

Case Study

# CENTRALIZED ARCHIVES WITH FLEXIBILITY FOR THE FUTURE

Benzie Area Historical Society | Benzonia, MI



## ***Balancing Preservation and Growth***

Museum professionals are amazing resources for understanding the past and gleaning lessons learned that can be applied to future generations. The Benzie Area Historical Society (BAHS), which owns and operates the Benzie Area Historical Museum, understands this innately and was able to use their experience with archiving to plan a forward-thinking, flexible research center that allows them to build on their extensive collection of local history.

The museum, which was converted from a 19th-century church, began collecting artifacts from the surrounding area in 1969. As its collections grew, an addition to the museum in 2000 increased the organization's ability to house additional archival materials. However, after decades of accepting and cataloging photographs, maps, posters, manuscripts, letters, ephemera, and other items, storage space ran out, requiring some pieces to be stored throughout the museum - separate from the other archives and in less-than-ideal containers.

In 2025, with the backing of key donors and supporters, BAHS broke ground on what is now the Archibald Jones Historical Research Center. "One of our goals in building a new research center was to bring all of our archives into one facility," explains Larry White, President of the Benzie Area Historical Society.

Understanding how quickly the previous archives filled and determined to adhere to the organization's mission of preserving, collecting, and interpreting the history of their area, the museum's leaders knew their new research center would need to be well organized and able to adapt to, and grow with, items acquired in the future to ensure long-term functionality.



## No Room at the Archive

Built in 2000, BAHS's previous archives room relied on static wooden shelves on three sides of the room and one flat file cabinet. Gradually, it filled up with boxes of family photos, township and county maps, ephemera, and more. With an overstuffed archives room and items being stored wherever they could fit, access to some items - especially for older staff members - was increasingly difficult. Adding to efficiency challenges, there were no open workspaces in the archives room, except for staff members' desks.



*"We kind of maxed out our storage capabilities. With that, unfortunately, we did have to be a little more picky on what we could accept."*

**Matt Varnum** | Executive Director at the BAHS



As space limitations continued mounting, it affected the organization's ability to store artifacts, put items on display, and in some cases even accept donated collections. "We kind of maxed out our storage capabilities. With that, unfortunately, we did have to be a little more picky on what we could accept," explains Matt Varnum, Executive Director at the BAHS.

With all this considered, BAHS required a solution that would solve their immediate storage and workflow challenges and also remain adaptable to accommodate evolving needs for years to come.

## THE SOLUTION

### *Freedom to Adapt, Space to Grow*

Benzie Area Historical Society's goal was to create a centralized archives area with space for staff and volunteers to comfortably work. To find a solution that would meet their needs, BAHS leaders interviewed other museums to ask what storage systems worked for them. During these discussions, they connected with a nearby historical society that had been using Spacesaver solutions for decades. The durability and long-term functionality of those systems and the positive testimony shared gave BAHS confidence that Spacesaver would be a reliable partner.

BAHS Board Members reviewed product brochures and design resources on our website and connected with our local distribution partner, who gave a presentation to the BAHS Collections Committee. Our rep highlighted examples of other installations, thoroughly explained the proposal process, and provided potential space plans. Thanks to the comprehensive assessment, the BAHS shifted its plans from renovating an existing portion of the museum to building an addition to house its new research center and archives room.



## ***Innovative Solutions, Historic Functionality***

The key to achieving versatility and ease of use within the project was Spacesaver's innovative 4-Post FreeSpan™ Shelving. Thanks to FreeSpan's patent-pending clip design, the archive's shelves can be adjusted quickly in  $\frac{3}{4}$ " increments to ensure optimal shelf spacing for any collection or individual artifact. Now, a single member of the museum staff can easily move shelves without tools to accommodate changing storage needs.



Our local rep utilized an array of FreeSpan configurations for the project, including Single-Face shelves with removable Center Stops for standard archival boxes, Double-Face shelves for larger, bulkier items, and Nantucket Drawers to consolidate smaller items like eye glasses, political buttons, daguerreotype photographs, and glass plate negatives into one space and better protect these fragile items.

For heavier items, BAHS reinforced their shelves with FreeSpan™ Shelf Stiffeners, increasing the weight capacity per shelf and ensuring priceless collections are supported without sacrificing ease-of-use and adjustability. Integrating 4-Post FreeSpan Shelving into a Mechanical Assist High-Density Mobile Shelving system that moves along rails embedded into the floor allows for not only more capacity in less space but also room for future growth.





420 Series Flat File Cabinets

## Archives Preserved, Workflows Enhanced

In the middle of the archives room, 420 Series Flat File cabinets are configured back-to-back and installed under a nearly 10' x 8' countertop. This solution allows items to be safely stored while also providing ample workspace.

"The archival flat files have helped us immensely in storing our large collection of maps," says Jane Purkis, Museum Curator at the BAHS. "Having such large drawers in the flat files is wonderful. We no longer fold any large object up. Everything is stored flat, the way it should be."

A cabinet equipped with 4-Post FreeSpan Shelving and doors stores supplies needed for archival work. The museum added FreeSpan™ Shelf Extenders to prevent smaller items from falling from the shelf while remaining easy to adjust thanks to FreeSpan clips.

Day Use Lockers, in two different sizes and configurations, are positioned near the High-Density Mobile Shelving system to provide staff, volunteers, and visitors with a secure, dedicated place to leave personal belongings. Custom end panels on the High-Density Mobile Shelving and Day Use Lockers give the room a cohesive look and pleasing aesthetic.



Day Use Lockers



## THE RESULT

With their archives consolidated into one location and easily adjustable solutions in place, museum staff have become more efficient when reviewing and documenting new items, and they're excited for the possibilities the future holds.

**"It almost tripled our storage capacity compared to our old archives room - it's just magnificent,"** says Varnum about BAHS's new storage system.

The versatility provided by 4-Post FreeSpan™ Shelving has made moving collections into the new space easier than expected. As boxes and objects of various sizes are moved into the research center, staff can adjust shelving on the fly to establish the best configuration for each set of items.

"We've been very happy with how the shelving system has operated for us," says White. "The most important things museums do are collect and preserve artifacts and items that need to be protected for the future. Being able to think about that from a standpoint of what types of boxes, what types of shelving, what types of drawers, and what types of rooms these need to be in, it's really important to think of all the factors that need to go into it. And it's great to have partners like Spacesaver, where we had the opportunity to be able to plan this together."



*"There's just a ton of space; way more than what we had in the old archives room. The space is working great. I would invite anyone here to see what we've done. They're going to want just what we have."*



**Cheri Dundon** | Lead Archivist/Records Manager



## *Freedom to Grow*

Spacesaver's in-house engineers and design experts can help bring your museum's long-term vision to life. Contact us to learn more about how we work with locally based consultants to deliver solutions versatile enough to protect your collections for generations to come.

**800.492.3434 | [spacesaver.com](https://www.spacesaver.com)**



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