

## Case Study

# Assessing Preservation Needs of Manuscript Collections with a Comprehensive Survey

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## Abstract

This article describes the planning, funding, methodology, and impact of a comprehensive survey of the physical condition and preservation needs of manuscript collections in the Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) unit of the Washington State University Libraries. MASC librarians and management determined that these collections, as well as MASC's historical photograph collections, should be systematically surveyed and assessed, so that a prioritized preservation treatment plan could be developed. MASC librarians designed and executed two separate surveys, one for photograph collections and one for manuscripts. The manuscript portion of the survey project, which supported the development of a comprehensive preservation treatment plan for processed manuscript collections, is the subject of this article.

## Introduction

The Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) unit of the Washington State University (WSU) Libraries is responsible for acquiring, processing, preserving, and providing access to manuscripts,

I am grateful for the assistance of my colleague and coprincipal investigator Trevor Bond, Special Collections librarian, and for the support and contributions of Laila Miletic-Vejzovic, head of MASC; Saadia Hassan, graduate assistant; Gudrun Aurand, formerly MASC conservator and now in private practice; and, for financial assistance with the project, the Washington State Library's Washington Preservation Initiative program. I would also like to thank the editor of *American Archivist* and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

graphic materials such as historical photographs and maps, rare books and other printed materials, and the archives of the university. These collections have been acquired by MASC and its predecessors since the founding of the university over a century ago. Manuscript collections include personal papers, records of businesses and organizations, congressional papers, and literary manuscripts. Most of these materials are paper based, but media such as audio recordings, film, and video are also present in some collections. Approximately 5,500 linear feet of processed manuscript material ranging in extent from a single item to several hundred boxes,<sup>1</sup> are housed in a modern, climate-controlled facility located on the WSU Pullman campus. A full-time manuscripts librarian (the author) provides access to these collections and assists the unit head with collection management and development.

Researchers can easily discover information about processed collections using on-line access tools. Approximately 2,250 collections have on-line catalog records, and approximately 500 of these also have on-line finding aids. These finding aids are available through the MASC Web site in HTML format, and many are also included in the Northwest Digital Archives on-line database in Encoded Archival Description format.<sup>2</sup>

## **Phase I: Survey**

### ***Project Background***

Preservation activities are a fundamental element of collection processing and management in MASC, but specific preservation practices have varied over time. This variation is easy to observe in the normal course of handling collections, and it is true of both simple preservation treatments, such as rehousing or fastener removal, and of more complex treatments, such as flattening or repair. An in-house conservation laboratory, established in the late 1980s, increased internal capabilities for providing specialized treatment for damaged, unstable, and/or fragile items. A conservator responsible for treating all types of paper-based materials, including books and other printed materials, photographic prints, and manuscripts, staffs the lab. In current practice, fragile or damaged items are routinely sent to the lab for treatment in conjunction with processing. Prior to this survey, no system was in place for similar routine treatment of previously processed photographs and manuscripts, which were treated only as

<sup>1</sup> Approximately 3,000 additional linear feet of unprocessed manuscript collections comprise roughly 600 individual accessions. These materials were not included in these projects.

<sup>2</sup> The Northwest Digital Archives (NWDA) is an on-line union database of Encoded Archival Description finding aids from institutions in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Alaska, and Montana. The NWDA database is available at <http://nwda.wsulibs.wsu.edu>, accessed 8 August 2006.

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researchers or staff members observed condition problems in the course of use. If a staff member believed an item was so fragile or damaged that it needed immediate attention, particularly if it was unsuitable for use, it was sent to the lab for treatments such as cleaning, repair, humidification, flattening, and the addition of custom enclosures. If the need did not seem urgent, the materials were generally returned to the shelves after use. The need for treatment that could be done outside the lab, such as simple rehousing, was sometimes noted by the librarian as a possible future project, but no system existed to incorporate these activities into normal work flow.

In MASC, as in many other repositories, manuscript cases and records cartons neatly arrayed on the shelves sometimes conceal materials in need of preservation treatment. The most common problems with manuscript collections are stress on contents due to over- or underfilled containers; overstuffed folders; the presence of rusty or sharp fasteners; brittle, torn, and/or fragile (usually acidic) paper; surface soil; and folded documents that cannot be safely unfolded for use.

