

Profile for the Nebraska State Historical Society
Catherine Atwood, Paper Conservator
Lincoln, Nebraska

Institutional Profile

The Nebraska State Historical Society has a position called Conservation Specialist. Judith Fortson was the first conservation person at the Society, followed by Ann Dodge. I began work in Lincoln in November of 1988.

The Society has three sites in Lincoln, and other facilities around the state. The conservator works mainly with the library (including 3000 maps), State Archives, manuscripts, and photographs (250,000 items); these collections are based in the headquarters building. Access to storage areas is restricted; materials are used in a reading room, and may not be "checked out."

So far, my most organized work has been done with the library, which has an estimated 80,000 titles. The priority areas of the library were identified, based on their importance to research on Nebraska. As time and money permit, we are systematically upgrading the storage of the library collection. This usually means that polyester covers are put onto dust jackets, slings and envelopes are used on small or vulnerable items, and four-flap phase boxes are made for books that are falling apart.

In the past, work has come from the other divisions sporadically. Some materials need repair or better housing so that they can be added to the collections. Other materials are noticed when they are pulled for use. During the next year, we may be able to decide on overall conservation priorities for all paper based artifacts.

All conservation-related work is done by one full time person, and perhaps 12 hours a week of help from students, interns, or volunteers, so "repair" is a minor part of our agenda. Making storage containers, doing stabilization and encapsulation of paper, answering conservation questions, and ordering folders/ boxes/sleeves/etc. for all divisions takes up most of the time. When treatments are done, and there are treatment choices to be made, the curator for the collection is consulted.

The starting salary for the conservation position is \$23,198. There is minimal chance for professional development.

The conservation position is in a NAPE bargaining unit (Nebraska Association of Public Employees). This is affiliated with AFSCME. I recently became a union steward for the Historical Society. Coincidentally?, soon after this, the conservation position was put on a list of cuts to be made if the budget is reduced for the 1993 fiscal year.

Postscript. As of November 1992, the conservation program of the Historical Society was terminated. The Society is still building the Ford Conservation Center in Omaha, and groundbreaking is the Spring of 1993. New conservators will be hired, and a new conservation program started, when construction is

completed.

The administration has said that this is a re-organization of the Society, and that it is not tied to budget cuts.

And of course it is not tied to any activism on behalf of staff members which may have been practiced by the current conservator!