



# Conserve O Gram

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## Handling Archival Documents And Manuscripts

All users of archival collections, including museum staff, should learn collection handling procedures. Proper handling can greatly extend the life of the material. Basic handling procedures for archival documents and manuscripts are provided in this *Conserve O Gram*. See also *Conserve O Gram* 19/15, Storing Archival Paper-Based Materials and *Conserve O Gram* 19/16, Housing Archival Paper-Based Materials.

To Properly Handle Your Archival Collections You Must Do This...	Don't Do This...
<p><b><i>Providing Basic Handling Procedures</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide museum staff and researchers with written guidelines on using and handling archival collections and have them watch a preservation handling videotape (see <i>References</i>) when they first use the collection.</li> <li>• Provide guidance to researchers and museum staff about how to handle audio-visual, electronic, and oversize materials.</li> <li>• Minimize all handling of original archival documents.</li> <li>• Show researchers how mishandling can damage materials.</li> <li>• Use copies of archival documents, such as microfilm, xerographic copies, or digital copies, whenever possible for reference.</li> <li>• Have at least master duplication copies and usage copies for all electronic, audio, visual, and moving image materials.</li> <li>• Support documents in suitable containers, such as folders and boxes.</li> <li>• Provide <i>master copies</i> of original documents to researchers for duplication.</li> <li>• Instruct staff and researchers to use only #2 graphite pencils for notetaking when viewing archival documents.</li> <li>• Be alert to how staff and researchers hold, move, and use collections.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't eat, drink, smoke, or bring packages, overcoats, or containers in the archival reading room, work, exhibit, or storage areas.</li> <li>• Don't leave researchers unmonitored or allow them to work with more than one folder from one box from a single collection at a time.</li> <li>• Don't allow extensive handling or copying of original archival documents, particularly fragile, oversize, or vulnerable items.</li> <li>• Don't allow researchers or untrained staff to make copies of original documents.</li> <li>• Don't allow archival collections to circulate.</li> <li>• Don't use pens, markers, or adhesive labels in or around archival and manuscript collections.</li> <li>• Don't allow researchers to press down on documents, place elbows on them, trace them, or take notes on separate sheets of paper that are resting on original documents.</li> </ul>

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<p><b>Setting Up Work and Research Areas</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide documents to researchers for use in a reading room.</li> <li>• Keep the archival reading room, workspaces, exhibit, and storage areas clean, dry, pest-free, and secure.</li> <li>• Provide well-lighted library-size tables where researchers work with one folder from one box at a time.</li> <li>• Supervise use of archival collections, including staff use for research.</li> <li>• Set up a dedicated archival workspace, in both work and reading room spaces, whose surface is clean, flat, and at least three times the size of the largest item you will be working with. Such a space allows room to work, take notes, and maintain the collections' arrangement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't allow archival collections to be used without supervision.</li> <li>• Don't allow yourself or others to work with archival or manuscript materials in cramped spaces or in spaces that lack adequate environmental or security controls.</li> <li>• Don't allow anyone to store archival materials indefinitely in reading rooms.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Holding and Lifting Documents</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep your hands clean when working with archival collections.</li> <li>• Wear cotton or latex gloves when handling vulnerable materials, such as photographs, film, audiotape, videotape, and electronic records, because finger oils can damage or destroy the materials over time.</li> <li>• Use book cradles for bound volumes. See <i>Conserve O Gram 19/18, How to Care for Bound Archival Volumes</i>.</li> <li>• Support fragile paper documents by placing a piece of stiff archival board behind them, if necessary, and to aid in turning them over.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't slide documents around on top of each other because they may abrade or damage each other.</li> <li>• Don't lift documents tightly by their edges.</li> <li>• Don't fold or roll documents to make them easier to handle.</li> <li>• Don't carry documents under your arm.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Moving Documents</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support documents in folders and boxes and move them on carts.</li> <li>• Move individual, stable documents to or from carts holding them lightly by diagonally-opposite corners and use an archival board support to move fragile documents.</li> <li>• Get help if you cannot easily move an item by yourself, especially to move oversize or heavy materials.</li> <li>• Place working labels on the containers of all oversize or heavy materials.</li> <li>• Keep items in folders and boxes when they are not being used, to minimize damage from light, dust, pollution, and handling.</li> <li>• Keep all book carts and trucks in good repair.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't stack or pile documents during transport.</li> <li>• Don't move documents of any kind, including rolled or folded materials, without suitable supports or containers.</li> </ul>

