

HISTORICAL RECORDS REPOSITORY SURVEY

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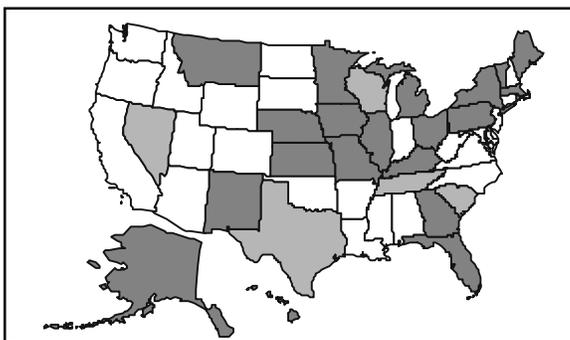
OVERVIEW

The Council of State Historical Records Coordinators (COSHRC) undertook the Historical Records Repository Survey (HRRS) as part of its ongoing effort to understand the status and needs of archival and records programs in the United States. The HRRS expands on two earlier surveys and re-reports compiled by COSHRC that focused on state archives and records programs. Having examined state government programs in some detail, the Coordinators wanted to learn more about “nongovernmental” repositories in their states.

The Historical Records Repository Survey has collected a broad range of information about historical records in the United States and the repositories that hold them. There was no attempt to select a scientific sample. Instead, this survey has attempted to probe all possible places that might be collecting historical materials.

Participation in the Historical Records Repository Survey was open to all of the states and territories. Twenty-one states actually took part in the two-year project and collected a total of 3,508 usable responses. Several states had completed similar surveys of their own in the last few years and chose not to duplicate these efforts. However, we were able to incorporate many of their findings and conclusions into the final analysis.

While representation was stronger in the Northeast and Midwest regions of the country, we believe that the responses fairly characterize the overall profile of repositories across the nation.



PARTICIPATING STATES

Alaska	Kentucky	Nebraska
Florida	Maine	New Mexico
Georgia	Massachusetts	New York
Hawaii	Michigan	Ohio
Illinois	Minnesota	Pennsylvania
Iowa	Missouri	Rhode Island
Kansas	Montana	Vermont

STATES CONDUCTING EARLIER SURVEYS

Nevada	Tennessee	Wisconsin
South Carolina	Texas	

A PASSION FOR HISTORY

The respondents to the Historical Records Repository Survey (HRRS) demonstrate a broadly based commitment to the preservation of historical documentation in the United States. The survey reveals both deep concentrations of scholarly activity that prevail in a few hundred academic repositories and the infectious enthusiasm of thousands of volunteers who work to capture the histories of their communities and organizations, large and small, nationwide. All of this activity is certainly part of the “heritage phenomenon” described by historian Michael Kammen in studying on the place of history in American culture. The widespread interest in heritage “has the great virtue of accentuating the common core of values, institutions, and experiences that Americans have shared . . . [It provides] the glue that holds us all together.”

The repositories that make up the archival landscape in the U.S. are as diverse as the materials they collect, but fall into three broad groupings. At the core are the larger academic repositories and historical societies where the bulk of the records reside and in which the serious and important work of advancing professional practice takes place. These are the repositories with the wherewithal—trained staff, administrative support, and a floor of physical and fiscal resources—to pursue the vital research and development that will benefit all.

A significant volume of records also reside in mid-size repositories many of which are multifunctional. These include the public libraries, museums, and historic sites whose primary mission is the collection of books or artifacts but which also care for archival materials. They are staffed by professionals trained and active in other fields who know they need guidance to perform records-related activities effectively.

A large number of repositories are quite small and staffed mostly by volunteers. These individuals have the enthusiasm to tell their neighbors how essential and exciting history is. They are the ones with the time to go into elementary school classrooms or staff booths at town festivals to broaden public participation in and support of history-related activities of all kinds. They play crucial roles in documenting their communities, their families, and everyday life. The archival profession can help them by providing simple guidelines for implementing best practices and can ask them, in turn, to rally their forces and raise support for historical efforts across the nation.

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS

Stewardship of historical records in the U.S. is shared by many different types of organizations and institutions.

