

# A.A.® Guidelines

## Archives

from GSO, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163

A.A. Guidelines are compiled from the shared experience of A.A. members in various service areas. They also reflect guidance given through the Twelve Traditions and the General Service Conference (U.S. and Canada). In keeping with our Tradition of autonomy, except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole, most decisions are made by the group conscience of the members involved. The purpose of these Guidelines is to assist in reaching an *informed* group conscience.

### SERVICE THROUGH ARCHIVES

*Whenever a society or civilization perishes there is always one condition present; they forgot where they came from.*

—Carl Sandburg

Like any other A.A. service, the primary purpose of those involved in archival work is to carry the message of Alcoholics Anonymous. Archives service work is more than mere custodial activity; it is the means by which we collect, preserve, and share the rich and meaningful heritage of our Fellowship. It is by the collection and sharing of these important historical elements that our collective gratitude for Alcoholics Anonymous is deepened.

A.A. members have a responsibility to gather and care for the Fellowship's historical documents and memorabilia. Correspondence, records, minutes, reports, photographs, newspaper and magazine articles from the past and the present should be collected, preserved, and made available for the guidance and research of A.A. members and others (researchers, historians, and scholars from various disciplines) — for now and for generations to come.

Many areas, districts, intergroup/central offices, and groups have elected to develop archives collections to preserve their own local history. These guidelines have been developed to assist with these efforts.

### GENERAL SERVICE OFFICE ARCHIVES

The GSO Archives has a Mission and Purpose statement, which can serve as a foundation from which each local and area A.A. archives can develop its own principles according to its group conscience. It reads:

#### MISSION

The mission of the Alcoholics Anonymous General Service Office Archives is to document permanently the work of Alcoholics Anonymous, to make the history of the organization accessible to A.A. members and other researchers, and to provide a context for understanding A.A.'s progression, principles and traditions.

#### PURPOSE

Consistent with A.A.'s primary purpose of maintaining our sobriety and helping other alcoholics achieve recovery, the Archives of Alcoholics Anonymous will:

- Receive, classify, and index all relevant material, such as administrative files and records, digital materials, correspondence, and literary works and artifacts considered to have historical importance to Alcoholics Anonymous.
- Hold and preserve such material.
- Provide access to these materials, as determined by the archivist in consultation with the trustees' Archives Committee, to members of Alcoholics Anonymous and to others who may have a valid need to review such material, contingent upon a commitment to preserve the anonymity of our members.
- Serve as a resource and laboratory to stimulate and nourish learning.
- Provide information services to assist the operations of Alcoholics Anonymous.
- Promote knowledge and understanding of the origins, goals and programs of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The General Service Office Archives is administered by the GSO archivist. The policies, procedures, and projects of the General Service Office Archives are overseen by a trustees' committee of the General Service Board (which meets three times per year), as well as a committee of the General Service Conference (which meets jointly with the trustees' Archives Committee during the annual General Service Conference).

For more information about the GSO Archives collections, projects, and services, see the Archives Workbook, or GSO's A.A. website, at [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org). You can also contact us anytime with specific questions. You will find our contact information in the "References" section on page 3.

### A FEW WORDS ABOUT ANONYMITY

The question often arises if, in collecting, writing up, or displaying local or area history, full names or full face photos should be used of group founders, early members or group officers, regardless of whether the manuscripts are to be retained in the area only, or are also intended for sharing with GSO and other area archives. Development of procedures seems to be a matter of local policy decision by the archives committee, but the necessity for protecting the anonymity of A.A. members whose identity could be determined by photos or correspondence is without question an important consideration and a trust that falls upon all A.A. archivists and archives committees.

Archives committees that plan to exhibit in venues that might be viewed by the public, such as at certain events or on the Internet, may wish to limit the display to only those items that are in keeping with our principle of anonymity. Archival displays at A.A. events might also include signs about anonymity throughout the exhibit area, and discourage picture taking of certain items. For more information, the pamphlet "Understanding Anonymity" contains shared experience of how A.A. members practice our principle of anonymity, including posthumous anonymity.

## **GETTING STARTED LOCALLY**

One of the best ways to get started in archival service work is to contact GSO in order to obtain the Archives Workbook, as well as other service pieces. The workbook contains helpful information gathered from shared experience over many years.

