorded?
- D. Did the creator have the expertise necessary to understand the events recorded?
- E. Does the creator exhibit a bias?

B. What was the official position of the person who created these records?

Higher-level managers have an overview of the entire government, and their records reflect that fact. The higher the position of the records creator, the more likely the records are significant. For example, if the record series, **Records related to the construction of Interstate 88** was being appraised, then the official position of the person who created or received the records (the planning commissioner) might increase the historical importance of the records. The Appraisal Scorecard addresses this question by asking, "Was the records creator a high-level manager?"

C. Was the creator personally involved in the events recorded?

Usually where records describe an event or chain of events, the records of people who participated in the events are more significant than those of people who did not. For the Interstate 88 records, the commissioner presumably had direct involvement in all the meetings (at least high-level ones) and other decision making processes throughout the construction of the highway. Therefore, his or her records are more likely to be significant.

D. Did the creator have the necessary expertise to understand the events recorded?

Many government records deal with complex issues that require special education and training to understand. Whenever records deal with technical or complex subjects, records created by experts *may* have more significance than records created by others. In the example, the selection of the interstate route might involve questions of population density, land use, etc. In such a case, the importance of the records may depend on the ability of the records creator to understand and communicate the subject matter.

E. Does the creator exhibit a bias?

Whenever the creator of the records exhibits a strong bias, the appraiser must be careful to examine whether that bias diminishes or increases the historical importance of the records. Even when the bias is negative, the record may be an important historical record of the fact that such a bias existed. In the case of Interstate 88, if the commissioner favored a route proposed by the planning department but not selected by the federal government, then the records may reveal information that never found its way into the official record of the event.

The Last Step: Adding Up All the Evidence

Once the appraiser has asked all the questions, the final step in the appraisal process is to look at *all* the clues, assess all the factors, and then make an informed decision. The *Appraisal Scorecard* chart (Appendix A) maps out the checklist questions and provides room to write a "yes" or "no" response and/or comments. Final decisions cannot be based on a simple arithmetic calculation; it is not just a matter of deciding to keep all records where 50% or more of the answers are "yes." In some situations, one factor is so compelling that the record is worth keeping despite other deficits.

The four-step process provides a framework for making an informed decision. It also enables the appraiser to put in writing the appraisal decisions -why records were kept or discarded. This written record can be beneficial in the future when government staff or the public questions the appraisal decision.

Appendix C

Using the Appraisal Checklist

Case Studies

These case studies illustrate how to apply the appraisal questions identified in the *Appraisal Checklist* (Appendix B) to decide the historical significance of record series. Two series, **Journals** and **Subject and correspondence files**, serve as the test cases. The case studies examine each step question from the *Appraisal Checklist*, and bring all these questions together in the final phase, "Adding Up the Evidence."

Each case provides a series description and tables that correspond to the step questions. The tables include the general and specific step questions and provide detailed narrative answers. Finally the exercise brings the individual tables together into the *Appraisal Scorecard*.

Many step questions draw on information about the history of the government or office that generated the records. As outlined earlier in this publication, the *Summary of Important Time Periods* and *Office Analysis* charts is designed to draw together pertinent information about a government and the offices that comprise it. An example of how to complete these two charts is included at the end of the case studies. The models provide narrative descriptions of a fictional government and two of its offices, followed by completed *Summary of Important Time Periods* and *Office Analysis* charts. The background information from these model charts was used to complete the case studies.

Case1: Journals

Series Descriptions

As the appraisal questions are considered for the series, **Journals**, readers should assume that the Town of Empire, the fictional government in these case studies, also has the series **General ledgers**. Both series descriptions are provided here.

Journals.

- Location: Comptroller's office
- Qty: 2 volumes
- Dates: 1899-1900
- Retention: 6 years after last entry
- Comments: Chronological entries of all fiscal transactions. Includes the account number, the amount of the debit or credit for each transaction, and (sometimes) a short description of the item or service purchased.

General Ledgers.

- Location: Comptroller's office
- Qty: 53 volumes
- Dates: 1877-1930
- Retention: 10 years after last entry
- Contents: Record of all receipts and disbursements. The receipts section lists entries by date and includes the source of the money, the credited fund, and the amount. The disbursements section is also arranged by date and includes the person or vendor to whom money was paid, the account debited, and the amount. Each entry also includes a description of the goods or services purchased.

Step Questions with Narrative Responses for Journals

Step 1: When Were the Records Created?

