

1

Intro to Archives and Moving Image Collections

In this chapter, you will learn to:

- Explain the difference between an archive and a library
- Identify three components of an archival record
- Describe the types of material found in a moving image archive

Additional vocabulary to look for:

- Archivist
- Record

WHAT ARE ARCHIVES?

The word "archive" or "archives" can be used in many ways. The two we consider in this course are:

- A building where historical records are kept, whether a library, historical society, or government repository
- A collection of historical records that are preserved for their value as historical evidence

An archive generally contains collections of **rare, unique, and original** historical documents, photographs, media, and other materials from individual people or organizations. Items within archival collections can include:

- letters and correspondence
- financial and business records
- published books and periodicals
- original research data
- photographs, slides, and negatives
- architectural drawings
- audiovisual media
- maps
- posters
- artwork
- objects, artifacts, and textiles
- digital files

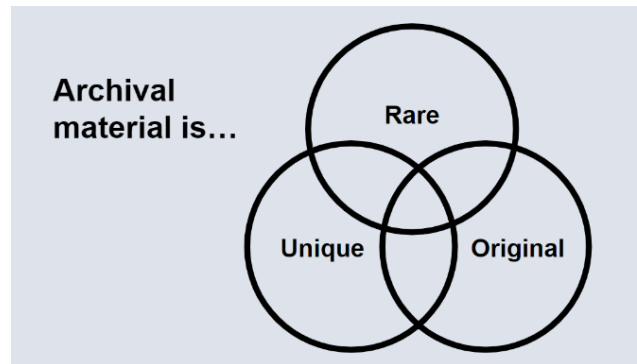


Figure 1.1 – Archival material is often rare, unique, or original. Archives rarely collect material that is easily accessible in other formats, like published books or copies of modern popular films.

Archival material can also be referred to as:

- **Records** - referring to documentation created in the course of the regular work or functioning of an organization
- **Personal papers** - referring to material created by an individual in the course of their life and work, including correspondence, diaries, and original writing
- **Manuscripts** - often referring to hand-written material or writing drafts that were never published
- **Special collections** - Though often referring to collections of rare books, some institutions hold archival material within a broader category of "Special Collections"

What is an archival “collection”?

Each archival institution holds a number of separate archival “collections.” Each archival collection is usually:

- **Acquired** from a single original creator - like the personal papers of an artist or politician, or the records of an organization or student group
- **Stored** together with other material from the same person or organization from which it was acquired
- **Comprised** of a variety of different types of material - including paper records, photographs, media, maps, or other documents

Unlike many library resources, archival material is not usually arranged according to subject or material type. Keeping material together according to the source of the collection - what we call *provenance* - is a fundamental principle of archival practice, intended to maintain the original historical context in which material was created.

How are archives different from libraries?

Both libraries and archives preserve materials and make them available for research use. However, there are some important differences between them:

- **Materials:** Libraries hold copies of published books and periodicals. As we've seen, most archival materials are rare, unique, or original, and come directly from the original creators. Because most archival materials were not created to be published or widely circulated, there may be no other copies anywhere else in the world.
- **Access/use:** Usually in a library, you are able to browse the shelves and check out material to take home with you. Archival materials - due to their age and rarity - are often kept in closed, climate-controlled storage and do not circulate. Archival collections are made accessible only in supervised "Reading Rooms," to ensure long-term preservation.



Figure 1.2 – Buckingham Library, first library at the University of Colorado Boulder, ca. 1903

Why visit an archive?

