

ARCHIVAL STORAGE 101: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO STORAGE SOLUTIONS FOR CHURCHES

FEBRUARY 22, 2023

KYLE ROBERTS: Good afternoon. My name is Kyle Roberts, and I'm the Executive Director of the Congregational Library & Archives. Welcome to the start of Lent and today's virtual workshop with the CLA's archivists Zachary Bodnar and Billy McCarthy on how to store your church's records.

To begin, I want to acknowledge that the Congregational Library & Archives resides in what is now known as Boston, which is in the place of the Blue Hills, the homeland of the Massachusetts people, whose relationships and connections with the land continue to this day and into the future.

For those joining us for the first time, the Congregational Library & Archives is an independent research library. Established in 1853, the CLA's mission is to foster a deeper understanding of the spiritual, intellectual, cultural, and civic dimensions of the Congregational story and its ongoing relevance in the 21st century.

We do this through free access to our research library of 225,000 books, pamphlets, periodicals, and manuscripts, as well as our digital archive, which has more than 100,000 images, many drawn from our New England's Hidden Histories project.

Throughout the year, we offer educational programs and research fellowships for students, scholars, church members, and anyone interested in Congregationalism's influence on the American story.

Please do check our website, congregationallibrary.org, to learn more about what we do and for news of forthcoming events.

The Church Stewardship Initiative at the Congregational Library & Archives is committed to supporting churches struggling to engage in effective records management. From reference requests to in-person feedback, the archivists at the Congregational Library have long recognized the desire among churches to better understand how to steward church records and maintain the memories and the mission of their church community.

Please now let me introduce our speakers.

Zachary Bodnar graduated with a Masters of Library and Information Science from Simmons University with a concentration in Archives Management in 2018. Prior to his work at the CLA,

Zachary worked at the Bellamy-Ferriday House and Garden archive, the Vassar College Special Collections, Harvard Law School Library, and the Harvard Botany Libraries. Zachary joined the CLA as an Archives Assistant in 2017, helping to prepare materials for digitization through the New England's Hidden Histories project. In 2018, he took on the title of Archivist. His professional interests include metadata collection and management, digital archiving, audio visual preservation, and archives management.

Billy McCarthy graduated with a Masters of Library and Information Science at Simmons University with a concentration in Archival Management. Billy started working at the CLA through a graduate internship and then was hired full time as an archivist in 2018. His work includes processing some of the oldest and most complex collections housed here, and he also manages reference requests and serves as the archival collections manager. Some of his professional interests include increasing access, collection management, processing of complex materials, and facilitating research.

So I'm going to ask Billy to come up now. Great. Billy is gonna speak first, and then Zachary will take over, and then we'll come back for Q&A.

BILLY MCCARTHY: Well, hello, everyone, and welcome to our second virtual workshop on how to store your church's records.

Today, we will provide a surface overview on the world of storage so that you can get a better grasp on the topic. By the end of today, you'll be ready to take what you have learned and go back to your church with the steps needed to properly store your precious material.

I'll start by discussing what we mean by archival boxes. We'll discuss some of your purchasing options, and then briefly overview some other options for the physical storage of non-paper, such as photographs, CDs, and vinyl.

Then Zack will jump on in to discuss archival storage processes such as how to properly folder a volume, the importance of removing metal fasteners, and why labels are so critical.

So we want to be clear, while we are providing knowledge based on our expertise, your particular situation is gonna come with its own practical limitations, be they financial, personnel, or just plain time.

I say often in our conversations on records management, but I feel it always needs to be said, by being here and viewing this discussion either live or afterwards, you've already started on the right path. So a congrats for you is in order.

Part of why we started this work was because it has become clear to us here at the CLA that Congregational churches need guidance. And we wanna help them protect and steward their collections.

So, do not feel like you need to put together a robust program today because that's just simply not possible. But by being here and taking some of the small steps we're gonna provide, you know, you'll be part of the group that helps preserve your church's community, its mission, and its history.

Your church's work deserves to be remembered, both for the current and the future generations. And by doing this work now, I promise people will thank you down the road.

