

SESSION I: THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF ARCHIVES

What are archives?

A body of original unpublished records or other source materials that document the history of an institution or a group of people.

In a Bahá'í community that would normally mean the official records of an Assembly, a Bahá'í school, committees, or other administrative bodies. These are records that are no longer in current use but that have permanent value and merit preserving. They are the primary storehouse of information about Bahá'í history. The exciting thing to remember is that we are living and making history every day. Everything that we do becomes part of the history of the growth and development of this wonderful Faith. But if we don't record and preserve what we do, there won't be anything for future historians to write from. The Archives is an integral part of the Bahá'í administrative order.

Aside from official records, an archives also contains papers of individual believers, photographs, scrapbooks, printed matter like newsletters and other publications, and artifacts. So, archives are more than just the secretary's records. The holdings of a Bahá'í archives, collectively, documents the complete history of the Bahá'í community.

Make a distinction between museum work, library work, and archival work. In early Bahá'í communities the lines between these three professional fields have often been blurred, and individuals or committees have performed valuable work, doing whatever was needed at the time.

Many Bahá'ís associate the word archives with the International Archives Building on Mt. Carmel and therefore think of archives as more of a museum function. The Archives Building that you visit when on Pilgrimage or a visit to the Holy Land a museum that contains holy relics and writings associated with the Central Figures of the Faith. Museology (the collecting, preservation, and display of material artifacts) is a distinct profession in itself.

In Haifa, the Archives Office is part of the Department of Library and Archival Services. The Archives Building and its contents are under the jurisdiction of the Department of Holy Places, with whom the Archives liaises to arrange for conservation of items or photographic work.

In general, however, archivists work primarily with paper documents, and more specifically with unpublished materials

What is special about Bahá'í archives?

The reason that Bahá'í archives are particularly special is that this is the first time in history that man has the opportunity to document the growth of an independent world religion from

its very beginnings, with the words and records of the Founders of the faith through all the stages of the growth of the administrative order.

Shoghi Effendi has stated that in the future every Hazíratu'l-Quds will have an archives as one of its component parts. He speaks of the establishment of National Archives for “the authentication, the collection, the translation, the cataloguing, and the preservation of the Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh and of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and for the preservation of sacred relics and historical documents.” **(HANDOUT Intro-1)**

“The importance of the institution of Bahá’í Archives is not due only to the many teaching facilities it procures, but it essentially to be found in the vast amount of historical data and information it offers both to the present-day administrators of the Cause, and to the Bahá’í historians of the future. The institution of Bahá’í Archives is indeed a most valuable storehouse of information regarding all aspects of the Faith, historical, administrative as well as doctrinal. Future generations of believers will be surely in a better position than we are to truly and adequately appreciate the many advantages and facilities which the institution of the Archives offers to individual believers and also the community at large.

Every believer should realize that he has a definite responsibility to shoulder in this matter, and to help, to whatever extent he can, in rendering successful the valuable work which national and local Bahá’í archives committees are so devotedly accomplishing for the Faith.”

History of archives in the Faith

The Greatest Holy Leaf assumed responsibility for collecting and safeguarding many of the early materials of the Faith and is credited with beginning the Bahá’í International Archives.

The Guardian, of course, was meticulous in his efforts to document every facet of the growth and development of the Faith. He systematically assembled archival material in the late 1920s and early 1930s at the World Center by collecting and organizing the Writings of the Central Figures and historical objects associated with the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, their families, and early Bahá’í history.

During the 10 Year Crusade he planned the construction of the International Bahá’í Archives building on Mount Carmel, which was begun in 1955 and completed the year following his death, in 1958. It was the first edifice to be erected on the arc, the cornerstone upon which the world administrative center of the Faith was to be established.

Under the Universal House of Justice the work of properly protecting and preserving the official records of the Faith was formalized with the hiring of the first professional archivist, Ms Judith Oppenheimer, in 1981, dedicating space for proper storage, establishing records management procedures for records created at the Bahá’í World Centre, and calling for the preparation of detailed finding aids and retrieval mechanisms to

make full use of the records, plus making provisions for preservation and restoration of records (conservator). At present the Archives Office has a staff of nine, three of whom are professional archivists. Their principal efforts are devoted to building up a database containing an item level inventory and electronic texts of documents in the core collections (Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the correspondence of Shoghi Effendi). That area of work employs two Persian-speaking document analysts for the inventory work, two Persian/Arabic typists, and two full-time Persian/Arabic proofreaders.

In America, National Archives began in 1903 under the National House of Spirituality. Mr. Albert Windust was the first keeper of the records. He collected sacred writings and relics primarily. Eventually a National Archives Committee was appointed. It was most active during the 1930s - 1950s when a great body of material was collected. In the 1940s the collection was moved from a Chicago bank vault to the basement of the House of Worship, where it remains today.

