

SESSION II: BASIC FUNCTIONS OF THE ARCHIVIST

(Or, What Can You Do Until You Have A Full-Time Professional Archivist?)

There are limits on the amount of work you can do, in terms of organizing and processing the collections in your archives, until you have a professional, trained archivist who can work with you. But in the meantime there are many basic things that you can accomplish to further the work of the archives. Perhaps most importantly, you can give your National Spiritual Assembly assurance that the archives are being properly safeguarded and prepared for future work. Expect your progress to be gradual and be patient.

Let's presume that you have just been appointed by the National Spiritual Assembly to take care of the archives. (Hopefully many are far beyond this point.) What are your first and most important priorities?

1. Make sure the archives are securely and safely housed.

If possible, consolidate all archives in one location, preferably not in a basement or attic. Make sure the room is lockable and know exactly who has keys. It should be a place that is not prone to flooding or seepage, not near heat sources or electrical generation equipment. Preferably it should be air-conditioned. Use metal rather than wooden shelving. Bottom shelf should be at least 6" off the floor.

2. Ensure physical preservation of the records. (Handout II-1)

Inspect the physical conditions of the room with an eye to long-term preservation of records and make notes on what needs to be fixed or improved. Do everything possible to control temperature and humidity conditions. If there are windows, block them to prevent damage from ultraviolet light. If possible, have a well-lit room for work areas and a second room that can be kept dark for archival storage. If your work area has fluorescent lighting, buy ultraviolet sleeves for the tubes. Examine closely for evidence of insect or rodent infestation. Install smoke detectors and fire extinguishers.

All the while you are determining the requirements for the archives, be making notes that can be used to build a comprehensive report to the National Assembly, as well as a budget for materials, facility improvements, and other needs.

4. Decide whether to establish a National Archives Committee. If so, develop a mandate for the committee and identify potential members. (Handout II-2)

Pros: More people to consult with and bounce ideas off of
Ability to recruit people with expertise in different areas
More hands to help—at the National Centre and in local communities
More individuals to act as ambassadors and promoters of the archives

Look for people who have experience in scholarship, publishing, library work, teaching, records management. Examples: a history teacher, a librarian, a sociologist, a published scholar/author

Sample Archives Committee mandate is provided in book

Every Bahá'í endeavor benefits from good, strong consultation. Ask the BWC for help, if you need it, and keep them apprised of your efforts. I will be available this evening if you would like to have private one-on-one consultations about the status of archives in your countries.

5. Conduct a basic inventory of the archives (Handout - Günter's Inventory)

Archives are practically useless if you don't know what you have and where to find it. Also identify what records *should* be in the archives but are missing. Search for those items.

List items by type and date range.

Goes faster with two people and a laptop computer

Assign a logical numbering system to shelves and storage containers, so you can indicate the exact location of each item

Take continuous notes about corrections/changes that need to be made

Set aside an area for oversize materials and photographs and have separation records on hand. Or make detailed notes on locations of photographs. **(Handout II-3)**

As you go, you can take steps to safeguard things and correct harmful storage situations.

Look for: NSA records, committee records, annual reports, minutes and proceedings of National Conventions, correspondence files, financial records, legal records, property records, teaching materials, deepening materials, materials from Bahá'í conferences, personal papers of individuals, pamphlets, Bahá'í newsletters, photographs, scrapbooks and publicity files, artifacts or relics, artwork, carpets, audio and video tape recordings and films, maps and architectural drawings, wills and other legal papers from individuals, computer disks and printouts

Some archives will contain two copies of each publication produced by their publishing trust. Ideally, published material should be kept in the National Bahá'í Library.

Your NSA should be taking parallel steps to establish a National Bahá'í Library and employ professional librarians to aid in its organization and development. This job can get complex, with the plethora of pamphlets, brochures, deepening materials, etc. Sometimes the lines between what belongs in the library and what belongs in the archives can get a little blurry.

For important records such as minutes, legal records, and property records, make sure that a security copy is maintained off site and give consideration to microfilming the collection.

6. Work with the NSA Secretariat to establish a records management program and schedules for retiring inactive records to the archives.

Your most important customers will be the National Spiritual Assembly and offices at the National Centre

Good archives begin with good record-keeping practices

Offices need to keep active records for a certain period of time, for use as reference in their day-to-day activities. This period can vary from one year to five or ten years, depending on the nature of the records.

At the end of their useful life as active files, those records that have permanent value should be transferred to the archives for permanent retention.

The archivist should meet with each office and committee associated with the National Centre, develop an inventory of the types of records that they create, evaluate each type of record for retention value, and establish a schedule for transferring records to the archives. **(Handout II-4)**

Once a year, the archives should receive records that are ready to be retired. Keep a stock of acid-free record center cartons on hand for offices to use. Hopefully, offices will box their own records and prepare a list of everything that is included. Some may need reminders or assistance in getting this done.

Issue an Archives Receipt and prepare an Accession Record for each collection of records as it is received, keeping one copy for your Accession Files and giving the other to the office for their records. **(Handouts II-5 and II-6)**

Shelve the material for later processing by an archivist, making careful note of the location.

7. Establish procedures for accessioning materials into the archives.

Prepare a collections policy and follow it. Be aware of what kinds of records best belong in which repositories.

