



# Organizing Your Historical Records

New York State Archives  
[www.archives.nysed.gov](http://www.archives.nysed.gov)



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## Today you will learn

- How to make your historical records easier to use by staff and your constituents through the development of good series descriptions



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Making your historical records available to the public involves more than just dragging them out of storage



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People using these records need to know something about them to ensure that they will answer the questions they have.



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### Questions Such As...

- When was my house built?
- Who witnessed my Great-great grandfather's will?
- When did the street numbers/street names change?
- When did people around here start using tractors?
- How many dogs were in town in 1893?
- Who lived next door to great-grandma in 1905?



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### Would Any of These Records Help Answer the Questions?

- Tax rolls, 1870 to 1940
- State census rolls from 1915 and 1925
- City council minutes, 1867-1935
- Chattel Mortgages, 1877-1940



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## Let's Focus on the Tractors

- Which record would best tell a researcher when tractors came into use in her community
  - Chattel Mortgages/Conditional Sales
  - Tax Rolls



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## Chattel Mortgages/ Conditional Sales 1877-1940

These ledger books contain a record of chattel mortgages registered with the Town. Entries include name of mortgagor and mortgagee, date, amount borrowed, when due, and when filed.

The Record of Conditional Sales includes such information as name of buyer and seller; description of goods; price named in contract; date of contract; and the time of filing.

The purpose of this record is to document all mortgage and conditional sales transactions within the town.



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## Tax Assessment Rolls, 1880-1920

- Arranged chronologically, these volumes list properties in town by tax map number. Information on property includes tract number, farm lot number, boundaries, acres, land value, assessed value, amount of tax and when paid.



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## Good Series Descriptions

- Save wear and tear on your records and staff by
  - speeding up retrieval of needed information
  - helping researchers rule out records that will not help in their research
- Arrangement and Description will lead to Good Series Descriptions



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## Arrangement and Description - 1

- Arrangement
  - Physically organizing records
- Description
  - Gathering information about records to improve access



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## Arrangement and Description - 2

- Identifies and brings together groups of records that are
  - derived from a common source
  - which have common characteristics and/or a common structure
- These we call record series



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## Record Series

- Standard unit for Arrangement and Description
- Defined as a group of related records that is
  - normally used and filed together
  - related to a similar function
  - managed as a unit



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## To Identify Record Series...

- Look at
  - Function or activity of record creator
  - Organization's structure
  - Format or type
  - File structure
- Ask yourself
  - Do records come from a common source?
- Utilize your records retention schedule



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## Before Organizing...

- Identify your historical records
  - Conduct surveys and/or records inventories
  - Use your retention schedule
  - Appraise the records - not a monetary appraisal
- Get the records
  - Physical transfer (Acquisition)
  - Legal transfer (Accessioning)



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## Arrangement

- Putting archival records in physical order
  - by creator (provenance)
  - by original order



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## What is Provenance?

- Records created by the same entity should remain together.



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## What is Original Order?

- Records should be kept in same order as by the creating entity.



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## Why Provenance and Original Order?

- Provide
  - The context in which records were created
  - Evidence about records creator
  - Information about activities
- Records are created in the course of business
  - Order will reveal how the entity operated



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## Fight the Urge to Rearrange



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## Strategy for Arrangement

- Assess current arrangement
- Identify information about the records
- Weed the records
- Do basic preservation
- Rehouse them



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### Assess the Current Arrangement

- Organized by provenance?
- Organized by series?
- Arranged within each series?
- What is the file arrangement?
- Any files out of order?
- Are they self indexed or is there an existing index?



