

# Careers for Historians: Archivists

By Beth Crist

Maybe you have visited an archive and wondered what goes on behind the scenes. Did you picture people working in dusty little rooms, shuffling old papers all day? Those people, called archivists, do organize a lot of paper and other materials. They do much more than that, though. Archivists preserve original records that are useful to society and help people get at those records. If that sounds interesting, read on.

First, archivists research and collect records. In the past, archives contained mainly documents, but today they also contain computer files, photographs, postcards, audio and video recordings, and more. Archivists need to know about history and also about the history of records they collect. Sometimes they don't know where records come from, how old they are, or even what they are. They use their knowledge of history and their research skills to investigate these items.

Second, archivists arrange records according to an established system and describe records so that they can be located quickly. They also document relationships between records. For example, the letters of a Civil War soldier might be kept with family records, but they are related to other Civil War letters. Documenting interrelationships makes it easier for people to find similar records.

Third, archivists preserve records. They determine how records—from old diaries to computer disks—should be stored, handled, and displayed. Some archivists specialize in certain kinds of records, such as paper documents or photographs.

Finally, archivists provide reference assistance to the public. People use archives for many purposes. Some look up information about their ancestors for genealogy projects. Others conduct research for professional projects. Archivists help people use archives. They also create exhibits, publications, and on-line archives.

Most archivist jobs require a master's degree in history or library science. A few universities offer master's degrees in archival studies, and others have certificate programs for aspiring archivists.

Archivists find jobs in federal and state governments, companies, universities, libraries, nonprofit organizations, museums, and historical societies. Wherever they work, archivists know they are preserving the past for future generations.

## To learn more:

- Check out the following Web sites:

### **Archivists, Curators, Museum Technicians, and Conservators**

(<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos065.htm>)

The United States Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics gives a summary of the responsibilities and working conditions of archivists, and the job outlook.

### **The Exhibit Hall**

(<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/>)

Explore these exhibits from the National Archives and Records Administration, which oversees the management of all federal records.

### **Library and Archival Exhibitions on the Web**

(<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos065.htm>)

This site features links to on-line exhibitions created by libraries, archives, and historical societies.

### **The North Carolina Collection**

(<http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/index.html>)

Explore this collection of literary, visual, and artifactual materials at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

### **So You Want to Be an Archivist: An Overview of the Archival Profession**

(<http://www.archivists.org/prof-education/arprof.asp>)

This site from the Society of American Archivists offers an overview of archival work.

- Arrange a behind-the-scenes tour with an archivist at a local library, university, or historical society. Come prepared with a list of questions: What do you do on a typical day? What is your favorite part of the job? Why did you want to be an archivist? What is your educational background? Are you working on any special projects?

## Try it out:

- Check out volunteer opportunities at a nearby historical society, church, museum, or library. These organizations may be looking for volunteers to help archive records.
- Create an archive for your THJHA club. Begin by gathering club projects, awards, photographs, applications, reports, and other records. Next, write a plan for the materials that need to be kept, how and where they will be preserved, and how they will be organized and maintained. Put the plan

into action with the materials you've gathered. Be sure to continue adding to the archive. Ask about starting an archive for your school (or offer to help maintain an existing one).

### **Interview with Steve Massengill**

*Steve Massengill has worked as an archivist at the North Carolina State Archives for twenty-five years. He is the head of the nontextual records unit, which contains photographs, motion picture films, videotapes, sound recordings, slides, posters, postcards, and prints.*

#### **Beth Crist: What is your educational background?**

**Steve Massengill:** I received a bachelor's degree in history from St. Andrews Presbyterian College and a master's degree in history, with a minor in archives, from North Carolina State University.

#### **BC: When did you become interested in being a nontextual archivist?**

**SM:** In the 1980s when I discovered that nontextual materials were an important part of the historical records of our state.

#### **BC: Have you had any other history-related jobs?**

**SM:** I have conducted research for historic sites in the past. I have also done different archival work than what I do now, including arranging and describing archival records.

#### **BC: What do you do at work on a typical day?**

**SM:** I help patrons find nontextual records—especially photographs—in the State Archives.

#### **BC: What do you like best about your job?**

**SM:** I enjoy working with the photographs in the State Archives. I also like to help patrons with their research needs.

#### **BC: What advice do you have for students who are interested in this field?**

**SM:** Work or volunteer at an archival agency. If you like the work, enroll in a public history program in graduate school.

**BC: What has been your favorite project?**

**SM:** I really enjoyed creating *A North Carolina Postcard Album, 1905–1925*, which was published in 1988. It was fun to find and look at postcards from that period. I like that the book shows the public how North Carolina’s early twentieth-century towns, buildings, and pastimes looked.