

# Documents—Their Repair and Preservation

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TO get right down to the practical housekeeping methods to be employed once records come to an archives, we should define what we mean by "preservation." I interpret the term to mean *the protected storage of records in such a manner that they are readily accessible for use*. I feel rather strongly about accessibility. There's no sense in preserving materials only to keep them so safely hidden that no one can use them. Of course the character of the material determines the way in which it is handled. I am talking here, naturally, about business records, which because of their volume can not and need not be handled as one would handle single items of rare manuscript.

A recent article in the *American Archivist* advocated regrouping all incoming correspondence by name of the writer and including all names of writers of multiple letters in the manuscript catalog.<sup>1</sup> How would any one of you like to start such a project with the 105 file drawers of correspondence accessioned by Baker Library from Avondale Mills? Or with any of the dozen or so of our other large textile collections, which include many document cases of incoming letters where company records amount to the equivalent of 500 to 1,000 volumes? Frankly we do not think we shall ever live long enough to do this sort of thing, nor do we consider it the sensible thing to do. With material from the seventeenth century or earlier, and probably with eighteenth-century material, it would be valuable if it could be done. But with the masses of nineteenth-century business records such as Baker holds, we should not attempt such an approach.

What do we do, then, when we receive business records? First a brief preliminary inventory is made. Often this is done when Mr. Lovett visits a firm before deciding whether or not Baker

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<sup>1</sup> Richard C. Berner, "The Arrangement and Description of Manuscripts," in *American Archivist*, 23:298 (Oct. 1960).

will accept the material. (Like all of you, we are short of space.)

If it is decided to accept a collection, the records are delivered to the basement work area, where they are examined and cleaned. Volumes are sorted into their natural series: minute books, day-books, ledgers, payrolls, letter books, and so forth—each series chronological—and are numbered and labeled. Then a listing is made for the collection folder; and accession, donor, and industry cards are prepared. Baker uses an industry classification both for listing the manuscripts and for shelving them, except that large collections are usually given a single name (for instance, "Slater," "Trotter," and "Hamilton Mills") and are shelved wherever space is available. Cards are made also for the index file and the manuscript list, which is being kept up to date to facilitate editing and publishing a new manuscript list. The present list was printed in 1951. The collections have all been listed for the Library of Congress Union Catalog of Manuscripts, and as each new collection is received the descriptive sheet for that is prepared for the Union Catalog at the time when the collection is recorded.

Unbound materials are usually rough-sorted and put into folders, and the folders are filed in cases. In the past we have used many wooden boxes, but today we use the familiar cardboard storage boxes that take letter-size folders in one direction and legal-size the other. Occasionally we keep materials—such as the records of the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce, which came to us a year ago and which are chiefly twentieth-century subject files—in regular steel filing cabinets.

Unbound materials may arrive in good order or no order, or they may be docket-tied in bundles. Docket-filed material may be left temporarily as it is, after the preliminary listing of the collection, but as soon as feasible it should be carefully flattened, put in folders, and then filed in the storage cases. In the meantime, however, if the collection is fully listed, the material is accessible if desired.

Preservation, then, betokens careful, clean, orderly storage of material, with sufficient descriptive listing of content to enable the user to determine the specific portions he would like to see and to enable the manuscript division to provide them readily.

Obviously, the repair of documents is a part of the preservation process. The bound volumes generally require little attention; it is the unbound material that chiefly concerns us. As for paper—in general the older it is, the easier it is to handle. That is, rag paper of the prewoodpulp period is less a problem, in many ways,

than are the chemical woodpulp papers of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rag paper is a joy to handle. It may be unfolded and flattened to remove its creases and dog ears, while dog ears on later papers generally break off.

Mending materials are many. No one here, I am sure, needs to be reminded of the dire results of using ordinary cellophane tapes, which crawl, bleed, and darken, or other tapes, which fail to hold. Of course, for very rare items, the silking and inlay processes are the most satisfactory protection, but such treatment is not for the mass of business manuscripts. Individually these papers do not merit such great expense. For them we use the new Scotch brand permanent mending tape, which seems to be satisfactory for the purpose. For documents that may receive extensive use, lamination is possible. We have not used it at Baker, but I am using it at my house in Reading on a variety of documentary materials that have become too fragile and brittle to handle. I use the Apeco equipment with mylar. (In fact, if I may put in a plug, I use in my home Apeco equipment for photocopying and for plastic-ring binding as well.) It is excellent for preserving newspaper clippings and the like; and it seems to sharpen writing, print, and halftones as well.

For posters or broadsides, which might be used for exhibit or display purposes at Baker, we have found a simple and safe mounting. We put the document on a sheet of heavy bristol or mounting board, lay over it a sheet of cellulose acetate, and bind the frame with masking tape, providing a single pinhole in the acetate for "breathing." In this way a document may be used for display or may be handled by anyone with complete safety. And at any time it may be easily removed.

In mending torn documents do you find it easy to line up the type accurately, especially when you prefer to place your mending tissue on the reverse side, where it will be out of sight? Perhaps this little trick may help. First make the alignments on the face of the document, then apply *peelable* stamp hinges. After this is done you can turn the sheet over and apply the mending tissue on the reverse. A little later, when you are certain they are dry, you can peel the hinges from the face of the document, leaving it clean and unmarked.

Another standby in our repair department is Quik, the glue solvent that does such a good job of removing old labels and clippings from scrapbooks. It is much more convenient than steaming and much more effective than water. Brushed on the face of

the item—I use a pastry brush—it soaks in and dissolves the glue so that the unwanted article may be removed easily from the page. With care, both the item removed and the sheet beneath may be left in good condition. I used this process in removing newspaper clippings of the Civil War period that were pasted into three volumes of accounts of Thomas and James Perkins, Boston merchants. One of the items uncovered in the first volume shows the purchase, July 14, 1800, of brass and copper and a bell for the ship *Globe*—a purchase from Paul Revere. And all this is possible because of a good glue solvent, plus time and patience in the handling.

Some types of records, whether handwritten manuscripts or typed or printed items, lend themselves most readily to some form of binding. It may be a punched ring binder, sewed or stitched, with hard or soft cover; but we have found at home that the plastic-ring type, with custom cover or with handmade covers, is highly satisfactory for many types of records, and the great advantage of this binding is that it opens wide and lies flat, thus minimizing wear and tear.

It was the expressed intention of this workshop to offer some practical aid to beginning archivists in the business records field. That is why some of us who have been approached for such help—and who are still new enough in the field to see your problems as we remember our own—were asked to suggest some simple methods and practices. We do not pretend to be experts.

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### **Forbearance**

I know nothing of the letter of M<sup>r</sup> Scoville to which he referred you. Necessarily in this Department, as in every other, the letters received are opened and distributed among the proper bureaux daily. Only those are laid before me which, in the opinion of the Chief Clerk, deserve and need my especial attention. Any other rule would be impracticable, since I could not, in the midst of a revolution, read all the communications addressed to me every day if I did nothing else. Of those that do come before me, one half can never be answered or acknowledged, without a clerical force treble what the Government allows. It is a time when the loyal citizens must practice forbearance towards Government and disloyalty cannot on any ground be excused.

—WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State, to John A. Kennedy, Superintendent of Police, New York City, Oct. 1, 1861 ("Secret Correspondence," Department of State, vol. 2, p. 35, in the National Archives).