The idea of setting up an archives collection in a specific geographic area most often occurs to someone who has been in A.A. for a while, or to several oldtimers who realize the need to create local or area archival centers, often beginning with a project to collect material for an area history.

Often, after a need for an archives collection has been identified, the idea is brought to the area or other local committee, as applicable, for wider discussion. Following sharing and reaching a group conscience, it may then be agreed upon to create an Archives committee, responsible to the area or local committee. Archives committees usually include A.A. members knowledgeable about the early history, who have sources for obtaining historical A.A. material.

## **THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL ARCHIVES COMMITTEE**

The Archives committee is responsible for establishing policies, budgets and procedures. Through its group conscience, it undertakes and maintains final responsibility and authority for the use of the Archives. In all of its actions, the Archives committee needs to be guided by A.A.'s primary purpose.

One of the most important functions of the Archives committee is to establish a Collection Scope, defining and describing what the archives will and will not collect, and why. These parameters will guide the archivist in gathering material of historical significance and will reduce the amount of time and space spent collecting and preserving relatively insignificant materials. For an example of a defined Collection Scope, please contact the GSO Archives.

## **THE ROLE OF THE ARCHIVIST**

The Archives committee may decide, as its first act, to select a member to serve as the archivist, so that there will be a central administrator for the collection. From shared experience we know that it takes a considerable amount of time to become familiar with a collection of historical information. Therefore, it is suggested that the archivist not rotate frequently. Some areas choose to appoint non-rotating archivists who hold the position for many years.

The archivist is the person responsible for the collection, including documents, books, recordings, and artifacts. They maintain the physical integrity of the collection, and also develop an index, inventory, and/or finding aid, to provide easy ways to search and access the collection. The archivist is also responsible for ensuring the protection of the anonymity of members, and the confidentiality of all A.A. records. In most cases, the archivist regularly reports to the local A.A. entity that supports the work, giving updates on current projects. It is desirable that the archivist take at least an introductory course in archival science or library science, and have a membership in a local archivists' organization. For more information about how to find these educational opportunities, contact the GSO Archives.

The function of the archivist can be considered therefore to be two-fold: primarily, a custodial responsibility for assuring the physical integrity of the collection and its availability to persons with a valid reason for study; and also a parallel and critical role of information gatherer. The archivist gathers facts and documentation, from both the distant past and in the present, to preserve A.A.'s message. Bill W. urged that archives are needed "so that myth doesn't prevail over fact." In a real sense, A.A. archivists are "keepers of the past."

## **FINANCING THE ARCHIVES**

In keeping with Tradition Seven, the archives ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions. It is better when funding for the archives is derived from an overall budget of the A.A. entity it serves, rather than through separate A.A. contributions. In this way, archival activity can better reflect the support of the membership, and maintain the perspective of the entire range of Twelfth Step activity.

## **HOUSING THE ARCHIVES**

Over the years it has become clear that, whenever possible, an archives collection ought to be housed in rented space, rather than in an individual A.A. member's home. Renting space for the archives eliminates both any appearance of there being a "private collection," and any problems that might arise later regarding issues of ownership following the death or departure of a custodian. Additionally, with rented space, displays of all general material can be made available on a regularly scheduled basis.

## **DEVELOPING A COLLECTION**

The foundation of an archives collection may include: A.A. literature, General Service Conference materials, locally produced materials such as flyers, bulletins, newsletters, news articles, area or district committee reports and minutes, local group histories, local meeting lists, and other locally produced materials, in print and/or digital. The archivist might also arrange to audiotape local oldtimers, thus adding irreplaceable oral histories to the collection. If you need more information on collecting oral histories, the GSO Archives can send you a complete Guidelines for Collecting Oral Histories, which provides more tips, technical information, forms and questionnaires, and a source list for more information.

Whenever possible, the archivist seeks out and accumulates local A.A. historical material on an ongoing basis — including letters, bulletins and photographs — from oldtimers, past delegates, various committee members and so on. It is important to note that whenever a donation is made to an archives, a signed Deed of Gift should be included, indicating that the material has been legally transferred to the archives (rather than to an archivist) to avoid any later misunderstanding regarding ownership of the donation. For a sample Deed of Gift, see the Archives Workbook.

