



A New Committee Launches

Making a Case for Archival Repatriation

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Access to and community possession of archival materials containing Native knowledge, language, and lifeways is crucial to the cultural survivance, revitalization, and continuation of communities. Nevertheless, archival organizations have yet to fully address how the profession might approach the growing demand for archival repatriation. In response, the Society of American Archivists formed the Archival Repatriation Committee with the charge to “[E]nsure that [SAA]’s services, activities, policies, communications, and products support the goal of supporting archivists in repatriating and receiving archival materials.”

The members of the committee see our work as one step toward archivists and archival institutions fulfilling our responsibilities to Indigenous communities and

acknowledging Tribal sovereignty. We accept our charge with humility, and as such, we will begin our work with a series of listening sessions to invite archivists and community members to share their repatriation ideas and concerns. This includes having a sustained presence at the International Conference of Indigenous Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM).

How Did This Committee Come About?

Archivists must have a shared understanding of what it means to develop community relationships, pursue pathways to reparative and reciprocal arrangements, and in some cases, facilitate the actual return of Native archival items into their custody. However, physical repatriation of

archives has not been directly addressed by the archival profession, even amid ongoing conversations around ethical access, the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, reparative description, archival Indigenization, post-custodial paradigms, shared stewardship models, digital repatriation projects, and knowledge sharing efforts.

In 2021, as part of discussions on SAA’s new DEIA initiatives, the Native American Archives Section (NAAS) began a conversation about the need for policy on physical archival repatriation and purposeful deaccessioning. NAAS members recommended that SAA seek to educate the archival field about repatriation and the sovereignty of Native Nations, as well as broader issues around archival holdings

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in non-Indigenous repositories that were unethically obtained, culturally sensitive, or sacred.

NAAS, led by Rachel Menyuk, Nathan Sowry, Rose Buchanan, Lotus Norton-Wisla, and Selena Ortega-Chiolero, with the support of Council Liaison Dominique Luster, prepared a document that was presented at the February 2022 SAA Council meeting. Council approved the new committee at its May 2022 meeting, issued a call for volunteers, established a review committee, and in Fall 2022, the [Archival Repatriation Committee](#) was formally launched.

Upcoming Committee Initiatives

This committee is keenly aware of the significant role archives play in truth-telling and reconciliation efforts relating to the impact of Indian boarding schools for many Indigenous Nations. In the months ahead, we will continue to support the efforts of Indigenous Nations to secure archival materials relating to boarding school records.

Other initial projects include compiling a list of archival repatriation training opportunities, developing a bibliography of resources, and collecting case studies of successful repatriation efforts. The committee will also draft guidance for SAA membership, institutions, and communities to inform best practices around archival repatriation.

The committee recently launched an [SAA microsite](#), where you will find more details of our work and our roster of committee members. We are excited to begin this important work as part of the larger project of repairing archival harm and addressing colonial collecting histories and practices across the archival field. We welcome suggestions and feedback as we improve and expand our work. ■

Recommended Reading

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