

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

A RESOURCE FROM IHS LOCAL HISTORY SERVICES

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CONDITION ISSUES: STRUCTURAL VERSUS COSMETIC

By Karen DePauw, manager, IHS Local History Services

As preservers of history and the objects that others leave behind, it is easy to get distracted by a desire for those objects to be "perfect." We worry about every little tear, stain or blemish, and we want nothing more than to return objects to their "original state." However, so many times those rough spots are part of the item's history. It is important to understand the difference between the types of condition issues on objects that cause structural issues versus those that are purely cosmetic. Knowing and identifying these differences can help when determining whether or not an item requires conservation or deciding simple factors like the best way to store or exhibit an item.

Structural issues are those that can cause continual damage or restrict object use (in exhibits, educational programming, or the like). They attack the structural integrity of the item. Cosmetic issues, on the other hand, may not look great but also do not cause the same continual or limiting damage as structural issues. So, how can you identify the differences?

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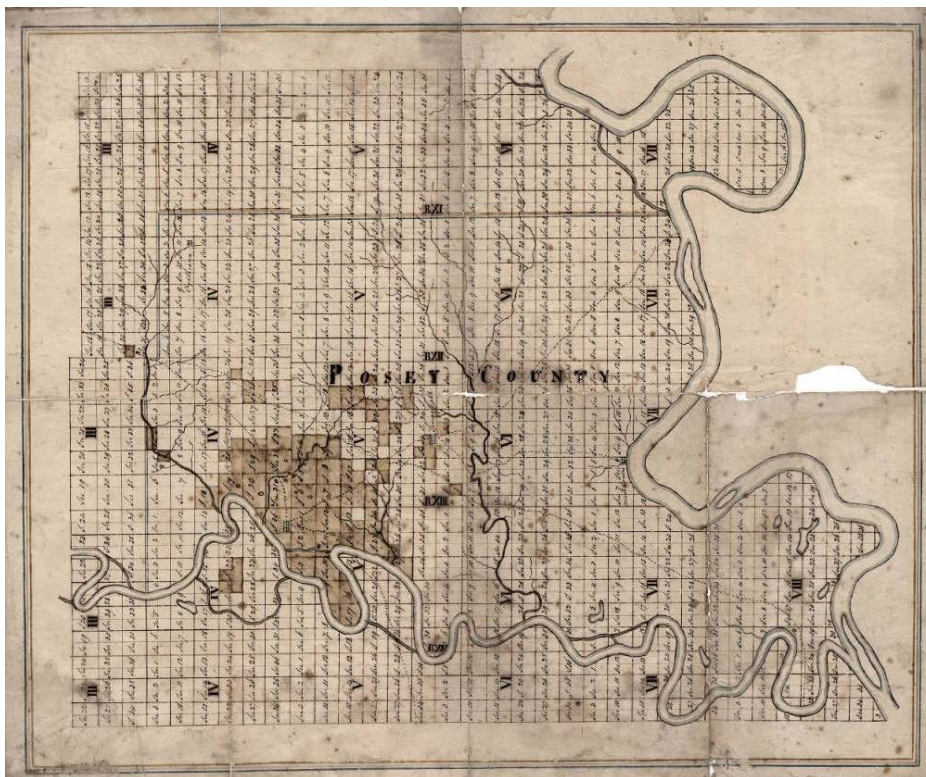
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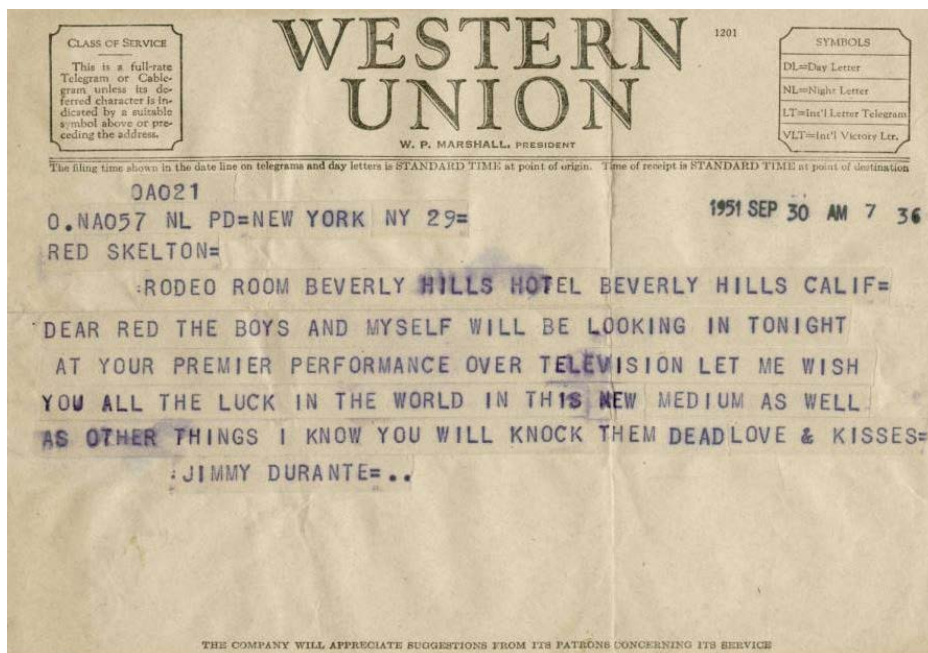


[Manuscript Map, ca. 1825-1832](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Image shows tears and loss of paper that cause a loss of structural integrity.

Structural condition issues usually take the form of holes, tears, cracks, or missing portions of an item. These issues negatively affect the structural integrity of the item. They can, and should, change how you store, transport, display, and generally handle an item. Some structural issues can cause continual stress. For instance, hanging a dress that has a large hole at the waistband or shoulder seam can cause continual tearing as gravity pulls down on the lower part of the dress and makes the tear larger and larger. Similarly, a crack near the bottom of a jar can become larger if the jar is not supported because the weakened area around the crack continues to try and support the jar's full weight.

Cosmetic issues, on the other hand, have more to do with the visual integrity of an item. These issues, like stains, small holes or missing parts, discolorations, and smells, are not continually detrimental to the artifact. Although a stain or discoloration may be unappealing visually, they do not change the way the item is stored or displayed. In fact, sometimes these small cosmetic issues tell the history of the item, like where the bride dripped red wine during the toast on her wedding day.



[Telegram from Jimmy Durante](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
Image shows bleeding ink, a cosmetic issue seen in archival objects.

Holes and missing portions fall into both categories because they can be either structural or cosmetic depending primarily on their size and placement. For instance, a letter with a small hole from a staple is primarily a cosmetic issue. However, the same letter with a large hole along the fold is structural.

It can take a bit of time to get used to determining what is a structural and what is a cosmetic issue. Just remember to look closely at an item and really think about how the item was constructed and where those points of stress (like seams, folds, and joints) naturally are. Try to think about whether or not the condition issue is near one of these points, or creates a new point of stress, or if it is simply that the item does not look as good as it did the day it was created. Wanting historical objects to look perfect is a difficult thing to achieve, because their imperfections often result from their history and what makes them special.



[NAACP Freedom Rally March](#) (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

*There is quite a bit going on in the world right now, from the continued

threat of Covid-19 to social unrest. We have some previously published editions of Collections Advisor that might be of particular help at this time: [Keeping Collections Safe and Healthy During A Pandemic](#); [Special Edition Collections Minivisor: Collecting Covid-19](#); and [Collecting Difficult History](#).

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[Local History Services](#)

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