

Beginner's Guide to Archives

What is an archives?



Archives are information centers where records about the past — including diaries, financial records, photographs, and emails — are made available to researchers.

Researchers use primary sources because they provide a firsthand account of events or conditions during a particular period. Written by people who were there, primary sources and archives reflect thinking and understanding at a moment in time.

Swarthmore has three archives: the Friends Historical Library, the Swarthmore College Archives, and the Swarthmore College Peace Collection. There are dozens of other archives in the Philadelphia area, many associated with historical societies, universities, museums, churches, municipal governments, or businesses.



Archives are for everyone.

Both the Friends Historical Library and the Swarthmore College Peace Collection are open to everyone, including the general public. **Swarthmore students are especially welcome.**

Archives are not just for academic history research. Disciplines as varied as English Literature, Linguistics, Peace & Conflict Studies, and even Astronomy, have used our collections in recent years.

Every archives holds a wealth of information that is unavailable elsewhere, and it is up to the researcher to decide how best to contribute to our collective memory.

- Journalists use archives to establish context for contemporary events and to hold people and groups accountable for their actions.
- Artists and fiction authors find historical details in archives to add texture to their works of art.
- Genealogists find traces of their ancestors in archival records.
- From the History Channel to the Halls of Justice, the information archives hold shapes the world in which we all live.
- College students research the history of campus life and policies before their time.

Archives Etiquette

Archives can be
intimidating.

Archivists love to help!



Compared with the main library, our hours are more limited, and far less material is available online. The way our collections are arranged and described can be confusing. The catalog may use unfamiliar jargon and inventories may be vague.

We have good reasons for all of this, but we know there is a downside: it makes it harder to come into the archives. That is why we have archivists to help you! Please never hesitate to ask lots of questions. We're here to make your life easier!



What is it like to visit an archives?

Archives often have special restrictions because most of our materials are irreplaceable, fragile, and/or at risk for theft.

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- **Bring a photo ID.** You will usually be asked to fill out a registration form and will require some form of identification.
 - Some archives require you to store your belongings (including purses) in a locker or another designated spot for security and safety purposes.
 - Staff will “page” or fetch the materials for you and bring them to a specific room, the “reading room.”
 - **Bring pencils and a notebook and/or laptop.** Pens are not allowed in most reading rooms. If you do not bring a pencil, there will likely be some to borrow, as well as scrap paper for taking notes.
 - Inquire with the archives about their copy policies. Some do not allow photography or photocopying. Others charge a fee, or require you to fill out paperwork, before allowing it. If permitted, **bring a digital camera or fully-charged phone** to take pictures of documents you find while researching.
 - **Plan for times to eat, drink, and caffeinate yourself.** Food and beverages are not allowed in most reading rooms.
 - **Keep track of what you look at.** Note the collection, as well as series/file information if necessary. You cannot expect the archivist to remember materials you have previously viewed.



Why should I contact the archives in advance?

- **Off-site collections:** Some materials may be kept in an off-site storage location and it may take several weeks to retrieve them.
- **Related materials:** Even if you have something specific you want to see, the archivist may have suggestions for other materials.
- **Check the holdings:** A lot of collections don't have detailed descriptions. If you're looking for a specific document or piece of information, contact the archives before making a trip so that you won't be disappointed if the collection doesn't have what you're looking for.
- **Services:** Check to see what services are available if you may want to make copies, publish from, or request scans or photographic prints.
- **Research Help:** Archivists understand that using archives is more complicated than using libraries. We know our collections and are truly happy to help!



How to request materials

It is helpful for the archivist, but not necessary, to know what collections or boxes you need ahead of time. If you do NOT know what specific materials you need, don't worry! We are here to help

and offer guidance based on your interests.

Once the desired materials have been identified, you will be asked to fill out a **call slip**. This is a piece of paper with all of the information needed to locate the materials, as well as basic information about your needs. Here are examples of what call slips can look like:

FRIENDS HISTORICAL LIBRARY
MANUSCRIPTS REQUEST FORM

CALL # RG5/161

COLLECTION Deborah Fisher Wharton

ITEM/BOX # 1

REQUESTED BY Phineas Phoenix

SIGNED Phineas Phoenix

DATE 4/1/1864

NOTES _____

PLEASE KEEP THIS SLIP WITH THE ITEM UNTIL RESHELVED!

PULLED BY _____ DATE _____

RTND BY _____ DATE _____

PLEASE PRINT LEGIBLY

Full Call Number

F159
.S82
M6
1993

LIBRARY USE Form 1a

Author Morikawa

Title Swarthmore Illustrated

Name Phineas Phoenix

Address _____

Date 4/1/1864

This slip entitles the borrower to use the book in the Library only.

