Smithsonian Institution Archives

Preservation Assessment Descriptor List

INTRODUCTION

This *Preservation Assessment* tells us in 7 data points about the condition of a collection. When this data is entered into the Collections Management System (CMS), it tabulates a score and gives the collection a *preservation priority number* (1 is HIGH, 9 is LOW).

Every collection entering the Smithsonian Archives should receive a preservation assessment in order to keep the list of preservation priorities current. Every collection prepared for National Underground Storage should receive a current assessment (even if one is already on file) in order to ensure that the most recent information about the collection is on file. Note, any collection assessed for offsite storage that has **glass, mold, pests, cellulose nitrate**, or **deteriorated (offgassing) cellulose acetate,** or does not **conform to the standard box sizes** identified for offsite storage **cannot go**.

DESCRIPTION

Collection Number:	Numerical number of identification. Accession number or Record Unit number.
Location:	Numerical value indicating collection location and position within A&I or Fullerton.
Number of Boxes:	Total number of cubic foot boxes, 5" boxes, oversized boxes and bound volumes

HOLDINGS MAINTENANCE

This section describes the **present housing materials and their condition**. It does not assess the physical condition of the artifacts or contents of the collection, except with regard to the condition of the housing materials. It is to provide general information about the extent of *housing-related problems* in each collection to determine what holdings maintenance attention is needed most urgently. Because we know that poor quality boxes, acidic file folders and attachments can create or exacerbate damage to a collection, we need to know exactly what problems exist in a given collection and make plans to remedy them.1

1 http://cool.conservation-us.org/iada/ta95_103.pdf, accessed 4/18/2011

1. Housing Needs: A summary of the present physical protection, both primary and secondary.

Consider the condition(s) that apply.

- **In folders** - the collection material is primarily protected with file folders or similar primary enclosures.
- **In boxes** - the collection material is housed in a box for primary (no file folders) or secondary (with file folders) protection.
- **On shelves** - that shelving units are the primary furniture for the collection.
- **In drawers/cabinets** - drawers or cabinets are the primary furniture for the collection.
- **Other** - any primary or secondary physical housing, and/or furniture, that is not adequately described above.

Circle the appropriate number in response to the question.

What percentage of the collection needs housing?

3	2	1	0
Over 75%	25%-75%	Under 25%	(none)

For example: if the whole collection (100%) is in boxes, in file folders, and on shelves it gets a 0; if some of the collection (25%-75%) is like this, and it has a few bound volumes just on the shelf it gets a 2; if the whole collection (100%) is in boxes but has no file folders it gets a 3. **No collection can go to NUS if it receives a 3.**

Figure a Bound volumes without enclosures represent a "3" housing needs. They are exposed to dust and other airborne contaminants, which are acidic. They are not protected from handling, and could be damaged in a water emergency.

2. Housing Materials: A summary of the present housing materials.

Consider the condition(s) that apply.

- **Paige boxes** - inappropriate brown (and highly acidic) cardboard boxes approximately one cubic foot.
- **acid-free boxes** - appropriate acid-free cardboard boxes approximately one cubic foot.
- **old document boxes** - inappropriate grey, blue or greenish document boxes with an interior that are not *acid free2** approximately 5" wide.
- **new document boxes** - appropriate blue or tan document boxes with white interiors approximately 5" wide.
- **oversized boxes** - any oversized box regardless of size or material.
- **acidic file folders** - inappropriate file folders known/suspected to be acidic* such as recycled.
- **original office folders** - inappropriate file folders that were not replaced when collection was transferred. These could be colored, have attached clips, etc.
- **acid-free file folders** - appropriate folders that are specifically used and known to be acid-free.
- **folders - unknown** - any type of primary folder enclosure that is not adequately covered above.
- **binders/envelopes** - inappropriate primary enclosures other than folders which may be of poor quality or of unknown plastics.

Circle the appropriate number in response to the question.

What percentage has inappropriate housing materials?