We also lacked data about the preservation needs of historical photograph collections, but based on observations made in the course of handling, they also needed to be assessed.

The unit head and librarians all agreed that the anecdotal evidence showed the need for gathering data about collection condition to support an efficient and effective approach to preservation. We agreed with Tyler Walters, former head of the SAA Preservation Section, who observed that "The result of being an informed manager is being a decisive manager. If the 72 percent of repositories who have not performed holdings condition surveys would do so, they will find that preservation priorities will develop and that indecision and ad hoc preservation activity will begin to subside."<sup>3</sup>

### ***Search for Project Models***

Before developing a survey methodology, we searched the professional literature. We hoped to identify case studies that could provide models for such a large-scale collection assessment and also to discover existing survey instruments that we could adapt for our purposes rather than developing one entirely from scratch. We needed to identify a survey model with elements that corresponded well with the kinds of manuscripts held in MASC, one that would enable us to gather meaningful information to serve as the basis for a preservation plan. We also hoped to discover metrics to assist us in anticipating the resources, particularly labor, needed to execute the survey successfully.

<sup>3</sup> Tyler O. Walters, "Special Collections Repositories at Association of Research Libraries Institutions: A Study of Current Practices in Preservation Management," *American Archivist* 61 (Spring 1998): 170.

Our literature review revealed considerable information on the general subject of preservation of special collections, but little dealing specifically with collection surveys for manuscript and photograph collections. The repositories we identified in case studies in late 2003 were not sufficiently similar to MASC to be directly applicable for our survey. The literature indicated that similar surveys were being conducted, but none had been reported or published as case studies.<sup>4</sup> We did not discover any survey metrics to assist us in planning the project. Although the lack of information about other institutions' experiences with such surveys was disappointing, we proceeded with our project planning, recognizing that we would need to rely heavily on our own judgment in balancing tasks to be accomplished with resources available to accomplish them.

Although we did not locate an existing survey instrument to adopt for our project, we found suggestions for a collection or record group survey, including a sample survey form, in *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* by Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler.<sup>5</sup> And, just as we were developing our draft survey instrument, we discovered another helpful resource: a newly published survey guide from the Northeast Document Conservation Center.<sup>6</sup> We used its recommendations in developing our survey form. Both publications helped us to remember to focus on making "actionable" observations about the condition of collections during the project. As Ritzenthaler notes, "Data gathered on the physical needs of collections must be considered in combination with available resources and the relative values and projected uses of the materials, as the basis for assigning preservation priorities."<sup>7</sup> This concept is important because it increases the utility of the data, providing for easy translation of survey observations into specific recommendations for treatment, taking into account specific institutional resources and capabilities. These recommendations ultimately became the foundation for our comprehensive, prioritized preservation plan for manuscript collections.

<sup>4</sup> Among the works consulted were Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993); Graham Matthews, "Surveying Collections: The Importance of Condition Assessment for Preservation Management," *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* 27 (December 1995): 227–36; Paul R. Green, "A Method for Undertaking a Full Conservation Audit of Special Collections of Books and Manuscripts," *Collection Management* 28 (2003): 23–42; Jennifer E. Hain, "A Brief Look at Recent Developments in the Preservation and Conservation of Special Collections," *Library Trends* 52 (Summer 2003): 112–17; Susan G. Swartzburg, *Preserving Library Materials: A Manual* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1995); Katherine Swift, "The Oxford Preservation Survey 1: The Main Survey," *The Paper Conservator* 17 (1993): 45–52; and Nancy Bell, "The Oxford Preservation Survey 2: A Method for Surveying Archives," *The Paper Conservator* 17 (1993): 53–55.

<sup>5</sup> Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Beth Patkus, *Assessing Preservation Needs: A Self-Survey Guide* (Andover, Mass.: Northeast Document Conservation Center, 2003). This document is available on the NEDCC Web site at <http://nedcc.org/oldnedccsite/selfsurvey/intro.htm>, accessed 23 January 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Ritzenthaler, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*, 12.

