Preservation Librarian

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Development of the Profession

Preservation librarianship emerged in 1956 as American research libraries began to establish formal structures, such as the Council on Library Resources (1956), the ALA Library Technology Project (1959), and the ARL Committee on Preservation of Research Library Materials (1960), to address the increasingly visible needs of brittle library collections. These preservation efforts were accelerated by the Florence Floods of 1966, which drove international attention to recovery efforts and led to the development of standards and ethics for the treatment of books, scientific research on heritage objects, and a pool of experienced conservators who would establish preservation programs in American institutions.

Within months of the flood, the Library of Congress appointed their first preservation officer to prolong the life and accessibility of their collections, with other large research libraries developing their own programs in the 1970s and 1980s. Early preservation librarians worked to identify the array of conditions that threatened collections and establish the fundamental outlines of the field as we understand them today: storage environments, disaster planning, binding, reformatting, training and education, collection surveys, and conservation.

In 1977, the Research Libraries Group funded the first cooperative microfilming project to preserve and provide access to the content of brittle books. This eventually grew into national projects such as the US Newspaper Project and the Brittle Books program, which microfilmed millions of monographs and newspaper issues. In 1985, Gay Walker published the first large-scale collection survey documenting the physical condition of library collections at Yale University, providing insights into the needs of these materials. Harvard opened their Depository Library in 1986, establishing a model for efficient high-density storage to retain and preserve low-use collections that has been emulated across the country. By the mid-1990s, libraries recognized the growth of digital objects in their collections and, since then, have worked to develop the Trusted Repository Audit Checklist and ISO 16363 to provide standards for ensuring access to digital collections. The work continues today as librarians continue to build and share their knowledge of how to best preserve access to diverse and valued collections.
A Day in the Life

The role of the preservation librarian is to be an advocate for the physical and/or intellectual object, working to ensure both immediate and long-term accessibility. The preservation librarian must be able to identify a range of potential issues in collections, prioritize risks, and develop workable solutions based on geographic location, storage environments, types of formats, history of the collections, patterns of use, institutional foci, past damage, and envisioned future use, all within established budgetary constraints. The position requires a broad understanding of the library’s vision and goals as well as the procedures and priorities of other units that share collection responsibilities.

Role Within the Library

The position is often situated in a technical services department separated from curatorial and reference duties. This frequently means relying on staff who work more directly with the collections (whether in acquisitions, cataloging, access services, facilities, or special collections) to observe and communicate issues that arise in their daily activities. Trust and relationships must be built with staff across the library before undertaking programmatic changes or collection interventions. For example, working with facilities to establish appropriate set points for HVAC systems will only work if collections staff do not change the dial on the thermostat; an extensive boxing project for rare books may succeed in providing needed housings but fail because the added space requirements can’t be accommodated on the existing shelves.

Administration and Policies

Many of the administrative duties associated with being a preservation librarian involve elements to be expected with the management of a unit including budgetary responsibilities; hiring, training, and managing staff; establishing unit priorities and directions; and attending meetings and representing the library to external organizations. Beyond standard managerial responsibilities, a substantive component of the responsibilities will be developing preservation policies and procedures for the care and handling of collections, housings and storage, and long-term preservation strategies. The preservation librarian must investigate new strategies and technologies to address challenges and stay abreast of national preservation practices and guidelines, as well as emerging technologies.
Assessment and Planning

Planning is an essential duty for every preservation librarian. Repositories, collections, and items must be assessed to understand their current and future condition, needs, and vulnerabilities. Several tools are available for this purpose:

- A preservation needs assessment is a holistic evaluation of the institution. This needs assessment looks broadly at every aspect of the institution, from facilities to policies and housings to better understand both micro- and macro-actions that may need to be addressed.
- The preservation survey is a collections-focused tool that uses a random sampling of a library collection to understand the broader composition and needs of the materials and help to establish programmatic directions.
- More specific assessments such as collection assessments or item-level condition reports can be used for project planning or grant seeking.
- Digital preservation assessments, such as TDR/TRAC, DRAMBORA, Data Seal of Approval, and ISO 16363, provide insights into an institution's preparedness for caring for growing digital collections.

These assessments identify institutional needs and inform the development of new policies and planning with regard to preservation projects.