3	2	1	0
Over 75%	25%-75%	Under 25%	(none)

For example: if the entire collection (100%) is in acidic Paige boxes and poor quality folders, it gets a 3, if the entire collection (100%) is in new document boxes and acid-free file folders it gets a 0. If the boxes are acid-free but the folders are acidic, split the difference and give the collection a 2.

2 Use an acidity test pen to determine if the material is acidic or has alkaline buffering materials in it.

Figure b Acidic envelopes are inappropriate enclosures for collections (left, Record Unit 305 United States National Museum Accession Records; right, RU 7167 Robert Ridgway Papers) because they impart acidity to original records and require the user to slide original records in and out of the envelope, potentially damaging the records

Figure c These videotapes are wrapped in plastic, which has prevented plasticizer from the containers from evaporating, and created a sticky mess

3. Positioning of Records: A summary of the present records position within enclosures.

Consider the condition(s) that apply.

- **fine** - the position of the contents of the box is neat and of the right amount for that box.
- **box too full** - the items within the box are packed too tightly and retrieval is difficult.
- **box too loose** - there are insufficient items within the box without the support of a spacer. The records and/or files are slumping.
- **box messy** - the contents within the box and/or file folders are untidy.
- **files too full** - the file folders within the box are too full and it is difficult to grasp the file.
- **documents misaligned** - the documents are twisted or rotated within the box and/or folder, but would fit in the box if properly aligned.

Circle the appropriate number in response to the question.

What percentage of the collection is poorly positioned?

3	2	1	0
Over 75%	25%-75%	Under 25%	(none)

For many records, poor positioning is solved easily by simply placing a spacer in the box. Slumping and loose records are immediately straightened and the score may go from a 3 to a 1. If the records have been permanently deformed because they were not supported, see section "physical damage: physical condition" below.

Figure d Left, these records had no support and required an acid-free spacer to keep them from becoming permanently deformed. Note also that the original box is acidic (see discoloration on the box). Right, these records (primarily photographs) are loose in the folder and will be damaged.

4. Difficult Formats/Sizes: A summary of the records format and item size.

Consider the condition(s) that apply.

- **variety of sizes** - the collection contains a variety of paper sizes; legal, letter and smaller. All of the sizes fit adequately into the folders and boxes they are housed in.
- **mostly legal** - the majority of the collection is legal sized 8 1/2" x 14" and either properly placed in a legal orientation, or is not placed in a legal orientation (folded).
- **mostly letter** - the majority of the collection is letter sized 8 1/2" x 11".
- **undersized** - the records are sized smaller than letter sized 8 1/2" x 11", and are not placed in a handling container.
- **oversized: rolled** - oversized materials intentionally rolled prior to being placed in the enclosures, such as rolled panoramic photographs.
- **oversized: folded** - oversized materials were intentionally folded prior to being placed in the enclosures, such as maps and plans.
- **oversized: forced** in box - oversized materials which do not adequately fit, are forced into the enclosure.
- **bound** - bound volumes/pamphlets are housed within the collection. They should be in file folders and stored spine down.

Circle the appropriate number in response to the question.

What percentage of the collection has format problems?

3	2	1	0
Over 75%	25%-75%	Under 25%	(none)

If the collection has oversize or undersized items that are not properly housed (crushed, folded, rolled without cores, etc) it receives a corresponding number to the percent that is not properly housed.

Figure e Metal-tabbed file folders do not allow the box lid to close, allowing dust to gather in the records and adding to the danger of clumsy handling in trying to shelve a non-standard box. Hanging file folders have a similar problem.

Figure f Rolled artifacts without cores are potentially very damaging to the records

5. Damaging Attachments: A summary of inappropriate attachments.

Consider the condition(s) that apply.

- **staples** - metal staple used to attach more than one item together. Usually at the top left corner.
- **paper clips** - metal or plastic clips used to hold together more than one item. Usually at the top left corner.
- **stick pins** - metal pin used to attach more than one item together. Usually found at the top left corner of older documents.
- **brads** - metal (usually brass) prongs poked through and bent over more than one item to keep them together.
- **clip file folders** - file folders that have metal prong clips attached to them, onto which papers are threaded. These clips are usually along the top or inside edge of the file folders.
- **other** - this describes any method of attachment used to group more than one item that is not adequately described above.

