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# Book Review: Archives for the Lay Person: A Guide to Managing Cultural Collections by Lois Hamill

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# Archives for the Lay Person: A Guide to Managing Cultural Collections

By Lois Hamill. American Association for State and Local History series. Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2013. 287 pp. Softcover. \$32.95. ISBN 978-0-7591-1972-7.

Though readers of *The American Archivist* are not the intended audience for this publication, archivists and other professionals involved with historical collections will want to become familiar with *Archives for the Lay Person: A Guide to Managing Cultural Collections*. Community outreach is a reality of every archivist's work, and most of us have heard some form of the question, "I found these old documents and I don't know what to do with them. Can you help?" Two years ago, a community member came to me and asked for help organizing materials of a church that was established over 150 years ago. I provided some guidance to that church member, but now that a volume like *Archives for the Lay Person* has been published, I will have a much more comprehensive resource to recommend in the future.

Lois Hamill holds master's degrees in both history and library and information science and became a certified archivist in 2000. She has been working in the archives' field since 1999, first in a historical society and then in two universities. Hamill has held leadership positions in regional and national professional organizations and is presently the university archivist at Northern Kentucky University.

Hamill's work differs from Elizabeth Yakel's 1994 *Starting an Archives* in that it is truly meant to benefit collections that will be cared for by nonprofessionals, while Yakel's work offers a more advanced level of advice that focuses on starting an archival program. Yakel addresses all programmatic areas but does so broadly and on a more conceptual level than Hamill does. Hamill is writing for people with little or no background in collections management and assumes no prior knowledge of collections' care from acquisition to storage to exhibit. This reviewer concurs with the author that people who are new to the profession and working in solo positions may also find information of value in the text. Additionally, Hamill states that "Faculty teaching courses to prepare students to work in or manage cultural or nonprofit organizations . . . may find this text helpful" (p. 2). Given that the book is coherent, whether taken in whole or in part, faculty who offer formal coursework and archivists who offer workshops or provide community outreach through other avenues might select relevant parts as needed to guide their presentations. *Archives for the Lay Person* is comprehensive in its approach, and yet a reader might open the book to find advice for a specific need and then follow the steps provided for any point in the life cycle of a record.

Terminology is laid out in chapter 1, giving readers a grounding in the difference between records of organizations—whether government, private, or business and personal papers or other types of manuscripts. A need for more specific definitions can be satisfied through the annotated chapter notes that refer readers to standard works in the field such as Richard Pierce-Moses's *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*.<sup>1</sup> However, when professional terminology is used later in the text, it is italicized and explained in a depth appropriate to the context of the discussion.

With a basic understanding of our field's jargon laid out, chapters 2 through 5 offer step-by-step guidance on acquiring and preparing collections for use. Each chapter's overall heading includes both the justifications for and the actual processes needed to accomplish work on the relevant topic. For example, chapter 2 on "Acquiring New Materials" includes recommendations for policy creation and content that should be considered in creating policies. Insights are also given on the potential need for deaccessioning previously accepted materials that might fall out of scope during a formal program planning process. Chapter 3 similarly treats the topic of collection organization, working from

theory to incremental steps needed to put it into practice. A reader familiar with one concept or part of a process is able to skim through a logical series of subheadings to find a specific topic.

Details on describing collections and how descriptions can be shared with others are the focus of chapter 4. Hamill begins with the creation of inventories and the elements they contain, including how and why DACS may be used, and then offers several methods of publishing inventories. If in-house support for MARC records does not exist, a discussion about the cataloging service provided by the Library of Congress through the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (pp. 46–47) will lead the reader to a helpful, nontechnical avenue for the creation and distribution of collection-level records in a national network.

At this point, Hamill introduces the archival practice of description through “intellectual unit, not to a physical item” (p. 49). While explaining that archival practice does not recommend working at the item level, Hamill recognizes that many historical societies and museums use the collections management software PastPerfect, which often functions best using the item-level treatment of objects. Rather than leave the reader to discover how the software works independently, Hamill acquired a copy of the manual from the developers and provides step-by-step instructions on how a catalog record can be created using the software. References to PastPerfect are made throughout appropriate areas of the text, and screen shots are frequently used to illustrate the relevant points.

