

A Green New Deal for Archives

By Eira Tansey. Alexandria, VA: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2023.

50 pp. Electronic only.

<https://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/a-green-new-deal-for-archives>.

Challenging times call for novel ideas and urgent change. Between 1933 and 1939, under the leadership of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the United States enacted the New Deal as a response to the economic hardships of the Great Depression, which devastated millions of Americans. This set of domestic programs and policies consisted of three parts: relief, recovery, and reform. Relief was meant to combat immediate issues, recovery was meant to restore balance to the economy, and reform was meant to prevent this kind of devastation in the future. Society today faces another crisis: climate change. Scholars are reacting to this crisis by investigating solutions to mitigate climate change's impacts on archives and its effects, using the New Deal as a blueprint.

A prominent voice leading this discussion is Eira Tansey. Born in Toledo, Ohio, and raised in Cincinnati, Tansey is an archivist specializing in research on the impacts of climate change on archives and cultural heritage.¹ After receiving her MLIS from San José State University and working in academic libraries for fifteen years, she founded Memory Rising, which “provides research, consulting, and archival services for cultural and humanities institutions and other organizations.”²

To further emphasize her advocacy for archival and environmental preservation education efforts, Tansey has made much of her work publicly available, ensuring *A Green New Deal for Archives* is openly available online as part of CLIR's 2023 Pocket Burgundy series.³

In *A Green New Deal for Archives*, Tansey asserts that those involved in the field of archives, from archivists to policymakers to government officials, should push for and adopt systematic reforms like those of the New Deal to create a sustainable system to address the worsening climate crisis.

Specifically, Tansey calls attention to the urgent threats that archives face as a result of the growing climate change crisis and suggests a plan for a long-term solution. To make the case for why a New Deal is necessary, Tansey illustrates the significance of archives to society. She describes why saving archives is so crucial, stating that “preservation of the historical record is essential both for continuity of cultural memory and civil society, and for documentation of the ongoing permanent alteration of natural and human environments” (p. 1). Maintaining records of the human experience and collective knowledge throughout time keeps us progressing as a society through the mistakes and successes that came before, much like the legacy of the New Deal can inspire ideas such as Tansey's.

Natural disasters put archival preservation at stake and can result in catastrophic consequences. Tansey cites several incidents of this from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)'s climate adaptation plan. Documenting climate-related hazards since 2006, this plan highlights disasters such as hurricane-related flooding at the NARA facilities in New York and Texas, wildfires at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in California, and sea-level rise threats to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and the National Archives in Washington, DC. While these disasters have caused resource and monetary damage at these large institutions, Tansey points out that smaller institutions have, and will continue to have, a harder time rebounding from these impacts.

Continuing the discussion of impacts to smaller institutions, Tansey includes the impacts that natural disasters have on individuals and communities at a local level, incorporating personal stories of how people of all backgrounds are affected by the loss of library and archival materials, humanizing what these kinds of losses mean. I find it compelling that she pinpoints real-life examples of the type of destruction that is possible when vulnerable institutions, such as those surrounded by large bodies of water and those in areas of high natural disaster rates, lack strong emergency response policies.

Although natural disasters have always occurred, Tansey emphasizes that climate change is intensifying the frequency and severity of these disasters. To combat this, she offers a proactive solution with her proposal for a Green New Deal, drawing inspiration from the federal government's involvement in the New Deal, particularly through the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Historical Survey, which employed thousands of workers to take inventory and preserve local government records. Tansey envisions a similar effort today in which a federally funded program could support archival labor.

Tansey's proposal consists of three parts: 1) ensuring a stable and secure workforce within archival institutions; 2) establishing a nationwide plan for emergency response, including the movement of coastal archives inland; 3) encouraging archivists, government agencies, and stakeholders to work together in establishing climate change documentation policies. This blueprint provides an approach to short- and long-term issues facing the archival profession.

One of the short-term goals that has been an escalating issue, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, is that of staffing. Tansey pleads her case for guidelines to improve issues such as understaffing and lack of training and planning, particularly for climate-related problems. She warns of the dangers if no change is made, stating, "Just as future generations will inherit the poor decision-making around climate change of previous generations, so will future archivists constantly have to reckon with the decisions made by those archivists who do not adapt their practices in recognition of the climate crisis" (p. 12). Her solution to this includes a permanent

increase in staffing in archives, with an established ratio of archivists to collection volume. The funding for this, she asserts, should come from expanded government funding, mirroring how New Deal programs like the WPA provided funding for the Historical Survey in the 1930s.

Tansey's plan for establishing an emergency response plan centers around risk mitigation. She asserts that archives can be better protected if they are moved from areas that are vulnerable to natural disasters, such as areas surrounded by water and those susceptible to wildfires and other extreme weather conditions, to safer regions. Although relocating archives would present challenges, particularly financial ones, Tansey argues that it is the best preventative measure to safeguard invaluable collections and to decrease disastrous losses.

Last, Tansey suggests collaboration is necessary to create long-term solutions to climate change. Workforce improvements and mobilization of archives cannot be tackled individually. Strategic planning and prioritization require a collective effort as they involve systematic change. The mobilization of archives demands decision-making on many levels, such as what collections to move, which are considered priorities, and the cultural impact of such a move. Tansey does not name specific stakeholders that should participate in this collaboration, the inclusion of which would have further developed this goal.

Tansey concludes by affirming the interconnected threats of climate change and understaffed archival institutions that require a change in the status quo. Achieving safety for our archives while acknowledging environmental change and the importance of sustaining these records to preserve cultural heritage should be a priority. Solidifying archivists' involvement in decision-making should a Green New Deal be put in place would give responsibility to those who are already trained to make decisions on archives and have the passion for preserving history. Tansey's proposal of a Green New Deal for archives provides thought-provoking solutions to long-term issues that extend beyond just those of archives into greater discussions of labor rights and climate resilience.

Despite its strengths, I believe the book could benefit from more discussion on the hindrances to implementing all aspects of Tansey's plan. Since her proposals take inspiration from the New Deal, what would a more detailed plan for government involvement in funding look like? While Tansey does acknowledge the need for a "larger, long-term political project to reassert the importance of public services and spaces" (p. 31), I think a deeper analysis of this project would open a necessary conversation about logistics as openly discussing challenges allows us to prepare for them. Nevertheless, Tansey's work does provide a starting point for these conversations.

Unlike other works on emergency preparedness and disaster response, *A Green New Deal for Archives* provides an ambitious plan of what it would take to achieve appropriate safety measures to protect archives from climate change in the United

States and in institutions across the world. It is a significant work and an important resource for archivists and all those in the orbit of research, history, cultural studies, and beyond. Tansey's perspective on how to combat staffing and climate change issues for the sustainability of archives is a thought-provoking suggestion in a time when climate change is a pressing matter. I highly recommend this book to those invested in archival sustainability and historical preservation and particularly to those who are in positions that can have a direct impact, such as policymakers, archivists, and government leaders.

© **Mollie B. Frazier**

*William E. Laupus Library
East Carolina University*

NOTES

¹ Eira Tansey, *About Me*, 2025, <https://eiratansey.com/about>, captured at <https://perma.cc/FN73-CKZB>.

² Memory Rising, <https://memoryrising.net>.

³ Tansey, *A Green New Deal for Archives*, 2025, <https://eiratansey.com/climate-change>, captured at <https://perma.cc/W9JY-PA63>.