



"Section 4: The book collections: An overview of preservation issues" in "Preserving Harvard's retrospective collection"

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Section Four

The Book Collections: An Overview of Preservation Issues

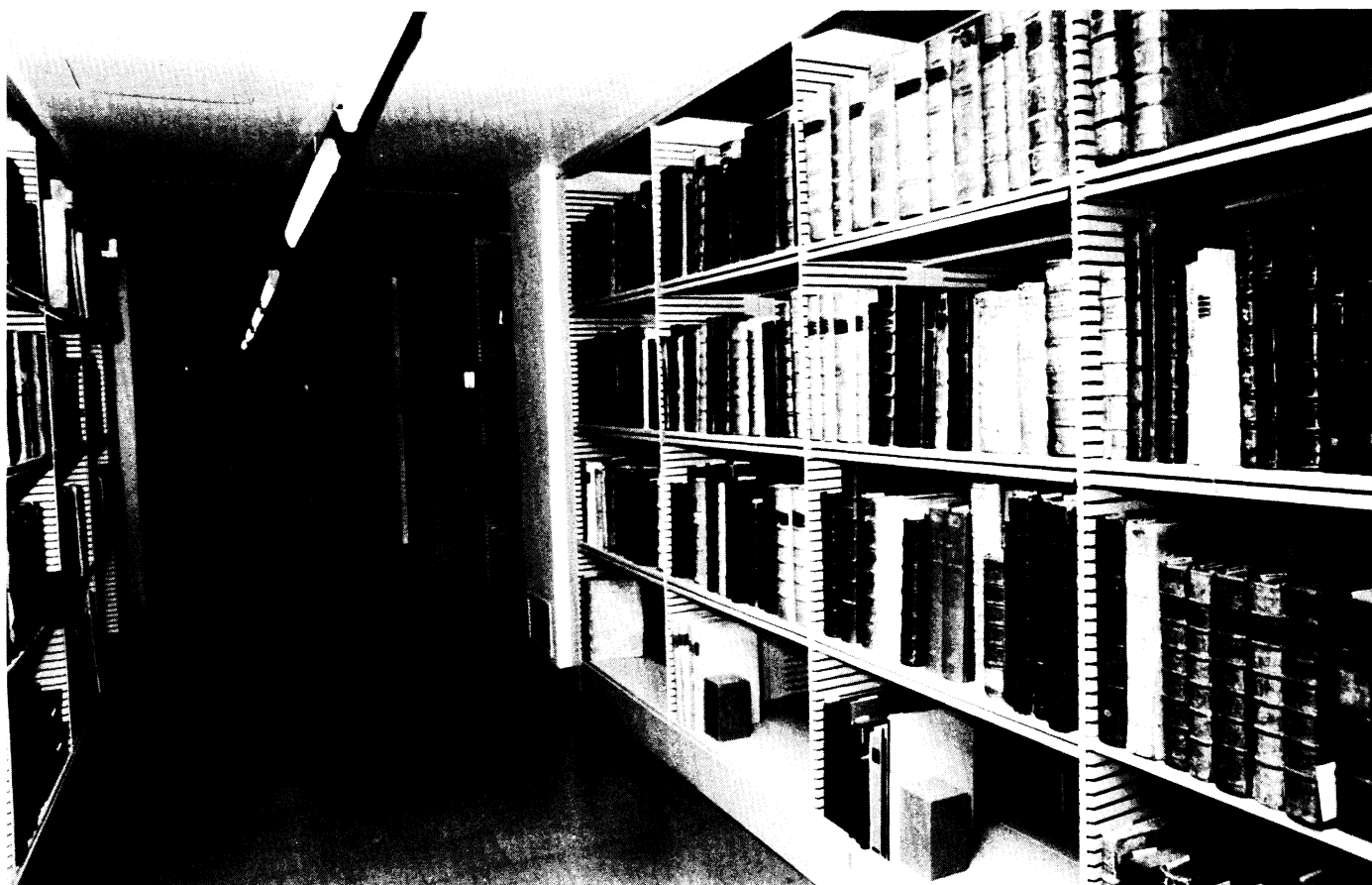
John Harvard's bequest in 1638 of approximately 400 volumes began the Harvard Library. Now, after 352 years, the collections contain more than twelve million volumes, a number that includes serials and pamphlets. There are also extensive holdings of manuscripts, archives, and visual materials. Each type of item has special problems, but all partake of the issues facing the book collections, a term used here to apply to printed, bound volumes that are not serials or pamphlets.

The production of books has undergone significant technological change over the centuries, and Harvard library collections contain every variety of book in every type of binding, from the one-of-a-kind bindings given early printed books to examples of high-speed continuous inline production. In addition, a significant number of Harvard's books have been bound and rebound over the centuries and their original physical format altered.

Each book exhibits its own history of use and, occasionally, of abuse. Materials acquired as part of collections reflect the care given them before they arrived at Harvard, and once here the storage environment and patterns of use—and all use does do some damage—further modifies the artifact. Regrettably, some materials, particularly those with illustrations, have suffered from deliberate mutilation, and the number of books defaced by handwritten comments grows ever larger. Besides careless handling, water, mold, or insects have also damaged numerous books, but the over-riding danger, known to all who use the stacks, is that resulting from the impermanence of paper produced since 1840. The quality of the paper means that many books cannot be used in their current condition, but must be repaired or replaced by a reprint, photocopy, or microfilm.

