

## Mission/Parish Archiving Diocesan Presentation, December 1, 2020

In June of 2019 I presented a proposal to the BAC of St. Bede Episcopal Church for retooling one of the few available office complex rooms into a permanent archive. At the time of this proposal I had been working since the end of 2013 on collecting, collating, and properly cataloging the discrete historical documents, records, correspondence, and ephemera that largely make up the archival vertical file collection of any church. During the five-and-a-half years leading up to my request I had taken over counters and file drawers far and wide to house what I had already processed and had also determined that complex-wide there were approximately 8½ linear feet of BAC notebooks, 2½ linear feet of church scrapbooks, assorted architectural renderings, framed photographs, loose photographs to be contained in archival photo boxes and a variety of three-dimensional memorabilia.

When I submitted my proposal, St. Bede was amidst a year-long process of congregational discernment. Though this activity was centered on looking towards the future, I felt it important to remind the BAC that the future does not exist in a vacuum and that our past history and experiences will always inform, to some degree, how we think about and respond to both the present and the future. This is why the proper maintenance and preservation of a church archive is more than an exercise in office management. Access to historical materials and the interpretation of those materials can only serve our hopes and dreams for the future. This fact alone should lead us to desire to create a special space for the processing and housing of these materials. The bottom line is where do we start and how do we accomplish this given all our dissimilar realities and needs.

Let's start with basic descriptions and institutional constructs. By definition an archive is a "collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people." Colleges and universities, corporations, governments, historical societies, museums, and religious institutions all maintain archives to some degree. The Archives of the Episcopal Church declare that it is their mission to "honor the Episcopal community's diversity, educate Episcopalians for mission, and communicate an inspiring faith for future ministry." To accomplish this mission, they seek to "unlock institutional memory to frame new reflections on our unfolding mission" and "to connect the Church's history with today's ministries by creating innovative information pathways." To move forward with

this vision they have to daily accommodate the seemingly diametrically opposed archival goals of access and preservation. This will be your task at the mission and parish level as well.

Given the discrepancies that undoubtedly exist in storage capabilities, supply needs and that oh so necessary enthusiastic volunteer, you are all going to be confronted with a different reality in your attempt to set up an archive. This is why it is important that you understand that, though nothing else may currently be addressed, you can at least hopefully find someone who would be willing to start going through all those old papers and ephemera that have been shoved into banker's boxes living in a closet or under a stairwell and sorting them first into chronological order and then by subject!

This initial task can be readily accomplished using acid free file folders labeled for each year since your church's founding and then employing a second batch of these folders to be broken down by chronology and subject heading. Out of deference to paper abrasion, each folder should ideally have no more than ten items in it. I am ashamed to admit that I have been a professional archivist for over 30 years and I never initiated this basic sorting procedure in any archive I worked with until I started archiving my own family's documents and photographs. (Yes, I do have a family archive!) Those of us who are trained have a tendency to want to gloss over the basics and get to the "fun part"—in this case, the processing—but I can assure you that you will save yourselves untold hours of corrections and redo's if you simply begin with the slog—the basic sorting!

And what will you be sorting? Before you (and hopefully before your eager volunteer) will be a bewildering variety of items: newspaper clippings, bulletins, correspondence, programs, flyers, instructions, directories, contracts, pamphlets, and so on and so forth. In the professional archive world, these disparate items are known as an *artificial collection*, a collection of materials with different provenance (the history of ownership). In a church archive, we simply refer to them as the *vertical file*, but the goal remains the same. The bottom line is that they need to be organized in such a way that they can be easily managed, preserved, and made accessible.

As you may have noted, there is one prominent historical format missing from the above list: photographic images. This is because the single area of physical division that is mandatory in any archive exists between paper materials—the vertical file—and photographs. Though each can be filed in

appropriate acid-free storage units and though the photographs might have been all mixed up with your documentary and ephemera materials in those bankers boxes you are attempting to sort, they are dealt with as a separate entity. More on the reasons for this shortly.

So, what do you do once you have several plastic bins of hanging files containing subject heading folders in chronological order? First, you recognize that proper archival subject headings should reflect the type of institution in which the archive resides. For decades now, professional archivists have relied upon a variety of anthropological terms to generate standard subject lists as they are essentially dealing with all things related to humans and their activities. Those activities associated with the Episcopal Church are, indeed, human but they are also institution specific. Once a main, institutional heading is determined, it can then be broken down into specific activities, administrative duties, celebrations, various sacraments, etc. To allay the fears of the office staff, parishioners and/or researchers who tend to think in terms of a letter about the upcoming Christmas celebrations as simply being filed under “Christmas,” you can create a common word index which enables them to go to “Christmas” and then be directed to “Church Seasons—Christmas.”

