Transitioning the Historic Preservation Grant Program
from Paper to Paperless

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I. Introduction

The goal of this project is to determine the potential costs and benefits to transition away from the paper-based Historic Preservation Grant program at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History to an all-digital grant program. Many public and private entities have already transformed their business processes to be paperless. Business is increasingly taking place in an all-digital environment with hard copy documents as a secondary option, if at all. The Archives has already begun the process of making selected groups of legacy hard copy records available to researchers online in digital format. The Archives has also already begun working with other state agencies to accept their permanently valuable records for preservation in "born digital" formats. Consistent with our agency's goal to preserve digital records and make records accessible to the public in digital format, it is my intent to identify what steps are needed to eliminate or minimize the use of paper by managing the Historic Preservation Grant program application, administrative, and record storage processes digitally. It will be necessary, in an environment of limited resources, to consider what changes are realistic that can make use of existing resources and avoid expensive set up costs that are sometimes associated with new initiatives.

The Historic Preservation Grant program at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History is one of several programs administered by one of its three divisions known as the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). The funds for the grant program come from an annual grant awarded by the National Park Service (NPS) to each state's historic preservation

office. The grant from NPS helps each SHPO finance the cost of operating the National Register of Historic Places and its associated programs at the state level. Each SHPO is required to sub-grant at least ten percent of its annual award to local historic preservation projects. Each SHPO sets its own priorities and criteria for competitive selection of local sub-grant projects. Some SHPOs have decided to make the switch in their grant programs from paper to digital applications. It is the aim of this project to consider what would be necessary for the South Carolina SHPO to make the transition to digital not only for the application process, but also for all the documents generated by each project.

The South Carolina SHPO awards grants that help conduct surveys to identify historic properties, to help local governments and non-profits to plan for the preservation of individual historic properties and districts, and to help governments and non-profits make repairs to stabilize and weatherproof threatened historic buildings. Managing historic preservation grant projects generates records that have temporary and permanent value. The records that have typically been produced in paper format are now frequently being produced primarily in digital format. Digital versions of final grant products are increasingly seen as more useful because they can be made available to stakeholders via the internet. In 2016, the South Carolina SHPO for the first time awarded grants for municipal historic properties surveys where the project deliverables would be all digital. Both the SHPO and the local governments involved found it desirable to have the hundreds of historic property survey forms and photographs delivered digitally rather than in the traditional format printed on card stock with photographic prints. Digital survey data eliminated the need for physical storage of paper and made it easier to publish the data online which is where the general public now expects to find such information.

The administrative processes that made these projects possible are also increasingly functioning in an all-digital environment.

II. Historic Preservation Grant processes and records

There are three major processes involved with managing the Federal Historic Preservation Grant program that may be affected by a transition from paper to digital: the application process, administration of awarded projects, and temporary storage of completed project files. Each process involves management of paper documents to track administration of an average of fifteen to twenty grant projects that are ongoing each year.

The first grant management process is the application. Local governments and non-profit organizations are the typical applicants. The application is prepared by a professional within the applicant organization, or sometimes by a volunteer if the non-profit is small or a religious organization. The application is provided in Microsoft Word format and sent by e-mail upon request or is available for download from the agency web site. Applicants are required to submit a signed original of their application with five additional hard copies. Only one set of original hard copy attachments is required with the application. Attachments typically includes maps and photographs, reports, and letters of support. Photographs are also required to be submitted in digital format on a disk or flash drive.

The additional five hard copies are intended to facilitate review by an internal staff committee. This is a significant amount of paper for the applicant and our office to deal with and could be substantially reduced or eliminated by allowing a digital-only submittal. A digital-only application could be saved in a central network file that would be accessible by the staff review committee. This would eliminate time spent sorting and distributing a stack of paper applications

to each reviewer. For application years 2014 through 2017 we reviewed an average of 18 applications each year. With the required original plus five copies, that is an average of 108 physical application copies we had to manage in each of those years.

By offering the blank application in an electronic format, and by requiring submittal of digital photographs, we have already moved significantly in the direction of an all-digital application process. Converting the current MS Word version of the application to a fillable PDF version would help facilitate acceptance of an application by e-mail instead of a hard copy. A digital signature can be used to submit the PDF version of the application. We could also give applicants the option of sending only a signed signature page by regular mail and sending the rest by e-mail or file upload.

III. Current trends in other SHPOs and other South Carolina agencies

Some of our colleagues at other state SHPOs currently allow or require online submittal of applications for their historic preservation grant program. A few of those utilize web sites created by their state government as a portal for applications to multiple state grant programs including the historic preservation grant. The Florida Department of State created a web portal to accept applications and manage grants by the state's divisions of Cultural Affairs, Elections, Historical Resources, and Library and Information Services.[1] The Louisiana SHPO, a division of the state Office of Cultural Development, accepts grants through an online portal that is shared with the arts and culture divisions of its umbrella cultural agency.[2] In addition to the online submittal, Louisiana applicants must also submit a hard copy signature page mailed to the SHPO.

