



# Conserve O Gram

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## Care And Security Of Rare Books

Rare books, as well as books and other library materials used in exhibits or furnishings in historic structures, are managed as part of the museum collection and require care and security equal to that provided for museum objects. See *Conserve O Gram* 19/1 for the criteria used to determine whether a book is rare and *Conserve O Gram* 19/3 for guidelines on the use and handling of rare books.

### *Housing the Collection*

When rare books are housed in equipment designed specifically for support and protection, wear and tear is decreased. When they are housed under proper environmental conditions, the rate of deterioration is slowed. Rare books should be stored in such a way to prevent abrasion and structural damage.

- Rare books must be secure, but they also must be accessible with proper control (see *Security Considerations* below). The best compromise between security and accessibility is locking glass-front bookcases. (See *Conserve O Gram* 4/1.)
- Metal shelving coated with a baked enamel finish is preferable to wood. If wooden shelving is used it should be sealed to prevent the migration of acids from the wood into the books. Use a water-based aliphatic urethane, such as Polyglase Waterborne Finish, or a clear two-part epoxy coating, e.g., Inner Protect 1000.® (**NOTE:** Since oak is the most acidic wood, it is generally avoided for library shelving.) Very old wooden shelving is probably sufficiently dried out and vapor-free, depending on the type of wood.
- Fragile rare books should be boxed for protection in custom-made book boxes that are sized to the book and constructed of acid-free materials. These boxes can be made in-house from pre-cut bond stock or purchased ready-made. Note that these boxes are not slipcases, which are containers that slide onto the book and leave the spine exposed. Slipcases should be avoided for rare books because they often lead to abrasion when inserting or removing the book. These acid-free containers open four flaps to envelope the book and are secured with either waxed string, velcro, or magnetic tape.
- Books should not slouch on the shelves. Large volumes over 18" high or with a spine wider than 3" should lie flat. The binding may not be able to support the book and the cover will warp, the pages separate, and the spine weaken. When these large volumes are laid flat, stack no more than three volumes. Lift off the top two volumes before removing the volume on the bottom.
- Books should not be packed too tightly on the shelves. They should be close enough to provide support to the other books, but loose enough to be removed without abrading the bindings when sliding them in and out. Bookends or other supports should be tall enough to prevent a book from leaning over the support.
- In most cases, books are arranged on shelves according to the classification number. However, tall volumes shelved next to short volumes have a tendency to warp and deform over time. For support, books should be grouped on shelves according to size, if this

will not disrupt the intellectual access to a collection. A book block, a sturdy book form made from archival materials, may be used to hold the place of an over- or under-sized rare book. The book block is labeled with the rare book's full citation and a note as to where the book has been placed for safe storage.

### ***Environmental Conditions***

Monitoring and controlling environmental conditions are also essential for reducing the threat of deterioration to rare books. Fluctuating temperature and relative humidity, light, dirt, microorganisms, insects and rodents are as harmful to books as they are to museum objects.

- The recommended temperature for storage of bound rare books is between 18°C and 21°C (65°F to 70°F). The recommended relative humidity (RH) is between 40%-55%. Low RH levels can make paper brittle. RH levels over 65% provide a favorable environment for mold and mildew growth and foxing of book pages.
  - Wide fluctuations in temperature and RH levels can be damaging to paper, leather bindings, and other materials. Attempt to maintain stable levels within the acceptable range, with no more than  $\pm 3\%$  RH fluctuation from the set point per month.
  - Shelving should be ventilated to prevent mold and mildew growth.
  - Ultraviolet light can break down paper and cloth fibers and visible light can fade colors. Install ultraviolet filters on fluorescent lights. Don't allow sunshine to fall on books. Keep light levels low whenever possible. Windows should be shaded or coated with an ultraviolet filtering film.
  - Air pollution is also harmful. If air pollution is a problem in the local area, install high-efficiency filters on the air-handling system
- and see that they are changed regularly. Consider using portable air cleaners, if necessary, especially if no air-handling system exists.
- Good housekeeping practices and routine inspections of areas where rare books are stored or exhibited will reduce the risk of pest infestation. See *NPS Museum Handbook*, Part I (Rev 9/90), Chapter 5.

### ***Preservation***

Follow these preventive conservation measures for rare books. For any conservation treatment question, seek the advice of a conservator.

- Do not repair books or paper using adhesive tape, glue, or similar approaches. Most tapes and glues will leave a residue that further damages the material, and some tapes yellow with age. Also, repairs made with most glues and tapes are not reversible, and therefore are not sound conservation practices.
- Dust jackets are usually removed from regular library books because they tend to tear and become ragged from use. Under humid conditions, mold may grow between the dust jacket and the book. Dust jackets, however, enhance a book's value and should be retained with rare books. Under acceptable environmental conditions, and low usage situations, they can be left on the book. If temperature and relative humidity cannot be maintained at appropriate levels, remove dust jackets and store them flat in shallow archival document cases.
- Do not attempt to treat leather bindings with oils. Some book dressings are inappropriate for some types of leathers. Always seek the assistance of a conservator for treating leather since ongoing research in this area results in continually changing recommendations. Books with flaking and powdering leather bindings (red rot) should be placed in a book box and examined by a conservator to determine treatment requirements.

