GUIDE TO PRESERVING HISTORICAL RECORDS

Why Your Records are Essential to LGBTQ History

Through social activism, theological challenges, and demands for full membership in faith communities, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender (LGBTQ) individuals have played a key role in the reshaping of modern society. However, movements that fail to preserve the records of their activities can disappear from history. Historians use readily available original record to create a compelling version of social change. They are likely to find records saved by mainstream religious institutions that had deep conflicts with the LGBTQ movement. As a result, the LGBTQ religious movement may remain "in the closet" indefinitely, creating a history that is less authentic because it excludes our voices. For this reason, LGBTQ activists, historians, and archivists organized the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Religious Archives Network (LGBTQ-RAN) to assist LGBTQ religious organizations and individuals to locate and preserve their historical documents. This mission remains critical as many records of emerging movements are recorded online without plans for long-term retention.

How LGBTQ-RAN Can Help You

LGBTQ-RAN assists LGBTQ groups and individuals of all faith traditions and nationalities to identify and preserve their records and consider how and when to donate them to archives for long-term preservation and access. LGBTQ-RAN archivists are available to consult with groups and individuals about their specific questions regarding their historical records and have created this "Guide to Preserving Historical Records" as an introduction to the process.

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Part I: Preliminary Steps—Identifying Your Historical Documents

Individuals and organizations deeply involved in the challenges of social change seldom give serious thought to their historical records. Even when they recognize that their efforts have changed history, they may be at a loss about how to proceed. This section was created to clarify the benefits of donating materials to a repository and outline the preliminary steps in identifying and assessing your historical materials.

Why Donate Historical Materials to an Archival Repository?

A physical archives is a place where professional archivists collect, organize, preserve, and make available for research historically significant documents. They also maintain electronic records for long term retention and research. Archives provide a level of protection and preservation that is beyond the resources of most groups or individuals. For example, records might be lost to unexpected calamities—when roofs leak, fire sprinklers go off, basements flood, or buildings burn, but most records are lost when someone misplaces them, neglects to return them, drops out of the group, or moves away. Valuable records are lost when an individual dies or is incapacitated and executors do not understand the significance of their collection and fail to contact an archives. Computer files are lost when hardware fails or become obsolete. Email and social media are created for the moment and lost to abandoned accounts and forgotten passwords. When historical records are lost, your organization's memory and the record of its accomplishments will also be gone. And once gone, is gone forever. In addition to preservation, archives publicize and promote the research use of historical records. Anyone with Internet access can search for and access information about archival collections.

The LGBTQ historical records risk being marginalized in mainstream media and historical accounts. We must make strenuous efforts to make our history visible and available for research by historians, journalists, activists, students, and our communities. LGBTQ-RAN provides archivist consultants to help individuals and groups to locate archives to suit their needs and maximize use of the collection.

What Kinds of Documents Should Be Placed in A Repository?

Documents are all those files and records generated in the course of pursing your activities. Few are valuable in isolation; each individual document adds context and significance to others in your collection. Therefore, the more complete the set of records, the more authentically the collection will reflect your history and document activities such as worship, public outreach, publishing newsletters, creating web-pages, lobbying religious authorities, or building LGBTQ faith organizations.

Archivists use the term, "papers" for collections created by an individual, while documents of an organization are called "records." In many LGBTQ groups, the two categories overlap. Typical examples might be:

Personal AND organizational records:

- Letters, email threads
- Social media
- Photographs, posters, banners, buttons, cards, mementos, costumes
- Newsclippings/scrapbooks
- Audio and video recordings
- Files from conferences
- Records of service on committees/boards within faith communities
- Web-sites

Personal papers:

- Writings, manuscripts, and publications authored by the donor

Organizational records:

- Constitutions, by-laws, and other founding documents
- Minutes of meetings
- Committee files
- Membership lists
- Reports
- Publicity materials
- Newsletters (their own and those of other organizations)
- Documents stored on a computer, on a disc, or online/in the "Cloud"

lgbtqreligiousarchives.org

Electronic and Cloud-based Documents:

- Computer files (text, photo, audio, and video), web pages
- Social media
- (Facebook™ and Twitter™ provide downloading functions that enable organizations to copy their pages to discs or hard drives. Extensive social media accounts may be saved and archived through third-party vendors or emerging technologies.

Two Important Rules of Thumb

DO NOT DISCARD ANYTHING before you discuss your collection with the repository of your choice. Archives are interested in more of your materials than the average individual or group anticipates.

