



# "Section 7: Selection for preservation action" in "Preserving Harvard's retrospective collection"

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## *Section Seven* Selection in Action, or Further Decision-Making

**A**lthough section six considered certain criteria that would suggest the selection of one group of material or even one item over another for preservation treatment, the question remains as to whether selection is practical. The very first report on preservation microfilming, "The Preservation of Deteriorating Books," by Gordon Williams's Committee on the Preservation of Research Library Materials of the Association of Research Libraries (1965) stated that "everything" would have to be preserved because selection would cost more than it would to preserve what any practicable selection process would reject. We now, however, view the problem differently: the task is not to determine what to reject but what first to save. Machine-readable cataloging records have helped greatly in this refocusing of the problem, since they make possible preservation strategies other than filming or not filming. Machine-readable records, in contrast to catalog cards, can easily and inexpensively be altered to show a different location; they can also increase intellectual access. Both factors permit offsite storage under conditions that greatly prolong the life of materials, and that creates the possibility of future reconsideration of preservation options.

Another aspect that makes possible establishment of priorities is that we now have had for several decades professional book selectors, the first of whom was employed in Widener as recently as 1953-54. The book selectors have built up sufficient expertise that selection need not be solely on the basis of hard data laboriously gathered; it can be on the basis of the intuitive feeling that these librarians have acquired. Their role in establishing priorities is crucial.

### 7.1—THE METHODOLOGY OF SELECTION

The decentralization of the Harvard University Library means that for administrative reasons no one approach to selection for preservation can be universally applied in all libraries in all of the faculties. It is also desirable that there be no universal approach. The decisions should be made locally by the book selectors, subject specialists, and scholars who are responsible for the development of the collections. Those are also the individuals whose knowledge makes it possible to identify the collections needing preservation. The task group has, therefore, chosen to conduct a survey to inventory the materials most in need of preservation at Harvard. Within this survey, those most knowledgeable about the collections have the opportunity and the responsibility to identify materials as candidates for pres-

ervation. Criteria include most items found in Sections three, four, and six of this report. This is the first step in identifying collections in need of preservation. When those collections are identified, it will probably be true that in some of these collections virtually all of the materials are in need of preservation. In others, only a certain percentage may be in immediate need. Additionally, some of the collections will contain materials in need of differing types of preservation treatment (i.e., microfilming, deacidification, and other conservation treatments.)

Therefore, further analysis will probably be necessary to refine and further define the information provided in the inventory survey. Some of the collections identified as worthy of preservation will consist of hundreds of thousands of items. Some may consist of relatively few items. Therefore, not all methods of selection for preservation will be appropriate for all the individual collections. Appropriate measures may include item-by-item inspection on the shelves or identification of items as they are returned from circulation. Materials that are currently in storage (the New England Deposit Library and the Harvard Depository) should be considered and may need to be examined. Additionally, items may need to be selected with further thought to dates of publication, place of publication, or condition of material. The type of format and its vulnerability to loss of information will need to enter into the decision.

#### 7.2—THE ROLE OF RETROSPECTIVE CONVERSION

Retrospective conversion of the library's cataloging records is one of the most important preservation measures that could be undertaken, for it increases the freedom to choose among preservation options. It facilitates, for instance, taking inventories in the course of which appropriate decisions are made about filming,



*Staff at the Loeb Music Library are engaged in retrospective conversion of cataloging records for music scores, a project funded by the Department of Education, and conducted in cooperation with a number of other music libraries. Preservation of the scores through electronic digitization of images may be envisioned as a possible next phase of cooperation, whereby a scanned digital image could be disseminated over a computer network and printed at the requesting library. Pictured are (from left to right) Harry Stem, Terry Halco, and John Lynch.*

conservation treatment, storage, or even weeding; a record of preservation decisions and actions, including the fact that another library has preserved this item, can also be stored in the HOLLIS record, so that the information is subsequently available. Retrospective conversion may also reduce the need for physical browsing, a form of use that damages fragile material, though that reduction may be offset by the higher use that can accompany on-line records. Retrospective conversion makes it possible to manage the collections efficiently, i.e., to remove to storage, to recall from storage. Retrospective conversion, because it enhances access, reduces the connection between the physical location of an item and the ease of using it.

Whenever the library contributes to national preservation microfilming efforts, machine-readable records must always be made in national databases. Those records enable librarians to avoid unnecessary microfilming and make it possible for librarians and users to learn of the availability of material. At present making bibliographical records is an expensive part of preservation microfilming projects, and conversion is more expensive than it would be if carried out in the course of a retrospective conversion project. Retrospective conversion at the earliest possible moment would thus both reduce the costs of microfilming projects and the cost overall of conversion.