All right. So, what do I even mean by our archival boxes? So I'm gonna go through some of just the major types of boxes that we use here at the CLA.

The four that we use most often are the standard box, pamphlet boxes, document cases, and then clamshells.

Starting in the top left, we have what we call our standard box. This typically refers to something that's 10x12x15.

Here at the CLA, we use a company that's called Hollinger Metal Edge. So we often here just refer to them as Hollinger boxes. We're gonna go through some other options for purchasing later, but this is just an example.

For 99% of you, I'd suggest sticking to the standard size box, as they're gonna be easily the most cost efficient. But I'm keeping the... I want you to keep these other options in mind as you might have a particular situation where they might be helpful.

So to the top right, these are our pamphlet-sized boxes, which, as you can probably guess, are perfect for pamphlets.

In the bottom right, we have some of our document cases, which typically come in the letter and the legal size. This box is typically used when a collection is on the smaller end of things, or when we have a particular set of documents of the letter or legal size.

Finally, in the bottom left are what we call our clamshell boxes, which are also available in letter or legal size. These boxes are really helpful when you're storing one particularly large volume. But I ask, you know, don't put folders in them. I'll show you why later, in a little bit here.

You know, as I said, for those of you on a tight budget, just stick with the standard-size boxes. After your church gathers together its records, you might determine that a few pamphlet boxes or a few clamshell are worth investing. But out of the gate, just keep it simple.

And for the rest of this particular area of the discussion, I'm just gonna refer to the standard-size boxes.

Some of you may have already started to think, why on earth do we even use a special kind of box? What does it even matter?

So, very understandable. And when I first started working in the profession, I honestly wondered the same thing.

So here in the archives, we're not thinking about sustainability in the terms of five, ten, or even twenty years. You know, we're looking towards long-term preservation of 50, 100, and even more years. As such, our storage containers need to also be constructed to fit that long-term preservation.

Our collection sits at well over 1,700 boxes, so in order to maintain sustainability, the archival boxes are the way to go.

You can tell if something is an archival box, mainly because they're considered acid free, which helps mitigate the process that's called off-gassing. Simply put, it just refers to a release of a gas that was dissolved, trapped, frozen, or otherwise absorbed in some other material.

One example you might think of is if you've ever had that faint vinegar smell present in older wood, or if you have old, like media reels, if you try to open them up, you get this sort of very... vinegar smell. And so we want to mitigate that ever happening.

Combined with acid-free folders, which we'll discuss in a second, this is the safest way to preserve your volumes, paper, and other physical mediums for the long term.

And you know, you're gonna hear this a few times, but, you know, to be clear, you want to think of acid-free boxes as the ideal to strive for. It's not a minimum you're gonna achieve today.

You know, long-term sustainability can never be achieved by just snapping your fingers. It takes us time, so it's gonna take you time.

Where do I even purchase archival boxes?

So in the archival profession, there are several options for purchasing of supplies. The largest three that I'm aware of, and the ones I'm gonna talk about today are: Hollinger Metal Edge, University Products, and Gaylord Archival.

Yeah, here at the CLA we are exclusively purchasing our boxes from Hollinger because they tend to be the cheapest option around, especially for the standard box. The differences in

price can be kind of crazy for the standard boxes. So I have included on this slide a price comparison for the three companies as of today, which is February 22, 2023.

As you can see, Hollinger is clearly the cheapest option both for individual purchases and in bulk. That said, this is not meant to discourage purchases from Gaylord or University Products. These companies are very viable options, and we purchase other kinds of supplies from them all the time.

But Hollinger is definitely our recommendation for when it comes to the bang for your archival buck.

So, okay, so far I've been giving you sort of, as I said, the archival ideal or what we do here at the CLA. However, we're very cognizant of the fact that many of you might not be in a position to purchase archivally-sound boxes.

Honestly, that's absolutely okay and exactly why I wanted to highlight and discuss some of the far more cost effective options. Because at the end of the day, what matters most to us here is that your church's material are stored as safely as humanly possible.

So if you, you know, the difference between your oldest records sitting on the floor and sitting in a box, we choose the box.