Circle the appropriate number in response to the question.

What percentage of the collection has inappropriate attachments?

3	2	1	0
Over 75%	25%-75%	Under 25%	(none)

Some collections have special stainless steel paperclips that should not damage the papers. Most paperclips and other metal fasteners will (or have already) rust. Adhesive tapes and other plastic materials are also considered damaging attachments.

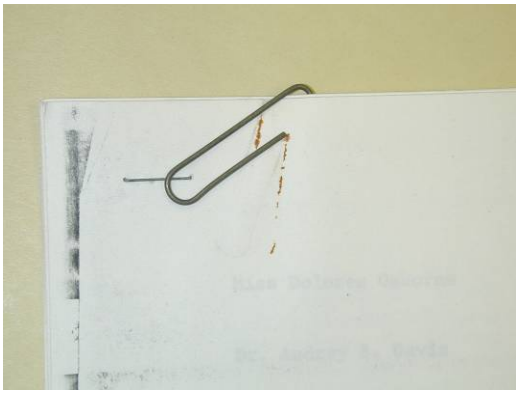

Figure g This document is less than 15 years old, yet it already has a permanent stain where this paperclip rusted. The paper is weaker here, and the stain is disfiguring.

Figure h This slide has been damaged by pressure sensitive tape that has deteriorated. The tape is brittle and is seeping plasticizers.

PHYSICAL CONDITION

1. Physical Damage: A summary of the present physical condition and/or physical damage of the collection.

Consider as many of the condition(s) that apply according to the following:

- **dirt/dust** - accretions such as dirt and/or dust accumulated on the surface of the item or the enclosure.
- **tears/losses** - physical damage to the substrate caused mainly by poor storage and handling. Often characterized by tears, particularly along fold lines and weak areas, or complete loss of the substrate.
- **"dogears"** - specific physical damage to the substrate that occurs along the edges and at the corners of the item. It caused mainly by poor storage and handling.
- **adhesive** - previous applied adhesives whether the carrier is present of not such as scotch tape, masking tape etc. Also applies to overall glues used to adhere one item to another such as a small paper item glued to a larger format.
- **brittle** - an overall weakness of the support usually caused by inherent acidity of the material or by close association with acidic materials. Brittleness can result in snapping, cracking or breaking of the paper support with handling.
- **stained/discolored** - local discoloration of the paper substrate such as yellowing along the edges or overall, or a change of color due to contact with other materials.
- **media damage** - damage of the media on or to the substrate such as media transfer or burning through the paper, bleeding or fading. Damage to the media itself through chemical deterioration (e.g. iron gall ink)
- **cockling** - substrate deformation of the item generally caused by poor storage conditions and improper handling. Often characterized by distortions either randomly oriented or aligned in parallel ripples.
- **water damage** - characterized by local color changes with a discrete line (tide-line) at the point of evaporation, cockling of the paper support, rust spots at staples and clips, etc.
- **fragile** - an overall weakness of the support caused by poor storage and handling which can lead to more damage through handling. This includes items with extensive tears and folds etc. particularly with an inherently fragile paper type (e.g. tissue).
- **other** - unknowns such as sticky shed in magnetic media,

Circle the appropriate number in response to the question.

What percentage of the collection has physical damage?

3	2	1	0
Over 75%	25%-75%	Under 25%	(none)

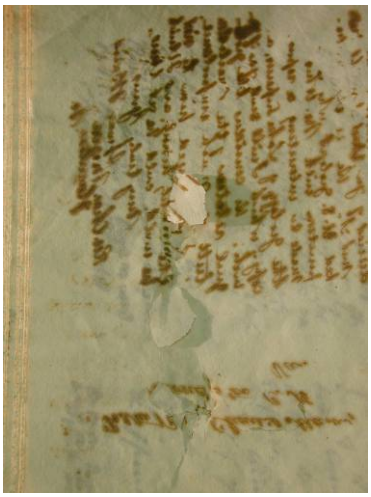

Figure i This fragile tissue paper is written on with iron gall ink. The acidic ink has caused the paper to weaken further, so there are breaks in the paper. The ink itself is not legible because of its own deterioration patterns. Only cold storage and conservation treatment can stabilize this damage. If the items had been properly stored in acid-free enclosures, some damage would have been preventable.