Because archives contain primary source evidence of historical events, people, periods, and areas, there are many different ways they are used by archives patrons:

- Academic researchers and students use primary source evidence to support their arguments in books, articles, and papers. In addition to history students, archival material is useful to researchers in media studies, literature, social sciences, and many other fields.
- Families often consult archives for genealogical research, to learn more about their ancestors and family history.
- University alumni and community members visit archives to revisit memories from their own lives.
- Artists and creative writers draw on archival material to develop projects and incorporate historic images, media, and writing into new creative works.
- Businesses draw on archival material for new marketing and messaging.
- Advocates and lawyers use archival material as evidence in legal arguments, to ensure accountability of elected officials, and to advocate for social and political causes.
- Local planners and architects consult archival maps, blueprints, and other documentation when determining property ownership and planning new constructions

Many archives are open to all users, whether their research is academic, genealogical, or personal. However, some archives are restricted only to scholarly researchers and may require a university affiliation or summary of research project to access.

Types of Archives

Archival collections may be found in a number of different types of institutions:

- **College and university archives** - College and university archives usually include institutional history, as well as collections on local and area history and collections on subjects that are specialties of faculty members on campus. College and university archives are often accessible to public users, regardless of their affiliation with the university.
- **Corporate archives** - Found in businesses and corporations, documenting business history and policies. Corporate archives are usually only accessible to people within the company.
- **Government archives** - Hold official materials from local, state, and national government bodies. Government archives are accessible to the public to facilitate accountability and advocacy.
- **Tribal libraries, archives, and museums** - Many indigenous communities hold material documenting their own local cultural and governmental histories. Tribal archives may be open to public researchers, though some material may only be accessible to tribal members, tribal elders, or other specifically designated groups, depending on their cultural protocols for knowledge sharing
- **Historical societies** - Historical societies are usually non-governmental, non-profit organizations that collect material on a particular region, historical period, or subject. Archival collections at historical societies are often accessible to public researchers.
- **Museums** - Unlike most research archives, museums generally focus on preservation and exhibition of artifacts, rather than storage of records for research use. Some museums do allow research access to closed collection material that is not on display.
- **Religious archives** - Records held within religious organizations. Religious archives may or may not be open for public use, depending on the policies of the organization or institution
- **Community archives** - Some archival materials are collected, preserved, and overseen by small, grass-roots organizations. These archives often focus on regional history and local communities, like racial and ethnic groups, LGBTQ people, or immigrant communities. Community archives are often created by people from historically marginalized groups, who do not feel their histories represented or supported by traditional government and university institutions.
- **Digital archives** - Most online digital collections are created and overseen by the types of organizations listed above, displaying material scanned or digitized from their broader physical collection holdings. Some digital archives are founded and directed solely as internet repositories of digital material, available only online

WHAT IS AN ARCHIVIST?

One definition of **archivist** provided by the Society of American Archivists (SAA) is “an individual responsible for appraising, acquiring, arranging, describing, preserving, and providing access to records of enduring value “

Each of these activities will be addressed in subsequent chapters of this course. Important to note is that all of these activities require an archivist to make subjective decisions about what material will be acquired and preserved for future generations. Ethical archival practice requires deliberate self-reflection and careful decision-making by archivists, in effort to provide the most accurate and inclusive historical record possible.

This definition of *archivist* can also inform our definition of *archives*. Colloquially, we can say that deleted email goes into an “archive” folder. However, that folder does not comprise an *archive* in the professional sense, unless those emails are subsequently arranged, described, preserved, and made accessible to others for re-use.

Notice that SAA’s definition of archivist ends with “records of enduring value.” How do we know what records have “enduring value,” and who decides? That process is called *appraisal*, and we’ll revisit it in Chapter 5. For now, we can ask an even more basic question:

What is a record?

The SAA defines a *record* as “data or information stored on a medium and used as an extension of human memory or to support accountability.”

This definition can be broken down into three parts:

- **A record contains information.**

It is difficult to imagine a document that contains no information. However, we could consider whether a document contains *useful* or *meaningful* information.

For example, consider a copy of a book that is signed by its author. If the book is otherwise widely published and available, what additional information would this signature provide in an archival collection? Does it include a date, inscription, or further information explaining the context in which the book was signed? For this reason, the presence of a signature by the author is rarely a good enough justification for using institutional resources to preserve it in an archive – unless the signature of that author is particularly rare itself.

