

The Code of Ethics and Archival Conservation

by Norvell Jones

I think Marian has said a great deal which applies to archival materials. I should preface this by saying that I am very new to the field of archival conservation, I have been working at the National Archives for about a year now, and it has been a real revelation to me to realize that archival conservation is not library conservation and it is not manuscript conservation. Those of you who heard Stuart Kohler speak about his computer experiences this morning will have recognized the column labelled "cubic feet." My introduction to what archival conservation was about came when I asked my future employer about how many items existed in the

National Archives that were in the category of top treasures. At the Library of Congress, we have fifteen or twenty items that would be evacuated in a case of a national emergency; and when I asked this question at the National Archives, I was told that there were probably seven or eight hundred cubic feet. And these are the rarest and most valuable. Other holdings are similarly large. Obviously for those seven or eight hundred cubic feet we would have no difficulty in complying with the highest standards of practices as they are outlined in the Code of Ethics with full documentation. However, for much other material, that simply is not practical. You cannot provide probably the best stewardship of what has to be rare resources, that is, our skills, and do the kind of documentation that is required now in the Code of Ethics. I think that probably it might be useful to look at Part One, II.A., which is "Respect for Integrity of Object." And I think that it might be useful to consider what we are talking about in terms of the object. An example that I have used in the past which is somewhat relevant to archival conservation is the question of scrapbooks. When you are dealing with a scrapbook, there is a question: what is the object? Is the scrapbook itself the object, or is the material that is contained in the scrapbook the object? An example might be the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Papers at the Library of Congress, which were named Elizabeth Cady Stanton Papers, this was the name of the collection, the holdings. The scrapbooks in this collection were assembled by Susan B. Anthony, but they were the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Papers. And it was the decision that was made in conjunction with the custodian of that material to separate the scrapbook, to take it apart, in order to be able to determine what was on the reverse of some of the items (it was not possible to see the reverse of them) and in order to

integrate the papers into the collection where they properly belong. In this case, the determination was made in conjunction with the custodian that the object was the paper itself, rather than the scrapbook. In another instance, it might be that the scrapbook itself was the most important part, and that became the object. And I think that Marian alluded to the possibility of a series of papers which had little importance, perhaps, as individual items, but which retained its value because of the group, the way that all of the pieces fit together. I think that in that case, you could consider the series to be the object. And I am not sure that I have answers about exactly what kind of documentation is appropriate when you are dealing with the conservation of a series, but I think that this is an area that would be appropriate for this group to explore.

I would like to add under reversibility (Part One, II.E.) one factor that might be considered. Occasionally, deacidification has been mentioned as a treatment which is not reversible. There are instances when I think that it is inappropriate to deacidify, especially when you are dealing with historic samples. I think that no matter how bad it is, you would not want to change the chemical nature of the material. And so, in terms of determining treatment, reversibility of treatment, it is appropriate to consider, again, exactly what the object is that they are trying to preserve, and what the goals of preservation are.

Under Part One, III.D. there is "Proper Course of Treatment." My personal feeling is that, when you are dealing with individual objects, or a series of objects, that it is very important to outline to the custodian or owner what alternatives there are for treatment. I think that frequently there are several courses of treatment which are equally appropriate or perhaps could be chosen

appropriately depending upon the interaction that you have with the curator and what determinations are made about, again, what the object is and what the goals of preservation are. And that we do not necessarily need to outline one single course of treatment, but that it may often be appropriate to outline several alternatives and to work closely with the custodian to determine exactly which one is appropriate.