

**Washington State Archives Policy Statement
on the Reappraisal, Weeding and
Deaccessioning of Material From Its
Accessioned Collections**

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Attributions and Acknowledgements

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Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle. Deaccession Policy
(<https://archseattle.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/DeaccessionPolicy.pdf>)

Center for Sacramento History, Collections Management Policy, December 2016
(<http://www.centerforsacramentohistory.org/-/media/CSHistory/Files/About/Collection-Management-Policy.pdf?la=en>)

Wyoming State Archives. Collections Management Policy, 2002

National Archives and Records Administration. NARA 1540 – Reappraisal and Deaccessioning of Archival Federal Records, 2013.
(<https://www.archives.gov/files/foia/directives/nara1540.pdf>)

The Society of American Archivists. Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning, 2017.
(https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForReappraisalDeaccessioning_2017.pdf)

The National Archives of the U.K. Deaccessioning and Disposal: Guidance for Archives Services, 2015.
(<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/Deaccessioning-and-disposal-guide.pdf>)

Introduction

Washington State Archives believes in the proactive, strategic and sustainable management of its collections. The Archival records are preserved for the enduring value of the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creators. Archival records are unique, and therefore irreplaceable. When the Archives accepts custody of archival collections, it is with the intent of permanent preservation.

However, it is sometimes necessary to remove materials that are no longer appropriate to retain in the collections. The removal of this material is accomplished through the processes of reappraisal, weeding and deaccessioning.

- Reappraisal is the process of identifying materials that no longer merit inclusion in the permanent collections. This could be due to a faulty original appraisal, a change in the collections policy, or a change in the value of the material over time.
- Weeding is the process of identifying and removing unwanted material at the item, file folder, or higher level. Typically this is due to small amounts of non-archival material included within larger collections.
- Deaccessioning is the process used by the Archives to formally and permanently remove materials from its holdings and dispose of them or, more rarely, transfer their legal ownership to a more appropriate repository.

Purpose and scope of the guidance

This guidance is to formally establish reappraisal, weeding and deaccessioning, as responsible options for managing the collections of the Archives. It describes the conditions under which accessioned collections can be reappraised, weeded, and deaccessioned. The guidance is intended to guard against the irretrievable loss of one-of-a-kind records due to improper disposal. The goal is to ensure that the Archives retains only collections worthy of long-term preservation.¹

Our intention for providing these principles and formal process for reappraisal, weeding and deaccessioning, is to ensure transparency, accountability, and the preservation of trust so that the public, donors, researchers, agency staff, and other stakeholders may better understand archival practice.

Authority

- **RCW 40.14.020** - provides that the State Archivist centralize the archives of the State of Washington and make them available for reference and scholarship.

¹ "Washington State Archives Collection Development Policy," January 2019 and "Washington State Archives Policy Statement on Archival Appraisal," September 2018.

- **RCW 40.14.060** - authority of the State Records Committee to set records retention policy for the records of state government agencies.
- **RCW 40.14.070** - authority of the Local Records Committee to set records retention policy for the records of local government agencies.

Definitions

Accessioned Collections: materials physically and legally transferred to the Archives.

Appraisal: the process of determining the value and disposition of records based on administrative, legal and fiscal use; evidential, intrinsic and informational value; and their relationship to other records.

Deaccession(ing): to remove records from an archival collection and disposition them through destruction or transfer to another institution.

Disposition: actions taken at the end of the retention period. Actions are either the destruction of the records or their transfer to the Archives for permanent retention.

Reappraisal: the process of reviewing records in the Archives to see if they still warrant preservation or if their historical value is minimal enough that they should be removed from the archival collection.

Transitory Records: Records with little or no administrative, legal or fiscal value that need not be kept for future use or information.

Weeding: the process of identifying and removing unwanted materials from a larger body of materials. Unwanted materials are typically those with transient value in archival records groups, such as duplicates, purchasing documentation, leave slips, etc.

Policy

The reappraisal and deaccessioning of collections should be rare occurrences. The Archives has a continuing responsibility for the records they hold, and disposal decisions should be made with great care and not occur repeatedly, as repeated reappraisal will diminish the collection.

The Collection Development Policy and the Policy Statement on Archival Appraisal are the primary reference points for decision-making on reappraisal, weeding and/or deaccessioning. If a collection or item meets the criteria found in those policies, it should be retained. Financial constraints, or a need to conserve physical space, should not be the main drivers for reappraisal and deaccessioning.

