

Advocacy, Activism, and Archives

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The Canadian Cultural Heritage Advocacy Committee—Comité canadien de défense du patrimoine culturel (CCHAC-CCPDC) was established in Spring 2026 in the wake of federal budget cuts, to raise public awareness of the challenges presented by the loss of funding for heritage, museums, libraries, archives, and other cultural institutions. As noted on the CCHAC-CCPDC website, the organization's goal is "to develop a shared vision and shared messaging and engage our decision makers, professional communities, and broader society in developing a sustainable and well funded culturally diverse heritage sector."¹

I have been following the work of CCHAC-CCPDC with great interest. One of the layers of this "culturally diverse heritage sector" is archives management, which has been my professional environment for over 40 years. As a records and archives management consultant, writer, and educator, I have worked around the world from Fiji to Zambia to Hong Kong to the Canadian Arctic. I can say from experience that the need for advocacy and awareness raising is not new.

In my long career, I have seen too many examples of misunderstandings about the nature and value of archives.

- I have argued with software developers that they should ensure digital personnel records systems hold a complete span of employee data, including content from legacy paper files managed by the government's archival office. Public servants cannot access pensions and benefits if their employment record is not complete, and that record might span decades. But the software developers did not see a link between digital ("new") and archival ("old"), which resulted in a grave risk to the financial future of pensioners.
- I have battled with digitization contractors who wanted to scan early 20th-century government registers, holding copies of documents on onion skin paper tightly bound in leather cases. The contractors proposed cutting open the books, stacking the sheets of paper on document feeders, and pushing start. This approach, I argued, would only result in mangled pages, missing content, and lost and damaged original evidence. The contractors did not see the need to protect original documents as trustworthy sources of evidence and adapt quality control standards for digitization and management.
- I have struggled to explain to historians that archivists cannot override privacy restrictions imposed by original donors. Archivists know that many access conditions reflect poor decisions made long before they started in their posts, but they cannot unilaterally undo legally binding agreements, no matter how much they might wish.

In 2019, in an effort to raise awareness of the nature of archives, and the challenges presented by the digital age, I wrote *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age* in

¹ For more information about the Canadian Cultural Heritage Advocacy Committee, see the CCHAC-CCPDC website at [CCHAC-CCDPC – Advocating for Canadian Cultural Heritage](#). Accessed 22 August 2026.

2019. In that book, I presented case studies and stories to break down these common but dangerous myths.

Myth 1: Records, data, and archives *just* exist. The archivist's job is simply to make them available for scholarly use.

Myth 2: Archives are *old* and thus are different from records (new and bureaucratic) and data (new and digital).

Myth 3: It is easy to preserve archives and make them available, no matter how much time passes between the creation of the records and their arrival in archival custody.

It is essential that we counter those myths with reality.

Reality check 1: Records, data, and archives *only* exist if they are protected from the moment of creation. Archivists cannot wait months or years to manage a digital documentary resource. By the time the archivist becomes involved, the material might be altered beyond recognition or destroyed entirely.

Reality check 2: Everyone from the records creator to the IT specialist to the archivist needs to participate in the care of documentary evidence, especially digital records. The old-fashioned “lifecycle” approach, which left archivists waiting for years or decades to become involved in records care, needs to be replaced by a holistic team-based approach.

Reality check 3: In a digital age, archivists are not just keepers. Archivists need to be advisors and advocates. Our job is not just to organize and rescue those traditional, paper-based archives that might survive the ravages of time but to work actively with creating agencies to “make and keep good records” – especially digital records – from the beginning.²

The many crises that led to the establishment of CCHAC-CCPDC are rooted not just in weak support for heritage but also, in the archival realm, in this lack of understanding of the nature of archives as *evidence*.

Pressure points

Myths about the nature of archives are impairing archival work across Canada, as we are experiencing right now, in 2026.

- After completing an expenditure review and adopting a new budget in November 2025, the Canadian government eliminated the only federal grant program in place specifically for archival management. This grant – the Documentary Heritage Communities Program (DHCP) – provided \$1.5 million a year for archival work. In the same budget, the federal government cut the staff of Library and Archives Canada by more than ten percent.

