

# Historical Records and the Local Government Historian

by

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## Introduction

New York's officially appointed public historians play an important role in preserving and interpreting the history of their communities. This publication suggests ways that such historians can use their specialized knowledge and interests to encourage and support records management and historical records programs that are adequate to the needs of local governments and their constituents. Local public historians can be advocates for the greater and broader use of both governmental and non-governmental historical records, for the preservation of a community's local character, for addressing community needs, and for planning for a community's future. While no public historian may have the time or resources to be involved with all the areas suggested in this publication, it may be possible to work on relevant projects selected from each of the major areas discussed.

Historical records, also called archival records, are records that should be kept permanently because of their long-term usefulness for historical or other researchers. For purposes of this publication, the term **governmental historical records** is used to designate records created, filed, or used by local governments in the course of their business that are worthy of preservation and special care. These records may have continuing importance because the information they contain is useful for administrative purposes or for historical or other research. Such records may include, but are not limited to, land records, minutes of governing bodies, tax records, subdivision maps, photographs, building permits, and records of capital construction, regardless of whether they are on paper, film, magnetic tape, or any other medium.

**Non-governmental historical records**, for the purposes of this publication, are records produced by private individuals, groups, or institutions that contain significant information about the past and are therefore worthy of long-term preservation and systematic management for historical and other research. They can include diaries, letters, journals, ledgers, minutes, photographs, maps, drawings, blueprints, deeds, contracts, memoranda, and other material, and they may exist on paper, parchment, magnetic tape, film, or any other medium.

**In short, the State Archives defines governmental historical records as those created by and belonging to some type of government, while non-governmental historical records originate with, and are kept by, private individuals, organizations, and institutions.**

Public historians' responsibilities were defined under laws passed in 1919 and 1933 which are now in part outdated. Local government public historians' prerogatives and responsibilities relating to both governmental and non-governmental historical records remain somewhat unclear. Local government public historians are not meant to be collectors, curators, or archivists, although some historians oversee collections that accumulated in the absence of other repositories and that have grown as a result of the performance of official duties.

The Local Government Records (LGR) Law (Section 57.07(1) of the Arts and Cultural Affairs Laws as amended by Ch. 737, Laws of 1987) effective August 5, 1988, updated the "Historians' Law" and partially clarified historians' records-related responsibilities. Section 1 reads as follows:

Each local government historian shall promote the establishment and improvement of programs for the management and preservation of local government records with enduring value for historical or other research; encourage the coordinated collection and preservation of nongovernmental historical records by libraries, historical societies, and other repositories; and carry out and actively encourage research in such records in order to add to the knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the community's history.

The LGR Law was developed in consultation with many local government associations, including the former Association of Municipal Historians and the County Historians Association. This law establishes a Local Government Records Advisory Council of twenty-seven members to advise on implementation of the law and on related state oversight and services. Local government public historians are included in the council's membership. Under the LGR Law, local government historians have three areas of responsibility: programs, records, and research.

## Programs

**I. Each local government historian shall promote the establishment and improvement of programs for the management and preservation of local government records with enduring value for historical or other research.**

The LGR Law not only modified the duties of public historians, but also included provisions relating to records management in local governments and specified the responsibility of the Commissioner of

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Education to provide records management advice and assistance to local governments (exclusive of the municipal agencies of the City of New York). The law requires local governing bodies and chief executives to “promote and support a program for the orderly and efficient management of records, including the identification and appropriate administration of records with enduring value for historical or other research.”

Just as each general-purpose local government (county, municipality) must appoint a public historian, so must each local government appoint a Records Management Officer (RMO) to “coordinate the development of and oversee” its records management program. The law specifies that each locality’s town or village clerk shall be the RMO and that a fire district’s secretary shall be the RMO in a fire district. Other local governments—counties, school districts, public benefit corporations, special authorities, BOCES, and miscellaneous units of local government—must appoint an RMO, but the designation is a local choice, subject to the usual process for official appointments. In a number of counties, county historians are the RMO or work closely with or for the RMO.

The State Archives strongly recommends that each local government pass an ordinance or other enactment that establishes a records management program. The State Archives also encourages the creation of a records advisory board, which includes the public historian, that works with the RMO to produce records management plans, policies, and procedures, including those related to archival records.

A local government records management program is an ongoing administrative necessity, comparable to highway maintenance, central purchasing, civil service, or taxation. Records management usually includes the survey and inventory of records, development of filing systems, coordination of micrographics, establishment of appropriate inactive records storage, systematic destruction of obsolete records, analysis and planning for information systems, and deployment of modern information technology, as well as the identification, maintenance and use of records.

