

Holdings Maintenance at the U.S. National Archives:

An Introduction

The National Archives places strong emphasis on holdings maintenance as one important aspect of a systematic approach to preservation of the materials in its custody. Holdings maintenance is the term used to describe those preservation actions that are designed to prolong the useful life of records and to reduce or defer the need for laboratory treatment by improving the physical storage environment. These actions include replacing acidic storage materials such as boxes and file folders with materials of known quality that meet National Archives specifications, improving shelving practices, removing damaging fasteners, reproducing unstable materials such as Thermofax copies onto stable replacement materials, and dusting boxes and shelves.

The groups of records selected for holdings maintenance projects are chosen after weighing a variety of archival considerations, including intrinsic value, condition, and anticipated use of the records. In some instances it may be appropriate to do no more than rebox, or refolder and rebox a records series; in other cases, it will be appropriate to carry out the complete range of holdings maintenance actions. Such decisions reflect the informed judgment of archivists (who identify and plan holdings maintenance projects) and conservators (who consult regarding the condition and physical needs of records). The guidelines are intended to instruct archival staff in a full range of advisable preservation actions short of laboratory treatment. They are not meant to be hard-and-fast rules but rather a representation of the best practice for most situations. Common sense will reveal exceptions, as will archival judgments about the use, intrinsic value, condition, and space available for storage of the records being considered. The guidelines were developed to supplement training for non-conservation staff who perform holdings maintenance tasks. They reflect the collective insights of archivists, conservators, and managers of the National Archives.

When specific questions arise about the appropriateness of a course of action outlined in the guidelines, or when a situation occurs that does not seem to be covered, staff should consult the supervisor of the project, who will, if necessary, seek advice from conservators. Preservation is a partnership; it works best when there is active communication between archivists and conservators.

Appended to the guidelines is a list of basic materials and supplies needed to carry out holdings maintenance projects. The list does not include specific brand names or sources, because vendors do not always stock the same products, and because suppliers may change the basic composition of items they manufacture. Materials purchased for holdings maintenance should be evaluated to assure that they meet archival standards.

The following preservation procedures should be followed when implementing holdings maintenance actions. They will also provide a framework for basic preservation measures that can be incorporated into arrangement and description projects, preparation of records for microfilming, and other archival projects.