In order to have a clear understanding and awareness of the risks involved in reappraisal and deaccessioning, staff need to be familiar with the records retention schedules, specific legislative mandates and the regulatory environment in which the Archives operates. Some of these risks include:

- Disposing of significant archival material;
- Accusations of poor management;
- Attracting bad public relations and damage to reputation; and
- Loss of trust from users and stakeholders.

Re-appraisal decisions must be well documented to provide an audit trail. Without this documentation, the Archives cannot show that approved policy was followed, and that professional judgement was used.

Objectives of Reappraisal, Weeding and Deaccessioning

- Improve overall access to the collections;
- Assess collecting strengths and refine collecting focus;
- Correct faulty appraisals made at the time of acquisition;
- Maintain compliance with the law, the collection policy and retention schedules;
- Balance the research potential of collections with the necessary allocation of resources (space, staff, time, and preservation resources) for their care;
- Make split collections whole.

Guiding Principles for Reappraisal, Weeding and Deaccessioning

- **The process should be systematic** to ensure consistency, proper documentation, and ethical, responsible practice.
- **Reappraisal and deaccessioning decisions are shared responsibilities** and are not to be made independently. All decisions should be made with the concurrence of the State Archivist, the Deputy Archivist, and at least two (2) staff archivists.
- **Each step of the reappraisal and deaccessioning process needs to be thoroughly documented.** Documentation must be retained as a permanent record in the Collection Files. Proper documentation is crucial for providing Archives staff, agency staff, researchers, donors, and donors' heirs with information on what happened to a collection and why.
- **Reappraisal and deaccessioning can be implemented across the entire Archives or applied only to individual collections.** The procedures for reappraising and deaccessioning whole collections are the same for parts of a collection.
- **There are legal considerations.** Records disposals must be in-line with an appropriate retention schedule, statutory authority, or donor agreement.

The Reappraisal Process

The reappraisal process is a systematic and shared responsibility that involves many steps and can be time-consuming. It can also result in the addition of new

information to collection files, stimulate or renew interest in neglected collections and record series, provide a better understanding of holdings on the whole and lead to the discovery of new material.

Preparation: Gathering the right information before embarking on reappraisal is critical. Preparation should include the following steps:

1. Determine the objectives for conducting the reappraisal;
2. Review collection and appraisal policies to ensure that any deaccession decisions are accurate and defensible;
3. Identify the scope of collections to be included in the reappraisal. The scope can be the Archives complete holdings or limited to certain areas by subject, time period, format, agency, division or department.
4. Ensure the process has been authorized by the State Archivist.
 - Explain why the reappraisal is needed and outline the goals, objectives, and anticipated outcomes;
 - Document each step of the process;
 - Decide who will be making the final reappraisal decisions (a designated Archives staff member, a committee, the State Archivist).
5. Collect information that allows for good decision-making. For instance:
 - The provenance of the original collection (records retention schedules, records transmittal forms, deeds of gift);
 - Agency biographical or historical descriptive information (paper finding aids, catalog records, etc.);
 - Acquisition dates (accession logs and records of all accessions);
 - Use statistics and knowledge from users about the research significance of the collection.

Evaluation and making a decision: Once the collection information has been gathered, a final decision to retain or deaccession can be made. When the information is not conclusive, the more nuanced issues of research use, financial concerns, the balance between risks and benefits, and/or higher administrative or legal issues can be taken into consideration. The questions and criteria used as the basis for these decisions, should include:

1. Is the provenance, content and/or subject matter of the material unknown or unclear?
2. Does the collection fit within the Archives collection policy?
3. Is the material unique and archival?
4. What are the preservation and maintenance costs?
5. Has the material been in an unprocessed state and stored offsite for

long periods of time?