So nearly all of you should be located near some form of a Home Depot, a Lowe's, Ace Hardware, U-Haul, your local hardware store, you name it. Every place tends to sell boxes.

That said, the boxes they're going to be selling are typically for moving or other temporary means. So they're not gonna be acid free. You know, that said, they're extremely cheap compared to archival boxes.

Just as an example, at my local Home Depot, I can buy a, basically the same standard box for around \$2 compared to Hollinger's \$8.

While these are not meant for long-term sustainability, you know, this route will always be better than just having the volumes out. And as I said, our goal is to help you protect and steward your material.

And we hamper on this so much because, as an archivist, we hear really bad horror stories, and we want to mitigate those.

As an example, one church told me that they keep their oldest record volumes underneath construction equipment. Not next to. Underneath. And that is really horrifying. So what I told that person is actually a very condensed version of this workshop, which is basically get some boxes as soon as you can and gather everything together.

Like I said, I implore all of you here today and listening in the future to at minimum just start thinking about where your records are and trying to gather them all together into boxes as soon as you can.

There is a lot of other steps in the preservation of collections, but for now, just worry about getting everything together.

And as we continue on with our workshops, we can work through those other steps as we go.

And one little note to add here is, even if you do get some boxes and bring your collection together, you want to be considerate of where you're putting them.

You want to avoid putting boxes in places with extreme temperatures. So if you have a hot attic or a damp basement, even if you gather all your materials in a box, the environment around it is just going to not make much of a difference. So try to avoid those closets that get to 100 degrees or an area where you could be worried about flooding, for instance.

So, you know, in conclusion, Home Depot box, always better than no box.

All right. So we're gonna shift gears a little bit here and talk about folders.

So folders are definitely like the second big component when it comes to keeping your collections secure and safe. In the image here on the left are the letter size, and then on the right are the legal size.

Off-gassing is also something to be aware of with folders, and the folders that we use are also acid free, and you can purchase them at all the major vendors I discussed before.

Unlike the standard boxes, prices for folders do tend to be in line with each other a bit more at these companies. So I didn't really see a reason to make comparisons there. Similarly to the boxes, though, we do use Hollinger Metal Edge exclusively.

Okay, so, when it... Excuse me. When it comes to these folders and boxes, you know, the way you're storing the material is also very, very important.

So first, I'm gonna talk about a little example here with the top left and top right image.

To the left is a document case, but it only has a single folder in it. And you can tell right away that it started to become warped. On the right, is that folder removed from the box. And those folds are not great for long-term preservation.

While you could easily flatten this particular folder out and it wouldn't be that bad, there are situations where you could be causing pretty irreversible damage. So just keep in mind to not have that much empty space.

The image on the bottom contains folders that were originally placed inside clamshell boxes. So you can, you can tell from the image the folders are actually bent, and this was the result of decades of improper storage.

Thankfully for this collection, the material within the folders were not harmed in any way. But the tops of the folders are completely warped, and it makes it really difficult for us and visitors to more effectively look through the boxes.

So I briefly covered boxes and folders, and I also wanted to briefly mention the use of shelving for storage. Chances are your location is at a premium for space, and, you know, that is where shelves can really come in handy. The image on the left is actually from our storage closet, and image on our right is from our archival office.

When it comes to shelving, try to stick to metal and avoid any that have, like wood, just because... same thing, long-term sustainability. So you just want to think long term.

Other than space, shelving is just an excellent added step for preservation as it keeps things off the floor, keeps things raised.

You know, if you happen to have some issues with flooding, you have a little bit of time so that it doesn't damage the material. You know, archival and non-archival companies sell this stuff. So just go with what your budget allows.

So I'm just gonna quickly run through a few storage options for things such as VHS and CDs. So like boxes and folders, you can purchase sort of archivally-sound storage containers for basically every medium you can think of.

On the screen are just a few examples of things we have here at the CLA. As with everything else, we mainly purchase through Hollinger Metal Edge. But a few of these were purchased through University Products.

So on the left is a container for reels. This is just one example, and you can find them in basically any size that you need. After that, we have containers for a VHS, a CD, and then cassettes. And these are only a few examples.

And like I said, if you have a digital format, there is an archivally-sound box for it somewhere.