Environments, Housings, and Disasters

While other librarians focus on outreach and the use of collections, the preservation librarian focuses on the life and condition of collections by establishing policies and monitoring regimens that influence collections when they are not in use. Temperature and relative humidity are driving factors in the rate of aging of library collections. Establishing an environmental monitoring program informs collection risks, including pests and mold. Setting standards for housing special and archival collections imparts a baseline preservation benefit to all collections regardless of perceived value. Developing and maintaining up-to-date disaster plans helps to mitigate catastrophic losses. Together environmental monitoring, housing standards, and disaster plans provide preventative care to ensure continued access to collections for all potential uses and users.

Communication and Vision

With an understanding of the needs and makeup of a collection, the preservation librarian needs to analyze findings, communicate priorities to and from other stakeholders, set achievable short-term priorities for the preservation program, and to build consensus for long-term institutional commitments. Frequently, many of the most impactful actions, such as improved HVAC and storage environment or reformatting entire holdings of a vulnerable media format, are not
immediately actionable due to budgetary constraints but can and should continue to be communicated to library leadership.

**Changing Priorities**

Evolving expectations in modern research libraries mean that traditional roles are changing as institutional budgets and priorities shift. Commercial binding was once a major part of most library preservation budgets, but reduced funding and increased reliance on interlibrary loan, consortial borrowing, and digital access have dramatically shrunk expectations for most binding operations. Reformatting has shifted from microfilm to digitization, frequently with a shift of reformatting outside of the preservation department. Digital archiving and digital preservation responsibilities may also reside in a separate IT or curatorial unit depending on the institution. Special collections are also increasingly being used in exhibits, external loans, and classroom teaching settings, each with new demands on providing access and requiring policies to mitigate these risks.

As many libraries shift their collecting policies to emphasize unique holdings, the role of the preservation librarian in consulting curators and establishing organizational priorities is key.

**Skills and Credentials**

**Skills**

To be effective, the most prominent soft skill the preservation librarian needs is the ability to collaborate—to develop and maintain effective engagement with internal and external leaders, stakeholders, and unit staff. The preservation librarian’s role is to emphasize the importance of preserving collections, which requires networking broadly across the library. Other soft skills include strong verbal and written communication, leadership abilities, and personnel management. Given the breadth of the position and the large planning component, project management skills and experience are highly desired.

Hard skills are also needed for hands-on preservation work, such as the ability to perform conservation treatments and construct housings for a variety of book and paper materials. Many libraries require experience or knowledge in some form of digital preservation, even if the position itself is not directly responsible for this area. There is need for librarians who understand the entire suite of preservation projects and who will be adept at representing the library’s needs when collaborating with experts or directly planning digital preservation projects.
Experience

Academic libraries hope to hire preservation librarians with experience in academic or research libraries, preferably in a preservation department or conservation lab. For entry-level positions, experience generally includes coursework, internships, and volunteer work.

Credentials and Knowledge

The MLS or MLIS is the standard degree requirement, and many institutions also require a specialization or experience in preservation. Some advanced degrees are acceptable in lieu of the library degree, such as a degree in preservation management, conservation, materials science, and public history.

Knowledge of emerging trends, standards, and best practices are standard requirements for the preservation librarian. Commonly, knowledge of assessment methods is a preferred qualification. Grants and/or fundraising activities are important components for the preservation librarian at many institutions. Some institutions require experience in this area while others list it as a preferred qualification.

Where to Find Preservation Librarian Positions

Preservation librarian positions can be found in most library job venues. Frequently, the best way to discover preservation jobs is to become part of a professional group or association that focuses on preservation. The Preservation Administrators Discussion Group (PADG) listserv of the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS) is the primary forum for both job postings and preservation inquiries. Within ACRL, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) website has a dedicated Careers and Scholarships webpage. Other venues include Preservation and Conservation Administration News (PCAN) and the Conservation OnLine Distribution List (ConsDistList).

Advancement Paths

The primary means of growth is to expand existing functions or develop new capacities of the preservation program. The preservation librarian could start or grow a conservation lab, begin a digitization program, add capacity for new formats to an existing reformatting program, or begin a digital preservation program. Building new funding streams, whether from recurring annual budgets or outside grants for projects, is another means of developing in the position. Preservation librarians frequently achieve promotion to head technical services divisions or other administrative roles within research libraries.
Preservation librarians can also advance their careers by moving to larger or better-funded institutions with more programmatic elements already in place. Private and nonprofit consultant positions are also options to provide preservation assessments and grant writing, disaster planning, and preservation training to smaller institutions.

**Additional Resources**

**General Resources**


**Continuing Education Opportunities**


**Key Resources**

• Demas, Sam, and Wendy Lougee. “Shaping a national collective collection: Will your campus participate?” *Library Issues* 31.6 (July 2011).
Endnotes


Bibliography


