

# **Creating a Collection Development Policy for Historical Records**

**Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board  
Wisconsin Council for Local History**

*With support from  
the National Historical Publications and Records Commission*

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# Caring for Historical Records

## *Valuable resource and important responsibility*

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Of all the services that local historical societies perform, none is more important than that of saving from destruction historical records, photographs, and artifacts that document the past. In innumerable cases, only the presence of a local historical society has prevented locally significant historical materials from being carted off to the landfill or scattered in all directions by the auctioneer's gavel. Large institutions like the State Historical Society of Wisconsin collect many aspects of Wisconsin history, but they cannot collect all the important documents for each region, county, or town.

Although most historical societies collect artifacts and publications in addition to records, the primary focus of this manual is records. Historical records have been called the building blocks of history. By saving them, you are helping to preserve the collective memory of your community. You are probably familiar with the saying that those who refuse to learn about the past are condemned to repeat it. But the importance of history reaches beyond this concept. We cannot fully understand who we are as a community or as individuals if we don't understand who we were as a community, and what it once meant to be a member of that community. Historical documents can help us to understand and appreciate not only who we are but also how we interact with each other.

You have pledged to preserve your local historical record. By doing so, you have taken on a serious responsibility. The Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board wants to help you meet that responsibility. Our goal is to give you the tools you need to keep records in trust for future generations.

### **The cost of caring for historical records**

Collecting, maintaining, and providing access to historical records involves significant costs. These costs may be incurred in staff time, available space, money, or all of the above. We realize that state-of-the-art conditions are beyond the limits of many local historical society budgets. Our recommendation is to provide a minimal level now and to strive toward ideal practice.

## TODAY: Implement Minimal Best Practices

- ☛ Decide what you want to collect.
- ☛ Decide what you don't want to collect.
- ☛ Find out what materials are already being collected by neighboring:
  - ✓ libraries
  - ✓ historical societies
  - ✓ genealogical societies
  - ✓ private collectors

## TOMORROW: Work Toward Ideal Practice

- ☛ Create a written collection development policy and update it regularly.
- ☛ House records in a **secure, safe, separate, space**.
- ☛ Have enough funds to acquire, maintain, and make the records available now and in the future.
- ☛ Have a way to reproduce rare or fragile items that can't survive repeated handling.

# How We Created this Manual... *and for Whom*

### **This Manual is a First Step**

This manual was created as part of the "Best Practices Project" administered by the Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board (WHRAB) and funded by a federal grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. The goal of the project was to create and distribute manuals of best practice to help local historical societies, librarians, and local government officials (folks who generally haven't received any archival training) take care of historical records.

In 1997, the Wisconsin Council for Local History (WCLH) formed a task force to work with WHRAB on a manual of best practice. The first step in the process of developing the manual was deciding what its topic would be. The task force considered the question: "what information do local historical society staff and volunteers most need when they work with historical records?" Though it at first gave the ambitious answer, "Everything!", the task force eventually had to select a topic which it could treat in the scope of a short, easily useable manual. It chose collection policy.

The products of the Best Practices project, including this manual, will become the property of the associations that helped to create it. The initial workshop of this project will be presented in conjunction with the release of this manual. Additional workshops, led by representatives of the Records Advisory Board and WCLH, will be possible with the help of the curriculum packet which will also be given to the WCLH.

# Using this Manual

## *Create a collecting policy and put it to work*

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We have designed this manual to take you step by step through the process of writing a collecting policy, getting it approved, and putting it to work.

### **I. CREATING YOUR POLICY (SECTIONS 1-3)**

#### **Section 1: Creating Your Collecting Policy**

This section includes step by step instructions on who should draft the policy, using the mission of your society as a guide, surveying your current collection, surveying other area collections, elements that every policy should contain, and how to get your new policy approved.

#### **Section 2: You Can't Keep it All!**

The manual begins with an overview of what a collecting policy is, why it should be in writing, and how it can help your local historical society to take care of the materials entrusted to its care.

#### **Section 3: The Anatomy of a Collecting Policy**

We have broken down a typical collecting policy into six separate components. Each component has a description, an example, and some questions to help your decision making. This section also includes a fictional collecting policy so you can see how one might look.