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[1] http://www.dosgrants.com and http://dos.myflorida.com/historical/grants/small-matching-grants/. Accessed January 29, 2018.
[2] https://louisiana.culturegrants.org/. Accessed January 29, 2018.

The Tennessee SHPO, a division of the state Department of Environment and Conservation, accepts and manages historic preservation grant applications via an online platform that supports grants in more than a dozen of the department's program areas.[3] The Maryland SHPO has its own exclusive historic preservation grant application and project management web portal.[4] Applicants for historic preservation grants from these states must create a user profile to log in to the web site before completing and submitting their application online.

The grant programs managed by various South Carolina state government agencies do not operate under a single platform. Each granting agency establishes their own system of accepting applications. Much like for our SHPO historic preservation grant, the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism accepts applications through the mail or by e-mail for its various grant programs without offering an online submittal option.[5] The same is true for the South Carolina Energy Office Mini-grant program.[6] The South Carolina Humanities Council requires submittal of applications for its grant programs via e-mail with hard copies accepted only "subject to a reasonable exception".[7]

Some other South Carolina state agencies not only require grant applications to be submitted online, but also use the online platform for subsequent management of awarded grants. The South Carolina Arts Commission has established its own internet platform for General Operating Support grants using a third-party commercial platform. The Arts Commission uses a web interface supported by Foundant, a company that lists arts and humanities organizations

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[3] https://www.tn.gov/environment/about-tdec/grants-home.html. Accessed January 29, 2018.
[4] https://mht.maryland.gov/grants.shtml. Accessed February 2, 2018.
[5] https://www.scprt.com/grants. Accessed February 2, 2018.
[6] http://energy.sc.gov/incentives/grants. Accessed February 2, 2018.
[7] http://schumanities.org/grants/howtoapply/. Accessed February 2, 2018.

among the many categories of clients it serves.[8] Foundant touts their clients' ability to make their

own changes to the web site as one of the advantages of their service.

The South Carolina Department of Education also uses a third-party commercial platform

for its grant application and project management web site.[9] The Department of Education lists

seven different grant opportunities with deadlines in the winter or spring of 2018. With multiple

grant programs operating simultaneously, a third-party platform may be desirable to help manage

a large group of applications that must be processed. Education uses a platform built by

Formstack that costs from $468 to $2,988 dollars annually depending on the options selected.[10]

In addition to Foundant and Formstack, there are other third-party commercial options

available to build a web-based grant application and management portal. SmarterSelect annual

fees range from $1,000 to $5,000 depending upon the options used. Survey Monkey, a popular

online survey tool, also offers Apply, an online grant management package that costs $3,950 to

$7,000 each year for lower end options. AwardForce offers annual plans from $1,188 to

$4,180.[11]

These prices are not necessarily cost-prohibitive, especially if you have a large applicant

pool each year and fund a large number of projects. But for the South Carolina SHPO's small

historic preservation grant program (less than two dozen projects at any one time), these costs

may exceed what is reasonable. The effort and expense needed to create an online application

portal would have to be balanced against the potential benefits.   The paperless application option

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[8] http://www.southcarolinaarts.com/foundant/index.shtml#apply and https://grantmakers.foundant.com/.
Accessed February 2, 2018.

[9] https://ed.sc.gov/finance/grants/scde-grant-opportunities/. Accessed February 2, 2018.

[10] https://www.formstack.com/pricing. Accessed February 2, 2018.

[11] https://www.smarterselect.com/pricing/. Accessed January 29, 2018; https://apply.surveymonkey.com/pricing/.
Accessed January 29, 2018; https://www.awardforce.com/pricing/. Accessed January 29, 2018.

is beneficial to both applicant and the grant manager and can be achieved for no extra cost by allowing for e-mail submittal.

The second grant management process is administration of active projects. This phase of grant management generates the most paper. The award letter and funding agreement serve as the contract documents cementing the agreement between the agency and the recipient. These documents outline the scope of work and define other terms of the project. Additional required forms are signed affirming the grant recipient's compliance with all applicable and federal and state laws. Most grant recipients hire a professional consultant or contractor to complete the project scope of work. The hiring process for any grant-funded professional services must be approved at each step by our grant manager. The paper trail documenting the competitive procurement of professional services adds to the growing collection of paper in the project file. A Request for Proposals (RFP), documentation that the RFP was advertised, responses to the RFP, documentation of the selection and award process, and the grant recipient's contract with the consultant are typical records in the project file related to procurement. Consultants typically produce a deliverable in the form of a report that may include photographs, building plans, and other documents as appendices or attachments. The project deliverable is a record that is subject to permanent retention by the Archives and a copy is also provided to the National Park Service. Both the Archives and the National Park Service are already accepting final product copies in electronic format for permanent retention.

