Archives Preservation Guidelines*

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"It has been said that, preservation engages the past in a conversation with the present over a mutual concern for the future."

Keeping Time: The History and Theory of Preservation in America,
William J. Murtagh

The General Service Office (G.S.O.) Archives is the keeper of the historical and business records of the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. Among the holdings are records on a wide variety of mediums; film in black & white and color; sound recordings on nearly every medium, including copper wire; manuscripts, both typewritten and handwritten; documents on carbon paper; photographs, negatives contact sheets, slide collections, and microfilm.

The G.S.O. Archives is committed to improving the conditions under which archival records are stored and preserved. The procedures and recommended guidelines we follow comply with professional archives.

PRESERVATION VERSUS CONSERVATION

The information presented in this paper is intended to help local, area or district archivists. These procedures and techniques are suggestions only. Archivists are not conservators; therefore, the following will be techniques on preservation, not conservation. *Preservation* refers to the processes involved in stabilizing and protecting historical documents from deterioration by using archival quality material and optimum environmental conditions for storage.

Conservation involves the work of a professional to repair damage that has already occurred to a document or artifact by employing physical or chemical treatments. It is imperative to remember the first rule of archival work: **Do No Harm.** Be sure that every action done is reversible.

HANDLING ARCHIVAL MATERIAL

As with any archival item, correct handling of flat paper items will aid in preserving them. You can do more damage to archival materials from mishandling than you would if you left them in an attic or basement for a period of time. Handle materials only with clean hands or gloves — the natural oil from your fingers can cause permanent damage.

Handle materials with care.

- Use clean hands or wear cotton gloves. If cotton gloves are not appropriate, for example if the object is particularly fragile, use clean, close-fitting, latex-free surgical gloves.
- Use a rigid and flat support at all times, especially with fragile items.
- Carry papers flat between two rigid supports, especially over long distances.
- Interleave artworks and documents with archival paper to protect them from abrasion and from ink or adhesive transfer from other items.
- Use a flat-bed trolley when moving oversized material.
- When working with artwork and documents, always use pencil not ink. Pencil marks can be easily removed, whereas inks can be difficult or impossible to remove.

STORAGE ENVIRONMENT

A large part of the preservation process has to do with the materials we use to store the documents in, such as boxes and folders, as well as the storage environment. Without proper storage techniques it does not matter how well the documents are preserved. In ideal situations the items should be kept in a temperature, humidity, and light controlled environment. A suitable temperature range is 65-68 degrees Fahrenheit. If possible, photographs should be stored at a lower temperature, around 55 degrees. Since books and other paper materials are vulnerable to mold it is also ideal to store the items at a low-humidity level, preferably between 30-50 degrees. It is best to keep

*This is the first in a series of papers on the preservation of archival materials. Future papers will address the subjects: Arranging Records; Preserving History Found in Newspapers; Preserving Photographs; A Guide to Archival Exhibitions.

all temperature and humidity levels stable. Fluctuations are more damaging than high temperatures and humidity.

Exposure to light can also be damaging to archival materials. It is important to remember to shut off lights in the storage area when not in use. Bugs, insects, and rodents are also damaging factors to archival items. Therefore, the space should be as clean as possible. No food or drink should be allowed in the storage area, not only to help prevent pests, but also to prevent spilling and staining the material. Traps should be set to catch insects, and they should be monitored frequently. Keep a log to track the number and type of insects that have been found in the storage area. This way you can monitor for signs of infestation and can take steps to properly eliminate them before they become a serious problem.

Care should also be taken to keep the storage areas and work areas as clean as possible. When setting up an archival storage area every shelf should be dusted prior to placing boxes on them. There is no point to dusting any item if the shelve they will be stored on are also dusty. Always dust from the top shelf down to the bottom shelf. Any item that was not previously stored in a box or flat file cabinet should be carefully dusted before being brought into the storage area.

STORAGE MATERIALS

Two of the most important archival storage materials are boxes and folders. These items should be specifically for archival use, meaning they have low or are neutral pH levels and are acid free. Documents high in acidity, such as newsprint, deteriorate extremely quickly. Storing items in acid-free boxes and folders helps to prevent acid from migrating from the box into the documents, therefore helping to preserve the life of the item.