DO NOT REARRANGE FILES
Strive to keep records in the order in which they were originally used. The original order often provides an additional layer of "contextual" meaning to individual documents. An example may clarify the reason for this. Suppose that the board of a LGBTQ synagogue decided to compile and distribute a brochure describing itself and its activities. Perhaps in the course of doing so, they wrote to other LGBTQ synagogues for samples of their brochures and for advice on how to proceed. They also wrote to several LGBTQ Christian and Buddhist faith organizations and gathered all the resulting correspondence and sample brochures in a single file folder.

Now suppose further that a well-meaning secretary comes along ten years later and decides that the bulky brochure folder needs to be divided into several folders, and puts all the synagogue brochures in one folder, but files the brochures and letters from the other faith groups alphabetically into separate subject files. If that happens, the original folder disappears and is not there to provide evidence of the interfaith process the synagogue used to create its brochure. In archival collections, the order and relationship of documents is often as important as the contents of individual documents themselves.

Archiving—When, What, Who, and How?

- **_When** should records be archived?

  When documents are no longer in active use they should be stored carefully. Computer files of all kinds, email, and any programs routinely used to create records should be backed up routinely and saved to an external hard drive or CDs or DVDs. If possible, update these files to new versions of the program they are created on before saving them.

  When clearing out folders and files to remove items no longer in use, some will be historically important while others can be safely discarded.

- **_What** records should be saved and which can be discarded?

  Save: The items listed at the beginning of "What Kinds of Documents Should Be Placed in a Repository." It itemizes most, but not all, of the documents that should be preserved. However, it is wise to save all items until you have discussed the collection with an archivist at the repository to which you intend to donate.

  Store temporarily: Financial (invoices, receipts), personnel records, tax records, and legal documents are kept as required by law and can be discarded.

  Discard: Duplicates, blank forms, draft copies (electronic and printed), extra flyers, and publications. Discard junk mail and irrelevant messages from your e-mail client.

  Note: Archives seldom accept published books, magazines, journals, or other items readily available in libraries. If you have a large collection of such materials, try donating them to a library.

- **_Who** should locate and identify your historically significant records?

  The board should authorize this project for a long-term member or group. Any person with interest in preserving the records can share in the various tasks of donating your records. However, it is best to enlist the advice of a professional archivist as you assess your records. Individuals and members of organizations are not as likely as historians to value the sometimes disorganized, but utterly irreplaceable original documents. The archivists at LGBTQ-RAN are available to consult with you as you begin the process of listing your records. The archivist at the

repository to which you intend to donate materials would also want to work with you and answer questions. The three-step process outlined below is offered as a guide for you as you begin gathering your materials, evaluating their completeness, and deciding which records to preserve.

- _**How** does an organization start the process?

Step One: Find your records

Identify the earliest records and individuals who were involved in organizing the group.

Find any materials listed in "What Kinds of Documents Should Be Placed in a Repository." Do not remove these materials from their files (or piles as the case may be), simply note the subjects and where they are located—in the office files, in storage spaces, at the homes of various members, or on hard drives or CDs, etc..

Search for gaps in the records. Are there missing items in your run of newsletters or series of minutes? Contact individuals who may have knowledge of these missing items.

In many cases, one or two individuals may have been central to the development and survival of an organization. Frequently, these individuals have many records of the organization in their personal possession. Contact these individuals whenever possible, as well as other people known to have records or papers related to the organization. Find out what records, letters, files, and personal memorabilia they have. Whether or not they have organizational records in their possession, they may have personal materials that reflect their work with your organization. Encourage them to donate these materials to the same archives that you donate your organizational files, minutes, newsletters, etc. If they want to donate their materials directly to you, have them sign a **gift agreement** to you. All archives will ask you to sign a gift agreement. Sample copies and more information about these agreements are available from LGBTQ-RAN archivists or the archives of your choice.

Step Two: Evaluate and annotate your records

Do the records in your collection:

- accurately describe the scope and vision of your group?
- give your legal name or that of your group? Indicate name

changes?
- give dates? Pencil in important dates on the margins when they are missing? (Flyers seldom specify the year they were created.)
- identify any working committees within the organization?
- give the full name or names of members or key figures?
- identify the geographical location of the group or groups?
- include a statement of purpose or group identity?

If significant materials in a collection lacks critical dates, titles, or names of creators, the donor should put the information on a separate note and clip it to the item. Do not write over the documents or photographs or modify the electronic record.

