

ARLINGTON HISTORY TASK FORCE: MID-TERM REPORT

A Five-Year Plan

The Arlington History Task Force is a working group of citizens and county staff charged with making recommendations to the County Manager on best practices in Arlington County capturing, digitally preserving, and providing online access to Arlington's rich history. After meeting since January 2015, this is our mid-term report.

In five years, 2020, Arlington County will reach a historical landmark – its centennial as a county. Now is the perfect time, as we approach this historical milestone, to commit the county's energy and resources toward preservation of and public access to local government and community records. This effort promotes openness, cultivates public participation, and strengthens bonds within our local community through widely-available public access to valuable government and community records.

Our examination began with the establishment of two sub-committees covering the issues of community records and records management. Within the Arlington community, the Center for Local History (CLH), housed in the Central Library, is the lead agency for the collection of local records gathered from individuals, community groups, and local businesses, under the banner of "Collecting, preserving, and sharing our community's history." Their efforts at preserving our local history are enhanced by community preservation organizations, such as the Arlington Historical Society and the Black Heritage Museum of Arlington.

In government, the Department of Technology Services (DTS), has established policies for collecting and preserving millions of records at the departmental and program levels. The department faces the challenge of raising awareness within each government department to the importance of records preservation within a defined records management set of standards. (Regrettably, Arlington Public Schools have declined several invitations to participate in the task force. Their records, on both the community and government levels, are of immense importance in Arlington's history, so we urge their future participation in the process and future cooperation in the archival effort.)

Together, the combined efforts of public and private records preservation forms the backbone in the establishment of an "Arlington Archive."

This concerted endeavor to document, organize, digitize, and open access of county and community records over the coming five years provides Arlington County unique jobs training opportunities in technical and data entry skills in the growing fields of data and records management. In clearing the overwhelming backlog of existing records, as well as the ongoing records management program, new training and employment opportunities will become available to our local citizens in need of such opportunities, supplemented by volunteers and student internships.

First, definitions of the primary terms of our task:

Capture

Community records: Local private organizations, such as the Arlington Historical Society and the Black Heritage Museum of Arlington, provide valuable historic preservation and dissemination of materials and information from Arlington's past. Arlington's front line in the

collection and preservation of general community records is the Center for Local History, an important part of the Arlington Central Library, as well as the community at large.

The Center for Local History (CLH) holds two collections:

Virginiana Collection: Located in the center's research room, the Virginiana Collection is a reference collection only. It consists of books, maps, genealogical resources, historical newspapers, vertical files, legislative information, oral history interviews, directories, as well as local, regional, and state documents. This is not an archival collection and the materials in it may not be retained indefinitely. Some materials in this collection may eventually be promoted to the Community Archives.

Community Archives: This collection contains personal papers, over 200,000 photographs, and archival records of families, individuals, organizations, clubs, businesses and associations in Arlington County. These materials are retained indefinitely.

Collections in the community archive most commonly represent the second half of the 20th Century (1950 – forward) for two reasons: one, pre WWII Arlington was very rural and thus the community did not generate as much content, and two, because materials from the recent past are better preserved and more frequently available or offered for donation. (The CLH began collecting for the community archive in the early 1990s).

CLH staff actively pursue collections from local businesses, cultural organizations, and the estates of prominent community members. The CLH also partners with community and regional organizations to pursue collections from immigrant and minority populations. A volunteer is currently actively pursuing menus from local restaurants. Apart from these strategic efforts, the collection grows organically through voluntary donations, or donations pursued through staff networking efforts.

CLH overflow is housed in the Woodmont center, occupying a small space that is staffed by one part-time archivist lacking the equipment necessary for the task at hand. The space is cramped by sheer volume of documents with inadequate equipment for cataloging and digitization.

Government records: There are, roughly, twenty-seven presiding entities in the Arlington County Government, including the public schools. There is a countywide government policy on "Records and Information Management," as well as best practice guidelines, FAQs, training videos, and other resources available on the Arlington government intranet available to staff. Collection compliance and classification is based upon the guidelines of the Library of Virginia (LVA), which does not necessarily address issues of significance to local jurisdictions. While LVA mandates collection of general governance records, the Arlington Archive will need to augment the record groups' categories with the records of local government history, such as local planning initiatives, public-private partnerships, and citizen commissions/committees, in order to preserve historically important local government records. Compliance with the LVA requirements, outside of records of the Department of Technology Services (DTS) recordkeeping systems, is implemented individually by each department in a largely decentralized environment. "

At present, DTS has a Chief Records Information Officer and Information Management Analyst on their team to develop policy and guidance for implementation, and provide direct support to departments, as needed. Likewise, the department is responsible for training Records Coordinators, who in turn are responsible for acting on that information. Their Records and

Information Management Program is currently in the process of developing a training module for all staff to complete. The major question facing the program in accomplishing their goal of a unified records management system is how to get each department and Records Coordinator to fully cooperate in making a unified records management system a cohesive reality? The answer will be found in the support at the highest levels of the Arlington County Government making it known that records management and preservation is a top priority.

Physical/paper records not held by each department are stored in a basement room in the Woodmont Community Center at 2422 North Fillmore Street. The Woodmont facility currently houses a YWCA gymnastics program, services for the developmentally disabled, and the processing office for the Center for Local History, and county records storage. Government records are stored in a room in this aging building with an inadequate fire suppression system and no environmental controls. Ephemeral county government records, such as commissions and other publicly-sponsored citizen's organizations, are stored in an over-crowded storage room in 2100 Clarendon Boulevard. Arlington County Government currently has a huge backlog of millions of paper records that have not been indexed or digitized. A significant portion of these records contain historical value and will be publicly accessible, as well as preserved, with digitization. Most county departments either the duplication equipment, or access to technology, for digitization, but the full preservation process requires skilled personnel dedicated to the task of collecting, cataloging, and data entry absent in most departments. At present, DTS lacks the budget for full implementation of a preservation program. Likewise, DTS does not have systems in place to capture and preserve web-based content or social media yet. The Arlington County Government web portal is not currently integrated with the Center for Local History, and lacks the functionality of sophisticated online archives.

The participation of the Arlington Public Schools (APS) in developing, implementing, maintaining a complete history of Arlington County is critically important. Their records document important aspects of Arlington County's history and must become part of the general, unified Arlington Archive. Also vitally important is the role of APS in communicating information about the Arlington Archives to public schools students as an important resource in teaching present and future generations about our community, its history, and Arlington's place in American history. Local history curriculum will need to be directly tied to the Arlington Archive, and its community and government collections.

Digital preparation and preservation

Digitizing collection materials is much more than the simple act of scanning an analog document into digital form. There is a series of steps, starting with the point when the materials are accepted into the preservation process.

Digitization decreases the wear-and-tear on collection materials, and the process can also help offset costs through the sale of digital reproduction for use in publications and multimedia productions. Digitization also, of course, makes it possible for collections to be put online for better access by county residents and users all over the world.

The following are the steps in the capture-to-digitization-to public access process. Keep in mind that captured materials are paper documents (both letter and legal format), photographs, audio recordings, home movies, videos, large maps and other printed materials, such as campaign posters and announcements, as well as physical objects:

- a. Materials acceptance (the physical hand-off of materials for preservation)
- b. Storage of materials awaiting processing
- c. Organizing and processing materials (i.e., placing the materials into an organized order and format, in accordance with standard guidelines. This information is then entered into an appropriate finding aid category for reference.
- d. The processed materials are then physically stored in appropriate archival storage containers.
- e. Within each collection of materials, decisions must be made as to what portions of the collections, if not the whole, deserves digitization.
- f. Digitization by scanning, digital photography, conversion from film and tape to digital formats.
- g. Storage of the digital assets (some of the files, especially audio and video, can be massive).
- h. Metadata entry to each piece of the digital collection. This information is the critical key in online cataloging and access to the materials.

Digitization can be accomplished in a combination of public and private partnerships, as presented by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

“To date, digitization partnerships have delivered the vast majority of online content available through the catalog. NARA has shown that partnerships with private, public, non-profit, educational, and Government institutions to digitize and make available holdings can be a powerful model.”

A cost-benefit analysis of public and private digitization efforts of other community historical preservation efforts will be most helpful in determining the optimal balance in the digitization of for the Arlington Archive.

NARA is also implementing a “crowdsourcing” digitization effort where researchers visiting NARA scan materials and provide the National Archives with copies, as well as accepting contributions from individuals interested in donating documents and images. NARA is looking to install scanning equipment for public use in their facilities where visitors can scan directly into the NARA database. For these situations, establishment of easy-to-understand standards of duplication and adding metadata will be critical.

Digitization standards must be established across both government and community records. There will be on set of metadata for historical community materials and for routine departmental materials. Government departments will need to establish archival workflows into their routines.

Online access

Access to archival materials from both the government and community records is ideally accomplished online, once the records are digitized. For this to be accomplished, a unified point of records access will need to be developed. County records, both community and government, will be accessed via personal computers (expanded well beyond what is available online today),

and through a public research reading room where visitors can easily access both digital and print records, as is the case today in the CLH. Both points of access include an online ordering portal for reproduction services at quality or quantities beyond the capacity of the online archive that will help offset costs.

Solutions

For the Arlington Archive to become a reality and succeed for the long term, the Arlington County Government must fully commit to this enterprise. It will require additional staffing at the Center for Local History, in the Department of Technology Services, and in individual departments, particularly during the first five years of development. For the government, appointment of a Records Coordinator in each county department is an important first step.

An IT strategy and commitment must be developed with storage capacities adequate for future archival needs, and a communications bandwidth capable of handling both public and internal transfer of documents and materials. Within this, establishment of a unified set of metadata for use across government and community records cataloging is needed beyond the LVA guidelines. Likewise, establishment of technical standards to be followed by each contributor to the Arlington Archive, public and private, will be critical. These standards must be established with an eye to future innovations. All county employees need to be educated on the critical importance of records preservation.

Establishment of an Arlington Archive will require new facilities to house records, preserve them, and provide public access to all digital and physical data. CLH and DTS lack adequate storage facilities, staffing, and equipment for the task we are presenting. The backlog of community and government materials awaiting cataloging is immense.

Implementation and success of a robust and innovative Arlington Archive will require the full engagement of the Arlington County Government, from the top down, in leadership emphasizing the importance of records management, preservation, and access for genuine open government to become a reality. Additionally, this effort will require the fiscal commitment of the Arlington County Government over the long term.

Likewise, the success of the Arlington Archive will require an ongoing public information campaign with outreach to individual citizens, schools, community organizations, business groups, churches, and civic organizations. Arlington citizens and businesses will first need to be introduced to the archival resources the county has to offer and how to easily they can be access. In years to come, the Arlington Archive will be an important component of Arlington's Open Government effort, offering efficient access to the records of greatest interest to citizens and local businesses, as well as historical records and artifacts opening Arlington's past to our community's future.

What's next for the task force?

Our final report will be issued in January 2016 and we certainly will not be idle in the meantime.

In our last meeting, the Arlington History Task Force decided to expand its examination into the issues of capture, digitization, and access by breaking down a series of smaller sub-committees examining the following issues, under the four basic categories of *Stuff, Standards, Staffing, and Storage*:

- Space
- Data management/IT
- Staffing
- Equipment
- Staff education
- Archives access
- Partnerships and grants
- Communications outreach through a “talking team”
- Digital and physical preservation

Acting County Manager Mark Schwartz will address the next meeting of the full task force in July and that will be followed by a presence of the task force at the upcoming Arlington County Fair under the heading, “Your Attic, Our History.” we hope to both educate the public to the importance of preservation of Arlington’s history and to evoke input from citizens about what they see as preservation priorities. In this effort, task force members are reaching out to business and community groups seeking their input to the process.

We look forward to your questions and challenges. The Arlington History Task Force is an enthusiastic and committed group of citizens and county staff who share the vision of an innovative historical records preservation effort in our community.