Boxes

If it is unknown whether or not the box is acid free, it should be replaced. Also, boxes should be replaced after approximately 10 years, or when the boxes fade as they lose their ability to absorb acid and protect the documents. You can buy specially designed pens that test the pH of boxes or folders to determine if they need to be replaced.

Boxes should also be replaced when they are no longer able to support or protect the items they contain. Records should be placed in appropriate sized boxes. The boxes should not be underfilled or overfilled. Underfilling a box can cause the records to slump in the box and they will eventually curve and warp. Overfilling a box can cause the records to be damaged when removing or placing the materials.

Spacers can be added to boxes to help support documents in underfilled boxes. The spacers come with prescored fold lines so that you can custom fit it in the box. Spacers should also be acid-free and can be obtained through archival supply companies.

Folders

Folders will not only help provide support for records, but will also serve to organize the items in the box. Just as boxes should be acid-free, the folders should be as well, and should be replaced when they are no longer capable of providing protection to the documents. The folders must also be the correct size; overhanging edge of a document is very easily damaged, especially when the folder is removed or placed in the box. Folders should also not be overfilled, as this creates inadequate support for the documents and increases the risk of the documents falling out of the folders.

Most archival folders have score lines on the bottom of the folder to allow for expansion. Do not expand beyond these lines as creating your own score lines can result in slumping of materials. If you need more room use a second folder.

It is suggested to always use pencil when handwriting folder labels. Most nonarchival inks are acidic and have a tendency to fade or bleed if exposed to water or high humidity. Since these do not meet archival standards, it is best to *always* use pencil, unless archivally safe pens are purchased. Keep in mind that even when using archivally safe inks the inks can still get onto the documents, causing damage.

PROCESSING ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

Newspaper Articles

Highly acidic records, such as telegrams and newsprint, are good candidates for photocopying onto archival paper or being placed between interlaying acid-free sheets. As the newsprint ages it oxidizes due to the chemicals in the paper being exposed to light and oxygen. This is why it turns a yellow-brown color. You might notice a tannish color imprinted on the papers that have been stored

next to newspapers; this is due to the chemicals from the newsprint being embedded in the other paper. Unfortunately, since newsprint is a very low quality paper, not much can be done to preserve it. The best way to stop further damage is to photocopy the news article onto archival paper and then discard the original. You can also place the article in a polyester sleeve with interleaving sheets of acid-free paper, which help absorb some of the acid, or place a piece of interleaving paper on either side of the newsprint. If an article has intrinsic value* it can be preserved using the above technic.

Oversized Records

A record is considered oversized if it cannot fit, without being folded or rolled, into boxes, folders, or other containers. Trying to place oversized materials into standard sized boxes can damage the materials or cause them to bend or warp. The materials should not be trimmed or cut to try to fit them into smaller boxes, instead larger boxes should be obtained for the documents. Archival suppliers offer a large variety of box sizes.

If oversized materials are stored in standard boxes, they should be removed and if possible stored flat. They should not be bent, folded, or rolled if possible. Folding causes stress to the joints and the folds will deteriorate first on brittle documents. Original art work, posters, or photographs should also not be folded. Folding is only acceptable when the document is strong and flexible. If it is absolutely necessary to fold a document, only one fold should be made. When removing oversized materials from a box and moving them to an oversized section, be sure to cross-reference those materials. Moving oversized documents can be awkward for one person, so, have two people move them. They should never be carried unprotected or loose as you risk causing damage.

Bound Volumes

There are two basic ways in which to help stabilize bound volumes that are damaged: tying or boxing. When tying a book the goal is to keep the cover and spine from separating from the textblocks. The books should be tied with white cotton twill tape, which is available through archival supply companies. Take care not to tie the tape too tightly. Wrap the tape around the length of the book, then cross it over itself and then wrap the width of the book. Be sure that the cotton tape lies flat against the book. The volumes should be tied so that the bow is opposite from the spine and that there is enough slack that the knot can be untied and tied again.

Boxing is also an option for damaged volumes. This method provides better protection, as the whole volume is encased in adjustable book cases. These cases fold around the book to create a tight fitting box. The book cases can also be obtained through archival supply companies.

Ideally, large, heavy volumes should be stored horizontally rather than vertically. This method provides better support for the spine and textblock. Volumes should not be stacked more than three or four high for a variety of reasons. First, there is less pressure on the bottom volume. Second, there is less risk of the volumes toppling out of the shelf when retrieving a book. When handling volumes, do not pull from the top, but support them from the bottom when removing them from shelves. If the volumes are small enough to be placed in acid-free folders, label the folders.

