

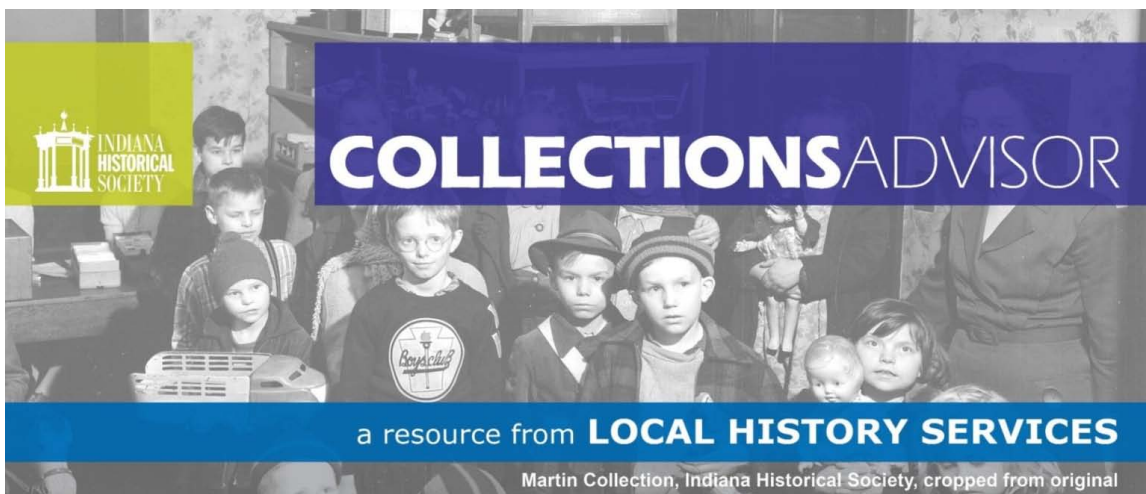


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Collections Advisor has a new look!

If you have any questions, email collectionsadvisor@indianahistory.org.

Caring for Books

Kathy Lechuga

Book conservator, Indiana Historical Society

Museums, libraries and archives have collections of books, papers and photographs they've acquired over the years. In order to preserve these items for future generations, one of the most important things we can do is store and handle them properly to reduce the risk of damage and slow down the rate of deterioration. This article provides some tips and best practices for storing books and other bound items, however, many of these guidelines are applicable for storing other types of cultural materials as well.

Environment

One of the leading causes of damage to collection items is poor environment and storage conditions. The best environment to store your materials is one that is dry, cool and stable with good air circulation and minimal light exposure. Storing books in attics, basements or outdoor sheds is less than ideal as the temperature and humidity of these spaces is typically uncontrolled and prone to wide fluctuations which can lead to damage. In addition, these locations are susceptible to flooding, leaks and pest infestations much more readily than other spaces throughout the building.

A more ideal environment for storing your bound items would be in an area that can be maintained at a temperature around 70 degrees Fahrenheit and 50- to 55-percent RH (relative humidity), typical ranges for most living spaces. Ensure there is adequate air circulation to prevent areas of stagnant air and dampness which could lead to mold growth. When selecting storage locations for your collection materials, make sure you choose a space away from air vents, water sources and preferably away from exterior walls to prevent damage or possible mold growth from excessive moisture. Try to minimize as much light exposure as possible and strive to prevent direct light exposure altogether. Light can damage books by causing binding elements to weaken, fade and change color.

Ideal conditions cannot always be achieved but following the



This collection of Civil War letters was destroyed by subterranean termites due to improper storage. The damage is so extreme and pervasive that these materials cannot be salvaged.

Indiana Historical Society



Two methods for safely removing books from a shelf.

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above guidelines and thinking about common-sense ways to prevent damage through proper storage can greatly improve the long-term preservation of books.