### **II. PUTTING YOUR POLICY TO WORK (SECTIONS 4-8)**

#### **Section 4: Archival Appraisal - *Deciding What to Keep***

#### **Section 5: Acquisition - *Transfer of Ownership***

#### **Section 6: Local Government Records - *Guidelines***

#### **Section 7: De-Accessions - *Removing Items Permanently***

#### **Section 8: Outreach - *Describing Your Collection to Others***

### **III. APPENDICES**

#### **Appendix A: Glossary**

#### **Appendix B: A Bibliography of Further Reading**

#### **Appendix C: Information About Other Collections**

# Creating Your Collecting Policy

## *Step by step*

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- Step One**      Decide who should write the policy, or choose the right people to help you. Choose someone with strong writing skills who knows the current collection well.
- Step Two**      Examine the mission statement of your society and its long range goals. Is the mission statement still relevant or has your society changed its focus. The collecting policy must reflect the mission statement and the mission statement must reflect the current realities of your institution.
- Step Three**     Examine your current collection. Are you supporting your society's mission in your collecting or are your collections weak in areas important to your local society.
- Step Four**      Check out what other area repositories are collecting. If another repository is better able to care for certain records in a given subject area, you may wish to defer to that institution. When you enter into a cooperative agreement with another repository, be sure to spell out the nature and extent of the agreement in your policy.
- Step Five**      Using our fictional example as a guide, draft a policy that at the very least:
- defines the geographical or thematic focus of the collection
  - defines the formats you will and will not accept
  - outlines items that will *not* be accepted (based on condition, duplication, etc.)
  - delineates final responsibility for acquisition and disposal decisions
  - requires a deed of gift for items destined for the permanent collection
- Step Six**      Get the policy approved by the board of directors. By doing this you give the policy authority and demonstrate the governing body's commitment to the policy.

# You Can't Keep It All!

## *Why a written collecting policy is important*

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No institution has either the resources or the physical space to collect *every* historical record. Each institution, no matter how large or how small, must decide which records to actively collect, which records to accept if offered for donation, and which records to decline. A written collecting policy is an important tool that will help you make these decisions. A collecting policy contains a set of criteria that must be satisfied when historical materials are added to a society's collection.

### **Why you need a collecting policy.**

Each new acquisition, whether a single item or an individual's entire collection, will make claims on storage, staff time, and / or exhibit space. In addition, collections tend to grow haphazardly without a collecting policy to guide decision making. Not only will a planned collection be better organized and more valuable to researchers, it will also reduce the amount of unwanted or duplicate materials that waste precious resources.

A collecting policy is also a valuable tool when dealing with donors. It can help you to graciously decline unwanted materials. *For Example:* Betty wants to donate her late husband Frank's Hawaiian postcard collection. Your collecting policy could draw a clear boundary between ephemeral items that document local history, and items that were owned by local residents, but document other areas of the world. Such a distinction would make your decision much easier.

Another important role of the collecting policy is to designate which officials are responsible for final approval of acquisitions and disposals. Since a local historical society's collection is one of its largest tangible assets, final authority to add items to the collection or dispose of items in the collection should rest with the Board of Directors. Board approval demonstrates responsible oversight of the society's tangible assets just as action on a treasurer's report signifies oversight of financial assets.

### **Why it should be in writing.**

*There are several advantages to a written policy, including:*

- ☛ Decisions are not personal, they are policy.
- ☛ It's easier to decline unwanted materials.
- ☛ It's easier to explain acquisitions to donors, volunteers, supporters, and the Board.
- ☛ A plan provides continuity and consistency.

Let's return to the Hawaiian postcard example. If the policy is in writing, Betty knows you'd make the same decision no matter who offered you the collection. Donors can have strong emotional attachments to items that they have collected over the years. It can be a huge relief to point to policy and explain that you are not judging any collection as *bad*. "I'm not saying that Frank's postcard collection is worthless or unimportant. It's just that our collection is focused on the history of our town, and Hawaiian postcards just don't fall within our collecting area."

Another benefit of a written policy is that it will still be around after you leave. Your successor will not accept a Hawaiian postcard collection out of ignorance. We're not saying that policy never changes. It can, and should, evolve over time. A carefully written plan will last for years and ensure a focused collection.

**Our Fictional Example is the Lombardi County Historical Society.**

**MISSION STATEMENT** (*Written years before the collecting policy*): The Lombardi County Historical Society is a non-profit, educational institution whose purpose is to collect, preserve, interpret and promote the material culture and history of the Blue Lake region.

**LOMBARDI COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
*Collecting Policy*

**Purpose and Scope of the Collection**

① The society will collect items for the purpose of preserving and interpreting the history of Lombardi  
② County and the Blue Lake region. The society will also make materials available for research, but because the society holds these materials in trust for future generations, researchers are required to examine items in the society's research room only.

③ The society will collect historical materials in a variety of formats including, but not limited to: manuscripts, books and other written and printed materials; photographs, prints, paintings, and other visual materials; tapes, recordings, and other oral history materials; equipment, furnishings, clothing and other natural, commercial, institutional, and personal objects of the past. The society will accept memorabilia only if it represents important themes or episodes in the community's past. The society does not collect materials in the following formats: motion picture film, video recordings, and computer files.

⑤ The society may choose not to accept items which are in poor condition, which duplicate similar items in the collection, which are not contemporary with the time period they depict, or which are beyond the scope of this collecting policy.

**Additions to the Collection**

④ All items accepted for the collections must be cataloged. Purchases over \$250 must be approved by the Board of Directors. Donations will be accepted only when accompanied by a signed Deed of Gift form that legally transfers ownership of the materials to the Lombardi County Historical Society. Forms must be signed by the donor and an authorized official of the society. Both the donor and the society will receive signed copies of the form for their files. Donations are tax deductible under Section 501c(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code of 1954. Donors are responsible for arranging and paying for their own appraisals.