- **A record is stored on a medium.**

There are a few important points here. First, a record can be stored on *any* medium, which includes paper documents as well as photographs, audio recordings, or digital files. Archival collections can contain information recorded on many diverse formats and media.

Secondly, archival collections *cannot* contain information that was never recorded. As a result, our collective historical record is often limited to the perspectives of people who could read and write, and people who had access to printing, publishing, and photographic technologies. In many places, for much of human history, this would only include wealthy and the powerful. Moreover, there are many indigenous and other cultures globally in which oral history is the primary means of communicating narratives across generations. These oral traditions do not leave behind physical records that can be archived in the traditional Western sense.

This also means that all historical information from an archive is inherently *mediated*. Despite our best intentions, every primary source document is a limited representation of historical information, reflecting only the purpose and perspective of its creator at the time it was created. We cannot capture everything about a single historical moment in its entirety.

- **A record is made or used “as an extension of human memory or to support accountability.”**

In short, a record may be either *created* to be used as evidence of the past or *re-purposed* now as evidence of the past. Some material that we create in our lives is meant to provide documentation for the future – like photographs, diaries, or business ledgers. However, much of what we create is meant to be used in the moment, without the intention that it will be preserved beyond its present purpose. These latter records of our everyday lives and actions are often the most honest and detailed.

The “accountability” part of this definition will be discussed in Chapter 2. It reflects the development of archives in the 19th and 20th century primarily as repositories of government information, made accessible to public citizens in new democratic systems.

MOVING IMAGE ARCHIVES

So far, we have looked at descriptions of archives and archival material generally. This course is focused specifically on archives of moving image film and analog video material.

When we talk about “moving image archives,” we may be talking about different things. Paolo Cherchi Usai, motion picture curator at the George Eastman House Museum, has offered the following categories of film archives:

- **National film archives** – state-controlled institutions charged with the preservation of a country’s national film heritage. Examples include the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome and the New Zealand Film Archive
- **Major collections** – large collections of motion picture films held by a private institution or collector. For example, you may be familiar with the Rick Prelinger Archives in the US
- **Municipal or regional film archives** – public or private archives established to preserve the heritage of a city or region. Examples include the Chicago Film Archives or the Münchner Filmmuseum in Germany, which collects films of Bavarian directors
- **Specialized collections** – institutions that focus on specific subjects, like the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive in Jerusalem or the Anthology Film Archive in New York, which specializes in avant-garde and experimental film

Cherchi Usai also distinguishes film archives according to the way their material is primarily accessed and used:

- **Programming film archives** – These archives focus on collecting and restoring films to make them available for public screening. These include the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California, and the Cinémathèque Québécoise in Montreal.
- **University film archives** – Many large film collections were developed to serve the needs of academic film studies programs in the 1960s-1970s. For example, the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research in Madison, Wisconsin, began collecting rare film prints for in-class screenings by University of Wisconsin students
- **Film museums** – In addition to preserving motion picture film prints, some institutions collect filmmaking equipment, publicity materials, production documents, and other material representing the history of the motion picture industry. Examples include the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, Italy, and the American Museum of the Moving Image

All of the models above describe dedicated film archives that focus on moving image material specifically. These archives tend to collect individual titles, often completed commercial films, whether narrative, documentary, or avant-garde. However, there are also archivists who focus on archival moving image and media materials within broader historical collections, like archives held within universities, historical societies, or government bodies. The archival film and video material at the University of Colorado Boulder Libraries is often found within broader collected records of individual people or organizations.