ASSESSING PRESERVATION NEEDS OF MANUSCRIPT  
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The Washington Preservation Initiative (WPI), a competitive program funded through the federal Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) and administered by the Washington State Library, offered an opportunity for funding.<sup>8</sup> This program explicitly supported surveys as a project category, and in 2003 we developed a proposal for a collection survey. In structuring our proposal, we considered the data we needed to gather in order to assess the overall conditions of our collections, the maximum possible award amount, and the schedule that would define the grant period. The grant proposal outlined five elements: (1) developing a methodology for the survey; (2) developing and testing a survey form; (3) hiring a graduate student to conduct a large part of the survey; (4) working with the graduate student to conduct the survey (approximately 1,300 hours); and (5) performing preservation treatments on collections already identified as high priorities. The manuscript portion of this final element included a large preservation photocopying project for one particularly significant collection, the L. V. McWhorter Papers.<sup>9</sup>

Our funding proposal was successful, and we were awarded \$20,000, the maximum amount. The grant provided eight months to complete the proposed work plan, from January through August 2004, with an option to request a one-month extension. This timetable put the project on a tight deadline, but also presented a rare opportunity. Because the grant period coincided with the university's academic calendar, we were able to structure a half-time graduate assistantship during the spring semester and summer session 2004, rather than hiring temporary employees on an hourly basis. This appointment benefited both the WSU Libraries, which had not previously offered an assistantship, and the student selected.

***Survey Methodology***

As we made decisions about survey methodology, we tried to be as practical as possible to maximize the usefulness of the data and to be efficient in our approach. We believed that collecting condition information and making treatment recommendations at the collection level would contribute best

<sup>8</sup> Information about the Washington Preservation Initiative is available at <http://www.secstate.wa.gov/library/libraries/projects/preservation.aspx>, accessed 8 August 2006.

<sup>9</sup> This is the most heavily used manuscript collection in MASC, consisting primarily of manuscripts on brittle, acidic early twentieth-century papers, and heavy use was accelerating its deterioration. A finding aid is available at <http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/holland/masc/McWhotr/Mcwh1.htm>, accessed 31 July 2006.

to planning treatment projects, in part because the collection is already the customary “unit” for many projects in MASC—processing, for example. We thought collection-level information would be more useful than, for example, either a comprehensive box-level survey or a sampling of all the holdings.

Once our external funding and a defined timetable were in place, we determined that the manuscripts portion of the survey would focus on collections consisting primarily of paper documents. We excluded the few collections consisting mostly of other media such as audio and video recordings; we also excluded segregated oversized manuscript material. We recognized the need to gather evidence of the condition of these materials for a complete assessment of our collections, but we believed it more efficient and effective to address these special categories separately. They are easily identifiable in our collection descriptions, making it relatively simple to identify the universe of such material to be assessed, and they represent a small fraction of our manuscript collections. They should lend themselves well to smaller-scale, format-focused projects in the future.

We began planning the manuscript survey by calculating the approximate extent of all processed collections, which are organized in two separate groups: a main numbered sequence, approximately 5,400 linear feet, of collections ranging in extent from a single box to several hundred boxes; and a separately numbered sequence of small collections, approximately 64 linear feet, generally consisting of no more than a single folder of material. We developed general guidelines based on collection extent. For the main sequence of collections, we planned to examine each box for all collections of twenty or fewer boxes; for larger collections, with some exceptions, we planned to use sampling. For the sequence of small collections, each generally not more than a single folder, we planned a more detailed examination at the item level. We excluded a few collections from the survey, most notably two large twentieth-century collections that had been recently processed (approximately 925 linear feet in total). As the survey progressed, we eventually excluded twenty-four more collections, because we found them to be incompletely processed or because we determined that they were candidates for reappraisal. We prioritized these for later assessment. After exclusions, we surveyed approximately 4,400 linear feet of manuscripts, including approximately 600 collections in the main sequence surveyed at the box level or by sampling and approximately 1,700 small collections surveyed at the item level.