**Removal and/or Sale of Items from the Collection**

⑤ Items in the cataloged collections can be disposed of only by a two-thirds vote of the Board of Directors. In case of disposition of cataloged collection items, any funds generated must be used to benefit the collections. Items may be accepted by a majority vote of the Board of Directors solely for the purpose of sale or exchange, provided that the donor is informed of that purpose.

**Loans**

⑥ Loans are accepted only for a limited time period and only for the purposes of exhibition or research. Loans from the society are made only for a limited time period, only to non-profit organizations of similar purpose, and only for exhibition or research.

# The Anatomy of a Collecting Policy

## *What it should contain, and how it might look*

Collecting policies will all vary in their details according to the needs of different local historical societies. There are, however, certain basics that should be included in every policy and we have indicated these basic components in the fictional collection policy on the preceding page. We have broken down a typical policy into the six components which should be found in every collecting policy. The numbers 1-6 in the following narrative correspond to the numbers found on our mock collecting policy (page 7). In the following pages you will find a fuller description of each section and issues that you should address when writing your policy.

### ❶ What is the purpose (or mission) of the collections?

This section defines, in very broad terms where the interests of your institution lie. Your collections should contribute to the overall mission of your historical society. Use the mission statement as a starting point for your collecting policy. If your society doesn't have a clearly defined mission, we recommend that you start by meeting with the Board of Directors to draft a mission statement.

### ❷ Who will be using the collection? For what purpose?

Researchers make different demands on available space and staff time than do visitors to your exhibits. If you don't have space for a research room you shouldn't encourage folks to conduct research using your collections. Common user groups include historians, students, and genealogists. In some cases, the collection may dictate who wants to conduct research at your society.

### ❸ What is the FOCUS of the collection?

This section defines the scope of your collections, which should contribute to your mission. Here are a few questions to help you get started:

#### ➡ What do we already have?

Are there areas of local history that are documented well by your collections? Areas that you should build upon? Are there obvious gaps in your collections?

#### ➡ What do other institutions have?

Remember, you can't collect everything. Find out what materials are housed in neighboring collections. It could be that some gaps in your collection are filled in nicely by the holdings of another institution, while others are not. Candidates include other historical societies, preservation societies, genealogical societies, public libraries, and Area Research Centers.

#### ➡ At *minimum* you should define:

##### Geographic or Thematic Area of Interest.

Most historical societies have a geographic region defined as part of their mission. County historical societies are an obvious example. If you are defining a geographic scope of your collections, it's a good idea to keep in mind the types of materials that other repositories in the area are collecting. *Example:* The collection will document the history of Fox Village and the Mill Creek valley region.

Other societies, such as the Waukesha Engine Historical Society and the Wisconsin Black Historical Society and Museum, are organized around a particular theme. Still others are organized around a particular time period. *Example:* The collection will document the history of steam engines in the United States, with particular emphasis on the Midwest.

#### **Format.**

Records in different formats have different access and preservation requirements. For example, you should think twice about adding videos and films to your collections if you don't have any way to use them in your organization's programs or make them accessible to users. Cassette tapes are a fairly unstable medium, and should be stored in a stable environment. Oversize materials such as large maps can become damaged by frequent folding and unfolding.

For additional information on the preservation needs of various media, please consult the bibliography in Appendix B. In addition to requirements, a collecting policy can also express preferences. *Example:* The society will accept oral history interviews on cassette tape, but requests that they be accompanied by a typewritten summary or transcript. *Another example:* Oral history interviews that are offered along with a transcript will have a higher collecting priority than interviews solely on tape.

#### **Other types of focus that you may (or may not) want to specify:**

##### **Subject.**

You can mention specific subjects in your policy, either as items you will or will not collect. If there is a certain industry that is of particular importance in the history of your region, you may want to cite it as a desirable subject for your collections. On the other hand, if there is another repository in your area that collects extensively on a specific subject, you may want to exclude that subject from your collections as a courtesy. *Example:* Subjects of particular interest to the society include the tourism industry, family-owned farms, and the political career of Senator Mitch Abbot.

##### **Language.**

There's a good chance that the early European settlers in your region kept their records in languages other than English. You may want to specify that no collection will be refused based on language.

##### **Diversity**

You may want to affirm in your policy that your organization seeks records that document the diversity of people and historical events in your geographic area.

## **4 Additions to the Collections**

This section defines the conditions under which the society will accept donations. For instance, if your society is willing to purchase historical records, the maximum amount which you are willing to spend on one collection should be defined. Other issues such as restrictions on access and legal transfer of ownership are addressed here.

We *strongly* recommend that you include information about legal transfer of ownership in your collecting policy. For a brief overview of legal ownership issues and a sample Deed of Gift form, please refer to the section called "**Transfer of Ownership – Acquisition.**"

### **Authority to Add Items to the Collection:**

A local historical society's collection is most often its largest tangible asset as well as its central resource for fulfilling its mission. Therefore, final authority to add items to the collection or dispose of items in the collection should rest with the Board of Directors. However, the Board cannot and should not be present on a daily basis to respond to donors who call, write, or visit to offer items for the collection.

