





# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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## SHOW YOUR COLLECTION SOME LOVE: WORKING WITH CONSERVATORS

By Karen DePauw, coordinator, IHS Local History Services

When I envision conservators, I picture men and women in lab coats and gloves in stark silver and white rooms working on priceless historical artifacts. So often when speaking with organizations doing exhibits or collections care, we urge them to "talk to a conservator." But, if the picture in your head is the same as the one in mine, this might feel like a very intimidating prospect. What happens when something is sent to a conservator? Can I just pick up the phone and call them? And, most importantly, how do I find one?



Indiana Historical Society Conservation Lab.

Here is what to expect when you need to show your collection some love.

### Step 1: Find a conservator.

The main listing of conservators in the U.S. who do work for hire (i.e., are not attached to an institution for the expressed purpose of conserving that institution's collection) can be found on the website of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. The Indiana Historical Society also keeps an online list of Indiana-based conservators.

### Step 2: Call the conservator.

The best place to start is with a simple phone call. Explain your item and its needs as best you can. This initial conversation will help identify a few key things:

- \* Does this conservator do the type of work you need?
- \* Does the conservator have time to take on this work in the amount of time you need it done? (an upcoming exhibit deadline for the object may be harder to work around than an object that just needs conserved without a required deadline, so it is very important to let the conservator know of any timeline needs)
- \* What is the cost of a conservation assessment and treatment proposal? (more on those in a



### ONLINE RESOURCES

[Conservator List](#)  
(Indiana Historical Society)

[Find A Conservator](#)  
(American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works)

[Midwest Regional Conservation Guild](#)

minute)

\* Can the object be shipped or is in-person delivery required?

\* Who is responsible for insuring the object while it is at conservation and in transit to and from the conservator?

### Step 3: Get the object and conservator in the same room.

How this happens depends on a few things. First, the answer to the question regarding whether or not the conservator requires the object be delivered in-person or can be shipped. If possible, it is always preferred to hand deliver the object to the conservation lab, as this is generally the safest mode of transportation as the item is in the museum's care for the entire time. If, however, the item must be shipped, as is often necessary when the conservator is not nearby, make sure to pack it carefully to protect from breakage, weather, and any other potential hazards. Make sure all necessary insurance on the object is in place (again, what this means will depend on the answer provided in step 2).

### Step 4: The conservation assessment and treatment proposal.

Before any work is done on the item, the conservator will closely examine it and make a suggestion for treatment. There is usually a set fee for a treatment proposal as this takes time from the conservator. The cost of the proposal is generally owed upon completion regardless of whether or not the owner decides to go through with any of the proposed treatments. The treatment proposal is sent to the owner and should include:

- \* a breakdown of the recommended treatment procedures and their estimated total cost, which allows the owner to pick and choose if finances are tight or if a more aggressive treatment is proposed than what the owner is comfortable with at the time. For instance, the conservator may suggest a wedding dress be wet cleaned and have the fraying hem encased, but the owner decides just to have the fraying hem dealt with and forgo the wet cleaning for the time being. These decisions can sometimes result in a conversation with the conservator to determine what the high-priority issues are or if one treatment cannot be done without another.
- \* a cost breakdown of supplies and labor.
- \* photographs of the damaged areas being proposed for treatment.
- \* and an estimated timeline for completion. Many conservators will create a timeline not based on dates, rather spans of time, such as six months after treatment is approved instead of June 22. This gives the conservator some wiggle room in case the owner of the object is slow to respond to the treatment proposal.



Conservation in progress at the Indiana Historical Society Conservation Lab.

### Step 5: Approval of treatment proposal, signing of a contract and paying any required pre-payments.

Some conservators combine the contract and treatment proposal and therefore approving the treatment proposal constitutes a signing of the contract. Whether a separate document or a combined document, make sure to fully understand what will happen with the object once treatment is approved.

### Step 6: The conservator performs the treatment.

Stay in contact with the conservator throughout the treatment process. Touching base once towards the middle of the proposed timeline and towards the end help to keep the owner

informed. Many conservators will initiate these updates, particularly if a complication has arisen, but it is never a bad idea to make contact once or twice to ensure there are no complications and the timeline is still accurate.

### Step 7: The object is returned to the owner with final payment due.

When the conservation is complete, the object is returned to the owner in an agreed upon fashion (whether the owner picks it up on site or the conservator ships it). The final payment is generally due at this time. Some conservators will also include a final treatment report and cost, especially if any treatments were changed or abandoned during the conservation process.

### Step 8: Preventative care of the object.

Once the time and resources have been put into conserving an object, it is important to continue to care for the item once back in the museum. Make sure to follow best practices for storage and display to the best of the museum's ability. This preventative care will help keep the object from needing conservation again due to neglect or misuse.

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[Local History Services](#)

Indiana Historical Society, 450 West Ohio Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202  
(317) 232-1882 | [localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org](mailto:localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org)



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