² I first heard this apt phrase from Australian archival colleagues, who have been leaders in archival innovations for decades. See for example the 2004 presentation by Steve Stuckey, Assistant Director-General, Collection Preservation & Management, National Archives of Australia, “The Role of the National Archives of Australia in Recordkeeping by Australian Government Agencies,” 12 November 2004. The National Archives of Japan coordinated this presentation; a copy of the text is available at [acv 18 p101.pdf](#). Accessed 22 August 2026.

I acknowledge, with frustration, that \$1.5 million is not a lot of money. But it was one of the only substantial sources of funding available to hundreds of local, regional, and community archival operations across Canada. And the loss of so many archival specialists at Library and Archives Canada has left a gaping black hole in the capacity of our national archival institution.³

- In December 2025, the Canadian government implemented Bill C-3 (An Act to Amend the Citizenship Act). With the amendment, anyone can apply for Canadian citizenship if they can demonstrate that they are a direct descent of a Canadian, including a parent, grandparent, or more distant relative. To succeed with the application, the applicant needs to prove that their ancestor had a substantial connection to Canada through three years of cumulative presence in the country.

The demand for archival documentation, especially in provincial and religious archival institutions, has been enormous. But there has been little recognition of the increased workload for already under-resourced archival institutions. Some institutions have reported an increase in requests for ancestral documentation from one or two dozen a month to one or two *thousand* a month. This is an unsustainable practical outcome of policy change.⁴

- In June 2026, the Canadian Council of Archives (CCA) Board of Directors announced that it had accepted three core recommendations by the Archives Canada Working Group (ACWG). These recommendations effectively ended the archival community's ambition to develop a comprehensive national database of archival descriptions – “ArchivesCanada” – a central element in the long-standing vision of a coordinated archival “system.”

The CCA had been established in 1985 with a budget of \$1.5 million, specifically to oversee the development of a unified national approach to archival management. Provincial and territorial councils were established to coordinate the capture of descriptive data according to archival standards, under the umbrella of the CCA. The “Canadian Archival Information Network” as it was known then (later renamed ArchivesCanada), was initiated in 1990 with a projected budget of \$15 million. But as the CCA acknowledged in June 2026, it faced serious capacity challenges with maintaining ArchivesCanada, and the decision was made to stop maintaining the descriptive

³ See the announcement by Library and Archives Canada at [Documentary Heritage Communities Program - Canada.ca](#). Accessed 22 August 2026.

⁴ Facing a growing number of applications providing insufficient documentary proof (including links to genealogy websites instead of notarized copies of official documents), the federal government announced in June 2026 that it would suspend some certificates it had already issued. See for example the news stories by Elizabeth Thompson from 15 and 16 June 2026: “Government abruptly suspends citizenship certificates issued under ‘lost Canadians’ law,” *CBC News*, 15 June 2026, available online at [Government abruptly suspends citizenship certificates issued under 'lost Canadians' law | CBC News](#) and “NDP wants minister to explain why citizenship certificates were abruptly suspended,” *CBC News*, 16 June 2026, available online at [NDP wants minister to explain why citizenship certificates were abruptly suspended | CBC News](#). Accessed 22 August 2026.

database. The portal would serve instead as a directory of archival institutions. Canada's experiment with the coordinated management of archival information is over.⁵

Déjà vu all over again?

Sadly, these crises are not new. Canadian archivists went through similar challenges a decade ago, as I wrote about in my 2014 *Archivaria* article "Coming Up with Plan B: Considering the Future of Canadian Archives."⁶

- In 2012, the federal government eliminated the \$1.7 million National Archival Development Program (NADP), the predecessor to DHCP. Foreshadowing the cut, Daniel Caron, Head of Library and Archives Canada at the time, announced in 2011 that Library and Archives Canada's "monopoly as stewards of the national documentary heritage is over."⁷

Archivists were not ready for the sudden elimination of grant funds or for the federal government's unwelcome statement that a coordinated national approach to archival management was not within its purview. Gaps in archival service began to grow wider.

- Decentralization of archival operations was becoming the norm, not the exception. As Canadian archival thinker Terry Cook highlighted in 2013, "ordinary citizens" are creating records "to bind their communities together, foster their group identities, and carry out their business."⁸

Archivists did not – and could not, without adequate funding – pivot fast enough to support local archival development. As new grassroots archives developed, often outside of the CCA-led archival system, the system itself began to break down.