Table 1.1: Step 1 Questions for Journals	
<p>1A. Are the Journals from an important period?</p> <p><i>Clue: Records created during times of momentous change may be significant.</i></p> <p>Help: See the completed chart <i>Summary of Important Time Periods</i> to identify periods that are important to the government's history.</p>	<p>No, the completed <i>Summary of Important Time Periods</i> chart on p. 37 shows that while the town was growing, it was not experiencing a rapid increase in population.</p>
<p>1B. Are the Journals scarce?</p>	<p>Yes, the 1909 fire destroyed many town</p>

<i>Clue: If most of the records from a certain period have been destroyed, the records that survive tend to be significant.</i>	records.
1C. Are the Journals old? <i>Clue: Very old records tend to be significant.</i>	Yes , the records are nearly 100 years old.
1D. Do the Journals cover a long or short time period? <i>Clue: Records that cover a long period of time tend to be more significant than those that cover a short period.</i>	Short , they only cover a two-year period.

Step 2: Why Were the Records Created?

Table 1.2, Step 2 Questions for Journals	
2A. Which office created the Journals?	Comptroller's office
2B. What are the principal functions of the Comptroller's office? Help: Complete the <i>Office Analysis</i> chart	Prepare and recommend an annual budget for the board; maintain fiscal and banking records of the town; report annually on the fiscal activities of the town. See <i>Office Analysis</i> chart on p. 39.
2C. Do the Journals document the principal functions of the office? <i>Clue: Records that preserve evidence of the office's principal functions are normally more significant than those that do not.</i>	Yes , they directly relate to the primary function of the office.

Step 3: What Is in the Records?

Table 1.3: Step 3 Questions for Journals	
3A. Do the Journals cover important activities? Clue: Records that document important activities tend to be significant	No , the records are routine by nature.
3B. Are they the only source of information?	No , the General ledgers provide another source.
Are they the best source of information?	No , the General ledgers include more information.

Do they dispute other information?	<i>No</i> , they do not dispute other information.
Do they contain unique information?	<i>No</i> .

Step 4: Who Created the Records?

Table 1.4: Step 4 Questions for Journals	
4A. Do the Journals reflect a routine or an individual point of view?	Routine, the remaining Step 4 questions do not need to be asked.
4B. Were the Journals' creators high-level managers? <i>Clue: The higher the position of the records creator, the more likely that the records are significant.</i>	Since they are routine, the question is not applicable (n/a).
4C. Were the creators of the Journals personally involved in the events recorded? <i>Clue: The records of people who participated in the events are more significant than those of people who did not.</i>	n/a
4D. Did the creators of the Journals have the necessary expertise to understand the events recorded? <i>Clue: Records created by experts may have more significance than records created by others.</i>	n/a
4E. Do the creators of the Journals exhibit a bias? <i>Clue: Whenever the creator of the records exhibits a strong bias, the appraiser must be careful to examine whether that bias diminishes or increases the historical importance of the records.</i>	n/a

Adding Up the Evidence

NAME OF SERIES: <i>Journals</i>	
Step 1: When Were the Records Created?	
1A: Are the records from an important period?	No
1B: Are the records scarce?	Yes
1C: Are the records old?	Yes
1D: Do the records cover a long or short time period?	Short
Step 2: Why were the records created?	
2C: Do the records document principal functions of the office?	Yes
Step 3: What is in the Records?	
3A: Do the records cover important activities?	No
3B: Are the records the only source of information?	No (the general ledgers are available)
Are the records the best source?	No
Do the records dispute other records?	No
Do the records contain unique information?	No
Step 4: Who Created the Records?	
4A: Do the records reflect a routine or an individual point of view?	Routine
4B: Was the records creator(s) a high-level manager?	n/a
4C: Was the creator(s) personally involved in the events?	n/a
4D: Does the creator(s) have the necessary expertise?	n/a
4E: Does the creator(s) exhibit a bias?	n/a
Adding Up All the Evidence	
Will you keep the records?	No, a better source is available. (For records before 1910, SARA will need to approve of their destruction.)

Case 2: Subject and correspondence files

Series Description

Subject and correspondence files.
 Location: Office of the Commissioner of Planning
 Qty: 2 file drawers
 Dates: 1934-1941
 Retention: 1 year, 6 years, or permanent
 Contents: Correspondence, memos, reports, program budget materials, photographs, maps, engineer's notes, carry-out menus, golf scorecards, and unmailed Christmas cards. Included are several folders of records related to the search for an appropriate site for the municipal airport and heavily annotated reports regarding the advantages and disadvantages of each. Files also contain information on the construction of the airport.

Step Questions with Narrative Responses for Subject and Correspondence Files

Step 1: When Were the Records Created?

Table 1.1: Step 1 Questions for Subject and correspondence files	
1A. Are the Subject and correspondence files from an important period? <i>Clue: Records created during times of momentous change may be significant.</i> Help: See the completed chart <i>Summary of Important Time Periods</i> to identify periods that are important to the government's history.	Yes , the <i>Summary of Important Time Periods</i> chart on p. 37 shows the records were created during a time of great controversy over airport construction.
1B. Are the files scarce? <i>Clue: If most of the records from a certain period have been destroyed, the records that survive tend to be significant.</i>	No , there is no evidence of any missing or destroyed records during this period.
1C. Are the file old? <i>Clue: Very old records tend to be significant.</i>	No , the records are fairly recent considering the town is more than 150 years old.
1D. Do the Subject and correspondence files cover a long or short time period?	Short , they only cover eight years.

