

At State Records we often refer to the State archives 'collection', meaning all the records being preserved as official archives of the State of New South Wales. We have taken up the term, since it is widely understood as a description of the holdings of other institutions which also preserve and provide access to cultural heritage, such as libraries, museums and galleries. But the term sits uncomfortably, because it implies that the archives have been 'collected'; that we are in the business of 'collecting' archives.

This gives a misleading impression of how the records kept as State archives come into our care, and how the 'collection' is built.

Unlike museums or art galleries, we don't seek individual records to add to the collection, to fill gaps or to develop particular themes. With rare exceptions, records are not donated to us and we have little or no budget for purchasing records that come onto the open market.

Rather, the way in which official records become State archives is usually an orderly and systematic process, governed by law, policies, standards and procedures.

As part of their records management programs, public sector bodies work out how long the different classes of records that they generate need to be kept, to meet their business needs and to protect their interests and those of their clients and other stakeholders. At the same time, in a process called 'archival appraisal', we identify the classes of records that should be kept indefinitely as State archives. Sometimes the creating body nominates such classes and we confirm or reject this view; at other times we identify additional classes. In any case, we and our Board have the final say.

We have the final say in approving or rejecting the destruction of official records for a further important reason: to help ensure that records that should be retained to protect the interests of government, the public sector body concerned, clients or anyone else affected by official decisions and actions, are not destroyed inappropriately or to hide maladministration or corruption.



Once appraised, the records of finite value are destroyed when their time is up, while the very small proportion to be kept as State archives are transferred to us when no longer in current use by the creating body.

So we don't 'collect' archives, but nor do we 'select' individual records during appraisal. The quantities of records generated by modern governments are so great that it is whole classes or series of records that must be appraised, usually based on an analysis of the functions of the creating body and its role in government. Appraisal decisions must also be made early, usually while the records are still being generated. This is necessary in the electronic business environment,

especially, to ensure that the records requiring long-term retention are preserved in a form that will meet future needs.

Archival appraisal is at once the most crucial and the most difficult task that an archivist undertakes. The consequences are final: once records are destroyed we cannot bring them back if we later change our mind about their value. Yet we are trying to anticipate the potential uses of records for research in the decades or centuries to come.

James Bonwick, the first 'Archivist of New South Wales' recognised this difficulty (he was not the head of an Archives or Records Office; he never succeeded in persuading the colonial government to establish one). Writing to Henry Parkes in 1891 to propose an

archival system for the colony, he noted:

'Great care will be needed in deciding on the first ["absolutely useless"] class: since, in many cases, what was at first conjectured of no special value, afterwards proved useful in the elucidation of questions.'

Despite all the help we get from today's appraisal policies, methodologies and other tools, we know that this is still very true.

David Roberts
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Quote: Parkes Correspondence vol 5, p47, Mitchell Library ML A875, quoted in RF Doust's 1969 thesis, 'The Administration of Official Archives in New South Wales, 1880-1960'