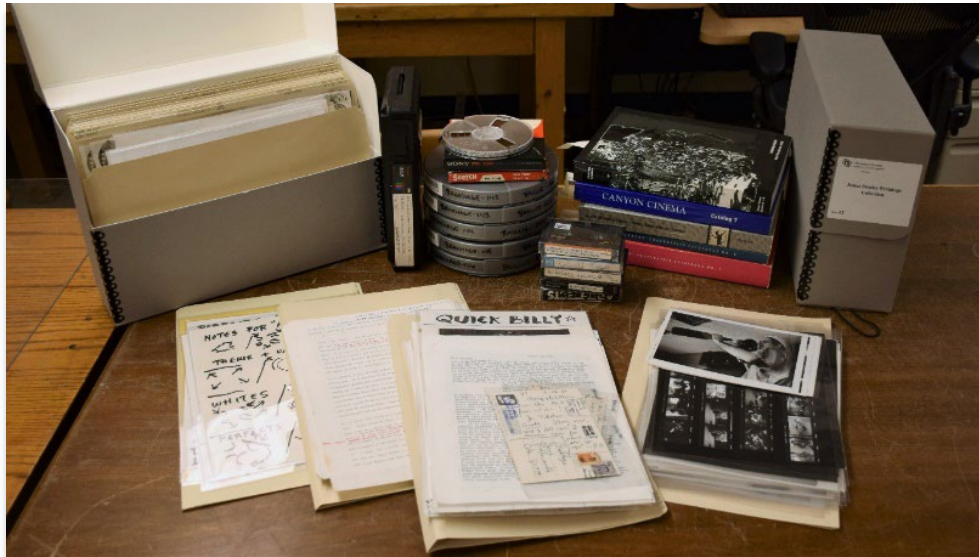


Figure 1.3 – Material from Stan Brakhage Collection, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries

For example, Figure 1.3 shows a small sample of material from the papers of avant-garde filmmaker and film professor Stan Brakhage. In addition to documents and correspondence, Brakhage's archival collection includes photographs, books, maps, artwork, audio, video, and film. If you can think of any reason a person or organization may have filmed or recorded something in the course of their life or work, those films and recordings could later become a part of their historical archival collection.

Types of Archival Media

In addition to complete films as creative works, archival media can include:

- **Production material and outtakes** – This could include material like original documentary interviews, cut scenes, alternate takes, or screen tests from the process of shooting and editing a complete project. A collection can also contain original workprints or versions of productions that are different than the version later distributed to audiences.

For example, archival records of the University of Colorado Boulder Publicity Offices include original footage and sound clips from campus events, buildings, and activities (Figure 1.4). Reels

in this collection have labels like “Stock Show,” “Firefighters” and “Centennial.” Notes like “Narration” and “Outs” (meaning outtakes) indicate the type of production element. Importantly, these reels do not contain complete, edited productions ready for audiences to view. They are original clips and pieces leftover from the publicity offices’ production teams.

- **Educational films** – Though educational films may have been mass-produced and broadly circulated, many of them are no longer available on film or on more contemporary formats. Collections of rare educational films are often preserved as historical documents and for re-use in new media production.
- **Publicity films** – Publicity films – including advertising and public service announcements – are often found in the collections of companies, organizations, and politicians. Publicity films are made for a broad public audience, to raise awareness of products, services, or information.
- **Industrial films** – Unlike publicity films, industrial films are made for audiences internal to a company or organization. These can include training videos, recorded announcements, or films screened at conventions or annual meetings to highlight and celebrate recent achievements. Industrial films are often rare, and they can offer significant insight into a company’s internal functions and its self-image.
- **Home movies and travel footage** – Some archival collections can include films and recordings of family events or trips, which were intended to be shared with friends and family. These recordings can be useful as historical reflections of cultural activities and norms.
- **Television and radio programs** – Though much mass entertainment television is now available as home video, DVD, or from streaming platforms, collections of local or public programming are often less accessible. Because early television programs were often broadcast live from studio performances, films and recordings of early television are very rare to find. Radio programs may still be broadcast live, without recordings, even today.
- **Recorded events** – This can include lectures, speeches, performances, conferences, legal proceedings, ceremonies, or any other event filmed or recorded by a person or organization for posterity. An archival collection may contain original recordings of events that were never copied or available elsewhere.
- **Research footage** – Research footage refers to original film or media created in the course of scientific or anthropological research, which was not intended to be used or distributed outside of that particular research project. For this reason, research footage often contains rare documentation of phenomena not recorded or available elsewhere.

