

History Lost? Saving Louisiana's Archival Heritage

Executive Summary

The Louisiana Historical Association's Ad Hoc Committee on Preserving Louisiana's Archival Heritage offers this "Statement of Action" and seeks support statewide. Signatories of the Statement will commit to add their strengths to meeting our agreed upon goals for "Saving Louisiana's Archival Heritage." We prepared this initiative to outline anew the many challenges to archival preservation and to invite your participation in this renewed effort to save the records of our extraordinary patrimony.

Louisiana's historical archives are endangered assets, imperiled by direct and indirect threats. We have three main areas of concern: first, saving all historical and public records, paper to digital, that are held by organizations and entities; second, the preservation of historical (and other) records created by institutions and organizations that are not housed in archival facilities; and third, the transferring to the appropriate repository of public records that are currently in private hands.

The LHA aspires to assemble a broad coalition of any and all organizations, institutions, offices, and agencies that have an interest or stake in the preservation of Louisiana's archival heritage. These constituencies include state legislators, the governor's office, and other appropriate state agencies. Also included are professional associations with a specific focus on libraries, museums, and record management; genealogical societies and organizations, and regional historical and professional associations.

The goals of this initiative are to educate government officials, institutional administrators, and the general public of the threat to Louisiana's archives and the need to preserve them. The committee will undertake to set both short-term and long-term objectives and timelines for the effective implementation of these goals. The funding of preservation initiatives is imperative and is among our primary goals. However, this initiative would not rely strictly on public funding but instead could be a joint public-private initiative, partnering with private foundations and businesses.

The Louisiana Historical Association will present the compiled comments, letters of support, and the final version of this document to the Governor, the Legislature, the Secretary of State (authority over the State Archives and museums), the Lt. Governor (authority over the State Library of Louisiana and museums), and other state and local officials with authority over libraries, museums, archives, colleges and universities, etc., to gain their support. Through these government agencies and professional organizations, the LHA can spearhead a campaign to educate the public.

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The Louisiana Historical Association's Official Statement and Plan of Action

I. Preamble

Louisiana's historical archives are endangered treasures. They are more than scraps of yellowed paper and tattered leather-bound journals. They are the state's intellectual patrimony. And, thanks to the state's civilian law heritage, they are virtually unique, capturing, usually in notarized documents, the mundane transactions of everyday life, registering who we are and who we have been as a people. It is a peerless tradition of record keeping over time. Today they are imperiled by climate and neglect. Losing them will sever us off from our past and impair our ability to remain informed citizens, so critical to the functioning of democracy itself.

One of the first tasks is to confront challenges of preserving the full range of Louisiana's archival collections. Although some records are already archived in libraries and universities, a great deal of historical materials remain outside archival care. The Louisiana Historical Association's Ad Hoc Committee on Preserving Louisiana's Archival Heritage offers this "Statement of Action" and seeks support from organizations, institutions, and individuals statewide. Signatories of the Statement will commit to add their strengths to meeting our agreed upon goals for "Saving Louisiana's Archival Heritage."

All citizens are part of public and historical records, from cradle to grave. Citizens require public records in their daily lives. Citizens also share the need to know their family histories and to pass those histories onto their descendants. Governments cannot continue without public records. Teachers seek historical records for lesson plans and classroom discussions. Lawyers excavate those records to establish chains of title in property transfers. Louisiana historians connect us to the past through research in historical and public records. Historians from across the United States and in Europe are also quarrying Louisiana records. Records created by Louisiana governments, institutions, and businesses from the territorial period through today, whether on parchment, paper or in digital files contain our history. "Saving Louisiana's Archival Heritage" is imperative for now and for the future.

II Problems, Difficulties, and Challenges

1. Concerns and threats

Broadly speaking, we have three main areas of concern. The first includes saving all historical and public records, paper to digital, that are held by governments, universities, public libraries, churches, institutions, businesses, and any other organizations and entities that hold records relevant to Louisiana's history. The second includes the preservation of historical (and other) records created by the foregoing

institutions and organizations that are not, for whatever reason, housed in archival facilities. The third includes the transferring to the appropriate repository of public records that are currently in private hands.

Louisiana's public records face any number of direct threats. For instance, the State Archives, founded in 1956, maintains records of the state government. From that day to this, however, the agency has lacked sufficient funding, staffing, and—at times—vigorous leadership. It is telling that the State Archives was without a proper home before construction of the Essen Lane building in the 1980s. The construction of this facility was a tremendous step forward. Nonetheless, the work of the State Archives is further hampered by a toothless public records law that has no enforcement provisions and permits clerks of court, state agencies, and executive departments to maintain their records on their own. A public records law that lacks clear enforcement provisions is virtually useless in ensuring the preservation of public records. No matter how conscientious these other public officials may be in preserving the records in their custody, the fact that they cannot be legally required to remand those records to the State Archives represents an institutional problem that needs to be corrected.

