

Archives Preservation Update

"Holdings Maintenance: An Overview"

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Over the years, the archives community has demonstrated an abiding concern for the preservation of records, personal papers, and historical manuscripts held by institutions nationwide as one element of what is coming to be called "responsible custody." Herbert Friedenwald, the first Keeper of Manuscripts at the Library of Congress, illustrated this point in his paper delivered at the 1897 meeting of the American Library Association. "No treasures that come to a library are so precious as its manuscript collections. They are usually unique, and in but few instances have ever seen the light of the printer's day. It is proper and necessary therefore, that manuscripts should be given a special care, and different, from that accorded even the rarest books." Historically, the literature contains many references to the importance of repairing, protecting, and handling materials properly in order to--as one 19th century historical society stated--"preserve the manuscripts of the present day to the remotest ages of posterity, or at least, to use other words, as near FOREVER as the power and sagacity of man will effect." Much of this early literature focuses on methods for repairing and strengthening documents, reflecting the belief that the application of technology would conquer our preservation problems.

Today, our view of preservation has broadened as we have achieved a better understanding of the complexity of our holdings, their preservation needs, and the importance of integrating archival and preservation concerns in our institutional programs. In practice, this broader view has led the archives community away from the conventional approach of treating individual documents on an ad hoc basis--an approach that leaves the majority of our holdings at risk. Instead, we are moving toward the development of multi-faceted preservation programs that incorporate preventive measures along with selective treatment and other measures to reduce the vulnerability of records and to improve their condition on an institution-wide basis. This reorientation of our endeavors is summarized well by Trudy Peterson, Assistant Archivist for the Office of the National Archives, who refers to preservation "as a program to be managed, not a problem to be solved." And, perhaps nowhere is this broader management approach to archives preservation better demonstrated than in the program called "holdings maintenance."

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The concept of a holdings maintenance program stems from the nature of archives holdings themselves. In general, archives contain enormous numbers of documents that are measured in terms of linear or cubic feet and not counted as individual items. Often, the significance of these documents is based on their associative relationship with one another and the importance of the event, subject, or place that they collectively record rather than on the value of individual items--though there are some notable exceptions. On the whole, individual documents within these large institutional holdings receive limited use. Yet, the expectation exists that the majority of documents will be available for use in their original form--that they will be readily accessible, can be safely handled, and are in reasonably good condition when researchers request them.

A consideration of these factors has led to the simultaneous recognition that treatment is neither feasible nor warranted for most documents and that a stable storage environment is the key to maintaining documents for use in the long-term. More directly, this dual recognition has led to the development of the holdings maintenance program in which simple, basic preservation procedures are carried out on selected groups of records to insure that they are appropriately housed and can be handled safely. In the process, the need for the records to receive individualized attention--such as conservation treatment--is deferred or eliminated and the useful life of the records is prolonged. The program can address housing-related problems that exist in both current and incoming records. Holdings maintenance procedures are intended to be carried out by trained archives technicians, rather than conservation staff, making it possible for an archives without conservation staff to have an effective program and permitting one with conservation staff to use available expertise for specialized work. Holdings maintenance practices are applicable to all types of record materials held by archives and are responsive to the different format, size, and condition requirements of these materials.

Procedurally, a holdings maintenance program is responsive to the institutional reality that existing records may be housed inadequately or inappropriately; that they are found in an assortment of containers, wrappers, envelopes, and folders; that they are bundled, tied, pinned, and fastened together; that too many may be wedged in one place or too few allowed to slump and curl; that their format and size requirements may not be addressed; that the mechanics of good housing may not have been followed; and that enclosures used to provide additional protection may have caused damage. Most often, incoming records are housed in modern office-quality folders and boxes that meet short-term rather than long-term retention requirements.

With these points in mind, a holdings maintenance program has three major procedural objectives.

- to place documents into a good primary housing (a container that fully encloses them, supports them, and protects them from the environment)
- within the container, to group documents into folders for additional protection and support and to enhance safe access
- to place documents that are severely damaged or vulnerable into individual enclosures

Also defined in a holdings maintenance program are the four functional, design, and compositional features of the housing supplies--the containers, folders, and sleeves--used during the course of work.

- Housings and enclosures must perform their assigned function.
- They must be as simple and straightforward to use as possible to facilitate easy and safe access to the documents.
- They must not contain any structural features that will physically damage or jeopardize the documents.
- They must be made of stable materials that will not contribute to the deterioration of the documents in the present or the future.

Finally, the mechanics of carrying out the housing-related procedures are addressed in a holdings maintenance program. Attention is paid to such matters as aligning documents properly within folders so that they do not overhang the folders and become damaged during handling, filling boxes so that they are neither overfilled nor underfilled, using spacer boards to support the documents in boxes that must remain partially filled for reasons of archival arrangement, properly removing harmful fasteners and replacing them with stable alternatives as necessary, photocopying unstable originals or copies onto permanent paper, and tying loose or detached components of bound volumes appropriately so that further damage or loss is avoided.

A holdings maintenance program encompasses more than the procedures carried out to provide suitable housing for records over time. It must have as a framework general policies that deal with the broad managerial functions of organizing, staffing, directing, and reviewing the program. To be effective, these policies must derive from an understanding of the overall goals of the archives and be integrated with ongoing archival programs and policies. In addition, the holdings maintenance program must be defined by administrative policies that address such matters

as the training and supervision of technicians, the location of holdings maintenance work, and the evaluation of completed work. Of particular importance are issues related to selecting which groups of records will receive holdings maintenance attention. Most archives have numerous groups of records in need, and most have neither enough staff to attend to all the groups nor enough money to purchase all the necessary supplies. Therefore, a system that balances archival and preservation priorities must be developed to determine which portion of the holdings requires holdings maintenance attention most urgently. Finally, in a holdings maintenance program, it is desirable to formalize the technical procedures in written guidelines to insure that all work is carried out consistently and in the proper manner.

In many ways, holdings maintenance is the focal point of preservation efforts within the archives community. Through holdings maintenance, any size or type of archives, regardless of existing staff and resources, can institute preservation measures that have a broad and immediate effect on its records. Ultimately, by establishing sound housing systems and practices throughout an institution, holdings maintenance helps to insure that our records remain in good condition and that they can be used and appreciated by everyone--today and in the future.