At the beginning of the project, we produced two draft survey forms, one for manuscripts and the other for photographs, each with separate sections for evaluating collection housing and collection contents. Designed to be completed manually, these paper forms included checkboxes to expedite completion and also provided room for written comments for each question. We tested the draft forms on several collections and made minor revisions. For example,

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after observing problems with small, loose items in one of our test collections, we added a question about problems with mixed-size material<sup>10</sup> (see Fig. 1).

**Execution of Survey**

The special collections librarian directed the historical photograph survey; as manuscripts librarian, I directed the manuscripts survey. The graduate assistant worked on both surveys under our joint supervision. Early in the project, I determined the collections I would survey myself and those I would assign to the graduate assistant. In some cases, this determination was arbitrary, simply to divide the work so it could all be accomplished, but in other cases I preferred to survey certain collections myself based on existing information about condition problems or on the significance of the materials involved. I also decided which collections larger than twenty boxes we would survey comprehensively rather than by sampling. Except for a guideline to examine at least twenty boxes for each sampled collection, we did not establish an overall methodology for sampling, but determined sampling strategies for these collections on a case-by-case basis. We used container lists in our finding aids as a tool to determine the categories of materials in each collection (for example, correspondence, field notes, diaries, maps), and we identified specific boxes to examine to capture all major categories or formats represented.

For each box we examined, we made an overall observation of the contents based on the elements included on the survey form, and then we pulled at least one folder for a closer evaluation of contents; pulling additional folders if the collection included a variety of formats, or if it seemed to be in poor or unstable condition. We completed a survey form for each collection or, in the case of the small collections, for each box, and placed a sticker on the first box of each collection indicating that the survey for that collection had been completed.

While we typically limited our activities to making observations about the condition of each collection, it became apparent that it would be efficient to treat some of the smaller collections “on the fly,” as time permitted. If a collection could be treated in a relatively short period of time—perhaps an hour or two—it made sense to do so, as we were already handling the materials for the survey. These simple treatments included fastener removal, addition of interleaving, addition of spacers or minor redistribution of contents, and replacement

<sup>10</sup> This form (along with many of the other tools developed for this project and information about the photograph portion of the survey) is available on the MASC Web site at <http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/holland/masc/preservationsurvey.html>, accessed 31 July 2006. Another potentially useful tool became freely available after the execution of the MASC preservation survey. This is the “Special Collections Materials Survey Instrument” developed by the Columbia University Libraries. It is available at <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/services/preservation/surveyTools.html>, accessed 8 August 2006.

## THE AMERICAN ARCHIVIST

2004 Preservation Survey Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections WSU Libraries Manuscript Collections			
Collection Reviewed by (name): Cheryl Gurselman			
All Boxes Checked? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sampled? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			
<u>Collection Information</u>			
Cage: 213			
Name: Simms, John			
Date reviewed: 6/10/04		Comments on reverse side? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Yes	No	Comments (check here if more attached _____)
<u>1. Boxes</u>			
a. Good condition?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
b. Too full?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		esp. 1 + 2
c. Not full enough?		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<u>2. Folders</u>			
a. Acid-free?		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
b. Good condition?		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
c. Too full?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
<u>3. Paper/Contents</u>			
a. General condition (check one): Good _____ Fair _____ Poor <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>			dirty, damaged
b. Acidic/brittle/badly yellowed?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		Interleaving: Added <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <sup>small amt.</sup> Needed <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
c. Fasteners removed?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		removed during survey
d. Problems with mixed-size material? (small insertions, etc.)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		some small items throughout
e. Fading to illegibility?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		fading ink
f. Includes folded items that cannot be unfolded without damage?		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
g. Includes scrapbooks or other books?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		business record books + notebook, Box 3

FIGURE 1. Manuscript survey form completed.

