

Creating a Safe Storage Space for Archives

by Melissa Mannon

One of the main problems organizations have with caring for their archives is creating and maintaining a safe storage area for records. The historic buildings in which many old records are housed have inadequate climate controls, inadequate fire safety measures, and improper security controls to safely house materials. Newer buildings that have not been designed with archives in mind can also pose a hazard to materials when the above factors are not considered.

Fluctuations in temperature and humidity are common problems in buildings without systems designed for careful control of the environment. Small changes in climate that do not affect human habitation can speed up the destruction of archives. As temperature and humidity go up and down, paper expands and contracts, making it brittle and subject to accelerated degradation. In addition to the physical stress, changes in temperature and humidity accelerate the

chemical reactions that will inherently occur in acidic papers. The manager of an archival collection should maintain the storage environment as close to 68 degrees as possible with humidity between 30 and 50 percent. Whatever environmental conditions are established, they should be maintained within 2 degrees and 3% relative humidity in any 24-hour period. Levels should be continually monitored in any institution using a hygrothermograph. This instrument can help you determine how adequate your storage areas are for housing archival material. The best solution is to install a proper HVAC system to maintain and monitor the environment in your institution.

While it is not ideal to retrofit a building to house archival material because of environmental considerations, the conditions within an existing structure can be altered to positively affect the environment and the conditions under which archives will be stored. With the addition of a fireproof vault, fire-

proof ceiling, reinforced walls, climate control, and/or secured doors and windows a historic building can be altered to adequately serve the needs of the archives held inside.

Environmental concerns are largest when materials are stored in attics and basements where climate fluctuations are great. At the very least, materials should be stored in an interior space, not in a room with only a wall separating materials from the outdoors. Materials should not be stored under air conditioners or under areas where water pipes run. Consider the plumbing to your bathroom areas and keep your archives far away from it.

To protect your archives from fire, make sure that proper sprinklers are installed in your facility and storage areas. Make sure that there are also working smoke detectors. Fire can spread very quickly among a facility that houses large amounts of paper. To

For More Information about Storage, Fire Safety, and Security

- See UNESCO Fire Prevention measures <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/ramp/html/r9214e/r9214e06.htm>
- See National Fire Protection Association. *Standard for the Protection of Records*.
- See Massachusetts Archives. Public Records Technical Bulletin 3. *Records Security*. <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcrmu/rmutbl/tbl3.htm>
- See NEDCC. *Collection Security: Planning and Prevention for Libraries and Archives*. http://www.nedcc.org/resources/leaflets/3Emergency_Management/11CollectionsSecurity.php

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help slow down the progress of fire in the event of one, make sure all papers are stored in boxes and are not loose among the shelves. Use metal, rather than wooden shelving to house your boxes. Appropriate firewalls in your ventilation systems will help keep materials safe from fire disaster.

Security is one of the biggest concerns in institutions caring for historic artifacts and archives. Controls are generally lacking in this area. Limited access should be granted to archives storage areas. Archives storage areas should be locked when not in use. A limited number of keys to storage areas should be handed out

and a list of who has access to the records should be maintained. Formal written procedures should be established for the records to prevent damage due to accidental human contact and theft. Outside researchers should not have access to archives storage under any circumstances. Proper procedures include giving users access to one ledger or box of records at a time and providing an appropriate supervised space where they can view materials separate from the storage area. Researchers should only be given access to materials that have been properly arranged and described. All materials should be reviewed to ensure they are being returned in their entirety before being placed back in locked storage.

If you are unable to provide a climate controlled space with proper fire prevention measures and security, consider storing your archival materials off-site in a facility with adequate controls. Loan and amenable donation agreements can sometimes be made with local professionally run historical societies or libraries where records can be safely kept. Alternately, you may consider storing records at a large records management storage facility. Consider making digital copies of your organized records. Maintain originals off site and keep a digital copy for your institution's use at hand. The safekeeping of your original records should be your paramount concern, even if that means materials need to be moved out of your building.

Tips for Maintaining Records



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For more information about her work and for access to past issues of this newsletter see www.archivesinfo.com

Other Factors for records safety

- Archival boxes are your best defense to keep materials free of dust, away from light and safer from fire.
- Overhead lights should be incandescent rather than fluorescent and materials should be stored away from windows where sunlight streams in.
- Pest control is important for the safety of materials. Prevention of pest infestation first requires the sealing of entry routes and the establishment of appropriate environmental conditions to prevent their attraction to storage areas. Food should not be allowed in storage areas.
- A proper HVAC system will help remedy any dust problems with proper air circulation, but archives storage areas should also be periodically cleaned with a HEPA vacuum to remove dust. Cleaning is recommended at least once a year