Use this for books in Tripod with Location Swarthmore: FHL

Archives at Swarthmore and Beyond

Friends Historical Library,
Peace Collection,
& College Archives
Enter McCabe, immediately turn left



Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College (FHL)

Website: <http://swarthmore.edu/friends>

Email: friends@swarthmore.edu

Location: McCabe, first floor (first door on left inside McCabe)

Hours: 9:00 am–4:00 pm Monday–Friday, and select select Saturdays (check our website) 10 am–1 pm

What do you have?: FHL is the largest collection of materials relating to the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in the United States. Because Quakers played prominent roles in almost every major reform movement in American history, our collections cover such topics as abolition, African-American history, Native American history, women's rights movements, prison reform, humane treatment of the mentally ill, and temperance. The collections also reflect the significant role Friends played in the development of science, technology, education, and business in Britain and America.

Swarthmore College Archives (SCA)

Website: <http://swarthmore.edu/archives>

Email: archives@swarthmore.edu

Location: Friends Historical Library, in McCabe

Hours: same as Friends Historical Library

What do you have?: We collect the official records of the college (such as Board minutes and presidential papers), as well as documentation of campus life and student experience, such as scrapbooks and photograph albums created by students and student organization records.

If you are interested in contributing digital or paper materials to the college archives, visit: <http://swarthmore.edu/archive-my-stuff>.

Swarthmore College Peace Collection (SCPC)

Website: <http://swarthmore.edu/peace/>

Email: peacecollection@swarthmore.edu

Location: McCabe, first floor (first door on left inside McCabe)

Hours: 9:00 am–4:00 pm Monday–Friday, and select select Saturdays (check our website) 10 am–1 pm

What do you have?: The mission of the Swarthmore College Peace Collection is to gather, preserve, and make accessible material that documents non-governmental efforts for nonviolent social change, disarmament, and conflict resolution between people and nations. The Peace Collection (materials date from 1815 to the present day), has collections of peace organization records and the papers of peace activists in the following areas: pacifism, nonviolence, disarmament, conscientious objection, women and peace, WWI, WWII, the Vietnam War, the anti-nuclear movement, and civil rights. About 50% of the collection is about the role of women in peace efforts. Many peace activists have also worked for social justice and reform, such as civil rights, civil liberties, sanctuary of refugees, environmentalism, so many of these topics may be found here as well. The Peace Collection has resources in a wide variety of formats: original paper documents, photographs, posters, memorabilia-such as political buttons, banners, etc., as well as digital files.



Off Campus

In the Philadelphia area

Visit <http://findingaids.pacscl.org> for the Philadelphia Area Archives Research Portal, a regional finding aids database hosted by the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries (PACSCL).

Across the U.S.

Visit ArchiveGrid <https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/>

Key Terms in the Archives World



- **Archives & Manuscripts**
(<http://archives.tricolib.brynmawr.edu>): Swarthmore, Haverford, and Bryn Mawr's shared online **catalog** with **finding aids** to our archival materials.
- **Archivist**: Here to help YOU! A professional responsible for preserving materials of historical value and providing access to them for research.
- **Call number/identifier**: A combination of letters and numbers used to uniquely identify an archival collection or item. Examples: SFHL-RG5-050 or SCPC-DG-074.
- **Call slip**: Fill out this piece of paper with the information the archivist will need to retrieve an item for you. Typically asks for the **call number**, collection name, and box number.
- **Catalog**: A systematically arranged list of items held by the repository.
- **Collection**: A group of similar materials, usually all created by the same person, family, business, or organization.



- **Digitization:** The process of scanning physical materials (paper), and usually putting the scans online. This labor intensive process requires careful handling of often fragile materials, and detailed cataloging work, as well as an ongoing commitment to maintenance, upgrading online interfaces, and digital preservation. Contrary to popular belief, only a very tiny percentage of our collections have been digitized, and it is unlikely that we'll ever manage to digitize everything.

- **Extent/Linear feet:** How “large” a collection is, typically measured in linear feet, as in amount of space the collection occupies on a shelf. A typical estimate is 1,500 pages may comprise a linear foot. The number of boxes or number of pages is often also given.
- **Finding aid:** A description to help you find an archival collection or locate items within it. Typically contains both an overview of the collection (who created it, what topics it covers, etc.) as well as an inventory of its contents.
- **Manuscripts:** A handwritten or unpublished document. Often abbreviated as MSS.
- **Primary source:** A firsthand account of an historical event or time period from someone who was there. Common forms include letters, diaries, or oral histories.
- **Reading Room:** A room where researchers come to look at archival materials.
- **Secondary source:** A work created by someone who was not there, but who analyzes or aggregates primary sources to comment on or make an argument about a historical event/time period. Common forms include scholarly articles, monographs (books), or documentary films.
- **Series:** A group of similar materials within a **collection**.