

Preservation Activities at the New York Academy of Medicine Library

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The New York Academy of Medicine (NYAM) Library was founded in 1847 and has grown to become the largest private medical library in the United States. The library contains 680,000 bound volumes (including 32,000 rare books), 185,000 cataloged pamphlets, 276,000 portraits and illustrations, and 386,000 manuscripts on biomedical subjects.

In 1982, the Library received a 3-to-1 matching grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to establish a preservation program. The Mellon Foundation, the New York Community Trust, and other organizations helped the Academy to match the NEH funds, and the preservation program was instituted in 1985. In 1992, the Gladys Brooks Foundation generously donated funds to move the laboratory to a greatly enlarged space, and to purchase a number of pieces of specialized conservation equipment. The new lab has been named the Gladys Brooks Book and Paper Conservation Laboratory.

At present, the staff of the Preservation Department consists of three full-time professional employees: Administrator/Conservator Elaine Schlefer, Conservator Susan Martin, and Assistant Conservator Solveig Schumann. Temporary summer employees and volunteers supplement this staffing. The administrator and the conservator previously worked for a number of years with Carolyn Horton and Associates. The assistant conservator, after some previous experience in other binderies, served an 18-month internship at NYAM before being hired.

The Preservation Department is responsible for all aspects of preservation in the Library, including collections maintenance, overseeing of commercial binding and exhibitions, and cooperative preservation activities, as well as conservation.

Conservation activities included dry-cleaning, washing, deacidification, mending, rebinding, rebacking, pamphlet binding, ultrasonic encapsulation, matting, paper repair, and construction of a variety of protective enclosures, including several types of wrappers and drop-spine boxes. The staff has designed a number of structures to solve particular problems of the collections. Whenever possible, staff publish articles about new techniques in professional newsletters.

The Preservation Department handles all repairs to the collections. Staff members are trained in all aspects of the Department's work. Therefore, a person might perform a painstaking conservation treatment on a rare book one day, then make a wrapper for a general collection book the next. A single budget covers both basic repairs and rare-book conservation.

Work is generally routed to the lab by supervisors. The Special Collections Librarian maintains a close relationship with the Preservation Department and regularly brings problems and suggestions to the attention of the staff. The Reference and Serials/ Acquisitions librarians also send books in need of repair to the lab. Stack supervisors are advised to set aside books in obvious need of repair and to bring them to the attention of the Preservation staff.

Grant-funded projects with deadlines and books in the Library's Adopt-a-Book program receive priority. The Department has had a number of grant-funded projects, funded by the New York State Library, the National Library of Medicine, and other agencies.

Treatment specifications are determined by the Preservation staff, who work together to decide on the best materials and techniques to use. The value of an item to the collection governs to some extent the sort of treatment it will receive. General Collections materials usually receive laser-printed Japanese colored

paper (Moriki) labels, while gold-stamped leather labels are used for Special Collections materials.

Pamphlets are not routinely bound – they are put into acid-free envelopes and shelved upright in filing-type cabinets. The staff has developed a fast and easily-constructed pamphlet binding that is used on General Collections items, and with some cosmetic modifications, on Special Collections materials as well.

The staff has recently begun making facsimile copies (on acid-free paper) of deteriorated pamphlets. These are bound non-adhesively in a variation of our standard pamphlet binding. The original pamphlet is placed in a wrapper or in an acid-free envelope with a polyester film sling and retained. Access to the original is restricted, and in most cases prohibited.

When rebinding Special Collections books, the boards and other significant parts of the original binding are retained and stored in a compartment in the box with the rebound book.

Staff members spend a considerable amount of their spare time on professional activities, serving on various committees of the Guild of Book Workers, the New York County Metropolitan Reference and Research Library Agency (METRO), the New York County Medical Society, and other organizations. The New York Academy of Medicine strongly encourages professional development, and staff members have regular opportunities to attend workshops, courses, seminars and meetings.