

Proposal to the ASOR *ad hoc* Archives Committee
From the American Heritage Center

Answers to Questions, 5/4/22
Paul V. M. Flesher, Director

1) The American Heritage Center has no history of collecting archaeology. Why should ASOR place its materials with it?

True. The American Heritage Center has no history of Middle East archaeology. Nonetheless, the Center is offering ASOR a home for its archives and is willing to make a commitment to preserving ASOR's archival materials and to making them accessible. In addition, the Center is willing, indeed wants, to seek out other archaeological materials in ASOR's field and to bring them together at the AHC to create a dedicated archival home for this kind of material. The larger goal is to create a centralized place where these kinds of collections can be housed, preserved and made accessible. Hopefully it will become a place where everyone—especially former dig directors—knows they can house their field notes and research documents. At the moment, these materials are being scattered among the home institutions of the archaeologists, at best.

2) Physical Archives: Will ASOR materials be accessible at the AHC in Laramie, Wyoming?

Laramie Wyoming is quite accessible. It is a 20-minute plane flight or a 2.5 hour drive from Denver. And Denver is only a four-hour flight from New York and a three-hour flight from Los Angeles. Indeed, Denver is the largest airline hub between Chicago and the west coast, with direct flights from all major cities. Scholars regularly visit the American Heritage Center from around the world and around the nation. It is also a fairly inexpensive place for lodging and food.

In addition, the AHC has a large digitization lab to make its materials digitally available. During Covid, when many archives were shut tight, the AHC created a virtual reading room to make all of the services provided on-site virtually accessible. This includes RRAD (Remote Research and Discovery) which enables researchers to remotely peruse and explore the materials of any AHC collection. This service is regularly used by scholars around the nation and abroad as a substitute for in-person archival research. It is cheaper and less time-consuming and allows the same access to collection materials. (See more discussion below.)

Digitization

3) Can the AHC make available collection materials that were digitized and made available in the past?

Yes. There are several ways to accomplish this goal, two of which are discussed above, under digitization. This task should be fairly straightforward, given the professional archiving work already performed. Both the physical and digital materials in the ASOR collections will be more accessible than they are now.

4) How does the AHC pay for digitization projects?

On the one hand, the AHC digitizes material on an ongoing basis, according to a set of priorities. The first priority is to digitize materials requested by our patrons. The AHC has a small part-time (PT) staff to accomplish this. The second priority is to undertake digitization projects with this

same staff. There is a queue and as a project is completed, new projects are undertaken. These projects feature strategic digitization rather than mass digitization.

On the other hand, has numerous larger digitization projects underway paid for by a variety of sources. An IMLS grant pays for two PT staff to digitize materials for Wyoming History Day. Anaconda memberships pay for two PT staff to digitize geological exploration data. Gifts to the Director's Internship program pay for interns on a semester basis; some of these have worked in the Digitization Lab.

5) Can the AHC digitize additional materials, whether already in the collection or to be donated in the future?

Yes, although here is where the AHC's financial resources are limited. For rapid, dedicated service, ASOR would need to fund the PT workers to accomplish the work. This could be done through grants, donations or other means. The AHC would provide the equipment, would hire the workers, provide the training (if needed) and supervision. It will also create the needed metadata.

6) Can a digitization schedule be placed into an agreement?

I do not think that negotiations about donating the ASOR archives to the AHC is the place to make hard and fast agreements about digitization and online access. Once this agreement is in place and the collections are settled at the AHC and the pressure to get the transfer accomplished is over, we can consider what ASOR's goals are with regard to digitization and then design a project or two to accomplish those goals.

What needs to be considered? For example, I hear two goals in the request for digitization. One is simply to have digital copies of the materials, while the other is to provide some sort of internet-based accessibility. The former has one set of benefits and costs while the latter has increased number of benefits and higher costs. Are the increased benefits worth the cost? Having materials on the internet provides "instantaneous" access. That is good, but is it needed for collection material that may be accessed only once a year? once every five years? Instead, the materials could be offline and supplied by the Reference Services department upon request, within 24-28 hours.

Furthermore, there are many new tools and ways to make items internet-accessible than there were 15 years ago. I suggest we do some creative brain-storming about what ASOR wants to accomplish with digitization before getting this underway again. There could be some exciting things that ASOR could do. Or not—but it should at least consider the opportunities.

7) Would the AHC give the archives back to ASOR if it requested them?

No. Once ASOR signs the Deed of Gift to the AHC, the AHC owns the materials permanently. (See the discussion in the proposal for the reasoning.) The AHC commits to looking after and preserving the collections donated to it. It commits to looking after the materials, preserving them, and making them accessible—at whatever cost necessary. In turn, the AHC expects its donors to trust it and to commit to it by giving a permanent donation. Our aim is not to "take your stuff," but to have the legal authority to take the steps needed to preserve and conserve the collections in its care. Archives in general do not operate by the same practices as museums.

8) What is RRAD?

RRAD is Remote Research and Discovery, a way of accessing collections remotely. On the one hand, if a researcher knows what they want to see (e.g., Folder 22 in Box 9), it is simply to digitize those materials and to send them to the patron. On the other hand, if a researcher needs to explore a topic (e.g., for my question, I need to look at these 6 collections and see if they have anything relevant), that is not so easy. RRAD solves that problem. RRAD connects an on-site research assistant with a remote researcher anywhere in the world. (The AHC recently had a researcher in China and another in England who used the service once a week for a stretch of months.) It uses Zoom technology connected to document camera, which everyone now knows how to use. The assistant retrieves materials, places them under the camera, turns pages, takes digitization orders, etc. Any physical collection material can be studied this way and all of ASOR's papers and photographs would be immediately and always accessible in this format.

9) How did the AHC handle Covid restrictions?

Many archives and special collections in libraries were closed for months (some for more than a year) during Covid. This includes the National Archives in Washington, D.C. They did no business with their patrons, not even remotely. At the AHC, we closed the building to users, but archivists came to work every day in masks and practicing social distancing. We created a virtual equivalent of every service provided in-person by in our Reading Room. Remote requests came in regularly and we dealt with them expeditiously. Many digitization requests arrived as well, and those were also undertaken.