

What Are Historical Records and Research Materials?

Historical records and research materials are items that have been collected and/or received by a person, an organization, or family in the course of their daily affairs. These records and materials document and provide evidence of daily activities and are kept because of their enduring historical and/or research value. Archives and other collecting institutions keep these materials in discrete collections to preserve the contextual relationship between records, in order to better tell the history of the people or organizations that created the collections.

Collection materials can include but are not limited to the following types: diaries, journals, ledgers, minutes, reports, photographs, maps, architectural drawings, deeds, case files, and rare books. Materials may take the following forms: paper, parchment, bound, photographic, microfilm, audiotape, film, videotape, and born-digital, among others.



"Oath of Allegiance to the King," manuscript, 1776.
The New York State Library.









"Hudson Falls. View up the Hudson" lantern slide, 1912.
The New York State Archives.



"Alkmeiy; Roi de la Guinée" print, circa 1800 - 1899.
Schomburg Center, The New York Public Library.

Types of Archives and What They Collect*

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University and College Archives preserve materials that relate to a specific academic institution. These collections are often a part of the institution's broader special collections.
Examples: Columbia University Archives, Juilliard School Archives.
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Historical Societies typically preserve and promote materials that focus on topics about the history of a region, period, or subject. They may maintain some government records. Collections often include artifacts in addition to books and papers.
Examples: Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society, Ticonderoga Historical Society.
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Government Archives collect materials relating to local, state, or national government bodies.
Examples: National Archives and Records Administration, New York State Archives, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library.
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Corporate Archives are a department within a company that manages and preserves records of that business.
Examples: Wells Fargo History Archives, Johnson & Johnson Archives.
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Special Collections are usually a department within a library that holds collections from individuals, families, and organizations that have significant historical value. These collections often contain the rarest and most valuable materials. Materials commonly include books, manuscripts, and/or collections of local history.
Examples: NYU Libraries' Special Collections and Archives, Niels Bohr Library and Archives.
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Museums have an institutional goal of preserving items of historical significance and tend to place an emphasis on exhibiting and interpreting collection material. Materials often focus more on artifacts and artwork rather than books and papers. Stand-alone museums may also contain libraries and/or archives.
Examples: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Eastman Museum.