<i>Clue: Records that cover a long period of time tend to be more significant than those that cover a short period.</i>	
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Step 2: Why Were the Records Created?

Table 1.2, Step 2 Questions for Subject and correspondence files	
2A. Which office created the Subject and correspondence files?	Office of the Commissioner of Planning
2B. What are the principal functions of the Office of the Commissioner of Planning? Help: Complete the <i>Office Analysis</i> chart	Develop and carry out policies and programs relating to town development, especially zoning, infrastructure housing, parks, natural resources and environmental issues. (See <i>Office Analysis</i> chart on p. 38.)
2C. Do the Subject and correspondence files document the principal functions of the office? <i>Clue: Records that preserve evidence of the office's principal functions are normally more significant than those that do not.</i>	Yes , most of the records relate directly; a few (golf score cards, menus, Christmas cards) do not.

Step 3: What is in the Records?

Table 1.3: Step 3 Questions for Subject and correspondence files	
3A. Do the Subject and correspondence files cover important activities? <i>Clue: Records that document important activities tend to be significant</i>	Yes, they document a variety of activities and thus provide a wide range of information about the government and the community.
3B. Are they the only source of information?	No, the planning board has minutes of its meeting in which much of the information is conveyed at least in summary form.
Are they the best source of information?	Yes, they may be the best source since they will provide a greater level of detail.
Do they dispute other information?	Yes, they may dispute information in other records, particularly if the airport records contain annotated reports.
Do they contain unique information?	No, many municipalities have airport controversies.

Step 4: Who Created the Records?

Table 1.4: Step 4 Questions for Subject and correspondence files	
4A. Do the Subject and correspondence files reflect a routine or an individual point of view?	Individual point of view. Continue to ask the Step 4 questions.
4B. Was the creator of the files a high-level manager? <i>Clue: The higher the position of the records creator, the more likely that the records are significant.</i>	Yes, the commissioner.
4C. Was the creator of the files personally involved in the events recorded? <i>Clue: The records of people who participated in the events are more significant than those of people who did not.</i>	Yes, annotations and arguments show involvement.
4D. Did the creator of the files have the necessary expertise to understand the events recorded? <i>Clue: Records created by experts may have more significance than records created by others.</i>	Yes, the Office Analysis chart tells us he was a professional engineer.
4E. Did the creator of the files exhibit a bias? <i>Clue: Whenever the creator of the records exhibits a strong bias, the appraiser must be careful to examine whether that bias diminishes or increases the historical importance of the records.</i>	Yes, the commissioner professed open opposition to the airport site.

Adding Up the Evidence

NAME OF SERIES: <i>Subject and correspondence files</i>	
Step 1: When Were the Records Created?	
1A: Are the records from an important period?	Yes
1B: Are the records scarce?	No
1C: Are the records old?	No
1D: Do the records cover a long or short time period?	Short
Step 2: Why were the records created?	

2C: Do the records document principal functions of the office?	Yes
Step 3: What is in the Records?	
3A: Do the records cover important activities?	Yes (some)
3B: Are the records the only source of information?	No
Are the records the best source?	Yes
Do the records dispute other records?	Yes
Do the records contain unique information?	No
Step 4: Who Created the Records?	
4A: Do the records reflect a routine or an individual point of view?	Individual Point of View
4B: Was the records creator(s) a high-level manager?	Yes
4C: Was the creator(s) personally involved in the events?	Yes
4D: Does the creator(s) have the necessary expertise?	Yes
4E: Does the creator(s) exhibit a bias?	Yes
Adding Up All the Evidence	
Will you keep the records?	Yes , at least some records. The files should be weeded of the non-relevant material such as golf scorecards, menus, and Christmas Cards, and the department should Improve its filing practices.

Using the Background Information Charts

The *Summary of Important Time Periods* and the *Office Analysis* charts are tools that local officials can use to gather background information on their local government and its offices. The charts can be used in a variety of ways:

- To provide a quick synopsis of the government's history or the community's development
- To provide an overview of office functions or the development of a department
- To provide a foundation for a later history on the region or government
- To help identify records which are historically important

Below is *background information* on a fictional government and two of its offices, followed by examples of completed charts that illustrate how to blend the background information into charts.

