

Supplement 3 – Determining the Significance of NARA Holdings

Effective Date: January 17, 2023

1. The significance of NARA holdings and the sensitivity of the material may be taken into account when the standards in NARA 1571 and related Supplements cannot be feasibly implemented in an existing archival facility or when determining the applicable archival storage standards.
2. The significance of holdings usually at a series level guides decisions about the preservation, storage, access needs, processing, and digitization of records and is determined by an appraisal of characteristics after accessioning. Significance is evaluated along several dimensions that indicate how valuable the records are as sources of information, as artifacts, as evidence of government actions, as guarantors of individual rights, to ensure government accountability, and as continued value for understanding the actions of the government. Appraisal of significance weighs factors such as intrinsic value, evidential value, the nature of the government function and activity represented by the records, age, and historical importance. The results are generalized to three levels of significance: low, medium, and high.
3. Specific records within a series (items, files, volumes, etc.) may have high significance even though the series as a whole does not (this includes “specially protected holdings,” which are unclassified or national security classified holdings to which extra physical, intellectual, and access controls are assigned because they bear exceptional intrinsic or monetary value and are therefore subject to heightened risk of theft or vandalism). When it is not possible or practical to treat specific records differently than the whole series, the whole series should be treated at the same level as the most significant records. An example where this is not the case is where highly significant items or files are separated as specially protected holdings.
4. Records with low significance have little or no intrinsic value, were the product of minor or routine government functions, and have limited informational or evidential value. These are often series created by functions in the course of administering a business process or a routine program such as providing individual entitlements, carrying out registrations (such as draft cards and passports), issuing licenses, or providing services. Other series held by NARA or published sources may contain the same amount of information. These records were usually created after 1900.
5. Moderately significant records may have low or limited value as artifacts, but contain important information about, or were produced as a result of, major government processes and functions. They provide evidence of the basis for substantive functions performed by a Federal agency, commission, or court, and possess evidentiary value

for documenting policy formation and government decisions at leadership levels. The information contained in the records is generally considered to be unique to the records, with no other known sources having the same range and type of information or reflecting the way it is organized. Age may also be a factor, and records that otherwise may be considered of low significance could be designated as having moderate significance primarily because they date to a period when few records survived or before the National Archives was created. Generally, all records created before 1900 should be considered as moderately or highly significant regardless of other characteristics.

6. Highly significant records have characteristics that are similar to moderately significant records, but the importance of the original physical copy of the record is as great as, or even greater than, the importance of the information contained. These records have either great intrinsic value as unique artifacts, association with significant historical events, or the nature of the original documents conveys important information that reproductions or other sources cannot convey. The records may be considered international or national historical icons or treasures, unique or irreplaceable, and have few peers, or they may be viewed as works of art in addition to sources of information. These records may also provide exceptional documentation of functions and activities at the highest levels of government. Handmade annotations by historic figures and great age (generally NARA holdings created before 1800) may be an important determinant of high significance independent of most other characteristics. Highly significant records often have a high monetary value and may be attractive targets for theft. Significant harm to the Federal Government would occur if these records were lost.

Example Archival Significance Worksheet

Purpose:

Use this worksheet to determine how significant a series of records are to assist in making decisions about storage, processing priorities, selection for digitization, and recommendations for reappraisal. Factors determining significance include research importance, level of use, and uniqueness. This worksheet is based on appraisal criteria in NARA 1441 and worksheets used by other cultural management organizations, such as the Smithsonian.

Limitations concerning level of use (#7):

- The amount that records have been used must be based on a fairly subjective assessment, considering knowledge of reference activity. At this time the amount of actual records use is not consistently recorded below the record group level.

Recording researcher pull requests through an electronic pull request system would be needed to provide more accurate data on usage at and below the series level.

- Certain records may be regularly used by researchers yet only make up less than 1% of the whole series.
- Low use may be due to the use of surrogates (microfilm, digitized, etc.) in lieu of the original records.
- Low use may be due to restrictions on access and therefore may not indicate a lack of demand or interest in the records.

Step One: Identify the score for each of the following four factors, according to the criteria. Examples are included for each criterion to guide evaluation.

