

What is an Archive?

Visitors to the Danish American Archive and Library (DAAL) often ask whether it is a museum. Some ask whether the DAAL is the same as a museum. The answer is “no.” The Danish American Archive and Library is different from a museum and is doing invaluable work that a museum is either unable to do or uninterested in doing because its concerns lie elsewhere.

Traditionally, an archive has been a place to store official government records. The National Archives in Washington, DC, which house the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, are a classic example of this type of archive. The DAAL has similar records, such as the reports of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church’s annual conventions and the records of Dana’s faculty minutes. These materials will only be preserved if the DAAL preserves them. A museum has no interest in preserving official documents.

Furthermore, while the DAAL does have extensive materials that document the history of institutions, its primary focus lies with the stories of people. Museums, it is often suggested, collect artifacts while archives collect documents. This is correct as far as it goes, but the truth is more complicated and in fact points to some of the underlying, but often unnoticed, strengths of archives. Most museums do not want artifacts unless they have provenance, i.e. have a personal story that gives life and meaning to it. Yet what about the people who have enormously interesting and noteworthy life stories, but no significant artifacts? Most museums have no place for them, yet in an archive they take center stage. The DAAL is the repository of thousands of stories of people, places, and organizations that would undoubtedly be lost if there were no archive to preserve them.

A further limitation faced by museums is that artifacts generally take up far more space than do paper documents. The number of artifacts that a museum has collected generally far exceeds the available display space. The situation in an archive is far different. All the materials in the DAAL are directly available and accessible in one double storefront building.

Because an archive can both preserve and organize vast amounts of paper documents (letters, diaries, teacher contracts, bills of sale, photos, books, etc.) in a relatively limited space, it becomes a particularly appealing venue for academic researchers. There is a depth of understanding that is available in the Archive’s treasure trove of correspondence. No one has tried to count them, but the Archive probably holds upwards of 60,000 letters covering the period from the late nineteenth century through the beginnings of the twenty-first. The DAAL has continued over the course of many years to attract researchers. This interest is if anything increasing. For example, the Community Partnership Agreement with the University of Nebraska at Omaha was established in 2011 because the Archive’s resources are especially appealing to historians and other academicians. A similar agreement was reached with the Museum of Danish America in Elk Horn, Iowa, in 2013. Grand View University in Des Moines, Iowa, has also expressed an interest in establishing a partnership, as has the public library in Blair.