Figure j This collection is has significant mold damage

2. Unstable Materials: A summary of the paper and item types within the collection. Unstable materials are generally considered here as inherently or chemically unstable.

Consider the condition(s) that apply:

- bond/ledger - this refers to all regular paper types such as writing paper, printed paper and photocopy paper regardless of physical size. It is generally white, moderately sized, opaque, of moderate thickness, with little or no surface coating, and made from a variety of fiber types and manufacture. Most bond and ledger paper is considered good quality
- tissue - this refers to a very thin paper support usually copied unto or written on. It is fairly transparent and tends to be very fragile.
- newsprint - this refers to paper that is apparently made from mechanically processed wood pulp. It is often not very heavily sized, has a rough/prickly texture, and is not often white. It is unstable.
- newspaper clippings - this refers specifically to clippings, or pages, from a newspaper included in the collection. Because these materials are often adhered with unstable adhesives in addition to being acidic, these are considered very unstable.
- thermofax/copy - particular types of paper used for reproduction copies that are heavily sized and coated
- negatives – polyester based black and white negatives are usually stable, whereas cellulose acetate and nitrate in both black and white and color are very unstable.
- photographs, color, are usually very unstable
- photographs, black and white, depend on the type of photograph (albumen, platinum, printed out, etc.)
- audio visual materials (film, video, audio), usually very unstable
- magnetic media (data), usually very unstable
- architectural papers, depend on the type of architectural paper or process (cyanotypes are stable as long as not exposed to light or very alkaline environments)
- bound volumes or pamphlets – while not necessarily inherently unstable, these items are considered unstable if they are poorly housed
- iron gall ink

Circle the appropriate number in response to the question.

What percentage of the collection is of unstable material?

3	2	1	0
Over 75%	25%-75%	Under 25%	(none)

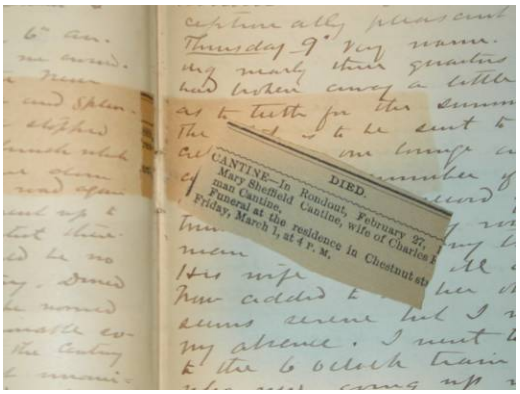

Figure k Newspaper clippings inserted into diaries, ledgers and volumes present a preservation challenge. Note the acid burn and that the clipping is brittle and has snapped from its original adhesive placement.

Additional Actions taken:

Consider what actions have been taken in the course of filling out the preservation assessment sheet:

Preservation Intervention

The preservation "intervention" is where some action has been taken to improve the quality of the housing of the collection or where conservation treatment has occurred. This may be as simple as placing a spacer, or as complicated as reprocessing, rehousing, making custom enclosures, and digitizing a collection. If a preservation intervention has taken place during the assessment, the assessor should fill out this form.

Preservation Flag

The Preservation Flag alerts the preservation team to immediate or long-term needs of the collection that cannot be addressed by the person who fills out the flag. Damages to specific items, or basic needs such as reboxing can be listed on the preservation flag.

Enter data into Collections Management System (CMS)

This indicates that the information on the assessment has been entered into CMS.

Name and Date:

This is important information, as surveys will be kept on file indefinitely.

Figure l A poorly housed collection "Before". The books are unsupported, and wrapped with rubber bands.

Figure m A properly housed collection "After". The books are supported (on their spine), in good quality folders.