There are many other ways to develop collections. For example, archives committees can participate in and publicize local history-gathering efforts, making presentations, and offering table displays at many A.A. events, such as oldtimer meetings, conventions, and roundups.

## ARCHIVAL PROCEDURES

At a very basic level, archivists do four things with an archives collection:

1. Organize it: Sort the collection somehow; chronologically, alphabetically, by subject, and/or by type of object, in a sensible manner.
2. Catalog it: Create a searchable list or inventory describing each item in the collection.
3. Preserve it: Perform preservation tasks, from the very simple to the very complicated, to prolong the life of the item.
4. Let people know about it: Create exhibits and displays, publish articles about the archives in a newsletter, provide research access, and give information to those who have questions.

As soon as an item is received in the archives, it should be organized, filed appropriately, and added to the inventory list. Each item should be entered into some kind of retrieval system or database, either manual or computerized, in order to provide readily accessible information to researchers.

Next, the conservation and preservation needs of the collection should be evaluated. As a general rule, materials should be simply housed in acid-free folders and boxes to stabilize, protect, and preserve them. Archivists should avoid performing any 'repair' on a document or item that is not reversible. For example, documents should never be laminated, and adhesive tape should not be used, as this will inevitably do more harm than good. Sometimes it may be necessary to seek outside professional help to ensure the integrity of an item, through conservation, repair, reformatting, or digitization.

## RESEARCH IN THE ARCHIVES

Researchers working in the archives ought to be informed that they will be expected to adhere strictly to our Anonymity Traditions. Only first names and last initials may be used to identify A.A. members. With respect to GSO Archives, the trustees' Archives Committee has recommended that there be no photocopying of private correspondence, in order to assure anonymity protection, to maintain the physical integrity of archival documents, and to respect copyright

laws. The GSO Archives Photocopying Policy is available on the GSO A.A. website.

In addition to the preservation of the anonymity of the author of the correspondence, the writer's private opinions and observations, some of which might be controversial, must be treated with delicacy. In some cases members donate these documents with a trust and expectation that their remarks will be held in confidence. It is essential that the archives committee provide access to these kinds of materials only after great care and consideration of each individual's privacy.

## AVAILABLE ARCHIVAL ITEMS

The following items, available from GSO through the Catalog/Order Form, might appeal to those with an interest in A.A. history:

- Books such as *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, "Pass It On," *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, and *Our Great Responsibility*.
- "History of Service," two CDs containing audio recordings of Bill W. and other A.A. longtimers.
- "Voices of Our Co-founders," five excerpts from different talks by Bill and Dr. Bob available on audiocassette and CD.
- "Markings on the Journey," a video of A.A. history.

In addition, several items may be ordered directly from the GSO Archives: A photocopy of a prepublication manuscript of *Alcoholics Anonymous*; individual 8" x 10" black-and-white photographs of many places and individuals involved in the establishment of A.A.; the A.A. Archives service piece; and historical articles on A.A. and alcoholism. Contact the GSO Archives for a complete list of available items.

## REFERENCES

For a more detailed discussion of archival matters, please review the "Archives Workbook," (M-44I) \$2.50 USD, available from GSO.

For answers to any specific questions, and lists of additional resources, feel free to contact the GSO Archives at [archives@aa.org](mailto:archives@aa.org) or 212-870-3400. Other valuable information is available on GSO's A.A. website, at [www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org).

For basic archival information the Society of American Archivists (SAA) is a good source. They have published several books in their "Archival Fundamentals" series. SAA also offers a literature catalog and a list of archives workshops and seminars, and may be reached at: The Society of American Archivists, [www.archivists.org](http://www.archivists.org). For Canada: Association of Canadian Archivists, [www.archivists.ca](http://www.archivists.ca).

Annually, A.A. archivists come together for the National A.A. Archives Workshop (NAAAW). In this weekend event, A.A. archivists from all over the U.S. and Canada gather to learn from one another and share ideas. Instruction is given in basic archival techniques and ideas. This event is hosted by a different area each year. Learn more at: [www.naaaw.org](http://www.naaaw.org), or by contacting the GSO Archives to be connected with this year's host area.

