

What Is An Archives?

An archives is a place where people go to find information. But rather than gathering information from books as you would in a library, people who do research in archives often gather firsthand facts, data, and evidence from letters, reports, notes, memos, photographs, audio and video recordings, and other primary sources.

Whether or not you realize it, you probably have an archives in your home. It might be in a filing cabinet in the study, a box in the basement, a chest in the attic – or even in all three. This is your personal archives: a collection of material that records important events from your family's history.

Believe it or not, there are similarities between your family's archives and local, state, or national archives. All save items to serve as proof that an event occurred, to explain how something happened, or for financial or sentimental reasons. All types of archives may be stored in more than one location. And both personal archives and larger archives save a variety of materials that can range from letters, to photographs, to films, to databases, to official documents, and more.

But what are the differences?

Archives come in all shapes and sizes. There are national archives, state archives, city archives, community archives, business archives, church archives, and more. There are archives for different types of government records, and also archives that contain the personal records of people and organizations. There are archives that contain the personal papers of famous leaders (for example, Martin Luther King, Jr), authors (for example, Maya Angelou and Ernest Hemingway), scientists (for example, Albert Einstein and Marie Curie), performers,

religious and business leaders, social activists, and more!

Archives – and the professional archivists who work in them – make sure that all important records will be available for research by generations to come. To help preserve material, archivists in all types of repositories store archived records in acid-free folders within acid-free boxes that are placed in dark spaces with consistent temperature and humidity.

Does your family use any kind of preservation technology to preserve your archive collection?

America's largest archives is the National Archives in Washington, DC. What makes America's National Archives different from what you might call your personal memory box?

The materials held by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) number in the billions! NARA's holdings are created either by or for the federal government. The material comes from the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Although your records are personal, those held by the National Archives are official. Your family's archives might contain, for example, your great-grandmother's diary, while the National Archives retains the correspondence files of past U.S. presidents and previous directors of federal agencies. Or your family's archives might include your birth certificate. The National Archives holds the original, signed "birth certificate" for our nation – the Declaration of Independence.

Chances are that you and your immediate family members are the only ones with access to your family's archival materials. The holdings in the National Archives, on the other hand, are available to almost everyone. More than ninety-five percent of the records in the National Archives are declassi-

fied, which means that they are accessible to researchers. And NARA employs about 3,000 full- and part-time workers to help facilitate the use of its holdings. Many of the records in the National Archives are available on microfilm, and more than 124,000 digital images of documents can be seen on NARA's website (www.archives.gov).

Some of the oldest materials in the National Archives are on parchment and date back to the founding of the United States of America. These include the records of the Continental and Confederation congresses. Some of the more recent holdings include electronic files that came from the Clinton White House.

What is the oldest object or document in your family's archives?

There also are ways that your family archives and other archives complement each other. For example, your family's archives might contain the final certificate for your great-great grandfather's homestead. And guess what – the National Archives holds the original application for that homestead! Also, your family's archives may include a photograph from the day your grandmother became a U.S. citizen. Well, the National Archives contains your grandmother's government appli-

cation for naturalization. In addition, the National Archives has all census records dating back to the very first U.S. census.

And what about other types of archives? Your county clerk's office is the official record keeper for births, marriages, and deaths that occur in your county. Your town or city clerk's office maintains the official record of your town or city council. If there is a college or university nearby, it may house a collection of an author's manuscripts or a scientist's notes, just as the Robert W Woodruff Library at the Atlanta University Center houses the papers of Martin Luther King Jr. Another place that probably has an archives is your church, synagogue, or mosque.

Have you visited an archives in your town? Chances are there's one nearby that would welcome your visit. And, of course, there's always your family's archives.....

This material was adapted from an article written by Lee Ann Potter for Cobblestone Magazine in September 2003. Lee Ann Potter is the Head of Education and Volunteer Programs at the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, DC. ■

Your History Is Our Country's History...

Letters from relatives, your grandmother's diary, photos and videos of you and your friends, and other material collected over the years provides vital and unique information about your life or the history of your family. Obviously these items are important to you. But they also may be important to your community, state, or country, too. Whether or not members of your family attained a degree of fame, they have contributed to the heritage of a certain place and time. When you donate your personal or family papers to an archives, your family history becomes a part of your community's – and America's – collective memory. ■