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### Identify Information About the Records

- Inventories
- Indexes
- Filing plans
- Finding aids



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### Order May Not Be Apparent

- Check with creating office
- Ask other governments
- Talk to RAO
- Consult with RAO before reorganizing



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## Weeding

- Consider the need to do it
  - Time and cost
  - Impact on space
  - Ease of use if not weeded



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## Arrangement Includes Basic Preservation

- Remove rubber bands
- Remove staples, pins, etc.
  - If there is rust or if causing damage
  - If fastener isn't damaging, leave it alone
- Remove all paper clips
- Use a separator (a folded sheet of paper)



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## Unfolding or Flat-filing

- Keeping the records flat, not folded
  - will make them easier to read
  - will save wear and tear from repeated folding and unfolding
- Before unfolding, consider
  - the condition of the records
  - the frequency of use
  - the time and effort to unfold
  - space unfolded records would take up
- Handle brittle items with extreme care



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## Preservation Problems

- Most can be solved by
  - Reformatting
    - photocopying or microfilming, retiring original
  - Replacing
    - photocopy brittle clippings and discard original
  - Simple basic care
    - Better housing
    - Better environmental controls
    - Better handling practices



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## Difficult Preservation Problems

- Track problems that need professional help
  - Damaged records
  - Fading ink
  - Crumbling paper
- Stabilize any problems you encounter
- Have professional address these
- Do not attempt repairs yourself!
- Ensure any preservation work is reversible
- Talk to your RAO, State Archives Albany staff, or a professional conservator



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## Rehousing

- Basic rules
  - Don't underfill or overstuff
  - Fit documents squarely in containers
    - Use scores on folders
    - Adjust container to fit records
  - Use alkaline, buffered, lignin-free products
  - Use the right product for the right job



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## Labeling

- Evaluate current labeling
  - Is it adequate?
  - Will you need to provide more information?
- Labels
  - Series/Folder title
  - Date
  - Box/container number (if created)
  - Box/Folder number
  - Records creator

Planning Board Minutes - Department of  
Planning and Development F1/B20  
Minutes, 1974 -



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## Labeling Hints

- Don't use standard adhesive labels
- Use foil-backed labels
- Don't use pen
- Use pencil only
- Consider a rubber stamp for a large series
- Be legible



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## Container Lists

- Consider using a container list
- Some can be very brief:
  - Personnel files
  - Case files
- Others might be more detailed:
  - Subject files
  - Correspondence files



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## From Arrangement to Description

- Arrangement sets pattern for description
  - Records described at the series level
  - Records described in the same groups in which they are arranged



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## Description

- Provides essential information about records
- Facilitates retrieval of information
- Helps users determine usefulness of records
- Develops the foundation for access tools



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## Description is a Process

- Presenting information on
  - Content of the records
  - Context in which the records were created
  - Physical characteristics of the records
- Level of description depends on the nature of the records and user needs



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## Good Series Descriptions

- Are concise
- Are focused
- Are complete
- Help users determine if records meet their needs
- Save time for you and your users



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## Elements of Description

- Records creator
- Series title and dates
- Physical characteristics
- Historical note
- Informational note



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## Records Creator

- Who made the record series?
- Usually will be a department or office
  - Town Clerk
  - Planning Department
  - School Nurse



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## Series Title and Dates

- What is the record series?
- When was it created?



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## Physical Characteristics

- Quantity
  - Usually in cubic feet (for paper)
  - Sometimes in number of items
    - rolls of film
    - volumes of books
    - reels of tape
  - If multiple formats, indicate
    - 5 volumes, 10 reels of microfilm
- Arrangement
  - What order is the series in?
- Format
- Condition



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## Historical Notes

- What is the history of the record?
- What is purpose and function of the record?
- Why was it created?
- How has it been created over time?
- Be objective and neutral
- Why was the record produced?
- Is there a statutory or regulatory requirement?
- What changes affected the creation of the record?



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## Informational Note

- What kind of documents are in the series?
- What kind of information is in the series?
- How has information changed over time?
- What is format and how has it changed?
- What unusual information is in series?
- Is expected information not in the series?
- If series has gaps or is no longer created, why?