And just a note here, if at all possible, consider getting as much of that data off of those like legacy media as humanly possible. Really, none of these media were created with an eye toward long-term preservation.

So while proper housing can mitigate some of the dangers, it's not gonna fix the core problem.

So I also wanted to take a moment to just highlight a few of the other items that are in our archival tool belt that you could keep in mind if applicable to your own situation.

First, on the top left are photograph sleeves. You can basically purchase any size sleeve that you need. And we have well over, I think like 10 or 12 different sizes. They're really helpful, and I highly suggest if you have a lot of photos to acquire some of these.

Next in the middle are... for microfilm. They... this is an archivally-sound box also purchased through Hollinger that's really great for long-term preservation. So if you have a bunch of those, I'd also consider getting some.

To the right, you have a single page housed within what we call mylar sheets. Typically, we use these to sort of protect items that have been ripped or otherwise falling apart. In this particular example, it's sort of hard to see, but it's basically cut in half, and the mylar sheet allows it to be lined up properly. It is not only great for long-term preservation, but also by putting it in the mylar sheet, it allows us here at the CLA to let patrons see the item without fear of additional damage.

Finally, on the bottom, we have Permalife bond paper. Bond paper is the standard for preservation-quality paper in most archives, museums, and other similar institutions.

Here at the CLA, we mainly use bond paper for interweaving between fragile items or pages. But the paper also serves as a great way for the creation of permanent records or photocopying other sorts of fragile documents.

So, this was just a really brief introduction to the storing of your records.

We completely understand that this might come off a little bit overwhelming, but I hope I was able to at least explain the basics and you're now thinking about how best to apply this knowledge in your own churches.

A robust church management program is never built in a day, or barely even in a year. But the reason we decided to focus so heavily on storage as our second workshop is because it is a smaller step that you can start working on right now, today.

And although I say small, it's easily one of the most important when it comes to protecting your collections for the long term.

And finally, I just want to acknowledge that those of you who want to know more specifically about digital records, we absolutely hear you. Even as professional archivists, the world of digitization and digitally-born material is not easy.

And we felt it was better to start with some big picture topics first. Then over time we'll get more specific.

While I'm on the subject, though, just as a reminder, digitization is not a process for preservation, but for increasing access. Please, please, please never throw out your original documents. Paper is still and likely will always remain king.

Thank you so much, and I'm now gonna go ahead and pass the baton off to Zachary.

ZACHARY BODNAR: Thank you so much, Billy.

And for the second part of this workshop, I want to focus on, relatively briefly, the process of storage and preservation, since proper storage and the proper handling of materials are in themselves, acts of preservation.

What I'll be focusing here are on physical paper materials. Paper materials—such as loose documents, printouts, volumes, pamphlets, newspapers—they make up greater than 90% of most all collections that we see here at the CLA. And so I want to focus on what most people here will be primarily working with in their own churches' collections.

Also, audio and visual materials and born digital materials are both so varied in what they can be, and each has their own specialized techniques to properly handle those materials that the topics themselves audio visual and digital materials are both in and of themselves full hour-long workshops. So for today, I unfortunately won't be able to discuss those topics.

So first, let's talk about paper and more specifically how you should prepare your paper for permanent storage.

But actually first, a bit of a disclaimer. Paper is inherently fragile. You will find paper that is damaged or torn. In the process of working with paper, you will probably yourself accidentally cause some damage or tear it a little bit. This is just how working with paper is.

Certain types of paper are practically designed to break down after a certain amount of time. If you've ever handled a 19th century pamphlet or that type of paper, pamphlet paper, they were printed on terribly cheap paper, and today it just sort of falls to dust.

Onion paper is another example. It's so thin that almost any movement will lead to small tearing or crunching up. And all of this is all right. I'm giving you, as an archivist, permission to be okay when something breaks.

The goal of this work is not to ensure that no harm ever comes to these records. To do so would require locking them away from the world and those who want to use them.

Instead, what we hope for is rather reasonably to minimize to the degree the dangers of damage.

