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Preserving the History of the Oldest Library Association: A Report from the American Library Association Archives

Cara S. Bertram

American Library Association Archives, University of Illinois, Urbana, United States
cbertra@illinois.edu



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Abstract:

The American Library Association Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is the official repository of the American Library Association (ALA), the world's oldest and largest national library association. Established in 1973 at the University of Illinois by then University Archivist Maynard Brichford, the Archives now holds over a terabyte of digital content and nearly 4,000 cubic feet of official records, personal papers, and publications created by or relating to the ALA, its members, and the history of librarianship. The collection spans from a scrapbook on the 1853 Librarians Convention to born digital documents produced by ALA members today. The Archives supports the research of ALA staff and members, along with an increasing number of scholars, students, and the public from across the United States and around the world.

Beyond the ALA, the Archives stewards and is adjacent to other collections relating to the history of librarianship and library organizations. As a program of the University of Illinois Archives, the ALA archival collection is close to rich primary source materials relating to library history from the University of Illinois. Including the historical records of the University of Illinois Library, iSchool, and personal papers of alumni who became librarians. The Archives also holds materials on related library associations, both created and collected by ALA or deposited by the associations. This includes the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, Art Libraries Society of North America, two divisions of the Special Libraries Association, and the National Associations of Librarians of Color.

On the strength of its collection and affiliation with the University Archives, the ALA Archives serves as a major research center on the history of the association and librarianship. As the ALA sesquicentennial approaches in 2026, the Archives is taking a critical look at the strengths of its holdings and gaps in the historical record. This report will reflect on the history of the archives, now fifty years old, and its efforts in the preservation of ALA's history. It will discuss the current state of the ALA Archives collection, including a robust catalog of series descriptions, digitally available materials, sources relating to other library associations, and its physical backlog. The report will also cover past digitization practices and current efforts to select papers for digitization, considering the research

needs of patrons, preparation for the ALA sesquicentennial, and supporting librarian organizations in their work and celebrations.

Keywords: archives, library history, library associations, American Library Association

Introduction

In October 1876, 103 librarians met at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania during the United States' Centennial for a Convention of Librarians. At the end of the meetings, a register was passed around for all who wanted to become charter members of the American Librarian Association (ALA).¹ This was the start of what has become the oldest and largest library association in the world.

Preserving ALA's lengthy history is the job of the ALA Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In the years before its centennial, ALA saw an increase in scholarship utilizing the historical records. With their archives housed in a warehouse in Chicago and scholars having to do research in the corner of a loft, ALA sought a solution for the management and preservation of its historical records.² University of Illinois Archivist, Maynard Brichford, made the case for sending the archives to the Urbana-Champaign campus, approximately 140 miles south of headquarters. He emphasized the University Archives own archival holdings on library history, the strength of the University Library collection, the prominence of the library school program, and the participation of University Library staff in ALA.³

ALA and the University of Illinois entered a three-year contract to manage the records and in October 1973, ALA announced the transfer of its archives to the University.⁴ Fifty years later, the collection is nearly 4,000 cubic feet of physical materials and over a terabyte of digital content available for research.

Collection

The ALA Archives collects, preserves, and provides access to inactive records of enduring value from ALA units, members' papers as they relate to ALA activities and librarianship, and manuscripts and records on the history of librarianship.⁵ The date range of the collection spans from a scrapbook on ALA's short-lived predecessor, the 1853 Librarians Convention, to born digital documents produced by ALA members today. Strengths of the collection include ALA Council and Executive Board records, ALA conferences, intellectual freedom and censorship, library advocacy, the World War I Library War Service, and photographs of libraries and librarians. There is also has a growing collection of papers from ALA

¹ "History," American Library Association, <https://www.ala.org/aboutala/node/230/>.

² Maynard Brichford to David Clift, December 21, 1971, Library Advisory Committee Minutes & Correspondence, 1967-1980, Record Series 18/1/1, Box 1, Folder: ALA Archives Correspondence, 1967-72, American Library Association Archives.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Press Release, October 31, 1973, Library Advisory Committee Minutes & Correspondence, 1967-1980, Record Series 18/1/1, Box 1, Folder: ALA Archives Correspondence, 1973-74, American Library Association Archives.

⁵ "About the Archives," American Library Association Archives, <https://www.library.illinois.edu/ala/about-the-archives/>.

presidents, staff, leadership, and members, documenting the careers and work of a wide range of librarians.

The ALA Archives also holds materials on related library associations, both created and collected by ALA or deposited by the associations themselves. This includes the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, Art Libraries Society of North America, Association for Library and Information Science Education, and the National Associations of Librarians of Color. These complimentary records strengthen the core collection by expanding into specialized areas of librarianship and emphasizing the work of underrepresented librarians and the organizations they founded. The records also demonstrate the interconnectedness of ALA as many organizations can trace their origins to the association, along with documentation of past and ongoing relationships.

