

Northeast Document Conservation Center: A Case Study in Cooperative Conservation

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THE CONSERVATION OF HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION has long been among the archival profession's most serious responsibilities. As archival holdings expand and associated costs escalate, administrators are looking increasingly for cooperative ways to conserve their materials. To establish a multiplicity of individual institutional conservation laboratories may be an inefficient use of what little funds come our way; the alternative of conservation centers serving a range of clients seems more promising.

The Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC, formerly the New England Document Conservation Center) was founded, at least partly, to provide a model for other regional centers. Yet no one has followed NEDCC's example, and the question remains, why not? The purpose of this article is to analyze the reasons for NEDCC's effectiveness and to evaluate the possibilities for establishing similar centers in other parts of the country.

History and Purpose of NEDCC

NEDCC was founded in 1973 by the New England Library Board. Initial funds were provided by the New England Library Board and the Council on Library Resources, as well as other contributors. Prime movers in drafting and implementing the original prospectus were Rockwell Potter, Administrator of Public Records for Connecticut; Walter Brahm, then State Librarian of Connecticut; and George Cunha, Conservator of the Boston Athenaeum, who was to become NEDCC's first director.

The Center was created to be a shared facility, making available the expertise for restoring documents and books to all non-profit institutions in the region. The Center's founders recognized that because of the high cost of setting up and staffing an in-house conservation laboratory, most libraries and archives would never have their own conservation facilities. Further, there simply were

not enough trained conservators to serve all the repository institutions. It seemed that conservation was a problem that could be most effectively addressed on a cooperative basis, as opposed to an institution-by-institution approach.

From the start, there was an expectation that the Center would eventually become self-supporting through fees charged to user institutions for conservation work. Initially the Center was conceived as a membership organization; however, this idea was soon dropped so as not to exclude those very small organizations which could not afford a membership fee. Charges for treatment and consulting were levied to all non-profit institutions in the region on an at-cost basis. NEDCC, with an operating budget of over \$500,000, presently serves 300 institutions annually through its laboratory and consulting activities.

Today, the Center's laboratory services are virtually self-supporting. The growth of NEDCC's microfilm program and photographic copying service should help the Center to achieve a stable financing footing. The Center's education programs and free disaster assistance service, however, are not cost-recovering, nor are they factored into the charge for laboratory services. For these activities, the Center relies on outside grant support.

For seven years NEDCC was legally an arm of the New England Library Board. In September 1980, the Center incorporated as a non-profit corporation for increased legal protection of the Center's staff, board, and assets. It changed its name to reflect the expansion of the Center's region to include New York and New Jersey and provided board representation to the state librarians of the two new states. NEDCC is governed by a Board of Directors, made up of directors of state

library agencies in the eight states it serves. The member states provide grants to NEDCC amounting to approximately 5 percent of its annual income. In return, NEDCC makes its services available to all non-profit institutions within member states at a discount of 10 percent.

NEDCC's structure differs from a consortium which works primarily for a group of member institutions. NEDCC's structure is based on membership by several state agencies which contract for services on behalf of the repositories in their respective states. The Intermuseum Conservation Association in Oberlin, Ohio, is the prototype of a consortium (its members are assessed annual dues in addition to charges for services), and there are several other centers of the consortium type specializing in conservation of museum objects. An advantage of NEDCC's structure is that it opens a potential market of literally thousands of institutions which may use the Center's services. A disadvantage is that client institutions do not make any annual commitment to use the Center's services at a predictable level.

Services

From its inception, the Center's role as a treatment facility was seen as the predominant one. The Center began by treating books and manuscript collections, but soon expanded the range of its services to meet the enormous variety of needs presented by the collections of historical institutions: maps, photographs, historical prints, even an occasional watercolor, globe, wallpaper fragment, or lampshade.

While there are a number of cooperative conservation centers throughout the country which treat paintings and other fine arts media, NEDCC's large paper conservation laboratory is the only one



Conservation laboratory, Northeast Document Conservation Center, Andover, Mass. Photograph courtesy of NEDCC.

which specializes in the books, maps, and documents typical of the collections of archival institutions.

NEDCC's laboratory offers specialized equipment which most institutions could not afford to purchase for in-house laboratories. For example, NEDCC's Israeli-manufactured leaf-caster, which fills losses in documents

and book pages, is one of only six manufactured. NEDCC's large sinks and light tables are well suited for over-size materials, including wall maps and large architectural drawings.

