

ASSESSING ALABAMA'S PROBATE OFFICES

A REPORT ON HISTORICAL RECORDS
AND
AGENCY NEEDS

April 16, 2025

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Figure 1 Mobile County Government Center Annex



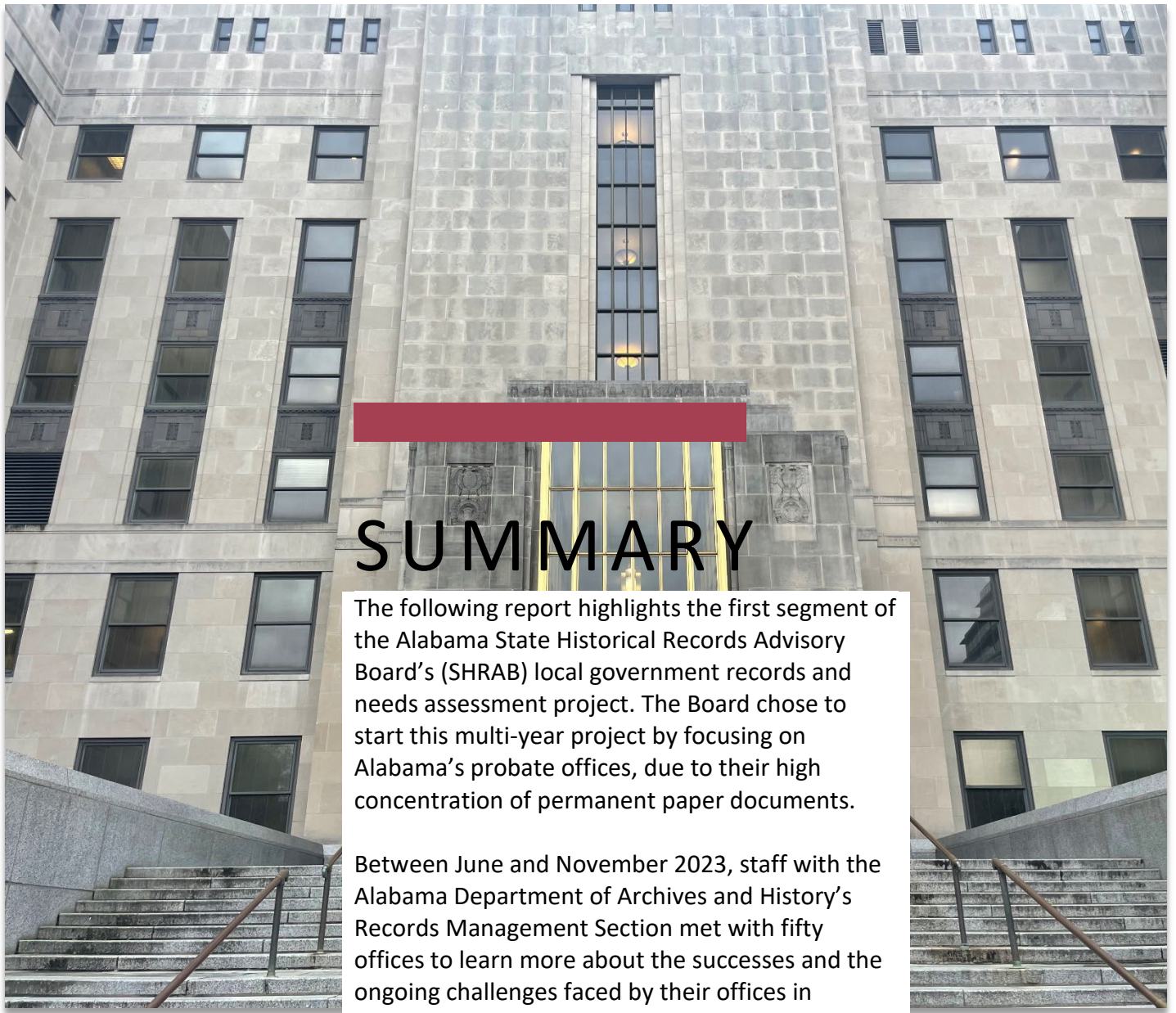


Figure 2 Jefferson County Courthouse

SUMMARY

The following report highlights the first segment of the Alabama State Historical Records Advisory Board's (SHRAB) local government records and needs assessment project. The Board chose to start this multi-year project by focusing on Alabama's probate offices, due to their high concentration of permanent paper documents.

Between June and November 2023, staff with the Alabama Department of Archives and History's Records Management Section met with fifty offices to learn more about the successes and the ongoing challenges faced by their offices in managing and preserving their records.

As the report details, while there is a commendable commitment to best practices in preservation and accessibility, there is also a pressing need for expanded storage facilities and improvements to environmental, safety, and security systems. Addressing these challenges will not only safeguard vital public records but also facilitate public access and ensure the long-term preservation of these important documents. As these offices evolve to meet modern demands, their role in preserving history and providing public access remains as crucial as ever.



BACKGROUND

In 1985, the Alabama State Historical Records Advisory Board (SHRAB) undertook an investigation into the preservation, management, and use of Alabama's historical records. Titled "The Alabama Assessment Project,"¹ the study centered on the following objectives:

- Assessing the conditions of and making recommendations for improvement in the administration of state government records, local government records, and historical records repositories.
- Evaluating statewide archival functions such as conservation, education, and training.
- Gauging availability of archival and records management advisory and assistance services.
- Advocating increased archival program coordination.

SHRAB organized three task forces (one for local government records, one for state government records, and one for historical records repositories); each of these task forces were charged with analyzing preservation conditions for the entities within their respective purviews. They accomplished their objectives using questionnaires, consultations, site visits, and reviews of archival literature and professional standards.

Findings of the Local Government Records task force showed that local governments desperately needed help to develop adequate management systems for both current and historical records. As a result, the task force concluded that a concerted statewide effort was needed to better the administration, identification, preservation, and use of Alabama's local government historical records.

The Alabama Department of Archives and History (ADAH) was tasked to bolster lacking statewide collaborative resources through publishing written resources (such as local government records manuals and records retention schedules) and developing educational and training programs to address the disparity of professional knowledge for local government records administrators. The overall effect was to make the ADAH a clearinghouse for the dissemination of information about records management in the state.

Since the publication of the 1985 project's final report, *Assessing Alabama's Archives: A Plan for the Preservation of the State's Historical Records*, the ADAH's Records Management Section has successfully implemented many of the study's recommendations. For instance, the section published a guide titled *Managing Local Records in Alabama* for local government agencies; developed a wide-reaching array of Records Disposition Authorities (RDAs); assisted with efforts to establish county-based archival programs; and

¹ The full text of this report is available online at the Alabama Department of Archives and History's website:
https://archives.alabama.gov/manage/docs/Assessing_Alabama_Archives_report.pdf

established a standing records management training program, among other resources.²

While those successes have been vital to the development of successful records management programs across Alabama, local government officials still regularly contact Records Management staff to discuss their struggles with preservation best-practices, their lack of adequate storage spaces, and their ongoing need for professional guidance with their records management plans.

Local government agencies report that storage spaces previously dedicated to permanent historical records are being repurposed, whether for storage of voting machines, creating new office spaces, or even housing 3-D printing machines. In addition, since October 2020, staff have received approximately 30 requests from local government agencies for approval to digitize and destroy large volumes of records. The range of requests encompasses every branch of local government – from law enforcement agencies and county commissions to probate offices and municipalities.

Fortunately, in March 2023, after a brief hiatus, the State Historical Records Advisory Board endorsed a Local Government Records and Needs Assessment to acquire an updated understanding of the needs of local agencies. Assessment planners started with county probate offices, which have some of the highest concentrations of permanent records at the local level of government.

Figure 3 Wilcox County Courthouse



² Record Disposition Authorities are documents that serves as a roadmap for state and local government records retention. They are designed to help state and local governments manage their records more efficiently by identifying how long specific records should be kept, when records can be destroyed, and which records should be preserved permanently.



PROJECT OVERVIEW

Purpose of the Assessment

SHRAB's mandate entails providing leadership and guidance to identify, preserve, and provide access to Alabama's historical records. To provide sound recommendations to our local agencies, the Board needed data. This survey reveals where our local government offices are succeeding and where they are struggling. With this data, ADAH and SHRAB can model realistic plans to better serve this unit of local government. Furthermore, as part of this assessment, Records Management staff gauged interest in whether localities would welcome the possibility of transferring pre-1980 permanent paper records to the ADAH at some point in the future.

Ultimately, the goal of this project is to continue supporting healthy records management programs throughout the state while also evaluating how best to assist those offices that lack the resources to care for their historic, permanent records.

While this report references the precedents and goals established by the original 1985 study, direct comparisons between the 2023 and 1985 studies should be made with care due to differences in methodologies, sample sizes, and data-gathering techniques.

PROBATE OFFICES

- Probate offices have a high concentration of permanent paper records.
- A significant research demand exists for probate records including wills and estates, marriage certificates, and property documents.
- Alabama has a total of 68 probate courts throughout the state.

PERMANENT PAPER RECORDS

- The assessment questions centered on **permanent paper records** because space and environmental considerations for storing paper records were the most pressing concerns expressed by local agencies.

Alabama's Probate Offices

Probate offices represent important centers of county business, and every county in Alabama has a probate court. These courts' jurisdictions include wills and estates; adoptions; involuntary commitments to mental health institutions; the recording of important property, marriage, and historic corporation documents; and, in some counties, the collection of fees for various licenses. Probate judges are elected by the qualified electors in each county for six-year terms.

Data Collection

Records Management staff developed the assessment questions by consulting the questionnaire from the original 1985 assessment, drawing on a multi-year County Records Project by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History³, and reviewing the ADAH's recent communications with probate offices regarding current records management practices and challenges. Records Management staff also researched the ADAH's own archival records to identify trends in preservation issues, natural disasters, and losses of historical records.

The finalized questionnaire focused on storage spaces, environmental issues, interest in hypothetical resources (including the transfer of records to the ADAH),

³ From 2010 to 2016, the MDAH Local Government Records Office conducted an inventory of pre-1920's county records.

and self-identified strengths and weaknesses. Also included were questions on staffing, access to public records, microfilm collections, and newspaper holdings.⁴

To garner support and to answer questions about the project, Rebecca Hébert, State and Local Records Coordinator for the Appraisal and Records Management Section, introduced the project at the Spring 2023 Probate Judges Association meeting, after which an introductory email was sent to Alabama probate judges inviting them to participate in the assessment. While the questionnaires were provided in advance, probate staff were not required to review or prepare answers to the questions prior to the scheduled meetings.

The ADAH Team used Calendly, a web-based scheduling program, to schedule the assessments. Probate offices were provided a number of times and dates to self-schedule the assessment. Participants were given the option of scheduling the assessment online via Zoom or Microsoft Teams or over the phone.

A follow-up email was sent approximately a month later to those probate offices that had not yet scheduled a meeting; two weeks later, Records Management staff reached out to the remaining offices to invite them to participate and to answer any questions they might have about the assessment. A final invitation was sent via regular mail to the remaining offices.

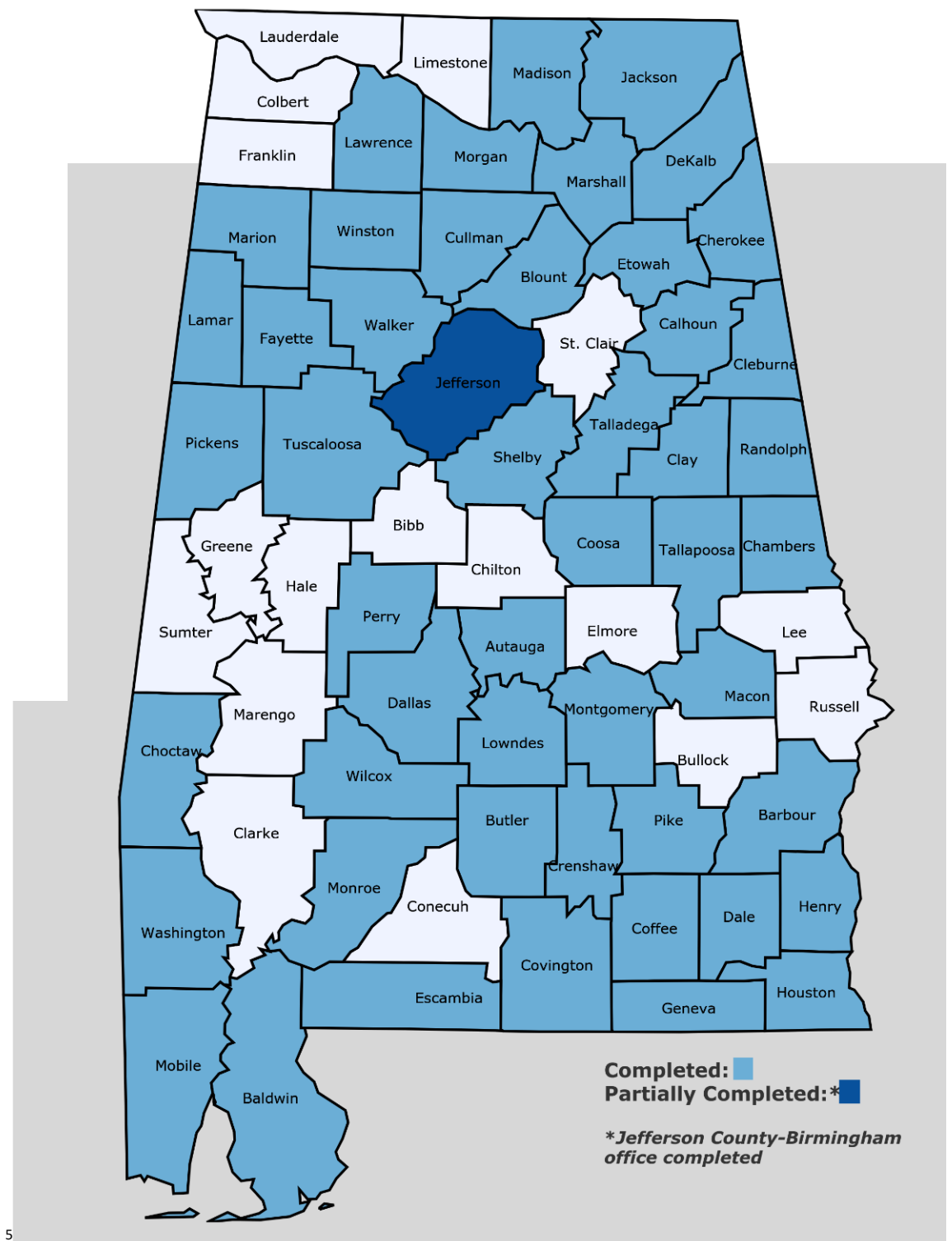
The first email garnered a response rate of 45 percent, with 31 of the 68 probate offices scheduling an assessment. The follow-up email garnered an additional five assessments, and staff were able to schedule an additional 18 when the probate judges were contacted by phone. The final letter did not elicit any further participation in the project.

Figure 5 Winston County Courthouse



⁴ See appendix for the final version of the assessment questions.

RESPONSE RATE AND REPRESENTATIVENESS



⁵ Per 2020 U.S. Census figures, Alabama has a total population of 5,024,279.



PROBATE ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

Four research questions informed the analysis of the data collected during the assessment project.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the current status of storage space constraints in Alabama probate offices?
2. What are the current conditions of permanent paper records and the spaces in which they are stored?
3. To what extent are probate offices engaged in records management best practices?
4. To what extent are records accessible to the public?

Research Question 1 seeks to understand the current state of space constraints within probate offices. Probate offices were asked directly if they were experiencing any space-related issues in their office. Offices' willingness to transfer documents to the ADAH was gauged and incorporated into the analysis. The self-identified strengths and weaknesses provide further insight into how probate offices are doing with their space issues. Finally, the various types of storage spaces utilized by probate offices reflect a lack of available suitable spaces.

Research Question 2 asks about the current state of the storage spaces available to offices and the physical conditions of permanent paper documents. This question is answered by analyzing the common environmental challenges offices are facing, the environmental conditions of the storage spaces, the physical conditions of the permanent paper documents, the history of loss or damage pertaining to these documents, the condition of newspapers, and self-identified strengths and weaknesses. The question also incorporates offices' interest in hypothetical resources.

Research Question 3 asks to what extent probate offices are engaged in sound records management practices. Answering this question means examining loss prevention efforts (e.g., implementation of security measures and fire safety systems), how and where offices store their records, staff familiarity with the records destruction process, the presence or absence of disaster preparedness planning, and other self-identified strengths and weakness.

Research Question 4 focuses on access and availability of historical records to the general public. Interviewers sought to answer this question by asking about the availability of computers or workstations for public use, the accessibility of records both in-person and online, and the availability of records via email.



FINDINGS

The information below represents the results of the 2023 State Historical Records Advisory Board's (SHRAB) Probate Records and Needs Assessment. These findings provide the context needed to inform the SHRAB's resource planning as it pertains to Alabama probate courts.

Research Question 1: What is the current state of space constraints in Alabama probate offices?

The findings show that the 50 participating probate offices collectively store their records in 125 distinct spaces, not surprising given the high concentration of permanent paper documents housed by probate offices. Despite this ratio of nearly three storage spaces per probate court, many probate judges still grapple with an overall lack of records storage space, especially spaces suitable for long-term storage. Overall, the assessment data shows that space constraints are affecting a majority of Alabama probate offices.

SPACE CONSTRAINTS

- a. 20% of probate offices store records for other county offices.
- b. 40% of spaces are not suitable for long-term storage.
- c. 54% of offices rated "new records storage space in your county" as having "high value" to their office.
- d. 70% of offices do not have enough storage space.

To understand just how space constraints affect the day-to-day operations of probate offices, respondents were asked several direct questions related to space issues in their office, as reflected in Chart A. These questions showed that 70 percent of probate offices report lacking enough space to properly house their permanent records. Nearly 40 percent of offices believe the spaces available to them were not suitable for long-term storage, and 20 percent of offices have had to reallocate records storage spaces for the storage of other materials.

Space-related challenges came up often throughout the assessment, and not just collaterally, given that 30 percent of respondents rated space constraints as a major concern when asked about the biggest challenges facing their offices. Moreover, 54 percent of probate respondents rated "new records storage space in your county" as a "high value" resource for them (see Chart H).

The survey results also show that offices are often forced to utilize unconventional spaces to store their permanent paper records. While most offices (88%) have traditional storage spaces (such as records rooms or vaults) to store a portion of their records, some offices store their records in places that may not be well-suited for long-term storage. These spaces include, but are not limited to, attics and basements (see Chart B), further indicating that storage spaces are in short supply for a number of probate offices.

Respondents were asked about their interest in transferring records to the ADAH should such an option become available to them in the future. In this hypothetical situation, the probate office would transfer custody of the records along with the responsibility for their access and preservation to the ADAH.

Offices indicate a modest desire to transfer documents should the option be made available to them in the future. As Chart C details, 42 percent of offices are open to

STORAGE SPACE CONDITIONS

- a. Over 50% of offices have experienced some type of environmental damage.
- b. 56% of offices have identified water damage in at least one of their storage spaces.
- c. 62% of offices have identified mold or mildew in their storage spaces.

CONDITION OF PERMANENT PAPER RECORDS

- a. 20% of offices cited preservation of historical documents as a challenge facing their office.
- b. 43% of offices that maintain newspapers observed yellowing or crumbling of their collection.
- c. Nearly 60% of offices have records showing signs of fading or light damage.

transferring documents to the ADAH. Respondents cited a lack of space and preservation concerns as the primary reasons for their interest in transferring documents. Thirty percent of offices that were open to transferring their documents noted that they would need more time to decide or would have to consult with their county administrators or legal counsel before making a definitive decision. Finally, some offices' willingness to transfer records to the ADAH is contingent on the records being digitized first.

However, there appears to be no correlation between space constraints or preservation concerns and the desire to transfer documents to the ADAH. Of the twenty-nine offices that responded "No" or "Maybe" to the question of transferring permanent records to the ADAH, 79 percent noted they had issues with their current storage spaces (such as a lack of space, unsuitable conditions, or a past or future reallocation of available storage spaces). Of the 21 offices that answered "Yes" to transferring documents, 24 percent did not report any issues with their current storage spaces.

Research Question 2: What are the current conditions of permanent paper records and the spaces in which they are stored?

Beyond finding a place to keep records, storage is about preservation. One of the most important factors in keeping records safe is the condition of the storage environment. Documents readily degrade and decay where fluctuating temperature and humidity go unchecked. Fortunately, the survey results show that while probate offices have struggled to maintain environmentally optimal storage spaces, their permanent paper records have been mostly spared from significant damage.

Probate offices store their historical documents in a variety of spaces, but not all are suitable for long-term records storage. The data shows that more than 50 percent of storage spaces have suffered from some type of environmental damage over the past decade. As shown in Chart D, the data indicates the following:

- More than 55 percent of offices have storage spaces that show signs of water damage.
- More than 60 percent of offices have found mold or mildew in their storage spaces.

As noted earlier, many offices utilize non-standard spaces for storing their records. Some of these spaces such as attics and basements (see Chart B) may be prone to flooding or have large fluctuations in temperature or humidity levels, which can put paper records in peril.

Despite the prevalence of less-than-ideal environmental storage conditions, probate offices overall have avoided significant loss or damage to their paper records in recent decades. While courthouse fires were commonplace in Alabama from the 1800s through the early 1900s, no recent major records losses were reported. Of the 50 probate offices who participated in the assessment, only one reported a recent courthouse fire, and no records were damaged in that incident. The most common source of loss over the past several decades has been either floods or tornadoes, and only one office reported a significant loss of records.

However, a number of respondents stated their records show signs of deterioration or are in need of conservation. For example, of the 39 offices that reported having newspapers in their collections, 17 (43 percent) noted they have observed yellowing or crumbling of the newsprint.⁶ Twenty-eight percent of offices reported struggling with preserving their older documents, such as keeping their bound volumes intact.

Other key findings as noted in Chart D:

- Nearly 60 percent of offices have records in their collection that show signs of fading or light damage.
- Pest damage is less prevalent, with only 14 percent of offices confirming damage.
- Fifteen percent of offices report evidence of other environmental damage including nicotine staining and smoke damage.

A few offices reported the disappearance of some records from their collections. For example, one probate judge reported a loss of approximately 40 volumes but was unsure of the circumstances that led to the loss. Another office reported that two deed books turned up in an antique shop in Tennessee but that attempts in having the items returned to their office had proven unsuccessful.

RECORDS MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

- a. 79% of storage spaces have climate controls such as HVAC.
- b. 80% of offices receive regular pest control treatment.
- c. 87% of storage spaces have adequate light control.
- d. 13% of storage spaces have environmental monitoring of temperature & humidity.
- e. 77% of offices are familiar with the destruction process for eligible records.

Research Question 3: To what extent are probate offices engaged in records management best practices?

Effective records management practices ensure that documents are protected from disaster and unauthorized access during their useful lifetimes and that they are routinely destroyed when no longer needed; such practices enable probate offices to function efficiently on a day-to-day basis and plan for future records storage needs.

Building on this understanding, the survey results reveal that most offices are already implementing key records management practices, as outlined below:

- Eighty percent of offices received regular pest control treatment.
- Records are stored off the floor in 80 percent of the storage spaces identified.⁷

Results show that offices prioritize environmental controls, as part of their efforts to protect their collections from physical damage. Key findings as shown in Chart E:

- Controls such as HVAC are found in 79 percent of the storage spaces.
- Light controls are found in 87 percent of the storage spaces.

Respondents were asked whether spaces were routinely monitored to identify environmental problems before they developed into larger problems. Probate staff noted that 79 percent of storage spaces were inspected on a regular basis.

These impressive statistics notwithstanding, the survey reflects that offices are interested in receiving additional assistance from archival professionals. The prevalence of this request suggests that staff are aware of the importance of records management best practices generally, even if they are unaware of the specifics on

⁶ The original version of the questionnaire did not address the condition of newspapers. As a result, the first eight offices that participated in the project were not directly asked about the newspapers in their collections.

⁷ To mitigate the risk of future water damage, records should be stored at least four inches off the floor.

how to complete important preservation tasks. To this end, 81 percent of offices believe a consultation by trained archivists would be of some or high value to their office. Similarly, 84 percent of offices saw some or high value in training on records storage best practices.

Results indicate that, despite a history of environmental damage, most offices currently engage in practices that protect their collections from loss through theft, fire, or environmental accidents. Security measures (e.g., locks or controlled access) were present in 80 percent of storage rooms, and security systems (e.g., motion sensors, cameras, alarms) were installed in 53 percent of spaces. Eighty percent of the offices surveyed noted that staff constantly monitor visitors when they are accessing records, which can also serve as a deterrent from theft.

Knowing which records to keep and for how long is essential to ensuring compliance with the Local Government Records Commission's guidelines. Some government agencies decide to keep everything "just in case," believing that maintaining everything is better than destroying something important. However, keeping everything presents its own host of problems, including longer records retrieval times to locate a record and higher storage costs. The majority of respondents (77 percent) are familiar with the ADAH's established destruction process for eligible records.

The following are opportunities for improvement:

- Forty-four percent of offices have a disaster-preparedness plan in place, but only 6 percent include provisions for records.
- Forty-four percent of offices store some portion of their bound materials vertically rather than horizontally.⁸
- Thirteen percent of storage spaces have environmental monitoring, such as hygrothermographs.⁹

RECORDS ACCESSIBILITY

- a. 78% of offices will provide at least some of their records via email.
- b. 94% of offices provide at least a portion of their records online.
- c. The majority of offices have a dedicated space for visitors to access records.

Research Question 4: To what extent are records accessible to visitors?

Probate documents such as wills, guardianships, marriages licenses, deeds, and other probate office records can contain a wealth of information for historians, attorneys, surveyors, scholars and genealogists. Ensuring access to these records entails a delicate balance between availability and protection. Staffing and equipment shortages can also hinder access to records by the public.

Survey results show that probate offices are very committed to providing easy access to historical records. A vast majority of offices (94%) offer at least some of their records online, and many offices will provide certain records by email if requested by customers (78%).

For customers attempting to access records in-person, most probate offices provide a dedicated space for them to access records (counter space, computer terminals, etc.). In addition, the majority of offices are open five days a week, providing customers adequate opportunity to access records in-person. Seven of the surveyed

⁸ The larger bound volumes typically found in probate offices, should be stored lying flat, because upright storage can result in heavy books pulling away from their bindings.

⁹ A hygrothermograph is an instrument that measures and records both temperature and relative humidity, simultaneously.

offices (14%) required an appointment or advanced notice to view historical records.

Probate offices also appear to have sufficient equipment (e.g., microfilm readers, computers) to facilitate access to their analog records. Only eleven offices (22%) confirmed they could use additional equipment to increase access for the public. However, the data also show that probate offices are very interested in expanding digital access, with 36 percent of offices expressing a desire to digitize more documents for enhanced accessibility and other pragmatic reasons.

By way of self-reported opportunities for improvement, half of all offices store some historical records offsite, where challenges such as navigating to and within warehouses, old storefronts, and offsite county buildings can reduce accessibility. A few offices cite staffing shortages as an impediment to proper access to historical documents, with one short-staffed office noting that visitors are “on their own” when it comes to conducting research.

Figure 6 Macon County Courthouse





CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the survey data highlights both the strengths and areas for improvement within Alabama's probate offices regarding records management and storage. While probate offices show a commendable commitment to best practices in preservation and accessibility, there is a pressing need for expanded storage facilities and enhanced environmental controls. Addressing these challenges will not only safeguard vital public records but will also facilitate public access and ensure the long-term preservation of these important documents. By investing in disaster preparedness, environmental monitoring, and updated technologies, probate offices can better protect their collections and serve the community more effectively. As these offices evolve to meet modern demands, their role in preserving history and providing public access remains as crucial as ever.

To address these issues, several solutions could be considered:

- 1. Expanding Storage Capacity:** Counties could invest in new, purpose-built storage facilities that meet long-term preservation standards. Alternatively, offices could explore shared storage solutions across multiple counties to reduce costs and improve efficiency.
- 2. Digitization of Records:** Accelerating the digitization of records would not only free up physical space but also enhance accessibility for the public. Funding of such projects may be a barrier, but offices could seek funding or grants specifically for digitization projects and work with the ADAH to transfer records that have been digitized.
- 3. Environmental Controls and Monitoring:** Installing and maintaining proper environmental controls, such as HVAC systems and humidity monitors, in all storage spaces would help monitor conditions that could damage records. Regular environmental assessments and preventive maintenance could be implemented to catch issues before they escalate.
- 4. Training and Consultation:** Providing additional training and consultation from archival professionals could help offices improve their records management practices. Efforts could include workshops on disaster preparedness, proper storage techniques, and environmental monitoring.
- 5. Collaboration with the ADAH:** Enhancing collaboration with the ADAH could alleviate some of the space and preservation challenges. Possible projects include joint digitization efforts and shared storage solutions.

APPENDIX A: CHARTS

Chart A: Space Constraints

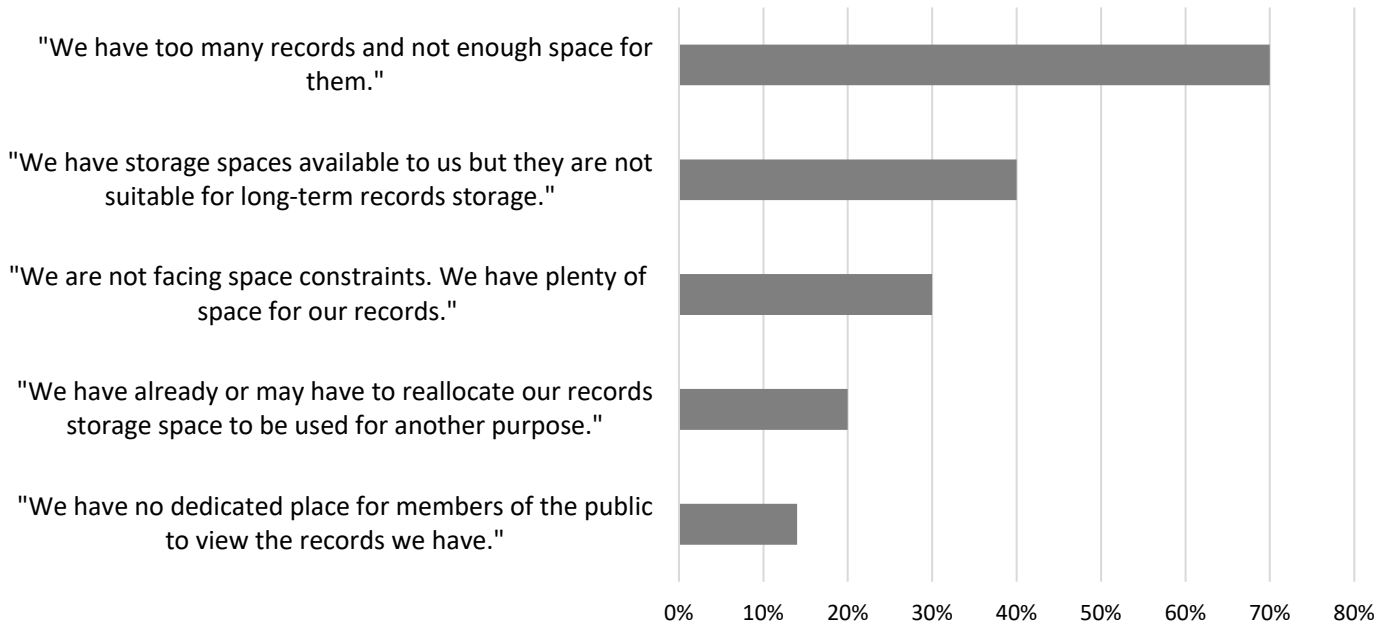


Chart B: Storage Spaces

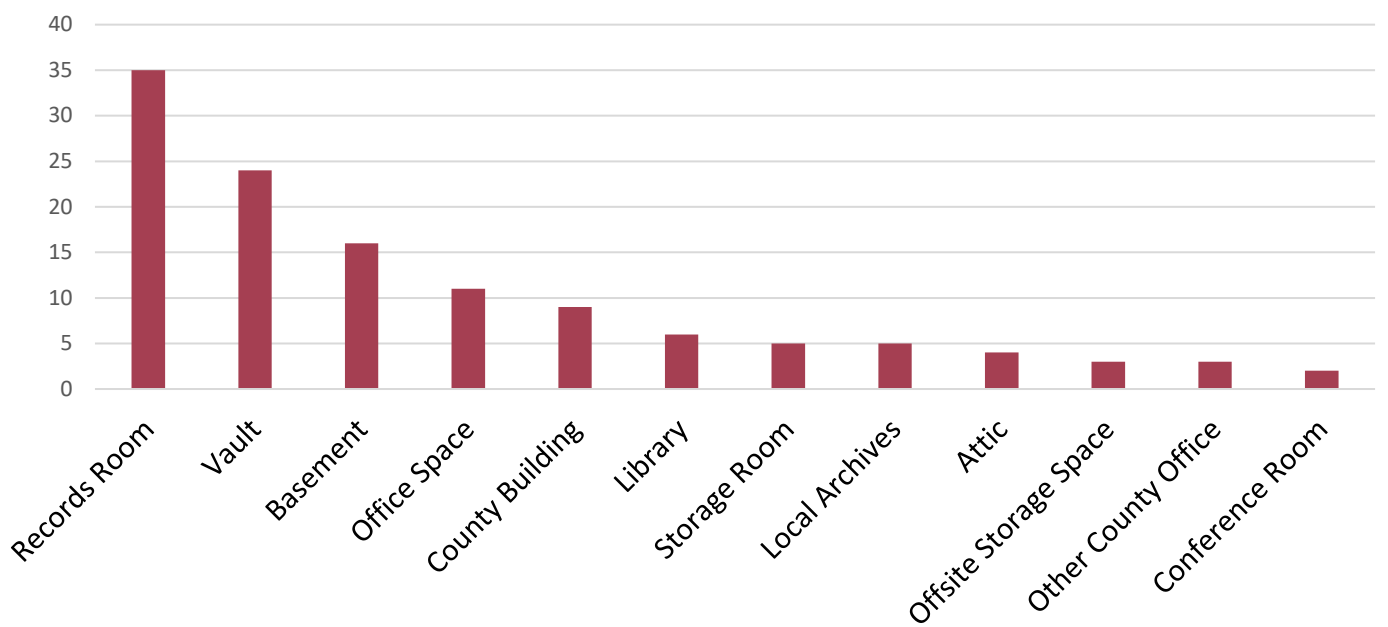


Chart C: Willingness to Transfer Permanent Records

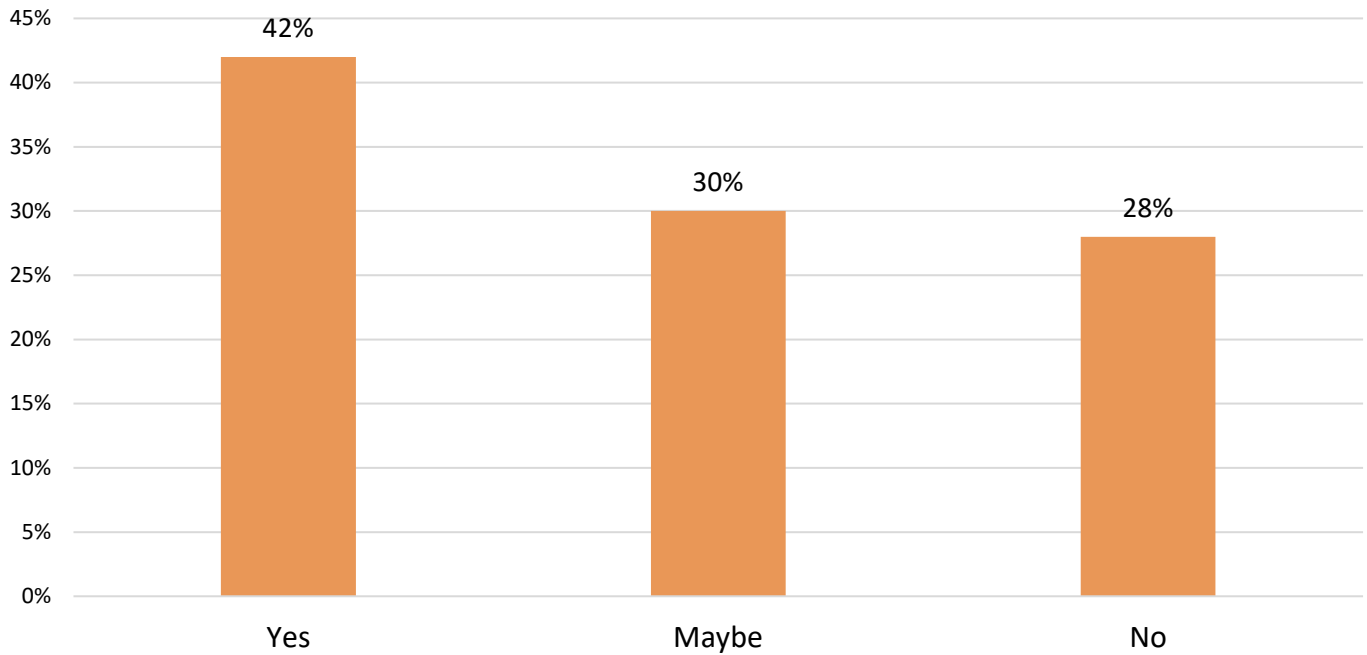


Chart D: Environmental Issues

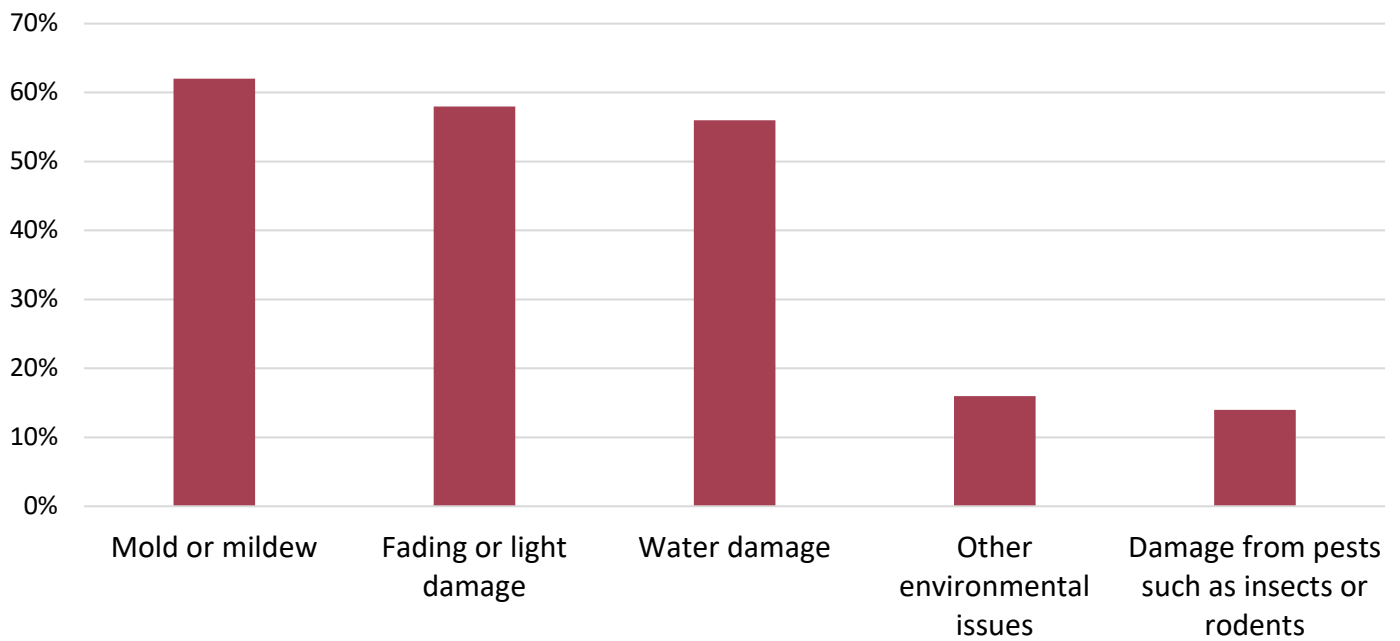


Chart E: Presence of Environmental Controls

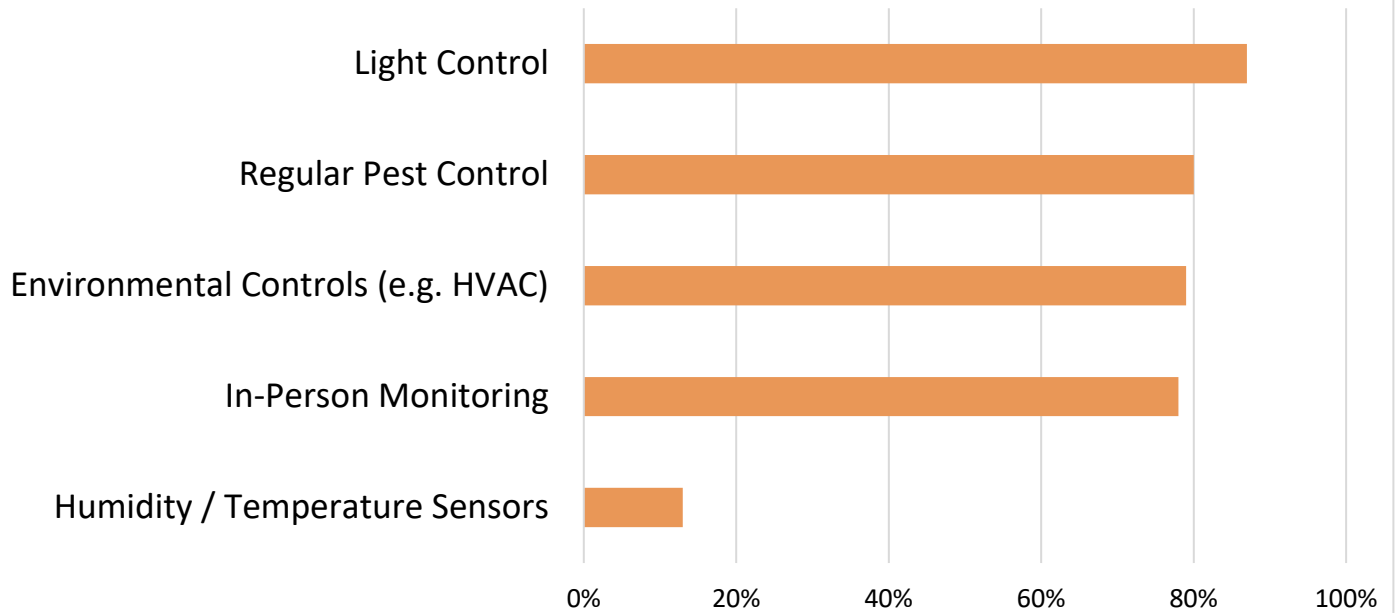
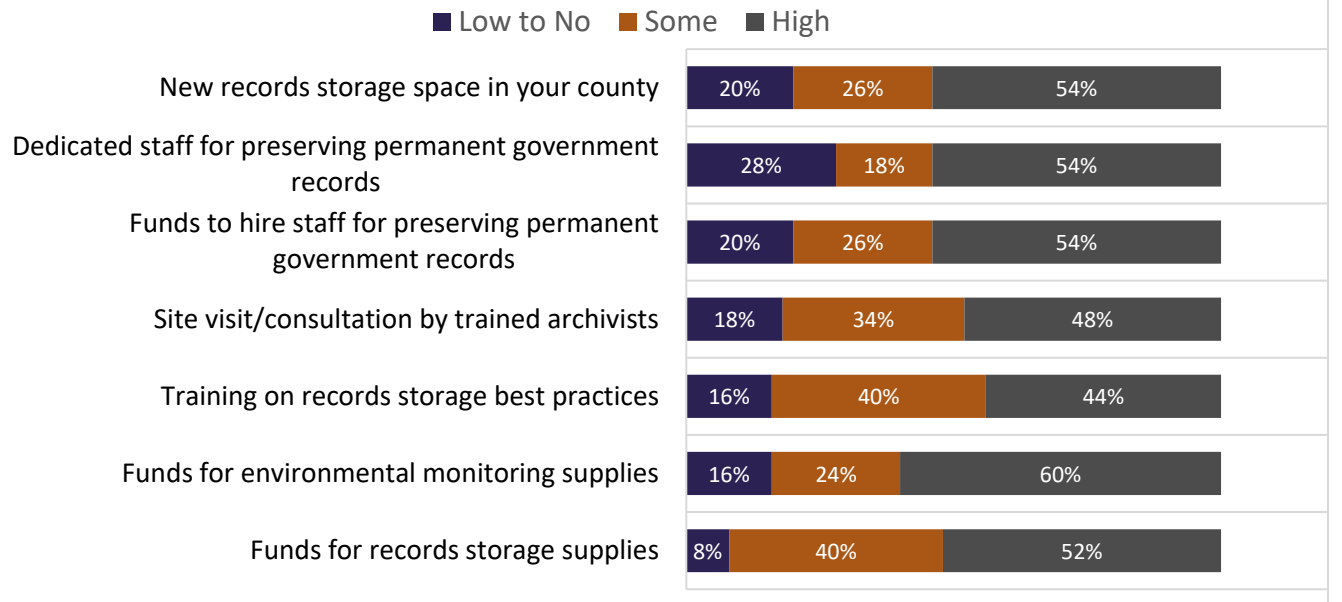


Chart F: Interest In Hypothetical Resources



APPENDIX B: ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What do you feel that your probate office does well?

2. What do you feel are some of the biggest challenges facing your probate office?

3. Many local governments are facing records storage space constraints. Which of the following statements, if any, apply to you.

- ☐ *"We have too many records and not enough space for them."*
- ☐ *"We have storage spaces available to us, but they are not suitable for long-term records storage and preservation."*
- ☐ *"We have already or may have to reallocate our records storage space to be used for another purpose."*
- ☐ *"We do not have a dedicated place for members of the public to view the records we have."*
- ☐ *"We are not facing space constraints. We have plenty of space for our records."*

4. Below is a similar list outlining some common environmental challenges local officials face when it comes to records storage. Which of the following types of damage, if any, currently apply or have previously applied to your storage areas in the past decade?

- ☐ Water damage?
- ☐ Mold or mildew?
- ☐ Fading or light damage?
- ☐ Damage from pests such as insects or rodents?
- ☐ Other?

*Questions 5-7 will address the spaces where your office stores its permanent records. Please focus on your main storage space when answering question 5. If you have more than one space, please complete questions 6 and 7 (if needed). It's not uncommon for permanent records to be stored in more than three spaces but, out of respect for your time, we will focus on your three main storage spaces for this assessment.

5. Please describe the first place where most of your permanent paper records are stored (ex: dedicated storage room, basement, attic, closet, former office, etc.):

➤ Do you store the records in the following ways:

☐ In boxes?

Are the boxes on ☐ shelves, on ☐ pallets, or ☐ directly on the floor. Other:

☐ In filing cabinets?

☐ Tri-folded?

Regarding the records in this same space:

☐ Do you have bound oversized materials, such as deed or ledger books?

- Are those bound materials stored ☐ flat or ☐ upright?
- Are they on ☐ shelves or on the ☐ floor?
- ☐ Do you have unbound oversized materials, such as maps?
Are those unbound materials ☐ stored flat or ☐ rolled onto/in tubes? Other:
- ☐ Do you have newspapers in this space? If so, then:
 - i. What title(s)?
 - ii. How are you storing your newspapers? ☐ bound, ☐ unbound,
☐ Other, e.g., electronically?
 - iii. Newspapers are printed on acidic paper and can be hard to care for - have you noticed that any of yours are yellowing, crumbling, or otherwise compromised?
- ☐ And, in this particular space, do you have a portion of records that are loosely stacked, for instance, on bookshelves, tables, on top of cabinets?
- ☐ Other unique storage solutions?
- Does this space have environmental control, such as HVAC?
- Does this space have environmental monitoring, such as temperature or humidity sensors?
- Does this space have light control, such as blinds, UV filters, or timers?
- Does this space have routine in-person monitoring, such as scheduled walkthroughs?
- Does this space have security measures, such as locks or controlled access?
- Does this space have security systems, such as motion sensors, cameras, and alarms?
- Does this space have fire safety systems, such as sprinklers?
- Does this space have regular pest control?
- Does the public access and view records in this space?

Repeat as Needed - Second Storage Space

- 6. It's common for local governments to store permanent records in more than one space. Do you store records in another location than the one previously mentioned?**
If so, please describe this space (ex: dedicated storage room, basement, attic, closet, former office, etc.):

Some of the following questions will sound familiar.

- In this room, how are the records stored:
 - ☐ In boxes?
Are the boxes on ☐ shelves, on ☐ pallets, or ☐ directly on the floor. Other:
 - ☐ In filing cabinets?
 - ☐ Tri-folded?
 - ☐ Do you have bound oversized materials, such as deed or ledger books?
Are those bound materials stored ☐ flat or ☐ upright?
Are they on ☐ shelves or on the ☐ floor?
 - ☐ Do you have unbound oversized materials, such as maps?
Are those unbound materials ☐ stored flat or ☐ rolled onto/in tubes? Other:
 - ☐ Do you have newspapers in this space? If so, then:
 - i. What title(s)?

- ii. How are you storing your newspapers? ☐ bound, ☐ unbound,
☐ Other, e.g., electronically?
 - iii. Newspapers are printed on acidic paper and can be hard to care for - have you noticed that any of yours are yellowing, crumbling, or otherwise compromised?
 - ☐ Do you have a portion of records that are loosely stacked, for instance, on bookshelves, tables, on top of cabinets?
 - ☐ Other unique storage solutions?
- Does this space have environmental control, such as HVAC?
 - Does this space have environmental monitoring, such as temperature or humidity sensors?
 - Does this space have light control, such as blinds, UV filters, or timers?
 - Does this space have routine in-person monitoring, such as scheduled walkthroughs?
 - Does this space have security measures, such as locks or controlled access?
 - Does this space have security systems, such as motion sensors, cameras, and alarms?
 - Does this space have fire safety systems, such as sprinklers?
 - Does this space have regular pest control?
 - Does the public access and view records in this space?

Repeat as Needed - Third Storage Space

7. Are there permanent records stored in any other unique room or facility that we've not yet touched upon?

If so, please describe this space:

Please answer the same questions for that space:

- In this space, do you store the records in the following ways:
 - ☐ In boxes?
 - Are the boxes on ☐ shelves, on ☐ pallets, or ☐ directly on the floor. Other:
 - ☐ In filing cabinets?
 - ☐ Tri-folded?
 - ☐ Do you have bound oversized materials, such as deed or ledger books?
 - Are those bound materials stored ☐ flat or ☐ upright?
 - Are they on ☐ shelves or on the ☐ floor?
 - ☐ Do you have unbound oversized materials, such as maps?
 - Are those unbound materials ☐ stored flat or ☐ rolled onto/in tubes? Other:
 - ☐ Do you have newspapers in this space? If so, then:
 - i. What title(s)?
 - ii. How are you storing your newspapers? ☐ bound, ☐ unbound,
☐ Other, e.g., electronically?
 - iii. Newspapers are printed on acidic paper and can be hard to care for - have you noticed that any of yours are yellowing, crumbling, or otherwise compromised?
 - ☐ Do you have a portion of records that are loosely stacked, for instance, on bookshelves, tables, on top of cabinets?
 - ☐ Other unique storage solutions?

- Does this space have environmental control, such as HVAC?
- Does this space have environmental monitoring, such as temperature or humidity sensors?
- Does this space have light control, such as blinds, UV filters, or timers?
- Does this space have routine in-person monitoring, such as scheduled walkthroughs?
- Does this space have security measures, such as locks or controlled access?
- Does this space have security systems, such as motion sensors, cameras, and alarms?
- Does this space have fire safety systems, such as sprinklers?
- Does this space have regular pest control?
- Does the public access and view records in this space?

8. Are any of your permanent records stored at another county office or third-party location? --

- If so, where? (ex. Historical society, archive, a library)
- Are you aware of any records storage issues at these locations?

9. Alternatively, do you store permanent records for other county offices? If so, which offices?

*Some of the purposes of our survey include collecting good data for evaluating the needs of local government records custodians and determining whether anecdotal evidence of space constraints and access challenges is indicative of real needs. The Alabama Department of Archives and History seeks to take these needs into account as it makes plans to increase its storage capacity for state records and, potentially, permanent local records in cases where local custodians consistently lack resources to preserve and provide access to records.

10. If the ADAH develops capacity to take possession of local government records, would your probate office be interested in transferring custody and responsibility for preservation and providing access to any of your permanent paper records up until 1980?

- Is there anything you'd like us to know about your reasoning?
- If yes, do you have a sense of how much material you would be interested in transferring?

11. Are there certain permanent paper records you'd specifically be interested in transferring? See below for examples.

12. Are there certain permanent paper records you're specifically NOT interested in transferring? See below for examples.

Permanent Records

Land Records
 Official Election Results
 Marriage Records and Indices
 Newspapers
 Business Entity Records
 Municipal Incorporations
 Will Records
 Estate Records
 Probate Dockets and Fee Books
 Court Minutes, Records, and Orders

Permanent Records No Longer Created

Poll Tax Records
 Chattel Mortgage Records
 Birth Records
 Death Records
 Road Books
 Confederate Pension Records
 Penitentiary Convict Records

13. We'd also like to gauge your interest in some other hypothetical resources. Please score the following options for the value they would provide to you: low to no value, some value, or high value?

Funds for Records storage supplies (ex. boxes, shelves, folders)	<u>Low to No / Some / High</u>
Funds for Environmental monitoring supplies (ex. temperature/humidity sensors)	<u>Low to No / Some / High</u>
Training on records storage best practices	<u>Low to No / Some / High</u>
Site visit/consultation by trained archivists	<u>Low to No / Some / High</u>
Funds to hire staff for a records cleanup project	<u>Low to No / Some / High</u>
Dedicated staff for preserving permanent government records	<u>Low to No / Some / High</u>
New records storage space in your county	<u>Low to No / Some / High</u>

14. Is there an option not listed that would be beneficial? If so, what is it?

15. What awareness do you have of any Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU) microfilming or scanning projects that have happened in your county?

- Whether from that project or another, do you have any microforms?
[Click for appendix image of Microfilm Examples](#)
 - ☐ 16mm or ☐ 35mm rolls of film
 - ☐ Microfiche Cards
 - ☐ Other
 - ☐ To my knowledge, we have **no microforms**.
- IF YES, then how would you estimate the volume?
In rolls or
Number of printer paper/cubic foot boxes:
- IF YES: When microfilm is produced, there is a master copy and derivative copies of that original. Do you know anything about your microfilm that would suggest what kind it is? e.g. If you have more than one copy of the same reel then you might have both the master and a convenience copy.

16. To your knowledge, has your county ever experienced significant loss or damage of permanent government records?

Incident #1:

- If so, when?
- What happened?
- What types of records were lost or destroyed?
- How many records were lost or destroyed?

If multiple incidents, repeat questions for each incident.

Incident #2:

- If so, when?
- What happened?

- What types of records were lost or destroyed?
- How many records were lost or destroyed?

17. Does your office have a disaster preparedness plan or a disaster response plan in place?

- If so, does this plan include provisions for your records?

18. Think about the ways that members of the public access your office's records. Do you have a dedicated space for the public to access records?

19. Are visitors consistently monitored while accessing records?

20. Does your office require advance notice, or have limited hours, to view certain historical records?

- If so, is that requirement due to staffing, location of the records, or some other reason?

21. Can the public access records electronically through a ☐ web-based portal? ☐ Via email?

22. Does the lack of any equipment prevent you or members of the public from accessing records (ex: lacking a microfilm machine to read microfilmed records)?

23. What are the three types of record types that the public most often request?

24. Considering both in-person, and all other requests for information, how many inquiries does your office receive weekly?

Numbers or Percentages

Total:	_____
In-person:	_____
Online/emailed request form:	_____
Other:	_____

25. Please answer the following questions regarding your staffing:

- About how many staff do you have in the probate office?
- Do you have any staff who focus specifically on historic permanent records?
- What are the titles of staff in your office who work with records?
- Is records management training provided to staff or volunteers?

26. Are you aware of the process that exists for destroying temporary records that have met their retention?

27. Do you have any comments or concerns regarding records management that we haven't addressed previously?