## ***Binding***

When dealing with old and rare books, the question of rebinding usually arises, and there is a range of opinions on what to do. Some like to see bindings restored and as much of the original fabric retained as possible even though the cost can be considerable. Others are less concerned with preserving the original fabric than with making the book usable. In this situation a strong, inexpensive library buckram binding is often the answer. If the book is exhibitable or if it is an association copy (associated with a prominent person or event), consideration should be given to restoring the binding. On the other hand, if the book is not an association copy or candidate for exhibit, but will be heavily used, consider having the book duplicated either photographically or xerographically on acid-free paper. The copy then is used for reference, while the original can be rebound in its original boards and boxed in an acid-free container. Bear in mind that the *rare* value of the book will decrease significantly once a book is rebound.

If the book is not bindable because of brittle paper or narrow margins, if it is an association copy (*never* put a library binding on an association copy), or if there are philosophical objections to putting a library binding on an old book, it should be placed in a custom-made, acid-free book box.

If covers are detached from the body of the book, secure them with linen or white cotton non-adhesive tape. Never use rubber bands which will eventually decompose and damage the book.

## ***Pamphlets***

Valuable pamphlets, particularly those with exhibit potential, should be stored in the portfolio type of acid-free binder. Pamphlets that are not brittle and not rare can be put on the shelves in acid-free photo envelopes. Do not use these envelopes for rare or fragile materials because the contents can be damaged when inserting or removing them. Instead house

fragile or brittle materials in four-fold envelopes and boxes.

## ***Ephemera Found in Books***

Sometimes books are found with papers, pressed flowers, or other ephemera between the pages. Ephemera are potentially important since they may tell us about the owner's interests and reading or work habits. This material must be evaluated for its relevance and historical value and whether it should be left in the book. If the book is an association copy (e.g., from Carl Sandburg's collection) it is best to leave the item where it is found and document the location. It is also necessary to isolate the item from the pages by interleaving with acid-free tissue, or enclosing the item in an acid-free paper or polyester (e.g. Mylar®) envelope. If it is not possible to leave the item in the book, perhaps because its presence may damage the spine, remove it, file it separately, and document its original location.

## ***Picture Plates***

If a picture plate becomes detached from the page, remove it from the book and store it separately in acid-free materials. Document the origin of the picture plate so that the link with the book, as well as the location in that book, is never lost.

## ***Security Considerations***

Theft of rare books is an increasing problem. The following measures can help the rare book manager protect the collection.

- Make sure all rare books are properly identified and marked for ownership in pencil on the back of the title page near the binding at the bottom. Each book is unique, even if the only distinguishing mark is a smudge. When cataloging a rare book, it is important to identify the volume with enough detail so that, if stolen, it can be reclaimed as park property upon recovery. Books, including rare books, were originally issued in

quantity, with each individual volume identical to the next. The only way to legally prove ownership is to have a detailed physical description of a book on file.

- Librarians and book collectors are often hesitant to mark ownership on rare books. They feel that any mark defaces the book. However, a rare book recovered after theft is very difficult to return to the owner if there is no indication who that owner is. Write on the back of the title page in pencil any mark of ownership and any classification or accession number. Even if erased, sophisticated detection devices can still read the residue of the pencil mark.
- Rare book reading rooms must have controlled entrances and exits. Researchers must register on a form that records the users identification and the rare books used by the researcher, and that delineates the rules and procedures for using rare books, manuscripts and other closely controlled items. The researcher provides personal photographic identification and signs the form to indicate understanding and acceptance of the rules. Staff are on hand to supervise the use and assist the researcher.
- Researchers must not be allowed to carry briefcases, packages, overcoats, or other containers into the reading room.

### Sources

Rare book boxes, four-fold envelopes, and book blocks can be purchased from library and archival materials suppliers.

Polyglase Waterborne Finish is available through local hardware stores and distributors or from Camger Chemical Systems, Inc., 364 Main Street, Norfolk, MA 02056, (508) 528-5787.

Inner Protect 1000 is available from Interlock Yacht Finish, Courtaulds Coatings, Technical Division, 2270 Morris Avenue, Union, NJ 07083, (908) 686-1300 and McLean Brothers, 122 North Langley Road, P.O. Box 819, Glen Burnie, MD 21061, (301) 761-9200.

### References

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David Nathanson  
Librarian  
Harpers Ferry Center  
National Park Service  
Harpers Ferry, West Virginia 25425

Diane Vogt-O'Connor, Archivist, Curatorial Services Division, National Park Service, Washington, D.C. 20013, also contributed to the *Conserve O Gram*.

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