Any notes found in the volumes should be evaluated for their archival value. Highly acidic note papers can

*Intrinsic value refers to the inherent worth of a document based upon factors such as its age, content, usage, or circumstances of creation.

cause damage to the volumes. These papers should be reproduced by photocopying onto acid-free paper or a hand written copy onto stable paper.

Folded or Rolled Documents

Only attempt to unroll a document if the paper is strong and it is clear that no harm will come to the document. If, while unrolling the document, it starts to break, stop and gently allow it to roll up the way it was. These items should only be unrolled by a conservator. When unrolling a document, do not back roll it in an attempt to get it to lay flat. Back rolling, especially along fold creases, can cause brittle documents to tear or break.

The same applies for trying to unfold a document; only unfold it if it will do no harm. Do not back fold the document to get it to lay flat. Instead lay the document flat on a clean table with the peaks of the folds up and gently smooth the peaks with clean hands. While the document will not be perfectly flat, it can now be placed in a folder or in a polyester sleeve. Again, do not attempt to unfold brittle paper as this can cause it to break.

WRITING NOTATIONS ON ARCHIVAL RECORDS

If written notes need to be made on archival documents, always place the notes in places that will not interfere with the information provided on the document. Write as neatly as possible. It is suggested that you place brackets [ ] around the information to signal that it was added by the archivist and not the creator of the document.

It is highly recommended to only use pencil when adding notes to archival documents. If a mistake is made in ink, it is very hard to remove, if not impossible. If you must use ink, be sure to buy a nonbleeding, nonacidic pen.

CARE OF RECORDS

Cleaning

Great attention should be paid when dusting fragile books or brittle papers. Use a soft, clean, dusting cloth, or a brush that is recommended for photos, to dust the dirty documents. Always start from the middle of the document and work your way out to the edges. Only dust items that are in good condition. Trying to dust items that are torn or brittle can only make the existing damage worse, as well as cause new damage. Do not try to remove any stains or dirt that has been embedded into the document. This is work for a conservator.

To avoid spreading dirt or dust on a book that has been exposed to either, the exterior of a bound volume should also be dusted with a soft cloth, while the edges should be dusted with a soft brush. When dusting the edges, be sure to hold the volume closed tightly to prevent the dirt from entering the pages.

Never use dust cloths on textured records or photographs. While attempting to dust these materials, it is possible to embed the dust even more. All photographs should be dusted with a soft dusting brush before being placed in a polyester sleeve. Brushes should be cleaned periodically with soap and water and then be allowed to air dry.

Preservation

Brittle documents, such as newspaper or telegrams, or torn documents should be placed in archival polyester sleeves to help protect them from further damage. Be sure that the sleeve is larger than the document so the document can be entirely enclosed. Take care when placing the document into the sleeve. Place the sleeve on a clean desk and lift the top sheet of the sleeve, leaving the bottom sheet on the desk. Gently place the document inside the sleeve. Acid-free paper can be placed into the sleeve with the document to help support the document. If the document is double-sided, the acid- free paper can be removed from the sleeve once the document has been placed inside. It is a good idea to get archival polyester sleeves that are closed on at least two sides to help prevent the documents from falling out. A polyester sleeve that is only closed on one side can crumple when being removed from or being placed into folders. It does not provide adequate protection and the documents can easily fall out.

Place only one document in a sleeve. Taking the document out of the sleeve and putting it back in repeatedly, when needed, will cause damage. All fasteners should be removed before placing the document in the sleeve. The only exception is when removing the fastener will damage the document more than leaving it in.

You may use archival mending tapes to repair books or torn documents. There are a variety of tapes for specific projects and these are available from Archival supply dealers. However, it can be tricky to use. It is suggested that you practice first on nonarchival documents to get the hang of using it. It is a good idea to use the tape on the back of documents so it is not disturbing the information on the document. It is also suggested that you use it on items that have low intrinsic value.[1] Documents that have a high intrinsic value should be stored in a polyester sleeve until it is possible to be repaired by a conservator.

