HOW DO YOU APPRAISE GOVERNMENT RECORDS?

Appraising government records and artifacts is one of the toughest jobs in historic preservation. Deciding what to retain is indeed a difficult task as perhaps only 3-5% of all government records have permanent historical value. As a staff member of a government agency or historical society, it is your job to preserve those records that have permanent historical value, and to do so you will need the tools that can help you separate the few valuable records from the many that have no permanent value.

In this chapter you will learn the meaning of appraisal and the types of values government records can have. You will also be given useful procedures and tools that can help you get started appraising your own collections, whether your collections consist of paper or non-paper records, or both.

What does appraisal mean?

When appraising government records, you are actually determining their value and eventual disposition. Should the records be destroyed immediately? Should they be retained? How long should they be retained? Should they be transferred to an archive? You might think that records are appraised only once: when you receive the records and need to decide whether or not to keep them. However, the values of records often change, and therefore, you need to appraise them more than once throughout their lifetimes. For example, before converting a paper record to an electronic record, you need to appraise the value of the record in both media to ensure that the record does not become less accessible, and therefore less valuable, in electronic form.

As you appraise government records, you need to consider the many possible values records can have. Records are important for their administrative, fiscal, legal, and historical value. Records can also be important for their intrinsic value. With all these possible values, the necessary task of appraising records can sometimes be complex. This chapter will help you get started appraising your records, and will help you identify those records that have historical value.

Keep in mind that the term record refers to information and not a physical object such as a piece of paper, a photograph, or a floppy disk. For example, the information found in a birth certificate is considered the record, whether the certificate is on paper or on microfilm. When appraising government records, your appraisal should be based on the record, regardless of the medium the information is on, or format it is in.

Why are records valuable?

Records have four primary values—administrative, fiscal, legal, and historical—and it is important to remember that a record often has more than one of these values at any time.

Administrative Value
Records with administrative value typically pertain to the origin, development, activities, accomplishments, and functions of an agency. Examples of such records include:

- Annual reports from a county highway department
- Correspondence from a city clerk
- Minutes from a town board meeting
- Policy and procedures manuals for a school district

**Fiscal Value**

Records with fiscal value are often needed for audit purposes. It is necessary to consider federal and state requirements when determining retention periods for records with fiscal value (the State Auditor requires you to retain local government fiscal records for a minimum of six years). Examples of records that have fiscal value include:

- Accounting records
- Audit reports
- Budgets
- Grant agreements
- Ledgers
- Payroll records
  - Vouchers

**Legal Value**

Records with legal value deal with matters related to law. Examples of such records include agreements, civil and criminal case files from district courts, contracts, leases, city ordinances, personnel records, land records from county recorders, township road records, and naturalization papers.

**Historical Value**

Records with historical value are important as they provide information about our past and help guide us into the future. They document the development of government and its policies, provide unique evidence of the lives and activities of people, describe social and economic conditions, and record the development of community and business. They are important to students, researchers, historians, citizens, and local governments. Some historical records must be retained permanently. Examples of records that have historical value include:

- Annual reports
- Birth and death records
- Selected correspondence
- Hearing transcripts
- Meeting minutes
- Photographs
What is intrinsic value?

In addition, records can also have intrinsic value.

**Intrinsic Value**

Records with intrinsic value have unique characteristics that make them interesting and worthy of retention. A record might have intrinsic value because of its:

- Age or time period
- Association with a particular geographical location
- Association with famous people
- Famous author
- Unusual physical or aesthetic qualities
- Description of important or controversial issues
- Coverage of historical events
- Exhibit potential
- Unique or special content
- Creation under unusual circumstances
  - Signatures or attached seals

Examples of such records include Minnesota territorial records, township citizen petitions, city council proclamations, school certificates, and hand-drawn maps from county surveyors.

How do you get started appraising records?

At first, appraising your records might seem like an overwhelming task. For this reason, the Minnesota Historical Society has created a helpful tool that will make the appraisal job easier: the Appraisal Checklist [http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/appchecklist.pdf]. The Appraisal Checklist can be used for any quantity of records, from just a handful of documents to a basement vault filled with many types of records. When using this checklist, you will be using a proven process that provides a systematic way to arrange and identify records, making a large project easier to manage.

What is the recommended appraisal process?