- Digital technologies were fueling revolutions in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, where citizens were gathering digital documentary evidence to expose the secrets of governments and to advocate for human rights. The pro-democracy Arab Spring movement was a momentary light in a time of political darkness, grounded on the creation and protection of authentic proof.

⁵ The English-language report can be found on the CCA website at:

https://archivescanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/ArchivesCanadaWorkingGroup_Report_2026_EN.pdf.

Accessed 22 August 2026. See also the report I wrote for the Association of Canadian Archivists in 2003, *Seeking Our Critical Vision: Speculations on the Past, Present, and Future of CAIN* (Web Publication No. 3), available at [Association of Canadian Archivists - ACA Books & Guides](#). Accessed 22 August 2026.

⁶ See Laura Millar, "Coming Up with Plan B: Considering the Future of Canadian Archives," *Archivaria* 77 (Spring 2014): 103–139. Available at [View of Coming Up with Plan B: Considering the Future of Canadian Archives](#). Accessed 22 August 2026.

⁷ It is ironic that the original link to Library and Archives Canada's post, cited in my 2014 article, is now broken. The original (now inaccessible) source was "LAC, About Us, "Towards a Pan-Canadian Documentary Heritage Network" at <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/about-us/Pages/towards-a-pan-canadian-documentary-heritage-network.aspx>." That source can now be seen on the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine at [Towards a Pan-Canadian Documentary Heritage Network - Library and Archives Canada](#). Accessed 22 August 2026.

⁸ Terry Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms," *Archival Science* 13, no. 2–3 (June 2013): 113.

Archivists were slow to address the dramatic impact of information technologies on digital evidence and did not take the opportunity to promote the critical message that digital content created today could hold evidential value long into the future.⁹

As I reflect back on my comments in 2014, I feel like Cassandra. The concerns I raised then remain the same. But the need for action is even more imperative. Consider the data/records/archives landscape in 2026.

- People with aspirations to obtain Canadian citizenship are seeking access to authentic documentary evidence, including sacramental records pre-dating the creation of the nation of Canada. Access to birth, marriage, and death records are just not a “nice to have” for family historians. They are legally admissible proof of someone’s lineage and, through that, their legal rights and identity, such as for the descendants of Acadians, so brutally expelled from their homes 250 years ago.

Archivists cannot support the deluge of requests, often from people under immediate threat from their own governments, if decision makers will not provide adequate financial support to support the exponential increase in archival workloads.

- Immigration raids against innocent civilians are happening with frightening frequency in the United States and elsewhere in the world. These crimes are being perpetrated by people in positions of power and authority. These officials are creating digital records such as body cam footage, but they are not allowing the public to access the evidence.

Bystanders who use their cell phones to record perpetrators and victims are witnesses and watchdogs. Archivists need to collaborate with them to protect the evidence, so that the public can hold officials to account in the short term, and, in the long term, help preserve a continuing record of human rights abuses.

- Society faces grave risks with the growth of AI-generated images, the spread of falsified and manipulated records, and the lack of controls over the proliferation of fake news. Today, digital technologies are in the hands of corrupt politicians and self-interested oligarchs.

To counteract the threat, activists are developing open-source software and other digital tools to support the creation, capture, and protection of documentary evidence. Archivists need to work with these groups to ensure their efforts generate accurate and reliable proof.¹⁰

⁹ In my 2014 article, I cited several resources about the impact digital technologies at the time, including Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy’s Fourth Wave?: Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), and Micah L. Sifry, *WikiLeaks and the Age of Transparency* (New York: O/R Books, 2011).

¹⁰ See for example the work of Bellingcat, which carries out open-source research to investigate issues of public interest and then captures, preserves, and makes available digital resources to support accurate and fact-based investigations. The Bellingcat website is at [bellingcat - the home of online investigations](https://www.bellingcat.com/). Accessed 22 August 2026. See also the work of the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity, or C2PA, which provides an open technical standard for publishers, creators, and consumers to document the authenticity of digital content. The C2PA

To work collaboratively with citizens, communities, partners, and the public, archivists need to play an active role not only in the care of extant (i.e., “old” and too often deteriorating) traditional physical archives but also in the development of processes and protocols that allow records creators to “make and keep good records,” both physical and digital.