Photographic formats receive extensive attention spanning both chapters 5 and 6. Photographic materials receive such treatment because of the preservation needs for their varying “composition and the processes used to create them” (p. 64). Hamill covers issues of care for a range of historical printed formats and their specific handling, storage, and need for description. She also addresses the needs of born-digital images and includes instructions on creating standardized file naming conventions.

This reviewer appreciates the caution Hamill expresses on issues surrounding digitization practices in this part of the volume. Some may think that digitization will easily bring an end to the trouble of providing access, but Hamill advises that “the creation, storage, and preservation of digital (electronic) files require thinking, planning, and intentionality” and that the act of scanning “is the tip of the iceberg” (p. 99). An extensive additional resource list includes headings for copyright, equipment choices, and the process of digitization itself. While noting that all aspects of digital object creation are covered in varying degrees in other sources, Hamill’s careful balance of practical instructions with advice on avoiding pitfalls in a digitization program offers a degree of assurance that readers can succeed in this work too.

Until this point, provisions for access are framed within the context of file preparation and the ability to find materials through the methods previous

chapters address. But in chapter 7, on working with researchers, serving one's community is fully treated. This chapter covers the delicate task of helping novice researchers identify what they need, as well as the archivist's responsibility to instruct users about the organization of collections. Additionally, the author offers methods for giving researchers the materials needed while minimizing the risk of damage through use. Security risks are the companion concern of use in archives, and Hamill provides an overview of the problem of theft as well as some mitigating strategies in chapter 8.

Exhibit space and collection storage concerns, chapters 9 and 10, are treated with a depth similar to the rest of the volume's topics. She offers reasons for creating exhibits and the preservation concerns of different materials in both temporary and long-term storage environments; along with practical suggestions for safe display and storage. The final chapters, 11 through 14, contain straightforward descriptions of materials typically held in historical collections and their particular needs; an overview of the types of companion professions, like appraisers, that one may need; the ways in which regular staffing may be supplemented; and the topic of disaster preparedness.

Throughout the text, references are made to policies and common forms used in collections management. While some, such as the one for a collection inventory on pages 40 and 41, are used to illustrate particular points within the chapters, the appendixes contain copies of these resources that can be used as templates. A final appendix contains a brief list of common suppliers and a referral to a more comprehensive listing of vendors.

The author has carefully considered the recommendations for each chapter's additional readings list. The citations are either for readily available published volumes or for online content that does not require a subscription. These sources include peer-reviewed articles such as those published in *The American Archivist* that are now freely available through JSTOR. The works cited within each chapter are contained in a separate notes section organized by chapter, and a comprehensive bibliography is also included. While this reviewer did not try searching for all cited materials, many of the references are for publicly available sources or a narrow range of monographic materials that should be accessible to small institutions.

Community consultations are a reality in every archivist's work. Usually these requests come from places that operate with volunteers and have high turnover rates. It is difficult to give brief but professionally responsible advice to a volunteer force without fully understanding their specific needs. With a manual such as this, it is easy to imagine that organizations facing a fluctuating workforce can achieve continuity in work practices. Clear wording of philosophical and theoretical underpinnings lead the reader into step-by-step instructions throughout the text. If each successive volunteer used this volume to pick up

where a predecessor left off, eventually one cohesive organizational scheme would emerge.

A professional may also find him- or herself helping someone who has professional training in and primary responsibilities for another field and has been given the task of organizing historical records as an extra, part-time duty. Regardless of the specific use, collection type, or staffing need in an institution, *Archives for the Lay Person: A Guide to Managing Cultural Collections* will serve as a useful tool. The instruction provided in this work goes a long way toward achieving our mutual interests: the survival of collections being cared for in a variety of cultural organizations and their use by the wider community.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary>.