

**Preserving the History of ACM:
Report and Recommendations to the ACM History Committee**

Final Report with Appendices

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Appendix 1 – “CBI Seeks Early ACM Records,” *CBI Newsletter* 10:2 (Winter 1988)

Appendix 2 – “ACM Materials in CBI” and “ACM Materials in Other Repositories”

Appendix 3 – “Association for Computing Machinery Record Retention Guidelines,” 1991

Executive summary:

In Fall 2003 a Presidential Ad Hoc Committee on ACM History was created with a charge to “make recommendations on how to create an archive of ACM’s documents and how to deposit future materials into this archive,” among other objectives. The History Committee became a standing committee of the ACM in February 2004 and proposed an initial planning project. The first step was to assess the current state of ACM documentation; the second was to develop a set of recommendations for the future action based on those findings. The project was approved by the Executive Committee and the archival staff of the Charles Babbage Institute (Beth Kaplan and Carrie Seib) was engaged to conduct it.

The process included analysis of a variety of documentation, an onsite survey, and interviews with ACM Headquarters staff. Fortunately, a combination of diligence and good luck has resulted in a reasonably good documentary record of the history of ACM currently at the ACM Headquarters and in storage. These records are now at increased risk given the upcoming relocation of ACM headquarters. Given that, we recommend immediate steps that should be taken to minimize potential loss. Further recommendations are less urgent and could occur over time.

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Introduction:

Established almost sixty years ago and with a current membership of nearly 80,000, the ACM is both the oldest and the largest professional organization of its kind. As such, the ACM has played a central role in the history of computing, shaping as well as reflecting the development and diffusion of the field.

While the entire span of ACM publications are preserved and readily available at libraries across the country and now in the ACM Digital Library, the same cannot be said for the unpublished documentation of ACM's internal operations, or what should be considered ACM's corporate memory, its archives. This is not news to historians of computing. Since the 1980s, a series of efforts to preserve ACM's historical documentation have met with moderate success. (See Appendix 1.) A comparatively successful initiative has been the effort to collect the papers of ACM officers at the Charles Babbage Institute.

The most recent effort is an outgrowth of the work of the ACM history committee. In Fall 2003 a Presidential Ad Hoc Committee on ACM History was created with a charge to "make recommendations on how to create an archive of ACM's documents and how to deposit future materials into this archive," among other objectives. As stated in a 2004 report, the committee's "central conclusion was that ACM ... has an imperative to maintain a physical Archive of its material and to make this Archive accessible to historians." (ACM History Committee report, March 19 2004.)

The premise here was an assumption that a body of valuable historical documentation existed to populate that physical Archive. The History Committee became a standing committee of the ACM in February 2004 and proposed an initial planning project that would investigate that assumption. Among the questions to be answered were these: had anything approaching a critical mass of archivally valuable documentation survived the organization's first 60 years? If so, where was it located? Was it physically safe? Was it under any kind of intellectual control? Could it be made available to researchers? And, last, how was current ACM documentation being created, shared, and preserved? The assessment of the current state of ACM documentation was the first part of the proposed planning project; the second was a set of recommendations for the future action based on those findings. The project was approved by the Executive Committee and the archival staff of the Charles Babbage Institute (Beth Kaplan and Carrie Seib) was engaged to conduct it.

Proposed project activities:

To bring the History Committee's goal to a practical level, we outlined these component project activities:

First, we would locate and compile information about core ACM-related material known to be preserved and accessible at archival institutions around the country.

Second, we would assess any material held by ACM itself, through a review of lists, manifests, and other descriptive documentation available from ACM Headquarters.

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Third, we would conduct an onsite survey to gather firsthand information about the materials that would either verify or otherwise elucidate our analysis of the lists. This would give us the opportunity to clarify ambiguous descriptions, to identify any “red herrings,” and to locate additional material not uncovered by the lists.