The third and final step in the grant management process is storage of completed project files. We currently have the paper records physically stored in file cabinets for completed project years from 2009 through 2016. These records take up space equivalent to six

cubic feet (six standard archival storage boxes), or three standard file cabinet drawers. This currently fills up less than one of the three file cabinets in our immediate office area. Because of the relatively small amount of storage space required, the grant administrative files remain stored in this cabinet for the duration of their retention schedule until their scheduled destruction date. The grant administrative files are destroyed eight years after their completion date. Each year in October (after the eighth anniversary end date in September), the files for one grant year have reached their schedule destruction date. When they are destroyed space is created for the files of the grant year just completed. By destroying paper records on schedule, we are able to regularly create space for the files of the project year just completed and consistently maintain this relatively small amount of physical storage space in the office.

IV. Costs related to existing paper system

The costs for the existing hard copy storage system for our historic preservation grants consist primarily of the paper needed to generate documents and the filing space needed for storage. As described above, the filing space used in the office is relatively small, taking up less than a third of the available filing space in the immediate area of the grant manager's work space. The costs in paper are also relatively small. The typical project file includes the application, award letter, funding agreement, required federal compliance forms, procurement documentation, miscellaneous correspondence, and reimbursement request documentation. For the typical project file, this adds up to an average of about seventy pages. For the last five grant cycles (2013-2017), we have managed an average of eleven projects in each cycle. The amount of paper in all the project files averages to about 770 pages per year. The cost in paper is minimal: the average amount of paper used each year is less than two reams (one ream is 500 pages) which cost less than $3.00 each.

Sending required grant administrative documents through the regular mail generates postage expenses for each project. The minimum documents that need to be sent through the mail are the grant award letter, funding agreement, and required compliance forms. This can be accomplished currently for combined postage of $1.38. For an average year of eleven projects, the total postage bill is $15.18.

V. Potential Advantages of a Digital Historic Preservation Grant System

If paper, postage, and storage needs are minimal, then what is to be gained by having grant processes and documents exist only in digital format? Among the advantages are the grant manager's improved accessibility to active files. In an electronic filing system, documents should be arranged according to file naming conventions in the network folders.[12] The file naming system should clearly identify each record in the project file. The naming conventions make finding documents for current users easier by avoiding vague terms or unclear abbreviations. Consistent and clear file naming also helps others in the future who may not be familiar with the program to access documents.

The digital environment can also lead to improved access to inactive files for audit or other purposes. We keep completed project files in the office for eight years before their scheduled destruction date. Since the physical space required to store these files is relatively small (usually requiring less than one cubic foot of storage space for each project year), we keep the completed project files in the office rather than send them downtown to the State Record Center for temporary storage. Having the completed project files on hand in the office makes it

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[12] "Electronic Records Management" by Jessica Hills.
http://rm.sc.gov/Documents/Electronic%20Records%20Managment%20October%202017.pptx. Accessed January 30, 2018.

easier to retrieve them if information is needed to answer audit questions. More frequently, the

files are valuable during their storage period to reference information on past projects that can be

used to advise current or potential future projects. Useful information in the completed project

files can include contact information for past grant recipients and professional consultants, past

project scopes of work, and budget details, all of which can be valuable for cultivating future

grant projects. This information is often shared via e-mail with potential grant applicants to help

them develop their applications. Having fast access to these documents digitally will make for

more efficient communications with applicants.

The digital filing system can also make it easier for other staff to access project

information in the absence of the grants manager. The file naming conventions that would be

required for the digital filing system will reflect the succession of administrative steps for each

grant project. The file naming system will make it easier for non-grants staff to locate

documents. This system will also make it easier for a successor in the grants manager position to

learn the administrative requirements of the program. A future successor in the position will

likely be accustomed to working in a digital environment. The organization of records in the

digital project files will help facilitate training on the required documents and processes of the

historic preservation grant program.

VI. Implementation Steps

The first step towards a digital Historic Preservation Grant program will be to develop an

application that can be submitted via e-mail. The current MS Word version of the application

may already be transmitted via e-mail, but a fillable PDF version would be easier for applicants

to complete and result in submittals that are consistently easier to read. Presently we receive

applications printed from the MS Word version where the formatting is sometimes changed or altered by applicants (unintentionally in most cases). A fillable PDF will produce a more consistent document and not allow applicants to make changes to the format of the document. Text boxes for application information will be more controlled. The PDF form will also need to be structured so that photographs, maps, and other attachments may be included. One limitation of our e-mail system that will have to be accounted for is that e-mails with attachments larger than ten megabytes are automatically blocked. We will need to build the application package in such a way that it allows for necessary attachments but does not violate the size restrictions of our e-mail system.

