

Archives Preservation Update

"A Programmatic Approach"

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The mission of an archives is to identify, acquire, preserve, and make available records of enduring value. Nowhere is the importance of preservation in the archives setting expressed more clearly or succinctly than in the Webster's Third New International Dictionary. An archives is: "a place in which public or institutional records or other materials of historical value...are systematically preserved." This paper explores the goals of one archives preservation program, the New York State Archives', as well as practical strategies toward accomplishing them. I will focus today on one of these strategies, reformatting. I'll close by discussing the importance of and opportunities for integrating preservation throughout the overall archival program.

Records are produced by a creating body or individual in the conduct of a specific activity or transaction. In my situation, the creating body is New York State government or its pre-statehood predecessors. Like most major government archives, our holdings are voluminous (52,000 cubic feet), and physically and intellectually diverse. They contain such disparate records series as: Dutch colonial manuscripts; the largest collection of movie scripts in the U.S.; and original video tapes and movies of the assault on Attica shot by State police in the early 1970s. The preservation program at the New York State Archives is one of the oldest and best developed among government archives in the U.S. It is considered to be a model for several reasons, including a high level of management support--preservation gets an excellent share of the overall budget--and the integration of preservation throughout the program.

The goals of our preservation program are the stabilization and long-term survival of the informational context and/or physical form of archival records of State government for the purpose of ensuring access over time. Our approach to preserving our holdings is systematic, well-planned, production-oriented, and aimed at preserving information as opposed to artifacts, although there are exceptions here. This is the appropriate approach in our setting; the ultimate consumer of our services is the records users, and he/she is interested in information.

There are three principal functions within our program: conservation treatment, holdings maintenance, and reformatting. Approaches to conservation treatment have been discussed by

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Mary Lynn and will be further explored in the two treatment cases yet to come. Holdings maintenance procedures aimed at ensuring proper records storage will be described in the next paper by Karen Garlick.

Reformatting is a preservation option that means copying information from one medium to a more stable one. Currently, the medium for reformatting standard textual paper records preferred by most archives is black and white silver gelatin, polyester-based microfilm, either 35 mm roll film or 105 mm fiche. For the reproduction of records that contain color like some maps and architectural drawings, Cibachrome color micrographic products can be used.

At the State Archives, we are deeply committed to preservation microfilming; five of the nine full-time employees in our preservation unit are dedicated full-time to micrographics. Why? Microfilm is recognized as one of the most stable information storage media available when processed to meet nationally established standards and stored in the appropriate environmental conditions. Indeed, one of the great advantages of microfilming records is that standards exist for film production, storage and maintenance. This means that technical quality can be measured against a series of quality indices. With the recent introduction of polysulfide toning technology thanks to landmark research conducted by the Image Permanence Institute (IPI), we can be assured of improved resistance of silver gelatin images against oxidative attack. An ongoing IPI investigation of stability of Cibachrome micrographic images suggests that it is equal to or greater than that of black and white silver images. Just as with paper records, keeping original order and intellectual control are critical with microforms; intellectual access is provided through the use of editorial targets and indices on film.

Security of information is assured through microfilming. We store our microfilm master negatives off site for security purposes. Researchers are required to use service copy microfilm of any records that have been filmed to protect originals from damage or theft. Microfilm is a format that is compact, and easy to copy and distribute through sale or loan. In short, microfilming epitomizes our program goals in that it preserves information and improves access to it.

Preservation photocopying is an inexpensive reformatting option that is especially suitable for reproducing records on unstable supports and/or media, such as newspaper clippings or faxes that may be scattered within a records series and putting adjacent records at risk of damage. To produce a stable copy, the image must be transferred onto alkaline paper and sufficiently fixed to the paper support. Technical standards exist for both the paper quality and the permanence of the image.

You are probably familiar with the use of camera and contact duplication for the reproduction of photographic prints and negatives. A new duplicating method for large collections of negatives has been developed using medium format, long roll film cameras that take 70 or 105 mm film. For preservation, the film must be polyester based, have high resolution, and be processed to national standards. The long roll camera method yields a high quality, stable image for about 1/4 the cost of contact duplication. Contact production of duplicate negative print masters from the master interpositive assures image security and facilitates production of prints using the negative print master. This imaging technology has been used by several archives since its introduction a few years ago and promises to be the wave of the future for large archival photograph collections.

A major challenge facing many archives is preserving information and images contained in sound and moving image records on magnetic media. We have thousands of units of these media in our holdings and are acquiring more at increasing rates--because State agencies are producing them at increasing rates. Such records have critical preservation needs; they are inherently unstable and access to them depends on machines and software whose obsolescence is guaranteed. Without a reformatting program that responds to these characteristics, the information recorded in machine dependent formats is essentially lost. Our strategy is to duplicate any obsolete formats to a current one--we have selected 3/4 inch U-matic videocassettes for moving image records and 1/4 inch reel-to-reel for sound--at the point of acquisition, and to systematically convert records recorded in formats on the verge of obsolescence to an appropriate newer one.

Unfortunately, a lack of resources has kept us from consistently and comprehensively employing this strategy. On a limited basis, we have had video tapes duplicated by outside vendors who have the appropriate playback/recording equipment, that is necessarily both obsolete and current. Researchers gain access using VHS and audiocassette service copies of these records on VCR's and tape players in our research room.

In major archives, including the New York State Archives, preserving and providing access to archival records are accomplished by a series of core functions, one of which is preservation. The functions are: identification of records for permanent retention, description for intellectual control and finding aids, preservation, and reference. These functions are often, but not always, carried out in that order. In an integrated archival program, none of the core functions stands alone, and all of them contribute collectively to the overall mission.

You may wonder how a preservation program meshes with the other archival functions. Let me give you some examples. At my institution, the archivist who goes to the creating agency to identify (appraise) records of long-term value for permanent

retention in the archives considers the records' condition, format, and preservation needs as well as their significance in his/her appraisal. The appraisal report often provides information helpful in preservation planning and projecting resource needs. The appraisal archivist may actually participate in preservation planning. And preservation staff are more frequently becoming involved in protecting archival records early in their life cycle, while still in active agency use by providing technical assistance on records creation, storage, and maintenance to agency officials.

Integration of preservation in the reference unit is key to the diversity of good reference services as well as to records preservation. Preservation staff provide guidelines governing the use of records in the research room, and, with reference staff, coordinate off-site use, such as loan for exhibit to minimize the associated risks. They provide regular training to reference staff in proper handling during retrieval and re-shelving, and in identifying records with serious preservation needs that preclude access. And finally, preservation staff work closely with the reference staff to ensure that the products of our preservation efforts, whether it is a reformatting product like microfilm or fiche, or rehoused paper records, or a treated original map, meet the access needs of our users: that is, are legible, in order, and in a format that is convenient to use. After all, our ultimate goal is to preserve information for present and future use.