In the case of a historical organization with a professional staff, the paid director or curator who serves as the head operating staff member should be authorized to approve temporary acceptance of donations to the collection pending final approval by the Board. In a large organization, the director may delegate part of this responsibility to one or more staff members. In a volunteer operated historical society, the collection committee would assume responsibility for temporary approval of donations offered to the society.

In either case, the staff or the collection committee should report its recommendations to the Board for its final approval. In most cases, approval of the report and its recommendations will be routine business similar to the approval of the treasurer's report at a Board meeting. Nonetheless, Board approval of collection acquisitions and disposals demonstrates responsible oversight of the society's tangible assets just as action on a treasurer's report signifies oversight of financial assets.

### **⑤ Unwanted Materials**

A collecting policy can address two types of unwanted materials: those that may be offered in the future, and those that have already been cataloged and added to the permanent collection. In the first instance, you can use your collecting policy to define items that will not be collected, such as duplicates or items in poor condition. In the second instance, you should use your policy to delineate authority for the removal of items from the permanent collection.

### **Authority to Remove Items from the Collection:**

Disposal of collection items represents the reversal of previous decisions made on behalf of the society. Just like other actions that reverse previous decisions (such as the amendment of bylaws), the society may wish to require more than a simple majority vote to dispose of items from the collection.

### **⑥ Loans**

Generally speaking, you don't want to spend resources for housing and maintaining collections that you don't own. If you want to accept loaned items for a specified time period (during an exhibition or anniversary event, for example) you should spell that out in your collecting policy. This should include not only the general conditions of deposit but also the conditions of termination of the loan.

### **One Final Reminder - *KEEP IT FLEXIBLE!***

Policy can provide structure for decision making, but you don't want to leave yourself closed to new possibilities. The more you use your policy, the better you will understand how it can help you in your work. Your collection will also change over time, as all collections do. You may need to amend your policy as you add items to the collection.

## Putting Your Policy to Work, Part 1

# Archival Appraisal - *Deciding What to Keep*

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## Archival Appraisal    Monetary Appraisal

An archivist “appraises” a collection to determine if it has enough historical value to justify the expense of storage and preservation. An archivist does *not* appraise a collection to determine its monetary value. In the past, archivists sometimes determined the monetary value of a donation, and the donor used that figure to request a tax deduction. Today we view appraisal for monetary value as unethical and an extreme conflict of interest. Indeed, the Society of American Archivists’ professional code of ethics explicitly forbids this practice. If donors are interested in obtaining a tax deduction under Section 501c(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code of 1954, they must arrange and pay for their own appraisals.

### How appraisal works

Appraisal is the process by which you apply your collecting policy criteria and other standards to help you decide whether or not a collection of historical records belongs at your historical society. You first use the focus expressed in your collecting policy (geographic area, subjects, time periods, and so forth) to test the value of a collection. This first test will allow you to confidently decline or accept many collections.

If a collection meets the terms of your collecting policy, you next want to ask a series of additional questions to confirm its value for your historical society. Just because the records in the collection apparently fit your policy does not necessarily mean that you will decide to accept the collection and add it to your historical society’s holdings. You must first look more closely at the collection—that is, you must appraise it for historical value.

**One of the most important appraisal questions is:**  
*“Does this material fit within  
the scope of our collecting policy?”*

Archivists conduct this kind of appraisal confidently only after years of training and practice. While this manual can introduce you to the concept of appraisal, it cannot provide an adequate substitute for the professional preparation which appraisal requires. But it does afford a starting point. The questions below help to guide you through the thought process which appraisal involves. **Please do not treat these questions as a formula for appraisal.** You must understand and accept that *only you and your colleagues* can decide which questions are relevant for your collection, and how to weigh the answers. Please refer to *Appendix B*, the bibliography, for a more complete appraisal discussion.

## Sample Appraisal Questions

**1. Did the donor create the materials?**

**2. If not, does the donor own the materials?**

**3. If yes, is the donor willing to sign a deed of gift that transfers ownership to the historical society?**

**4. If not, is the donor willing to sell the materials to the historical society?**

Can your institution afford to purchase the materials?

**5. Do the materials fall within our collecting area?**

**6. Who created the records?**

Did this person or group play an important role in the community? Was this person or group representative of the community as a whole, or representative of a group within the community?

**7. Why were the records created? Do the records provide information beyond this initial purpose?**

Does a diary record just the weather, or does it also detail community events and people?

**8. Is this information available somewhere else?**

A little research can go a long way in answering this question. Examine the published histories in your collection. Think about what other area repositories have.

Issues to think about include: AGE: the older an item is, the less likely it is duplicated somewhere else; SCARCITY: how often do you see items like this? You may want to contact colleagues at other repositories to confer on this question.

