

# Preserving Public Records

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Public officials are bound by law to preserve the public records in their care. (A.R.S. §41-1347 & 1351) Over the last ten years, the staff of the Arizona State Archives has discovered historically significant records in an abandoned airport hanger, a tin shed, a frequently flooded basement, an attic, a condemned hospital and other substandard facilities. Many records were completely destroyed by water, mold and rats, while most of the rest required expensive conservation treatment.

Although providing a state-of-the-art storage facility can be expensive, adequate storage conditions are relatively easy to provide and inexpensive to maintain. Public records should be stored in an area with the following considerations in mind.

## **Security**

Elected officials should insure that public records are safely stored to prevent vandalism, theft and other unlawful acts. Although the public has the right to use almost all public records, access should be monitored to insure the integrity of the records.

## **Disaster and Accident Prevention**

Some buildings have a history of water leaks, electrical shorts and similar problems. These and other faults are a hazard to personnel and to everything within the building. They are accidents waiting to happen, and sooner or later they will occur. Risk management and fire officials can provide valuable insights to a building's vulnerability to a variety of weaknesses.

Common sense plays a critical role in preventing disasters and mishaps.

- Although unsightly, using duct tape is a cheap and easy repair for leaky windows. Shelving materials at least three inches off the floor will preclude most water damage from broken pipes.
- Using surge suppressors instead of extension cords will prevent many electrical fires, as will making sure that kitchen appliances and electrical equipment are properly maintained.
- Maintaining at least three feet of clear space around electrical panels will prevent fires in case of malfunction.

## **Temperature**

For every 9° increase in temperature, the expected life of paper decreases by more than half. In buildings without air conditioning, interior temperatures can easily go above 100° and literally bake the materials stored within. Although not ideal, a temperature comparable to that in a normal office, around 70°, will do much to insure the long term preservation of documents, bindings and other materials.

## **Humidity**

Mold and mildew become active when the relative humidity is high, about 65% and above. If uncontrolled, these fungi can literally destroy an entire collection. Air conditioning removes excess moisture in the air quite efficiently, so excessive relative humidity is seldom a problem.

Evaporative coolers, on the other hand, add moisture to a building, so records stored within must be monitored more carefully. Stagnant air pockets are especially susceptible to an infestation, but portable fans help maintain good circulation.

## **Air Quality**

Air pollution, no matter its origin, can severely damage books, papers and photos. Air pollution usually contains many gases which combine with water to form acids that eat everything from paper to bronze

statues. By properly maintaining air conditioning filters and regularly cleaning materials with non-oily dust cloths, much of this type of damage can be avoided.

### **Light**

All light damages paper and photographs to some degree, so they should ideally be stored in a dark or dimly lit area. Direct sunlight on valued materials must be avoided, because it causes severe damage very quickly, as witnessed by a newspaper that is left outside for only one day.

### **Handling**

Natural oils on hands transfer to documents and leave permanent oily spots. At the very least, researchers and staff should make sure their hands are clean before using public records. Inexpensive gloves available at photo stores will provide additional protection. If materials are to be handled frequently, photocopies will save the originals from being inadvertently damaged.

### **Storage Materials**

Common cardboard boxes and file folders usually contain acids that contaminate historical materials, so they should be avoided. Several companies provide a wide variety of archival boxes and enclosures for all types of records, and a modest investment will add considerably to the expected life of family records. Such containers provide many benefits by keeping materials in the dark, by preventing contamination by dust and pollution, and by providing protection in case of water leaks.

### **Additional Information**

For additional information, please contact the preservation staff of the Arizona State Archives, (602) 926-3720. The Preservation Officer provides free consultations and referrals on preservation topics and is also available for workshops and presentations.