It is sometimes hard to remember, when faced with the archival riches of a local government, that these documents were not created for eventual use by historians. Rather, these records were created in the most prosaic way for the most mundane reasons. Local government archival records—those with enduring legal, fiscal, administrative, or historical research value—accumulated from the routine of government, and have as their main reason for permanent retention their ongoing utility. Local government archival records should always be an integral part of a comprehensive records management program,





- (C) encouraging development of guides to facilitate access to archival records and encouraging distribution of these guides to local repositories, libraries, other historians, and researchers
- (D) promoting use of archival records by local government officials, schools, and others
- (E) helping new users become acquainted with archival records for public policy, planning, legal, and other research (see “Records” below)
- (F) supporting a proper environment for the storage and use of archival records
- (G) advocating the physical security of archival records
- (H) ensuring that the records of defunct local government departments or agencies pass to the local government’s archives. When a program ends, a department is merged with another, or a local government is dissolved or annexed, the archival records of those former entities must be protected and assessed for their ongoing research value

- Promote the importance of archival records to local government officials, news media, the historical community, and the public.
- In the case of special purpose local governments (such as school or fire districts) where no public historian is required by statute, a public historian can still serve on records advisory boards, provide advice and historical perspective during the development of a records management program, and advise on the identification and treatment of archival records.

Many of the above-named activities can be assisted by Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund (LGRMIF) grants. Funding is available to local governments for a number of projects related to historical records, including

- assessment of the current state of historical records in a local government
- improvement of areas where historical records are stored
- facilitation of access to historical records through their arrangement and description and by the development of finding aids for use on-site, or on a local website or on the State Archives Historic Documents Inventory (see “Records” below for further information on the HDI )
- preservation of records by analysis, reformatting them onto other media (such as microfilm), or conservation treatment

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- promotion of use of historical records through outreach and public programs
  - encouragement of projects that use local government records as teaching tools in the classroom and in community programs

Local officials should contact their State Archives Regional Advisory Officer (RAO) for further information concerning LGRMIF grants. RAOs are based in nine regions across the state; each RAO serves all local governments in a region contiguous with a state judicial district. Local government historians should be involved in the development and implementation of any projects and should encourage local government RMOs to submit applications.

Public historians can also play a role in shaping State Archives services to regions by serving on a Regional Advisory Committee (RAC). RACs meet four times a year to discuss issues and needs in their regions.

## Records

### **II. (Each local government historian shall) . . . encourage the coordinated collection and preservation of non-governmental historical records by libraries, historical societies, and other repositories . . .**

Every community has historically valuable non-governmental records that include information on the development of the community, its institutions, and its people. But too often, such records have been lost because there were no organized programs to identify, collect, preserve, and make them available for research. Even where such programs exist, they often operate in isolation from each other and are undersupported and underdeveloped. Communities do not always see the historical value in such records, particularly more recent records, and people seldom realize that what they have been doing in their communities has historical value.

Small municipalities may not have local historical repositories, or their local historical societies may be dormant. In such situations, the public historian often becomes a *de facto* collector of historical records, but may lack essential collections policies and procedures governing the acquisition, legal custody, accession, protection, storage, and use of those records. Without the appropriate legal and procedural guidelines in place, the line between what the public historian has collected personally and what has been collected in an official capacity can become blurred. Too often items collected

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officially by the public historian fail to pass to a successor, or are irretrievably lost to the antiquarian marketplace. If the public historian accepts private papers and other non-government documents in her/his official capacity, these records become the property of the local government in whose name the public historian accepted them. They are then subject to the retention periods designated in the appropriate State Archives records retention and disposition schedule.

However, local repositories may not have secure space to store and preserve these records, or facilities to make them available. Local government historians considering the collection of such historical records, or actively working to ensure that their community's valuable historical records are not lost, should consult their State Archives Regional Advisory Officer.

The New York State legislature established the Documentary Heritage Program (DHP) in 1988 to help strengthen the state's historical records programs and to ensure that all of New York's historical records are identified, preserved, and made available. The law establishing the DHP authorizes aid to nine regional service providers, following the regional boundaries used by New York's Reference and Research Library Resources systems, to hire archivists to advise and assist historical records programs in their regions. The DHP also provides grant funds for historical records projects. DHP advisory services and its discretionary grants program are available to non-governmental historical records repositories. Local governments are not eligible for DHP funding, but local government historians are encouraged to promote the availability of DHP grants and advisory services to holders of historical records in their communities.

The DHP encourages the comprehensive documentation of New York State's history and culture by supporting projects that identify, survey, collect, and make available important records relating to traditionally under-represented groups and topics. The DHP is supported by the Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund and is administered through the State Archives. For further information about the DHP, visit the State Archives' website at [www.archives.nysed.gov](http://www.archives.nysed.gov) or call the State Archives' Access Services at (518) 474-6926.

