



"Section 1: The preservation challenge" in "Preserving Harvard's retrospective collections"

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Section One

The Preservation Challenge

The preservation challenge faced by society's repositories of past documents—its libraries and archives—is to pass on to succeeding generations the written and visual records of the last 150 years. More precisely, the challenge is to hand on the rather ordinary documents from that period.

The writings of the great authors, thinkers, and historical figures—such people as Hawthorne, Melville, Abraham Lincoln, Emily Dickinson, George Eliot, Henry James, William James, Teddy Roosevelt, Benjamin Disraeli—they are not going to be lost; they continue to be reprinted and edited. Rather, we risk losing the materials around us that we take for granted. It could become impossible to look up a date of birth or the record of a real estate transaction in the local town hall or county registry. Already, few adults can read in the original the local newspaper issued on the date of their birth. Very possibly membership lists of the local church—certainly the sermons of the minister—are not going to be passed on to our descendants. Grandfather's correspondence will not, especially if grandfather was so fortunate as to have a secretary: she would have made carbon copies on the cheapest of paper. Becoming faded is the historical society's photograph of a carriage in front of the Victorian house. Open an old movie canister, and you might find a solid, gelatinous substance. The loss of such material would affect in some fashion almost everyone, for we all use or benefit from old documents in our lives. Scholars just do so more frequently and more directly.

Scholars are also the ones who particularly face the loss of what one might call the non-ordinary, albeit mundane printed material. Walk down a library's shelves and pull off a volume of French occasional verse published contemporaneously with the start of the Marshall Plan after World War II, the 1880 Yiddish guide for new immigrants to America, the pamphlet in support of free silver and Bryan in the presidential campaign of 1896, the proceedings of the conference of missionaries in Shanghai in 1906, the periodical produced by British prisoners in Germany in World War I, or, perhaps, the edition of Shakespeare with a scholar's notes and commentary. If you do this, you will probably find that the paper is brown, even if still intact. Then take it home and actually read every page. Look at the corners of the book; look in the gutters, especially if in order to take notes, you had to hold it open by putting another book on top. You will probably be the last person to take the book home; your successor, if the book is caught in time—and if libraries have enough money—will read it on a microfilm reader. If not caught and treated, society will lose millions of such items—each individual one not so important, but vital in their collectivity to continued exploration of the past.

It is estimated that the number of such books in the nation's libraries is more than 80 million—over 3 million of them at Harvard. Also at Harvard is a substantial

portion of the 2.5 billion pages in archives, about 120,000 feet of pages. And there are also—and threatened with destruction—photographs, prints, slides, tapes, etc., etc.; in the Harvard Theatre Collection alone are about 5 million such items.

The only way that we can economically pass on much of that material among which we now live is to copy the texts onto microfilm. Yet some records lose so much of their utility in another format that we must often try to retain the original. With some material we may have the option of storing it in a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment that will prolong its life, in the hope that other options will develop and that increased funds will be available.

The decisions that are made at Harvard will be shaped by a number of factors, among them availability of funds, both nationally and locally—and our perceptions about future funding; the strengths of Harvard's libraries vis-à-vis those of others, plus the preservation activities of other institutions; use patterns; bibliographic access; costs, including decision-making costs and capabilities; and the interrelationship between preservation activities and other goals of the libraries.

Absent from the above list is the criterion of importance. The members of the Task Group are not prepared to maintain that the publication of a school in Butte, Montana, is more important than one of a school in Utica, New York. We cannot argue that the Mongolian work is less or more important than the Portuguese. We are all too conscious that publishing in the area of Black Studies and Women's Studies has been a growth industry precisely because libraries had formerly neglected such materials. And we are aware that the interest in those materials cannot in and of itself be taken as a statement of importance, the elements of which we cannot describe without recourse to our personal views, which are, of course, those of individuals living in one small period of time, at one spot on the globe. Agreement as to what is important would only show that we are well-adjusted, acculturated products of the ideology of our time and place. We have not, however, sought that agreement, for we have instead agreed to reject the criterion of importance.

That means there is no single, overriding criterion on which to base the decisions that must be made. (Even if we were to believe that everything will be preserved, choices must be made about the order in which collections receive preservation attention.) The many factors mentioned above, in various mixtures, will weigh in preservation choices. Moreover, it seems prudent to recognize that both nationally and locally decisions will reflect many factors other than those mentioned above. One body of material might be filmed because an individual librarian is a successful fund raiser or because a scholar has a particular passion for a subject that leads to a bibliography. Some material will be filmed because it is in strong institutions; other records will be lost because they are in small or moribund ones. Sometimes decisions will be made because other goals—in the present or the future—will, it is anticipated, be served. Politics in the broad sense will not be absent from decision-making.

A rational plan can, however, be made. We need not surrender to nebulous grounds, to circumstance, to convenience, to fashion, to what is merely efficient. That does not mean that this report will dictate all future preservation work at Harvard. Increasing sophistication has characterized thinking about preservation during the last decade, and this report represents only a stage. Part of its utility will, in fact, lie in the degree to which it keeps the process going.