Fastened Documents

Do not attempt to separate documents that are held together with wax seals, glue, paste, ribbon lacing, or ties. Only trained conservators should attempt to separate documents held together in this way. Metal fasteners, rubber bands, staples, paperclips, tape, or straight pins should not be used to hold archival documents together; they should be evaluated before removed. The metal can rust, which stains and weakens the documents. Other fasteners that are bulky will not allow documents to lay flat and may cause distortion. Over time rubber bands lose their elasticity and become sticky and can adhere to the documents around them. This not only causes the rubber band to stick to the document, but it can also cause the documents to stick to one another. Attempting to get them apart can cause damage.

Plastic paperclips or stainless steel paperclips are the preferred method of fastening documents together. However, be careful not to put too many pages together using the plastic clips, as they can break and the clip can put too much pressure on the pages. To reduce the pressure on the paper place a strip of acid-free paper between the paper clip and the documents. Place the paperclips at various points at the top of the paper, not just in one place. Spreading out the clips will help the papers to lay flat in a folder.

Some fasteners can become embedded in the paper and should only be removed by a conservator. To help prevent these fasteners from damaging other documents, place the item in a polyester sleeve. If the paperclip or staple has rusted, take care to gently lift the metal from the paper to be sure it has not become embedded.

To remove a rusted fastener, place the document flat on a clean table. Always attempt to remove the staple from the prong side. Carefully slide a micro spatula* under the prongs of the staple and gently lift up both prongs. Then turn the paper over and gently work out the staple from the front. The prongs of the staple sometimes break when trying to lift them, especially if they are very rusty. Be sure to collect all pieces of the staple when removing it.

Some examples of when records should not be paper clipped:

- Photographs, negatives, or other sensitive materials.
- If a document is too brittle.
- If the value of an item will be affected.

Another item to avoid using is cellophane tape. You may find documents in your archives that have tape on them. Over time, the adhesive dries out and leaves a yellow residue on the documents. If the glue is old enough, then the tape will lift right off the page. However, if the tape is not dry enough, do not force it off. Doing so may damage the document. Also, the remaining residue will be sticky and other pages may stick to it. Those pages may also be damaged if forced apart.

*A spatula is an excellent tool for all sorts of tasks. It may be used to remove labels, separate pages, remove fasteners, or for other detailed work.

PRESERVATION PHOTOCOPYING

It is a good idea to have a duplicate set of your archival documents, which can be used by researchers without the worry of damaging the originals. It is also a good practice to store a set of duplicate records offsite in case of a disaster. This way, even though one set may be damaged or destroyed, you will still have your archival records.

When photocopying archival records, try not to damage them in any way. Do not run them through the automatic feeder on copy machines. It may take longer to copy the documents this way, but it also eliminates the risk of the documents getting stuck and then being ripped or damaged while trying to retrieve them.

Early copies were often made on onionskin paper, which is very thin and delicate. Take extra care when handling this paper. Do not try to photocopy bound volumes as it can damage the bindings of the books when forced onto the copy surface. It is better to photograph or microfilm these items. Oversized records are also better to photograph or microfilm since the records can become damaged while attempting to manipulate the piece to create a complete image.

EXHIBITING MATERIALS

If exhibiting materials, try to limit the length of time they are on display. Items should not be on display for more than six months. The time that an item is on exhibit should be equal to the time it is not on exhibit. For example, if an item is on display for three months, it should be returned to the storage area for at least three months before being displayed again. As a general rule, items should not be exposed to harmful substances, such as the release of gas from materials used in the construction of the exhibition case.

PLEASE NOTE . . .

For answers to any specific questions, and lists of additional resources, feel free to contact the G.S.O. Archives at archives@aa.org or 212-870-3400. Other valuable information is available on G.S.O.'s A.A. Web site, www.aa.org.

Archival Preservation Suppliers And Supplies*

Hollinger Metal Edge
Website: www.hollingermetaledge.com
Phone: 1-800-862-2228 (West); 1-800-634-0491 (East)

University Products
Website: www.universityproducts.com
Phone: 1-800-628-1912

Gaylord
Website: www.gaylord.com
Phone: 1-800-448-6160

Suggested basic materials
Paper, acid-free
Boxes, variety of sizes, acid-free
Brushes, for dusting
Brushes, for dusting photographs
Cotton glove, white
Cotton twill tape
Dust clothes
Folders, acid-free
Microspatula
Archival polyester sleeve
Paperclips, plastic or stainless steel
Spacer boards, acid-free

*This list has been provided for reference only. It does not imply endorsement nor approval of the General Service Office Archives.