Let's talk about perhaps the most common and important thing to do with our own paper records. That is the removal of metal fasteners, which most commonly includes paper clips and staples, but can also include such items as pins, sewing needles, and other types of metal clips.

The primary reason we remove these from paper is because they rust. And they rust really easily.

Paper clips especially are prone to rusting if they are exposed at all to high humidity for pretty much any length of time.

But fasteners in general can simply damage paper. Through compression they can warp paper, and through their immovable nature can become a point of stress that causes paper to tear.

Finally, removal of fasteners, especially if you're limited in space, can actually be a pretty significant space-saving measure. Fasteners prevent paper from lying completely flat, and the cumulative space taken up by paper clips in a stack of papers can be surprisingly significant.

The go-to tool for the removal of metal fasteners is what we call a spatula. Specifically this pictured spatula.

One piece, bit of advice: never use those sort of fang-like staple removers that you can easily find in office supply stores. They're more of a sledgehammer solution to the problem of removing staples. And then the spatula, the spatula is a very manual, kind of a little, little labor intensive method, but is much safer for the paper, is gonna... the claw is gonna cause damage. The spatula should hopefully mitigate or not cause any damage.

Oftentimes, especially with much older paper documents, such as letters, like the little bundles of letters that you see here pictured, you find in bundles of paper that have been tightly folded in on themselves, sometimes folded in on themselves multiple times. Whenever possible, we try to unfold these papers.

Folded paper can become brittle along that fold and may be prone to tearing and breakage. So be smart about unfolding something. If you have a document, and you're starting to unfurl it, and it's looking like whatever movement you're doing is causing damage, leave it. At that point, it's safer to leave it, but if it can be unfolded and unfolded safely, then that's a good thing to do.

It helps save space. It helps protect the paper from future harm, and it makes it far easier to leaf through and access those materials.

One note: If you've gotten a letter and the paper's been folded in half to make four leaves. So it's a sheet of paper, then the folded in half. Now we have four pages really to write on. You don't have to unfold that fully. That's usually way more work than it's worth.

And in general, this advice of flattening paper is aimed more towards paper that has been folded to such an extent that if they're left in that folded state, it's gonna be a danger to themselves.

So now is when we talk about one of our archivists' secrets, and that is that newspapers are bad for collections. The actual paper that newsprint is printed on is incredibly acidic and over time and really pretty much no matter how well you store it, it will degrade and eventually eat itself.

And because that paper is so acidic, it is also an active danger to any paper that is in direct contact with it. If you've ever seen like an old 19th century book, and then someone's stuck in a newspaper clipping in the middle, and you open it up 200 years later, and the side the opposite of that paper is now completely darkened? That's been caused by damage from the newsprint.

So for this reason, archivists generally don't keep newspaper clippings. What we do instead is photocopy them onto regular white paper or bond paper and recycle the newspaper original.

The newspaper itself is just generally too dangerous to keep as part of a permanent archival collection.

When we can't dispose of the newspaper original, usually because it's been glued into something such as a scrapbook or a record book, what we do instead is insert bond paper between the pages, so interleaving that bond paper so that the newspaper is no longer in direct contact with whatever is on the opposite page.

That helps prevent damage to that opposite page, and if there's any text on that opposite page, it also helps to ensure that that text remains readable long term.

Something you might run into, especially if you have any leather-bound volumes from the late 18th century, up until about the midway through the 19th, is something called red rot. Basically, vegetable-tanned leathers are likely to experience red rot either due to exposure to humidity or due to the bookbinding process adding color to the leather.

And when you run into it, you'll know, pretty much instantly. It makes a mess everywhere. It's not dangerous. It won't hurt you. It's simply the messy result of a chemical reaction.

While the process can technically be stopped through very specific chemical treatments, usually the best thing to do is to simply attempt to isolate that volume as best as possible so it isn't in direct contact with other paper materials, such as other volumes, or other loose material, other print and paper material.

Also, you may want to use gloves when handling such items. If you visited an archive before around 2000ish, 1990ish, you might have been asked to don the white cotton gloves before handling materials.

I'm here to tell you that, that for the most part, you don't need to be wearing those gloves when handling paper materials. That might have been an overreaction on past archivists.

