

Historic New England Library and Archives:

How it Demonstrates Archival Work

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Concept Explanation

The purpose of an archive is to preserve materials. Through the preservation and organization of materials, an archive supports the current work of an organization. Also, an archive is responsible for making collections accessible to the public or their intended audience (Hunter, 2003). “Though the settings may vary, the mission of the archivist is the same: to identify, preserve, and make available records and papers of enduring value” (Hunter, 2003, p. 1). An archive reaches its goals through a variety of methods. Acquisition and accessioning are two areas that archives are involved in. Hunter explains that:

Acquisition covers such areas as donor relations and contacts, and policies for collecting records and papers. Accessioning involves the actual transfer of records or papers to an archives or manuscript repository, along with the transfer of legal rights to the physical and intellectual property (2003, p. 5).

Exposition of the Main Argument

The Historic New England Library and Archives demonstrates how an archive can carry out its goals of preserving materials while supporting an organization and providing public access. The Library and Archives’ collection includes photos, architectural plans and drawings, and ephemera. In addition to having researchers examine documents in the research room, they can also look at a piece from the museum collection that has been transported to the archives (in Boston) from the collections facility (in Haverhill, Massachusetts) (A. Kardos, personal communication, December 8, 2011). Researchers and the general public would use these materials making it a historical archive. The Library and Archives support the work of Historic New England, which means that it is also an archive for an organization. Some of the materials used in support of this work include letters, paper, architectural plans, and photos. The letters

being preserved on microfiche are by William Sumner Appleton (A. Kardos, personal communication, December 8, 2011). He is the founder of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, which is now called Historic New England. The manuscripts came from families whose former homes are now house museums. For example, there are manuscripts from the Codman, Barrett, Little, and Casey families. Photos that are taken for Historic New England are also managed by the archive. This includes photos taken at house museums during preservation work and other photos by the photographer who works for the organization. The archive serves graduate students, undergraduate architecture students, staff members, doctoral students writing dissertations, and other researchers (A. Kardos, personal communication, December 8, 2011).

The principles and standards of archives are demonstrated through how the Library and Archives make materials available to the public and stores them. During tours and by appointment, the public can access the archive. The archival staff also responds to questions from the researchers wanting to know if the archive has materials that could help them in their research. Photos from the archive are used in the Historic New England magazine, which helps the organization to reach members and share their collections with the public. The materials in the archive are catalogued and stored in a manner that takes their protection into consideration (A. Kardos, personal communication, December 8, 2011). For example, the temperature is kept low in the archive and the windows are covered with a film (Jeanne, personal communication, December 8, 2011).

The process of selection and appraisal is not evident from looking at the archives. However, based on their holdings, the materials in the archive relate to the houses, which are owned by Historic New England or New England history. They would support the larger mission

of Historic New England to “serve the public by preserving and presenting New England heritage” (Historic New England. 2011).

There are definitely choices being made about which materials are priorities. Only part of the materials in the archive have been photographed to be displayed on the website. When I was shown a folder of ephemera, the items being included in the website were wrapped in clear sleeves (A. Kardos, personal communication, December 8, 2011). Other items such as some business cards were simply sitting in the folder since they had not been selected for inclusion on the website.

The process of acquisitions and accessioning also could not be seen directly in the Library and Archives. The Senior Curator who is in charge of the Library and Archives handles the acquisitions (A. Kardos, personal communication, December 8, 2011).

New plans and architectural drawings arriving in the archives are entered into the computer, while plans that have been in the collection for many years were recorded on paper catalog cards (A. Kardos, personal communication, December 8, 2011). I noted that there were barcodes on the outside of the folders holding photos from various towns. These barcodes are for inventory purposes (A. Kardos, personal communication, December 8, 2011). Also, if an item is photographed for inclusion in the catalog on the website it is assigned a permanent number for use in that system (D. Dwiggins, personal communication, December 8, 2011).

Another way that archives make their collections accessible to users is through their use of arrangement and description (Hunter, 2003). The archival holdings for Historic New England are catalogued by collection. The folders containing historical photographs are arranged according to geography. The folder for each town is stored in alphabetical order. The photos of Boston have been further divided by street name and in some cases the section of the street.

Sections of Boston that used to be separate towns such as Jamaica Plain are still filed as towns. The ephemera are sorted by subject. Each subject is in a folder. Several subjects are stored together in an acid free box. The collection of Appleton's letters is on microfiche. Plans and architectural drawings are catalogued either on a card or in the computer. The actual documents are stored in large, flat, metal drawers (A. Kardos, personal communication, December 8, 2011).

Analysis

There are some shortcomings in my demonstration that the Historic New England Library and Archives demonstrate how the goals of an archive can be carried out. It was not possible to see how the archive was built or originally set up. Since the organization was founded in 1910, I expect that part of the collection has been there for some time. New collections continue to be added, but I would need to do more research to find out about acquisition and accessions procedures.

The Library and Archives are atypical in the fact that they are both a library and archive at the same time and are part of a museum. This is a blending of all three of the areas that we are discussing in class. It is possible that this leads the Library and Archives to be more like a traditional library or museum than normal. However, one staff member remarked that the divisions between libraries, archives, and museums are artificial (D. Dwiggin, personal communication, December 8, 2011). If that were the case then the blending would not affect how the Library and Archives carries out its work as an archive.

References

Historic New England. (2011). Historic New England. Retrieved from www.historicnewengland.org

Hunter, G. S. (2003). *Developing and maintaining practical archives: A how-to-do-it manual*. (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc.