

Archives and Power: What Gets Preserved

The Archive as Construction

Archives are not passive repositories of the past. They are active constructions shaped by power, resources, and ideology. What survives into the historical record reflects who had the ability to create documents, who decided to preserve them, and who maintains access.

Mechanisms of Silence

Creation

Not all events generate records. Illiterate populations leave fewer written traces. Informal economies operate without receipts. Marginalized communities often lack the resources or incentive to document their experiences.

Consider what typically gets recorded:

- Official transactions (taxes, courts, property)
- Elite correspondence and memoirs
- Institutional proceedings
- Published materials

And what often doesn't:

- Daily life of ordinary people
- Underground or resistance activities
- Oral traditions and folk knowledge
- Experiences of the colonized, enslaved, and dispossessed

Assembly

Even when records are created, someone must decide to save them. Archives reflect institutional priorities. Government records are preserved because governments fund archives. Corporate records survive when businesses see value in them.

Questions to ask:

- Who founded this archive?
- What was their collecting mandate?
- What did they consider historically significant?

Access

Preserved records aren't always accessible. Classification systems, language barriers, physical deterioration, and institutional gatekeeping all limit who can use what. Digital archives expand access but create new divides between those with and without technology.

Case Studies

The Enslaved in the Archive

Enslaved people appear in historical records primarily as property—inventories, bills of sale, plantation ledgers. Their inner lives, relationships, and resistance are rarely documented in their own words. Historians must read “against the grain,” extracting meaning from records created by enslavers.

Colonial Archives

Imperial powers generated massive documentation of colonized peoples—but from the colonizer's perspective. Administrative records categorized, counted, and controlled. Indigenous knowledge systems were often dismissed as primitive or simply ignored.

Women's History

For centuries, women's experiences were considered private and unremarkable. Domestic labor, childrearing, and community networks left fewer traces than male-dominated public life. The archives of women's organizations, when they exist, are often underfunded and understudied.

Reading Against the Grain

When direct documentation is absent, historians develop creative strategies:

1. **Traces in official records** - Court cases, police reports, and administrative files reveal marginalized voices, however mediated
2. **Material culture** - Objects, buildings, and landscapes preserve evidence that paper records miss
3. **Oral history** - Living memory supplements written sources
4. **Comparative analysis** - Patterns across similar contexts suggest what specific archives omit

The Archivist's Role

Contemporary archivists increasingly recognize their power to shape historical memory. Best practices now include:

- **Community archives** - Supporting marginalized groups in preserving their own histories
- **Descriptive justice** - Revising finding aids that use outdated or offensive language
- **Transparency** - Documenting gaps and biases in collections
- **Proactive collecting** - Seeking materials that diversify the archive

Conclusion

Every historical argument rests on surviving evidence. Understanding how archives are constructed—and what they exclude—is essential to responsible scholarship. The silences in the archive are not absences of history; they are traces of power.