

Old-Time New England Primer of Preservation

P is for PAPER

By ROBERT W. LOVETT

I WOULD like to divide this subject into two parts: What to preserve, and How to preserve it. We all know people who save everything, even to the newspapers, brown paper, and bits of string of the woman in a recent *New Yorker* story. There are also people who make a virtue of saving nothing; and perhaps this era of small homes and apartments gives them encouragement. The happy medium of saving with discrimination is what we would encourage. If families and firms in the past had not saved a good deal we librarians and manuscript collectors would today be much poorer. And so would the scholars, who are eager to make use of these materials.

Some people may object that it is only famous people whose papers should be saved. But scholars are interested in the average person too. Some people would save only the choice bits, the treasure pieces, but often the whole tells more to the scholar than the parts. A long series of household accounts would have more value to the historian than a volume for a single year, or even a half dozen scattered years.

To be more specific, I might suggest that all manuscripts dating before 1865

should be preserved, at least until some expert had a chance to look at them before disposal. What are the types of record material which one may encounter? Personal papers, or those of a family too, might include the following: legal documents, largely relating to property, such as deeds, wills, and the like; such personal documents as diplomas and certificates; correspondence, including letters both to and from the individual or family members; financial records; occupational papers, though these may fall in the category of business records, referred to below; records pertaining to membership in societies and organizations; and diaries. A word or two about the latter: even the most routine diaries may include comments on local events of interest to the local historian, and there is a branch of the Weather Bureau which is interested in those purely weather diaries which our ancestors liked to keep.

Among family memorabilia one may find scrapbooks of clippings and albums of photographs. Since these present special problems, I wish to consider them also from the point of view of How to preserve. Unless the scrapbook is built around one unified topic of considerable significance, it is probably not worth preserving. Sometimes our ancestors used older record books in which to mount clippings which we may now wish to remove. This takes time, but it can be done by use of a solvent marketed under the name Quik.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article by Robert W. Lovett, Curator of Archives and Manuscripts at the Harvard Business School, formed a part of his talk to Society members at the Harrison Gray Otis House on March 20, 1963.

Since the effect of this on paper is still being tested, it would be well not to use it on material of great monetary or sentimental value. The best ways to preserve clippings themselves are either to paste them on a mount, pressing them until flat; or to have them laminated. To be of value, both clippings and pictures should be dated, and the latter identified. If desired for display, pictures may be kept in the glossy envelopes and albums sold for the purpose. But it is better to file them in acid-free folders in a box or suitable container. Framed pictures are easier to handle, and take less room, if removed from their frames; and it should be remembered that any picture or document, if framed and hanging in sunlight for too long a time, will fade.

Perhaps an individual may have been secretary of an organization; if so, his papers may include the minutes, correspondence, and financial records. These should be preserved, and there may well be a library or historical society anxious to obtain them. Business records may also be found; though, since they are so much more voluminous, they are likely to be encountered on the premises of the firm. But sometimes an owner takes the records with him, and we have found such papers stored in a barn in Newton and in similar spots. Because of their bulk, and the necessity of selection, it is well to call in an institutional collector. We at Baker Library would be interested in hearing of the existence of such material. If you are doubtful about the value of books or manuscripts in your possession, I suggest you call in an expert; either a dealer, whom you would probably have to pay, or a librarian, whom you might get for nothing! And if you have material which you think may be of interest, yet you feel you cannot attempt to preserve it or make

it available, I hope you will consider a gift to or deposit in a likely institution. I have already hinted at some of the principles of arrangement. In the case of papers, the archival rules: do not mix collections, and follow the original order where possible, are still valid. Material in series should be kept thus. This is especially significant in the case of institutional, society, or business records. Correspondence may be arranged either chronologically or alphabetically by writer of the letter. In general, the chronological arrangement is more foolproof and probably of more use to the outside scholar. Calendaring of each document is a possibility—that is, a date listing, with a summary of content and of persons concerned, but it is time-consuming and little practiced now. However, it would be helpful to the user—and also for insurance purposes—to draw up an inventory of the papers—series by series, if voluminous; document by document, if not too large.

Now we come to physical care, and again, first some general principles. I would like to put in a plea for common sense; at the start it is often better to do nothing except prevent further deterioration than to make hasty and perhaps injurious repairs. Any repair should be of a sort which could be removed, without permanent injury to the item; and any repair material should be chemically inert, so that it will not further endanger the item on which it is used. One should distinguish between methods suitable for repair of objects not of permanent value and those designed for repair of invaluable items; I shall try so to distinguish in what follows. Old documents, especially those before 1830 or 1850, are likely to be tough and can stand quite a bit of neglect.

