

The Do's and Don'ts of Historical Records

Where do you start when you have volunteered to be the historian or archivist for your state division? Are your records in a repository? If so, DO have a written agreement. If not, DO find a state university, historical society, or library that will hold them. DO agree about access (who? how often?). Who is authorized to remove papers from or add them to the collection?

DO agree on the amount of space your papers can occupy. If they must be weeded, who is authorized to do so? If you disagree with the repository, who has final authority?

DO create a finding aid, a guide to help users find specific documents. Archivists are trained to write aids, but if the repository is short of staff (all too common nowadays), you could write one under the guidance of an archivist.

DO agree about the odd-sized items (the scrapbooks from the 1920s, the governor's proclamation). These are always a headache for repositories but are often of inestimable historical value. However, if the scrapbooks are in poor condition with yellowed and brittle clippings shedding a letter here and a word there, consider photocopying the contents for preservation. Newer photocopying machines will copy even newspaper photographs well. This will not only preserve the intellectual contents of your scrapbooks, but also reduces them to a size which fits into an archives box!

The recommendations above assume that you have your records in good shape in a repository. What if they aren't? DON'T let them sit in your attic or, worse yet, basement. Look for a repository!

DO put the papers in neat order. First, sort them by committee or officer and then sort each group or series by chronology. If one committee ran a major project, note it in your finding aid.

DO encourage officers to maintain current files in good order. Remember that their files are the archives of the future. DO encourage them to weed their files before giving them to their successor, but DON'T let them discard (or purloin) everything.

DO treat your papers with respect. AAUW branches and divisions are so active that these papers reflect an important aspect of state and local history.

Many of our branches and divisions have developed guidelines for records retention. By sharing them, you can help others solve problems with papers. Please send any guidelines to Nancy Floyd, Librarian/Archivist, at the Educational Center. She will be happy to act as a clearing house to share experiences, problems, and solutions.