**9. Do we have similar materials already?**

This is tricky because you can decide to keep or not to keep with either a yes or a no answer. If the answer is yes, then the follow-up question is, "Does it duplicate what we already have, or does it add depth to our collection in this area?" If the answer is no, then the follow-up question is "Does it fill in a gap, or is it outside of our collecting area?"

**10. Does it document prominent citizens and/or everyday folks?**

Which is documented more heavily in your collection? Depending on your collection policy you may want to focus on well known community leaders, and also try to fill in gaps with documentation of under-represented groups such as minorities, the poor and uneducated.

**11. How complete are the records?**

Do they document a short period of time, a lifetime, or something in between? Are there gaps in the dates that would make research difficult? Unidentified photographs are another example of an incomplete record.

**12. How large is the collection?**

What is the proportion of useful material to the overall size? Size will play a factor not only in the amount of shelf space devoted to it, but in the cost of supplies to house the collection.

**13. Are the records in a discernable order, or are they in chaos?**

The time needed to arrange a collection for use should be a factor in your appraisal decision.

**14. What kind of physical condition are the materials in?**

What are the preservation needs? Will you need to impose strict handling procedures?

**15. Will the format cause problems in the future?**

Oversize materials have special storage and preservation needs. Film and video are very fragile media that may need to be transferred in the future. Electronic records such as an author's draft novel on computer disk will also need to be updated as word processing programs and operating systems change.

**16. Is there any information that is restricted?**

Examples include student information or medical information.

## Putting Your Policy to Work, Part 2

**Acquisition** *-Transfer of Ownership*

This section covers no more than the basics of legal ownership. We've written it for those folks who have not had to wrestle with these issues yet. For a more detailed examination of ownership, please refer to the bibliography.

**Legal Ownership.**

When you purchase an item for your collection there is little question about who owns the physical item. Unfortunately, gifts and donations are slightly more complicated. Each transfer of private property to your society should be ① clearly documented and ② in writing.

This documentation serves several purposes. First, it begins the process of expressing the society's thanks for the donation and demonstrates to the donor the society's commitment to provide appropriate care and management for the materials received. Second, the written documentation records the particulars of the transaction such as the date of the gift and the donor's address for future reference. Finally, the documentation establishes that the historical society has become legal owner of the materials it has accepted. The form of written documentation used by most historical societies to establish ownership of the historical materials they receive is called the deed of gift.

**The Deed of Gift Form.**

Every local historical society should employ a deed of gift or a similar document every time it accepts a donation of historical materials. A society that cannot prove ownership of the items in its collections cannot guarantee the preservation of these items for the future. Too many historical societies have painfully relinquished, to a donor or a donor's heirs, items given for the collection — but made as a gift by verbal agreement only.

Deed of gift forms vary slightly from institution to institution, but all include similar wording. This wording must clearly state that the donor gives the materials listed to the historical society as an *unrestricted gift*. The term *unrestricted gift* means that the donor cannot determine how the materials will be exhibited, stored, organized, or used in the education mission of the historical society. These decisions become the responsibility of the society as guided by its goals and objectives. As an unrestricted gift, the society may retain or dispose of the materials according to the best interests of the organization. This does not mean that historical societies dispose of collections casually. In the vast majority of instances, the goals of an historical society are served and enhanced by retaining and preserving items donated as part of the collection. However, a society must have the right to dispose of materials in its collection when this action is in the best interest of the organization or the preservation of the materials in question.

A deed of gift form should always include language stating clearly that the materials being transferred are the legal property of the donor. Such a statement reinforces the intent of the historical society and the donor to enter into a legal and ethical transaction. The form must provide a space for the donor to sign and date the document and a corresponding area for an authorized representative of the historical society to enter a signature and date. In most cases, the society's president or, if it has a staff, the paid director signs the deed of gift.

The deed of gift form provides blank space to list by item the historical materials being donated, with a brief description of each. Two copies of the form are completed, signed, and dated. The society

keeps one copy for its files and the donor receives the other. The society's copy should be placed in a file organized alphabetically according to the name of the donor. While the donor copy of the form acknowledges the legal transaction, the historical society should always send, in addition, a personal letter signed by the president or director expressing thanks to the donor for the contribution of historical materials.

Deed of gift forms can acknowledge the acceptance of both artifacts and archival materials into the historical society collection. In the case of artifacts, the assignment of accession numbers to the artifacts is a relatively simple process. Many historical societies assign accession numbers to artifacts at the time a donation is received and list the artifacts according to these numbers on the deed of gift form. The assignment of accession numbers represents the first step in cataloging artifacts.

### **Items "On Deposit"**

Generally speaking, you don't want to spend resources for housing and maintaining collections that you don't own. You may want to accept loaned items for a specified time period for an exhibit or anniversary event. If you decide not to accept materials without a deed, you can spell out in your collecting policy: "XYZ Historical Society will acquire materials through purchase or deeded gift. Loans will be accepted for exhibition only."