Because NEDCC works on materials from collections of several hundred different institutions each year, it has developed the capacity to treat a great

variety of materials. Recent projects have included an original Amendment to the Bill of Rights belonging to the State of New Hampshire, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's lampshade, a report card of John F. Kennedy, a pencil draft of a poem by Emily Dickinson, a logbook from the U.S.S. Constitution, and a watercolor by Winslow Homer. The Center recently completed work on a large map which General John J. Pershing kept in his field headquarters during World War I; Allied and German troop positions are marked with over 2,000 pins and labels, all of which had to be removed during treatment and then replaced in exactly the same positions. NEDCC is about to undertake the treatment of a large photographic collection from a metropolitan public library that will include the dismounting and stabilizing of approximately 14,000 photographic prints.

The Center is widely known for its hand bookbinding; in some respects, its trademark is the "full treatment" of

books. This means the book is completely disassembled; every page is washed, deacidified and mended; and then the book is rebound. Although there are a few other facilities that can perform this service, most hand binders do not have the training in paper conservation that would enable them to salvage badly deteriorated book pages. Whenever possible, original bindings are saved, especially when the bindings have artifactual value. Often NEDCC's conservators recommend that books be boxed in order to protect the original bindings.

The Center specializes in a conservation approach to binding. This means that considerations of permanence and durability come before those of making an exact facsimile or producing a highly decorative binding. Only conservationally sound materials are used, and techniques are employed that are non-damaging to the book block. A large number of NEDCC's clients are town record offices or small historical



Photograph courtesy of NEDCC.



Photograph courtesy of NEDCC.

societies. These institutions and agencies typically have in their possession a limited number of manuscript record books that must be made available in their original format to researchers for frequent use. The Center is also beginning to serve an increasing number of research libraries, treating valuable books from their special collections.

The Center's newest service is its microreproduction department. It in-

cludes a preservation microfilm program and a photographic copying service. The microfilm program was initiated in 1978 with a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission. It specializes in filming of hard-to-film materials, such as manuscripts, rare books, and brittle newspapers. Because of their fragile condition and poor contrast, these materials tend to be unsuitable for high-

speed, commercial reproduction. The microfilm service also offers assistance in preparing materials for microfilming. The emphasis of the program is on maximum legibility of the image, careful targeting, and archival stability of the film.

In response to demand from custodian institutions, NEDCC has developed a service for converting nitrate photographic negatives to safety film and producing prints from historic negatives. Institutions may well consider their nitrate negatives to be an urgent conservation need because they are highly flammable. Furthermore, they inevitably deteriorate, and there is a danger that the images will be lost forever unless they are preserved in another medium. In addition to making positive transparencies, copy negatives, and copy prints, the Center is capable of preserving these images on microfilm or microfiche. This can be a highly cost-effective means of providing access to a large collection of negative images.

The Center has a free disaster assistance service for the region it serves. This includes free consultation to any non-profit organization that has experienced a serious fire, flood, or other disaster. If necessary, NEDCC will send a staff member to the scene to help assess damage and organize recovery operations. While the number of serious disasters that occur in the region each year is small, the number of minor disasters is high. The Center receives an average of about one disaster call per week, ranging from major floods to coping with the aftereffects of an intruding skunk.

The Center offers a variety of educational services including on-site consultation and workshops to help archives, libraries, and other repositories develop better preventive conservation programs. From the start, the Center

has recognized the pressing need to make expertise available and to serve as a clearinghouse for information. The Center's emphasis on education and consultation is tied to its philosophy that preventive conservation is an important aspect of conservation that must be integrated with NEDCC's laboratory program. The Center seeks to work with user institutions to achieve improved storage facilities, environmental conditions, and in-house preservation procedures. Since it was founded, the Center has sponsored hundreds of workshops and seminars on conservation which reach approximately 1,000 people each year. These workshops have served to increase awareness of conservation problems among archivists, librarians, and historical society personnel. Through its educational work, the Center serves many small, grass-roots organizations that may never be able to afford costly laboratory treatment.

High quality conservation treatment tends to be expensive, even in a non-profit, partially subsidized setting like that of NEDCC. This is because the work is highly labor-intensive. The Center, for example, employs about 25 people, including 12 trained conservators. Every step must be done by hand and treatments must be carefully documented. A disciplined work environment is maintained to insure maximum efficiency in performing work for clients. But even so, it is not unusual to spend 30 to 40 hours restoring a single volume of records.

It has been no easy matter for the Center to strike a balance in pricing its services. It must ensure that it charges enough to cover the full cost of treatment, and yet it must not charge so much as to be out of the reach of libraries and archives. Building an active clientele is a long process based on developing trust and knowledge on the

part of client institutions. Today the Center is sufficiently well known and well regarded to attract an adequate volume of work, although it should be recognized that many of the Center's major clients are financing their conservation budgets with grant funds. Furthermore, the extension of the Center's region to include New York and New Jersey has helped to increase the Center's visibility and expand the number of potential users of the Center's services.