The appraisal process is covered in detail in the State Archives’ Appraisal Checklist [http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/appchecklist.pdf]. A summary of the appraisal process is provided here:

1. Separate records from nonrecords. When separating records you should keep track of records series, collect key record information, and weed out obvious duplicates. Records
series refers to a group of records that were created, arranged, and maintained as a group because they relate to a particular subject or function. Examples of records series include:

- Town clerk record books
- Township invoices
- City council ordinances
- City manager correspondence
- County board minutes
- County auditor tax lists
- School superintendent correspondence
- School district permanent pupil cards

You should also collect key information as you separate records from nonrecords. Key information includes the:

- Department or office that created the records
- Arrangement of the records
- Physical condition of the records
- Media of the records (for example paper, microfilm, photographic, or electronic)
- Topics—especially those of special importance—covered in the records
- Date span of the records (earliest to most recent)
- Principal correspondents, if relevant
- Uniqueness of records

2. Group similar records together.

3. Create records retention schedules based on the value of the records.

4. Re-house the records. Use boxes and folders as necessary. Refer to Chapter 5 of the guidelines (*How do you preserve and store government records?*).

5. Compile a detailed inventory of the records. Refer to Chapter 5 of the guidelines (*How do you preserve and store government records?*).

**What other appraisal considerations are important?**

You should have an organizational mission statement and collections policy that specifies the nature of the records you wish to collect and preserve. Your collections policy should take into consideration the resources you have available for collecting and preserving records, such as staff, talent, space, and funds. The Wisconsin State Historical Society has a practical and easy-to-follow manual at <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/whrab/wapl.pdf> that will help you create a collection development policy for your historical records.

When you start looking at records appraisal issues within your organization, begin by considering the broader issues, asking questions such as these:
Do you have a collection policy that provides guidance for appraising records?
Do the records fit into your collection scope?
How much will it cost to process and preserve the records?
Are the records in a physical condition that allows them to be used?

After dealing with the broader issues, spend time on more specific issues by asking questions such as these:

- Does an appropriate records retention schedule for the records exist?
- Is the information in the records available in another location or format?
- Will restrictions on use lessen the value of the records?
- Are you in compliance with the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act? (See Chapter 6 of the guidelines [How do you provide reference service to government records?]).
- How might researchers use the records?

**How do you appraise non-paper records?**

When appraising non-paper records, you need to understand and evaluate issues concerning technology. The two important steps in appraising non-paper records are:

1. Appraise the informational value of the records. It is important to remember that your appraisal should be based on records content, regardless of the media.

2. Analyze the technical nature of the records, including the cost of acquiring, processing, preserving, and servicing the records. Know if the records are dependent on particular technology, and determine if the records are best stored on their current media. Ask yourself such questions as these:

   - Are the records physically stable?
   - What are the storage costs?
   - Will you be able to migrate records information from an obsolete medium or format to a newer one?
   - Will the technology become obsolete making the record inaccessible?
   - What generation of the records would you prefer to document?

**What factors should you consider when appraising certain types of records?**

All types of records have their own specific appraisal issues that you need to be aware of. Here we discuss specific appraisal issues associated with audio and video tapes, electronic records, microform, motion picture film, oversized documents, and photographic materials.
Audio tapes

Audio tapes often have unique value because of the informational, artistic, and cultural nature of their content. You might find that selecting the tapes you want to retain is a difficult and time-consuming task. Be sure to store masters in a safe place and make copies for everyday use.

Video Tapes

Video tapes often have value because of the informational, artistic, and cultural nature of their content. You might find that selecting the tapes you want to retain is a difficult and time-consuming task. Be sure to store masters in a safe place and make copies for everyday use.

Electronic Records

When appraising electronic records, you need to consider the information system that created, stores, displays, and processes the record. Also, be aware that the cost of preserving electronic records can be high because of the need to migrate data and to periodically upgrade hardware and software. You will need to decide who will manage the records and where you will store the official copies. Documentation, such as computer system manuals, metadata, and in-house procedures, must be kept to assist in reading and using the electronic records. Lastly, you will need to determine the format of the official record copy.

The *Trustworthy Information Systems Handbook*<http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/tis/tis.html>, published by the State Archives, provides valuable information on establishing an information system that is accountable, and one that produces reliable and authentic information and records.

Microfilm and Microfiche

The cost of preserving and storing microfilm and microfiche can be high, and if you wish to do so, you will need to purchase and maintain an appropriate microfilm reader. Be sure to store masters in a safe place and make copies for everyday use. When appraising this type of record, you will need to consider the readability of and any damage to the microfilm.

Motion Picture Films

Motion picture films often have unique value because of the informational, artistic, and cultural nature of their content. Reviewing and selecting films for retention might be difficult and time-consuming. Be sure to keep the sound track separate from the negative or color original.