Mr. Roger Dahl was hired as the first professional archivist in 1974—since then the size of the collection has grown tremendously. Having a trained archivist working full-time, dedicated to developing, organizing, and preserving the archives made all the difference. He established schedules for transferring official records to the archives, began actively pursuing personal collections, and began organizing and creating findings aids for the archives in an organized fashion. For many years he was also in charge of the National Reference Library, which has now been spun off, and also functioned as an unofficial Research Office, which has also now been spun off. The U.S. now employs two professional archivists. Resources will be dedicated to the archives as part of the current Kingdom Project.

The place of archives in Bahá'í administration

Why do we save these records? Basically, we do this for three reasons:

1. For administrative purposes:

They represent the institution memory of our communities and document the growth and development of the Faith.

They preserve previous decisions and hopefully help us learn from our experiences and avoid reinventing the wheel.

They enable us to be independent of individual memory for a knowledge of the past

They provide an answer to the challenge of an ever-changing membership of Bahá'í institutions and communities

2. For legal reasons - to protect legal rights and interests, property records, to document previous transactions, Bahá'í cemetery records, marriage registers, etc.

3. And for use by future historians. A rich mine of historical information for posterity. Creates a spiritual link between past, present, and future generations of Bahá'ís.

What is the role of the Bahá'í Archivist?

The responsibility of the archivist, whether an individual or a committee, is threefold:

First, to ensure that records having permanent value are preserved. This includes taking steps to see that historically significant records are deposited in the archives and that they are protected from damage or deterioration.

Second, to make the records available for use. The archivist arranges the records, prepares finding aids that adequately describe them, and provides facilities in which researchers can work.

Third, education. Educating institutions and individual believers about the existence and importance of archives and promoting the continuous growth and development of the archives. Archives begin with good record-keeping practices, and archivists can be very helpful in instructing Assembly members about effective procedures for creating and maintaining important records.

Bahá'í archivists are interested in collecting two types of materials necessary to document the growth and history of the Faith:

1. Administrative records that document the history of our institutions
2. Personal records that pertain to the body of believers

So, what kind of records are we talking about? (**Handout I-1**)

Letters and other correspondence (incoming and outgoing)

Diaries and personal recollections

Manuscript materials, such as drafts of books, articles, talks, deepening materials, poetry, music

Personal notes, for deepenings, talks, etc.

Financial records, ledgers, check registers, accounting reports, etc.

Legal records, deeds, wills, leases, passports, court cases, birth certificates

Printed matter like books, pamphlets, programs, newspaper articles, Bahá'í newsletters, periodicals

Photographs, family and Bahá'í oriented

Artifacts, such as relics, jewelry, clothing, meaningful mementos

Art work, paintings, sketchings, drawings, prints

Professional files from work life

Bahá'í committee or Assembly files related to service on administrative bodies

Audiovisual materials, like films, slides, film strips, audio tapes

Computer-generated records in all their various formats

Architectural drawings and plans

Examples of personal collections in U.S. Bahá'í Archives: Martha Root, Juliet Thompson, Robert Hayden, Louis Gregory, Horace Holley, Lydia Zamenhof, construction of House of Worship,

The many uses of archives:

- Teaching work
- Administration of the Faith
- Scholarship
- Displays and inspirational exhibits
- Documentation of Bahá'í schools and institutes
- Source of history for study of history of the Faith
- Photographs are very popular and constantly used

Relationship of different Bahá'í archives to each other

There are different levels of Bahá'í archives. Local, national, sometimes regional, and international. Common sense applies in deciding what is the most appropriate repository for specific materials.

Each local community should have its own archives, containing the records of its Assembly, the history of its community, and the personal papers of members of the community, unless they are nationally-significant figures. As a general rule, if a community loses its Assembly and does not reform within two years, the archives should be boxed and sent to the National Archives for safekeeping until the Assembly is reestablished. All communities, large and small, should keep in mind that the archives is an institution of the Faith that will only continue to grow in importance.

National Bahá'í Archives preserve the records of the National Assembly and its committees, the papers of nationally prominent Bahá'ís, and documentation on teaching campaigns and activities of national importance.

By and large, the International Archives, aside from the Sacred Writings of the Central Figures of the Faith and records of the Universal House of Justice and World Center agencies like the International Teaching Center, preserves the personal papers of Hands of the Cause, International Bahá'í Council member, Universal House of Justice members, Counsellors serving at the International Teaching Center, and long-time staff members of the World Centre. (See **BWC Archives Brochure**)

The value of professional self-evaluation

Using tools published by professional archival organizations to gauge the progress of the Bahá'í Archives and its adherence to professional standards and procedures can be very valuable.

(Handout I-2) I have available copies of a questionnaire (essentially a checklist) used by the Society of American Archivists as part of their professional accreditation program. Some of the questions are pertinent and some or not, but it will get you thinking about the types of analysis all Bahá'í Archives should eventually use to evaluate their programs.