

The National Anthropological Archives

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The National Anthropological Archives (NAA) is part of the Smithsonian Institution's Department of Anthropology in the National Museum of Natural History. Its purpose is to serve as a repository for the records of the Department of Anthropology and its predecessor organizations and to collect private papers relating to all cultures of the world and to the history of anthropology. Many significant anthropological organizations have donated their records to the NAA, including the American Anthropological Association, the Society for American Archaeology, the American Ethnological Society, the American Society for Ethnohistory, and the Society for Applied Anthropology.

Past

The National Anthropological Archives is the successor to the archives of the former Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE), organized by John Wesley Powell in 1879. Because of the Bureau's interest in North American Indians, its research and files created one of the nation's important resources for the study of Native Americans. The Department of Anthropology in the U.S. National Museum, which formally dates to 1897 although there were already anthropologists on staff at that time, also generated valuable records documenting, in particular, physical anthropology, archaeology, and historic cultures of the Americas, the Arctic and the Pacific. The Department of Anthropology and the Bureau of American Ethnology were combined in 1965. The BAE archives had been active in serving the public and became increasingly visible in the 1960s. Margaret Blaker, the archivist, made a systematic effort to gather and make available anthropological bibliographies and photographic material. An example of her success can be seen in the number of photographic orders, which increased steadily between 1954 and 1966.

In 1968, the National Anthropological Archives was created as a documentation center to preserve records that document anthropological research and the history of anthropology, and to encourage their preservation elsewhere. Within the Smithsonian Institution, it is unique in being an archives specifically oriented to a discipline. The original mission delineated in 1968 was to serve as a repository for field notes, personal papers and photographs of anthropologists throughout the world, regardless of their topical or geographical specialties, as well as the records of anthropological societies and institutions.¹ The current policy is to accept records from



National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution. Photo by Robert Leopold 2004.

anthropologists and anthropological organizations based in the United States, whatever the subject or culture. Priority is given to Smithsonian-related research, particularly records of the Department of Anthropology, and to records of anthropological organizations.

The NAA's practice has been to collect personal papers and research materials primarily from scholars who have no institutional affiliation or whose institutions are unable to maintain their records. Anthropologists with institutional or organizational affiliations should first consider their own organizations as repositories. In 1968, when the American Anthropological Association passed a resolution on the National Anthropological Archives, it urged "all anthropologists who do not otherwise arrange for the preservation of their field notes and other field records and of their professional papers, to consider the Smithsonian Institution... a suitable repository for such materials." ² The intention of the resolution was not to designate a single repository for all of anthropology but rather to call attention to the need for archival preservation.

In 1968 there was concern that the NAA might be flooded with materials. This did not happen; however, in the 1970s, use of the Archives increased dramatically. Among the reasons were its increased visibility in the anthropological community and, in particular, the growing interest of Native Americans in records documenting their cultural heritage. The volume of holdings also increased, approximately doubling over ten years. The records were consolidated in their current location on the ground floor of the Natural History Building in 1970; in the early 1980s, the compact shelving presently in place was installed.

Present

Official records and manuscript collections in the NAA amount to over 6,300 linear feet in 608 record groups. Photographic holdings constitute an estimated 350,000 images. In 1991, reference activity included 1,562 researcher daily visits, about 7,500 telephone calls, and 1,095 responses to written inquiries; in 1992, reference activity increased, including the photocopying of close to 50,000 pages of material. (Figures for photographic copies are not available since they are now made in the Office of Printing and Photographic Services.) The rapid increase in reference activity is perhaps due to repatriation legislation. The budget for 1991 was \$320,000, most of which was for staff salaries; \$55,000 came from internal grants (under the Research Resources and Women's Committee programs) for conservation and processing. In addition, an acquisition was purchased with the help of corporate funding.



The National Anthropological Archives is housed within the Museum Support Center, an environmentally controlled research and collections facility in Suitland, MD. The NAA's holdings have grown rapidly since this article was written. In 2009, the NAA's collections included 9,500 linear feet of fieldnotes, journals and manuscripts; 402,000 photographs; 3,800 sound recordings; and 21,000 works of art (mainly two-dimensional works of art on paper). A robust digital imaging program has produced 100,000 digital surrogates, most of which are available through SIRIS, the Smithsonian's online public access catalog. Photo by Robert Leopold 2005.

Between 1969 and 1972, the permanent full-time staff was increased from three to seven. The core staff today remains at the same level, but special projects and other outside funding have often provided additional staff. The computerization of the collections, for instance, was accomplished with the help of inventory personnel assigned from the

Director's office. For 1992, the NAA staff included one inventory employee, an archivist and a technician funded through the Repatriation Office, and two grant-funded processing archivists.

