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SURFACE CLEANING DOCUMENTS

By Stephanie Gowler, paper conservator, IHS

WHY CLEAN A DOCUMENT?

Surface cleaning is a technique used to remove soils, grime, dust, insect droppings and other surface deposits from an object. Cleaning historic documents and books rarely means that they will look shiny and new again. While surface cleaning will often brighten paper, the primary goal is to remove soot, dust and particles that could transfer onto your hands and other documents. Soils are acidic, abrasive and attractive to pests - all of which are good reasons to remove them if possible.

SHOULD THE ITEM BE CLEANED?

Surface cleaning is recommended for printed or manuscript paper items - like letters, maps, posters, certificates - as well as books. Surface cleaning will be most effective on soot and grime, which is usually light gray or black in appearance; papers that appear yellowed or brown have likely been stained by other means (like hand oils, acid transfer stains and foxing) and may not respond to surface cleaning.

WHEN NOT TO CLEAN

- Works on paper such as pastel, chalk, charcoal or pencil drawings should never be surface cleaned, as permanent damage to the image may result.
- Photograph emulsions (the image layer) are especially fragile and chemically sensitive. Fragile or damaged photographs, especially those with flaking or cracked emulsion, should not be surface cleaned except by a professional conservator. **Never surface clean a tintype photograph**, even if it appears stable - the emulsion layer is extremely easy to scratch, even with a very soft brush.
- **If you suspect your item is moldy, contact a professional conservator or disaster-recovery vendor.** Mold needs to be deactivated before it can be safely surface cleaned and requires special precautions to avoid spreading spores.

ONLINE RESOURCES

[Preservation Leaflet 3.8
Emergency Salvage of
Moldy Books and Papers](#)
(Northeast Document
Conservation Center)

[Preservation Leaflet 7.2
Surface Cleaning of
Paper](#)
(Northeast Document
Conservation Center)

[Absorene Dry Cleaning
Sponge](#)
(Gaylord)

FROM OUR LENDING RESOURCE CENTER

[The Care of Fine Books](#)
(Jane Greenfield)

UPCOMING TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

[How to Change a
Lightbulb](#)
Nov. 21 -
Connecting to
Collections webinar.



Supplies for document cleaning. Left to right: natural bristle brush, cosmetic sponge, soiled document, document cleaning pad, soot sponge, grated eraser sponge and soft bristle brush.

PREPARE TO CLEAN

Before surface cleaning, familiarize yourself with the potential vulnerabilities of the document you are about to clean. Closely examine both front and back and ask yourself the following questions:

- Are corners or portions of the document folded? If so, you'll want to carefully unfold them in order to clean in the creases. [Refer to Collections Advisor article: [How to Humidify and Flatten Folded Documents](#)]
- Are there tears in the documents? The motion of using a cleaning pad or eraser can make tears larger, so take extra care in these areas.
- Is the paper brittle and crumbly at the edges? Brittle paper can tear very easily, so surface cleaning should be minimal (and may not even be possible).
- Are there pencil marks, colored pigments or handwritten inks that might flake or smudge during cleaning? Sometimes surface cleaning can only happen in the margins or areas between and around the media.

Prepare a large, clean, smooth surface to work on. Cover it with a sheet of kraft paper or blank newsprint; as this paper gets soiled, replace it with a fresh sheet. Wash and dry your hands; do not apply lotion before working with historic documents. Gloves are not necessary - and wearing them can cause further damage if they don't properly fit your hands - though if the document is extremely dirty, or if you're working with a photograph, you should wear clean, snug-fitting nitrile (or cotton) gloves.

STEP ONE: BRUSH

Your first step should be to remove loose dirt and debris with a **soft natural bristle brush**, like those used for painting or cosmetics. If it's soft enough to use on your face, it's soft enough for historic documents.

Securing the document in place with one hand, brush from the interior of the document towards the outer edges, avoiding areas with flaky media. If the paper is torn, brush in the direction of the tear - not perpendicularly across it - from the center to the edge of the page.



Using a cosmetic sponge to clean the edges of a book.

STEP TWO: CLEANING SPONGES AND ERASERS

If there is embedded grime or soot that isn't moved by simply brushing, it's time to bring out the cleaning sponges.