Fortunately, you may use the same subject headings for your photo files. In the larger world of archiving this becomes a more difficult task as photographic cataloging rules dictate that your image be cataloged based on what you *see* as opposed to what you *read*. This might seem a “hair-splitting” distinction but many a cataloger has failed to make it and it can lead to countless hours of frustration and correction! Fortunately, our images are usually a simple visual documentation of our other institutionally generated headings, so each can complement the other.

Up to this point we have essentially been addressing the initial principles of sorting and identification. These two activities, however, speak to only one of the archive’s disparate goals, that of access. What about preservation, its second mandate? Any man-made item is ultimately doomed to disintegration and this is a reality the archivist must live with. Fortunately, knowing how to easily prolong the useful life of your archival materials is primarily a matter of understanding the forces that destroy them. While eventual disintegration is inevitable, it is possible to forestall the end for decades, if not centuries--a long time in the history of a mission or parish church! For paper materials (and this includes the vast majority

of your photographs), the primary destructive agents you need to be aware of are acid, ultra-violet light, moisture, temperature, disasters, pests *and* human handling.

Since your goal is to preserve and not conserve (believe me, proper conservation is for the professionals!), your focus should be on the materials you purchase to house your archival items. Your rock bottom need is for archival folders for your vertical file and archival photo boxes and appropriate envelopes and sleeves for your loose photographs. These enclosures make your photographs last longer because they protect against light, dust, air pollutants, pests, rapid fluctuations in temperature and humidity *and* human handling. They must be made of materials that are strong, durable, and chemically stable if they are to provide long-term protection. Acid free file folders are easily obtainable and not outrageously expensive. They are the first step in preserving your documentary materials so long as you keep the number of enclosures per folder pared down to avoid abrasion. Photos can be stored in either neutral pH paper envelopes and sleeves or clear plastic enclosures constructed of an inert plastic. For your purposes, the latter is probably most appropriate, because the former encourages too much potentially damaging handling.

Amazingly, human handling is generally the most destructive of all the preservation evils. Many people handle historic documents just as they do other paper materials. Handle these documents with care! Professionals generally wear archival cotton gloves but, at a minimum, you should wash your hands frequently and make sure that they are thoroughly dry when beginning to handle your archival materials. Also remember that older items are generally much more brittle than today's papers. And, just like most of us as we get older, they cannot be bent, folded, pushed around, or abraded without damage!

Finally, a word about tools. As with most professions, there is a bottom-line rule in museum work and archiving. Simply put, *NEVER DO ANYTHING YOU CAN'T UNDO*. This means that you are *never* to write on a photo or document with anything other than a PENCIL. If you find yourself without a pencil, temporarily use a post-it or an *inert* paper clip to clip a note to the item identifying what it is until you do have access to a pencil. Ink or marker cannot be removed and the chemicals that oftentimes are used in their processing can actually be harmful to your photos and documents.

Also, think twice or even three times about attempting any conservation beyond simple preservation. Remember, conservation is best left to the professionals! Ignore the fact that the church scrapbooks' contain torn and degraded items and that everything is mounted on good, old-fashioned acidic scrapbook construction paper. *Do not* give in to the temptation to mend those items with your handy roll of scotch tape or remove images whose color is literally “bleeding” into the paper they are mounted on or glue down loose photographs with white glue. Each of these items—transparent tape, plain glue, and many other normal office supplies such as metal staples—are archival enemies. They literally eat away at the surface of the items they are meant to repair and they leave stains, tears and marks when they are removed.

In closing, a final word on archival preservation and what it means to our history. Our modern electronic world has made many avenues of communication and storage much easier for us and, to a large extent, this is a good thing. However, it has also to some extent encouraged us to be less respectful of the “stuff” that was important enough to those that came before us that they saved it for us. We should, to the extent that we are able, make use of our modern technology as a back-up to our archive, say with the scanning and photocopy labeling of all of our processed materials. This is an integral part of what we do at St. Bede and it is extremely important. What we must avoid, however, is the temptation to think that the computer record is enough and that we no longer need to hold on to all the originals.

Never forget that *scanning is not a substitute for the original, it is a back-up methodology* and to give it primacy of place is to do an immense disservice to those who deemed of importance the myriad items that you will undoubtedly find in your banker's boxes or their equivalent. That said . . . happy archiving!

Laurie Baker

Church Archivist

St. Bede Episcopal Church

Forest Grove, Oregon 97116