

INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Endangered Heritage: Risks to Museum Objects, Part 2

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Museums and other collecting institutions hold their objects in the public trust. That means that we hold and use our collections to benefit the communities we serve. It's important that we do all we can to preserve the objects that represent the history and stories of those communities. One of the best ways to do that is to take steps to handle our collections with care and mitigate risks to our objects.



Water damaged book (National Park Service)

Handling

Just lifting or moving an object can cause damage. Flags, rugs, and clothing are prone to tear or fall apart when handled. Photographs are easily damaged by oils from our skin when touched. Overcrowding in displays—because of lack of space or inappropriate display materials—can result in collections damage, too. Documents and photographs get creased or folded from overloaded files.

To prevent damage from handling:

- Provide training on proper handling, storage, and exhibit procedures.
- Be mindful of the space around objects, especially when they're being moved.
- Assure that you have ample room and a clear path if you are moving objects from one place to another.
- Use sufficient and appropriate display materials.

Storage

Objects that are folded, on top of each other, or crowded into small spaces, are more likely to suffer damage and deterioration. Storage in household storage containers, such as corrugated cardboard boxes and plastic tubs, causes objects and documents to deteriorate over time. This is due to acids, solvents, and plastics used in their manufacture.

To prevent damage:

- Use safe, archival storage materials such acid-free boxes, unbleached muslin, and padded hangers for hanging textiles.
- Store objects on coated metal shelving or sealed wooden shelves.
- Limit UV light in storage areas.

Water

Water damage can be catastrophic to collections. Many, if not most, items in collections can be harmed from contact with water. A burst pipe, leaking basement or roof might go unnoticed, causing collections loss or the need for an extensive conservation effort. Flooding from a natural disaster is the most extreme and devastating water damage. Prevention may be impossible, but preparation is essential.

To prevent or mitigate water damage:

- Use your nose. If areas in your building smell wet or damp, investigate to determine where water might be entering the areas.
- Implement a water monitoring program that includes regular checks of the roof, attic, and basements.
- Develop an Emergency/Disaster Preparedness plan.
- Train for all types of collections-related emergencies, including burst pipes, water incursion, and flooding.

Security

Security is an issue for all collections. Small objects on display in unsecured cases or without cases can be easily stolen when no one is looking. Sadly, vandalism can occur, too. A more common security problem is human desire to touch things. Children and adults alike will be drawn to touch an object if it is available to do so. The dirt and oils from our skin will degrade objects over time.

To protect our collections objects:

- Be clear about what can be picked up, held, or touched by visitors.

- Catalog and track collections objects so theft can be detected quickly.
- Secure collections storage and exhibits.
- Install security systems.

While we can't prevent all damage to our objects, we can be aware and mindful about risks, provide training, and create plans for preventing and mitigating damage.

Further Resources

- [Collections Advisors](#) (Indiana Historical Society)
- [Conserve-o-grams](#) (National Park Service)
- [Timely Tips](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

Collection Trainings

[Succession Planning for Cultural Institutions](#)

October 28 – November 15 (Conservation Center for Art and Historical Artifacts)

["Ready — Or Not": Cultural Heritage Disaster Preparedness Information Session](#)

October 8 (Northeast Document Conservation Center)

Webinars

- [NAGPRA Training](#) (National Park Service)
- [Recorded](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

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