A weakness of the collection are the early years of the association, particularly from 1876 through 1910. Before ALA had a long-term headquarters, it was said that the association was in cofounder Melvil Dewey's desk drawer or wherever the ALA Secretary hung up their hat.⁶ Without a centralized location to accumulate and store records, they ended up with individuals rather than retained within the association. This likely means that much of ALA's early history is within Dewey's personal papers held at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University⁷ and the papers of other early ALA officers and leadership. While archival sources from this time are sparse, published conference proceedings, programs, reports, and photographs held by the Archives help to bridge this gap and are often a starting point for research.

Processed record series are described in an Archon database, searchable through the Archives website and via OCLC's ArchiveGrid database. This comes to over 1,500 searchable online finding aids, many with folder level inventories.

The ALA Archives currently has a backlog of over 200 boxes, consisting of boxes sent by ALA Headquarters from its move in July 2020 and private donations from ALA members and related organizations. The materials primarily consist of ALA office and division records, predominately spanning from the 1980s to 2010s. Processing the backlog remains a priority for archives staff to make them available to researchers.

Digital Resources

The ALA Archives maintains a robust and multifaceted digital archives program, most of which is open access or available upon request. This includes:

- The University of Illinois Digital Library, which displays digitized physical records and born digital collections. It currently holds 101 collections from the ALA Archives.
- The ALA Institutional Repository, an online repository that preserves and provides access to the intellectual work of the ALA, including publications, minutes and agendas, reports, white papers, speeches, and presentations. It currently holds nearly 19,000 open access items deposited by ALA staff and members.

⁶ Virgil F. Massman, "From Out of a Desk Drawer... The Beginnings of ALA Headquarters," *ALA Bulletin* 63, no. 4 (April 1969): 475-481.

⁷ Melvil Dewey Papers, 1870-1931, Columbia University Libraries, https://findingaids.library.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-rb/ldpd_4078696/dsc/2.

- The ALA Web Archive, a collection in Archive-It of annual captures of ALA’s websites going back to 2013.
- An image database of over 5,000 digitized items, scanned from the physical archival collection and composed primarily of photographs, along with postcards, posters, and illustrations.
- And the University of Illinois Library’s Medusa digital preservation repository, which is an offline storage system for the preservation of digital materials and provides storage space for items unsuitable for immediate open access. This includes archival files that may have restricted information, third party copyright, or privacy concerns. Most of these digital archives are available upon request.⁸

The digitization of archival materials is primarily driven by requests from ALA staff, members, and researchers. This has steered the Archives digital holdings into several areas of interest and research. This includes materials on the World War I Library War Service, the American Library in Paris, intellectual freedom, prison libraries, Chinese librarianship, ALA administrative history, and photographs of librarians.

Anniversaries also drive a large portion of digitization efforts. Individual ALA units have a variety of founding dates, which means the ALA Archives is in a perpetual anniversary cycle, providing support to ALA units to access their history. This often includes the digitization of photographs of ALA unit leaders and events, early correspondence, meeting minutes, bylaws, publications, and other establishing documentation.

Additionally, the archivist selects materials for digitization outside of user requests. This is often done in anticipation of upcoming events and celebrations or due to heightened researcher interest on a particular topic. Materials are sometimes selected because they are not requested often as their absence in the digital collections may lead researchers to believe that there are little to no materials on those topics within the Archives.

With the ALA sesquicentennial approaching, the selection of materials to digitize and highlight has become even more important. Considering an increase of book bans, challenges, and censorship within the United States, ALA Headquarters and the Archives has prioritized the digitization and display of materials relating to intellectual freedom and the freedom to read.

Related Collections

One of the reasons why the ALA Archives is located at the University of Illinois is due to the strength of related collections held by the University Library. Librarian and historian, Edward G. Holley, noted the desirability of having the ALA Archives at the Urbana-Champaign campus in a 1971 letter, “In this matter I speak ... as one who has used the collections and the archives and knows how important it is to have related materials together.”⁹

⁸ “Digital Preservation,” University of Illinois Library, <https://www.library.illinois.edu/preservation/digital-preservation/>.

⁹ Edward G. Holley to Everett Moore, February 17, 1971, Library Advisory Committee Minutes & Correspondence, 1967-1980, Record Series 18/1/1, Box 1, Folder: ALA Archives Correspondence, 1967-72, American Library Association Archives.

Beyond library reports, periodicals, and publications maintained by the University Library,¹⁰ the University Archives and Rare Book and Manuscript Library provide a wide range of primary source materials that complement the holdings of the ALA Archives. This includes the historical records of the University of Illinois Library and its directors, the iSchool and its faculty, personal papers of librarian alumni, and the papers of Charles Evans, a cofounder of ALA.

Conclusion

The ALA Archives was established on the eve of ALA's centennial for the purpose of making its history more accessible to researchers. Today, the Archives receives inquiries and in-person visits from researchers from across the United States and around the world. Being established at one of the largest university libraries in the United States and the growth of the collection has made the ALA Archives a destination for researchers. As major anniversaries approach, such as the ALA sesquicentennial in 2026 and the IFLA centennial in 2027, the ALA Archives invites librarians, scholars, students, and the public to access its collection. Providing access remains a priority to the Archives and hopes that these anniversary celebrations will see more patrons, near and far, do research at the ALA Archives.

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¹⁰ Ibid.