Due to the recent increase in reference requests as well as internal obligations, the research room was temporarily closed in the afternoons from October 1990 to June 1991, to give staff an opportunity to control backlogs in letters and processing. The Department of Anthropology made a concerted effort to remedy the situation and to reallocate staff and funding, so that the Archives could resume normal reference hours.

A Guide to the National Anthropological Archives (Glenn 1992) was published and distributed, and plans for a second printing are under way. There are also over 100,000 computerized entries on the SIBIS (Smithsonian Institution Bibliographic Information Services) database; this database will eventually be available nationally through Internet. NAA staff have maintained information on the locations of other anthropological papers and have supplied an informal network for the last twenty years, which they will continue to do.

Toward a Disciplinary Strategy

The task of preserving anthropological records cannot be done by the NAA alone, and the NAA cannot — nor should it — accept all of the records created by anthropologists. Indeed, there are many archives and other organizations actively engaged in the preservation of records. (See O'Toole [1990] for an overview of the history and rationale for preserving records.) Universities and museums are the main repositories for anthropological records, although one of the best-known institutions for collecting anthropological materials is the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. The concern of most archivists and manuscript librarians is to place materials in an appropriate repository and to provide accessibility to researchers. Any progress that is made will come through a cooperative effort among individual professionals, organizations, and funding agencies.

Communication between anthropologists and record-keepers has been inadequate in the past. Repositories have had little incentive to keep anthropological records: for academic archivists, anthropological fieldwork had little to do with documenting university activities; for museums, field notes were often considered important only as a way of documenting collections. The records were often bulky and included many oversized items. Moreover, until recently, relatively few people used the collections that were available. Access was a key problem. Anthropologists often did not know where to find the records nor which repositories were collecting records. Fortunately, the situation is changing, as exemplified by Lynne Sullivan's analysis of archaeological records in museums (1991), which recognizes the value of historical records for anthropologists. However, finding aids and inventories of existing collections and a listing of those repositories holding collections are still needed.

Some of the problems in locating records can be attributed to the different approaches that archivists and anthropologists have taken to

describing records. Archivists have agreed on a standardized computer format, MARC-AMC, which has been widely adopted within the last five years. The MARC descriptions are compatible with two major library networks: OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) and RLIN (Research Libraries Information Network). In the long run, descriptions of archival materials should be available in any research or public library, and even on personal computers. The descriptions are developed from library cataloging and are oriented toward items that have an author, title, and other characteristics of books. Archivists have managed to use the format also to indicate donors, department affiliations, important correspondents, preservation comments, and other elements important in describing documents. However, these schemes will be more useful to anthropologists if they include anthropologically meaningful cross-indices by time period, cultural/social grouping, and locale.

Future

A network of anthropological resources should be made available to preserve anthropological records and to make them accessible in repositories linked by compatible databases. Several of the museums, universities, and other organizations that house anthropological records already have active programs of this kind. Anthropologists are beginning to develop programs and guidelines of their own to deal with historical materials. A committee of organizations, such as the sponsors of the *Preserving Field Records* manual (Kenworthy et al. 1985), or organizational initiatives such as those of the Society for American Archaeology have produced very positive results. These efforts should be systematically coordinated by a national board or through some other mechanism.

The NAA would certainly wish to participate in any initiative. While the NAA is linked to departmental research staff, supporting linguistic analysis, Native American programs, collections documentation, exhibits, and other activities, the Archives recognizes that it serves a wider national and international community, and it plans to do so in the future. It will continue to collect and maintain records and to make them available for research. It also expects to continue to provide advice on anthropological records and to work in coordination with other repositories.

The NAA has effectively balanced special projects with its basic preservation and reference activities. It plans to carry forward this work by combining earmarked funding with its core federal funding and by pursuing cooperative projects. It is in a good position to facilitate communication between anthropologists and archivists. There is much to do to preserve the anthropological record, and the National Anthropological Archives has the experience and contacts to contribute to future efforts.

Summary

- The National Anthropological Archives is a key resource for anthropologists, both for its own collections and for information on the location of other anthropological records, donation procedures, possible repositories for records, and general archival preservation issues.
- The NAA is interested in participating in cooperative projects, particularly those involving outreach and database development.
- Individual institutions should be urged to contribute to a network of anthropological resources aimed at preserving anthropological records and at making them accessible in repositories linked by compatible databases.

Notes

1. Annual Report of the National Museum of Natural History, *In* Smithsonian Year, 1969, p. 81. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
2. Council of Fellows Resolution, American Anthropological Association, November 23, 1968.