Fourth, as part of our onsite work, we would interview key individuals at ACM to uncover information about current and past recordkeeping practices as well as any additional materials not identified through the physical survey.

Finally, we would analyze findings and develop recommendations for practical steps to preserve any existing material of enduring historical value.

Findings:

1. Project work began in November 2005 with a thorough **survey to identify ACM material preserved and available at research institutions** including the Charles Babbage Institute. We searched the most comprehensive international bibliographic and archival databases (RLIN and OCLC), we reviewed published guides, and we conducted web searches using relevant subject headings and natural language. We also consulted with colleagues at relevant institutions. We were able to locate relatively little ACM material outside of the Charles Babbage Institute. This may be because it does not exist, because is not processed, or because it is not described in such a way available to researchers. CBI, in contrast, holds a comparatively rich collection of ACM-related resources, due to the focused efforts described above to aggressively seek out and preserve this material over the years. (See Appendix 2.)

2. As part of preparation for the onsite work, we **reviewed the descriptive material** compiled and sent to us by Pat Ryan. These consisted of lists, manifests, and narrative descriptions of ACM materials currently at ACM headquarters and in offsite storage. Some of this material was organized by ACM functional areas and provided a useful structure for what would become the onsite survey.

This descriptive matter was created over time, by a variety of people, for a variety of purposes. Not surprisingly, it included ambiguous terms and references, as well as varying levels of detail and accuracy. Lists of material from headquarters were generally easier to interpret than the lists of material in offsite storage. But it was clear that a physical survey would still be necessary. The lists enabled us to set priorities among broad categories of materials that would need onsite review.

During this time, we also reviewed the ACM website to determine what we could about information posted and available there.

3. Armed with this background information, we commenced **onsite work at ACM headquarters** in December 2005. We made detailed notes on our findings and summarize these below.

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Total volume of files surveyed:

125 cf (83 boxes) from offsite storage
120 cf (60 file drawers) publications files onsite
41 cf (20 drawers) administration files onsite

286 cf. total surveyed

Total volume of archival value:

43.5 cf from offsite storage
14 cf from publications files onsite
28.5 from administration files onsite

86 cf total archival

Overall description and physical arrangement:

Between the lists and the physical survey, we believe we were able to compile a reasonably accurate representation of what is actually contained in the boxes. The lists and manifests varied in their accuracy and usefulness, but the physical survey enabled us to verify that certain terms did indeed denote certain kinds of records. Not surprisingly, the listing and labeling of materials onsite (as opposed to in offsite storage) is quite good overall.

The physical arrangement of the files is also uneven. The majority of materials are in folders and hanging files, or notebooks or plastic binders. However, a not insignificant portion of the boxes in storage contain piles of unfolded material and this disarray can make the material difficult to assess.

Overall conservation assessment:

The physical condition of materials residing in headquarters is very good, as should be expected -- this is modern, climate controlled, clean office space. Physical condition of material from offsite storage is far better than expected, though material is dusty and dirty and will need cleaning. We found no evidence of deteriorating paper, fading ink, rust, water damage, or mildew.

One box is contaminated by active mold spores. (Fortunately, this one box contains materials that are not of archival value. We recommended that it be isolated and evaluated for destruction.)

Breakdown by department:

Administration

Administrative/executive records are by far the best organized and preserved. Of approximately 41 cubic feet (20 drawers) surveyed onsite, we identified approximately 28.5 cubic feet that should be removed for archives. Between what is onsite and offsite, there appears to be a full run of council minutes, executive committee minutes, annual reports, executive secretary's files; valuable subject files and documentation of important initiatives and activities (one great example is a set of files from 1996, which describe ACM's exploration of a name change and new logo). A key find among these materials were files relating to a records purge in 1991 (discussed below).