Step Three: Create a list of your records

Note: You do not have to organize or create a list of your records before donation! Archives accept collections in all states of (dis)organization.

A written list gives a quick overview of existing files. This list helps the organization keep track of its historical documents and facilitates discussions with repositories.

For example:

- By-laws and minutes, 1978-1989
- Photographs of conventions, 1975-present
- Outreach events, 2000 and 2001
- E-mail, 1995-2018
- Brochures, 2003 (on XYZ computer)

A list of platforms and apps with names of account owners/passwords helps manage social media accounts.

A screen shot of folder contents can identify electronic or cloud-based materials.

Contact information for individuals who have parts of organizational records in their possession should be kept up to date.

For example:

- Committee minutes from 1990-1995 are in the possession of the current secretary of each committee.

Part Two: Selecting an Appropriate Archives

Choosing an Archives

As a prospective donor you will probably find yourself considering archival repositories falling into one or more of four categories:

- professionally staffed academic archives located in colleges, universities, or seminaries;
- LGBTQ community-based archives;
- archives belonging to a particular faith tradition;
- local or state historical societies with a pro-active LGBTQ collecting policy.

Some archives are staffed by volunteers and while others have a larger budget and professional staff. LGBTQ community-based archives have the advantage of visibility within its community and researchers would expect to find LGBTQ collections of interest there. Donating to an LGBTQ archives is a statement of the value of the community to the history being preserved. On the other hand, large archives with institutional support and professional staff are more likely to have the resources to provide maintenance of and publicity for your collection. These are important considerations in selecting an archives, but far from the only one.

Other points to consider when selecting an archives include the nature and content of your collection—for example, an archives belonging to a particular faith tradition may accept only materials from its own tradition; a local historical society may refuse collections they cannot maintain. Most academic repositories have collection policies that limit their acquisitions to specific subjects. Less obvious issues need to be considered. Will the archives be convenient for members of the organization to visit? Is the staff enthusiastic and knowledgeable about LGBTQ history? Does the archives have a large backlog of donations that have not been processed for use? A large backlog may mean that your organizational records may not be available for researchers for several years. It may also indicate that the repository does not have adequate resources to fully publicize its holdings or attract researchers.

Once you donate your materials to an archives, it is rarely possible to withdraw them and re-donate them to another institution. Upon donation, you assign the repository the right to "weed" your collection and remove or "de-accession"

materials they do not deem of historic value—generally duplicates, empty forms, receipts, etc. You should be reasonably certain at the time of donation that the repository recognizes the importance of your work. The repository should also actively collect and preserve records of other, similar organizations. Researchers are more likely to travel to and do research at repositories where they can find more than one collection in their area of interest. In the current online world, the archives you choose should also post descriptions of their collections online in a way that allows browsers to search and retrieve the. Then, a Google™ search would retrieve the collection.

How Does an Archives Work?

Archives organize their activities around four basic functions: **Accessioning, processing, description, and reference**. It may be helpful to know something about these functions, to have a better idea of how the materials you donate will fit into the larger, archival picture.

Accessioning

Accessioning in archival practice refers to intake procedures performed on all incoming materials to maintain administrative and intellectual control of materials before they are processed for long term preservation. Electronic files can be accessioned from hard drives, zip drives, CDs, DVDs, or from the "Cloud." There will be a lag time between accession and public access. This time is used for processing.

Processing

Archival processing maximizes the longevity of physical materials and stores electronic files in a way they can be searched and used over the long term. Physical materials are stored in acid-free folders and boxes, harmful substances such as rubber bands, cellophane tape, and rusty paper clips are removed as are duplicates and items with no historical relevance.

Materials that are fragile or degrade quickly, such as heat sensitive paper, newsprint, audio and visual magnetic tapes may be copied to stable media or stored in special containers Professionally trained conservators, if available, attend to difficult restoration projects.

Electronic records are "packaged" with information about their dates, creators, and location in the collection. They are stored in deep repositories that may or may not be crawled by browsers.

Description

Archivists create **finding aids** to describe their collections. Finding aids vary from archives to archives, but almost always include the following elements:

- the size of the collection—in cubic or lineal feet, or the number of items;
- the earliest and latest dates of items in the collection, called the span dates
- who donated the collection and when;
- usually a list of formats found in the collection such as photographs, electronic records, scrapbooks, audiovisual, artifacts, portraits, etc.;
- a brief history of the organization or biography of the individual who generated the documents;
- a long note on the scope and content of the collection;
- a folder-by-folder list of the collection that includes the span dates of each folder.

