

**Testimony of Sarah J. Shoenfeld, Principal, Prologue DC
Tuesday April 28, 2015, 10:00 AM, Room 500**

**District of Columbia Committee
on Transportation and the Environment
Hearing on the Budget for the Department of General Services
Chair: Mary Cheh**

Good morning, Chairman Cheh and members of the DC Council. Thank you for this opportunity to speak in support of a new facility for the DC Archives. My name is Sarah Shoenfeld and I am a local historian. A colleague and I have written many of DC's Neighborhood Heritage Trails, and a little over a year ago we formed our own business, Prologue DC, to work on other projects.

I am here today because our most important project is one that relies on records housed at the DC Archives. This project, which has been partially funded by the DC Humanities Council and has received significant public attention, is called *Mapping Segregation in Washington DC*. Its focus to date has been on mapping the widespread presence of racially restrictive deed covenants that kept much of the city's housing off-limits to African Americans for the first half of the twentieth century.

Many of the city's most well-known early developers included restrictive covenants in deeds for new housing. Documenting them requires going through deeds at the DC Archives, found within massive volumes of around 500 pages each containing every transaction filed with the Recorder of Deeds. They are organized only by date, and transactions for one year alone take up around 85 volumes. Because there is no inventory of these volumes to tell us the period each one

covers or even how many volumes exist, we are creating one as we go, in hopes that future researchers may benefit from it.

The DC Archives is currently open only six hours a week for deed research, and as we learned after hiring several interns last summer, can serve only a very limited number of researchers at one time. The photo I've included here shows two of our interns from UDC, one of whom has a mask around her neck due to the high level of dust, working at a small table in the archives. Note that there is no designated area for researchers and that they are surrounded by unsafely housed records. The partially open large cardboard boxes piled on a table contain Metropolitan Police Department records. What the photo doesn't show is that it is often also extremely hot inside the archives, which is both dangerous for the records and can be unbearable for researchers and staff.



As the Department of General Services moves forward with developing a new facility for the DC Archives, it is imperative that this process be

guided by an experienced archivist and public records manager. The storage, maintenance and public accessibility of archival records are essential elements to planning for a new facility, and currently are not being addressed. I am also here to bring your attention the desperate need for physical improvements and more staff at the current DC Archives. Irreplaceable records of our city's past are deteriorating and are in grave danger of being lost altogether. I urge you not to let this happen.

Thank you.