

Legacy Management Resource Portal

Your collections are treasures, pieces of history

Many people have collections of valuable items in their own home or at their organization, from photographs to letters, journals to recordings, and more, that tell stories of the legacies of Black people in Chicago and beyond. Though we can't archive everything, we must remember that it's important to preserve the legacies of people both with and without widely recognized accreditations or titles. There are questions worth asking about materials you may have when deciding what to archive in your collection:

- Who is represented in these materials and who were they in their communities?
- What places are represented that have lasted, changed, or are gone?
- What activities or traditions are represented in these materials that are important to you and your communities?

Often, family members or other loved ones throw away someone's books, documents, journals, and photos when they pass away. This is a huge loss, because these materials illuminate the histories of communities everywhere told from their own perspectives. Here at the BMRC, we provide resources for anyone interested in archiving and sharing their collections with their chosen communities. Oftentimes, there is confusion about what *archives* are and the purposes they serve. We hope this guide will answer your questions about how to best protect your collections either by storing them yourself or within your communities, or by donating them to an archival *repository* such as a museum or library/archives.

What are archives?

Check out our [Archives Awareness page](#) for more information on what archives are, what archivists do, and how to research historical materials!

Archives, generally, collect materials like:

- paper or digital correspondence such as letters, e-mails, or postcards,
- paper or digital programs or minutes,
- paper or digital photographs or posters,
- paper or digital newspapers, magazines, books, or zines,
- scrapbooks or diaries,
- tapes, CDs and DVDs, digital videos, or records,
- objects, and more.

These materials are preserved because they have *historical value or significance*. For individuals and repositories, what is considered valuable may vary widely. Communities may have core values and traditions that do not match up with the mission and policies of formal repositories. This can affect which collections are accepted by institutions as donations, and often influences some communities' decisions to archive their materials with their own labor and resources.

For repositories overall, value is determined by how many of an item exists in global collections and if there are a limited number, the context in which it was created, and its historical representation. When donating to a repository, the research value assigned to an item or collection is up to their archivists' understanding of their visitors. But when it is your own collection, it is up to you to decide what is valuable and what is not.

Collections are most often made up of materials that represent us as people and as members of our different communities. Materials that were created for or that document significant events, contain any family history, or provide a narrative of the people who created them may be considered valuable to you, your family or community, or to an organization.

Materials can also represent community organizations, religious institutions, and other active groups in local communities. Organizations that fight against oppression and institutions like mosques, churches, temples, and other sites of religious and spiritual practices all create records and materials that are worth archiving. Whether or not they are housed properly, preserved long-term, and/or made widely available depends on the resources that each collection's owners and creators have access to.

Understanding archival repositories

Professional archival repositories like museums, libraries, universities, or other research institutions are likely to have funding, staff, and training to provide:

- storage,
- *organization*,
- description or cataloging,
- long-term *preservation*,
- and access to collections.

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

Considerations for housing collections independently vs. at a repository

- **Physical Preservation and Your Access to Materials:** Do you have the training, storage environment, and *housing* needed to physically preserve your materials (whether they are paper, print, digital, etc.)? Would you be willing to trust a repository with those responsibilities and have your collection housed there?
 - Formal repositories will have trained archivists with access to storage spaces and housing materials, like *acid-free* boxes and folders, to keep your collection in ideal physical condition. However, you may want to prioritize having your materials close to you and look for resources to store and house them yourself. You should also ask questions about an institutions' development structure and sustainability to make sure they will continue to have capacity to manage your collection long-term.

- **Organization:** Do you want to have complete control over how your materials are organized and described? Would you trust a trained archivist to do this work based off the collection's current organization?
 - While archivists will consult with you about *processing* your materials, in the end they will be organized and cataloged by someone other than you. If you prefer to do it yourself as the collection's expert, that may influence your decision to house it yourself.
- **Researcher Access:** Who do you want to have access to your collection? How do you want your materials to be presented to the public?
 - When donating materials to a formal repository, you will have some but not all control over who can view your collection in the future. It is important to think about who you want to share your story with and why. Others viewing your materials will have their own purposes for doing so that you might not always know. Some institutions will activate collections through public programs, which will influence who views your materials.
- **Copyright and Ownership:** Who do you want to have legal copyright and ownership of your materials?
 - You can retain ownership rights, including copyright, if you store your own materials. However, not all repositories require donors to transfer all copyright in their collections. More information on copyright laws can be found [here](#).
 - Some institutions have started using post-custodial transfer agreements where donors can trust the repository with storage and preservation while retaining ownership of their materials. The University of Texas Libraries has been using this model for their [Human Rights Documentation Initiative](#). While this is a new practice, it is important to remember as an option that some institutions may have.

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

BMRC Resources for Managing Your Archives:

- Learn more about how to select, process, preserve, and provide access to materials in our [Guide to Managing Your Archives](#).
- Learn more about basic archival practices by watching [Part One of our Introduction to Archiving Series](#).
- Learn more about personal digital archiving and small-scale digitization by watching [Part Two of our Introduction to Archiving Series](#).

- Find links, videos, and a spreadsheet listing housing materials you might need to purchase in our [Archiving Resource Packet](#).

BMRC Resources for Donating Archival Materials:

- Learn more about how to donate your collection to a professional repository in our [Guide to Donating Archival Materials](#).
- Learn about how some BMRC member institutions accept donations by watching the recording of our [Donations and Transfer Agreements Panel](#).
- Find sample documents related to donating archival materials from BMRC member institutions in our [Donations and Transfer Agreements Resources Packet](#).

Key Words

- **Acid-free:** paper or other materials distinguished from those that have acidic residue from its manufacturing. Residual acid will destroy the paper fibers and make the paper more brittle over time. Preservation includes steps to minimize this deterioration as much as possible.
- **Archives:** materials made or received by a person, family/community, or organization that are preserved because of how they represent their legacies.
- **Deed of gift:** an agreement transferring *title* to or ownership of property without financial compensation. May be for real, personal, or intellectual property. Deed of gifts are usually contracts that establish conditions for the transfer of title to materials and placing any restrictions on access or use.
- **Finding aid:** a document describing the contextual and structural information about an archival collection. Used by viewers of collections to discover and select materials to request.
- **Historical significance/value:** the importance of records that justifies their preservation because of the information they provide to help understand the human past. This is not about whether the person, people, or organization that created the collection were/are famous, but about how they have contributed to their communities. Materials do not have to be old or perfectly organized.
- **Housing:** how archival materials are stored appropriately in chemically stable folders, sleeves, envelopes, boxes, etc. to preserve them long-term and protect them from deterioration or damage.
- **Intellectual control/organization:** the creation of catalogs, finding aids, or other guides that help researchers locate materials relevant to their interests.
- **Preservation:** the protection of materials through minimization of chemical and physical harm, injury, decay, or destruction to prevent the loss of information and extend the life of materials with non-invasive treatment.
- **Processing:** preparing archival materials for use through the arrangement (organization) and description (cataloging) of the collection.
- **Repository:** a space or institution that cares for and stores archives.

- **Title:** the rights/privileges to control and dispose of property. Also, legal evidence of ownership.

More definitions are available at the [Society of American Archivists' Dictionary of Archives Terminology](#).

This resource was first created by Jehoiada Zechariah Calvin, BMRC Community Engagement Archivist, in 2020, and edited by him in 2022.