Oversized Documents

Oversized documents, such as maps and architectural drawings, can be inconvenient to preserve and store. They have more value when they provide unique information and when they are accompanied by related documents such as correspondence, reports, and specifications. Final drawings are preferred over preliminary drawings.
Photographic Material

Photographs and negatives often have more informational than evidential value. Proper exposure, clear focus, good composition, and complete identifying information (such as subject, photographer, date, and location) have an important impact on your appraisal. Refer to your collections policy to help you decide what photographic materials to keep. It is important to remember that photographic materials will disintegrate over time, and camera negatives and first-generation prints are always preferred.

What tools can I use to appraise government records?

Several tools are readily available to help you appraise government records: a checklist from the State Archives, records retention schedules, and government records information leaflets.

Appraisal Checklist

As described earlier, a practical and an easy-to-use tool is the Appraisal Checklist <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/appchecklist.pdf>, available from the State Archives.

Records Retention Schedules

Records retention schedules provide you with a plan for managing government records, and are available for the four major local government jurisdictions: city, county, school district, and township. These schedules help you dispose of records according to state law. (See the records management statute M.S. 138.17 at <http://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/stats/138/17.html>).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government Agency</th>
<th>Retention Schedule Status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>This schedule was updated in March 2008. It is available online at <a href="http://www.mcfoa.org">http://www.mcfoa.org</a>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County</td>
<td>This schedule was compiled in 1985 and is still valid. <a href="http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/retentionsched.html">http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/retentionsched.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Township</td>
<td>This schedule was compiled in 1985 and is still valid. <a href="http://www.mntownships.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&amp;SEC=%7B22F6F6C0-0B88-4DEF-B932-2F11716CF61E%7D&amp;DE=%7BEABEFC5C-CFDC-4F1A-91EE-4267D818B92D%7D">http://www.mntownships.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&amp;SEC={22F6F6C0-0B88-4DEF-B932-2F11716CF61E}&amp;DE={EABEFC5C-CFDC-4F1A-91EE-4267D818B92D}</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School district</td>
<td>This schedule was updated and distributed in January 2000. <a href="http://www.region1.k12.mn.us/main/Portals/0/SMARTFIN/docs/DistrictGeneralRecordsRetention.pdf">http://www.region1.k12.mn.us/main/Portals/0/SMARTFIN/docs/DistrictGeneralRecordsRetention.pdf</a></td>
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The Minnesota State Court System has a records retention schedule that is available at <http://www.mncourts.gov/documents/0/Public/Justice_Agency/Retention_Schedule_Revised_3-05rev.pdf>.
For records of county human services departments, the state Human Services Department hosts an on-line records retention schedule at <http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/agencywide/documents/pub/dhs16_140359.pdf>.

These general records retention schedules give you minimum retention periods for records based on the records’ administrative, fiscal, legal, and historical value. It is important to remember that the retention period pertains to the content of the records, regardless of the records’ media or format. For instance, city council minutes must be permanently retained. They are originally recorded on paper, but might eventually be migrated to microfilm. As long as the minutes are permanently recorded on film, the minutes in paper form might be eligible for destruction assuming the proper review and approval have taken place.

All records retention schedules indicate what records have historical value and what records need to be retained permanently. Some are retained in the agency, while others may be transferred to the State Archives, or to a local or county historical society. The State Archives has guidelines (Appendix A) as well as a model agreement (Appendix B) covering the transfer of local government records to a local or county historical society. For nonpermanent records, the retention schedules give the time period the records must be retained. For example:

- City personnel files must be retained at least five years.
- Contracts on county buildings must be retained at least ten years after the final payment.
- Township vouchers must be retained at least six years.
- School district accident or damage reports must be retained at least ten years.

**Government Records Information Leaflets**

The State Archives provides government records information leaflets that identify the most historically valuable records created or preserved by local government units. The following leaflets are available at <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/recser.html#info>:

1. Township Records
2. School District Records
3. Records of the County Superintendent of Schools
4. Municipal Records
5. Law Enforcement Records
6. County Auditor Records
7. Public Library Records
8. Records of Public Health Care Facilities
9. Records of Heritage Preservation Commissions
10. Watershed District and Soil and Water Conservation District Records
Where can you get more information on appraising government records?

**Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives Department, Appraisal Checklist**

<http://www.mnhhs.org/preserve/records/appchecklist.pdf>

The State Archives Department developed an *Appraisal Checklist*, which should be used to make the appraisal process easier.

**National Archives and Records Administration**

<http://www.archives.gov/index.html>


**Society of American Archivists (SAA)**

<http://www.archivists.org/>

The following resources are available in print from the SAA:


