

A GUIDE FOR PRESERVING AND WRITING CLUB HISTORY

General Federation of Women's Clubs  
Women's History and Resource Center

# Guidelines

**FULLY REVISED AND UPDATED**

WITH STEP-BY-STEP INSTRUCTIONS FOR:

- ESTABLISHING A CLUB ARCHIVES
- DONATING CLUB RECORDS TO A HISTORICAL REPOSITORY
- RESEARCHING AND WRITING CLUB HISTORY



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## **The General Federation of Women's Clubs**

### **WHRC Guidelines for Preserving and Writing Club History**

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Visit [www.GFWC.org/WHRCGuidelines](http://www.GFWC.org/WHRCGuidelines) for updates to the WHRC Guidelines for Preserving and Writing Club History

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# **PRESERVING AND WRITING CLUB HISTORY**

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## INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1984, The Women's History and Resource Center (WHRC) collects, preserves, interprets, and promotes the history of the General Federation of Women's Clubs and women volunteers. The WHRC maintains the GFWC Archives as well as related multimedia collections and a research library. The WHRC is a resource for GFWC members and staff, as well as scholars, students, and the general public. It provides research assistance on both the resources at WHRC and the location of archival records of state federations and local clubs. In addition, WHRC serves as a resource for state and local clubs in preserving their history.

A club's historic records are its institutional memory. They document not only the specific achievements of the club's members, but also illustrate the contributions of women volunteers from a national and international perspective. Permanently valuable archival records may be in a variety of formats, including paper and electronic documents, books and other publications, photographs, audiovisual materials, and artifacts. The following *Guidelines* are designed to help GFWC member clubs and state federations make informed decisions about maintaining their own archives or donating their historical records to an archival repository.

For those clubs who wish to maintain their own records, they provide basic information on how to gather, preserve, and organize a club archives. For those clubs that have neither the resources nor the appropriate space to maintain their own archives, they provide assistance in identifying an institutional repository that will professionally care for their records and make them accessible for research. In addition, the *Guidelines* provide some basic information on writing club histories. See also the *WHRC Guidelines for Recording Oral History*.

The WHRC staff is available to answer questions or provide advice on any of these issues. Members of the [Friends of the WHRC](#) may also participate in an email discussion list that allows clubs to share information and experience related to the preservation of their club's history.

# ESTABLISHING A CLUB ARCHIVES

## STEP ONE: IDENTIFY A PERMANENT LOCATION

- Find a secure, accessible location at a permanent site.
- Avoid attics, basements, and outbuildings that may have large fluctuations in temperature and relative humidity or pose the threat of water damage. Monitor and control temperature and relative humidity to maintain a cool, dry environment.
- Avoid exposure to both sunlight and artificial light by using insulated window coverings and turning off lights when the collections are not in use.
- If possible, maintain research space separate from storage, but with secure access.
- If the above conditions can not be met, a club should seriously consider transferring their records to a local or state historical repository for permanent preservation and access. (See Donating Your Club Archives, page 9.) Due to limited space and resources, the WHRC does not actively collect the records of GFWC member clubs.

## STEP TWO: GATHER RECORDS

- Identify the location of as many of the club's records as possible by thoroughly searching the club's meeting place and contacting current and former club officers and members. Online auctions, such as e-bay, often feature publications and memorabilia of local organizations that may fill gaps in your club's historic record.
- Review your state's requirements for keeping non-permanent financial records, such as purchase orders, cancelled checks, and receipts. See page 12 for a list of types of documents with permanent historical and administrative value. Consider drafting a records retention schedule to provide guidance on how long various types of records should be kept.
- Check with local historical institutions to see if any past club records may already have been transferred. If so, the club should contact that agency about permanently preserving additional records.

## STEP THREE: INVENTORY AND EVALUATE RECORDS

- Handling archival materials requires special care. See the Rules for Use of WHRC Collections at the end of this publication.
- Review and briefly describe the contents of each container or storage unit, noting dates, subject matter, and types of documents. Use the checklist on page 12 to help identify unknown materials.
- Do not begin sorting or arranging at this stage. Keep materials that have been filed together in the order in which you find them until you complete the entire inventory, so that valuable context is not lost.
- Check to see that documents in folders have been accurately described in the folder headings. Examine loose papers to see if it is possible to identify groups of like documents. In general, determine the usability of any existing arrangement.
- Avoid “reading” the collection now. Scanning the materials for subject matter is useful, but do not list folder contents item by item. Be conscious of the “big picture.” You will have plenty of time to research in the collection after it is organized.
- Note materials that are probably not of permanent value. Duplicates, envelopes, receipts, canceled checks, telephone memo slips, publications of other organizations (except for related clippings), and similar items are generally not kept permanently.
- Note preservation issues, such as rusty staples and paper clips, disintegrating newspaper clippings, and evidence of insects or mold. If not an immediate threat to the collection, these may be dealt with during sorting.

## STEP FOUR: ORGANIZE THE RECORDS

- The basic unit of organization in an archival collection is the series. A series consists of documents filed together because of a common creator, form, or relationship. Use the inventory created in Step Three to evaluate the existing filing system.
- If there is no apparent arrangement, you must identify common filing groups. The organizational chart for your club will help determine a system of arrangement. Records generated by each office should be kept together, arranged chronologically.

- If not created or collected by a particular office, publications, photographs, audiovisual materials, memorabilia, and artifacts collected or produced by the club as a whole may each be its own series following the office records.

## **STEP FIVE: SORT AND ARRANGE THE RECORDS**

- If possible, use old or recycled folders to do initial sorting. Materials will eventually be filed in clean, acid-free folders and boxes. Label folders lightly in pencil.
- Remove materials that were identified for disposal during initial evaluation in Step Three, including duplicates, receipts, canceled checks, telephone memo slips, etc.
- Carefully remove metal fasteners that may damage documents. Brass, copper, and aluminum fasteners, including most recent staples, will not rust and may be left in place unless there is danger of tearing. If fasteners are removed, make pencil notations of original document pagination in upper right hand corner of each page. For example, “[1 of 2]”, “[2 of 2].” If desired, plastic clips may be used. However, use them sparingly; they are expensive and bulky and crimp original documents.
- An enclosure item, such as a clipping or photograph, should note in the upper right-hand corner or on the reverse the item to which it was attached; e.g., “[enclosed with letter of 4 February 1956].” All notations must be made in pencil and surrounded by brackets to indicate that they were added after the document was created.
- Newsprint is generally highly acidic. Clippings darken and become brittle with age. The historical value of clippings is in the content. They may be scanned or photocopied onto acid-free paper, and the originals discarded. Other deteriorating paper, such as fax or mimeograph paper, may be handled the same way.
- Unfold folded documents whenever possible. They may be flattened with a flattening bone or by gently folding against the crease. Materials that are larger than standard letter or legal folders should be moved to oversize folders and containers. Note their removal and new location. (Reduced photocopies may be kept in the original order.)
- Very fragile documents may be encased in archival plastic or interleaved with acid-free paper. Very brittle or damaged documents should be referred to a conservator.

- When arranging documents chronologically, file them with earliest date on top. Undated items follow dated ones. If day of the week, month, and day are given on a document, a perpetual calendar may help identify a year. (See [www.vpcalendar.net](http://www.vpcalendar.net).)
- Once the collection is completely sorted, replace any old folders and boxes with acid-free storage materials. Wrap artifacts and textiles in acid-free tissue and store in appropriately sized boxes. Many vendors sell archival supplies, including Gaylord at [www.gaylord.com](http://www.gaylord.com), Hollinger at [www.hollingercorp.com](http://www.hollingercorp.com), Metal Edge at [www.metaledgeinc.com](http://www.metaledgeinc.com), and University Products at [www.universityproducts.com](http://www.universityproducts.com).

## **STEP SIX: DESCRIBE THE RECORDS AND MAKE THEM AVAILABLE**

- A well-organized collection has a descriptive guide to help researchers find information as easily as possible. This “finding aid” should include at least a box level inventory, but preferably a list of the contents of each folder. Every document need not be listed (unless they are particularly important), but the folder should give an overview; e.g., “Correspondence, 1900-1920” or “Meeting Minutes, 1910-1975.” The WHRC can assist clubs in preparing descriptive finding aids. Final copies should be sent to WHRC.
- To make information about the collection available to club members and other researchers, the finding aid may be distributed in paper copy, posted on the club website, or information from it may be entered into an electronic cataloging system. (The WHRC is currently cataloging its collections into PastPerfect collections management software. See [www.museumsoftware.com](http://www.museumsoftware.com).)
- If the club will be allowing researchers access to its collections, it should provide a secure, supervised location. See the WHRC Researcher Registration form and Rules for Use of WHRC Research Collections at the end of this publication...



