Preservation Essentials—Sara Holmes, Assistant Editor, NARA

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Caring for Books in Archival Collections

By Sara J. Holmes, NARA

Books in archival collections can be challenging to deal with. When part of a collection, they may not readily store in folders and Hollinger boxes alongside documents. Whether it is a diary in a manuscript collection or some well-worn reference books, here are a few tips on preserving bound materials in an archives.

Cleaning Dust and Dirt

A mini-vac can be used to dust head edges (tops) of books. The suction from this type of vacuum is not as strong and can be more suitable for fragile books, but it will also take more time to clean. Books with stable text blocks can be vacuumed at the head edge with a vacuum attachment. Place cheesecloth or screening over the opening of the attachment in case any parts of the binding (such as labels or decorative headbands) become loose while vacuuming so that they will be easily retrievable. Art brushes with soft bristles can also be used to brush dirt from hinges on the front and back flyleaves.

Leather Books

Cleaning and treating leather should be avoided unless direction and assistance from a conservator is available. Always keep in mind that many treatments, such as saddle soap or consolidants such as Klucel G or Cellugel, can alter the appearance of the book. Introducing moisture can blacken the leather and cause cracking! For a leather book that has started to deteriorate, wrap the book in tissue and keep it inside a box. This will prevent further light damage and reduce exposure to pollutants.

How to Lose that Musty, Smoky, or Mildewy Smell

Isolate untreated, odor-offending books until they are treated. MicroChamber paper contains a proprietary zeolite that can remove and reduce pollutants. Interleave the paper in intervals throughout the book. For larger amounts, a homemade zeolite chamber can be created using pure zeolite or material containing zeolite. Common materials with zeolite include nonclumping kitty litter and filter additives for aquariums. A chamber can be created inside a tub that can be sealed with a lid. Plastic lighting diffusers ("egg crating") can be used to lift the books up from the zeolite at the bottom of the tub. With either method, the length of time needed can vary depending on the type and strength of odor.

Uncut Pages in Books

The first challenge of a book with uncut edges is to determine whether it is appropriate to leave the book as it is or cut open the pages. If it is determined that the pages should be opened, do so with a dull knife. With the book on a flat surface, hold the knife parallel to the paper and slide the knife out and away from the book.

Mending Torn Pages

As with loose documents, pages of books can be mended. The trick, however, is supporting the structure of the book while mending. The page being mended needs to lie flat. Blocks, other books, and weights can help support the book by keeping it open without causing stress to the binding. Mending with Japanese tissue and starch paste is safe and reversible. Be aware that tapes marketed as "archival" may not be safe for use over years. Seek out training from a conservator to learn appropriate techniques for mending books.

Custom Housings

Custom housings have come down in price dramatically with computerized box-making systems. Two companies that offer KASEBox enclosures are CMI at archivalboxes.com and the HFGroup at archival-boxes.com. These are often more cost effective than making phase boxes in-house.

Book Support Systems

Book support systems reduce strain on a binding while open. A variety of supports are available from archival and library suppliers, including several based on the design developed by conservator Christopher Clarkson. The Clarkson supports include wedges that can be adjusted to accommodate various openings. Adjustable systems made from Clarkson's design can be found at bookmakerscatalog.com, Hollinger Metal Edge, and Conservation Resources. Be aware that preferential openings can develop when a book is placed on exhibit opened to a certain page for a long period of time. This kind of damage can result in distortion of the spine and loosening of pages or sections of the text.

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How to Learn More

To learn more about caring for the books in archival collections, courses and workshops are offered regularly around the country, or a local conservator may be willing to teach staff basic repair skills. The Campbell Center (www.campbellcenter.org) offers both a hands-on Maintenance and Repair course as well as a course on Care of Book Collections; while Amigos Library Services (www.amigos.org) offers Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced Book Repair workshops. The Guild of BookWorkers (www.guildofbookworkers.org) also offers meetings and workshops.

Archival Certification:
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The 2014 Certified Archivist examination will be held August 13 in Madison (WI), Albany (NY), Phoenix (AZ), Tuscaloosa (AL) and Washington (DC) -- and wherever 5 or more candidates wish to take it.

The 2014 application and more information will be available January 1 at www.certifiedarchivists.org or contact the Academy of Certified Archivists (aca@caphill.com or 518-694-8471).

The application deadline is May 15, so don't wait!

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