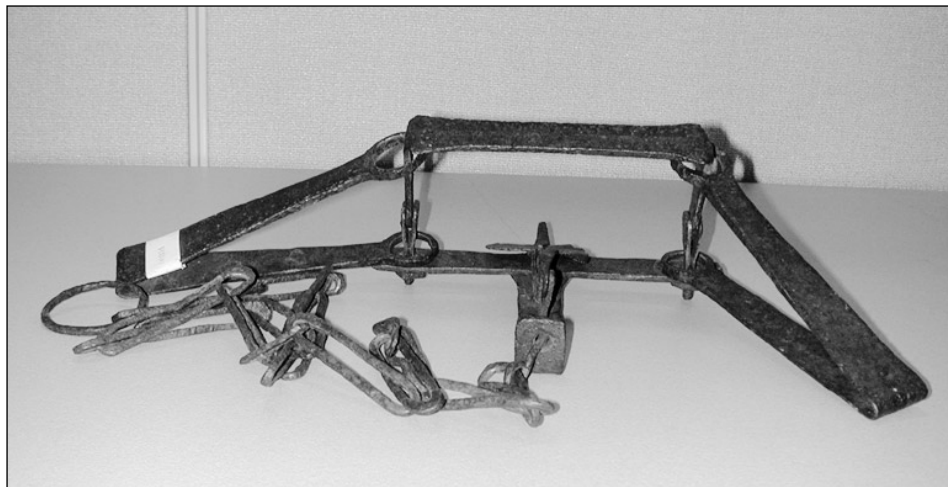


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of acidic enclosures. The collections we treated during the survey were typically no larger than one or two linear feet. When we determined that items were in urgent need of treatment, so unstable or damaged that they were unsuitable for use by researchers, we immediately referred them to the conservation lab for expert attention.

The survey revealed no real “horrors,” although we found condition problems in many collections. We were able to rescue most materials, even if they were badly damaged. Some problems resulted from earlier preservation actions; for example, well-meant homemade attempts to make protective enclosures from plastic wrap and transparent tape had shrunk with the years and deteriorated into a sticky mess. We were occasionally surprised by items we found; the most striking example, as seen in figure 2, was a fully functioning iron animal leg trap in one of the sampled manuscript cases.<sup>11</sup>

We observed a wide variety of condition problems, as well as some collections in good condition. Most collections needed at least some preservation treatment. In many cases, we observed the need for basic treatments, such as removal of rusty or sharp fasteners; replacement of acidic, damaged, or inadequate enclosures; and redistribution of contents in over- or underfilled containers. These treatments will require only simple supplies and can easily be performed by temporary employees or by staff other than the conservator, given a small amount of training and the time necessary for the work.



**FIGURE 2.** Trap included in the Carl Parcher Russell Papers.

<sup>11</sup> This item was part of the Carl Parcher Russell Papers (Cage 225). A finding aid for this collection is available at <http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/holland/masc/finders/cg225.htm>, accessed 31 July 2006.

In addition to the survey of the physical condition of the manuscript collections, I decided to examine existing on-line finding aids and catalog records for each collection, even though this required extra time. My reasoning here was similar to the rationale for conducting limited preservation treatments in conjunction with the survey: it made sense to do this as we were already physically handling each collection. I knew from prior experience that a few collections lacked on-line cataloging records and/or finding aids, and others had access tools that needed editing or correction.<sup>12</sup> As time permitted, I addressed these issues. Within a few weeks after the end of the grant period, I was able to complete nearly all of this additional work, an unanticipated but important benefit of the project.

Throughout the survey project, we tracked our progress toward completion as part of our regular reporting schedule to the granting agency. We kept track of the number of collections and the number of linear feet surveyed. Even with the addition of activities not included in our fairly ambitious work plan, we came close to completing the project within the eight-month grant period. Toward the end of the project, to help us finish on time, I used additional paid time for myself and the conservator not programmed as part of the grant. We successfully requested a one-month extension and finished the project in that time.

While it was not the purpose of this survey to determine the cause(s) of condition problems in our collections, questions about causes inevitably arose. In some cases, it was clear that materials had been received in poor condition—sometimes stable, but sometimes not. These cases of “inherent vice” had been handled in a variety of ways during processing, from a minimum of no treatment at all (the item might simply have been shelved) to intensive treatments such as mending and lamination. In other cases, materials received in good condition had deteriorated after processing, most often because of problems associated with housing, adhesives, acid migration, and sharp or rusted fasteners.