The loss of tactile feeling while wearing those cotton gloves is actually a far greater danger to paper material than the minuscule amounts of oils that are found naturally on your hands.

Nitrile gloves, which are the thin blue plastic gloves that are pictured in this picture, may be worn, though, when handling particularly dirty or red rotted materials, though if you'd really rather not dirty your hands.

There is one exception to the cotton glove rule, and that is when handling photographic materials. The oils on our hands can interact with the chemicals used in photography and in photographic prints. Then basically, whenever you handle anything photographic, it's really just safer to use those cotton gloves.

If gloves aren't available for whatever reason, simply just avoid touching the surface of the photograph as best as you can. Hold them by the corners, or even better, just hold materials by the very edges themselves. Try to minimize directly touching the photographic print on its face as best as possible.

All right. Let's change gears now from prepping your materials for permanent storage to the act of actually foldering materials.

Folders are the backbone of an archivist's work and have become kind of the primary point of access and organization.

Folders will generally come in two varieties: legal and letter size. Use the folder size that is most appropriate to the stack of papers that will be placed into it.

If you have a stack of papers that's all letter, use a letter folder.

You have a stack of paper that's all legal, use a legal folder.

If you have a stack of paper that has got legal materials in it, probably use that legal folder.

Also, most folders, or at least ones that we use here, will have these series of crease lines after the central fold. As you can see from this photograph, we use these crease lines to create a flat bottom so that the stack of papers lie as flat as possible and flush to the bottom of the box. This helps to prevent damage to the paper long term.

So, there have been countless solutions to keeping stacks of related papers, all conveniently in order and together, though the most ubiquitous method has likely been the three-ring binder.

In all cases, though, the binding, when possible to do so safely—a common theme—should be removed.

Binders, especially three-ring binders and spiral bindings, take up a lot of unnecessary space and also prevent paper from lying flat when stored in a folder or a box. Folders ultimately do the same job as binders, so we always remove the papers from binders.

Also, these types of bindings, especially three-ring binders, can easily cause damage to paper. Going back to that, sort of, fragile paper and immovable object, the metal ring being the immovable object, and the small space between that ring and the edge of the paper is a very common area for damage to happen and occur in paper.

So for long-term preservation purposes, we also remove materials from three-ring binders and generally remove other types of bindings such as the spiral binding, so shown in this picture.

When it comes to bound materials such as volumes, at the CLA, we typically place these materials into folders. We do this primarily so that the volume can easily be identified by the title on the folder and to prevent volumes from damaging one another through friction. And also, if you have red rotted materials, to help minimize the amount of contact between that volume and whenever it's being foldered next to.

Strictly speaking, this is a bit of an extra part on our part and isn't truly necessary. What is important, though, is to make sure you're storing your volumes properly.

Don't lay multiple volumes atop of one another. The weight to the bottom on that bottom volume can cause damage due to compression over long periods of time.

Instead, one of the safest methods, if you're not just sort of putting your volumes on a shelf like you would a normal book, would be if you're putting them into boxes is to, instead of... the volume should be placed into the boxes with their spine facing down. That is, in terms of weight distribution, one of the best and safest methods to store volumes long term in a box.

Perhaps the most important part of the whole foldering process is to make sure that every folder is properly labeled. The folders we use at the CLA have one-inch tabs that run the whole length of the folder, but most folders that you'll be able to find will have some sort of designated space to write a label for that folder.

Use this space to create a simple but descriptive title for the contents of the folder, and if known, add the dates too, to that descriptive title. So for example, something simple: "Church Records 1846 to 1918." It's super simple and descriptive, tells you exactly what it is, and tells you the date range for that.

To help identify where a folder belongs, we also label our folders with a box/folder number. So forward slash as in the symbol. So one of these folders that might be a little bit hard to see, but in the upper right corner you'll see B7/F8, which indicates that the folder is the eighth folder in box number seven.

One thing with folders: don't use stickers to create your labels. Sometimes you'll see, like for folders, you can print... they'll come with like little sheets of stickers that you can print out a label for them. Don't. The glue in most non-archival stickers--there are types of stickers that are archival; they have like silver backing, it's... they're, they're cool--but the glue in most non-archival stickers will eventually deteriorate.