Together, these elements guide researchers to the relevant folders without the work and wear and tear of searching each item of the entire collection. Thus, a well-written finding aid is critical to the accessibility of your collection.

Reference

The last and increasingly important service an archives provides is guiding researchers of all kinds to its collections. This is done in house and online. Brick and mortar archives have a secure reading room. Archivists explain how to navigate the finding aids, retrieve materials for researchers, and point out areas of interest within the collection. Archivists may also suggest collections of related materials.

To illustrate, a researcher interested in the effect of AIDS on the LGBTQ religious communities during the 1980s might come to the LGBT Center National History Archive in New York to search the Dignity/New York files. In discussing their project with the archivist, the archivist could note that the Dignity files have very little information concerning AIDS, while the papers Mary Dogood, Elisha Simmet, and Amin Raoul (fictive names) have vivid information about the effect of AIDS on their religious communities. Because archivists regularly discuss research topics with the researchers who use their

collections, they can often offer additional information about related sources and current research in the field.

Researchers often rely on the archivist to enhance and advance their projects. Their interest in and information about collections make them a valuable resource for researchers. Skilled and engaged archival staff are an important component of making your organizations accomplishments visible in the light of history.

Online reference has grown as quickly as the web itself. Reference staff receive and research questions regularly. Most repositories now routinely put finding aids online, build web interfaces to search archival holdings, and contribute their records to national and international databases to increase their findability. They create websites to attract new audiences and highlight new collecting strengths. Archives have also digitized every item in their popular collections to display them online.

Part Three: Safely Storing Papers or Records Before Donation

Organizations and individuals store their records for reference and when no longer in active use. The following information describes the *optimal* environmental and security conditions to maximize the useable life of your records. Implementing these suggestions wherever feasible will help you to protect your irreplaceable historical documents while they are under your stewardship.

Physical environment

As much as possible, the temperature should be between 65 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit and the humidity under 50% for all paper documents. Some types of film and other sensitive materials may require special storage conditions. Attics and storage sheds are too hot; basements and garages too damp.

Keep documents out of direct sunlight. Ultraviolet light degrades paper and other materials. The darkest closet remains appropriate for paper records. Dust, insects, and mice are hazards to long term preservation.

Preserving paper records:

- Protect all organizational records from the unexpected: from floods; sewer problems; leaks in overhead pipes; seasonal dampness; and the tragedy of fire.
- Remove rubber bands and replace rusty paper clips with plastic clips.
- Unfold all materials—paper eventually tears along folds.
- Do NOT mark or write on documents themselves. Make notes on a separate piece of acid free paper.
- Protect especially delicate items in polyethylene sheet protectors.
- Place paper files in acid-free folders, available from archival suppliers.

Photographs

Photographs on paper require special treatment. Strive to locate them in one file to facilitate optimal conditions. To do this, locate and gather all paper-based photographs and photocopy them and put the photocopies in place of the originals. Then collect all original photographs into one or more folders for long term preservation.

Identify the subjects of photographs, but do NOT write on the back of photographs. Instead, make brief notes or dates along the margin of the photograph or put a separate piece of acid free paper with each photograph.

Decide whether photographs can be safely removed from albums, scrapbook pages, or exhibit boards. In some cases, the scrapbook provides an irreplaceable context for the photographs and should be preserved. If the scrapbook pages are highly acidic (brittle and darkened), place acid-free paper between each leaf of the book.

Mold and mildew

Isolate any items that smell musty or are stained with mold or mildew. Place them in plastic bags and keep them in cool, dry conditions, away from other paper items. Mold and mildew will not "blossom" unless the environment is warm and moist, but in warm, humid conditions, mold will quickly contaminate entire paper collections, shortening their life.

Audio-visual materials

Analog tape has a short life-span in terms of historical preservation. Keep them in a cool environment and refrain from using them.

Digitize audio and video tapes and copy duplicates of these files to a hard drive or DVD.

Transcribe an organization's *essential* audio records such as recorded board meetings for which there are no written minutes, from tape into a more permanent format such as paper.

Note: Even though digitizing audio-visual material is now common, opinions differ about discarding the original film or tape. This is especially true of 8mm or 16 mm film, which is quite stable, while the useable life of digital materials has not yet been established.

Electronic materials

Save computer records and any web sites on CDs or DVDs. Save a copy of the program on which the records were created on the same disc if possible. At this time, there is no guarantee that the hardware (computers and discs) and software that created your electronic files will be available in twenty or more years. If you want to ensure that records will be extant after that time period, print them onto acid-free paper.

