

Archives and You: The Benefits of Historical Records

The University of the State of New York
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What Are Historical Records?

Today's society runs on information...information that may be conveyed casually in personal conversations or transmitted by radio, television, or other more sophisticated technology, such as computer networking.

When information is captured on paper, audio tape, videotape, or computer disk, a record is created. Usually the usefulness of this record spans a relatively short period of time, and it can be destroyed once it has served its purpose. But in a small percentage of cases, the information in the records is of such continuing value to society that it should be preserved so that it can be used today -and tomorrow. Such records are called *historical records*. They may include diaries, journals, ledgers, minutes, reports, photographs, maps, drawings, blueprints, agreements, memoranda, deeds, case files, and other material. They take many physical forms -parchment, paper, microfilm, cassette tape, film, videotape, and with the advent of the latest information processing technology, computer tapes, disks, and other "machine-readable" formats.

The determination that a record is a historical record rests not on the form of the record, but rather on the fact that a record contains information of enduring value to individuals or institutions.

Why Are Historical Records Valuable?

Historical records contribute valuable information to our lives, information which helps us address contemporary issues and solve current problems. Society benefits from historical records in a variety of ways.

Administration:

Institutions and organizations use historical records to understand the origins of policy and program decisions and to gain a perspective on their progress.

Law:

Records are often used to protect our legal rights, to document agreements and obligations, to substantiate claims, and to back up contentions.

Education:

The introduction of historical records into the educational curricula contributes to students' understanding of history and enhances their appreciation of the past.

Environment:

Maps, photographs, drawings, land use permits, and other historical records provide evidence of how the land and other natural resources were used in the past, so that scientists, policymakers, and ordinary citizens may understand the impact of such use on the present.

Infrastructure:

The bridges, roads, water, and sewer lines of our modern society must be maintained. Engineers, planners, and others constantly consult maps, reports, and drawings for information on location, age, or physical characteristics of the elements in the infrastructure.

Preservation:

Blueprints, engineering drawings, and old photographs are used to restore buildings to their original appearance.

Property Ownership:

Land grants, maps, deeds, and other records are used to determine property boundaries and ownership.

Health Care:

Epidemiologists, physicians, and other health researchers use census data, medical records, personal diaries, and other historical records to study genetic and familial diseases.

Exhibits:

Historical records in exhibits provide first-hand information on historical events and on people in history.

Entertainment:

Historical records are used to write fiction and nonfiction, to develop advertising campaigns, and to authenticate costume and set design in movies, television, and theater.

Historical records provide unique windows on the past. Scholars use them to gain new understanding of past events. These new insights contribute to our body of knowledge for the future. Ordinary citizens who consult historical records to trace their family heritage often make significant contributions to social history. Discovering one's roots enables a person to develop a sense of belonging and identity, both important in our modern, mobile society.

Where Are Historical Records Located?

Researchers can find historical records in

- public & research libraries;
- local historical societies;
- colleges & universities;
- archives of nonprofit organizations;
- corporate archives;
- museums;
- state and local government archives.

New Yorkers Use Historical Records in a Variety of Ways

A homeowners organization uses historical records to document its case for a new bridge.

Horseshoe Island was created when a new channel was cut into the Erie Canal as part of the design for the New York State Barge Canal. The bridge connecting the Island to the mainland was constructed in 1911. By 1987 it had deteriorated so badly that heavy fire trucks, school buses, and snow plows were not allowed to cross. When the State proposed to repair the bridge, residents of the Island formed the Horseshoe Island Homeowners Organization to convince the State that the existing bridge was in such poor condition that a new bridge was needed. A member of the Association volunteered to research the construction and the history of the bridge. "I wanted to know how it was constructed and what materials were used. I looked for correspondence about how long they intended the bridge to be used," he explained. He found maps, blueprints, and engineering notebooks at the Erie Canal Museum that helped the homeowners association document its case for a new bridge. In July 1988, the New York State Department of Transportation awarded a bid for the construction of a new Horseshoe Island Bridge.

A botanist uses historical records for a survey that will be used to determine the future use of Goat Island, Niagara Falls.

In 1986 Niagara Falls celebrated its 100th birthday as a protected area of New York State. Millions of visitors to the Falls every year have had a dramatic impact on the plant life of the area. To survey the existing plant life on Goat Island to determine the extent of the public's impact, the State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation turned to a botanist. "We needed to find out what's disappeared since the 1880s, and to understand what's here now that wasn't before," explained the botanist. She found the historical evidence she needed at the Buffalo Museum of Science. The Museum had botanical journals written by naturalists of the 19th century; thousands of pressed and preserved specimens on which were recorded species, date, location on the island, and who found them; and engravings that showed the plant life of Goat Island in the 19th century. The botanist's report provided the State with scientific evidence of the changing vegetation on Goat Island. This helped the State to plan for the future use of the island.

Teachers use historical records to teach children about the past.