### **Materials already in the collection.**

This information about legal ownership may be new to you. If so, you may be concerned about materials that were added to your collections before a deed of gift was required. *Every* collection includes materials of unknown origin. In these situations, it's best to get everything you know into writing, including possible origin and how long the materials have been housed in the collection.

### **Abandoned Property Act.**

Have you ever wondered what you should do with a collection of historical records or papers that someone (you might not even know who) loaned, deposited, or simply left at your historical society long ago? Because you do not legally own the collection, you naturally hesitate to devote time and attention to it or to ask another place to care for it.

In 1993, the State Legislature passed a new law to help you with a situation like this. **1993 Wisconsin Act 18** created a procedure by which museums and archives can acquire title to collections that were left on loan or deposit and never reclaimed or returned. The purpose of this change to **Chapter 171, subchapter II of the Wisconsin Statutes** is to help museums and archives legally care for collections that have in effect been abandoned at their doorsteps.

It is important for you to read the act in its entirety, because it includes definitions of both archives and museums that limit the applicability of its provisions. The act also specifies in detail a variety of requirements for assuming legal title to collections that have been abandoned. These requirements include notifications and responses to ownership claims. These requirements are too detailed to include in this manual, but we have included the full text of the Act here.

If you need to deal with a collection which has been left at your historical society, you can do so with confidence in your legal rights by following the provisions of this act. For help with understanding the act, contact Peter Gottlieb, State Archivist, at 608/264-6480.



## Putting Your Policy to Work, Part 3

**Local Government Records -Guidelines**

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Preserving Wisconsin local government records in local historical societies requires some knowledge and careful decisions. We have prepared the following guidelines to inform and help you. If you need further assistance, please call the State Historical Society's local government records archivist at 608/264-6469.

**I. Know the State Laws on Preserving Local Government Records**

State statutes provide for only two legal owners of local government records: the local office which created the records, or the State Historical Society. If a local government wants to dispose of any records whatsoever, Statute 19.21 requires that it must notify the State Historical Society at least 60 days prior to destruction. The Historical Society may preserve any records scheduled for destruction that it deems to be of historical importance. Statute 19.23(2) permits local governments to transfer title to historically important records to the State Historical Society.

**II. Know the Local Government's Responsibilities**

A local government office may elect to store its records at a local institution (such as a local library or historical society), instead of transferring the records to the State Historical Society, but it cannot transfer legal ownership of the records to such an alternate institution. If a local government chooses to store records at a local historical society, the local government retains ultimate legal responsibility for the preservation and protection of the records, and for assuring that the records are available to the public as specified in the open records law (statutes 19.31 - 19.39). The local government office also remains responsible for notifying the State Historical Society prior to destruction of any records.

**III. Assess Your Local Historical Society's Readiness to Keep Local Government Records**

Keeping local government records means contracting to assume some basic responsibilities to protect and keep available the information in those records. Before agreeing to take records from a local government office, your historical society should review its capability to:

A. Protect the records - do you have a facility which can keep the records secure from theft, vandalism, fire and other catastrophic events?

B. Preserve the records - can you store the records in a location which has stable year-round temperature and relative humidity, protection from ultraviolet rays, low levels of dust and air-borne pollutants?

C. Make the records accessible to users - does your historical society have public service hours year-round and staff or volunteers to retrieve the records from storage, help users find the documents they want, make copies from the records?

#### **IV. Sign a Written Agreement with the Local Government**

If your local historical society decides that it can take on record keeping responsibilities and provide public access to local government records, negotiate and sign a written agreement with the local government which clearly establishes your and the donating office's responsibilities. Consulting legal counsel as you draw up this agreement can help insure that the local government office continues to meet its statutory obligations while your local historical society helps the public use them.

## Putting Your Policy to Work, Part 4

**De-accessions - *Removing Items Permanently***

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Working with historical records is not a one way process of adding more and more items to a collection. Materials sometimes need to be removed. A written collecting policy ensures that the removal of unwanted materials is done in a formal, consistent way. The process is called *de-accessioning*.

A record is created for each item or group of items removed. Included on the deaccession record is a brief description of the material, the reasons for removal, and information on its new location (if applicable). It's a good idea to require approval of your Board before anything is permanently removed.

Deaccessioning is an issue that may surface as a result of your newly focused selection policy. Your new policy clearly states that you are interested in some historical materials, but not interested in others. You may realize that materials already in the collection fall under your new "not interested" category. Or you may discover that a neighboring institution has a collection that would be a better home for some of your materials.

You should also use your policy as a guide to evaluate how well the collection is documenting what you have set out to document. If you have added items that are outside the parameters of your collecting policy you need either to revise the policy to reflect the new areas, or get your collecting back "on track" and remove some items.

## Putting Your Policy to Work, Part 5

**Outreach - *Describing Your Collection to Others***

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Your collection policy can do more than help you deal with unwanted donations and gain greater control over your historical materials. It can also serve your Society's outreach and advocacy work by describing to your constituents what you collect.

