

Accessioning: The Always-Already Function of Archival Practice

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“Due to the broad impact of accessioning across an institution, all archivists and archives administrators will benefit from an increased understanding and appreciation of accessioning.”¹

Archival accessioning has expanded from the act of creating a single record to a more comprehensive suite of duties that provide pathways to access, inform future stewardship decisions, and promote sustained resource commitment for the care of archival materials. In conference programming, professional scholarship, and even in the allocation of professional position titles, the scope of accessioning continues to expand and diversify. Effective accessioning enables foundational description, stabilization, and relationship-building that is integral to managing collections ethically throughout their lifecycles, while avoiding duplication of effort and establishing meaningful connections with creators and communities. Still, individuals performing accessioning work often find themselves isolated and under-supported, combatting fundamental misunderstandings about the necessity and complexity of their duties.

Fortunately, within the past five years, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) approved member-driven efforts to formally include accessioning in the Accessioning, Acquisitions, and Appraisal Section. SAA also sponsored the National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning Working Group’s publication of the nation’s first official set of recommended professional best practices. Building on that momentum, we are excited to share this special section of *American Archivist* focused on archival accessioning. There is intellectual value *and* a professional imperative for us to think about accessioning in the medium of peer-reviewed publication, to capture this particular moment in our field. In that spirit, this section demonstrates SAA’s ongoing commitment to building professional networks and fostering scholarship amongst those in the accessioning community of practice.

As part of this section, we are proud to republish portions of the Archival Accessioning Best Practices—both as a complement to the section’s other submissions

and to help promote the Best Practices' more comprehensive, principled approach to accessioning. We have also selected five pieces that demonstrate overlapping themes and tensions concerning contemporary accessioning including:

- the experiences of small repositories
- institutions modernizing workflows while contending with resource constraints and legacy practices
- flexible approaches tailored to a specific context
- resource allocation (including labor) for responsible stewardship
- concrete explanations of baseline and/or access-driven born-digital accessioning

These case studies build upon existing scholarship and conversations in the field by adding necessary nuance and sophistication to our understanding of access-driven accessioning. Collectively, these writings explore the tensions between accessioning and access; the murky boundaries between accessioning and "traditional" arrangement and description; ethical accessioning of sensitive or restricted materials; the importance of collaboration and relationships within the scope of digital stewardship; and accessioning practices in non-academic archives. The case studies also continue the profession's long-standing inquiry on backlogs, offering productive pathways forward so others can develop and advocate for their own retrospective accessioning projects.

Apart from the republished Best Practices, all our selected pieces are case studies, a format *American Archivist* defines as "analytical reports of projects or activities that take place in a specific setting and offer the basis for emulation or comparison in other settings."² In editing these pieces, we asked authors to extend beyond their specific institutional contexts to consider broader observations and reflections. The authors share not only what they have done, but perhaps more helpfully, they explain **why**: we hear about decision-making processes, trade-offs and compromises, unsuccessful strategies, unresolved issues and areas for continued improvement, constraints outside of individual control, and the noticeable impacts of success. By using the case study format, these authors provide models for how others might navigate similar issues, even if their specific contexts differ.

This prevalence of case studies is not surprising, as accessioning is a developing area of archival thought and practice. Theory continues to coalesce, and research takes time and support, resources that practitioners are not always afforded in their roles. Praxis is emerging from a practical positionality, illuminating the efforts of archives workers who think about and do this work day-in and day-out. For accessioning, while gaps remain in practice, theory, research, and education, these case studies give us direction for research opportunities, possibilities for advocacy, and options for framing existential conversations about stewardship and resource allocation. They shine light on the difficulties of accessioning labor, as well as the principles-focused *value* of committing resources to this work.

Looking beyond this section, there are so many possibilities for theory and practice to flourish around accessioning, including (but in no way limited to):

- accessioning-related donor relations and relationship management
- affect and caretaking during accessioning
- sustainability and environmental/climate considerations
- appraisal, deaccessioning, and reappraisal during accessioning
- critical analysis of foundational archival concepts (e.g., provenance, respect des fonds, appraisal) in relation to contemporary accessioning
- post-colonial, post-custodial, reparative, and/or community-centered approaches to accessioning
- applied theoretical frameworks (e.g., critical race theory, feminist theory)

It is very important to note as well: gaps also persist in graduate and continuing education, which may address appraisal and acquisitions, but rarely point explicitly to accessioning itself. Developing a more comprehensive understanding of the skills and information needed to support accessioning will require dedicated focus and meaningful actions taken at both an individual and a field-wide level. By creating more practical training, scholarship, theory, and discourse that centers accessioning, we can enrich and move forward our profession.

Far from being the last word on accessioning, we hope this collection of writings acts as a spark. These case studies open a portal to see innovative, thorough, and *principled* accessioning being performed in current contexts. Hopefully they can also move people to more fully embrace the possibilities of accessioning as a field of study and an area of practice. As the Accessioning Best Practices increases the visibility and viability of accessioning, this special section aspires to humanize and contextualize these types of archival labor both to show that better practices are possible and that this work must be supported across the archival lifecycle.

To be clear: we can no longer ignore archival accessioning and its rightful place as a core part of professional theory and practice. The eighth principle of the Accessioning Best Practices states, “It is never too late to accession.” It is also **never too early** to think about how archival practices—including the foundational control provided by robust accessioning—can function more holistically and more ethically.