We should not overlook the obvious procedures, such as keeping material free from dust, from too much heat or dryness, and from too much moisture. The ideal is air conditioning, to keep the temperature at a range of 65° to 75°, the humidity about 50°, and the air free from dust and acids. Few homes are completely air-conditioned the year round, so we should remember that conditions which are good for humans are also good for books and papers. If the air is too dry, there are fairly simple means of adding moisture, and inexpensive instruments to measure the result. If it is too damp, a dehumidifier may be acquired; this runs by electricity, and provision must be made for removal of excess water. In a small area, bundles containing anhydrous calcium chloride may be hung; when damp, they may be heated, dried out, and re-used. Good housekeeping will control not only dust but also insects, such as silverfish, drug store beetles, and even crickets, which might feed on paper. If some are found, chlordane may be used, provided there are no children or pets around.

Suppose one has received a collection which has been in an attic or cellar for some time. How can one go about putting it in condition? First of all, dust and dirt should be removed. For books, a vacuum if used carefully, is satisfactory; but care is necessary or it could do more harm than good. Papers earlier than 1830 or so may be wiped with a damp cloth, since inks before that period do not run. If there is any doubt, a small segment may be tested beforehand. An art gum eraser can be useful for cleaning. If mold is found, the organisms may be killed by wiping the affected piece with a solution of copper sulphate. I am told that chloromine-T helps to control the reddish dis-

coloration known as foxing. If so-called scotch tape has earlier been used for repair, it may be removed by hexane and toluene. But permanent damage to the document is likely to result from long exposure to ordinary scotch tape.

Frequently letters and receipted bills are found folded, perhaps tied with pink ribbon. These should be unfolded, to prevent tears, and clips and pins should be removed to prevent rust. Sometimes papers may need to be flattened; earlier ones can be put between dampened blotters in a press without damage. They could then be pressed further or even ironed dry, if a protective sheet is placed between the iron and the document. Paper which has aged may even be resized; and penciled notes or carbon copies may be fixed by means of an acetate spray or a starch bath.

Perhaps some of your documents will be found to be torn and in need of mending. If the tear is a small one and the reverse side is blank, a reinforcement can be pasted on. It might be well to keep on hand some scraps of old paper for this purpose, so that the repair can match the original as closely as possible. A good commercial paste, including wall-paper paste, can be used, provided it is not acid. Barrow suggests paste be made fresh each day with flour free from alum. A piece of plate glass makes a good surface for applying the paste; an old telephone book is also handy, for the pages can be discarded as they become daubed with paste.

If the document bears writing or print on both sides, your job is complicated. But if the tear is small, you can use a slightly larger piece of tissue, applied as above. When the paste has dried, you can carefully remove the excess tissue by pulling toward the center of the tear;

the result is barely noticeable. For very valuable documents which are in bad condition, silking or lamination are recommended. The former can be done by an amateur, with some instruction. A sandwich is made of a piece of chiffon or Japanese tissue, the document, and another piece of chiffon. Each of these is pasted in turn and the whole put in a press. It might be well to photograph valuable documents before the treatment is done, since some loss of clarity results. Silking helps to preserve the document, but it does not really strengthen it, and the tissue itself may deteriorate in time. The more recent method is lamination, in which sheets of cellulose acetate are pressed into the document under heat and pressure. There are commercial firms which are prepared to do this; one, Barrow, gives the document an acid-free bath first, so that further deterioration is reduced. Commercial home laminators are well suited to handling clippings, passport photographs, and the like. Pressure-sensitive materials, whether in sheet or tape form, have not yet been sufficiently tested to warrant their use on items of considerable value. The new scotch magic-mend tape appears to work well for minor repairs, but its makers admit that it cannot be removed without damage, in case the document is to be laminated. But if your criteria is removal of the repair without damage, then lamination itself should be questioned. We may have to compromise our standards, if the document is falling apart or in danger of disintegration.

Documents ready for boxing or filing may best be placed in folders; acid free folders which will not injure the contents are made by the Hollinger Company. The same Company makes con-

venient boxes; they may be obtained in both standard and legal sizes. Some people recommend filing flat rather than vertically, but if sagging is prevented, the latter is satisfactory. Large pieces, such as broadsides or prints, should be placed in folders or between sheets of white paper and filed flat. Large maps, which are mounted on cloth, may be kept rolled. If the papers are voluminous and inexpensive containers are desired, cardboard cartons are available. They hold about a third of a file drawer, can be lifted by one person, and can be stacked on top of each other.

I have said that material exists to be used, but use itself can bring dangers. No book or document should be exposed to sunlight any longer than necessary; thus exhibits, unless the item is protected by a filter, should be limited to no longer than a month. I would hope it need not be stressed that books and documents should be handled carefully. If an item is very fragile, yet is likely to be consulted frequently, a photocopy should be considered; xerox is an excellent modern copying device. An entire collection, if valuable, may be placed on microfilm and the film stored in a separate safe place.

A present-day authority on repair of documents has written: "Most records that are on good paper and in a fair state of preservation will continue for an indefinite period without perceptible deterioration if properly stored and carefully handled." * It seems to me that we come back to common sense: to do what is sensible and within our capacity; and when we come to something we cannot handle, to call in the experts.

* Adelaide E. Minogue, *The Repair and Preservation of Records*. Washington, D. C., The National Archives, 1943.