

PRESERVATION BASICS FOR PAPER-BASED RECORDS



Maintaining public records requires judicious management of resources. It compels records custodians to identify simple, practical, cost-effective approaches that can be incorporated into daily routines.

Many preservation activities do not require additional staff, sophisticated equipment, or significant expense. Though your repository may not have a formal "preservation program," many preservation actions are probably already a part of your everyday activities. In many cases, "preservation" is simply properly channeled common sense.

EVALUATING TREATMENTS

Preservation has no all-purpose treatment. Many years ago, the term "lamination" became almost synonymous with "preservation." Lamination came to be viewed as *the* treatment of choice, and was even applied to documents in pristine condition. Lamination is seldom appropriate to need, does not use stable materials, is radically intrusive, and difficult to reverse. With experience, we learned that lamination can no longer be considered a viable preservation option for papers of enduring value.

Effective preservation treatments, whether preventive or remedial, must always be based on a variety of factors: the nature of an item, its condition, and

how it will be used. We look for treatments that *use stable materials* and are *appropriate to need, structurally sound, minimally intrusive, and potentially reversible.*

INTELLECTUAL CONTROL

Records collected over the years can become unintelligible piles of useless paper unless intellectual control is maintained. Intellectual control establishes order over records. Records inventories represent the holdings of a repository. Finding aids are created so that users can locate information within the records. By maintaining intellectual control, records custodians are protecting the rights of Georgians to have access to the public records of their communities. Knowing what you have is essential before beginning other records or preservation activities.

RETENTION SCHEDULES

Retention schedules are used to determine which records need to be kept and for how long. Records without permanent value may be scheduled for eventual destruction. Retention schedules save space, because only a limited number of records have long-term value. The development and implementation of retention schedules also save money by ensuring that

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only records of enduring value will be permanently retained.

The *Official Code of Georgia Annotated* (O.C.G.A.) 50-18-90 – 50-18-103 requires each government agency to develop retention schedules for each individual type of record in its custody. Retention schedules are created by evaluating the purpose and information content of records. Common records schedules have been created for public school systems, courts, and county and municipal governments.

For more information about retention schedules and their use, please call 404-656-2379 to contact the State Records Management Program at the Georgia Department of Archives and History, a division of the Office of Secretary of State.

STABLE HOUSING MATERIALS

Once it has been determined that records are to be permanently retained, make the effort to provide the best possible physical support and stable housing.

Protect all records from dust and light by placing them in enclosures, e.g., folders and boxes. When feasible, store heavy bound volumes flat. Remove records from the floor and place them on pallets (plastic pallets, if possible). Store records in contact with stable papers and plastics that will not accelerate degradation.

If possible, purchase paper products that meet the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) Z39.48-1992 standard for permanent paper. *Permanent papers* are made from cotton or 100% chemically purified wood and have a pH between 7.5 and 10, making them *alkaline*. They contain an alkaline reserve (2-3%) and are expected to last at least 300 years under normal storage conditions. Some alkaline papers are available that do not meet the ANSI standard for permanence, but even these papers should be strongly favored over their acidic counterparts.

Because you cannot visually distinguish between acidic and alkaline papers, test all paper shipments — paper-based storage materials, blank photocopy paper, computer printer paper — with an Abbey pH pen to ascertain that papers are, in fact, alkaline. (See the “Resources and Publications” section at the end of this leaflet for supply sources.) The marking from the pH pen will turn purple if papers fall within the alkaline range. Be wary of vendor assurances of alkalinity: older papers may have been manufactured before

the switch to an alkaline paper-making process.

For alkaline-sensitive materials such as blueprints or color photos, *neutral papers* (pH 7) are preferable. Adherence to the Photographic Activity Test (PAT), ANSI IT.9-16-1993, will ensure that neither papers nor adhesives will adversely react with the materials they are designed to protect.

Unfortunately, there is no set standard useful for specifying the quality of plastics used for storing permanent records. Plastics used for storage need to be inert or chemically stable. The plastic most commonly used to store permanent records is polyester film (polyethylene terephthalate) — for example, DuPont Mylar D or ICI Mellinex 516. This material is used for protective sleeves or L-velopes (sleeves sealed on two adjacent sides). Because plastics generate a static charge, they are unsuitable for loosely bonded media, such as soft pencil and flaking media or emulsions.

There is no safe, simple way to test plastics. Request Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS), which will provide detailed information about the chemical make-up of the plastic product you wish to purchase. Avoid plastics made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC), which are capable of doing extensive damage to paper and inks.

HOLDINGS MAINTENANCE

Holdings maintenance refers to the variety of basic preventive measures designed to prolong the useful life of records, deferring or potentially eliminating the need for future conservation treatment. Holdings maintenance activities include removing surface dust from materials, replacing poor quality enclosures and boxes, removing damaging fasteners, making photocopies of unstable records, and placing weak or damaged documents into protective sleeves.

Dust

If records are heavily soiled, a soft, white brush may be used to gently remove surface dirt from the documents before placing them in sleeves or folders. (Soft bristles minimize damage to a document's surface, and accumulated dirt is readily visible on a *white* brush.) Wash dirty brushes using a mild soap, rinse them thoroughly, and allow them to dry completely before using them again.

To dust records, place a thin pile of large sheets of scrap paper on the base of your work surface, beneath the document. Gently dust from the center of the document outward towards the edges. Never dust

inwards from the edge of the document towards the center, since this can easily damage the document's edges. Discard sheets of scrap paper as they become soiled.

Fasteners

Where possible, use folders or folded sheets of paper instead of fasteners to keep groups of records together. Fasteners such as rubber bands, staples, paper clips, and "bull-dog" clips used to store records in discrete groups can cause serious damage. Rubber bands become sticky and eventually harden, leaving behind a solid residue attached to paper. Metal fasteners may rust and can also cause rips and tears. Though plastic clips do not rust, they produce pronounced indentations that can eventually lead to tears.

If staples or metal paper clips must be used in the course of working with records, shield documents from damage by placing a barrier strip of *alkaline* paper between the fastener and the document. After the fastener has been placed, fold the barrier strip back over the fastener. In this way, only the barrier strip is in contact with the fastener, preventing damage from staining or abrasion to the fastened documents or those adjacent to them. Stagger the placement of fasteners (right, center, left) to distribute thickness.

Paper clips can be safely removed from records by inserting a piece of polyester film on each side of the clip, between paper and fastener. Once the polyester is in place, you can safely slide the clip from the paper with minimal damage.

Remove staples by using a strip of polyester film and a small lifting tool, such as a microspatula. Insert the polyester under the back of the staple. Using a lifting tool, open each shank of the staple. Turn the document over, and if necessary, use the lifting tool to remove the staple.

Folders and Boxes

Good housing is an important part of records preservation. Folders and boxes keep records together in discrete groups and provide support when records are transported. Folders and boxes also provide protection from light and dust. Use the score lines at the base of a folder to accommodate the volume of records inside. The use of these score lines will help to avoid overstuffing folders and will allow the documents to rest flat at the base of the folder.

To provide adequate protection, a folder should be large enough for unfolded records to be complete-

ly covered by the folder. Do not allow documents to protrude beyond the edges of a folder. Never house documents in folders too small to accommodate a document's entire dimensions. Select standard-sized folders, e.g., letter, legal, 11 x 17," and one or two oversized dimensions. Do not cut folders to the size of documents — and of course, never cut documents to fit the size of a folder.

Store oversized items such as maps or blueprints flat within oversized folders, and store these folders in flat files. Up to ten oversized stable items may be safely placed in each folder.

If oversized items have been previously rolled, they may be rolled *around* a wide diameter tube (3-6 inches) that extends beyond the length of the record. (This tube should adhere to the ANSI standard for paper permanence, or be covered with a paper that adheres to this standard.) Do not roll items without a support core, or stuff items inside of a tube. Once the document is rolled around the tube, cover the record with a stable paper to protect it from light and dust. Information about the record may be written in pencil on this protective cover sheet. Do not roll brittle papers, items printed on heavy board, or records with a fragile image or support.

Record boxes come in standard sizes to accommodate various sizes of folders. Place folders upright in boxes. Since too few folders inside a box can cause records to sag, use spacerboards (box board inserts folded to take up additional space) as needed. Do not overstuff boxes. This makes retrieval difficult and can damage records. House three-dimensional objects in separate boxes from those containing paper-based records.

Use pencil to label folders and boxes. Inks fade and may run if folders are exposed to excessive moisture. Adhesive labels often fall off eventually, causing a loss of information and perhaps also damaging other materials to which they may inadvertently adhere.

Never use glues or pressure-sensitive tapes (including "post-it" type notes) on any original record. These materials do considerable damage, obliterate information, and can be extremely costly to remove.

Sleeving Records

Polyester sleeves may be used to provide support for fragile records. Their static charge will hold torn or broken papers together in the sleeve. Sleeves may also be used to protect unstable papers and media from damaging adjacent records. [continued]

RESOURCES/PUBLICATIONS

Gaining and maintaining intellectual control, following retention schedules, practicing good house-keeping, and performing regular holdings maintenance activities will greatly contribute to the preservation of records.

For more information on preserving the records in your care, call 404-656-3554 to contact the Conservator at the Georgia Department of Archives and History, a division of the Office of Secretary of State.

OTHER RESOURCES

Local Government Handbook: Using the Common Records Retention Schedules

Office of Secretary of State
Department of Archives and History
330 Capitol Avenue, S.E.
Atlanta, GA 30334.
Telephone: 404-656-2379.

Ritzenthaler, Mary Lynn.
Preserving Archives and Manuscripts.
Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993.
Available from:
Society of American Archivists
600 S. Federal, Suite 504
Chicago, IL 60605.
Telephone: 312-922-0140.

American National Standards Institute (ANSI)
11 West 42nd Street
New York, New York 10036.
Telephone: 212-642-4900.

pH pens are available from: Abbey Publications,
7105 Geneva Drive, Austin, TX, 78723, Telephone:
512-929-3993; Gaylord, Box 4901, Syracuse, NY,
13221-4901, Telephone: 1-800-448-6160; or
University Products, P.O. Box 101, South Canal
Street, Holyoke, MA, 01041, Telephone: 1-800-628-
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