"Collective memory" is the term given to the widely shared reconstructed versions of the past that are assembled by both individuals and groups in order to define their present and prepare for the future. The construction of a collective memory is often the result of conflict between opposing groups with differing agendas but collective memory can also serve as a unifying force that provides a society with inspirational symbols in a time of crisis.

Although archives contain many of the materials out of which collective memory is constructed, the literature is still largely silent about the contributions that they make to this process. This thesis focuses on two Mennonite archives in Winnipeg, Manitoba and the attempts that they have made to assist in the construction of a collective memory for their respective denominations.

Mennonite archives face two main problems. First, they serve Protestant denominations with an active interest in missions and social issues and are often forced to defend the spiritual necessity of preserving the past. Second, Mennonites are often uncertain as to whether they should be defined by their religious faith or their ethnicity. Many Mennonite leaders are reluctant to commemorate their ethnic heritage out of a fear that such an emphasis might prevent cross-cultural outreach.

The archives at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies serves a denomination (the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches) that has been heavily influenced by North American evangelicalism. It seeks to influence collective memory in its Conference by stressing the spiritual necessity of preserving archival materials. The Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies has been active in producing resources designed to inform its constituents of their Anabaptist heritage.

The Mennonite Heritage Centre has portrayed itself as more of an ecumenical institution, due in part to the more open nature of its denomination, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. It seeks to assist the larger Mennonite community in reconciling the religious and ethnic aspects of its heritage. For the supporters of the centre and archivists at the Conference of Mennonites in Canada collective memory should (ideally) act as a kind of balance against various sorts of distorting or limiting tendencies which may arise in the Canadian Mennonite community.

Both institutions are actively involved in the forging of a new collective memory that finds inspiration in the words and deeds of the first Anabaptists as well as in the suffering and triumph of the global Mennonite church.