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<p><b>Handling Documents with Folds or Tears</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce handling of fragile documents by providing copies for reference.</li> <li>• Ask a conservator to open and flatten folded or torn documents before allowing handling.</li> <li>• Place torn or folded documents that are non-friable (not charcoal, pencil, crayon, pastel, or other smeary media) in polyester enclosures prior to handling until they can be mended by a conservator.</li> <li>• Make copies of torn materials that are frequently used.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't allow researchers to handle torn original documents without protecting the original by providing a surrogate or copy for reference.</li> <li>• Don't force open rolled or folded documents if they are brittle or fragile.</li> <li>• Don't use pressure sensitive tapes (not even <i>archival</i> or <i>conservation</i> tapes) to mend documents that are torn.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Handling Brittle Documents</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support documents that are not strong and durable, such as newspaper clippings, ephemera, and other items made out of acidic wood pulp paper, on neutral or buffered pH board or in a neutral or buffered pH folder or mat within a box or other container.</li> <li>• Copy brittle documents via microfilm, xerographic copying on acid-free paper, or digitization to make them accessible.</li> <li>• Provide copies for access purposes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't automatically encapsulate, place in polyester film, or spray-deacidify brittle documents because the media may be damaged by these actions.</li> <li>• Don't automatically place all brittle or acidic materials in buffered acid-free housing. Alkaline buffering can fade blueprints, cyanotypes, color photographs, and many handcolored items. See <i>Conserve O Gram 4/9, Buffered and Unbuffered Storage Materials</i>.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Handling Friable Media</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• House and handle documents that have smearable media, such as charcoal, pencil, crayon, and pastel, so that their media surfaces never directly touch another document, the document housing, or a hand.</li> <li>• Provide copies of friable media for use by researchers and staff.</li> <li>• Use sink mats (mats with a well cut into the backing to hold the items to prevent surface abrasion of fragile or friable media) or provide researchers with duplicates for reference purposes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't allow researchers or staff to touch or lay materials upon the surface of friable media.</li> <li>• Don't lay these materials directly upon a xerographic copy machine.</li> <li>• Don't ever place these items in or directly against polyester (i.e., Mylar) folders or enclosures.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Handling Documents with Attachments</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before removing any attachments, read <i>Conserve O Gram 19/5, Removing Original Fasteners from Archival Documents</i> and <i>Conserve O Gram 19/6, Attachments for Multi-Page Documents</i>.</li> <li>• Ask a conservator to remove attachments from fragile or brittle documents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't leave attachments, such as paperclips, staples, pins, string, or rubberbands, on torn documents that are about to be used for research or exhibition.</li> </ul>

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<p><b><i>Handling Contaminated Documents</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wear latex gloves, a washable smock, and a rated breathing apparatus if you must work with or near a collection or space contaminated with mold, insects, vermin, or chemicals. See <i>Conserve O Gram 2/8</i>, Hantavirus Disease Health and Safety Update.</li> <li>• Place contaminated material inside boxes within tightly sealed layers of trash bags.</li> <li>• Label them immediately with the collection name, box number and an appropriate contamination warning, such as <b><i>Contaminated with Vermin Droppings! Hantavirus Risk!</i></b></li> <li>• Clean and stabilize contaminated materials only under the guidance of a conservator.</li> <li>• Copy the collection to limit health risks caused by future use.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't vacuum rooms or use brooms around contaminated material because it will stir up dust.</li> <li>• Don't bring contaminated collections into the museum reference, storage, exhibit, or workspace.</li> <li>• Don't work in contaminated areas.</li> <li>• Don't provide contaminated collections to researchers. These collections are restricted for health and safety reasons.</li> </ul>

### References

Ogden, Sheryllyn, "Storage Methods and Handling Practices," Northeast Document Conservation Center Technical Leaflet. Andover, MA: NEDCC, June 1994.

Ritzenthaler, Mary Lynn. *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*. Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 1994.

Van der Reyden, Dianne, and Diane Vogt-O'Connor. *Rescuing Records: Recognizing the Problems of Preserving Documents in Research Collections* (Videotape). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Conservation Analytical Laboratory, 1995.

Van der Reyden, Dianne. "Paper Documents," *Storage of Natural History Collections: A Preventive Conservation Approach*. Pittsburgh, PA: Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections, 1995.

### Sources

See NPS *Tools of the Trade* (available only to NPS staff) for housing and interleaving materials and a list of vendors. Archival-quality materials can be purchased from suppliers, such as the following:

Conservation Resources International, 8000-H Forbes Place, Springfield, VA 22151; (800) 634-6932 or (703) 321-7730; Fax (703) 321-0629.

Gaylord Bros., Box 4901, Syracuse, NY 13221-4901; (800) 448-6160 or (315) 457-5070; Fax (800) 272-3412.

Light Impressions Corporation, 439 Monroe Avenue, P.O. Box 940, Rochester, NY 14603-0940; (800) 828-6216 or (716) 271-8960; Fax (716) 442-7318.

Metal Edge West, Inc., 2721 East 45th Street, Los Angeles, CA 90058; (800) 862-2228 or (213) 588-2228; Fax (213) 588-2150.

University Products, 517 Main Street, P.O. Box 101, Holyoke, MA 01041-0101; (800) 628-1912 or (413) 532-9431; Fax (800) 532-9281.

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