

From the Digital Archives Web site:

“The Washington State Digital Archives is the nation's first archives dedicated specifically to the preservation of electronic records from both State and Local agencies that have permanent legal, fiscal or historical value.

Located in Cheney, WA on the Eastern Washington University campus, the new facility was designed from the ground up to host this technically complex program. The Web interface and database storehouse were custom designed specifically for the Digital Archives to hold the unique and very important electronic records found throughout the state, and to provide simple, straight forward access to researchers.

The Digital Archives includes a state of the art research room, complete with computer research stations, a high tech presentation classroom and a world-class data left.”

Washington State's investment in digital archiving for government records provides a highly focused and successful example of pursuing public value through information technology. The job of collecting, preserving, and providing access to the records of government is central to the mission of Washington's Office of Secretary of State. That mission recognizes the fundamental importance of government record keeping in a democratic society. That is also the foundation of the public value proposition guiding the Digital Archives program: the state has the constitutional and statutory mandate to preserve and provide access to records of enduring legal and historical significance.⁽¹⁾ The State Archivist, Jerry Handfield made the public value quite clear, saying “Making records accessible to the public is the major function of a democracy.”

The growth of electronic records in government agencies in the 1990's presented a challenge to the State Archives' ability to fulfill its mission, because it lacked an effective program and the technology to deal with records in new digital formats. The Washington State Digital Archives (WSDA), a program within the Office of Secretary of State, was created in response to that challenge. It was initiated by the Office of the Secretary of State, with initial planning begun by the then State Archivist in March of 2000. The initiative was made a priority in 2001 by the newly elected Secretary of State Sam Reed, and was included in the Secretary of State's 2001-2007 Strategic Plan. The project was subsequently supported by the state legislature and included in the State of Washington's 2001-2003 Capital Budget. Construction of the physical hub of the WSDA in Cheney, Washington, began in January 2003.

The WSDA is more than a building. Concurrent with construction planning, exploration began to find the best programmatic and technological approaches to collecting and processing the electronic content intended for the WSDA. Beginning in mid-2001, this research explored a wide range of technologies and techniques for collection, access, and preservation. The results led to the custom development of a Web interface and database design that blended the latest technologies with traditional archival theory to create a first-of-its-kind digital records repository for state government. The grand opening of the facility and the repository occurred on October 4, 2004. The goal of the program was to make the historical electronic records of Washington's state and local governments easily accessible, from anywhere, at anytime. Adding records to the WSDA began with a pilot program transferring marriage records from three counties along with the historic census and naturalization records from the State Archives and State Library. The WSDA will grow through a seven year, four phase process, designed to eventually collect digital records from all Washington state and local governments, building to a storage capacity of over 800 terabytes of data. This case study reports how the initial vision and value proposition were carried out through a complex political and technical process to a functioning digital archiving program and facility delivering the promised public value.

⁽¹⁾ **Washington State Digital Archives Feasibility Study.** Olympia, WA: Office of the Secretary of State, August 2004, p. 1 (<http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov/staticcontent/Feasibility%20Study.pdf>).