

Preserving Archives and Manuscripts, 2nd ed. MARY LYNN RITZENTHALER. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2010. 544 p. ISBN 1-931666-32-6.

Preserving Archives and Manuscripts is the last volume in the Archival Fundamentals Series II (AFS II) of the Society of American Archivists (SAA). Author Mary Lynn Ritzenthaler has forty years experience in the field as an archival educator and conservator, the last twenty-five years at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). She also wrote an earlier version, published in 1983 entitled *Archives and Manuscripts: Conservation*, and revised it under the current title in 1993. Each iteration updates and expands the previous content and places greater emphasis on management considerations. While there are other useful and valuable archival preservation resources with smaller scopes, this volume remains the most comprehensive monograph within contemporary archival literature.

Although the structure of the volume is clear and logical, there is some awkwardness to the organization of some chapters, such as unrelated and untitled sections following titled ones, and repetition of content. The first two chapters cover the management context for implementing a preservation program. Two chapters on the physical composition of records and the science of their deterioration, set the stage for several chapters discussing how this deterioration can be managed through storage environments and handling practices. Another chapter is devoted to copying and reformatting, and the last short chapter discusses conservation treatment. Eight appendices provide more than one hundred pages of additional information including a bibliography, directions for some basic preservation procedures, and sources for supplies and specialist assistance. The sections most unique and valuable to archives are those that demonstrate how preservation is a management strategy, not just an easily isolated set of specialized activities. The chapter entitled “Integrating Preservation and Archival Management,” provides practical options for addressing potential preservation issues at every stage, including assessing potential acquisitions, packing and transporting mouldy and contaminated records, and research use. On the strength of its treatment of paper-based material and the general preservation procedures that can be applied to most, if not all, formats, this volume is a worthy addition to the professional library of any archives.

Nevertheless, *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* has some serious shortcomings as a guide to preservation in most contemporary archives. In spite of having more than five hundred pages of text, as well as the observation that “electronic data and digital files are beginning to transform every aspect of archival work” (p. 6), only fifteen pages are devoted to “machine-dependent records,” and a half-page to electronic records. As these “modern media” pose the more profound preservation problems (with their relatively rapid physical

deterioration and obsolescence of both the formats and their playback equipment), one might expect a significant proportion – even the majority of the text – to be devoted to them. Given that both “Archives” and “Manuscripts” are specified in the title, one would also expect a discussion of how to integrate preservation considerations into records management programs for those records that have been scheduled for archival retention; however, the strategies used for the preservation needs assessment of collections discussed in this volume assume that they are already in archival custody.

SAA Publications Editor Richard Cox states that the “new edition of the Archival Fundamentals Series (AFS II) is intended to provide the basic foundation for modern archival practice and theory”;¹ *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts*, however, does not appear to fulfill this goal since it is more of a manual of recommended procedures than a work reflecting the best current preservation theory, knowledge, and practice available to address the needs of archival records. Ritzenthaler looks mainly to sources within the archives and library literature, where there has been relatively little critical activity or new research regarding preservation strategies, and much of the text regarding the susceptibilities of, and threats to, the various record formats is presented as received wisdom rather than information substantiated by research.² The text would have benefitted by citing sources more often, and by identifying areas of debate or contention. Notably missing from the bibliography is the progressive and practical work on risk assessment and risk-based decision making for managing the long-term preservation of cultural property in a responsible and ethical way, developed for museums, but readily adaptable to archival contexts.³ The inclusion of such “big-picture” approaches to preservation management, tailored to effectively address the most serious preservation issues facing archival institutions, would have balanced the item-level focus of this book, and counter the danger of just “rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.”

Ritzenthaler’s advice from the 1993 edition of *Preserving Archives and*

- 1 Richard Cox, “Preface to the Archival Fundamentals Series II,” Society of American Archivists, <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/preface> (accessed on 4 September 2010).
- 2 For example, Ritzenthaler describes several environment analysis tools developed by the Image Permanence Institute (pp. 113–14 and 124–26), but then goes on to recommend environmental parameters based on NARA standards without discussing the origin of those standards, or citing evidence of the seriousness of damage that may occur in paper-based records if those standards are not met. The sustainability of such a conservative position has been questioned within the conservation literature since the mid-1990s. See for instance the flexible, and collection- and resource-based advice in Stephan Michalski, *Guidelines for Humidity and Temperature for Canadian Archives* (Ottawa, 2000).
- 3 See for instance Jonathan Ashley-Smith, *Risk Assessment for Object Conservation* (Oxford, 1999); and Robert Waller, *Cultural Property Risk Analysis Model: Development and Application to Preventive Conservation at the Canadian Museum of Nature* (Goteburg, 2003).

Manuscripts was critiqued at some length by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner in their influential 2005 paper “More Product, Less Process.”⁴ They highlighted the scale of resources that archives devote to item-level interventions and suggested that the benefits of these interventions have not been quantified in terms of extending the life of records.⁵ This critical evaluation of routine practices ostensibly conducted for “preservation” purposes, appears to be unique in the archival literature, and highlights the need for clear relationships between preservation goals and preservation strategies. Perhaps in response to these criticisms, Ritzenthaler has allowed that “preservation priorities for rehousing must be established, weighing such factors as the relative use and value of the materials, their chemical stability, and the condition of the housing containers” (p. 187); this advice, however, still reads as a concession or compromise rather than as a sound risk-management decision.

The archival profession would benefit from an authoritative text on preservation of archival records written to assist archival repositories in evaluating options and developing customized strategies for managing the inevitable changes to the ever-expanding volumes of increasingly complex holdings. A broader perspective might start with discussion of fundamentals: what it is about archival records that needs to be preserved in order to maintain their value as records; the wide variety of meanings of “preservation”; and the related ambiguities and contingencies of preservation goals. The text might then move on to discuss common principles for preservation of records in all formats, considering specific formats only where the differences are significant. Weight might be placed on discussing a range of successful and promising models for preservation needs assessment and management strategies, and linking these to the physical composition and deterioration of records. In order to maintain focus on managing the preservation of entire collections, this text might refer readers to a comprehensive list of high quality, specialized resources rather than providing detailed guidance or instructions for specialized preservation activities. *Preserving Archives and Manuscripts* has many strengths in its treatment of “traditional” formats, but it falls short of truly being an authoritative text for archives in the twenty-first century.

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4 Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005), pp. 208–63.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 217–22, 230–31, and note 72.