A Regional Approach to Conservation: The New England Document Conservation Center

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MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN, and more has been said, in recent years about planned obsolescence as a basic factor in modern industrial and commercial society. For better or for worse—and it is not here my purpose to say which—it is cheaper and hence more profitable to replace goods than it is to maintain and preserve them. This is true at least in the short run. And though there may be considerable argument about profit and loss in a system of planned obsolescence in the long run, the practice is likely to continue, and in any event its effects are going to be with us for the foreseeable future. The freedom to choose obsolescence and replacement, though it may have brought prosperity to manufacturer and seller, has created havoc for the keeper concerned with the permanence of books, documents, public records, and other materials requiring use of the written word.

Archivists, librarians, historians, and other public officials, with few exceptions, have been reluctant to give high priority to countering the effects of this havoc. They have failed to preserve the major portion of the nation's records, and they have made but meager efforts to prevent future deterioration of the printed page or to repair damage already done. Recently there has been greater realization of the need for concerted action. However, the cost of equipment, the lack of personnel, and the staggering volume of materials to be preserved have presented seemingly insurmountable problems, although dedicated research has provided answers about the chemistry of paper and print. We now know what to do and how to do it, but we have not applied this knowledge on any massive scale. There is no daylight at the end of the tunnel!

What can and should be done? It may be timely and helpful to report here the philosophy and efforts which led to establishment of the New England Document Conservation Center, a regional approach to the materials preservation problem.

In September 1969 town records officers of the New England states, meeting in Connecticut, voiced concern over the difficulty of maintaining their towns' public records entrusted to them for safekeeping and supervision. In Connecticut alone, many towns had accumulated 300 years or more of records. Records officers were confronted by the sheer volume of such records, their age, and the lack of attention given to their preservation over the years. Consequently they were groping for some means to arrest further deterioration and to repair existing damage. Connecticut statutes authorize its town clerks to expend $300 per town per year for repair of records, but few clerks in the past used such funds on any regular basis or program of restoration. For good reason! There were no conservation facilities with expert staff and required equipment conveniently accessible. The cost and delay involved in using commercial facilities elsewhere in the nation provided no inducement for de-

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veloping and following a consistent program of restoration. The condition of public records in towns in other New England states was similar to their condition in Connecticut.

The problem was not limited to town records. They were only a portion of the valuable heritage of documents reposing in the libraries of colleges and universities, historical societies, state archives, and public libraries of the region. Town records officers, although concerned with their problem, were pointing up a dilemma which also faced other groups and individuals responsible for storing past and present records.

Connecticut's State Library is responsible by law for inspecting town records for safekeeping (adequate protection from fire, theft, and vandalism) and for the use of time-tested paper and ink on current records. When the town clerks' concern with preservation of their records was transmitted to the State Library, Rockwell Potter, public records administrator, called the state librarian's attention to the lack of facilities, equipment, and trained staff to provide conservation services not only in that state but elsewhere in the nation, and to the improbability because of cost of any of the New England states doing so on its own. Equipment and skills necessary for this work are expensive, and their cost precludes the establishment of conservation workshops for their own needs, not to mention serving others, even in some of the largest libraries.

Could something be done on a regional basis? If so, what kind of regional facility would be needed? In our staff thinking at the Connecticut State Library we envisioned a center with expert technicians, with all equipment extant for preservation, to provide in-depth restoration service *at cost* to nonprofit institutions in the region, and to be centrally located for convenient access by such units. It would be a working shop, self-supporting after two years. Its primary goal would be production (treatment of paper) at lowest possible cost. Teaching preservation administration and training technicians, while very desirable missions, would, for the immediate present, have to be secondary; for they could not be subsidized by shop production revenues which would thereby defeat the cost objective of the center. Also, basic research would not be conducted.

Potter's call for a solution was timely and the decision for a solution on a regional basis even more so, because a means for hurdling the first formidable obstacle to regionalism existed but lay dormant. Where could a regional agency be found whose area of service was as large as the New England states and whose interest would include preservation of printed materials? In the early 1960s the legislatures of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, following recommendations of their state library officers, enacted laws permitting library compacts for improving or providing library services where regional efforts might prove more economical and efficient. However, almost a decade later, in 1970, the states had not used this authority for any purpose. Governors and legislators were beginning to question its use. What better project could state librarians have for their first compact than the establishment of a conservation center to serve the towns and libraries of the six New England states? When Connecticut's state librarian proposed such a center to compact administrators early in 1970, they agreed to consider the idea pending preparation of a budget for the first two years. Also, there was more discussion of its probability for self-support, and of assurances that funds for the initial period would be secured without obligating their respective states for the expenditure of the money.

