Analysis of Service Records Management Systems for Rescue and Retention of Cultural Resource Documents

Background:

According to the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), records related to a historic property or historic resource often are themselves defined as "historic property" or "historic resources." Historic documents and other materials relating to properties listed in (or eligible for listing in) the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) can include specifications, illustrations, sketches, drawings, property cards, maps, photographs, charts, tables, and textual documents. The Department of Defense (DoD) has obligations through the NHPA and other legislation to develop and implement plans for the identification and management of such records. In the absence of a plan, irreplaceable information may be lost.

In many cases, the loss of this information can be traced to record keeping using evolving technology. For example, on many installations, electronic real property databases have replaced the paper property cards. These cards contained building-specific information such as construction contracts, building materials, use category codes, occupancy records, and modifications tracked from initial construction through several decades of use. When the real property record system was automated, much of this information was not migrated to the new database. With the loss of historical information contained in cultural resource documents, determinations of eligibility and treatment plans become much more difficult to execute.

Objective:

The objective of this research was to identify and address the conflicts between cultural resource management and current records management regulations and practice for DoD-created records. More specifically, the team sought to examine current DoD records management practices in order to more carefully locate and preserve records associated with cultural resources on military installations.

Summary of Approach:

This research involved an assessment of relevant records management practices, DoD and Service-specific mandates and processes, and cultural historic property document types. Initially, the online service-specific records management systems, namely Army Records Information Management System (ARIMS), Air Force Records Information Management System (AFRIMS), and the Navy Records Management System (including Marine Corps) were examined. Each system has unique record categories, series, and records schedules.

A list of keywords was developed that would flag record types related to cultural resources. The identified records for each system were recorded in Microsoft Excel. With the service listings finalized, team members independently rated the record types according to their likelihood of Cultural Resource Management (CRM) use. The ratings were then compared across the team for a consensus list by service of highly CRM-relevant record types.

Benefit:

Without such an effort, many documents of immense future value are likely to be irrevocably lost to historians, historical architects, cultural resource managers, master planners and others.

Accomplishments:

A basic factor in the ability to locate and use these records in the future is to understand how the offices that create them are tasked to manage them. Through an investigation of the records management systems in use by the Army, Air Force, and Navy/Marines, records that may have information relevant to cultural resources have been identified and analyzed. Current records schedules have been reviewed to ascertain the disposition instructions for these relevant records, and ideas formulated for altering schedules to better serve CRM needs.

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Real Property Card - A Cultural Resource Document