Factors	Description	Criteria
<p>1. Intrinsic significance of the physical item</p>	<p>Evaluate the significance of the physical item apart from its content.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there any special symbolic significance of the physical item (e.g. the Constitution, Declaration, treaties)? • Is there an association with an important historical figure (a President), or landmark event (Brown vs. Board or Roe vs. Wade)? • Is the physical form important? Is it an artistic work or does it include artistic work? • Age-- does the material have significance because of great age-- for instance, making it 	<p>0- Records that have no, negligible, or undetermined physical significance. A reproduction could replace the original. Examples of such records might be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bankruptcy case files</i> • <i>Non-trial case files</i> • <i>Soil conservation documents, and etc.</i> <p>1- Records that have limited physical significance with minor intrinsic interest. However, a reproduction could replace the original. Examples of such records might be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Naturalization and passport records containing photographs</i> • <i>Indian School Student Case files</i>

	<p>scarce or providing rare insight into functions and activities?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique physical features 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Military draft cards</i> <p>2- Records that have moderate significance due to an unusual physical form or shape that can't easily be reproduced. The physical form or shape provides some informational value about the document to the researchers (enhances the content for the researcher). Examples of such records might be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Railroad right-of-way maps</i> • <i>Ship drawings (minor drawings)</i> <p>3- Records that have high physical significance as a result of the association with historical events, persons, or age.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Written opinions of the Supreme Court (Highest Court in the U.S. Government) or equivalent type Federal entity (FISC Court)</i> • <i>Documents signed by heads of cabinet departments and heads of other agencies</i> • <i>Age of the document, such as 17th and 18th century records. (And in some cases, certain 19th century records)</i> <p>4- Records that have exceptional physical significance. Perceived to be international or national/historical icons or treasures, irreplaceable, or</p>
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		<p>having few peers. Examples of such records might be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Holograph documents associated with prominent historical figures (such as the “Lincoln Telegrams”);</i> • <i>A unique physical artifact that has an association with an important historical event, such as Mediterranean passports or the SS passports; Confederate currency;</i> • <i>Those with high monetary value, such as the first Batman comic book, Ansel Adams photographs, Brady glass plate negatives)</i> • <i>Treaties</i> • <i>Richard Nixon’s resignation letter</i> • <i>Himmler document</i> • <i>Letters to Heads of State</i>
<p>2. Government Significance of Content</p>	<p>Evaluate the overall importance of the records in providing evidence of the substantive functions performed by a creating agency or court. How significant is the content of the records for citizens or a branch of government to determine the reasons, or nature of governmental decisions, actions, or policies? How significant is the content for providing evidence of policy</p>	<p>0- Records that have no, negligible, or undetermined significance. Reappraisal should be considered. 1- Records that have limited informational significance. Examples of such records might be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bankruptcy Case Files,</i> • <i>Railroad Retirement board,</i>

	<p>formation, governmental processes, deliberations, decisions, actions, and impact?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Interstate Commerce Commission Railroad Dockets,</i> • <i>Bituminous Coal Commission records</i> • <i>National Science Foundation Grant case files</i> <p>2- Records that have moderate significance due to the information value and possibly some evidentiary value. Examples of such records might be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Civil works project files, such as Dam construction.</i> • <i>Records of formerly used defense sites.</i> • <i>U.S. Patent Case Files</i> • <i>Indian Claims Commission Records</i> <p>3- Records that have high significance as a result of key informational and evidentiary value. Examples of such records might be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>International Boundary Commission Records</i> • <i>Records of the Department of State</i> • <i>Department of Justice classification case files</i> • <i>Records about the Tuskegee Airman Study,</i>
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<p>3. Historical Research significance of Content</p>	<p>Evaluate the overall importance of the records in providing unique evidence of a historical event, topic, or persons.</p> <p>How significant is the content of the records for providing information to researchers about important historical events, topics or persons?</p>	<p>1- Records that have limited historical significance. Examples of such records might be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Land Grant Records</i> • <i>Environmental Impact Statements</i> • <i>Records of the Office of the Housing Expediter</i> <p>2- Records that have moderate significance due to the historical value. Examples of such records might be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>WW2 Naval shipyard records</i> • <i>Early records of the U.S. Mint</i> • <i>Records relating to Native Americans</i>