Along with the society's mission statement, your carefully worded collection policy explains fundamental principles and policies for historical materials. You can familiarize your constituents with your society's policies in several ways:

- ☛ Put the entire collection policy (or the essential parts of it) on your web site so the public, other historical societies, and archives in your community can easily review your priorities for your collections.
- ☛ Bring the collection policy to a meeting of your board, Friends of the Historical Society, or other interested groups to help them better understand your responsibilities and how you meet those responsibilities.
- ☛ Give the local media a copy of the collection policy, with a "pitch letter," and invite a reporter to do a story on your collections. The collection policy provides context for the feature article or TV or radio spot focusing on the interesting items in your holdings.

Your collection policy can serve the society's planning for public programs. To meet your community's interest in history, your society will quite likely be called on to provide exhibits or organize programs focusing on local history. A collection policy helps plan these opportunities by directing work to subjects, themes, and time periods where your collection has the most to offer. Use the collection policy to inform history teachers in your community about your collections and invite them to use the material for class projects and for field trips.

Your collection policy also helps your society engage in active collecting of historical materials. Instead of just filtering out unwanted items, the policy can be used to persuade potential donors that the historical society is the best place for material the you do collect. With a well planned collecting policy, you can move beyond a reactive collecting program and begin to contact potential donors directly. To donors, the collection policy expresses the historical society's commitment to take good care of the documents that they have often treasured for many years.

# Appendix A

## Glossary

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### *Archival Appraisal*

Appraisal is the process of determining the value and thus the disposition of records based upon the degree to which they fit into an institution's collecting policy. Appraisal also takes into account records' administrative, legal, and fiscal use; their informational and artifactual value; their arrangement and condition; and their relationship to other records.

### *Archives*

The term *archives* is sometimes used to refer to a *collection* of materials (such as the written records of an organization) but it is most often used to describe the *repository* that houses such collections.

### *Accession*

The term *accession* is used in two ways, as a verb and also a noun. As a verb *accession* refers to the formal acceptance into custody of an acquired collection, both physically and intellectually, and the recording of such act. As a noun *accession* refers to an acquisition so recorded.

### *Collection policy*

A collection policy is an official statement issued by an archives which identifies the kinds of materials it accepts and the conditions or terms which affect their acquisition. It serves as a basic document for the guidance of archival staff and organizations and persons interested in depositing their records or papers.

### *Collections*

The term *collections* is used very broadly. *Collections* include individual manuscripts, archival or manuscript collections, public records series, or other groups of historical documents found in repositories in any format.

### *De-Accession*

*De-accession* refers to the process by which an archives formally removes material from its custody. An archival institution may deaccession material because the material has been reappraised and found to be unsuitable for its holdings, the legal owner has requested permanent return of the materials, or the institution has agreed to transfer the materials to another repository.

### *Deed of Gift*

A *Deed of Gift* is a signed, written instrument containing a voluntary transfer of title to real or personal property without monetary consideration. Deeds of gift to archives frequently take the format of a contract establishing conditions governing the transfer of title to documents and specifying any restrictions on access or use. A deed of gift is also known as an instrument of gift.

***Donor***

A *donor* is person or organization who has given documents to an archives.

***Reappraisal***

*Reappraisal* is the process of reevaluating the holdings of an archives to determine which holdings should be retained and which should be deaccessioned. Reappraisal should be based on how the collection fits into the collecting policy.

***Record / Historical Record***

A *record* can be any type of recorded information in any format. A record can be created or received by an individual or a group. Many types of historical records are created in our society: genealogical or family history records, business records, and government records. Records also come in a variety of formats including documents, photographs, films, audio tapes, and maps. Some examples of documents are letters, diaries, manuscripts, and meeting minutes.

Given the above definition, just about any item can be labeled an historical record. In real life, however, the term is most often used in a narrow sense to describe original, unpublished items with historical value. A Civil War diary is an historical record. Last week's best seller is not. The minutes of the first meeting of the village board is an historical record. The note the village board sent utility customers with their water bill is not.

# Appendix B

## A bibliography of further reading

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### Appraisal / Selection:

Ham, F. Gerald. *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscript*. SAA Basic Manual Series Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993.

### Legal Ownership

Tom McKay “**Conservation Corner: Deed of Gift**” *Exchange* 30 (Summer 1988)

Gary M. Peterson and Trudy Huskamp Peterson “**Donations and Purchases**” in *Archives and Manuscripts: Law* SAA Basic Manual Series (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1985) pp. 24-35.

### SAA Basic Manuals Series. Titles include:

Bellardo, Lewis and Lynn Lady Bellardo. *A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers*. SAA Basic Manuals Series. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992.

Ham, F. Gerald. *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*. SAA Basic Manuals Series. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992.

Miller, Fredric M.. *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*. SAA Basic Manuals Series. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990.

O'Toole, James M.. *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts*. SAA Basic Manuals Series. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990.

Pugh, Mary Jo. *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts*. SAA Basic Manuals Series. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992.

Ritzenthaler, Mary Lynn. *Preserving Archives and Manuscript*. SAA Basic Manuals Series. Chicago: SAA, 1993

Wilsted, Thomas and William Nolte. *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories*. SAA Basic Manuals Series. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1991.

# Appendix C

## Information About Other Collections

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### A. The Area Research Center Network

The State Historical Society, the University of Wisconsin System, and the Superior Public Library cooperate in a network of Area Research Centers located at campus libraries throughout the state and at the Superior Public Library. Records particular to the local area are housed permanently at each Center and also circulate within the network.

#### ☐ Eau Claire

Lawrence D. Lynch  
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire  
Phone: 715/836-3873

#### ☐ Green Bay

Debra Anderson  
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay  
Phone: 920/465-2539

#### ☐ La Crosse

Paul Beck  
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse  
Phone: 608/785-8511

#### ☐ Milwaukee

Timothy Ericson, Mark Vargas, Christel Maass  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee  
Phone: 414/229-5402

#### ☐ Northern Great Lakes Center (NGLC)

History Center  
Route 3, Box 418  
Ashland, WI 54806

#### ☐ Oshkosh

Joshua Ranger  
University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh  
Phone: 920/424-3347

#### ☐ Parkside

Ellen Pedraza  
University of Wisconsin-Parkside  
Phone: 414/595-2411

#### ☐ Platteville

Mary Freymiller  
University of Wisconsin-Platteville  
Phone: 608/342-1719

#### ☐ River Falls

Sue Ginter Watson  
University of Wisconsin-River Falls  
Phone: 715/425-3567

#### ☐ Stevens Point

William Paul  
University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point  
Phone: 715/346-2586

#### ☐ Stout

Kevin Thorie  
University of Wisconsin-Stout  
Menominee, WI  
Phone: 715/232-2300

#### ☐ Superior

Julie Zachau  
Superior Public Library  
1530 Tower Ave.  
Phone: 715/394-8860

#### ☐ Whitewater

Karen Weston  
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater  
Phone: 414/472-5520

#### ☐ SHSW

State Historical Society of Wisconsin  
Madison, WI  
Phone: 608/264-6460

**Not sure which Area Research Center (ARC) serves *your* county?  
Here's an alphabetical list by county...**

Adams.....Stevens Point	Jackson.....La Crosse	Portage.....Stevens Point
Ashland.....NGLC	Jefferson.....Whitewater	Price.....NGLC
Barron.....Stout	Juneau .....Stevens Point	Racine.....Parkside
Bayfield.....NGLC	Kenosha .....Parkside	Richland.....Platteville
Brown.....Green Bay	Kewaunee.....Green Bay	Rock.....Whitewater
Chippewa.....Eau Claire	La Crosse .....La Crosse	Rusk.....Eau Claire
Clark.....Eau Claire	Lafayette.....Platteville	St. Croix .....River Falls
Columbia.....SHSW	Langlade.....Stevens Point	Sauk.....SHSW
Crawford.....Platteville	Lincoln.....Stevens Point	Sawyer.....NGLC
Dane.....SHSW	Manitowoc.....Green Bay	Shawno.....Green Bay
Dodge.....Oshkosh	Marathon.....Stevens Point	Sheboygan.....Milwaukee
Door.....Green Bay	Marinette.....Green Bay	Taylor.....Eau Claire
Douglas.....Superior	Marquette.....Oshkosh	Trempealeau.....La Crosse
Dunn.....Stout	Menominee.....Green Bay	Vernon.....La Crosse
Eau Claire.....Eau Claire	Milwaukee.....Milwaukee	Vilas.....NGLC
Florence.....Green Bay	Monroe.....La Crosse	Walworth.....Whitewater
Fond du Lac.....Oshkosh	Oconto.....Green Bay	Washburn.....NGLC
Forest.....NGLC	Oneida.....NGLC	Washington.....Milwaukee
Grant.....Platteville	Outagamie.....Green Bay	Waukesha.....Milwaukee
Green.....Platteville	Ozaukee.....Milwaukee	Waupaca.....Stevens Point
Green Lake.....Oshkosh	Pepin.....Stout	Waushara.....Stevens Point
Iowa.....Platteville	Pierce.....River Falls	Winnebago.....Oshkosh
Iron.....NGLC	Polk.....River Falls	Wood.....Stevens Point

**WCLH Roster**

The Wisconsin Council for Local History publishes an annual Roster of repositories, societies, and museums. It is a Wisconsin state document. This valuable directory includes phone numbers and contact information.

However, the Roster doesn't include descriptions of what each institution has in their collections. Therefore, we created a worksheet on the following page that you can photocopy, fill out as you contact other area institutions, and file in your manual.

# SURVEY WORKSHEET

Name of institution:  
(Or private collector)

Address and Phone Number:

Hours of Operation:

Director:

Librarian / Archivist:

Main collecting area(s):

Formats collected (Circle all that apply):

Books	Maps	Artifacts (3-D items)	Films
Papers/Records (Unpublished primary source material)	Sound recordings	B/W Photographs	VHS Video tapes
	Electronic records (computer disks)	Color Photographs	Posters

Materials *not* collected: