The Conservation and Preservation of Historical Records

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While the physical deterioration of historical records has been a long-time concern of archivists, there have been few programs for the care and repair of documents. Perhaps the major reason for the lack of programs in this area has been the highly technical nature of the problem. This session served a two-fold purpose: to provide information to archivists and curators regarding the latest conservation techniques, and to allow discussion on the viability of regional and national conservation centers and conservation education programs.

GEORGE M. CUNHA:

Until about fifteen years ago, the physical condition of archives was of concern to archivists, but attention to their care and repair was not the general practice except in a few national and state repositories. The great majority of the written records of our heritage, after having been gathered in historical societies, offices of town and county clerks, court record repositories, state archives, and private collections, have been deteriorating at an ever increasing rate. We have reached the point at which if some positive steps are not taken, much of the information in these records will be lost.

For some strange reason the idea has developed that those responsible for records, although able to handle the many other aspects of their work, are not competent to manage this important aspect of their work. There is too little acceptance of the fact that, in addition to the prevention of damage by control of environment and improved storage facilities, the cleaning and deacidification of some materials, and simple repairs, including encapsulation in polyester film, is well within the "in-house" capability of most archives and manuscript repositories. I cannot accept the suggestion made by a professional paper conservator in a recent professional journal that "except for providing optimum environment and storage conditions, it is better to let damaged materials go untouched than to let anyone other than a professional conservator treat them."

Archivists must not accept the statement that it is not possible to establish cooperative conservation activities until there are available a large number of fully trained people to man them. That, of course, is an ideal solution; but it is utopian. Archivists must start in a small way, pooling their resources to provide the space, tools, and equipment even if they must be operated by only a skeleton force. There is much that can be done at the basic level by trainees working under the direction of only one skilled conservator or technician even without thinking of attempting slightly more sophisticated work. We must begin before it is too late.

The requirement for the education and training in conservation management for administrators is unquestionably equal to the need for the training of conservators

and technicians. It is the administrators who must make the decisions and it is they who must find the money to pay for the necessary work in-house and by professionals. A whole generation of archivists will have to become knowledgable in these matters before we can expect any great progress in this respect.

The importance of the establishment of policy guidance at the national level, long overdue, cannot be overemphasized. The reasons are many, but without question the most significant ones are to reduce costly duplication of effort, to make maximum utilization of available knowledge and resources, and to moderate the inevitable and natural differences of opinion that develop when there is no coordinated national effort.

FRAZER G. POOLE

Librarians and archivists have long been concerned about the problem of paper deterioration. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, librarians have warned about the continuing deterioration of books and manuscripts. Perhaps the most dramatic findings came from a study by the late William J. Barrow in 1959. Barrow tested a sample of 500 nonfiction books published between 1900 and 1939 and found that 97 percent of these had a useful life of fifty years or less. Even though great strides have been made in recent years, a large number of conservation problems remain to be solved. It is not easy to formulate specific recommendations; however, some essential needs can be identified.

Certainly the first priority is the establishment of an adequate education program for paper conservators. Any such program would need to be carefully meshed with current demand in order that no more personnel are trained than can be absorbed by openings in the field. In the opinion of the present writer, the need for an appropriate education program for conservators is the most critical need in the field of conservation.

The second priority in conservation is the need for an expansion of research facilities to provide for the more rapid solution of the many still unsolved conservation problems. In this case, the link between theoretical solutions and the practical applications of such solutions is very close. It is absolutely essential in most cases that the chemist conducting research into a particular preservation problem work closely with the conservator at the bench, in order that the chemist may understand the nature of the documents to be treated, the end use of such documents, and the problems of applying particular treatment methods to different media.

Third, priority might well be given to a national survey to determine the condition of important archival collections and to investigate the feasibility of a program to undertake the microfilming of collections of significant national importance and to develop plans for a national archives collection where both microfilms of such materials and, ultimately, original materials would be housed under ideal conditions for their long-range preservation and physical protection. This would be a difficult and complex undertaking but the intrinsic and historical value of many of the materials involved would more than justify the problems and costs involved.

