



March 12, 2025

Establishing Archives

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the CTAS website (ctas.tennessee.edu). This website is maintained by CTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee county government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with county government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other CTAS website material.

Sincerely,

The University of Tennessee
County Technical Assistance Service
226 Anne Dallas Dudley Boulevard, Suite 400
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
615.532.3555 phone
615.532.3699 fax
www.ctas.tennessee.edu

Establishing Archives	3
------------------------------------	----------

Establishing Archives

Reference Number: CTAS-1211

In addition to, or in conjunction with setting up a records center, your county should consider establishing a county archives if one is not already in existence. An archives differs from a records center in that the records center generally keeps inactive records for a temporary time period before their final disposition. A records center will primarily be used by the officials and employees who created the records that are stored in the center as some need requires them to retrieve older inactive records. An archives is usually dedicated to preserving records of such historical value that they should be maintained permanently. The two may be located in the same facility and virtually indistinguishable to the public, or they may be separately located and operated facilities. An archives provides many of the same benefits as a records center, namely, removing records that are not regularly used by an office from expensive and cluttered office space and providing proper storage conditions for the records. An archives also serves an important role in preserving the history of our country and our communities and provides a valuable resource for members of the community researching our past. More likely, these private researchers will access the records of a county archives more often than county employees. By providing another location for this research, the archives indirectly helps county officials by allowing them to refer genealogists, students, and other researchers to another office rather than diverting time and effort from their daily tasks to assist those people in accessing the older, historical records of the county.

Sample Resolution to Establish a County Archives

Specifications

Since the primary purpose of the archives is to preserve records permanently, the environmental conditions for the archives are even more important than those for a record center. The following considerations for archival space are recommended by the Tennessee State Library and Archives.^[1]

Archives Storage and Management Space

Archival standards should be met so as to preserve local archives for future use. The closer local archives come to meeting these standards, the more likely it is that the records will survive.^[2]

- Distinctly exclusive space—An entirely separate building is desirable, but not essential, and some counties may not be able to afford it. In an existing building, a separate, exclusive space that can be secured from unauthorized entry and that meets the following general specifications is the minimal requirement to assure proper maintenance. The space should not be combined or confused with any other use.^[3]
- A strong, durable building that is earthquake-resistant and storm-resistant—Heavy (e.g. masonry and steel) construction is desirable, not only to resist storm and earthquake damage, but also to help meet the other standards, below with greater economy of operating costs.
- Secure against theft and other hostile intrusion—A safe and secure locking system for the space is highly desirable. Entry to and exit from the space should be controlled by official staff so that patrons are not free to come and go without surveillance, so as to assure that documents will not be stolen or removed inadvertently without proper authorization.
- As damp-proof as possible with a consistently moderate relative humidity—The best relative humidity for archival materials is a constant RH of 45–55 percent; excessive ranges and changes in humidity tend to speed up deterioration of archives materials. Leaky roofs, walls, and foundations that invite seepage and mold are natural enemies of archives. The site of the archives space should be chosen to protect it from flooding, either from nearby rivers or from excessive ground-water during heavy rains. Care should be taken to see that water pipe systems that serve the space are sound and leak-free.
- Consistently moderate temperature—The best temperature for archival materials is a constant temperature between 65 and 70 degrees Fahrenheit. Excessive ranges and swings of temperature tend to speed up deterioration of archival materials.^[4]
- Free of pollutants—As much as possible, air circulation systems should be filtered to remove contaminating acids, dust, and other air-borne dangers to archives materials.
- Free of biological pests—As much as possible, the archives should be protected against and free from insects, rodents, mold, and other biological dangers to records.
- Free from ultra-violet light—As much as possible, sunlight and other sources of ultra-violet light,

such as fluorescent tubes, that tend to damage film and paper documents must be excluded from the archives by shielding and filtration.^[5]

- Fire-proof—To the greatest extent possible, construction materials should be of masonry, steel, and other fire-retardant or fire-resistant materials. Care should be taken to see that heating and electrical systems that serve the space are not likely to cause accidental fires.
- Protected by a reliably-tested fire suppressant system—The most commonly-advised system is a reliable water sprinkler system with proper drainage for the water to be eliminated readily. Desirable fire protection includes rapid response by local fire fighting teams and briefing and orientation of local fire departments by local government officials on the nature of the archives and the need to preserve the content materials.^[6]
- Shelves and other containers should meet archival specifications—Shelving should be of strong, baked enamel steel construction.^[7] Enough space should be left between shelves, for convenient access and to inhibit fire migration. Shelves should be deep enough so that there is no overhang of boxes. Oversize materials (such as engineering drawings) should be in oversize shelving or metal cabinets.
- Foldering and boxing of records—To the extent possible, records should be kept in acid-neutral paperboard boxes and folders (available from archival suppliers). This often requires removing records from original folders and boxes to new ones and labeling the new containers.
- Disaster plan—A well-devised disaster plan for actions to take in case of fire, flood, water leakage, earthquake, theft, bomb-threats, or other dangers to archives should be written. There are good models of disaster plans already in existence. Local archives can acquire one of these and adapt it to local conditions.^[8] Archives staff should be trained in its provisions and should know what to do in any emergency.

Technical Assistance

The Tennessee State Library and Archives is making an active effort to encourage the development of local and regional archives across the state. It is an excellent source of technical assistance and advice in developing an archives. The Tennessee State Library and Archives has produced a series of Tennessee Archives Management Advisories that provide a wealth of information on a number of topics.

[1] These recommendations are from the Tennessee Archives Management Advisory (TAMA) 99-004 Basic Archives Management Guidelines, p. 5.

[2] More detailed standards are available from the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

[3] In the past, some people have regarded archives as “dead” storage and put valuable records into rooms with old furniture, cleaning equipment, fuel stores, or into fire-trap attics and basements with dirt, vermin and the like. That kind of negligence endangers the very evidence that public interest needs to save and protect.

[4] There are stricter archival standards, with narrower ranges of tolerance for ideal conditions. Some materials may also require slightly optimum temperature and humidity. However, these present standards are tolerable for local archives that do not have the resources for highly-sophisticated environmental control systems.

[5] Incandescent lights do not produce strong ultra-violet rays, but fluorescent lamps do and they must be shielded with ultra-violet ray filters if they are used.

[6] Much damage has been done to records when local fire-fighters treat archives as they would any other storehouse of replaceable goods.

[7] Wood is flammable and it often gives off gasses and oils that may damage archives.

[8] The University Library of Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville has a well-developed disaster plan that may be used as a model. Other models are available from TSLA and CTAS.

Source URL: <https://www.ctas.tennessee.edu/eli/establishing-archives>