



Tennessee Archives Management Advisory

2005

MICROFILMING LOOSE RECORDS: GUIDELINES FOR LOCAL ARCHIVES IN TENNESSEE

The following guide is intended for use by individuals who are preparing local government loose records for microfilming by the Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA). **In order to ensure quality and uniformity throughout the state, these guidelines must be followed if your records are to be microfilmed by TSLA.** If you have further questions about processing loose records, including questions about conservation, arrangement and description, and beginning an archives, please consult the 1999 TAMA entitled “**Processing Loose Records: A Handbook for Local Archives in Tennessee,**” available on TSLA’s website.

For more detailed information, please contact:

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Definition of Loose Records:

Loose records are documents that are not in bound record books. They typically consist of documents such as individual handwritten wills, marriage records and bonds, estate packets, chancery court case files, and circuit court case files. The records of a given office must not be intermingled with those of another office:

What you find together, keep together.

Try to understand what you are looking at before you begin to work with loose records. Below are brief descriptions of the appearance and function of the most common types of loose records which qualify for microfilming by TSLA.

Loose wills--Typically a 1 or 2-page probate instrument putting forth the last wishes and bequests of a recently deceased person. There are generally two dates on the will—the date when the will was executed and signed by its maker and the date when the document was brought into court to be “proven” by witnesses (probated) as true and authentic. The original will may have appended to it additions or “codicils” embodying subsequent wishes of the author.

Loose marriage records and bonds--The marriage license itself is a 1-page instrument that records the names of the groom and bride, the date of the marriage, and the officiating minister. The marriage bond, on the other hand, records the terms of a surety bond whereby the groom’s bondsmen (close friend or kinsmen) obligate themselves for a certain amount of money as assurance that the groom is not already married.

**The above-mentioned records generally originated in the county court clerk’s office. During the 1980s, the probate function (including the recording of wills) in most counties was moved to the clerk and master’s office.*

Loose court case files--Such records can originate in one of three different judicial venues—county court, chancery court, or circuit court - which has both a civil and criminal division. In more recent times, loose records have been generated by county general sessions and juvenile courts. They may be tied together or enveloped in a heavy-gauge paper jacket, usually with the **case style** (plaintiff vs. defendant) written on the outside. These packets may contain trial transcripts, writs and summons, depositions, and other kinds of legal documents. *Despite their variety, the contents of such case files or packets should not be separated because they constitute the compiled record of an individual legal proceeding.*

Microfilming Guidelines:

Counties and municipalities that wish to have their loose records microfilmed by TSLA must adhere to the following archival principles and guidelines:

1. Provenance

Provenance is the rule of origin. **Records of a given office must not be intermingled with those of another office.** Do not mix records from chancery court with those of circuit court—even if the cases are related or have to do with the same people. Do not mix records of the register’s office (registration of legal instruments) with probate records or records of property settlements in equity (chancery) court. Do not mix or combine records with the same surname in order to create a surname file.

2. Conservation

All records must undergo basic conservation efforts before being microfilmed.

- Documents must be free from pins, paper clips, rubber bands, staples and other artificial connectors and wrappers.
- Documents must be cleaned of excessive dirt and soot.
- Documents must be unfolded and flattened.

3. **Arrangement and Description**

Records must be properly arranged and described to ensure their efficient and effective use. If not properly arranged and described, records are not readily available for public inspection as the law requires.

- **Records must be arranged in an alphabetical within chronological order unless the original, untouched order (i.e. by case or docket number) has survived fully intact.** For example, court cases should be alphabetized by plaintiff, wills by the author, and marriages by the groom or bride. In preparing a lengthy run of records, it may be useful to divide them into ten-year “batches,” alphabetizing and indexing each batch separately. A researcher lacking the precise date will be able to search the 1890s more quickly than all cases between 1800 and 1900.
- **The docket number (or case number) should not be the primary or control means of arrangement.** Some metropolitan counties, such as Shelby and Hamilton, may use docket numbers for control purposes, but this is not possible in most counties. It is acceptable to use the docket number only if the county has a continuous numbering system, but the case style is almost always more reliable. You may include the docket number if you have it, but do not rely upon it for indexing purposes: note that few researchers are likely to know the case’s docket number. Additionally, numbering systems are often inconsistent—changing with incoming clerks, etc.
- Records must be filed in archival folders and boxes.
- Folders and boxes must be labeled clearly and consistently as to their contents and dates. (A sample box label is included at the end of this document: see appendix A)