Allowing for e-mail submittal of grant applications leads to other computer security concerns that will need to be addressed with our agency information technology (IT) manager. In addition to concerns about file sizes, we will need to be sure that incoming files are safe to be ingested to our network. It will be required to coordinate with IT regarding any steps that need to be taken in addition to our existing e-mail security measures. After files are securely ingested, it may be necessary to set up a special file location on our local network.

In addition to protecting the integrity of our computer network we need to be sure that any sensitive data submitted by applicants is kept secure. Employer Identification Numbers and checking account information are typically included in grant reimbursement requests. This information will be provided to our finance office to process reimbursements, but will be excluded from the grant file to minimize exposure of this sensitive information.

The second step towards implementation of a digital system is to create a file organizing system. The filing system will change during the grant administration process as we move from

review of applications to management of awarded projects. For new applications there will be a

system for arrangement of new applications on the shared network folder. The staff review

committee will find it easier to review applications if they are arranged in a logical order on the

network. Newly received applications will be assigned to a file named for their corresponding

federal grant year. Applications for the FY2019 funding year (the first funding year this system

would be implemented on a trial basis) will be assigned to a folder labelled "FY2019" in the

historic preservation grants section of the network. Within the FY2019 folder, a new folder will

be created for each grant application received. The Application Folders will be arranged first by

county name. The naming convention for individual Application Folders will follow this simple

format: County Name, Project Name.

Once grants are awarded, the Application Folders will be updated to Project Folders.

Project folder names will include the same individual project number that is assigned as required

for the NPS online Project Activity Database: SC-19-000, [Project name]. Within each Project

Folder, the individual file names will include the project number, sequence number, and

descriptive name of the document. The sequence number will follow the typical order of each

administrative step of the project. There could be some variations between projects, but most

project files would have file names such as the following (in administrative sequence order):

SC19000-01-Award Letter; SC19000-02-Funding Agreement; SC19000-02-Non-Construction

Assurances; SC19000-03-Debarment Certification; SC19000-04-RFP; SC19000-05-Consultant

Selection; SC19000-06-Consultant Contract; SC19000-07-Draft Comments; SC19000-08-Final

Draft; SC19000-09-Reimbursement Request.

VII. Evaluation Method

After a trial period with this system, the grants manager will identify any problems and determine corrective measures. After FY2019 applications have been evaluated and selected for funding, the e-mail application process should be critically assessed to see what worked well and what could be improved. Questions to consider at this evaluation stage include: Were any applications delayed due to technical issues submitting photos and other attachments in addition to the application? Did the e-mail option discourage any organizations from applying for projects that would have otherwise been competitive? Did having paperless grant applications cause any difficulty for staff reviewers?

If the trial of the e-mail application system proves successful, then it can be adopted independent of the all-digital filing system. After a trial of the all-digital filing system, consultation with the Archives and Records Management divisions of the agency will be needed to determine if the record retention schedule can be revised and approved to allow for digital storage of completed project files. Consultation with the National Park Service will be required to determine if there are any records that are required to be maintained as hard copies. The Historic Preservation Fund grants manual (last revised in 2007) does not address digital records, but does note that completed files can be preserved for audit on microfilm.[13]

VIII. Conclusion

Upon considering the relatively minor costs of the current system, it seems that the primary benefit to be derived from a digital historic preservation grant program is eliminating or minimizing paper in the application process. The convenience of a paperless system benefits

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[13] National Park Service, Historic Preservation Fund Grants Manual (June 2007 Release), page 24-1. (https://www.nps.gov/preservation-grants/HPF_Manual.pdf)

both the applicant and our staff. The applicant does not have to make extra copies of the application and can avoid printing attachments including photographs, maps, and other supporting documentation. All components of the grant application are typically produced electronically before printing hard copies. Eliminating the hard copy saves the applicant a step that can cost time and money. Submitting the application materials directly to us in electronic format makes it easier for our staff to simply review the materials on their computer and not have to manage a large stack of paper applications.

Preserving the electronic copies of grant products will further our agency initiative to make more of our records available to the public online. Most of the grant products, except for city and county historic property surveys, are not generally accessible to the public. Accessioning digital copies of products instead of hard copies will make it easier to share them online via the South Carolina Electronic Records Archive.[14] Creating and storing in digital format the grant administration records that generated those products will make it easier to access them for audit and reference purposes.

As with all of the Archives' efforts to move toward digitization of records, the plan to transition our historic preservation grant program records to all-digital is motivated by the desire to improve efficiency of service and accessibility to information created for the public benefit.

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[14] http://e-archives.sc.gov