Louisiana's archival heritage faces other direct threats. These include the climate and natural disasters, the inconvenient or inaccessible locations of archival facilities, the lack of financial resources, minimal staffing, and inadequate storage space. Moreover, while many historical materials are not held in appropriate archival custody, many archival institutions themselves lack complete cataloguing information for the materials that *are* in their care. Much public attention has been devoted to Louisiana's rapidly eroding coastal areas. But the consequences of global warming will also directly affect repositories—in southern Louisiana especially but in the state as a whole. Archival institutions are severely and directly affected by Louisiana's continuously poor economy. Inadequate funding, in turn, limits the number of appropriately trained staff, leads to the deferring of essential (not discretionary) maintenance of physical plant, circumscribes access to storage space and supplies, and all but precludes archival institutions from competing for grants, since no necessary matching funds are available. These deficiencies prevent archival institutions from accessioning those historical materials that are in physical danger and that the institutions in question should be working to secure.

The direct threats to Louisiana's archival heritage are only amplified by myriad indirect threats. These include the lack of public knowledge and awareness of, and support for, the work and mission of archival institutions, the absence of administrative backing for archives and special collections in most institutions of higher education, and minimal (and even inappropriate) levels of staffing and adequate storage space.

We are not unaware of the very real financial constraints that fundamentally shape so much of life in Louisiana. Neither are we insensitive to the competition, historically speaking, among various constituencies in Louisiana for limited financial resources, especially regarding education, health care, and the environment. All of these things are essential to the quality of life of Louisiana's citizens and—some might argue—ininitely more pressing than the preservation of old, musty documents. These are undoubtedly

legitimate concerns, and indeed we share them. Nonetheless, we remain of the opinion that the loss of this archival heritage potentially represents as much of a *long-term* threat to our democratic way of life and institutions—to who we are as a people—as does the closing of a school, public health facility, or job-training center.

2. Potential constituents

The LHA aspires to assemble a broad coalition of organizations, institutions, offices, and agencies that have an interest or stake in the preservation of Louisiana’s archival heritage. These constituencies include state legislators, the governor’s office, and other appropriate state agencies. Also included are professional associations with a specific focus on libraries, museums, and record management, such as the Louisiana Clerks of Court Association, the Louisiana Archives and Manuscripts Association, the Association of Records Managers and Administrators, the Louisiana Library Association, the Louisiana Museum Association, and the Le Comité des Archives de la Louisiane. The state bar association and other legal organizations, the Louisiana Genealogical and Historical Society and other genealogical societies, and regional historical and professional associations within Louisiana are also essential allies in this initiative. Finally, civic groups, churches, and other private organizations that are not ostensibly historical in nature but that possess a historical component can help to build grass-roots support for this initiative and contribute to it in other ways.

3. Previous research/surveys on the state (i.e., condition) of archives in the state:

In the 1970s the Chief Justice of Louisiana appointed a committee to evaluate the problems with protecting court records housed in parish courthouses. A number of the Clerks of Court objected to the possibility of their historical records being transferred to the State Archives for protection because they feared losing fees paid for photocopies from the records. Because these fees continue to be an important part of their operating revenue, the Clerks of Court have a reasonable concern over the issue of funding for their offices. This is precisely the kind of matter that needs to be corrected in order to secure the long-term preservation of the invaluable materials they have in their care. The LHA’s Ad Hoc Committee emphasizes that it sees the Clerks of Court not as adversaries in this process but as indispensable allies and collaborators. The LHA recognizes that the support of the Louisiana Clerks of Court Association—and of key individuals within it—is essential to the success of this initiative. One important challenge we admittedly face will be how to incentivize this initiative for the Clerks of Court.

In 2004 twenty-nine Louisiana cultural institutions participated in the “Heritage Health Index on the State of America’s Collections: A Public Trust at Risk.” Statistics are not broken down by state, but the overall outcome clearly shows our “culture at risk” throughout the United States, including Louisiana. In only one facet of the survey did less than 50% of the participants not report a need for assistance—and that was in pest management. A survey and assessment of conditions was needed in 78% of the institutions, staff training in 77%, cataloging in 75%, preservation of digital collections in 68%, and environmental controls in 65%. In 2014, a second Heritage Health Index was conducted, but the statistics and report are not yet available. If anything, history teaches us that conditions are worse in Louisiana, by just about any measurement, than they are

in the rest of the nation, and often in the rest of the South. There can be little doubt that the statistics reported in 2004 were considerably higher for Louisiana.