6. Is the collection permanently inaccessible due to format obsolescence, or physically degraded to the point of uselessness?
7. Is the collection comprised of formats not generally collected by the repository, such as newspaper clippings, magazines, or artifacts?
8. Have the records been bypassed for years by researchers and use trends?
9. Is there doubt that the materials will be useful in the foreseeable future for research or display (e.g. ephemeral materials)?
10. Does the material duplicate information held in other areas of the Archives?
11. If the material consists of books, or other published materials, will they aid in understanding other records in the collections?
12. Do the records have adequate evidential, informational, or other value (e.g. historical, administrative, research, etc.)?
13. Do the records need to be kept for a certain period of time for legal or fiscal reasons?
14. Are the records in continuous use by the originating agency through long-term loans, large volumes of agency reference requests for copies, or other activity that makes it clear that the records are still very important to the agency's current operations and may have been transferred to the Archives prematurely?

The Deaccessioning Process

There are three methods for deaccessioning records: destruction, return to donor, or more rarely, transfer to a more suitable repository. Staff will initiate the deaccession process by submitting a request to the State Archivist, outlining a description of the materials, creator, date, and justification for permanent removal.

All deaccession decisions and authority must be fully documented in the permanent Collection Files, both on paper and in the collections database. Accession, catalog, or other unique identification numbers assigned and associated with the deaccessioned material will not be reused but will remain as a record of the deaccessioned material.

Methods of Disposal: As part of the deaccessioning process staff will recommend a method of disposition to the Archivist. Appropriate methods of disposal include:

- Permanent destruction
Verify compliance with records laws and rules prior to destruction using the relevant records retention schedules or other Archives policies. If possible, offer the records back to the agency of origin prior to destruction (see "Return to the donor or agency of origin" below). Any records containing exempt or confidential

information must be destroyed by shredding or other method of confidential destruction that renders their content illegible.

- Transfer to a more suitable repository;

Transfer can be an ideal option, especially for manuscript collections, artifacts, published material, and artwork. This keeps the collection open for public access, ensures long-term preservation, and promotes positive relationships between repositories. When a repository is selected, disclose all of the information about the collection up front. Specify any restrictions/special provisions, and the condition, size, and content of the collection. Create a transfer agreement for the repository to accept the collection and then send or include copies of the Collection File (correspondence, deed of gift, inventory) with the records at the time of transfer.

- Return to the agency of origin or donor;

Be tactful and honest in presenting the reasons for offering the materials back to the agency or donor. The Archives may send back a collection to the agency of origin if the agency requests that the records be returned and retention changes are made to the appropriate records series to correct the retention period and remove the archival designation.

The Weeding Process

Sometimes archival records are transferred or donated in disarray and it is not uncommon, particularly with modern records, to find materials within that have transient value. Weeding is the process used to identify and remove those unwanted materials from a larger body of materials.

The two main purposes for weeding are to remove transient files to highlight the remaining archival records for researchers and to decrease the amount of storage needed for the collection. Weeding is typically carried out at the item or file level, and usually occurs during the initial acquisition process, or later when the records are being processed. Subject and correspondence files usually contain the highest percentage of unwanted or transitory material.

Experience has shown that the following categories of records generally may be eliminated from collections without affecting their historical value. When in doubt, however, leave the materials in the files.

- Damaged Records: Records infested with mold or pests that present a danger to other materials and cannot be copied, or are so damaged or decomposed that they are unusable.
- Drafts: The Archives should only maintain the final version of a document, unless a transferred draft contains significant comments, annotations, or other substantive original material not included in the final version.

- Routine Correspondence: Letters of transmittal, or cover letters, that merely forward an enclosure and add nothing to the content of the item transmitted. Announcements, reservations, acknowledgments, confirmations, and routine requests for general information such as brochures and catalogs can also be weeded. Discard envelopes unless there are important annotations.
- Memoranda: Retain memos concerning policies and procedures, but discard those concerning routine matters such as holidays, vacation schedules, instructions to staff, etc.
- Financial Records: Purchase orders, invoices, budget working papers, travel files, bank statements, cash books, cancelled checks, long distance phone bills, delivery slips, payroll deductions, and other records documenting routine expenditures.
- Publications: Newsletters, bulletins, reports, manuals, books, and magazines should only be kept if they have an integral connection to the collection or file creator. Otherwise, this material should be offered to the Washington State Library.
- Reference Materials: Vendor and supply catalogs, directories, promotional material, and samples used as reference by the office.
- Multiple Copies: In general, the Archives should only keep one copy of any record (the original/official version, if it exists).
- Miscellaneous: Blank forms, obsolete equipment manuals, envelopes (unless annotated), personal materials, job applications, and other materials that do not relate to the function of the collection or creator.