Local government historians can and should support strong historical records programs for non-governmental records. Some suggested ways to do this include:

- Review county-level guides produced by the Historical Documents Inventory (HDI), which are available from the State Archives. The guides give an overview of holdings in regional repositories, as well as list regional topics in repositories elsewhere in the state. Guides

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can be used to determine how well particular places, events, people, topics, processes, or periods are documented. The HDI is now available online through the State Archives' Excelsior catalog. Local government historians should work to encourage local records repositories to 1) review entries for their institutions to ensure that the information is up to date and accurate, and 2) encourage local institutions that are not listed to submit information about their records.

- Promote further development of the DHP, including cooperating with and supporting the work of its regional archivists.
- Support and attend meetings of representatives from area repositories and institutions and meet with individuals interested in particular topics, to encourage coordinated collecting and documentation of previously under-documented subjects. Ensuring a more comprehensive and "even" record of New York's communities is a major focus of the DHP. Local government historians should follow up as appropriate to encourage, coordinate, or lead the development of such efforts.
- Advocate historical records programs in the community. Encourage the news media, community organizations, educators, governmental leaders, and other citizens to take an interest in, and become active supporters of, historical records programs.
- Encourage individuals in local historical records repositories to prepare grant applications under the LGRMIF (for local government applications only), the DHP (for not for profit sector repositories), the Discretionary Grant Program of the New York State Library's Division of Library Development, and the federal government's National Historical Publications and Records Commission's grants program.

## Research

**III. (Each local government historian shall) . . . carry out and actively encourage research in such records in order to add to the knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the community's history.**

Historically valuable records, including those of government and private organizations, contain information necessary to understand the community's past, cope with the present, and plan for the future. These records need to be actively used by researchers interested in pressing concerns such as health and the environment; by genealogists and family historians; by teachers and students to enrich social studies and history courses; by citizens interested in community

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history; and by scholars exploring how events in the community relate to or differ from regional, statewide, and national developments.

Public historians should be among the chief researchers of these records. However, there are specific ways for public historians to promote and conduct research:

- Draw on the local government’s archival records and related sources to write a history of the local government, stressing how its programs and services evolved to meet changing community needs.
- Carry out research in local government archival records and community historical records to prepare historical accounts of various aspects of the community’s history.
- Encourage broader and more innovative use of these records by introducing others to documentary resources and the repositories in which they are kept.
- Urge local schools to use historical records in appropriate curricula and teach students the importance and use of historical records. Acquaint local teachers and curriculum developers with local government archival records and help them integrate student use of those records into lesson plans. Working with the local government’s RMO and archivist, and appropriate officials such as teachers and school administrators, prepare copies of local government archival records or document packets for use in the classroom. For ideas and information about working with students and teachers, consult *Consider the Source: Historical Records in the Classroom*. This publication can be purchased from the New York State Archives. Examples of the book’s contents are available online at [www.archives.nysed.gov](http://www.archives.nysed.gov); click on “Education,” then on “Publications.” A brief course on using historical records in the classroom is available at [www.emsc.nysed.gov/](http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/)
- Visit school history and social studies classes to discuss community history, drawing on and showing copies of archival records to stress the importance of archival records in uncovering and understanding history.
- Encourage, organize, and participate in annual Archives Week events, using them to draw attention to the importance and research value of the local government and private archival records of the community.
- Encourage community historical records repositories to reach out to researchers, schools, and other groups through effective finding aids, audio-visual productions, and other public and educational programs.

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- In cooperation with the local government's RMO and representatives from other local historical records repositories, use records to prepare audio-visual productions on the community's history.

## For More Information and Assistance

The New York State Archives provides direct advice to local governments and state agencies on records and information management issues. The Archives has regional offices throughout the state, and each office has a records specialist who can visit you and provide technical advice and assistance. Archives services also include publications and workshops on a wide variety of records management topics. The Local Government Records Management Improvement Fund supports these services.

For further information, contact your Regional Advisory Officer, DHP Regional Archivist, or the following State Archives departments:

**For information on local government records:**

Government Records Services  
9A47 Cultural Education Center  
Albany, NY 12230  
518-474-6926  
recmgt@mail.nysed.gov

**For information on the Documentary Heritage Program:**

Documentary Heritage Program  
9C33 Cultural Education Center  
Albany, New York 12230  
518-474-6926  
dhs@mail.nysed.gov

**For information on the educational uses of historical records:**

Public Programs and Outreach  
9B52 Cultural Education Center  
Albany, NY 12230  
518-474-6926  
archedu@mail.nysed.gov