## Phase 2: Preservation Plan

After submitting a second successful proposal for \$20,000 in WPI funding for the following year (2005), we were able to continue the work begun with the survey. This second phase included several elements: (1) the creation of preservation treatment recommendations and the assignment of a priority ranking for each collection; (2) the creation of a database tool for compilation and analysis

<sup>12</sup> The most common errors were typographical. Some of these appeared to have been introduced when typescript finding aids were converted to digital format using optical character recognition (OCR) software, and they had not been caught during earlier proofreading. Other errors or problems included incorrect extent information, absence of links from catalog records to on-line finding aids (or bad links in the 856 field of the MARC record), or box and folder sequence errors in container lists.

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of survey results and treatment recommendations; (3) entry of data; and (4) creation of a preservation plan based on the priority ranking and categories of treatment recommended. This comprehensive plan included data about each collection and about categories of treatment recommended across collections, all ranked by priority on a simple four-point scale based on significance of the material and risk because of condition (both determined by the librarian) (see Figs. 3 and 4).

To create the database, we hired a student employee with appropriate technological skills. She used Microsoft Office Access to create a simple database with four modules: (1) survey data for manuscripts, (2) survey data for photographs, (3) preservation recommendations, and (4) a draft module for the conservation lab to keep treatment records. Each of these modules supports the creation of simple reports based on specified data elements. For example, in the preservation recommendations module, we can generate reports by category of treatment recommended.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike the first three modules, which were developed to capture information about collections at a specific point in time, the treatment recordkeeping module was developed in draft form only because the tool we ultimately adopt for this function needs to support ongoing activities. We believe there may be better alternatives for capturing this information, and we want to investigate all of our options thoroughly. We need to adopt a simple, useful, and sustainable tool; ideally, it will support preservation recordkeeping as part of a larger management information system. We are particularly interested in the potential usefulness of the Archivists' Toolkit currently under development.<sup>14</sup>

Toward the end of this project, we developed a simple recordkeeping system for tracking the implementation of the plan. We created a paper form to record preservation treatments performed for each collection. To measure progress on the execution of the plan as a whole, we transferred this information onto a spreadsheet. If we decide to complete the preservation recordkeeping module of our home-grown database, or if we adopt some other tool for this purpose, it should be simple to transfer and combine this information with data about preservation of other MASC collections, facilitating more complex measurement, analysis, and management of our preservation activities (see Fig. 5).

At the end of the second WPI-funded project, we had treated approximately 161 linear feet of manuscript material, including all of the highest priority small manuscript collections. Due to the small size of these collections

<sup>13</sup> For more information, see "Comprehensive Preservation Survey of Manuscript and Photograph Collections, 2004–2005" at <http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/holland/masc/preservationsurvey.html>, accessed 31 July 2006, or contact the author.

<sup>14</sup> The Archivists' Toolkit project Web site is available at <http://archiviststoolkit.org/index.html>, accessed 2 August 2006.

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### WSU 2004 Preservation Survey - Manuscripts

Cage #

Collection Name

Collection Reviewed by:

All boxes checked? ☒ Sampled? ☐ Date Reviewed

#### Boxes

	Yes?	No?	
Good Condition?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Too Full?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	esp. 1,2
Not full enough?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

#### Folders

	Yes?	No?	
Acid-free?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Good condition?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Too full?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

#### Paper/Contents

General Condition

	Yes?	No?	
Acidic/brittle/badly yellowed?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Interleaving Added?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Interleaving Needed?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Fasteners Removed?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	removed during survey
Problems with mixed-sized material? (small insertions, etc.)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	some small items throughout
Fading to illegibility?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	fading ink
Includes folded items that cannot be unfolded without damage?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Includes scrapbooks or other books?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	business record books and notebook. Box 3
Comments on Reverse	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Gudrun-please assess. Interleaving needed throughout-boxes are too full to do this during survey. (some 8 1/2 x 14)

FIGURE 3. Survey data for one collection entered into database.

