

## Establishing Archives

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Dear Reader:

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We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with municipal government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other MTAS website material.

Sincerely,

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# Table of Contents

Establishing Archives .....	3
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In addition to or in conjunction with setting up a records center, your city should consider establishing a city archive if one is not already in existence. An archive differs from a records center in that the records center generally keeps inactive records temporarily before their final disposition. An archive usually is dedicated to preserving records of such historical value that they should be maintained permanently. The two may be located in the same facility and be virtually indistinguishable to the public, or they may be separately located and operated facilities. An archive provides many of the same benefits as a records center, namely, removing records that are not regularly used by an office from expensive and cluttered office space and providing proper storage conditions for the records.

An archive also serves an important role in preserving the history of our country and our communities and provides a valuable resource for members of the community researching our past. By providing another location for this research, the archive indirectly helps city officials by allowing them to refer genealogists, students, and other researchers to another office rather than diverting time and effort from their daily tasks to assist those people in accessing the older, historical records of the city.

### **Specifications**

Since the primary purpose of the archive is to preserve records permanently, environmental conditions for the archive are even more important than those for a record center. The following considerations for archival space are recommended by the Tennessee State Library and Archives. <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Archives Storage and Management Space**

The following archival standards should be met to preserve local archives for future use. The closer local archives come to meeting these standards, the more likely the records will survive. <sup>[2]</sup>

- Distinctly exclusive space: An entirely separate building is desirable, but not essential, and some cities may not be able to afford it. In an existing building, a separate, exclusive space that can be secured from unauthorized entry and that meets the general specifications that follow is the minimal requirement to assure proper maintenance. The space should not be combined or confused with any other use. <sup>[3]</sup>
- A strong, durable building that is earthquake and storm resistant: Heavy (i.e., masonry and steel) construction is desirable, not only to resist storm and earthquake damage, but also to help meet the standards below with greater economy of operating costs.
- Secure against theft and other hostile intrusion: A safe and secure locking system is highly desirable. Entry to and exit from the space should be controlled by official staff so that patrons are not free to come and go without surveillance, so as to assure that documents are not stolen or removed without proper authorization.
- As damp proof as possible with a consistently moderate relative humidity: The best relative humidity for archival materials is a constant RH of 45 percent to 55 percent; excessive ranges and changes in humidity tend to speed deterioration of archived materials. Leaky roofs, walls, and foundations that invite seepage and mold are natural enemies of archives. The site of the archive space should be chosen to protect it from flooding, either from nearby rivers or from excessive ground water during heavy rains. Care should be taken to see that water pipe systems that serve the space are sound and leak free.
- Consistently moderate temperature: The best temperature for archival materials is a constant temperature between 65 degrees and 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Excessive ranges and temperature swings tend to speed deterioration. <sup>[4]</sup>
- Free of pollutants: As much as possible, air circulation systems should be filtered to remove contaminating acids, dust and other airborne dangers to archive materials.
- Free of biological pests: As much as possible, the archive should be protected against and free from insects, rodents, mold and other biological dangers to records.

- Free from ultraviolet light; As much as possible, sunlight and other sources of ultraviolet light, such as fluorescent tubes, that tend to damage film and paper documents must be excluded from the archive by shielding and filtration. <sup>[5]</sup>
- Fireproof: To the greatest extent possible, construction materials should be of masonry, steel, and other fire-retardant or fire-resistant materials. Care should be taken to see that heating and electrical systems that serve the space are not likely to cause accidental fires.
- Protected by a reliably tested fire suppression system. The most commonly recommended system is a reliable water sprinkler system with proper drainage for the water to be eliminated readily. Desirable fire protection includes rapid response by local fire fighting teams and briefing and orientation of local fire departments by local government officials on the nature of the archive and the need to preserve the content materials. <sup>[6]</sup>
- Shelves and other containers should meet archival specifications: Shelving should be of strong, baked enamel steel construction. <sup>[7]</sup> Enough space should be left between shelves for convenient access and to inhibit the spread of fire. Shelves should be deep enough so that there is no overhang of boxes. Oversized materials (such as engineering drawings) should be in oversized shelving or metal cabinets.
- Filing and boxing of records: To the extent possible, records should be kept in acid-neutral paperboard boxes and folders (available from archives suppliers). This often requires removing records from original folders and boxes to new ones and labeling the new containers.
- Disaster plan: A well-devised disaster plan for actions to take in case of fire, flood, water leakage, earthquake, theft, bomb threats or other dangers to archives should be written. There are good models of disaster plans already in existence. Local archives can acquire one of these and adapt it to local conditions. <sup>[8]</sup> Archive staff should be trained in its provisions and should know what to do in any emergency.

### **Technical Assistance**

The Tennessee State Library and Archives is making an active effort to encourage the development of local and regional archives across the state. It is an excellent source of technical assistance and advice in developing an archive. The State Library and Archives has produced a series of Tennessee Archives Management Advisories that provide a wealth of information on a number of topics. Much of the material in this chapter has been adapted from those publications, but it only scratches the surface of the information available from the State Library and Archives on archives and preserving records. A listing of the archives management advisories is in the appendix to this manual under Sources of Additional Information. For further information, contact the Tennessee State Library and Archives at [adp.tsla@tn.gov](mailto:adp.tsla@tn.gov) <sup>[1]</sup>.

<sup>[1]</sup> These recommendations are from the Tennessee State Library and Archives, Tennessee Archives Management Advisory (TAMA) 99-004 Basic Archives Management Guidelines, p.5.

<sup>[2]</sup> More detailed standards are available from the Tennessee State Library and Archives at [adp.tsla@tn.gov](mailto:adp.tsla@tn.gov) <sup>[1]</sup>.

<sup>[3]</sup> In the past, some people have regarded archives as “dead” storage and put valuable records into rooms with old furniture, cleaning equipment, or fuel stores, or into fire-trap attics and basements with dirt, vermin, and the like. That kind of negligence endangers the very evidence that public interest needs to save and protect.

<sup>[4]</sup> There are stricter archival standards, with narrower ranges of tolerance for ideal conditions. Some materials may also require slightly different optimum temperature and humidity. However, these present standards are tolerable for local archives that do not have the resources for highly sophisticated environmental control systems.

<sup>[5]</sup> Incandescent lights do not produce strong ultraviolet rays, but fluorescent lamps do, and they must be shielded with ultraviolet ray filters if they are used.

<sup>[6]</sup> Much damage has been done to records when local firefighters treat archives as they would any other storehouse of replaceable goods.

<sup>[7]</sup> Wood is flammable, and it often gives off gasses and oils that may damage archives.

[8] The University Library of Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville has a well-developed disaster plan that may be used as a model. Other models are available from TSLA and MTAS. For more discussion on disaster contingency planning and vital records preservation plans, see the next chapter.

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**Links:**

[1] <mailto:adp.tsla@tn.gov>

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