Attempts to get such expenditure authority in each state simultaneously could delay establishment of the center, perhaps indefinitely.

A preliminary budget, considered at a later meeting, estimated the cost for minimum start-up equipment and operation to be: $11,060 annually, for 3,650 sq. ft. of space; $51,340 for staff of seven; and $53,200 for one-time equipment costs. The total two-year cost: $178,000. Later revision, as the budget was reviewed, brought the amount needed to about $190,000. The administrators were somewhat shaken by the size of the budget and by the permanence of the obligation the compact might be assuming. Nevertheless, armed with the optimism urged upon them by their chairman, and with the "nothing ventured, nothing gained" philosophy, they gave the highball signal to proceed. An agreement was prepared, approved by the state attorneys-general, and signed by the administrators. The agreement specified the purpose of such a center, how it would be governed, whom it would serve, and that funds for its establishment and initial operation could come from any source available, enumerating direct grants from the states, fees, assessment of members, foundation grants, private contributions, and revenues expected to be received for work done. The governing board of the center was to be comprised of the six state compact administrators. (Some two years after the center was established the administrators amended a 1967 agreement which specified their rules of organization. The amendment designated the administrators as the New England Library Board. While somewhat confusing, the terms, "governing board of the center, compact administrators, compact members, and New England Library Board [NELB]" refer to the same group of persons.)

It may be of interest to note here that the center proposal did not emanate from a committee or a formal feasibility study, but primarily was the concept of an individual. This is not to say that there was little involvement of people whom the center would serve; indeed, there was considerable. During the early consideration of the idea by compact members, letters were sent to many library and historical society directors in the region, asking their reaction and their potential use of such a service. There were numerous meetings with museum directors who were thinking along similar lines about their unique preservation problems. It should be noted also that there was not a designated advisory committee prior to operation of the center. In retrospect this may have been an advantage. Development of the proposal was unrestricted by such a committee's reaction or delay, or dominance by all or part of it. It was not necessary to take time to keep a committee happy. Everybody could be involved. On the other hand, perhaps such a committee would have been helpful in obtaining funds. (An advisory committee was appointed after the center was in operation. It has been very effective as a means of communication with users of the center, and also in counseling the center on administrative problems.)

With the compact agreement signed, Connecticut's state librarian was authorized to spearhead a drive for start-up funds. A prospectus was prepared to be used in presenting the proposal to possible donors and potential users of the center. The prospectus gave a brief description of the conservation problem and the urgent need for action. It explained in more detail than the compact agreement alternative ways in which funds could be contributed for the initial two-year period of operation—grants, memberships, advance contributions for work to be done by the center. Unfortunately, the drive for funds was as untimely in 1971 as the compact concept was timely a year earlier. The effects of the economic recession following the expansion of the sixties was being felt in educational circles, particularly by

foundations. In 1972 with something less than complete optimism, new efforts, somewhat of a shotgun nature, were launched. Each state librarian, the compact administrator for his or her state, gave the chairman names of possible donors in the state, and also contacted area library associations for contributions. Letters with a copy of the prospectus were sent to some 300 potential users in the region: libraries, historical societies, government agencies, newspapers, chemical companies, and paper plants. An equal number of foundations were contacted, principally by letter. As a first contact with foundations, the letter was ineffective if not a mistake. Preliminary contact in person or, better, by a third party acquainted both with foundation and applicant, probably would have been more effective. Several noted regional councils serving the six states, dispensing state and federal funds for regional projects, whom we optimistically thought would be delighted to fund a tangible project with some, albeit minor, economic potential for the region, were not in the least interested. Libraries, and printed materials, reflected little political oomph for their purposes. This may explain in part why the conservation crisis has been allowed to develop.

Memberships as a source of funding were never vigorously pursued. The administrators realized soon after the drive began that memberships would limit the numbers of those benefiting from the services of a conservation center and therefore be contrary to the compact's aim of serving all institutions in the region and conserving materials wherever they existed. Consequently, offering memberships was held as a last resort for funding, and the idea of memberships was formally abandoned by the New England Library Board shortly after the center was established.

