

Archives Preservation Update

"Historical Perspective and Current Approaches"

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Preservation is one of several underlying concepts that is generally included in mission and goals statements of repositories that have custody of archival materials. To many, preservation is the very cornerstone upon which archival institutions are founded. The safekeeping of historical records is often mandated by law and/or charter, as well as by public interest and concern. While preservation is a primary goal or responsibility, an equally compelling mandate--access and use--sets up a classic conflict that must be arbitrated by custodians and caretakers of archival records. The dual responsibilities of preserving archival materials and making them available for use require that archival institutions balance sometimes conflicting needs when setting priorities and allocating resources.

Preservation programs in archives share many of the same problems and approaches as preservation programs in allied professions. While specific preservation strategies may differ, all include programmatic elements that address the following broad concerns: storage, use and handling, holdings or collections maintenance, reprography, conservation treatment, and disaster control. Collections must be assessed from the perspectives of their relative values and needs, preservation priorities must then be established, and institutional resources must be allocated accordingly.

Despite similar concerns, however, archives preservation is of necessity developing along somewhat different lines than preservation programs in libraries, museums, and fine art collections. The problems posed by archival records are in fact part of their attraction. Amazing diversity, compelling contents, and overwhelming quantity are but a few attributes that come to mind to characterize the nature of archival holdings. While there are large numbers of treasures--records having the highest historical, cultural, political, or legal significance--there are even greater masses of materials that gain importance not solely on individual merit, but through their relationship to a greater whole. Archival records are typically not published and usually contain unique information that is available nowhere else, or which can be reconstructed only with difficulty. Further, even materials from the same series or collection can be non-uniform from the perspectives of size, format, and media.

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Archival records are as diverse as are the means of recording information over time. Indeed, an archival record can be virtually anything that is appraised to have documentary significance and that is accessioned into a repository. Record materials range from the traditional--paper- or skin-based with a variety of media--to very contemporary electronic and digital media. Also included are photographic materials in all their diversity, maps, architectural drawings, and sound recordings. Archival collections also contain an amazing array of three-dimensional objects and artifacts--ranging from barbed wire to soil samples and patent models to swords.

Such diversity is a major defining element of archival holdings. Archival collections not only document the whole history of recordkeeping technology, but are virtual catalogs of historical approaches to conservation treatment. They are also wonderful study collections for conservators and students of materials science.

Individual archival collections vary in size but are often immense, comprising hundreds of linear feet. This affects methods of intellectual control and approaches to preservation. Unlike museum collections, where items tend to have individual accession numbers, and libraries, where printed materials tend to have individual call numbers, materials in archives are typically organized, described, and housed in aggregates...such as record group, series, and entry. With some exceptions (for materials of extremely high value), materials are not dealt with as individual items nor do they have unique identifying numbers. Such methodology has a direct impact on preservation and conservation and emphasizes the importance of maintaining original order.

Values are assigned to archival records on the basis of their administrative, fiscal, and legal significance. For example, some records document the rights and privileges of citizens, such as invention patents or land records. Other values relate to informational content, while records that describe how an entity worked are considered to have evidentiary value. The concept of intrinsic value is applied as a criterion in evaluating archival records and determining whether it is necessary to retain them in original form or if preservation of informational content will suffice. Factors used to assess intrinsic value include age, association or artifactual values, exhibit potential, artistic merit, and whether the physical form itself may be the subject of study. All of these elements help to determine relative values among collections or groups of records, and are used to set preservation and conservation priorities and approaches.

The concepts of batch and single-item treatments as they are evolving in archives conservation deserve brief mention. While it is intended that all treatments carried out on archival records be performed to the same high standard and be preceded by necessary examination and testing, the nature of many records is such that it is possible to group them together as a batch

treatment unit. Records composed of the same materials and exhibiting the same treatment requirements can be subjected to the same sequence of treatment steps. Depending on the materials and the treatment required, a batch might consist of twenty-five, fifty, or one hundred documents. Batch treatments might include humidification, washing, deacidification, or a similar procedure that permits simultaneous or sequential treatment of materials in small groups. Batch treatment approaches are appropriate for archival materials of low to moderate value, or those that require routine treatments. Single-item treatment, on the other hand, is required for materials of high value as well as for treatments that are complicated or experimental and thus require constant observation and attention. There is clearly a need for both approaches in archives conservation.

Most batch treatments are documented by the use of some type of form or checklist to describe treatment steps performed and materials used. This is considered to be sufficient for the routine nature of such treatments. Single-item treatments are documented more traditionally with condition and treatment reports, treatment proposals, and photographic documentation as appropriate.

Mass conservation procedures are seen by some as the most viable hope for the long-term keeping of large archival and manuscript collections. In theory, mass procedures allow high volume treatment of materials evidencing the same problem; individual handling is thus minimized, and the cost of treatment per item radically reduced. The potential for mass treatment seems most feasible in the areas of deacidification, fumigation, and some paper strengthening techniques. Most progress has been made with mass deacidification of printed library materials but, even here, the projected cost per item may place such treatment out of the financial reach of most institutions. Archival materials are less likely candidates for most mass treatments than are printed library materials, given the eclectic nature of archival collections and the great diversity of materials and formats that can be encountered in even a single archives box. With a potentially large universe of papers, inks, photographs, and other media intermingled in a collection, it is more than likely that little would be known in advance about the possible effect of a mass treatment on the majority of materials in any given container. The necessity of pre-screening holdings to segregate materials that could not be subjected to a particular treatment would eliminate one of the most appealing aspects of the concept.

Archival materials are compelling from the perspectives of content and are complex as physical objects. Just as form and content are intimately connected, preservation is inextricably intertwined with all other archival functions. The challenge of archives preservation is most fully met in institutions that emphasize the interdependence of sound archival management with sound preservation programs and practices.