

June 8, 2020

The Honourable John Horgan  
Premier of British Columbia  
501 Belleville Street,  
Victoria, BC V8V 1X4

Professor Jack Lohman, CBE  
CEO, Royal BC Museum  
675 Belleville Street,  
Victoria, BC V8W 9W2

Dear Premier Horgan and Professor Lohman,

We are writing to express our concerns as chairs of History Departments at British Columbia's research universities about the extended closure of the BC Archives to researchers. First, access to the records of government are essential to democracy and this extended closure is an affront to British Columbians and their relationship to government. Second, many research projects operate with tight timelines and this is particularly acute for students who have fixed terms and tight budgets. The proposed 2021 open-ended schedule for reopening puts many projects in peril.

Let us address this latter point first. Access to the archives is essential for many students to complete their degree in a timeframe that does not ruin them financially. The archives has been closed three, almost four, months which has already caused many students to either completely change their research projects or delay their research and extend their degree by a full semester. Continued closure will have a catastrophic effect on Honours, Masters and PhD students at our universities who will be unable to complete their degree. We also mention the hardship on faculty, postdoctoral fellows and community scholars who have limited timeframes in which to do research. For many faculty, May to August is their research semester and closure over the summer means that research important to our understanding of how the past shapes the present is delayed a year.

Most research projects operate within time limits. Many adjustments have already been made to deal with the nearly four month closure. Some researchers work on land title and litigation work, others are helping First Nations recover their history. Most of these projects have fixed and tight deadlines as do documentary and feature film makers. Books near completion require fact checking and archival images. Other cultural institutions depend on the BC Archives to mount exhibits, websites, and films and their work is more pressing because next year is the province's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of joining Canada.

Even more than the costs of delaying hundreds of degrees and projects, the more important issue is that the archives is, after the legislature itself, the most fundamental institution in our parliamentary democracy. It houses the records of government and the history of its interactions with British Columbians and other governments. The ability to retrieve those documents is fundamental to the functioning of our democracy. It is in the archives that we find records of the internment of Japanese, the settlement of treaties, the head tax on the Chinese, the record of timber and land alienation, the extension of the provincial franchise, the creation of police forces, the acquisition and disposal of indigenous artifacts, just to name a few topics that are at the forefront of research these days. Access to the archives allows us to hold governments to account, it allows citizens access to their own history -- the memory box of five million British Columbians. The languid timetable for reopening is the opposite of what we would expect for an essential service and a key to our democracy.

We recognize that health and safety of staff and users must be the main priority, but given that gymnasiums, tanning salons, and shoe stores are all able to open with precautions, not to mention libraries and other archives, there is no reason that the province's most important and best-funded archives should not be able to find a safe way to open.

This is all the more surprising since the archives was uniquely prepared, years before the current crisis, with its weekend and evening operations, to prevent the spread of disease should a pandemic occur. It already has a smoothly operating procedure for researchers to remotely order material, have it placed in a locker, use it on evenings and weekends, and then return to the locker where it could wait three days in quarantine with no person-to-person contact at any part of the process. Regular users of the archives have noted that there is plenty of space in the reading room to allow two meters between researchers and one could arrange to open alternating work stations in the microforms, audio, and computer stations to maintain the appropriate distance.

The archives has made great strides in digitizing resources in recent years but only a small fraction of their manuscript, map, library, oral history, and video and photographic material is online. It would be a total misunderstanding of the use, value and state of the collection to suggest that digital resources can, at this time, replace consultation of the physical collection.

We join the Canadian Historical Association, the British Columbia Historical Federation -- representing over 100 historical societies in British Columbia, and the Friends of the British Columbia Archives, in expressing our concern over the inexplicable delay in restoring public access to the British Columbia Archives. British Columbians deserve better.

Sincerely,

Dr. John Lutz, chair,  
History Department, University of Victoria

Dr. Theodore Binnema, chair  
History Department, University of Northern B.C.

Dr. Eagle Glassheim, chair  
History Department, University of British Columbia

Dr. Jennifer Spear, chair  
History Department, Simon Fraser University