Fund-raising was time consuming. Efforts extended over two years before sufficient funds (sufficient then only with assumption of considerable risk on the part of compact members) were secured to begin the program. In April 1972 the Council on Library Resources tentatively offered $70,000 on an even matching basis. Acceptance by the compact would mean providing an equal amount, and a revision of the budget and time schedule because the total amount to be available would be considerably short of the original budget. Accordingly the administrators revised costs and schedule. They agreed that the first year of the grant should be spent in the recruitment of a director, determination of a site, procurement of space, and selection of staff. Funds would then not have to be spent for staff for as much of the year as originally planned. The budget having been brought into line with the tentative grant, a more difficult task remained. How was the compact going to raise the matching $70,000? One state library generously promised $10,000 of its federal funds for each of the two years. Another offered $7,500 the first year. These offers, made without requiring similar amounts from other states, were touchstones that turned the center concept into reality. More than seed money, they produced a spirit and an attitude of cooperation that stimulated every administrator to investigate all possible sources of income within each state. Administrators in the two states explained their generosity to their own state constituents, rationalizing that the center, if established, would return much more in service to their libraries and other institutions than they were offering, so it was immaterial whether other states contributed on an equal basis or even at all. Subsequently, within the first year of the center's operation, other states found ways to offer funds, with some, in the second year, offering even larger amounts. Several library associations made grants totaling about $500. One state historical society made an advance payment of $2,500

for work to be done after the center was in operation. These contributions, coupled with income anticipated for work done during the second year when the center was expected to be in production, gave compact members sufficient courage to accept the challenge of the council's offer. The council then officially approved its grant in November 1972.

Search for a director began in January 1973. Here again the compact faced a major problem. The concept of the center required a director thoroughly qualified in the theory and techniques of conservation, and who is also an entrepreneur, a good manager, and an executive. Such qualities are often incompatible, usually not to be found in the same person. Reviewing recommendations on a national level, the compact ended its search with three persons considered qualified. It appointed the present director, George Cunha, on April 1, 1973. Selection of a site was a bit easier. The original proposal recommended location in western Massachusetts because of possible supportive and technical assistance which might be available from chemical and paper companies and the many colleges and universities in the area. This region also provided easy access by highway. The Boston area had similar advantages, but space and labor costs there were thought to be prohibitive. However, a set of fortunate circumstances determined a location near Boston. Initial efforts to investigate the feasibility of a conservation center and subsequent fund-raising activities had drawn the interest of a number of diverse groups, particularly museums, in the region. One of these groups was considering development of a center for restoring museum artifacts. The Merrimack Valley Textile Museum had plans for such a laboratory in its building in North Andover, Massachusetts. The museum's executive director was also interested in the document center proposal. The possibility of a joint library-museum conservation center was discussed, but conservation of museum artifacts and that of library materials seemed so significantly different that the idea lost its appeal.

George Cunha, at the time of his appointment by the compact, was, in addition to his work at the Boston Athenaeum, providing some restoration services with a small staff and basic equipment in Topsfield, Massachusetts, fifteen miles from North Andover. These experienced people could form the nucleus of the new center's staff, and enable it to become operational much sooner than planned, if the center were located within commuting distance of Topsfield. Cunha's equipment also could be purchased at less cost than if it were to be purchased on the open market. When the compact announced that the center would become a reality, and the appointment of a director, the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum offered to renovate, to the center's specifications, ground floor space in its museum building and to lease it at a most reasonable rate. This location had the advantage of being near the Boston area (thirty miles), centrally located for the six-state region, one mile off interstate highway 495 providing excellent access from anywhere in the region. The museum's offer was accepted. By midsummer 1973, equipment had been moved in, a small staff had come on duty, and service was offered. The center was in business! The competent and indefatigable director promptly placed orders for the additional heavy items of equipment that were required and were budgeted in the proposal.

In the promotion of the regional concept and the fund drive, the most persistent and only negative reaction was whether there would be sufficient demand for service to enable the center to operate on a self-supporting basis. The first year of operation not only overtaxed the capacity of the shop and its equipment but pointed up additional services that needed to be provided. Mobile vacuum

fumigation equipment permitting the staff to go to a library for on-site treatment was obtained, and the unit was also available for vacuum drying and sterilization at the scenes of disasters. Institutions in the region were experiencing, on an average of one or two per month, fire, flood, or other emergencies. Emergency calls came regularly to the center for advice and guidance on salvaging damaged materials. The center set up disaster recovery units to meet the new dimension of service. The recovery units and members of the staff were able to be on the scene anywhere in New England or the state of New York within twelve hours after a call for assistance. Like doctors, the center personnel felt obligated to help. However, once the emergency was over, reimbursement for staff time and equipment used was difficult to secure.