Publications

In the publications department, we surveyed 120 cubic feet (60 file drawers) onsite and identified approximately 14 cubic feet that should be retained in the archives. The great majority of Publications materials, both onsite at Headquarters and in offsite storage consist of either files of

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pertaining to accepted and rejected manuscripts, and documentation of copyright negotiations for manuscripts. Neither of these categories should be retained for historical archives.

Publications Board meeting minutes for 1997 – 2005 are posted on a restricted portion of the ACM website. We were unable to locate any previous documentation of meetings. (It might be worth contacting past chairs of the publications board and editors in chief, to see if they possess records that might fill this gap.) Annual reports are posted in the same restricted space.

Other important Publications materials include three year plans, a 1978/79 strategic planning document, market survey reports from 1994, the report from a 2001 reader satisfaction survey, and project files. We did not find files relating to the planning for ACM's Digital Library. (Note: it was subsequently confirmed with the Director of Information Services at ACM that these files are in IS. They should be reviewed for archival preservation.)

Membership

The functions of the membership department and our interview with its director suggest that there may be historically important files in this department. However, we were not able to directly access membership's files for a physical survey, and any descriptive information on membership materials has not been forthcoming. Some promising types of material would include ACM membership board materials (minutes, agendas, attachments), and files on planning, self-assessment and marketing. We were also told of a limited-distribution ACM newsletter which ceased publication in the 1980s; that would be of importance. We were unable to locate press releases pre-1997 (1997-current are available on the ACM web site) and hope these may be in membership files.

SIG Services

Much important documentation from SIG Services is posted on the ACM website (unrestricted). This includes The SIG Governing Board minutes (1998 - 2005); motions (1999-2005); agendas (2004-2005); and at least one presentation (2005). As with Publications, governing board materials previous to 1998 are not available. If located, they should be preserved.

As the director of SIG services explained to us, the SIGs are required to report annually to the SGB EC. Those reports are then compiled into the SIG Governing Board Annual report which is submitted to Council. Some individual reports from the SIGS to the SGB are known to exist. The earliest is from 1990.

Conference proceedings, for which SIG services is responsible, are made available through the Digital Library, as are newsletters.

Much of the documentation generated by SIG Services is financial and statistical data, or routine documentation related to conference planning and logistics. These materials are not appropriate for historical archives.

As well, volunteers for some SIGS have begun to take snapshots of selected conference websites.

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Significant Gaps:

Some specific gaps identified during the survey are discussed in the sections above. Some of these gaps (and undoubtedly others that have yet to be identified) are attributable to the 1991 ACM initiative to move to paperless operation. We discovered a document titled “Guidelines for Record Retention” in the executive administrative files, which, according to its introduction, was “intended as a tool in ACM’s upcoming purge campaign.” (See Appendix 3.) Significant quantities of historical content were destroyed in response to this initiative. However, as is typical in response to records management mandates, the purge played out inconsistently. Interviews with directors and staff indicate that while it is likely that many gaps in documentation are the result of the purge, not every staff person and not every department fully followed the guidelines.

General comment on location of material:

It is worthy emphasizing here the variety of locations where significant historical material exists now, as well as the variety of formats in which it is kept: paper files at ACM Headquarters and in ACM storage; digital materials in various formats in the Digital Library, on public areas of the ACM website, on restricted parts of the ACM website, and one websites of other institutions (SIGGRAPH, for example).

Recommendations:

ACM is a large and complex organization, with thousands of volunteer members who create documentation, as well as a professional staff and headquarters. The documentation produced is distributed, dynamic, and, increasingly, born-digital. All of these factors complicate the preservation of historical content. For this reason, preserving ACM’s history should be viewed in terms of two factors: the practical and the adequate. It is neither possible nor desirable to preserve the entire record of ACM’s activities for historical purposes. An adequate documentary record of the ACM will serve future historians very well. This project provides the opportunity for ACM stakeholders to define adequacy and to do so intentionally and analytically, rather than leaving it to chance.