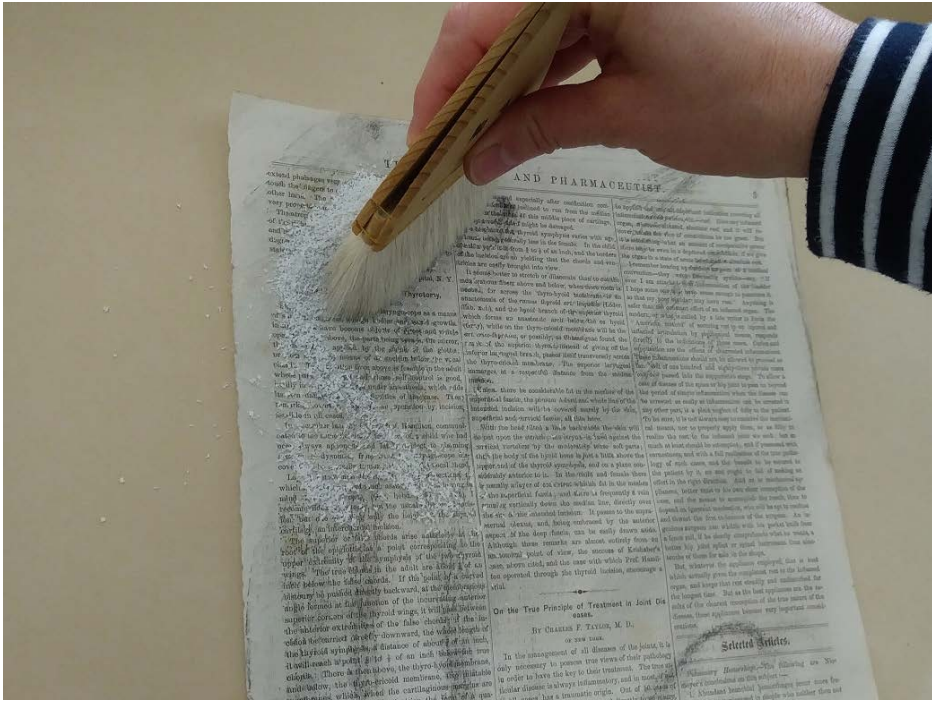
Cosmetic sponge wedges are a gentle and inexpensive way to remove soot and grime from paper documents, stable photographs, and book covers. As with brushes, if a make-up sponge is gentle enough for your face, it's gentle enough for your document! With a light touch, move a clean, dry sponge in a blotting motion or slight pulling motion across the soiled area of the paper; do not rub back and forth. Work in short, random strokes to avoid a pattern of erased lines. Latex-free makeup sponges are easily purchased at your local drugstore and can be used multiple times - simply hand-wash in mild detergent, thoroughly rinse in water, and allow to completely dry before using again.

Soot sponges, or dry-cleaning sponges, are vulcanized rubber erasers that work especially well on very sooty books and more robust papers. They can be cut to various shapes and sizes, and as the sponge becomes dirty the soiled areas can be cut away to reveal a clean surface. Use them in the same manner as cosmetic sponges. These sponges are for surface use only and are not the same as those sold as chemical sponges.



Cleaning soot with eraser crumbs.

In most cases, the combination of a soft brush and cleaning sponge will be enough to remove most of the soot and grime from your paper. But for somewhat more aggressive cleaning, move on to the **document cleaning pad**. Squeeze the pad to release tiny eraser granules and rub them over the surface of the paper with the pad. After you've cleaned a document, you'll want to remove the remaining eraser granules with a soft brush. **Do not use document cleaning pads on photographs.** Use caution when using them on books - the small particles can easily fall into the gutter or spine area and may be difficult or impossible to remove.



Gently brushing away the soot.

Using grated eraser crumbs, which are made from non-colored Staedtler Mars Plastic Eraser and can be purchased from conservation suppliers or DIYed with a (clean) parmesan cheese grater, is another way to provide overall cleaning to large, flat paper documents like maps, broadsides and certificates. The crumbs can be sprinkled onto the document, rubbed in a gentle circular motion with your fingers and then brushed away. Do not use erasers in their block form - they can be abrasive and there is a risk of over-cleaning.

CONCLUSION

Surface cleaning can benefit your historic books and documents by improving their appearance and preventing ongoing damage caused by dirt, dust and soot. As always, when doing actual treatment on an object, contact a professional conservator with any questions or concerns.

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