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### WSU Preservation Survey Plan

Cage #  Priority:

	Yes/No	
Redistribute contents/box too full	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text" value="b1,2"/>
Replace boxes/enclose loose items	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Box too empty/redistribute contents/add spacers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Replace folders - acidic	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Replace folders - too full	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Replace folders - condition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Add folders - loose/unfolded material present	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Replace folders - size	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Folder labels/numbers needed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Fasteners present - evaluate for removal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Add l/lvg/gather small insertions	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Photo housing needed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Conservator evaluate	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Librarian evaluate	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text" value="see notes about document sizes, damage and dirt"/>
Repair or encapsulation needed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Preservation copies needed	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text" value="fading ink"/>
General Notes		<input type="text"/>
l/lvg added during survey	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text"/>
Other treatment done during survey	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="text" value="fasteners removed"/>

FIGURE 4. Recommendations for one collection entered into database.

Preservation Treatment Form (Manuscripts)				
CAGE #:				
Collection name:				
Treatment category	√	Date treated	Treated by	Notes
Housing				
Boxes replaced				
Contents redistributed				
Spacers added				
Folders replaced				
Folders labeled				
Loose material enclosed				
Fasteners removed				
Photo housing added				
Polyester sleeves added				
Interleaving added				
Items encapsulated				
Items sent to lab				
Pres. copies produced				
Other reformatting				
Other treatment				
General notes				

FIGURE 5. Preservation treatment form (manuscripts)

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and the types of material they include—often particularly rare and/or significant items—treatments were in many cases more intensive than those for larger collections; for example, many fragile items were repaired, and many folded items were flattened and relocated to oversize storage.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, having a plan does not necessarily guarantee its full execution. Our most severe constraint is finite resources, which will affect the speed and intensity with which we implement the plan. But with a plan in place, it is now possible for us to improve the condition of processed manuscript collections systematically on an ongoing, routine basis. We also expect the plan to be useful for soliciting additional external financial support. We gathered and analyzed concrete evidence of our preservation needs, which will help us to demonstrate those needs to potential donors or granting agencies (see Figs. 6 and 7).

### Outcomes

Our survey and the subsequent creation of a prioritized preservation plan for manuscript collections have already had a noticeable, positive impact. Approximately two years after the beginning of the survey project, this impact is evident in a variety of areas. Some of these, primarily the improved condition and stability of collections, we anticipated when the project was conceived; others, such as improved collection descriptions, we did not. These unanticipated outcomes were generally a direct result of the time-consuming, and admittedly sometimes tedious, process of physically handling so many collections in a relatively short period of time.

Though we failed to generate metrics for a manuscript collection preservation survey because of our decision to combine the survey project with other activities, we can make some general observations that may be useful for other institutions considering such a project—things we might do differently if we did this again. We could have saved time, and worked more efficiently, if we had done more sampling in some collections (or series within collections) comprised of fairly homogeneous material. In these cases, it is not terribly useful to examine each box, because problems, if any, are usually fairly consistent from one box to the next. But collections or series comprised of heterogeneous materials may warrant more careful examination, and problems in these collections are more variable. Some patterns we observed continued from one collection to the next in a collection number sequence, perhaps as a result of decisions made by a particular processor. Thus, sequential groups of collections sometimes shared condition problems, such as overstuffed folders or boxes.

<sup>15</sup> The intensive treatment of one collection consisting of bank notes and currency is illustrated under “Encapsulation” on the MASC conservator’s Web site: <http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/holland/masc/conserve.htm>, accessed 31 July 2006.



FIGURE 6. Box of loose material from the Walt Horan Papers being treated and foldered.

In part because of the way the work described here was funded, and in part because we learned as we went along, we missed some efficiencies that other institutions using a different project structure might incorporate. We executed two separate projects, the second arising directly from the first. Our focus at the beginning of the first project was to gather data about the condition of our collections; we did not begin planning until later in the process just how we would go about translating our observations into recommendations for action. In a different project structure, well-trained staff members and/or temporary employees, with sufficient resources and time, could certainly make these recommendations in conjunction with such a survey. In our case, we generated the recommendations separately as part of the second grant, as an essential step in producing our preservation plan.

