

# Defining Key Terms:

## Archives, Special Collections Libraries, and Rare Books



“What is a **rare book**? From a book collector's point of view, a rare book is 'a book you want badly and can't find', or a book that is 'important, desirable and hard to get'. However, there is no clear-cut definition of what makes a book a rare book. Even different libraries and booksellers employ different criteria. The terms 'rare', 'antiquarian' and 'old' are not clearly defined or indeed distinguished. The rarity of a book has different aspects, too: 'rarity' can refer to the way the book is supposed to be handled, to the number of existing copies, and to its value.”

—National Library of Scotland,

<https://www.nls.uk/collections/rare-books/beginners>

“A **special collection** is a group of items, such as rare books or documents, that are either irreplaceable or unusually rare and valuable. For this reason special collections are stored separately from the regular library collections in a secure

location with environmental controls to preserve the items for posterity. Special collections also include rare items that are focused on a single topic, such as aviation or women's history. Special collections are created to benefit scholars by grouping related materials together in one repository. Often a repository will specialize in a limited number of subject areas for their special collections, to distinguish the institution from other libraries.”

—Purdue University Libraries,

<http://guides.lib.purdue.edu/c.php?g=352889&p=2378065>

“What Are **Archives**? The word *archives* can be used in three different ways:

The word *archives* (usually written with a lower case *a* and sometimes referred to in the singular, as *archive*) refers to the permanently valuable records—such as letters, reports, accounts, minute books, draft and final manuscripts, and photographs—of people, businesses, and government. These records are kept because they have continuing value to the creating agency and to other potential users. They are the documentary evidence of past events. They are the facts we use to interpret and understand history.

An *Archives* (often written with a capital *A* and usually, but not always, in the plural) is an organization dedicated to preserving the documentary heritage of a particular group: a city, a province or state, a business, a university, or a community. For example, the National Archives and Records Administration in the United States, Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, The Coca-Cola Company Archives, and The Archives of the Episcopal Church are all responsible for the preservation and management of archives.

The word *archives* is also used to refer to the building or part of a building in which archival materials are kept, i.e., the archival repository itself.

Excerpted from *The Story Behind the Book: Preserving Authors' and Publishers' Archives* by Laura Millar

—Society of American Archivists, <https://www2.archivists.org/about-archives>