In 2010 the Louisiana Archives and Manuscripts Association received a grant from the Institute of Museum and Libraries Services to conduct a preservation needs survey of cultural heritage institutions (archives, libraries, museums, historical societies' museums and libraries). An online survey was distributed to 348 Louisiana institutions. Although only 83 institutions, or 24%, responded, one of the most serious findings was many institutions' lack of complete inventories for the contents of their collections and archives. Other needs that were identified included plans for the storage and maintenance of digital collections once they were acquired or created; disaster planning, especially the creation of Continuity of Operations Plans; preservation and disaster preparedness education and training; and, of course, funding.

In addition to these disturbing survey results, conditions are below minimum professional standards or "best practices" in many institutions. Even where professional standards are being met, there remains dire need of improvement in space allocation, staffing, emergency preparedness, and collection accessibility. Of particular concern, among others, are Louisiana's courthouses and the condition of the records stored in them, the New Orleans Archives at the New Orleans Public Library, and historic-house museums with archival records but no environmental controls. In some instances, simply getting materials off the floor would represent a dramatic improvement. The Denham Springs City Hall was flooded in August 2016. Records relating to cemeteries in the area were destroyed, and the roofs of buildings holding historical materials leaked profusely. Finally, the University of New Orleans Library recently renovated the space for its Special Collections department, but library staffing has been reduced so significantly that the department enjoys no regular, full-time staff and is open only by appointment.

III Solutions/Proposals

1. General Statement

The goals of this initiative fall along two general lines: first, educate government officials, institutional administrators, and the general public of the threat to Louisiana's archives and the need to preserve them; and, second, promote models of good and consistent care of parish records, such as those practiced by the Clerks offices in Lafourche and East Feliciana Parishes. In order to accomplish these goals, the committee will undertake to set both short-term and long-term objectives, and to establish a triage system in order to effectively distinguish between the needs of preservation versus those of conservation (i.e., emergency situations vs. long-term projects). The committee will also set timelines for the effective implementation of these goals.

2. Short-Term Goals

- I. Identify stakeholders and have them sign a petition in support of these proposals.

- II. Solicit repository curators and managers to determine their preservation needs.
- III. Identify a funding source and write a grant proposal to assist the following entities in determining the help they need and how this help can be provided. Solicit an institutional sponsor that will serve as the agency for acquiring and managing grants. For the short-term, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, which hosts the Louisiana Historical Association, could serve as institutional sponsor. Name a project director and project board to carry out the grant's plan of work, and solicit volunteers to assist in information gathering and drafting further grants.
- IV. Begin preservation efforts by identifying and prioritizing five (5) specific institutions and/or issues that require or reflect immediate and emergency needs in preserving public and historical records:
 - 1) The New Orleans Public Library City Archives Division;
 - 2) Clerks of Court offices in the following parishes;
 - a. Avoyelles
 - b. Orleans
 - 3) Old Mint of New Orleans Louisiana State Museum;
 - 4) Secure the transmitting of all records required by law from the State Governor's Office for certain recent governors to the State Archives;
 - 5) Develop strategies to incentivize this initiative for key organizations, especially the Clerks of Court Association, so as to gain their support

3. Short-term goal timeline and funding:

2017-2018:

March—LHA meeting, document delivered to membership

April—call for volunteers for preservation efforts

Summer—stakeholder petition drafted, approved, circulated

Summer/Fall—identify grant sources, begin to apply for initial grants, appoint project director and project board, identify institutional sponsor

Summer/Fall—preservation needs submitted by curators and managers

Fall—assembly of professional evaluators begin preservation efforts

Fall—solicit comments on statement and proposals from professional organizations, government officials, stakeholders, and the public

September—grant application ready to submit

December—reports from preservation teams noting preservation activities

December—solicit signatures of commitment

March—LHA meeting, report to membership

The funding of preservation initiatives is imperative. It is and will be among our primary goals. These initiatives are not simply directives, ambitions, or aspirations. The entirety of initiatives, and the funding thereof, must include compensation in the form of time and stipends for professionals willing to assess the conditions of records. These individuals will have to travel, taking leave from their jobs. Time in the form of exemptions must be awarded to them and to the workers in the repositories under examination. Once preservation needs are assessed, funds will be required for the purchase of materials (acid-free folders, boxes, and interleaving paper; microspatulas; bonefolders and straight-edges) essential to storing documents and prolonging their viability and usefulness. In some dire cases, the facility housing the archival documents may be run-down and actively contributing to their disintegration. Digitization helps to alleviate this problem by making electronic copies of documents widely available, but it does not solve the problem. Digital availability may also—and usually does—promote greater use of the materials.

