

## The threats to the survival of old books and documents include:

### 1. High Temperatures.

*As you will find in your attic, garage or storage unit during the summer months.*

### 2. Humidity.

*High humidity such as is found in most basements and cellars helps destroy paper and promotes the growth of mold and mildew.*

### 3. Sunlight.

*The UV component of sunlight is very hard on all books and papers.*

### 4. Excessive Handling.

*If a book or document is handled a lot, it will suffer. It may make sense to make a copy to enjoy and use for research. Avoid folding and refolding old documents.*

### 5. Repairs.

*Efforts to repair tears or other damage with tape usually cause more problems in the long run.*

## If you have questions...

...be sure to consult with your local library or Historical Society. They may be able to offer you some additional advice, tell you where you can find safe storage supplies, or at least refer you to a professional conservator.

## And remember:

Safe storage and gentle handling is the best thing you can do for your books, letters, and documents. Leave repairs of these items to a trained conservator.

---

**James T. Downey** is a rare book conservator and book artist at Legacy Bookbindery in Columbia, Missouri (573-442-0855). He has done book conservation work for the Missouri State Archives, UMC Special Collections, Missouri DNR State Historic Sites program, and for hundreds of private individuals across the state and country.

Permission is given to all institutions serving the public to reproduce and freely distribute this pamphlet, so long as no changes are made to the text.

## *Saving Old Books & Documents.*

© revised 2004 by James T. Downey

---

Some things you can do to help save your old books and documents.

---

Our history is contained in the pages of books, on letters written to family and friends, and in documents that note military service, immigration, births, deaths, and marriages.

Yet the books and documents that are on paper made after the Civil War are in danger of being lost forever. Almost all of us have a few of these books and documents, and know from personal experience that they are quickly turning to dust, with the history that they contain. Why? What can be done to slow this loss, to save these books and documents?

The main reason is that the way paper was made after the Civil War left a high residual acid content. This leftover acid slowly eats away at the paper, making it brittle, and eventually destroying it. High

temperatures speed up this process. So does the Ultraviolet (UV) component in light, particularly sunlight. And high humidity also speeds the process, and encourages the growth of mold and mildew which will also destroy books and documents.

What can you do? Well, it is possible to neutralize the leftover acid in the paper, but this is expensive and requires some training to do properly. Most people are better off taking a few simple precautions to protect their books and documents.

Proper storage makes a big difference. Since heat and humidity contribute to acid breakdown, the best place to store books and documents is in your living space. Don't put them in the attic (where it gets hot) or in the basement (where the humidity is high). Lamination adds acid and isn't a preferred way to preserve and protect paper. Instead, wrap the items in acid-free paper, available at any art store, or use archival protective sleeves. A professional conservator will be able to help you find these.

## **Be kind to your books and documents:**

### **1. Store them safely.**

*Store them in your living area, not in the attic or basement. Where you are comfortable, they will be comfortable.*

### **2. Keep them out of sunlight.**

*The UV component in all light is hard on paper. Sunlight is particularly high in this type of light.*

### **3. Handle them gently.**

*Careful handling will prevent most damage. Do not repeatedly fold and unfold documents.*

### **4. NEVER use tape.**

*Even 'invisible' tape contains a high acid content that will destroy the paper over the years. Better to live with the damage, or have the item professionally repaired.*

### **5. Do not laminate.**

*Lamination adds acid and is usually irreversible. Alternatives exist that are much better for protecting letters and documents.*

Of course, anyone who has such heirlooms (whether they are a family bible, old letters, or your great-grandparent's immigration papers) wants to enjoy these items and show them to the family. Just be careful how you handle the item. If it is a document that is folded, unfold it once and leave it unfolded. If it is a book that has torn pages or a loose cover, it is better to not try and repair those damages yourself. Instead, get a protective box for the book, and be extra careful when using it.

If you want copies of a document or some pages out of a book, just make one copy of the original, and then copies of that copy. Do this because most photocopiers use a very bright UV light source which will cause damage to your document with repeated exposure.

And here's a tip for controlling mold and mildew on books and documents: freeze them. It is much safer than using a cleaner or sterilizing agent. Overnight in a deep freeze should do it...gently brush off the ice and dust when you take the item out. Then store the books in a drier environment that won't encourage a return of mold and mildew.