Storage

When choosing bookshelves, it is important that shelves are wide enough to adequately support the entire book so it doesn't hang over the edge of the shelf. Books should be stored upright with similarly sized volumes next to each other. Books that are very heavy or large should be stored flat on the shelf. If that is not possible, they should be stored with their spines on the shelf. This is to prevent text block sag which occurs when gravity pulls on a heavy text block causing it to sag and eventually tear itself out of its cover. Books should be prevented from leaning by either shelving to fill up an entire row snugly or by using book ends. If using book ends, make sure they have smooth surfaces with broad edges to minimize any possible abrasion to bindings.

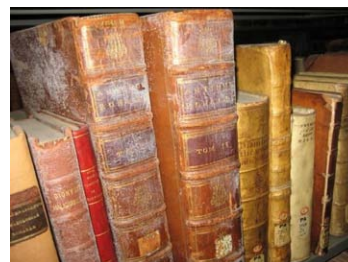
Many organizations use wooden bookshelves and, while aesthetically pleasing, they can contribute to the degradation of books. Wood, wood composites, coatings and adhesives can release acidic and other chemical compounds that can damage the books stored on them. One solution to minimize the amount of chemical off-gassing is the use of rag mat board or acid free, alkaline-buffered board liners placed on the shelves. Lining the shelves will not entirely block the chemical compounds, but it will reduce the amount that books come in contact with. Some alternatives to wood shelving units are glass or metal shelves, particularly powder-coated steel and anodized aluminum. See the article *Storage Furniture: A Brief Review of Current Options* published on the NEDCC's website and linked to at the end of this publication for more information about shelving furniture.

Handling

When touching books, it is important to have clean hands to reduce the transfer of finger oils and dirt which could cause staining or damage. There are two main ways in which to properly remove a book off of a shelf. The first is by placing a finger on the top edge of the pages and tipping the book back off the shelf. The second method is by pushing the books next to the one you want to remove back into the shelf exposing the spine. Grasp the book on either side of the spine and pull it off the shelf. Do not pull a book off the shelf by pulling on the headcap of the binding as this can cause damage and tearing. When reading a book, especially older books, it is important to remember to be gentle when opening it. Do not force the opening as this can cause the binding and/or text block to break. Ideally, both boards should be supported at a comfortable opening unique to each individual binding. Turn the pages carefully to reduce the risk of tearing. Page turners can be used which can be made of slips of stiff paper used to lift the page edges.

Cleaning

In order to discourage pests and reduce the risk of damage it is important to periodically clean your collection by gentle dusting. Magnetic cloths can be used on books with very smooth edges that can be held together tightly to prevent dirt and dust from becoming embedded in the paper fibers. Gentle vacuuming of the edges of books is an alternative to using magnetic cloths and most appropriate for books with deckled edges. The use of leather dressings and other leather lubricants was once considered necessary for keeping old leather volumes supple and in good condition. In fact, the opposite is true as leather dressings can cause leather to become more brittle over time and create the presence of "spew" or "bloom" on the surface of the bindings.



The spew appears as the white, waxy-looking residue on the bindings. A tell tale sign that this is not a mold infestation is that adjacent books are not contaminated and the residue is localized on the leather areas of the bindings.
University of Cincinnati Libraries

Leather spew and bloom occurs when fatty components in leather dressings migrate to the surface of the leather upon aging. Deposits can look like gloppy white or yellow particles or even crystals and are often times mistaken for mold.

Following the above guidelines or at least implementing several of them will help preserve and protect your books. However, if you have any damaged items in your collection, seek the professional advice of a conservator before attempting any repairs as these could cause more harm than if nothing was done at all. If treatment is not an option, housing a damaged item in a protective enclosure constructed from stable, high-quality materials is a good alternative.

Resources

NEDCC (Northeast Document Conservation Center) preservation resources

- [Overview of Resources](#)
- [Preservation Leaflets](#)
- [Storage Furniture: A Brief Review of Current Options](#)
- [Storage Enclosures for Books and Artifacts on Paper](#)

AIC (American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works)

- [Caring for Your Treasures](#)

Heritage Preservation

- [Resources for Protecting and Saving Family Treasures and Historic Properties](#)



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