NOTES

¹ National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning Working Group, “How to Use This Resource,” Archival Accessioning Best Practices, last modified January 2025, <https://accessioning.gitbook.io/archival-accessioning-best-practices/introduction/how-to-use-this-resource>, captured at <https://perma.cc/596W-8C7V>.

² Society of American Archivists, “Case Study,” Accessed April 24, 2025. <https://www2.archivists.org/american-archivist/case-study>, captured at <https://perma.cc/7D5E-K8H3>.

Excerpts from Archival Accessioning Best Practices— ACCESSIONING: THE ROOTS OF ARCHIVAL STEWARDSHIP and GUIDING PRINCIPLES

National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning Working Group

The following are two excerpts from version 1.0.2 of the Archival Accessioning Best Practices, published in January 2025 and republished under a CCA 4.0 International license. By republishing these core definitions and guiding principles, the co-editors of this special section of *American Archivist* invite readers to further engage with the first accessioning standard published in the United States, and with archival accessioning praxis more broadly. The full resource is available at <https://accessioning.gitbook.io/archival-accessioning-best-practices>.

ACCESSIONING: THE ROOTS OF ARCHIVAL STEWARDSHIP

Accessioning is the basis of all archival stewardship. It is a suite of activities through which archivists appraise, transfer, stabilize, and document archival acquisitions. Accessioning provides pathways to access, informs future decisions, and promotes sustained resource commitment for the care of archival materials.

Accessioning is foundational to ethical archival practice. Accessioning marks the beginning of care for archival materials and is proof of a repository's ability to do so. Through the act of accessioning, archivists commit to supplying accurate information about archival materials to colleagues and users, ensure materials are stable, initiate the ongoing work of preserving them, enable access, and keep promises made to donors and collection creators to do all of the above.

Accessioning is not an isolated or project-based task, but rather systemic work directly connected to the core archival functions of appraisal, arrangement and description, preservation, and access.

The amount of institutional resources put into accessioning may be the single best test of a repository's commitment to the responsible stewardship of materials.

If an institution doesn't have the time, space, and resources to accurately describe, stabilize, store, and administer a new acquisition, it cannot meet its obligations to care for and provide access to the materials. An unaccessioned or poorly accessioned acquisition is an inaccessible one, and providing access is an ethical imperative of the archival profession. An institutional commitment to accessioning constitutes a substantial commitment to care for archives and signals a meaningful respect for the work of archivists.

Accessioning work has a holistic impact across an institution. The accessioning labor of skilled archivists furthers institutional goals, mitigates risks, and has wide-ranging effects on preservation, stacks management, technical services, public services, instruction, outreach and programming, donor relations, and collection development. Therefore, it is vital to understand the complexity of accessioning labor, as well as the professional judgment and diverse yet specific set of skills it requires. The Best Practices seek to build solidarity around accessioning work by centering the archivist not only as a worker, but, more importantly, as a person.

These best practices are intended to be an active resource for practitioners.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

PREFACE

The Archival Accessioning Best Practices provide principles that both guide accessioning activities undertaken by practitioners and serve as a framework for developing an institutional accessioning program.

Archival values such as access and use, responsible stewardship, and accountability inform these principles for archival accessioning. These fundamental assumptions recognize and uplift the often invisible labor involved in accessioning work. **The principles represent an ethical baseline for archival accessioning**, with the best practices elaborating on specific recommendations to carry out the values presented in these principles. By providing a baseline, these principles can be applied to measuring or updating existing accessioning policies and practices and developing new accessioning programs within institutions.

PRINCIPLES

I. Accessioning is the leading indicator of a commitment to responsible stewardship.

- A successful accessioning program requires a thoughtful and thorough assessment of a repository's resources, technologies, and labor to ensure both responsible stewardship and baseline control of acquired materials.

- The assessment of resources must be honest, as accessioning work can surface a mismatch between resources that are required and those that are available. A culture of planning and a deep understanding of staff workload is needed.

II. A successful accessioning program provides a series of protective practices that collectively create a baseline of access, stability, and legal and ethical care. Effective accessioning fosters trust and strong relationships with creators and donors through clear, transparent, centralized information about archival interventions.

III. Accessioning is the optimal time to record custodial information about the collection and contextual information about the acquisition itself. It is also the point at which the most information about the materials—including information not present in the archival materials themselves—is available. Relying on memory or institutional knowledge rather than documenting information promptly, consistently, and in a reliable location exposes a repository to unnecessary risk.

IV. Accessioning work *must* be supported and built into the operational labor structure of the repository.

- **Accessioning takes time.** Archivists doing accessioning need the resources, especially time, to carry out accessioning tasks and create documentation.
- **Archivists doing accessioning need power and agency** to act on materials according to best practices. Archivists doing accessioning work need to be meaningfully involved in acquisition conversations from the beginning.

V. A permanent acquisitions program at a repository also requires a permanent accessioning program. Temporary or contingent labor is an unethical and unsustainable approach to persistent archival needs.

VI. Accessioning documentation is the most essential mechanism of accountability for decisions that resulted in acquisition, including why the materials were acquired and interventions made onto archival materials. Creating documentation is a shared responsibility between all parties involved in the acquisition and accessioning process.

VII. Accessioning should be transparent. Accessioning information is most useful when it is outward-facing. Ensuring this information is accessible to user communities offers a more universal sense of what is available in a repository.

VIII. It is never too late to accession. Use accessioning practices retrospectively to evaluate and improve control and stewardship of materials.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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