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## Sample Series Description

Town of Empire, Town Clerk, *Records Creator*  
Burial Permits, 1878 to present *Series Title and Dates*  
12.5 cubic feet. *Physical Characteristics*  
Arrangement: Numerical *Physical Characteristics*  
Although burial permits were issued by the town clerk or justices in the late 1800s, today they are issued by the registrar of vital statistics for the deceased's place of death. These permits are then collected by the cemetery at the time of burial and forwarded to the town clerk approximately once a year. Although the majority of the burial permits in this series was issued locally, a significant number of the records were issued outside of the county or state. *Historical Note*  
The burial permits generally provide the district and register numbers, the county and village where the permit was issued, and the name of the deceased along with his/her sex, color, marital status, date of death, age in years, months, and days, birthplace, and the cause of death. The name and address of doctor signing the death certificate is included. Permits also provide the date and place of burial, and name of undertaker or person in charge of burying the deceased. The series also includes transit permits showing how and when the deceased was transported to Empire, undertaker's requests to disinter bodies, and cremation information. *Informational Note*  
Some of these records may have restrictions on access.

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## After Completing the Series Description

- Review the completed description
- Set it aside and review it later
- Have someone else review it
- Does it make sense?
- Will it help a user?



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## Does it Indicate

- WHO created it
- WHAT was created
- WHEN was it created
- WHERE was it created
- WHY was it created
- HOW are the records arranged
- WHAT unusual information is included



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## Exercise - Writing a Series Description

- Review the sample assessment rolls
- Use the template on page 21 to start writing a series description



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## Draft Series Description

**Records Creator:** Town Assessor

**Series Title/Dates:** Assessment Rolls, 1865-1882, 1890-1935

**Physical Characteristics:** 63 vols. Arranged chronologically. Handwritten.

**Historical Note:**

Produced annually by town assessors to record information on personal property ownership and tax assessment. Final copies of local tax assessment rolls are filed with counties. Volumes kept for historical information.

**Informational Note:**

Lists of persons owning taxable property; brief description of property (such as lot, farm, land, shop, etc.); full value of taxable personal property and amount of tax; full value of taxable real property and amount of tax. Rolls from 1928 to 1935 provide location of property and abutting property owners. Dog tax is included in rolls from 1865 to 1883. Rolls from 1906 to 1927 include the dog tax plus the number of dogs. Rolls from 1870 to 1883 indicate the payment of military tax.



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## Sample Completed Description

Town of Empire. Tax Assessor.

*Records Creator*

Tax Assessment Rolls, 1865-1883, 1890-1935

*Series Title and Dates*

63 volumes; Arranged Chronologically

*Physical Characteristics*

Series consists of record books produced annually by the town assessors to record information on real and personal property ownership and tax assessment. Final copies of local assessment rolls, including the warrant authorizing collection and information on the collection, are filed with the county tax office according to the provisions of section 516 of the Real Property Tax Law. Copies of tax assessment rolls dating from 1865 to 1935 have been retained permanently because of their wealth of historical information.

*Historical Note*

Included in each yearly roll is a list of persons owning taxable property; brief description of property (such as lot, farm, land, shop, etc.); full value of taxable personal property and amount of tax; full value of taxable real property and amount of tax. The 1928 to 1935 rolls provide location of property and abutting property owners. For some years additional information is also contained on the rolls. Dog tax is included in assessments from 1865 to 1883 and, from 1906 to 1928, the tax amount plus the number of dogs is listed. Tax rolls from 1870 to 1883 indicated the payment of military tax. All assessment rolls are handwritten. The assessment rolls are arranged chronologically by year.

*Informational Note*

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## After the Records are Arranged and Described

- Put them to use
- Use the series descriptions as
  - Tools for aiding outside users
  - Tools for aiding government staff
  - Way to promote your community and its records
- You need to provide access



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## Providing Access

- Use series description as the building blocks for finding aids
  - Guides
    - By subject
    - By department
- Make information about your records available nationally
  - Online catalogs and indexes
    - Mount information on your website
    - Submit your information to the Historic Documents Inventory (HDI)



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## A Place for Access

- Provide a good place for using the records
  - Make it secure
  - Supervise use
  - Keep it comfortable



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## For Further Assistance...