Fortunately, a combination of diligence and good luck has resulted in a reasonably good documentary record of the history of ACM. There is much important material in ACM’s possession. *These records are now at increased risk given the upcoming relocation of ACM headquarters and this knowledge underlies all of our recommendations. ACM now has a tremendous opportunity to take a proactive stance and remove these materials to more appropriate facilities. This opportunity will not be repeated. If no action is taken, the materials identified for preservation in this survey will melt back into the sea of boxes and are not likely to survive the upcoming move.*

There are practical steps that the organization can take to become a better steward of its own history. These are listed as “first steps” below. There are also a variety of strategies that the organization could take to address the more complex issues involved. These are less urgent and could occur over time; they are also more complex and experimental in nature and may be costly.

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First Steps:

Recommendation: Select an appropriate archival repository to serve as the permanent home of ACM's historical record and begin negotiations for legal transfer of the materials.

This should be a well-established archival institution with the proven ability to preserve the materials, organize them, and make them broadly accessible to researchers. Negotiations will involve a legal agreement which should be in place before materials are transferred.

Recommendation: Take full advantage of the information gathered during this project.

A tremendous amount of information has been gathered and compiled during this survey, including detailed notes that will aid in readying the material for transfer. While the intention of this project was to assess the materials, not to prepare them for packing, the separation and packing of archival files will now be an accomplishable task. In order to take full advantage of this project, and to ensure that the records identified for preservation are not lost or damaged during the move, separate and transfer valuable records to an archival facility before the move to new headquarters is scheduled, because at that point the archival content will become a lower priority.

Recommendation: Boxing and listing the materials should be done onsite. This will also help to prevent loss of valuable information. As well, the total of 86 feet should be significantly reduced, perhaps by as much as one third, once hanging files are removed.

Recommendation: Destroy materials that can be destroyed

A significant amount of material in storage should not be retained in an archival collection, and has outlived its administrative usefulness. This includes records of routine transactions (e.g., bills, invoices, travel vouchers), and material that is available in summary form (individual questionnaires, surveys); multiple copies of publications; and the bulk of the editorial files.

Next Steps and areas for future exploration:

These recommendations are part of a longer-term commitment to preserving ACM's documentary history.

Recommendation: Pursue gaps in the documentary record

Once the materials at ACM have been safely archived, develop a strategy to pursue gaps in the record that are not the result of the records purge, namely by personal contacts with former ACM officers. Targeted oral histories that do not duplicate existing oral histories would be another approach.

Recommendation: Establish and implement official record keeping guidelines for basic materials such as meeting minutes, reports, and agendas.

Establish guidelines for capturing key documentation beginning now. While it may not be possible or desirable to solicit records from all of the SIGS, for example, this could be implemented within headquarters. Make it part of someone's responsibility to monitor certain types of documents – planning, self-assessment, reports from initiatives, board minutes agendas and attachments – and to capture them in uniform ways. Seize this opportunity to develop more systematic and intentional record keeping practices and policies for ACM headquarters. Educate

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staff on their use. Sort out what content needs to be restricted and what does not. Establish common practices across divisions.

Recommendation: Review the roles of the ACM web site and the Digital Library

Determine what kinds of materials belong in the Digital Library, and what belongs on the web site. Seize this opportunity to be more intentional about the “final destination” for digital content. Identify “final destination” for restricted parts of the ACM site. Is that the Digital Library?

Recommendation: Begin to develop policy and scope for the relationship between the Digital Library and the historical archives.

Does it make sense to add an “archival” function to the Digital Library? This would mean consistent capture of archival content from all of the various locations listed above.

Recommendation: Explore digitization.

Explore various options for scanning selected portions of archival materials. Identify the potential audiences, the costs (both upfront and long-term).

Recommendation: Explore extending scope of documentation

Consider whether to extend the scope of the guidelines to capture a broader universe of documentation, such as the locally help material developed by the SIGS and committees whose work is conducted outside the purview of headquarters.