Archives vs. Libraries

A Comparison of Materials

There are fundamental differences between an archive and a library that are most apparent when considering the differences in the materials collected by each. The differences in collections are distinguished using the following categories:

Nature

LIBRARIES:
- Published
- Discrete items
- Independent significance
- Available elsewhere

ARCHIVES:
- Unpublished
- Groups of related items
- Significance from relationship to other items
- Unique

Creator

LIBRARIES:
- Many different individuals or organizations

ARCHIVES:
- Parent organization or institution

Method of Creation

LIBRARIES:
- Separate, independent actions

ARCHIVES:
- Organic - normal course of business

Method of Receipt

LIBRARIES:
- Selected as single items
- Decisions revocable

ARCHIVES:
- Appraised in aggregate
- Decisions irrevocable (destruction is forever)
Arrangement
LIBRARIES:
• Predetermined subject classification
ARCHIVES:
• Provenance and original order (relation to structure and function)

Level of Description
LIBRARIES:
• Individual items
ARCHIVES:
• Aggregate (record group or series)

Descriptive Media
LIBRARIES:
• Built into the published item (title page, table of contents, index)
• Card catalog, online public access system (OPAC)
ARCHIVES:
• Must be prepared by the archivist
• Guides and inventories, online systems

Access
LIBRARIES:
• Open stacks
• Items circulate
ARCHIVES:
• Closed stacks
• Items do not circulate