

Preserving Archives and Personal Papers

Valuable archival resources are lost everyday to misplacement, mishandling, and neglect. Most of my work centers on the identification, collection, management and organization of archives, but central to the responsibilities of any archivist is also the preservation of materials. Without proper care, the items that we have decided to keep for posterity will disintegrate. If we value materials enough to keep them, we need to employ methods to ensure their safety.

All organic items will decompose over time, but one cannot easily predict the rate of deterioration of materials. Their destruction relies on a combination of factors working together. (Ex. heat speeds up acid migration.) Materials can degrade quickly when stored incorrectly. It is our job to slow down the rate of decomposition to the extent that it is unnoticeable and so that materials will last virtually indefinitely. Different types of items may require different storage supplies for their safekeeping, but there are some general factors that are consistent for all archival materials. Moving items from improper storage enclosures and improper storage environments can greatly increase their longevity and even prevent their imminent loss.

I last wrote about preservation of archives in this newsletter in February 2008. It is certainly time for a refresher and update.

The [previous article](#) focused on “Creating a Safe Storage Space for the Archives,” focusing on the repository and its environmental conditions. It emphasized that items should be kept in a facility with stable temperature and humidity. It is important to note and reiterate that changes in temperature and humidity will speed up the rate at which other factors harm materials. Your number one defense against harmful factors is to keep your collections in a stable environment.

What Makes Items Deteriorate?	
Climate	Oxidation
Acids	Fungi
Pests	Light
Pollutants	Water

If you cannot provide a climate control system, try to provide air conditioning in the summer and heat in the winter. If you can not provide that, make sure materials are kept out of attics and basements and in an interior room of your building where temperature and humidity are likely to remain more stable than along outer walls. If you are stuck in an attic or basement, purchase a dehumidifier and /or small air circulation system. Whatever your situation, be aware of its drawbacks, work to better the conditions, and set long range goals for achieving an ideal storage envi-

ronment. Periodical check your materials for any signs of environmental damage.

Be especially aware of water conditions. Make sure the environment stays dry. Do not store materials under windows, water pipes, or other areas that may be subjected to water. If you must be in a basement, lift your items six inches from the floor. Water itself can damage materials, but also encourages other damaging elements to attack. Fungus (mold) is an especially unwanted visitor. It is present everywhere, but remains dormant until an ideal environment for its blooming and growth is introduced. Once you have water, fungus gets excited and starts to harm your materials. Add heat and stagnant air to the mix and mold has a party.

The second defense against hazardous elements is proper housing, beginning with a proper storage box. Boxes protect items from dust



Water and mold damage to city archives

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and light, and also form some defense against outside pollutants, pests, water, and climate changes. Proper boxes are acid and lignin free. They usually have a calcium carbonate / alkaline buffer to help off-set the effects of the acidity of the archival material itself. All paper materials have varying levels of acidity depending on the way it was processed—if the acidic elements of the original material were removed, what chemicals were added when paper was sized, and what type of ink was used on the paper.

Separate extremely acidic elements from other archival material. Photocopy news clippings if you want to keep them. Retain copies and discard originals or store originals separately. Similarly, store manila envelopes, construction paper and other items that quickly discolor separately. They are

highly contaminant and will harm the papers near to them. A storage box creates a microclimate that can serve to protect materials, but can also more quickly damage them. When harmful papers are stored in a box, they “off-gas,” releasing harmful chemicals that cannot escape from the box and will rapidly build up and cause harm to anything within that box.

Within your box you can choose to get fancy to promote organization or provide extra protection. One can place materials in folders, with interleaving papers, and specialized enclosures for photographs, bound items, brittle items, etc. But if your resources are short, begin by focusing them on purchasing just boxes.

One should purchase archival supplies from a reputable archives and library supplier. One generally will not find proper storage supplies at local box stores. Mail order companies such as Gaylord Brothers, Light Impressions, Metal Edge, and University Products are used by professionals. These companies conform to standards and test products to ensure that they are safe for your materials. People often purchase items in stores that claim they are “Preservation Safe” or “Archival.” These terms are nebulous. They do not necessarily conform to any standard and are not necessarily to be trusted. Do not take a chance that you are creating a more hazardous situation for your collections by creating a negative microclimate.

Work to retain proper storage for items. Periodically check them for damage. Keep food away from storage areas to prevent pests from entering for the crumbs and staying for the warm, tasty pages and animal glues that make up your collections. Purify and circulate the air if possible. Perform regular housekeeping to keep dust off items. Wash your hands before handling materials and /or wear proper archival gloves. Keep light off original items. If possible, make copies of things you want to display and store away originals.

Recently, I have been providing a basic class called “Preserving Memories: Maintaining Personal Papers, Family Photographs and Memorabilia” to highlight preservation issues for the public. The elements of preservation are the same for repositories and personal collections. We all have different monetary resources to accomplish preservation goals and few of us have the resources to establish perfect conditions with elaborate climate control and the highest end storage supplies available. We can only do the best we can with what we have available. Remember that the elements of deterioration work together to speed up the destruction of archives. Reducing the influence of one element can greatly reduce the impact of them all. Use the information I’ve provided to establish the best storage that you can. Begin with a proper box and work from there.



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