We talked about accessioning Institutional records into the archives. Now let's talk about personal records, more commonly referred to as manuscript collections

Created and accumulated by a specific person or family

Personal records can help fill gaps in institutional records sometimes

Tell the entire story of a person's life, including professional life, Bahá'í growth

Accessioning manuscript collections – gaining initial physical and intellectual control over materials when they first arrive in the archives. The archivist must know what he or she has and where it is at all times. Intellectual control means that the archivist knows about the nature of the collection, the type of records, their subject content, their range of dates and their physical condition.

First the materials are given a collection number and a title. (May be addition to an existing collection.)

Issue a Deed of Gift **(Handout II-7)**. Maintain correspondence (with donor or next of kin)

Create individual files for each donor – contents will be Deed of Gift, correspondence with donor, biographical info, copy of archives receipt and accession record

Do an initial inventory to accompany the Deed of Gift—be thorough. As you complete the inventory, you can do basic preservation work and make notes on actions that need to be taken later.

Keep a master Accession Notebook with copy of Deed of Gift and inventory filed by collection number

Maintain processing cards to track progress of collections **(Handout II-8)**

Gather biographical information about the person the papers belonged to

Question of restrictions

Question of privacy and sensitive materials

(Show Sample Set-up: Donor box, Accession notebook, Inventory Book, Processing cards box, Reference card box, Records management book (schedules & receipts))

8. Develop policies related to operations of the archives.

It is the Assembly's (National or Local) responsibility to preserve records entrusted to its care and make available the human, physical, and financial resources to properly protect and utilize the archives

Space – Spell out your requirements for processing space, storage space (allowing room for anticipated expansion), shelving, furniture, equipment, archival materials, and supplies)

Budget – **Handout II-9** is a sample budget that lists some of the common things you may want to include

Personnel – Members of the Archives Committee and eventually a full- or part-time trained archivist. Perhaps you or a member of the committee is willing to pursue formal training. (**Handouts II-10, 11, and 12. American schools in notebook**)

Access – (**Handout II-13**) Basically, researchers or individuals who wish to conduct research in the National Bahá'í Archives must request access through the National Assembly. Access should be denied to unprocessed collections. You will need to establish a working relationship with NSA members and staff of the National Centre who will occasionally need access to materials in the archives when the archivist is not around. Establish a check-out procedure and encourage them to respect the fact that the archivist is working to organize and manage the archives and that, when possible, it is better to let the archivist retrieve materials that are needed. (**Handout II-14**) Your Access Policy will most likely develop and change over time, as the state of the archives improves.

Deed of gift – Every archives needs to develop its own Deed of Gift, reviewed by your legal advisor. A sample is at Handout II-7. The purpose of the Deed of Gift is to officially transfer free and clear ownership of the records to the archives.

Copyright and ownership – (**Handout II-15**) The NSA owns the copyright to its own records and to personal papers of individuals where the copyright was given to the NSA through the Deed of Gift. Generally, you want to have a liberal policy of permitting scholars to quote excerpts from your archival holdings to encourage scholarship, taking into account those collections that have restrictions. You will need to tell them writers how you want them to reference the fact that they got the information or photographs from you. Under certain circumstances, if you have a particularly valuable collection (an example being the Robert Hayden collection in the U.S.), the NSA might want to establish a schedule of royalties or fees to publish items from the archives. If someone wants to quote extensively from the archives, the request should be reviewed by the National Assembly.

Ethics – (**Handout II-16**) As trustworthy as Bahá'ís are, you must have guidelines in place for staff working in the archives. Staff members should not have any special privileges in using the archives and should follow the same rules for access when doing private research. Archives committee meetings should be treated confidentially, on the same basis as Assembly meetings. Committee members should not make any commitments for the archives without the permission of the

archivist. Archives staff should scrupulously avoid any appearance of conflict of interest in personal collecting of Bahá'í historical material. Archivists should under no circumstances accept money from researchers as payment for reference services performed. You might want to consider creating an Archives Endowment Fund with the National Treasurer, to receive earmarked funds that people want to donate.

Microfilming policy – The National Archives in the U.S. still uses microfilm for long-term storage. New technologies, while promising, have still not proven themselves for extended long-term storage and retrievability. They have the equipment to do some of the microfilming themselves and contract some of it out. Aside from microfilming NSA minutes and records, one project they undertook was to microfilm back issues of *The American Bahá'í* and make them available on microfilm.

Offsite storage – In the U.S. there are several large underground storage facilities, some in the mountains and some in abandoned salt mines. Rates are reasonable. Don't know if the same type of facilities are available in Europe, but they can be handy for long-term storage for large volumes material. For shorter-term secure storage try safe deposit boxes or bank vaults.

9. Prepare regular reports for the National Spiritual Assembly and keep it apprised of your progress.

Prepare regular reports for the NSA and keep them involved and interested in your work.

Prepare a work plan, with timelines, to accompany your proposed budget.

One issue that regularly comes up is the relationship between archives and library, publishing trust, and other committees.

Make your way. Cultivate productive working relationships with other entities.

Know clearly what your responsibilities are to the archives. Ask the NSA for clarification, as necessary.

The Archives at the Bahá'í World Centre suggests the following stages for development of the archives:

1. Appointment of National Archives Committee
2. Allocation of resources for the archives
3. Collecting and storing material for the archives
4. Appointment of a volunteer professional archivist
5. Practical work of “processing” the collections
6. Appointment of a full-time archivist and staff
7. Opening of the facility for use by researchers

The Canadian National Bahá'í Archives has developed a very comprehensive Policy Statement regarding its operations. (**Handout II-17**). It covers most of the things we have talked about above and would be a good starting point for developing your own policy statement.