- Let us review your descriptions
- Read our publications
  - Guide to Arrangement and Description of Archival Records
  - Appraisal of Local Government Records for Historical Value
- Look at Resource Booklet samples
- Take advantage of our grants program



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## Where to Get Help

- Contact your Regional Advisory Officer
- Contact the State Archives
  - Archival Advisory Services
- Visit our web site
  - [www.archives.nysed.gov](http://www.archives.nysed.gov)



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# Weeding

## ***Do Weed:***

- **Obsolete** records as indicated on the Records Retention Schedules
  - o weed out routine transmittal correspondence and memos
  - o retain policy determining correspondence
- **Duplicates**
  - o Information duplicated in other forms such as summary reports, published reports
  - o Multiple copies of same material
  - o Drafts, if final is present and no major substantial differences occur between final and working documents
- **Tracking** records
  - o Notes and messages
  - o Logs, schedules of internal information
- **Published Material** - not published by the government, catalogs, newsletters from associations
- **Non-record** items (blank forms)
- **Non-archival** items

## ***Don't weed:***

- Checklists or summaries which may **explain the contents or actions** within the file
- Documents that **justify why actions** were taken
- Materials that help you determine **how the office functioned**
- Any documents that are of substantial (not minor) importance - **content rich**

# Rehousing Materials

## Paper

- Quality determined by:
  - Composition > pH
  - Alkaline reserve > Durability

## Select paper

- Made of cotton or 100% chemical wood pulp w/ an alkaline reserve
- Has minimal amount of lignin (can't get rid of all of it)
- pH neutral (pH 7) or alkaline. For most rehousing look for 8.5 - 10 pH.
- Alkaline reserve (buffered) of 2-3% calcium carbonate or magnesium

## Exceptions

- Do not use buffered paper on blueprints, color photographs, or diazos.
- They need a neutral environment of 7-7.5pH.

## Exercise 2

Take another look at the sample assessment rolls from Exercise 1.

Review the following additional information you already know about the town and these records:

The Town of Empire maintains tax assessment rolls from the time that the town was founded in 1865 to the present.

Final copies of local tax assessment rolls are filed with the county, but the town wants to keep the volumes it has from 1865-1935 permanently.

A recent appraisal determined that:

- there is frequent local reference to the earlier volumes
- they contain important historical information

The RMO has asked you to write a series description for the records. You have just completed a review of the records and found the following information:

- Roll books were produced annually by town assessors to record real and personal property ownership.
- No index exists for any of the 63 volumes.
- Volumes for 1883-1889 were destroyed in a fire.
- Volumes for 1911-1913 are brittle, frequently with missing covers.
- The same form was used for multiple years.

Use the Series Description template on the next page to write a draft series description for this records series.

# Series Description Worksheet

Records Creator:
Series Title/Dates:
Physical Characteristics:
Historical Note:
Informational Note:

# PROCESSING CHECKLIST FOR ARRANGING AND DESCRIBING ARCHIVAL RECORDS

## I. Take physical and legal custody of inactive archival records

- A. Who has legal and/or physical custody?
  - 1. Authority to receive records?
  - 2. Who has title to transferred records?
  - 3. Authority to weed and destroy records?
  - 4. Access restrictions?
  
- B. Transfer documentation
  - 1. Transfer forms
  - 2. Unique number

## II. Review the records

Do the records match the information on the inventory sheet/transfer list

- 1. Are they from the department indicated
- 2. Are they the series noted
- 3. If not, update the inventory worksheet
- 4. Are all the records from the same series

## III. Arrangement

- A. Assess the current arrangement
  - 1. Are records organized according to Provenance (creating office)?
    - a. If not, then segregate and update the processing notes
  - 2. Are records organized by series?
    - a. Common file arrangement
    - b. Common characteristics
    - c. Record retention schedules can help identify
    - d. If new series formed, update the processing notes
  - 3. Are the records in their original file order?
    - a. Files out of order - refile the misfiles
  - 4. How are records arranged within the series?
    - a. What is the initial arrangement
      - (1) Chronological
      - (2) Alphabetical
      - (3) Numerical
      - (4) Other

b. Is there a secondary arrangement, e.g. chronological then alphabetical by last name

B. Weed files

1. Scheduled records
2. Duplication
  - a. Information duplicated in other forms such as summary reports, published reports
  - b. Multiple copies of same material
3. Tracking records
4. Published material
5. Printouts of e-mail/memoranda
6. Insignificant material

C. Sample when appropriate

1. Statistical/probability
2. Subjective
  - a. Staff review
  - b. Every “nth” file
  - c. Fat files

D. Update descriptive information

1. Dates of material: bulk years, beginning & ending dates
2. Type of the records: correspondence, ledgers, subject files
3. Form of the records: volumes, files, photographs, maps
4. Information about
  - a. The office
  - b. Function of the record
  - c. Individuals represented
  - d. Activities
5. Seek answers to these questions
  - a. Why the record was created
  - b. Why the record might have been kept
  - c. What did they use the record for
  - d. About the relations of the records one to another

IV. Describe the Records

A. Write an administrative history on the office or department

1. Provide information about
  - a. Its mission, mandates, activities
  - b. How it operates
  - c. Changes in name, structure, or function

B. Write a series description drawing on information gleaned from the records.

1. Include the following elements:

- a. Record creator
- b. Series title and dates
- c. Physical characteristics
- d. Historical/background information
- e. Informational content
  - (1) Kinds of information present
  - (2) Period of time covered and changes in information over time
  - (3) Material types
  - (4) Specific activity generating the records
  - (5) Geographical area
  - (6) Concepts present (subjects/topics)

2. Answer the following questions about the records:

Who created it (author/generator, office held)

What was created (type of record and format, type of information conveyed)

When was it created (dates)

Where (geographical location, placement in the organization)

Why was it created (function or purpose of the record)

How are the records arranged (chronological, alphabetical, etc.)

Whether the records include any unusual information, special indexes, etc.

C. Compile access tools from the series descriptions

- 1. Guides
- 2. Series Finding Aids (series descriptions with container list)
- 3. Databases
- 4. Internet sites

D. Develop access points to the access tool

- 1. Subject terms
- 2. Geographical terms
- 3. Form/genre terms
- 4. Function terms

V. Physical Arrangement

A. Inspect folder titles

- 1. Should be accurate and comprehensible
- 2. Provide enough information to identify and describe the contents
  - a. Record type
  - b. Function
  - c. Subject
  - d. Office of origin
  - e. Dates or numeric code
- 3. Labeling
  - a. Clarify existing folder titles to provide sufficient information.

- b. Folders' contents stated in fewest words possible to convey context
- c. Each folder should contain a unique number to differentiate it from other folders in the box and other boxes
- d. Place of information on the label should be uniform

## B. Preservation

- 1. Physical condition of the records
  - a. Are all folders upright
  - b. Letters folded, tied, rubber banded, loose
  - c. Are records deteriorating
- 2. Maintenance Activities
  - a. Unfold documents
  - b. Remove staples, paper clips, fasteners, tape, and foreign objects
  - c. Discard organic material (flowers, plants, etc.)
  - d. Photocopy acidic records
- 3. Note records needing conservation treatment

## C. Rehousing

- 1. Types of containers
  - a. Adjust size of container to match size of the materials. Excessive movement in containers is damaging to documents.
    - (1) Do not overstuff or understuff boxes and folders; both can cause curling and breaking of documents
    - (2) Documents should fit squarely in folders — no creeping up on the sides or extending beyond the folder's edge
  - b. Use Alkaline lignin-free products
    - (1) Letter & legal folders
    - (2) Record carton boxes
    - (3) Upright 6" and 2.5" document cases (also known as "Hollinger boxes")
    - (4) Flat document cases for maps and blueprints
    - (5) Special order sizes — folders and boxes
  - c. Polypropylene/polyester products (not meant to replace folders)— use for photographs, very fragile documents, ones that will see high usage, or will be on display
    - (1) "Mylar" envelopes
    - (2) Sheet protectors
- 2. Labeling
  - a. Box labels should contain a location symbol
  - b. Place of information on the label should be uniform

# SOURCES OF ARCHIVAL SUPPLIES

Please visit the consultant and vendor listing hosted by the New York State Archives at [www.archives.nysed.gov](http://www.archives.nysed.gov)