Securing funding for this initiative presents both opportunities and challenges. A number of Louisiana businesses and foundations are potential sources of funding and will need to be identified. One major challenge in applying to granting agencies, especially at the federal level, is the requirement that the state provide matching funds. This requirement applies, for example, to the LEH, NHPRC, and IMLS. The U.S. Department of Education sometimes makes available appropriate funding initiatives. The IMLS currently has a funding opportunity of up to \$3 million over three years, but it requires a 50/50 match. The initiative will also need to overcome the reluctance of certain groups, such as the Louisiana State Bar Association, to contribute to project funding.

Volunteers can be solicited from the professional associations, with the LHA leading the way. The functions of volunteers will include outreach to those groups and individuals we hope will be willing to sign a statement of support for the proposals; compiling comments and other responses, and reviewing and revising the proposals; and engaging in public speaking in various venues with regard to the initiative and proposals.

3. Long-term goals

I. Recognize that the five immediate objectives identified under “short-term goals” are only the “tip of the iceberg” and the beginning of a larger initiative to create comprehensive policy objectives for the preservation of paper to digital files.

II. Work with state officials to improve funding and begin a public fund-raising campaign; apply for grants to create an advisory group that will aid those officials responsible for historical archives, and develop a volunteer group available to inventory archival holdings. These efforts will help us to gather essential information in applying for further grants and requesting specific funds from the public and non-government granting agencies.

III. Establish relationships between credentialed and experienced professionals (archivists and historians) and individuals who work in various capacities with historic documents. Nurture and maintain these relationships through outreach to history workers and by extending training and professional development opportunities. Louisiana can serve as a pilot program for creating a unified history community. This coalition will require by-laws and governors. It must be nonpartisan, and it must hold archival and historic preservation as its highest goal.

IV. Digitize parish court records and make them available online. One potential model for such an objective would be the Library of Virginia's Circuit Court Records Preservation Program, which was implemented in the early 1990s and has been a tremendous success.

V. Construct regional off-site archival storage facilities with appropriate environmental and security controls and staffing while also ensuring full accessibility. In Texas, for example, empty retail space and other structures have been appropriately converted for such use.

In working toward these goals, this initiative could become a twenty-first-century version of the Historical Records Survey of the New Deal era's Works Progress Administration. However, this initiative would not rely strictly on public funding but instead could be a joint public-private initiative, partnering with private foundations and businesses. Nonetheless, the preservation of archival materials must always remain the primary goal and receive the highest priority of this initiative.

4. Long-term goal timeline: 2018-2022

2018

March—LHA annual meeting

March—call on stakeholders in the legislature to draft policy/law protecting Louisiana's Historic Heritage

June—draft preservation policies for all participating repositories

June—launch active preservation initiatives (training, rehousing documents)

June—call a meeting of stakeholders and representatives of participating groups and form a statewide alliance

[Further goals to be determined]

IV Summary

The Louisiana Historical Association should present the compiled comments, letters of support, and final version of this document to the Governor, the Legislature, the Secretary of State (authority over the State Archives and museums), the Lt. Governor (authority over the State Library of Louisiana and museums), and other state and local officials with authority over libraries, museums, archives, colleges and universities, etc.,

to gain their support. Through these government agencies and professional organizations, the LHA can spearhead a campaign to educate the public and to seek, when possible, legislative solutions to the challenges we face. The supported statement of action should also be transmitted to grant funding agencies at the state, regional and Federal levels. The LHA is aware that legislative sponsors will be necessary for implementing some of the specific measures that are put forward in this statement.

The Great Flood of August 2016 was only the latest of the many perils that have threatened and continue to imperil Louisiana's rich archival heritage. If the preservation of this archival heritage is ignored, its loss is not just something that *could* happen but *will* happen. Indeed, it *is* happening. These records will not last if deliberate action is not taken to preserve them. Their destruction would represent nothing less than a devastating and irreparable loss of our historical and cultural heritage. As we know, there has been considerable public debate recently—much of it heated—over the proper role and function of historical markers and monuments in commemorating Louisiana's past. Reasonable people, it has often been noted, can disagree. However, no reasonable person would dispute the need to preserve the materials that constitute the very building blocks of our past. No meaningful marker or monument could be created without an informed understanding of the historical record, a record that itself cannot survive if the stuff of which it is made is not preserved. Without this archival heritage, we would be bereft of our own past (as will future generations), and of our very identity as a people.

With that in mind, the Louisiana Historical Association's Ad Hoc Committee on Preserving Louisiana's Archival Heritage prepared this draft initiative to outline anew the many challenges to archival preservation and to invite your participation in this renewed effort to save the records of our extraordinary patrimony.