- **Historical societies** are the most numerous, representing 1,271 or 36% of the HRRS respondents. Most of them are quite small, however. The average size of their holdings is 555 lin. ft. The total volume of records reported by all historical societies is 602,584 lin. ft. or 25% of the total.
- **Academic** repositories are much fewer in number with 506 or 14% of the total, but they are much larger in size. An average academic collection comprises 2,680 lin. ft. The total volume for all academic repositories is 1.2 million lin. ft. or 51% of the total.
- **Public libraries** are the second largest group in sheer numbers, with 744 responses or 21% of the total (although not all states surveyed them). Their collections are relatively small, however. They average 137 lin. ft. and together reported a total of only 90,326 lin. ft. or less than 4% of all holdings.

- **Museums**, including historic sites and houses, represent 20% of the total (683 responses). They reported a total of 304,821 lin. ft. (12% of all holdings) with an average of 510 lin. ft.
- **Creators**—those organizations that still hold records that they themselves created—are the most diverse, comprising businesses, religious organizations, nonprofit groups, hospitals, and more. The degree to which responses from these organizations were pursued varied significantly from state to state. A total of 304 “creators” are included in the HRRS (9% of the total). They reported a total of 195,903 lin. ft. of records for an average of 705 lin. ft.

A relatively small number of repositories hold a large concentration of historical records.

- The 65 largest academic repositories represent just 2% of the total number of respondents but hold 41% of the records. The 1,640 “small” repositories (those with less than 50 lin ft.) represent 47% of the respondents but together hold just 1% of all records reported.

The number of historical records programs began to grow significantly during the 1970s and has continued to rise.

- Nearly half of the HRRS respondents initiated their historical records programs since 1970.
- 659 programs were created in the last decade. Although most are small, 60 are quite large, especially in “creator” organizations that have established institutional archives.

Many repositories depend heavily on volunteers.

- The HRRS respondents are the beneficiaries of some 8.5 million volunteer hours each year.
- In historical societies, unpaid volunteers outnumber paid professional staff by a ratio of 5 to 1.

Several indicators point to critical problems or challenges in these repositories.

- Only 39% of all repositories have written **acquisition policies** identifying the kinds of materials they accept and conditions or terms that affect these acquisitions. Public libraries are especially low with only 22% reporting such policies in place. Although larger collections are more likely to have such policies, it is of concern that only two-thirds of “major” repositories have them.
- Only 19% of all respondents have written **disaster plans** in place. The rate is 62% for “major” repositories, but just 10% for small ones.
- Asked to identify significant impediments to use of their collections, 48% report lack of **finding aids** and 41% cite respond at all.
- **Magnetic media** are present in many collections and will need special preservation measures to ensure long-term retention of the information they carry. Half of the respondents (74% of academic repositories) hold video tape which is known to have a reliable life-span of only a decade or so and will soon need attention. Nearly as many also hold sound recordings (46%).

- Only 15% currently hold **computer-generated materials** (24% of academic repositories) and even fewer, 11% (15% of academic) are actively collecting them. Given the rapid proliferation of electronic information systems, especially in universities, this should be much higher.

Several issues dominate the needs identified by the repositories.

- Storage space is a major concern across the board, both in lack of capacity and poor environmental controls. A desire to improve access and develop finding aids also ranks high among all respondents.
- Concern about preservation arose in many contexts. Respondents want better training to take measures themselves. They also want access to centralized preservation services that are beyond their own capabilities.
- Historical societies express a strong interest in increasing their visibility and the use of their collections. Academic repositories desire more support from their parent organizations and development of records management programs.
- Everyone needs more time and more money.
- In some cases, there may not be enough concern about issues recognized as critical. Only 10 respondents cited either electronic records or disaster planning as their most pressing problem. It is likely that most are putting all their efforts into coping with immediate problems -- space, time, and money -- and cannot begin to focus on longer term and more complex issues.

Training needs remain significant, but vary somewhat according to type of repository.

- Topics of highest interest are archival methods, preservation methods, and uses of computers in archives. The last has been the least offered to date. Small repositories also want public relations and outreach training.
- Most want 1-2 day workshops. Many also ask for publications. Given the significant volume of written material already available, individuals probably also need a more effective system for locating pertinent literature.

Assistance should be tailored to fit individual needs and characteristics.

- Respondents turn most often to colleagues in other repositories for assistance and express a strong desire for face-to-face, on-site help. This argues for broadening the availability of peer support networks and “archival circuit riders” in the form of state-funded field officers.
- Other sources of assistance vary by repository type. Academic repositories look to SAA and other professional archival associations; historical societies go to AASLH, their state archivists, and state-level associations; public libraries rely on their state library agencies and library associations; museums turn to the American Association of Museums, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and regional museum associations. The archival profession will have to work with and through each of these groups to effectively reach all recordkeepers.