The Future of Regional Conservation Centers

Can the example of NEDCC, with its nine years of experience, help other regions that seek to establish conservation facilities?

An obvious first lesson is that careful planning is needed before opening the doors of a conservation center. A feasibility study should include an assessment of the market for the services of a proposed center. Thought must be given to the location, governing structure, and funding mechanisms for a center. An initial need is start-up funds. More than \$100,000 was needed to equip and launch NEDCC. At today's prices, probably two to three times this amount would be needed. Whatever agency or agencies provide start-up funding for a center should be prepared to provide support for a long time, conceivably as long as five years, before the center can be expected to become fully self-supporting. It is likely that the educational services of a center, which cannot be cost-recovering, will always require a subsidy.

What sort of institutional base should a new center have? NEDCC's initial association with the New England Library Board was extremely valuable in terms of establishing credibility with potential funding agencies. Some fund-

ing agencies prefer to strengthen existing organizations rather than to create a new organization with its own expensive superstructure and operating costs.

A fundamental concern for a new center would be the obtaining of institutional commitments from potential users. If conservation services could be provided without charge, there would be almost no limit to the demand for those services. In fact, setting priorities among the many institutions with valid needs would then become an issue. However, no one to date has seriously proposed to provide a totally subsidized conservation service. Demand for conservation services for which a fee is charged, even a modest fee, tends to be self-limiting. Most archives, historical organizations, and libraries do not budget for conservation on an annual basis and are not in a position to make a long-term commitment to a cooperative facility.

Marketing the new center's services would be critically important. This is not easy when the potential users are themselves struggling, non-profit organizations. It is difficult to offer a service of high quality at prices low enough to encourage heavy use. While start-up subsidies may make it possible to price the services below the actual cost in the early years, a time will come eventually when charges must reflect the real cost of doing the work. Mass treatment techniques, which archivists and librarians desperately need in order to make conservation cost-effective, are simply not available at present. Research and development are needed in this area, but this lies beyond the capabilities of most production shops. Optimally, staff members of a center should make annual site visits to all of its members or clients to help identify materials which need professional conservation attention. In NEDCC's case, this has become unwieldy because the number of client institutions is so large.

In terms of developing a broad clientele, NEDCC has benefited tremendously from its location in an area of dense population. There are probably more historical organizations, research libraries, and museums per square mile in the Northeast than in any other region of the country. Geographic proximity to such institutions has made it easier for NEDCC to gain visibility as well as to facilitate the pick-up and delivery of items to be treated. It is unlikely that there would be enough demand in a sparsely populated area to support a center unless a few major institutions would commit a large annual budget for conservation work.

A serious problem that any new center would confront is the shortage of professionally-trained conservators. Until the newly established training program at Columbia University begins to graduate conservators, training programs will graduate no more than six to eight paper conservators annually, and most of those conservators will probably choose to specialize in art on paper rather than in library and archival materials. By the same token, most of the qualified conservators already have attractive jobs in subsidized institutions. Often these institutions can offer higher salaries, more leisurely working conditions, and attractive moonlighting opportunities. It took NEDCC more than a year to find a top-calibre senior conservator and almost eight months to locate a suitable book conservator.

In my view, a region that wishes to replicate NEDCC's model, or to develop a model of its own, for providing cooperative conservation services will

find that the key ingredient is leadership. The vision, dedication, and energy of an individual or a group of individuals will be needed to overcome inertia and secure commitments from potential supporters of the new venture. The leader must be willing to embrace what is essentially a sales job. In 1957 George Stout, then Director of the Fogg Art Museum, commented about a proposal for establishing a national conservation center: "The whole business of a national laboratory seems to settle into the need for a promoter. I wonder who will have time to do that?" It is a rare conservator or archivist who feels comfortable in the role of promoter, but that is exactly what is needed. In New England this need was met by George Cunha, whose abilities, commitment, and contacts were possibly unique.

Let us admit that founding and managing a cooperative conservation center is not easy to do. Still, there is no reason to give up hope. The Northeast was able to establish a cooperative conservation center, and this fact alone demonstrates that under certain circumstances it can be done. For other regions, the great challenge is stimulating investment in conservation. This is essentially a public education effort, which, in some sense, is the responsibility of all archivists. All innovations tend to meet with resistance. Remember the gentleman who remarked, "If God had meant for man to fly, He never would have invented the railroad." Let us hope that the Northeast example will help to convince skeptics that it is possible to fly.