- ### 4. **Records must be indexed before the records can be microfilmed.** A limited index is sufficient, but it should be comprehensive and complete, including all records that are being microfilmed. The index should also be consistent for all of the records. Loose wills should be indexed by name of the deceased; loose marriage records must be indexed by bride or groom; loose court records must be indexed by case style (use separate fields for plaintiff and defendant names) and include the year. If court case files are numbered, the index should also refer to the case file number.

Extensive indexing of individuals such as bondsmen, deponents, heirs, etc. is very time consuming and probably unnecessary. It can delay your goal of microfilming the records. Although using computer software is not absolutely necessary, many counties have had success using Microsoft *Access* and *Excel* for genealogical indexing projects. One advantage of *Access* is that it provides a set of “fields” into which you can put the names and other identifying information for plaintiffs and defendants, brides and grooms, deponents, slaves, witnesses, etc.

5. **Targeting Records for Microfilming**

For purposes of microfilming the records, there is a special kind of description called **targeting**. Targets are “signposts” that let a researcher know what each folder or case file is named; where each folder or case file begins and ends; what each record series or subseries is named; and, where each record series or subseries begins and ends. Targets are large labels that are filmed along with the records. The printing on targets must be sharp, large, on a white paper background, and very black so that it is easy to read on the microfilm.

- Targets must be typed on a computer and printed out in large, bold-faced type (preferably arial style or something else equally sharp and distinct for easy reading.).
- Targets must be printed on full-sized (8½ x 11) paper and indicate the beginnings and ends of films, series, and folders (where necessary).
- Targets must be placed in their proper locations in the record series or group of manuscripts that are to be filmed.
- Targets must be filmed in their proper sequence along with the document pages.
- **Archives (Repository) Target.** The first frame on any microfilm roll should be a target that identifies the archives or repository where the records are kept. (A sample target is included at the end of this document: see appendix B)
- **Finding Aids.** *Finding aid* is the word that archivists use for inventories, catalogs, or indexes that help people find things in record groups and document collections. If there is a finding aid for a group or collection being microfilmed, it should be filmed at the same time as the documents. The finding aid should be filmed at the beginning of the group or collection it represents.

It is strongly recommended that loose records projects intended for TSLA microfilming be reviewed or inspected as soon as possible during the project work in order to make sure they meet basic criteria. Loose records projects that do not meet essential criteria for microfilming will not be accepted by TSLA.

For further questions, please contact the Preservation Services Division of the Tennessee State Library and Archives before preparing any loose records project for microfilming.

Microfilming questions:

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**APPENDIX A
SAMPLE RECORDS BOX LABEL**

Office of Origin of the Records: _____

Series Number (CTAS Guideline Number): _____

Series Title or Description: _____

Disposition: [Check the ones that apply.]

These records are PERMANENT records.
Choose the appropriate one, below:

Transfer immediately to the county archives.

Retain in the custody of the office of origin until
1 January _____ (year), and then transfer the
container and contents to the county archives.

According to Records Disposition Authorization Number _____
of the _____ County Public Records Commission

These records are TEMPORARY records.
Choose the appropriate one, below:

Destroy immediately.

Retain until 1 January _____ and then
destroy contents completely.

According to Records Disposition Authorization Number _____
of the _____ County Public Records Commission

**APPENDIX B
SAMPLE RECORD SERIES TARGET**

**CUMBERLAND COUNTY
TENNESSEE**

**OFFICE OF THE
CLERK AND MASTER**

CHANCERY COURT CASE FILES

1920-1930