Fourth and seventh graders in New York State study local history as part of their social studies curriculum. In Saratoga Springs, teachers, principals, librarians, and others worked together to draw on historical documents to make the past come alive for the students. Photographs, letters, wills, bills of lading, and other historical records from the Saratoga Public Library, the Saratoga Museum, and the City Historian's office were used to heighten students' interest in their local heritage. They were especially interested in letters written by an 11-year-old girl visiting Saratoga in 1842. The letters described everyday life in the resort city and revealed how young people spent their time in the mid-19th century. Some fourth grade classes held a Victorian Day in the spring, complete with 19th century costumes, games, dances, and carriage rides. The

records helped the students assume the roles of 19th century individuals and "live" the history they were studying.

The Dance Theatre of Harlem uses historical records to document an important part of Black history and to help its daily operations run smoothly.

The Dance Theatre of Harlem is the first successful Black ballet company in this country. Arthur Mitchell, founder of the company in 1969, was the first principal Black ballet dancer in America. Clearly, the Dance Theatre of Harlem is an important part of Black history and culture. Early on, Mitchell recognized the significance of the company and devoted some of the company's limited resources to develop an archives to document its development. The purpose of the archives is two-fold: to document the history of the Dance Theatre, and to bring efficiency and economy to the operation of the company. Videocassettes, which are often the only record of a particular dance, are used repeatedly by the dancers and choreographers to review a performance, or to determine staging, and are preserved for future research as well. Paper records are also a part of the Dance Theatre of Harlem archives. Tour diaries, manager's reports, and publicity materials are organized and filed for quick access by current members of the company. These will be a continuing source of important information for the future operations of the company.

Planners at Central Park use historical records to rebuild and restore the park.

The Department of Parks of the City of New York and the Central Park Conservancy have embarked on a major 15-year program to rebuild Central Park. The study examined the 125-year history of the park from its conception by Frederick Law Olmsted in 1857, to changes by Robert Moses, Thomas Hoving, and others. This helped guide major renovation, rebuilding, and restoration where appropriate. Historical records played a major role in the development of this program. Survey maps from the competition to design Central Park were used by planners. Annual reports of the Commissioners of Central Park indicated uses of the park and also included photographs that revealed structures and landscape. A stereopticon collection was consulted for details about the park. Olmsted's drawings of physical structures in the park were used by engineers. These historical records were found in the New York Public Library, the Museum of the City of New York, the New-York Historical Society, Columbia University, the Municipal Archives, and the archives of the New York City Parks and Recreation Commission.

How Are Historical Records Cared For?

The use of historical records depends on our ability to retain them and to extract the information they contain. Historical records programs ensure that this will be possible by identifying, organizing, describing, and preserving these materials and making them available. These programs include both *institutional archives*, which identify and preserve the historical records of the institution of which the program is a part, and *collecting programs* in libraries, historical societies, museums and other settings, which collect historical records created by other institutions and individuals. Historical records programs should have

- A statement of legal authority, purpose, and collecting area;
- Adequate financial resources available on a continuing basis;
- A staff person or persons who, through training and experience, know how to administer historical records;
- Suitable storage space, controlled environmental conditions, and other facilities to ensure preservation and security for the historical records;
- Arrangement and description of historical records in accordance with basic archival principles;
- Reference services including being open on a regular schedule, adequate space for researchers, and staff to assist researchers to locate appropriate material;
- Outreach and public programs to reach the program's various constituencies.

The State Archives and Records Administration has published a brochure, "Basic Elements of Historical Records Programs." It has also developed a manual for historical records programs, *Strengthening New York's Historical Records Programs: A Self-Study Guide*. For more information, contact New York State Archives and Records Administration, Cultural Education Center, Rm 10A46, Albany, Y 12230.

Historical Records and You

Directly or indirectly, all of us benefit from the information in historical records. But too few of us are aware of it or act on our awareness. This lack of understanding and action has allowed historical records programs around the State to be *underfunded*, *underdeveloped*, and *understaffed*. One of our richest cultural resources remains vastly *undervalued* and *underused*.

You have such rich cultural resources IN YOUR COMMUNITY! Think about it...

- Where are the records of your family, your church or religious organization, and of the institutions and organizations that are a part of your life?
- Are there archives, historical societies, libraries, or museums in your community that identify and retain, or collect historical records?
- Are the records properly cared for?
- Are the records available for research?

You can take action to make sure that the historical records in your community receive the attention they deserve. Find out the status of historical records in your community. Support your historical society, library, or other institution that cares for historical records. Become an advocate for historical records. Help others to understand the value of historical records and encourage them to support the historical records programs in their community.

The State Archives and Records Administration has prepared a brochure, "Ensuring A Usable Past For Your Community: The New York Citizen's Guide to Evaluating and Improving Historical Records Programs," that explains what you can do to help strengthen historical records programs in your community.

"Let the Record Show: Practical Uses for Historical Documents" is an audiovisual production of the State Archives that helps people to understand the importance of historical records. Focusing on four New Yorkers who use historical records in very different ways, the show explains where historical records can be found and the variety of forms they may take. The show may be borrowed from the State Archives in either video (VHS) or slide/tape format. For more information about the brochure and the audiovisual show, please contact the State Archives and Records Administration, Cultural Education Center, Rm 10A46, Albany, New York 12230.