Requests became frequent for another type of service not anticipated. Library directors, more alerted now because of the center to their lack of conservation programs and the necessity to do something about it, wanted advice on the magnitude and cost of such programs and supportive evidence to present to their budget officials. They turned to the center for on-site surveys of the condition of their collections and for recommendations of permanent programs to be followed in restoration and maintenance. These surveys have become an effective "sales" arm of the center, for in almost every instance they generated work for the center's preservation workshop.

Demands arose for the center's director to visit libraries to train the staff in-house, for teaching conservation in colleges and universities, and for conducting seminars. Provision of these services was secondary to the center's self-supporting at-cost goal, so requests could be met only as the director could spare his energy and time. However, the demands continued to increase so that the position of assistant director specializing in the educational aspects of preservation was created and filled by the NELB, anticipating that charges for his services would ultimately finance his position.

All of these add-on services such as emergency calls, surveys, preparation of preservation programs, training and education, are highly desirable and perhaps essential, but they present a common problem. It is difficult to refuse to give them, and even more difficult to collect payment for some of them. The center's staff does not wait to assist in an emergency until promise of payment is assured; nor do they refuse expert advice requested by telephone or letter until payment is made. A cash-on-the-barrelhead policy may not be workable for emergencies and ad hoc consultation, but reasonable charges sufficient to pay for surveys, seminars, and teaching can and should be agreed on beforehand. The governing board has tried a variety of policies and cost schedules to solve the problems, ranging from efforts to secure grants and endowments, to state appropriations; but at present they have (except in one state) not been able to effect them. In April 1976 the center's advisory committee recommended that "The Board should fund the otherwise non-reimbursable consulting, advisory, reference, and educational services of the Document Conservation Center from annual sustaining contributions from the appropriate agencies in each of the six states; that failing the above the Document Conservation Center should as a matter of policy establish and enforce collection of appropriate fees for such services; and failing both of the above, such services should be eliminated." In other words, New England's experience suggests that if a center is to provide these extra services, it must have income other than revenue for materials treated in the preservation workshop, from charges for these services or

from other sources. Some services can be made to return costs in proportion to the effort made to price and collect them, but others have to be subsidized.

Experience also indicates that the term "document," in New England Document Conservation Center, should be broadly interpreted because all categories of record materials found in libraries, archives, museums, historical societies, and public records repositories come to the center for treatment. In addition to books and printed documents, these include maps and manuscripts, prints, broadsides, water color paintings and other works of art on paper, photographs on paper, and even paper and leather wall coverings. Actual experience differed also from the original concept of the director's duties. It was thought that he would spend much of his time "at the bench" doing conservation work. Impossible! Administrative duties, consultations, surveys, public relations, planning, and fund raising required almost all his time. His priorities at the bench must be limited to decision making on work in the shop, and to keeping fully informed of the work in progress.

The purpose of this article was to recount the development of a regional concept and its practical application in New England. A few statistics on use of the center may answer some questions occurring to readers. Did the compact raise sufficient money to match its grant? Did it become self-supporting? Is it getting enough business to sustain itself? The answer to all three is a resounding "Yes!" Contributions and income were more than sufficient to match the grant by the Council on Library Resources. Contributions received in 1973, the first year, exceeded $45,000; in 1974 were $24,000; cash income for work done in 1974 was $89,649 with an additional $40,849 receivable but not paid in that fiscal year. Income for work in 1975 was $143,142, and estimated income for work in 1976 is $238,000. The center's hourly rate for work done, $17.00 (September 1976), is well below prices charged by commercial services for similar work. No doubt inflation will raise the rates, but the center's prices should continue to be most attractive and affordable. The center is self-supporting. Space requirements originally called for 3,650 sq. ft. By 1975 it was necessary to utilize additional space made available at the museum. Total now in use is 5,735 sq. ft. After the director reported in June 1976 that business increases require further expansion, the NELB authorized him to seek larger quarters for additional workshop space and for the administration of the other functions that are now a regular part of the center's work. The staff has been increased from the original seven to fifteen, and when the space is available will be increased again. After three years of operation the center has made a place for itself, and in that short space of time has exceeded the expectations and the goals of its founders. Demands are being made upon it from areas far beyond the New England region. For how much longer should it endeavor to meet them? The question suggests the need for additional state or regional centers. John Spencer, director for museum programs, National Endowment for the Arts, reported in May 1973 to the American Institute for Conservation that there is a need for fifteen or more regional restoration centers in the United States. Whatever the magic number may be, the time seems opportune for librarians and others in individual states or groups of states to do some fact finding on their need for conservation services, and to investigate the potential of regional centers to meet that need. So, archivists and librarians, don't just sit there; take a good hard look at your conservation problem. You have one! Do something!