Had we found an existing database usable for our project, such a tool might also have introduced more efficiency into the process, especially if it had enabled us to enter survey data and preservation recommendations directly into the database using a laptop or other portable device. This would have eliminated the need for the separate data-entry step associated with the paper forms.



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**FIGURE 7.** Box from the Lewiston-Clarkston Improvement Company Records prior to treatment.

As a result of these projects, the manuscript collections in MASC will be more stable and will better withstand the stresses of storage and handling. Improvement is evident in the condition of collections treated to date. Some badly deteriorating materials were stabilized during the course of the project. Unlike our previous ad hoc approach, the preservation needs of the manuscript collection have now been systematically identified and prioritized in an action plan. These preservation priorities are now incorporated into the normal work flow of the manuscripts librarian, the conservator, and other MASC staff, including temporary employees. During 2004 and 2005, approximately 30 percent of my time was devoted to these projects or related preservation activities.

We have improved intellectual access and reference services as a result of this project. I became much more familiar with many individual manuscript collections and gained a better understanding of the collections as a whole with regard to content and description as well as physical condition. We created, corrected, or edited over a hundred cataloging records during the project; we also corrected or edited many on-line finding aids, and in a few cases, we created new finding aids for collections lacking them. In retrospect, it would

have been useful to integrate this element more formally into the survey by including information about access tools on the survey form, rather than maintaining a manual checklist that is not integrated with the survey data.

One of the most important results of the survey and preservation plan is the balancing of departmental priorities. Processing projects remain a high priority for our unit, which has a substantial backlog. Because these projects often compete for the same limited resources of personnel, equipment, and supplies required to preserve already-processed collections, the preservation plan will assist us in balancing the allocation of these resources.

The projects described here will positively affect our unprocessed collections; indeed, what we have learned is already influencing our processing decisions and practices. Having observed the consequences of various decisions made during processing decades ago, we are better able to anticipate the long-term effects of our current processing procedures, particularly those associated with housing. The three most common problems we encountered were under-filled manuscript cases that failed to support materials sufficiently, overstuffed folders that stressed documents, and the lack of secure enclosures for small, loose items. This knowledge will inform our consideration of other processing models for our backlog, such as Greene and Meissner's "More Product Less Process" approach.<sup>16</sup> If we adopt some elements of that minimal approach to processing collections, the lessons we learned during the survey project have prepared us to anticipate their potential consequences within our institutional context.

The project also revealed the attractive prospect of recapturing some much-needed shelf space in our manuscripts storage area. We discovered that some large collections occupied substantial amounts of extra space due to underfilled containers, which are both harmful to the contents and inefficient. When we complete our treatment of these collections, we hope to recapture over 200 linear feet of shelf space for other collections.

In a few cases, we discovered (or rediscovered) forgotten "treasures." The most significant was a papal bull issued by Innocent III in 1216. These items were all cataloged—so clearly they were not lost—but somehow they had not come to our attention until this project required us to examine our collections in depth. We have incorporated some of these treasures into MASC instructional and liaison activities with academic departments.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63.

<sup>17</sup> A Web page for the papal bull, including images, transcription, and translation, is available on the MASC Web site at <http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/holland/masc/papalbull.html>, accessed 8 August 2006.

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Our experience of gathering and analyzing data about the condition of our collections has confirmed information we found in the professional literature, particularly regarding the advantage of systematic assessment activity for evidence-based planning and action.<sup>18</sup> Historically, acquisition and processing of manuscript collections has been a higher priority in MASC, as in many other archival repositories, than assessing (or reassessing) already-processed collections. Our prioritized preservation plan makes it possible to bring materials in processed collections into normal preservation work flow. Unstable or at-risk materials are stabilized or reformatted and preserved for future use. We are making progress toward our goal to ensure that all collections are as stable and physically sound as possible to ensure continued access.

<sup>18</sup> See Walters, "Special Collections Repositories at Association of Research Libraries Institutions," 169.