Note content, individuals, dates, and the software program in which they are saved on each file or CD and on a separate inventory.

Security

Keep records in a secure area, preferably under lock or key.

- Do not make them available for casual perusal by staff or volunteers.
- Do not let members take the records home to work on a presentation.
- Do not let readers or researcher take records out of their secure location.
- Do not let families of past members take photographs from the secure area to have them copied.

This should be done by officers or staff members responsible for their safe return.

Keep a record of anyone who has been given access to archival records.

Make duplicate copies of your list of historical records; date them, and keep at least one copy at another site.

FAQs about Donating Materials

Does the group have to organize its materials before donation?

It is best to consult with the archivist at the archives to which you are considering donating your material. Some prefer that a collection not be rearranged at all, while other archives find that *judicious* organization and annotation by the donor facilitates processing that could result in your collection being open to the public far sooner than would otherwise be the case.

What should we do with material that is too personal to include with other records?

There are several approaches to this situation. Most individuals are satisfied to close part or all of the collection for specified period of time—twenty-five to fifty years—after which it will be opened for research use. No archives, however, will accept a collection that can never be opened.

Some donors prefer to destroy sensitive materials while donating the rest. This choice is always up to the donor, but it is important to trust the archives that holds your collection. A professional archivist will always advocate for the responsible and respectful use of their collections according to donor wishes. Archivists can and do impose restrictions on the kinds of confidential information that can be published (for example, information may be used if a fictive name is assigned or statistics can be compiled from records, but personal identities cannot be disclosed).

Can individuals or groups donate more materials after the initial donation?

Yes, organizations often have schedules for donating additional records as they pass out of active use. Individuals often donate the bulk of their personal papers but continue to generate and keep other items that will be donated later.

Should the organization divide their materials among more than one repository?

…for example, sending some to a local historical society and others to an LGBTQ archives?

No, the entire collection should be kept together at one location as much as possible. Completeness adds greatly to meaning. This is so fundamental to archival practice that archivists do not accept materials from a donor who already has a similar collection at another repository. There are *rare*

exceptions. While dividing collections among various topical archives may seem logical at first, a second view suggests how fragmented collections could become. For example, one individual may donate their music collection to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, their baseball cards to a museum in Coopersville, a family genealogy to the Mormon Church archives, and his or her papers related to their religious activities to an LGBTQ repository.) For this reason, collections are divided only if it contains extremely technical or esoteric matter. For example, a research biologist may donate his or her technical files to the science library at their academic institution while donating their personal papers to an LGBTQ archives. In general an LGBTQ organization or individual would donate their entire collection to a single repository and never separate the records of their LGBTQ activities from those of the rest of their life.

Can the organization take materials back or transfer them to another repository after they are donated?

No. Since archives devote considerable resources in accessioning, processing, and publishing your collection; donation should be considered permanent. Choosing an archives is a serious decision requiring careful forethought.

What kinds of materials have other LGBTQ groups and individuals donated?

The best way to approach this answer is to offer examples. The following web sites link to the finding aids of LGBTQ collections. These finding aids include detailed descriptions of the kinds of records that have been donated:

Affirmation and Reconciling Congregation Program
www.depts.drew.edu/lib/uma.html

Lesbian and Gay Interfaith Council of Minnesota
www.mnhs.org

Louie Crew Papers
www.lib.umich.edu/spec-coll/labadie

History is for Sharing

Utilize the history you uncover to build awareness of your organization and community's identity, achievements, and challenges. Include historical notes in newsletters and at program talks at annual meetings. Present historical vignettes to new groups, affiliates, and civic or religious groups seeking speaker programs. Sponsor oral history interviews of seasoned members or significant past members and ask interviewees for permission to use pieces from them in publicity. Individuals can share their memories at group events or fundraisers. History creates a sense of shared identity and purpose. As groups change and new members arrive, history reminds us of our central purpose. We created a vibrant LGBTQ community history, worthy of celebration.

Contact LGBTQ-RAN

The LGBTQ-RAN consulting archivist Doris Malkmus is available to answer your questions regarding your records and papers.

She can be reached by e-mail at:

> archivist@lgbtqreligiousarchives.org

LGBTQ-RAN staff can be contacted by phone at:

> 773-316-8892

or by mail at:

> LGBTQ-RAN
> P.O. Box 408565
> Chicago, IL 60640