		<p>3. Records that have high historical significance. Examples of such records might be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Central Files of the records of the Department of State</i>• <i>Policy files of cabinet departments and independent agencies:</i>• <i>Records concerning the Manhattan Project or Oak Ridge Lab</i>• <i>early TVA records</i>• <i>Army Command records such as General Subject Files</i>• <i>Related case files and other materials relating to Brown vs. Board of Education</i>• <i>Records of the Office of Strategic Services</i> <p>4. Records that have exceptional historical significance due to documentation of a major event, topic, or person. Examples of such records might be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Papers of the Continental Congress</i>• <i>Watergate Commission</i>• <i>JFK Assassination Records</i>• <i>September 11 Commission</i>
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<p>4. Rights and Interests Significance</p>	<p>Evaluate the overall importance of the records as a source of unique information about subjects, events, processes, or individuals regardless of historical significance.</p> <p>How significant is the content of the records for providing unique non-historical information to researchers about subjects, events, processes, or individuals?</p> <p>Records with non-historical significance establish rights, provide important scientific or technical information, data or other information that furthers scientific research, genealogical information, or provide information used by students and educators for non-history educational purposes.</p>	<p>0- Records that have no, negligible, or undetermined non-historical significance as a unique source of information about a subject, event, topics, or person. Reappraisal should be considered.</p> <p>1- Records that have limited non-historical significance as a unique source of information about a subject, event, topics, or person. Examples of such records might be</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>National Technical Information Service</i> • <i>Defense Technical Information Center</i> <p>2- Records that have moderate non-historical significance as a unique source of information about a subject, event, topics, or person. Examples of such records might be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Fishing Logs</i> • <i>Railroad Retirement Board Personnel files</i> • <i>Records of the Foreign Claims Settlement Commission of the United States</i> • <i>Japanese-American Reparation Act Claims Case files</i> • <i>Government Publications Office</i> <p>3. Records that have high non-historical significance as a unique source of information</p>
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		<p>about a subject, event, topics, or person. Examples of such records might be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>USCIS A-Files</i> • <i>Records of Naturalization</i> • <i>Official Military Personnel Files</i> • <i>War Relocation Authority Internee Case Files</i>
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Step Two: Answer yes or no to questions 5-7

5. Uniqueness	<p>Is the information contained in the records unique?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is the only source of information. • The same information is not available in other NARA holdings. • The information is not available in other publicly available sources (published or not). • If other sources exist, this source provides additional information not found in any other source. 	<p>Yes No (not unique)</p>
6. Usability of Records	<p>Are the records physically usable in their current condition?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These records be provided to researchers. • The records are in a media type that can be used in its current format. 	<p>Yes No (not usable)</p>
7. Level of Use (a)	<p>Have these records been used in the past 10 years? Base this on actual or estimated researcher use of the records (see “limitations” above).</p>	<p>Yes No (no use)</p>
(b)	<p>If 7a is “yes”, is all use limited to less than 10% of the series?</p>	<p>Yes (less than 10%) No</p>

(c)	If 7a is “yes”, has use averaged one or more times each year?	Yes (used one or more times per year) No
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Enter amount of use, if an estimate is available. Indicate the period of the estimate (e.g., monthly, annually, over decade) _____

Guidance for Interpreting and using the results

Exceptional Significance: at least one category = 4

Highly Significant: at least one category = 3 and no score is higher than 3 in any category

Moderately Significant: no score is higher than 2 in any category

Low Significance: All categories = 0 or 1

Step 1 (questions 1-4) indicates the significance of records. For records scored “Highly Significant” or lower, the significance may be rated even lower if the records are not unique (question 5) and/or they are not physically usable in their current condition (question 6). The answers to step 2 (questions 5-7) should be used with significance to make recommendations about prioritizing processing actions, digitizing records, candidates for internal disposal, and relocating records.