Government Background Information

Town of Empire

The Town of Empire was founded in 1835 and grew steadily until, by 1925, it had become the major municipal center and seat of government in its county. In 1925, to meet the growing needs of the community, the town board approved the creation of several new departments. By 1930, the population, which in 1900 was 27,000, had grown to more than 86,000. The town's physical facilities, already taxed by the 1909 fire that damaged the town hall, were strained nearly to the breaking point. During the next decade, the town built a new town hall and town garage, constructed roads, laid sidewalks, and repaired bridges.

In 1940, after a three-year controversy over the site, the town board approved the construction of a municipal airport. Throughout that year Commissioner Peter Parker publicly ridiculed the site selected by the Board. In 1956 Mr. Parker was vindicated when the entire airport sank into the swampy land.

The Town of Empire has continued to grow rapidly. With the enormous growth the town's rural landscape has changed. Housing developments, schools, highways, recreational facilities, and businesses have replaced farms and vacant land.

Completed Chart: Summary of Important Time Periods

Name of Government:	Town of Empire
The following periods are significant:	Because:
1822	Erie Canal which runs through the region was opened.
1835	Town of Empire was founded.
1877	Railroad depot was opened.
1909	A fire damaged the Town Hall (and burned most of its records).
1925 -1930	By 1925 the town had become a major municipal center and the seat of government in its county. During the next five years the town board created several new departments to cope with the growth.
1930 -1940	The town's physical infrastructure and utilities were strained nearly to the breaking point A new town hall, garage, and roads were built, sidewalks were laid, and bridges repaired.
1937 -1941	In 1940, after a three-year controversy over the site, the town board approved the construction of a municipal airport Peter Parker, a professional engineer and the commissioner of planning, professed open opposition to the site.
1956	The entire airport sank into the swampy land on which it had been built

Department Background Information

Planning Department

The mission of the department of planning is to develop and carry out policies and programs to promote the orderly development of the Town of Empire. The department's work focuses on zoning, infrastructure (utilities and transportation), housing, parks, natural resources and environmental issues.

The Department of Planning was established in 1930 with a professional engineer, Peter Parker, as its first commissioner of planning. The town board gave the new commissioner widespread powers over zoning matters, construction and other development issues. Commissioner Parker served as chief engineer on the project to select an airport site. He was relieved of his duties in 1941 after a year of publicly ridiculing the town board on its choice of a site for the airport. The department's third commissioner, Mike Smith, resigned in 1956 after being accused of taking bribes from developers. Upon leaving office he destroyed all the files he created during his tenure. Commissioner John Jones was responsible for developing the town's master plan, constructing the new town park in 1967, and building a civic center in 1976. The roof on the

civic center collapsed in the summer of 1978. The contractor was found liable for faulty construction practices and reimbursed the town.

Completed Chart: Office Analysis

<i>Name of Department, Office, etc.:</i> Department of Planning	
<i>Principle Functions of Office:</i>	<i>Source of Information:</i>
Develop and carry out policies and programs to promote the orderly development of the town.	Minutes of the town board
Be responsible for zoning, infrastructure (utilities and transportation), housing, parks, natural resources, and environmental issues	Annual report and budget
<i>Historical Development of the Office:</i>	<i>Time Period:</i>
Creation of the Department of Planning	1930
Appointment of Peter Parker, a professional engineer, as first commissioner	1930
Peter Parker serves as chief engineer on airport project	1937 -1940
Peter Parker is fired	1941
Bribery charge leads to Commissioner Mike Smith's resignation	1956
Commissioner Smith destroys all files he created during his tenure	1945-1956
Construction of new town park	1967
Civic center built	1976
Roof on civic center collapses	1978
<i>Form Completed By:</i> Jane Doe	
<i>Date Form Completed:</i> Jan. 2,1994	

Department Background Information

Comptroller's Office

The comptroller's office is responsible for reviewing annual department budgets, preparing the final budget to be submitted to the town board for approval, maintaining all fiscal and banking accounts, and reporting annually on all fiscal activities of the town. Initially the town supervisor handled all municipal finances. This, however, became impractical as the scope of the town's activities expanded, and the position of comptroller was created in 1925. In 1970 the comptroller, Tom Adams, was indicted for embezzlement of funds. All accounting functions were computerized in 1975.

Completed Chart: Office Analysis

<i>Name of Department, Office, etc.:</i> Comptroller's Office	
<i>Principle Functions of Office:</i>	<i>Source of Information:</i>
Prepare and recommend an annual budget to the town board	Minutes of the town board
Maintain fiscal and banking records of the town	Annual report and budget
Report annually on the fiscal activities of the town	Annual report and budget.
<i>Historical Development of the Office:</i>	<i>Time Period:</i>
First comptroller appointed	1925
Comptroller Adams indicted on embezzlement charges	1970
Office automates its accounting operations	1975
<i>Form Completed By:</i> Jane Doe	
<i>Date Form Completed:</i> Jan. 12,1994	