



Tennessee Archives Management Advisory

2004

SKETCH PLAN FOR A 1500-SQUARE-FOOT COUNTY ARCHIVES

This is a model to guide local authorities in planning a county archives—to demonstrate the kinds of things they need to consider. It is not a finished architectural plan. It is based on the square footage that is believed adequate to most county archives in Tennessee at the present time.

This design is a simple one that can be modified to suit local circumstances.

At the same time, archives require special construction that is different from an ordinary office building and different from a standard public library. Much more attention must be paid to the environmental integrity and access security of the archives than that of an office building or library. Although the archives must be accessible to the public, it must be controlled access, not free or casual access. Members of the public do not “browse” the stacks of an archives the way that they do in a library or a commercial shop.

Every record in an archives is a unique item—unlike books and magazines that are published in quantity and are replaceable. Once a record is gone it cannot be replaced. Therefore special care must be taken to keep it secure and in good material condition. This means that public access must be carefully controlled and supervised to prevent thoughtless damage or deliberate theft. It means that special attention must be paid to fire and flood protection and to the environmental conditions of the archives.

A wet-pipe sprinkler system with both smoke and heat sensor activation—preferably zoned to concentrate only on the source of trouble, is recommended. To protect records from water when sprinklers activate, shelves should be deep enough so that boxes do not overhang shelves, and no records should be stored on top shelves. In the stacks area, the sprinkler pipes should be centered on the centers of the aisles between rows of shelving.

The whole archives requires a relatively thick, well-insulated protective “envelope” of walls, floor, and ceiling—surrounding all three parts—that can hold constant temperature and humidity with minimal adjustment of the HVAC systems used to control the internal environment.

The archives should be on a separately-controlled HVAC system from the rest of any building in which it is located. The system machinery (compressors, blowers, etc.) need to be outside the “skin” of the protective envelope of the archives. This requires space in the building in addition to the 1500 square feet of the archives proper.

The simpler the design, the easier and cheaper it will be to control.

The materials used for construction need to be of high quality and carefully chosen. For example, any wallboard, ceiling panels, or floor tiles used must be of inert material so that it does not give off gasses that contain acids that could damage the archives.

Lighting in the stacks should be centered on the aisles between rows of shelving. The clearance between the tops of storage shelves and ceiling lighting should be about three feet (3') to avoid excessive heat on the archives. This means that the archives requires nine-foot (9') ceilings. The plenum for air-handling ducts, fire-suppressant system, and wiring usually requires another two feet so that the total elevation from floor surface to the top of the plenum is at least eleven feet (11'). If fluorescent tube lights are used for economy, then they need to be fitted with ultraviolet filter sleeves to prevent damaging archives.

There are no windows in the exterior walls.

Exterior walls must be constructed so that they are well-insulated and can prevent the leak of ambient air into the archives.

Floor must be of an inert tile, and it must be able to bear the heavy load of the archives. Moisture-sealed concrete slab on strong grade (clay or stone) away from any underground springs or run-off channels, and well-above flood plain, is the preferred and cheapest way to provide a proper load-bearing floor for the archives.

There are three functional parts to the design:

1. The archives storage area (“the stacks”) where boxes of records are kept on rows of metal shelves, or where registers and minute books are kept in metal “roller shelves.”

2. An archives work area where staff and volunteers can work at arranging and cleaning and describing records.
3. A public area, where members of the public may inspect records under supervision of a staff member.

Parts 1 and 2 may be in the same space, but a wall and lockable door should separate them from part 3: there are two reasons for this—to prevent casual public access to the unique records in storage, and to hold the temperature and humidity conditions in the storage area as constant as possible.

Parts 1-2 are basically a box. There should be no public access. Although it will be necessary to include some computer equipment for building descriptions and indexes, it should be kept to a minimum to avoid contaminating the environment with additional heat. The number of staff members or volunteers working the area should be kept at a minimum for the same reason.

In part 1 there are only rows of metal flat shelves in the center and lines of metal “roller shelves” against the walls for the storage of large registers and minute books. This is not a work space. The metal flat shelves should be at least 15” deep and preferably as much as 18” deep, and at least 36” wide. The lowest shelf must be at least 3” off the floor to guard against flooding. The 18” x 36” units should be 5-6 shelves high (usable shelves) plus a metal shelf top. Records should NOT be stored on the top.

In part 2 there should be two work tables, simple straight chairs, one computer, and shelving for archival supplies (folders, boxes, inert cleaning materials, etc.). Staff must take care to maintain a clean room atmosphere.

Part 3 is the public area of the archives, where members of the public may inspect records. The door between this area and the rest of the library or other building in which the archives may be located should be kept closed. However, it may be a glass door (or partially glass), and indeed the whole wall separating this end of the archives from the rest of the building may be made of glass or largely of glass (if it is thermal pane, tempered glass) so that people may see the archives and understand it better. The archives is actually better protected if the public understands what it is and there is little mystery about it.

Supervisor desk. There must be a desk and chair for a supervisor who monitors the inspection of records by the public so that none are damaged or stolen. The supervisor also registers each public visitor (requiring identification such as a driver’s license and the filling out of a registration form that includes the visitor’s

name and purpose of research), and the supervisor keeps a log of each records or set of records that each public visitor examines. This may be done by computer, which may be at the supervisor's desk.

Research table. There must be a large table with simple straight chairs at which members of the public may sit to examine the records. IT must be in full and constant view of the supervisor. Members of the public should not be permitted to bring to that table any container (such as an attaché case or large purse) into which they might be able to slip documents. They should not be permitted to bring to that table or to use any tools or equipment that might damage the documents—such as ink pens. The archives should provide graphite pencils and paper pads for notes.

Microfilm reader-printer. There should be a microfilm reader-printer and a simple straight chair so that the public may examine and print out paper copies of reference microfilm of county records.

Copying machine. There should be a standard office-copier for the copying of records (for a fee) for the public. Only staff should operate the copier in order to protect the records from careless handling.

Microfilm drawers/cabinets. Against one wall should be a cabinet of microfilm drawers containing the reference copies of film that are available to the public.

Reference book shelves. Along one wall may be a set of shelves for reference books that the public may need to refer to as an aid to their research, such as histories of the county, census abstracts and extracts, and the like.

File cabinets. There may be need of some file cabinets for the storage of the logs of public registrations and public uses of the archives.