Finally, additional research into the permanence of microfilm is suggested. This, too, is a complex problem; but it is important to establish more firmly than is presently the case the validity of using microfilm as the accepted medium for

preserving the intellectual contents of those printed records in archives and libraries which cannot be preserved in their original form.

CLYDE C. WALTON:

Cunha and Poole wrote that the deterioration of records is one part of the continuing world-wide deterioration of our total environment. Certain techniques, they wrote, can be employed to retard deterioration or to repair damaged documents: reduction of temperature, control of humidity, deacidification, alkaline buffering, leaf casting, and polyester encapsulation. It was suggested that we view records as falling into one of three categories: first, those that still have some useful life remaining; second, those that have no useful life remaining, so that all that can be done is to save their contents; and third, those that have such unusual intrinsic value that expensive, special repair and restoration is justified. Both speakers say that we need a well-thought-out national preservation plan. Such a plan might well stress (1) the training of conservators and technicians; (2) expanding the awareness of the seriousness and immediacy of the problem of paper deterioration; (3) developing examination and treatment facilities; (4) developing a comprehensive research program; (5) establishing standards of training and practice. With Poole and Cunha the dilemma is posed and the division within the profession is clearly stated. Do we practice immediate repair and restoration, basing our work on the current state of the art, or do we do nothing because we fear that what we do today may tomorrow be discovered to be irreversible?

The first priority ought to be making certain that directors of archives-library administrators are fully aware of the seriousness and immediacy of the problems of the deterioration of paper records, whether the records are manuscript letters, case bound books, or typewritten documents.

Second, our concern ought not to be with the restoration of the uniquely significant single manuscript or book of great historical value, but with the preservation of the information contained in large collections of manuscripts and books.

Third, the Society of American Archivists, the American Library Association, the Association of Research Libraries, and all other allied and related organizations, ought to put the strongest and most unrelenting pressure on those who manufacture paper and who publish books, so that it becomes commonplace to manufacture and use paper with a permanent life that we can all agree is acceptable.

Fourth, we ought to have a comprehensive National Preservation Plan that stresses regional, refrigerated, "last copy" centers, where the last copy of an endangered book or manuscript can be stored until its contents can be preserved permanently.

Fifth, although information held on magnetic tape now has a limited life, that is not the case with information stored on discs. We can record, with existing technology and at little cost, the contents of printed material, by using an optical scanner and a computer.

Sixth, clearly we need to exercise every technique at our command to counter disaster and emergency situations—a hurricane or a St. Louis storage facility fire.

Seventh, if the permanency of microfilm is in question, and I believe it is, let us establish a research program that will bring us as quickly as possible a definitive response to this important question.

Finally, and most important, we must stop sitting around wringing our hands and attending conferences which emphasize the magnitude and difficulty of our problems; we must instead begin to work on a well-defined program of action.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The discussion began with several conferees inquiring about the various preservation programs of the New England Document Conservation Center. George Cunha pointed out that the unchecked deterioration of paper has reached crisis proportions and that archivists must address the problem immediately. He argued that the archival profession needs a program to train archivists and curators in simple conservation techniques. This should be combined with a network of regional conservation centers to provide advice and consultation for more sophisticated problems. Cunha acknowledged that conservation programs are very costly and that any long-range effort should concentrate on the establishment of graduate level education programs.

Cunha vigorously supported the regional centers concept for conservation. He argued that such a network was more cost effective than the establishment of institutional programs because conservation centers could better utilize "mass" techniques. Cunha stated that the archival priorities should include funding for conservation workshops and seminars, funding for microfilm projects as a means of preservation, and funding for continued experimentation with mass conservation techniques. He felt that the best hope for these projects was sponsorship by the Society of American Archivists.

Clyde Walton responded to Cunha by indicating the need for a national plan for paper conservation as well as a regional plan. He agreed with Cunha that more research and development is needed in conservation techniques. Walton also expressed concern about the confusion among archivists over what materials are most in need of special care and treatment. He reminded the conferees that they should be concerned about the preservation of information as well as the preservation of the paper itself. He hoped that archivists would take a tough, positive attitude toward the problem.

A large number of those present agreed with Cunha on the issue of education for conservators. The session ended with a short discussion of the ways and means of utilizing preservation techniques.