The needs of the physical items require conservation and maintenance, which should be carried out by professional collection conservators and by appropriately trained and supervised conservation technicians. They must have available a full range of conservation and preservation options, including repair, rebinding, and the making of protective enclosures. These are all relatively low-cost preservation options, and they are executed on a routine, albeit item-by-item basis.

They cannot, unfortunately, always make an item useful. If an item's condition is too deteriorated, a different and more costly decision-making routine is required. Bibliographic information must be gathered, additional editions and copies located, and a search made to determine replacement options: purchase of a reprint, production of a facsimile photocopy, microfilming, or perhaps even withdrawing the item from the collection. The final decision is made by a subject specialist



who judges the importance of the item against limited resources for replacement and reformatting.

These item-by-item preservation routines are in working order at Harvard, and they are sufficient to cope with individual items that have suffered damage—hundreds of individual items, thousands, even tens of thousands. But they cannot guarantee survival of the entire holdings. Our best hope of accomplishing that is to store of the collections in optimum environments, to deacidify on a large scale, and to provide item-by-item conservation treatment and reformatting. No option alone is adequate to the task.

The most important single measure is to store the collections under environmentally optimal conditions. Although that requires improving the conditions in the libraries on campus, it also means, in the absence of new space in Cambridge, greater use of the Harvard Depository in Southborough, thirty-five minutes from Harvard Yard. The environmental conditions in the Depository are better suited to preservation than those in buildings designed to accommodate people as well as inanimate objects. Storage at the Harvard Depository is also the most cost-effective preservation measure, though costs are not small. At least one faculty librarian is concerned that storage of an ever greater body of material at the Depository will come to result in an unacceptable percentage of the budget going to storage and retrieval charges.

A fundamental factor that stands in the way of increased use of offsite storage is the concept of the “integrity of the collections.” The majority view of the Task Group members is that the concept derives from the highly rational and effective

A view of rare book stacks in the Houghton Library. Environmental conditions for preservation of the collections in the Houghton Library were improved in 1990 during the first phase of renovation of Houghton's air handling and ventilation system.

way in which collections have been built in the post-World War II era. Bookselectors, combining knowledge of the booktrade, of scholarly trends, of the existing strengths and weaknesses, have built collections on the basis of an over-all vision, whether or not written. But the earlier historical part of this report demonstrates the importance of gifts and of special collections in the formation of the library before the establishment of book selector posts after the war. The collections are wonderful, but they do not partake of a mystical wholeness. Especially at Harvard, this most decentralized of libraries, the issues are above all practical ones.

Space—or funding for new space—is not available to house all of the collections together, in many cases not even those of individual faculties, let alone of the totality. The brittleness of paper means that inevitably much that once was physically on our bookshelves can no longer be. Major purchases of microfilms also mean that there is available here a great deal that never was on the shelves. Hundreds of thousands of books have been withdrawn from open shelves into rare book collections

The Harvard Depository, located 35 minutes from Cambridge in South-borough, Massachusetts, provides a low-cost, high-density optimal preservation environment for collections.



to insure their availability to future generations. The constraints of every classification scheme mean that books can only be in one place, though they might belong in several. New electronic and optical formats result in important materials being elsewhere than on shelves at all. Moreover, the increasingly interdisciplinary and sophisticated nature of use cause an ever greater divergence between the intellectual "collection" and its physical manifestation on the shelf.

Yet, every scholar wants at hand the book wanted when it is wanted. That has been one of the glories of Harvard, one of the factors that have attracted the faculty and scholarly staff to this particular spot. Improving bibliographic access (through retrospective conversion) and preservation "readiness" (the ability to treat materials quickly, on demand) can help in furthering that scholarly ideal. However the future of our collections as in-depth resources for research calls for much stronger measures to offset losses.

Needed is a more interactive preservation selection model. The priority for preservation of the book collections should be to develop a series of preservation selection strategies for distinct portions of the collections. By defining the categories of materials that can be stored offsite and those that should be retained onsite in their original format as part of a cohesive physical collection, we will be able to simplify and streamline the process of making individual preservation decisions. Such a selection will mean that scarce preservation dollars can go to the most crucial items, those expected to be heavily used. Lesser-used materials (including extra copies, other printings, less authoritative editions, and peripheral works), if stored under optimal preservation conditions at the Harvard Depository, will reduce the total number of items that must soon be given more expensive preservation treatment, such as deacidification and reformatting. In acquiring time, we also acquire at the very least added years over which to bring resources to bear on the problem.

Various steps can also be taken to lessen the adverse consequences of offsite storage. They will be considered elsewhere. At this place in the report, we wish, however, to emphasize a concept: Deterioration and space problems threaten library service by scattering materials. By defining those materials that can be maintained offsite in a lower temperature environment, we will, however, more easily be able to implement preservation activities for those higher priority research materials that must remain onsite to serve scholars.