## DONATING YOUR CLUB RECORDS TO A HISTORICAL REPOSITORY

- The WHRC does not collect the archival records of member clubs, but it is a valuable resource for researching an appropriate repository for donating local or state records. Contact the WHRC at [whrc@gfwc.org](mailto:whrc@gfwc.org) or 202-347-3168 to discuss possible options for your locality, including local libraries with special collection departments; city, county, and state historical societies; and college and university libraries.
- Research the repository or repositories you are considering. Make an appointment to tour the facilities and talk to the professionals who manage the collections. Ask about environmental controls, security, processing time, preservation methods, related collections, and ease of access both for the club and the general public.
- Be prepared to sign a legal document, such as a Deed of Gift or Memorandum of Understanding that specifically describes the rights transferred with the collection. Go over this document with your club's legal counsel. Although most repositories prefer donations with as few restrictions as possible, the club may choose to retain copyright to the materials, at least while the club remains in existence.
- If the club is concerned about confidentiality issues regarding any of its records, a repository may allow some recent records to be closed for a stated period of time. However, most repositories will not take a collection with too many restrictions. Public research access to scholars is a benefit to the club and to GFWC.
- A brochure on donating records to a repository is available at the website of the Society of American Archivists: <http://www.archivists.org/publications/donating-orgrecs.asp>.

## RESEARCHING AND WRITING CLUB HISTORY

- Once the club's records are organized either by the club or an outside repository, it will be easier to use them for research. Allowing research in unorganized records may destroy important evidence of original organization.
- Consider hiring an independent historian or contacting a local college or university to interest a student of local or women's history in writing the club narrative.
- Place your club in the context of GFWC, local, national, and international history. Use the resources of your public library, historical society, or academic institution/s to research related materials, such as local newspapers, city and county histories, historical photographs, and archival records.
- Write the club history with the broadest possible audience in mind. See below for some possible research questions to consider.
- Be honest and objective. Your club's story should have enduring interest. A well-written history includes controversy and tragedy as well as success.
- Be creative and imaginative. A club history should be based on fact, but not be ONLY fact. Add amusing anecdotes, use engaging language, and include local color to make an interesting, readable story. Quote from oral history interviews to add immediacy.
- Carefully edit the final narrative. Be sure to include citations for factual information, whether from the club's own records or outside sources.
- Consider having your club history professionally printed. Add photographs and other illustrations to help make your club's story come alive.
- Send a copy of your club's history to WHRC. Be sure the cover page includes the author's name, club name and location, and date the history was produced.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN WRITING CLUB HISTORY

- When and where was the club founded? What year did the club join the General Federation of Women's Clubs?
- Did the club change its name over the years? Is so, why? How did the name change?
- What major project/s did the club undertake over the course of its history? How long did the club work on these projects? What were the challenges and successes? How do these projects reflect the priorities and perspectives of their time and place?
- Did the club build or donate a library and/or library collection? When did that happen? Who was involved and how did it affect the local community? What is the club's current relationship with that library?
- Where are the club's archives located? Be sure they are preserved either by the club or a local historical institution as described above. If they are held by an outside institution, volunteer to help organize and describe them, if necessary.
- What is the history of the club's headquarters or meeting place/s?
- How many members did the club have when it was founded? How has the membership changed over the years? What is the current number of members?
- Did any members become GFWC state, national, or international officers? Provide details and, if possible, record oral history.
- Did the club ever participate in hosting an international GFWC convention?
- Did any members hold prominent positions outside GFWC? How did the local and/or national press describe their contributions?
- Who were some of your club's most significant visitors?
- What were the significant events going on outside your club – locally, nationally, and internationally – that impacted the choices made by members?
- **THESE ARE JUST SUGGESTIONS. YOUR CLUB HISTORY WILL BENEFIT FROM DILIGENT DETECTIVE WORK IN ANY AND ALL RECORDS. BE SURE TO CONTACT THE WHRC IF YOU NEED HELP.**

## TYPES OF DOCUMENTS WITH PERMANENT HISTORICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE VALUE

- Architectural records
- Articles of incorporation, charters
- Artifacts (3-D objects, such as pins, badges, gavels)
- Audiovisual recordings (of meetings, events, oral histories)
- Audits, budgets
- Bylaws and revisions
- Clippings (from newspapers and magazines)
- Constitution and revisions
- Correspondence of officers
- Directories
- Financial reports
- Handbooks (club manuals, guidelines, etc.)
- Legal documents (deeds, contracts, etc.)
- Memoranda
- Minutes of meetings (Board, special committees, etc.)
- Membership lists
- Organizational charts
- Photographs
- Planning documents
- Press releases
- Programs, handouts, and flyers
- Publications (histories, newsletters, and brochures created by club; full publications of other groups need not be kept.)
- Reports (annual, board, committee, etc.)
- Rosters
- Scrapbooks
- Speeches
- Subject files (only if a resource for a specific program area; documents listed above **should not** be arranged by subject.)
- Tax returns

\*Adapted from the Society of American Archivists brochure "A Guide to Donating Your Organizational Records to a Repository," 1995.



GENERAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS  
Women's History and Resource Center  
Researcher Registration

GENERAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS  
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1734 N ST NW | Washington, DC 20036-2990  
www.GFWC.org

Welcome to the Women's History and Resource Center of the General Federation of Women's Clubs. We look forward to assisting you with your research. Our rules are in place to protect our unique materials for future generations of researchers. They reflect common professional practice in special libraries and archives around the world. If you have any questions, please bring them to the attention of the WHRC staff.

Please fill out the form below and show photo identification to WHRC staff upon first visit. On subsequent visits, please check in with photo ID at the reception desk.

PLEASE PRINT:

Full Name \_\_\_\_\_

Primary address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Secondary address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Primary phone # \_\_\_\_\_ Secondary/Cell phone # \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address/es \_\_\_\_\_

Institutional affiliation (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

Type of researcher (check one): \_\_\_\_\_ GFWC club member \_\_\_\_\_ GFWC staff  
\_\_\_\_\_ college/university faculty \_\_\_\_\_ graduate student \_\_\_\_\_ undergraduate student  
\_\_\_\_\_ other; please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose of research check one): \_\_\_\_\_ dissertation/thesis \_\_\_\_\_ course work  
\_\_\_\_\_ publication \_\_\_\_\_ business use \_\_\_\_\_ personal interest \_\_\_\_\_ GFWC staff use

Topic/s of research: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

How did you learn about the WHRC? \_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE READ RESEARCH RULES AND SIGN BELOW:

I have read and understand the Rules for WHRC Collections Use and agree to abide by them. Any violation of these rules might result in the suspension of privileges to use the reading room and collections.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Office use only: Photo ID # \_\_\_\_\_ By \_\_\_\_\_



## GENERAL FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S CLUBS

### Women's History and Resource Center

#### Rules for Use of WHRC Research Collections

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WHRC HOURS: 9 am - 4 pm, Monday through Friday, by appointment only.

#### REGISTRATION

- Researchers will be escorted from the reception area to the WHRC.
- Coats, books, briefcases, and handbags must be left in designated secure area. A laptop without carrying case may be used for note taking.
- Researchers provide a photo ID and read and sign a Researcher Registration form on first visit. The researcher's photo ID will be checked and his/her electronic record will be updated on subsequent visits.
- Researchers must sign out at reception desk when leaving for the day.

#### HANDLING MATERIALS

- WHRC materials must be reviewed in designated research area only.
- Only pencils may be used for taking notes from WHRC materials.
- Hands should be clean and dry before handling materials. Cotton gloves are required for handling photographs and artifacts and will be provided.
- Remove any dangling jewelry before research as it could damage items.
- Have only one box open and one folder out for review at a time.
- Keep archival materials flat and do not write or rest books or other objects on the surface of materials.
- Maintain the existing order of material within folders and boxes.
- To ask a question or to report any problems related to materials under review, ask WHRC staff to your research table. Do not move documents.
- Smoking, eating, and drinking are prohibited around all GFWC collections.

#### DUPLICATING MATERIALS

- All copying requests must be approved by WHRC staff. Staff may restrict copying due to physical condition of the material, donor restrictions, or "fair use" restrictions of copyright law. All photocopying is done by staff.
- Fill out a Photocopy Request form, marking volume and page numbers for books or box and folder reference for archival materials as directed.
- Folders with photocopy markers should be returned to original order in box before submitting photocopy request.
- Photocopies are made by staff. Researchers may pick up completed copies or request they be mailed (\$5 postage and handling fee).

#### PUBLICATION AND CITATION

- Researchers must obtain permission from the WHRC before any of its archival materials may be published.
- The researcher is responsible for using material in accordance with laws of defamation, privacy, and copyright.
- If permission to publish archival materials is granted, appropriate citation is required. Please check with the WHRC Director for required format.





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