



PROCEDURAL LEAFLET

January 2012

PROCEDURES FOR LOOSE RECORDS PREPARATION BY COUNTY PROJECT VOLUNTEERS

The following procedures are intended to assist local volunteers in preparing unbound (“loose”) county records for microfilming, or for digitization by FamilySearch (formerly the Genealogical Society of Utah, or GSU); but they are also useful for local organizations embarking on their own reformatting programs. Although FamilySearch no longer offers microfilming as an option, records it previously microfilmed are available for research at the Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH), at FamilySearch local history centers, and in all participating counties. For digital projects, FamilySearch provides the county with a donor copy of its digitized records.

Types and Cut-off Dates of Eligible Records

Eligible loose probate records have included: estate case files, marriage licenses, guardianships, apprenticeships, manumissions, bastardy bonds, and Confederate pension records. Divorce cases, disputed estates, and other circuit court civil files have been included in some counties. Previous projects generally began with a county’s earliest loose records and ended at the following cut-off dates: 1915-1950 for estate case files and related records, 1950 for marriage licenses and divorces. Confederate pension records, manumissions, and bastardy bonds have been filmed in their entirety. FamilySearch now uses a 1927 cut-off date for probate records.

Bound records missed in earlier microfilming cycles have also been microfilmed or digitized in many counties, so long as they fell under FamilySearch’s eligibility guidelines. Other types of records (such as church records, funeral home records, and private historical collections) have occasionally been included in a project’s inventory and evaluated on a case-by-case basis. If you have questions about any record’s eligibility, contact ADAH.

Beginning a Loose Records Project

County government officials, or members of local historical or genealogical societies, who wish to start a loose records project should first contact the ADAH Government Records Division. ADAH local records archivists will arrange training for county project volunteers and provide a limited number of free storage boxes and file folders for use in records preparation. Before beginning the project, volunteers *must* ensure that they have **permission from the loose records’ legal custodian(s)**, i.e., the probate judge and/or circuit clerk. Probate or circuit court staff will need to assist

project volunteers in locating eligible loose records and to provide a work space for records preparation. Eventually, the county will also need to find a suitable room where the records can be digitized. ADAH can assist new projects by making arrangements with county officials, recruiting and training volunteers, coordinating with FamilySearch, or locating a commercial vendor. Each project should appoint a coordinator to act as a liaison with ADAH, county officials, and FamilySearch staff or its vendor.

Records Inventorying Procedures

Records to be reformatted under the loose records program should be inventoried at the beginning of the project. ADAH archivists can assist local volunteers with inventorying and may compile a preliminary inventory on their first visit to the county. Once the project has an inventory, ADAH archivists will forward a computerized version to FamilySearch or to the project's vendor, using a standard listing form.

When compiling the inventory, a single entry—listing record title, inclusive dates, and estimated exposures—is sufficient for each type of case file or other record to be reformatted. “Estimated exposures” are the total number of camera “shots” (images) that will be needed to digitize the records. The following information may be useful in estimating exposures:

- One side of any piece of paper up to legal-size (8½ x 14"), whether loose or bound = 1 camera “shot” or image. (Any piece of paper—regardless of its size—that has writing on it should be counted as one shot.) Both front and back sides should be counted, separately, unless one side is entirely blank. Most loose records will have writing on both sides. Usually, therefore, **1 sheet (front and back) = 2 shots.**
- In estimating the volume of loose records still folded up inside their Woodruff files (the wooden or metal file drawers in which old case files are often stored), one full file drawer = 1/3 cubic foot. Thus, **3 Woodruff file drawers = 1 cubic foot.**
- A one-cubic-foot records carton (the standard box that ADAH supplies for storing loose records after they are flattened and foldered) can hold up to 2,400 sheets of paper if folders are packed tightly; thus, a box might contain up to 4,800 camera “shots” if every page has writing on both sides. However, most boxes and folders will be less than full, and not every page will have writing on both sides. For inventory purposes, therefore, FamilySearch has asked volunteers to estimate: **1 cubic foot = 3,000 images.**

One purpose of the inventory is to enable FamilySearch to calculate the time and resources it must devote to each loose records project. Volume estimates should therefore be as accurate as possible but need not be exact. When in doubt, estimate “high” instead of “low.”

Sometimes, volunteers will find eligible loose records stored in Woodruff files with other files not eligible to be filmed or digitized. This is especially true of circuit court files, which are often organized by case number instead of record type. An early step in the project, therefore, will be to remove all eligible files, organize them by record type, and estimate exposures for *only* the eligible

files. Ineligible files should be left, in their original order, in the Woodruff drawers. If record types are intermixed and volunteers are unsure which ones are eligible, contact ADAH staff for advice.

Cleaning, Flattening, and Removing Fasteners from Loose Records

The next tasks of loose records volunteers will be to remove the loose records from their Woodruff files or other storage units, clean and flatten them, and remove all fasteners connecting pages, prior to arranging the case files in archival folders and, later, storage boxes.

Cleaning. Old case files that are still tri-folded in their Woodruff file drawers normally have removable covers to protect the documents inside. Save the covers, which provide identifying information for the case file. Given this program's pre-1950 cut-off dates, most loose records encountered will be brittle. Unfold each document carefully and clean it—if at all—using the gentlest possible methods. Brushing (using soft, long-bristled brushes) is usually enough. For exceptionally dirty documents, use a dry cleaning pad: a small mesh bag filled with dry eraser particles that is available from art or archival suppliers. Instead of rubbing the bag directly on the document—quickly making it too dirty for continued use—shake the eraser particles onto the document, rub them gently with the fingertips to remove dirt; then brush off the particles. This is a time-consuming process but is not often needed. It is preferable to using gum erasers or putty-like cleaners, which can leave residue behind and wipe away deteriorating ink. Exceptionally brittle or torn case files should not be surface-cleaned; record information may simply crumble into bits.

Flattening. There are several methods of flattening loose records. Once unfolded, they can be placed, a few at a time, under a heavy weight, such as a few bricks, a large record volume, or a homemade book press. In order to protect the documents, first place them between two sheets of acid-free paper, inside thin sheets of cardboard. Another flattening method is to rub a document's creases with a Q-tip that has been dipped in alcohol, thinned down with water; this mixture relaxes the folds but will dry before it damages the document. Such measures should flatten most loose records sufficiently for processing. They will continue to flatten inside their file folders and records storage boxes, if the boxes are packed tightly enough to exert slight pressure on the folders.

Humidification chamber. If all else fails, construct a humidification chamber to flatten stubborn documents. Use a rectangular, transparent plastic storage box, approximately 3' wide x 2' wide x 2' deep, with a detachable lid. (These boxes are available from discount stores.) Pour about 2" of water into the box; then set plastic vegetable cartons, a wire screen, or some similar device inside so that it rests against the box's sides or on the bottom, high enough to keep the documents well above the water. Place several documents "on end" inside, leaving enough space for moist air to circulate and for the documents to expand as they start to absorb moisture. Then seal the lid. This process must be closely monitored; never leave documents inside the chamber more than overnight, or long enough to become damp. Remove them once they start to unroll and become pliable. Further flattening with weights may be needed before they are flat enough for processing.

Removing Fasteners. Over time, a variety of fasteners—ribbons, straight pins, brads, grommets, rubber bands, paper clips, and staples—have been used to hold related documents together.

Depending on the date span of their county's records, loose records volunteers may encounter all of them. Metal rusts and corrodes. Brads, grommets, or paper clips become a cutting edge against which brittle paper crumbles when the files are handled. Rusty pins and staples can also injure people, so be sure all project volunteers are up to date with tetanus shots. Despite the hazards and the time it takes, removing fasteners is an essential part of loose records preparation. Production suffers badly if the camera operator must pause to remove fasteners missed in preparation.

Here are instructions for dealing with most kinds of fasteners. In all cases, first place the document on a flat, hard surface. Hold it lightly with one hand, near the fastener, to prevent it from shifting.

Staples. Never use a standard staple remover on loose records, as its sharp claws are bound to tear the fragile paper. A microspatula (available from archival suppliers) is the best tool. Alternatives might be a small knife or letter opener with a very thin, flat, rounded blade. Rather than starting with the staple's "front," place the document face-down on a flat surface, and use the microspatula to lift one shank of the staple at a time. Then turn the document over, gently loosen the staple with the microspatula, and pull it from the document.

Brads. The method here is identical to that for staples. Place the document face-down, and use the microspatula to lift one flange at a time. Turn the document over, and lift the brad out of the paper with the microspatula.

Paper clips. Rusted paper clips can adhere to fragile documents. To remove them, carefully use the microspatula to lift the short side of the clip up and away from the document, while gently pressing on the clip's long side with one finger. Brush away any rusty residue left by the paper clip.

Straight pins. Rusty pins inhabit old loose records and can prick unwary volunteers. Use a microspatula to lift the pin's head gently off the paper. Then pull the pin out by the head with a small pair of pliers.

Grommets. Grommets are especially hard to remove without causing damage. They can be blasted out of sturdy documents by using a hammer and a punch with a concave tip, but that method is not recommended for loose records. If a document is brittle, use a small scissors to cut around the grommet before carefully removing it.

Rubber bands. At first, rubber bands become sticky and adhere to documents. Later, they harden and become imbedded in the paper. Again, use the microspatula (an essential tool!) to gradually break contact between the document and the rubber band. Keep the microspatula flat and *push*, rather than flicking at the rubber band or trying to lift it from the paper. If the rubber band cannot be removed without causing damage, leave it as it is.

What kinds of fasteners *are* permissible in loose records preparation? Plastiklips (plastic paper clips) have been employed by some county projects to keep pages in a document together. However, they tend to bend the paper and should not be used on old and brittle documents. For estates, and for other lengthy case files that have their own folder, place the individual documents (inventories, depositions etc.) in the folder chronologically but keep the pages loose. Folders housing shorter case

files, such as marriage licenses, may contain multiple records of only a few pages each. Here, place a sheet of acid-free paper between each separate file, or fold it around the papers in that file.

Arranging Loose Records for Reformatting

Although arrangement procedures may vary according to local conditions and the kind of loose records being processed, a few basic principles are generally consistent:

1. **Arrange by record series.** The next step, after the initial inventory, is to separate all eligible loose records by their records series (marriage licenses, estate case files, etc.). In some counties, records related to estate case files—for example, wills and guardianships—have been interfiled with the relevant estates; elsewhere, they have been filed and duplicated as separate records series. Which method to use depends upon the records’ original order; the preference of the responsible official; and whether there are enough “related” records, such as guardianships, to constitute an independent series. Records from different agencies—the probate office and the circuit court—should always be kept separate. Estates may begin in the probate court but be transferred to the circuit court (as “disputed estates”) before they’re finally settled. The two estate files, while related, should *not* be combined. They can be cross-referenced in the project’s index. Once all loose records have been arranged by series, original “estimated exposures” for the different series may need to be revised.
2. **Where possible, use alphabetical arrangement.** This method of arrangement is easy for researchers to follow, even without a separate index to the records. Alphabetize by the “main name” of a case file (e.g., decedent’s name for estates, husband’s name for marriage licenses). Additional names—such as descendants, attorneys, and slaves listed in estate files or brides’ maiden names on marriage licenses—can be written on the case’s file folder and included in an all-name index. There is one major exception to alphabetical arrangement: both the Administrative Office of Courts (AOC) and most circuit clerks prefer for divorces and other circuit court files to be left in case-number order. Do not alphabetize these records without specific permission from the circuit clerk. Obviously, records filed in case-number order will need an index to be accessible for research.
3. **Use acid-free file folders and storage boxes.** Acid-free materials are strongly recommended for storing historical loose records, because acids in untreated containers speed the records’ deterioration. ADAH also recommends, for preservation purposes, that prepared loose records be left in their acid-free containers after duplication, not tri-folded again and returned to their Woodruff files. Storage under controlled humidity and temperature will help to ensure their preservation.
4. **Vary foldering and labeling procedures for different types of records.** Estates, and other lengthy case files, should always be placed in a case-specific folder or folders, *never* intermixed with other cases. Conversely, marriage licenses, or other records having only a few pages, may be filed, in alphabetical order, within the same folder. Individual folders should contain no more than 50 pages. Folders should be numbered consecutively within a box, including the box number so they may be returned to the right box. For labeling file

brand of software package chosen is less important than ensuring that an electronic version of the index will be accessible for future use. Thus, a project does not end when a “hard copy” of its index is presented to the records’ originating office. The project coordinator should also arrange for the index to be stored on a reliable computer or at an online site, backed up by CDs or external hard drives, so that indexed information will be permanently archived.

Quality-Control and Post-Preparation Procedures for Loose Records Projects

Project coordinators should ensure that all loose records volunteers are thoroughly trained and consistently follow procedures outlined in this leaflet. Besides offering training before preparation starts, ADAH local records archivists are available for follow-up visits to projects and will inspect their records after preparation is completed. If questions arise during preparation, the project coordinator should contact ADAH before proceeding further. Incorrect or inconsistent preparation can severely slow down microfilming/digitizing and impair the records’ historical value.

If possible, county officials should limit or restrict public access to loose records once they are prepared. Otherwise, record information in the files is likely to be disarranged, and the records may be copied out of order. Such mistakes cannot be corrected easily. ADAH and FamilySearch will try to schedule a camera operator’s arrival promptly so that loose records will not be closed for an extended period of time. If they must be open to the public in the interim, county office staff should always supervise researchers to prevent the files from being disarranged.

Once the probate office or circuit court receives its copy of the digital images, it should consider using that format for reference purposes and removing the original loose records from public use. Ideally, the prepared files should remain in their acid-free boxes and folders, stored in a secure, climate-controlled environment to protect them from further “wear and tear.” If the agency cannot conveniently make digitized loose records accessible to the public, it should consider sending the external hard drive or other digital copy to the local public library; county, municipal, or university archives; or similar local repository whose staff is better equipped to help researchers. Local Government agencies may place these or other historical records in an off-site repository after completing a Local Government Records Deposit Agreement approved by the Local Government Records Commission. A deposit agreement should also be used if the agency places its original loose records with an archival repository. For more information, see the relevant procedural leaflet on the ADAH website at: http://www.archives.alabama.gov/ol_pubs/lgdeposit.pdf

Accessing Microfilmed or Digitized Loose Records

Roll contents lists for Alabama loose records microfilm (as well as for bound probate records previously microfilmed by the GSU) are available on the ADAH website at: <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/localrecords/search.cfm>. Copies of the film are available in the ADAH reference room (and also for purchase), as well as in the participating counties. Meanwhile, FamilySearch has begun the massive task of converting its worldwide microfilm collection to digital format, while record content from recent Alabama digital projects has begun to appear on FamilySearch’s website: FamilySearch.org.

Since 2006, the Alabama Genealogical Society's publications committee (some of whom were involved in Jefferson County's loose records project) have worked to combine all Alabama county project indexes into a statewide database of loose records information. It is available on the AGS website at: <http://lrp.algensoc.org/lrpw/loader.html>. By the end of 2011, 24 counties, almost 50,000 case files, and 57,322 names were represented in the database. This database total includes about half of the loose records projects finished so far, but the AGS will continue seeking county indexes or arranging for transcribers to create a new index if a county's original one is lost or unavailable. By creating a unified, consistent database of loose records indexes, the AGS web project has greatly facilitated public access to Alabama local records of enormous research value. Projects that are interested in adding their local index to the AGS database should contact ADAH.

Sources of Additional Assistance

For lists of archival supply vendors or commercial microfilming vendors, or for assistance with any phase of a loose records project, contact the ADAH Government Records Division at:

Government Records Division
Alabama Department of Archives and History
P.O. Box 300100, Montgomery, AL 36130-0100
Telephone: (334)242-4452; fax: (334)353-4321
E-mail: records@archives.alabama.gov
ADAH web site: <http://www.archives.alabama.gov>