In addition to the things listed above, archival collections could include voice memos, answering machine messages, legal depositions, interviews, oral histories – really any sound or moving image material created by a person or organization in the course of their lives and work.



Figure 1.4 – Film reels from the CU Boulder Publicity Collections, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries



Figure 1.5 – *WIPP: Freedom and Responsibility* (U.S. Department of Energy/Westinghouse Electric Corporation, 1994) – A publicity film describing the Waste Isolation Pilot Project in Carlsbad, New Mexico



Figure 1.6 – Unidentified travel footage, ca. 1910s. From the collection of T.D.A. Cockerell, CU professor of zoology

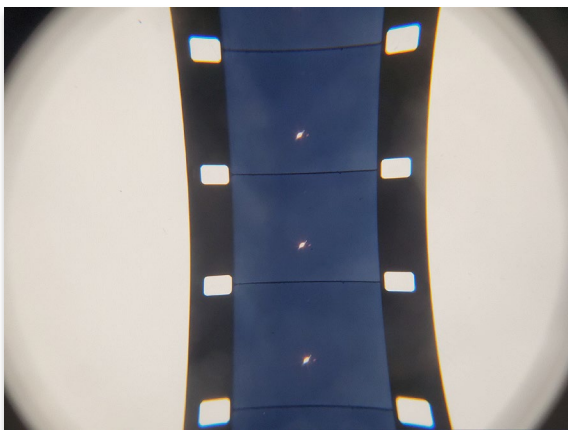


Figure 1.7 – Research footage from US Air Force rocket launch (1963), later cited in its report, "Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects" (1968), examining the appearance of a mysterious "bright object"

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- “The Dictionary of Archives Terminology” (Society of American Archivists): <https://dictionary.archivists.org/>
- “Introduction to Archival Research” (University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, 2021): <https://libguides.colorado.edu/introarchives>
- “Introduction to Archives” (King’s College): <https://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/archive-centre/introduction-to-archives>
- Pearce-Moses, R., “A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology” (Society of American Archivists, 2005): <https://files.archivists.org/pubs/free/SAA-Glossary-2005.pdf>
- Schmidt, Laura, “Using Archives: A Guide to Effective Research” (Society of American Archivists, 2016): <https://www2.archivists.org/usingarchives>
- Cherchi Usai, Paolo, “Raiders of the Lost Nitrate,” *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (British Film Institute, 2000): pp. 81-86

Image credits

Figure 1.2 – “Buckingham Library,” creator unknown, ca. 1903, public domain. CU Boulder Publicity Collections, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries. Contact rad@colorado.edu for access

Figure 1.5 – “WIPP: Freedom and Responsibility,” by U.S. Department of Energy/Westinghouse Electric Corporation, 1994, public domain. Rocky Flats Citizen Advisory Board Collection, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries. Available on [CU Digital Library](#).

Figure 1.6 – “Tulip,” creator unknown, ca. 1910s, public domain. T.D.A. Cockerell Collection, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries. [Available on CU Digital Library](#).

Figure 1.7 – “68/5-359-2 USAF-38908,” United States Air Force, 1963, public domain (CC0). Edward U. Condon Collection, University of Colorado Boulder Libraries. Contact rad@colorado.edu for access.

All other images in this chapter created by the author.

This course, Moving Image Archives: Curation, Management, and Programming, was supported by OpenCU Boulder 2022-2023, a grant funded by the Colorado Department of Higher Education, with additional support from the CU Office of the President, CU Office of Academic Affairs, CU Boulder Office of the Provost, and CU Boulder University Libraries.

Material in this course was created by Jamie Marie Wagner. Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).