Certainly, archivists need to strengthen our own efforts to advocate for ourselves. But it is not enough to ask for more money to do the same thing. Archivists also need to lobby for legislative and regulatory change, for improvements in the creation and use of information technologies, and for much greater public involvement in the protection of documentary evidence.

Archivists need to convince the public that archives do not *just happen*. We need the public to recognize that they can and should play a critical role in helping to protect and make available essential documentary proof.

Thinking nationally, acting locally?

I know that archives are but one layer in the broad field of cultural heritage. Museums, galleries, libraries, and other cultural and heritage institutions all feed our deep human need to document and understand ourselves. CCHAC-CCDPC represents a broader community, not just archives and archivists.

But CCHAC-CCPDC provides archivists with a wonderful opportunity for partnerships and alliances. We should capitalize on that opportunity. How can we come together to help this dynamic new group launch initiatives that expand advocacy and activism, for archives and heritage?

Nationally, archivists need to speak with one voice, to communicate two critically important messages:

1. **Archives are not “old.”** The documentation we create today may well be essential evidence today *and* a century from now.
2. **Archives matter.** Documentary evidence is not just an interesting historical resource but a vital source of fact and proof.

These messages cannot come from archivists alone. We need to work with our partners and allies, including historians, researchers, genealogists, community groups, curators, librarians, computer scientists, policy experts, and the public. I hope archivists can work with CCHAC-CCPDC to communicate the message that documentary evidence is an essential resource, one that helps everyone across Canada protect their rights, uphold their responsibilities, and tell their stories.

Archivists also need to speak out locally. In British Columbia, I have served for four years as Vice President of the Friends of British Columbia’s Archives (FBCA). I have been deeply involved in the effort to transform FBCA from a traditional support group for the provincial government’s archives – the Friends of **the** British Columbia Archives – into an advocacy group for archival holdings and services across the province – the Friends of **British Columbia’s** Archives.

website is at [C2PA | Verifying Media Content Sources](#). Accessed 22 August 2026.

This new FBCA advocates widely for the protection of and access to archives for research, history, accountability, and local and provincial identity and memory. FBCA strives to raise awareness about our provincial archival institution, the BC Archives, and also about the dozens of other archival institutions and collections around our province. We especially want to bring attention to the irreplaceable documentary materials held in archival repositories all across BC, to increase their protection and use.

To achieve these outcomes, FBCA offers innovative presentations and public events, provides grants to support community archives, and helps historians and researchers, including members of Indigenous communities, access documentary sources. We are currently building a new website to share information and raise awareness.¹¹

The new FBCA has only been in existence for nine months, and we are still building our tools and resources. But I see this provincial model as something archivists across Canada might consider for their own “Friends of...” groups, to operationalizing the wider advocacy vision articulated by groups such as CCHAC-CCPDC.

Archivists need to speak for the profession but, more importantly, we need to advocate for the *materials* – for the “stuff,” as I call it. We cannot advocate easily within our professional associations. I believe we can share that message more effectively if we work with our partners, including historians, genealogists, lawyers, and researchers, to urge the protection of the “stuff,” so that it can be accessed and used by anyone, for whatever purpose they wish, with as few limitations as possible.

Archives are not just historical resources. They are essential evidentiary tools in the effort to uphold accountability, democracy, identity, and memory.

Practical steps

Whether as individual archivists or others within the cultural and heritage sectors, from custodians to scholars, we can all work to raise awareness of the value of archives and cultural heritage more widely. I suggest some concrete steps below.

- **Gather data.** We can gather statistics and facts to illustrate the reality of archives management in our environments. How much does it cost to digitize a photograph or a document? How long would it take one staff member to digitize the backlog of documents in our repositories? How many sacramental records does a church archives hold, and how long does it take to answer a request for citizenship documentation? Numbers and statistics can speak much, much louder than words.
- **Craft our stories.** We can use the data we gather to create stories that help communicate our message in a clear, focused, and meaningful way. Can we explain, *persuasively*, how an archivist decides whether and when to digitize archives? Why AI cannot be used indiscriminately to describe archives without oversight from an archivist who understands the context of the materials? Why onerous access restrictions on

¹¹ FBCA’s membership approved the change in name and mandate on 7 December 2025. We have been redesigning our website over the summer of 2026 with a planned launch later this year. For more information about the *Friends of British Columbia’s Archives*, see the FBCA’s current website at <https://friendsbcarchives.ca/>.

private archives are not helpful to researchers and simply tie the hands of an archival institution for decades into the future?

