Personal Archiving: Managing and Preserving Your Papers and Family History

Bexx Caswell-Olson
Special Collections Conservator
caswellr@msu.edu
Storage Environment

- Location, Location, Location!
- **Avoid** unfinished attics, basements, garages, crawl spaces.
- Ideal environment is around 70 degrees, less than 55% humidity.
- Large fluctuations in temp/RH can lead to advanced aging of the paper.
- Basements, garages, crawl spaces are more likely to be damp, which can lead to…
Foxing

- High humidity can contribute to **foxing**.
- These reddish brown spots are disfiguring, but do not damage the integrity of the paper.
- Foxing is not reversible.
Mold

- Damp/humid conditions (over 55% RH) can lead to mold and mildew.
- Mold can leave disfiguring stains that cannot be removed.
- Mold weakens paper.
If You Find Mold:

- Determine if it is active (growing) or inactive (dormant):
  - Active mold will smear
  - Inactive mold is powdery

- If active:
  - Turn on the A/C, make the room as cold as possible.
  - Keep air moving in the area
  - Look for possible source of moisture (i.e. a leak)
  - **If you have a large scale mold problem, call a mold remediation professional.**

- If inactive:
  - Remove mold spores from the item
  - Look for possible cause, take steps to correct if possible
To Clean Mold:

- Mold can be removed by vacuuming. Put a piece of cheesecloth over the end of the hose.
- **Work outside** when vacuuming books, papers, etc.
- Wear long sleeves, disposable gloves, and a face mask.
- When finished, dispose of the vacuum bag immediately. Bag up and dispose of the mask and gloves. Change/wash your clothes ASAP.
- Clean hard surfaces (i.e. shelving) with bleach.
- **DO NOT** clean books with bleach!
Insect Damage

- Avoid storing items in dark, damp areas of your homes (such as the basement or crawlspace).
- Regular dusting and vacuuming will help eliminate bugs.
- Contact a pest management professional if you see signs of an infestation.
Light Damage

- Light can fade leather, cloth, ink, and photographs.
- Keep items out of direct sunlight.
Enclosures for Paper Based Items

- Acid-Free = pH neutral. Most paper is acid free when it is new – but will become acidic as it ages.
- An “acid-free” claim on the label is therefore meaningless.
- Look for envelopes, folders, etc. that are buffered to pH 8.5-9.0 and are lignin free.
- Avoid colored folders (can bleed) and those with metal fasteners (will rust).
- Sheet protectors can be used to store letters for frequent browsing.
Enclosures for Photographs

- Plastic sleeves, sheet protectors, binders, etc. should be **PVC free**. Look for non-stick sheet protectors.
- Polyethylene and polyester are both “safe” plastics that will not degrade over time.
- Albums, folders, etc. should be **PAT tested** or meet **ISO/ANSI Standard 18916**.
- Do not use glassine envelopes – these become acidic over time and can damage your photographs.
- Avoid adhesive album pages.
- Use photo corners to adhere photos to album pages.
Fastenners

Avoid using staples or metal paperclips – these will rust and leave a disfiguring stain.

Plastic paperclips offer a safer alternative.
Fasteners

Avoid using rubber bands – over time, they become brittle and crumble. When exposed to heat, they will melt. Cotton tying tape is a safer alternative.
Fasteners

Avoid using tape, which will leave disfiguring stains. It is also incredibly difficult to remove without causing damage.

If a DIY repair cannot be avoided, Filmoplast P is an alternative to tape. **DO NOT use on items of value.**
Rolled or Curled Items

- Tightly rolled documents can tear or crack if not unrolled properly. Photographs are especially vulnerable.
- Humidification can help make the process easier.
- For items of high value, contact a conservator.
Framing

- Do not have the item dry mounted before framing.
- Ask for “Conservation Framing” for items of value. This will ensure that high-quality, non-damaging materials are used.
- Glass with a UV protective coating is preferable, but will add to the cost.
Handling of Materials

- Always handle materials with clean, dry hands.
- Do not wear hand lotion when handling items.
- Cotton gloves are not necessary for handling books, letters, documents, etc. – you are more likely to cause tears.
- Cotton gloves should be worn when handling photographs, slides, or negatives to avoid leaving fingerprints behind.
Finding & Working with a Conservator

- DIY cleaning and repairs are **always a bad idea**.
- For items of value, contact a professional conservator.
- MSU Libraries Conservation Referral List: https://www.lib.msu.edu/preservation/consreferral/
Contact

Bexx Caswell-Olson
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517-884-0802
caswellr@msu.edu