- **Know our audience(s).** We can identify the different stakeholders we need to reach – whether a chief executive officer, a high school student, the person sitting next to us on a bus, or a child at a party. Then we can take our data and shape our stories to help *that* person understand our message in a way that makes sense to *them*. And we can listen to their questions and concerns, to find ways to serve them better.
- **Build coalitions.** We can reach out to historians, genealogists, Indigenous communities, representatives of minority groups, and others, to ask them to help us send the message that archives matter. We *must* involve others in this mission. Archivists cannot “sell” archives alone – largely because so many of us are public servants who face restrictions on advocacy. In my province, I see FBCA as a model for advocacy. Because the organization sits at arms-length from any archival institution, it can be more vocal in its messages of support for, or concern about, the future of archives – “the stuff.”
- **Use our tools.** We can use social media to share stories about the importance of archives: for citizenship, legal rights, historical accountability, and public service. We can, for instance, share historical content about events in the past that demonstrate the link between archives and today’s news. In the summer of 2026, we witnessed devastating fires across Canada. Can we share historical information on our social media feeds about past fires and other emergencies, to help make a link between past and present and also to remind the public that protecting their own family records should be a central part of emergency planning?
- **Engage the media.** We can promote and build on every news story that shows an intersection between archives, evidence, accountability, identity, and rights. We can write press releases, letters to the editor, and opinion pieces for newspapers and public channels. We can build connections with journalists. We spend enough time talking to each other. Let’s start talking more with those who can help promote the message that archives matter.
- **Lobby politicians.** We can lobby senior government officials and legislators, either as individuals or, ideally, through professional associations and advocacy groups like CCHAC-CCPDC or FBCA. We can testify at public hearings. We can submit policy briefs and position papers. We can provide input into budget planning sessions at all levels of government. We can write to our Member of Parliament, our provincial or territorial representative, our municipal mayor – everyone! Our message needs to be clear. Archives are not old. Archives are essential sources of evidence. *Archives matter.*

Presenting a united front

I also know how hard it is for archivists to advocate for our cause. I have taken advantage of my independence to speak out as loudly as I can. My voice is strong, but it is not enough.

I applaud CCHAC-CCPDC for being a voice in support of cultural heritage. I am proud of the work done by FBCA to reimagine itself as a voice in support of “archives-the-stuff” across British Columbia. We all need to keep speaking out – archivists, historians, researchers, everyone. But we need to ensure we are singing in harmony, not just adding to the noise.

We need to articulate a coherent message that demonstrates the link between archives and accountability, identity, and democracy: that documentary evidence is an essential component of cultural heritage – one of the core foundations of a just, democratic, and civilized society. Let’s work together to share our message:

Archives are not just old documents but sources of authentic and reliable proof.

Archives uphold rights and maintain accountability, today and a century from now.

As sources for research, understanding, and knowledge, archives are a fundamental part of our cultural heritage.

The protection of archives is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end.

That end is a society that values the heritage, culture, and identity of *all* of its citizens – a democratic, accountable, self-aware, inclusive society, built on facts, not falsehoods.

Archives matter.

Laura Millar has worked as a consultant and scholar for over 40 years, advising on records and archives management for governments and organizations around the world. She received her Master of Archival Studies degree from the University of British Columbia, Canada, in 1984 and her PhD in Archive Studies from the University of London, England, in 1996. She is the author of dozens of publications and presentations, including the award-winning archival textbook *Archives: Principles and Practices* (Facet Publishing, 2010, 2nd edition 2017, 3rd edition 2027). Her 2019 book, *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age* (Chicago: ALA Neal Schuman, 2019), was written for the general public to highlight the critical importance of records, archives, and information as bulwarks against mis- and dis-information in a digital age. Laura received the Emmett Leahy Award in 2021 for outstanding contributions to records and information management internationally. She is a Fellow of the Association of Canadian Archivists and an Honorary Fellow of the International Council on Archives.