And when that happens, that sticker will either fall to the bottom of the folder or, more likely, fall at the bottom of the box. And if enough of that happens, you'll never be able to identify which folder which sticker went to.

So the best long-term method is to simply just write your labels in pencil. Pencil is great because it is, it's not gonna fall off. And if you need to change anything, you can just erase it.

Finally, I want to very briefly talk to you about boxes, which are the final pieces of the storage puzzle and where all of the folders will go into.

So there are a few things to keep in mind when filling a box with folders. For starters, your standard record carton can be used to store either legal-size materials or letter-size materials, depending on how you orient the box.

However you orient the box, though, generally make sure to fill it with only one size of materials. Whenever possible, avoid mixing letter-sized folders and legal-sized folders.

If you do that, what happens is if you have a legal-sized folder, and then in front of it is a letter-sized folder, over time, what'll happen is that due to compression, the legal size will actually start bending around the letter size and long term can cause even the paper inside of that folder to bend.

Also choose the box which best fits the volume of folders you have. If you under fill a box, as Billy showed earlier, the folders will inevitably bend and bow, which long term can damage papers within. If you come up... if you fill a box and there's only three quarters of it full, use, either some sort of, like, additional cardboard that you find around to just sort of create like a spacer in that box, that'll help to... lead to having that box better filled and therefore cause less damage over time.

Just as we label our folders, we also label our boxes. The probably most important part of the label is the box number. The assigned box number will be incredibly important for both retrieving folders and returning folders.

In the future, we'll probably talk about how to make inventories or something akin to a finding aid. In that case, if you have an inventory and they have a box folder number system, all you really need to be able to identify where something is quickly is just say box seven, folder eight. So that's why we make sure every box, every folder is numbered.

The label should also include other identifying information.

For us, that is having the title of the collection front and center.

For you, where your church's record collection is probably just a single collection, you might want to, instead of putting just the title of the entire collection on that front and center label, you might instead decide to put sort of a broad description of what the contents of that box are, if that is a reasonable thing to do.

Sometimes we have so many different things inside of a box that that isn't reasonable, but that is a possibility.

If you make a box that is particularly heavy, we also always recommend either putting on a heavy sticker on the side of that box or just writing "heavy" on the label. It's just good practice for future people when they're coming to retrieve that box, especially if that box is up taller than them to just give people a warning that, hey, this box is heavy.

Heavy would probably mean somewhere over 25ish pounds. You kind of get a sense of what heavy is when you, when you start filling up these boxes.

So as Billy talked, obviously the, one of the best practices for boxes of materials is to have them on shelving units of some sort.

But reality is often quite different from best practices. Most record boxes can have one other box stacked upon it without too much worry.

A common example of why this might happen is if, instead of a shelving unit, you just have tables where you can fit about two boxes below and two boxes on the table. If you have to double stack boxes, that's honestly fine. Not the best, but anything is better than nothing. And two boxes is generally not gonna cause any major structural damage to the box on the bottom.

That said, if you are double stacking, always make sure that the lighter box is the one on top. That the heavier box is below. That just helps to ensure that there's no structural damage, especially to the top of the box.

Don't really ever triple stack. At that point, the weight does definitely become too much, and then the top starts bowing in itself and breaking down, and then that starts putting weight directly on the folders themselves, which is absolutely what we don't want.

And that brings us to the end of the workshop. And with that, then with what time remains, I hope we can both answer some of your questions.

Thank you so much already.

KYLE: That was fantastic. And the questions are flowing in.

Let me throw one your way, kind of asking you to kind of pull out to, you know, the 12 foot away view.

So, Zack, Billy, you get, you got a phone call, and you've been asked to come up to a church on the North Shore. And they lead you down into the basement, and there are two metal file cabinets. There's a table that has a stack of three-ring binders and some other volumes. And then under the table are a bunch of milk crates with loose paper in them.

And I think these are... that's not an unusual scenario.

BILLY: Not at all.

KYLE: And so you have a, you know, have a group of volunteers that want advice on where to start.

You know, they don't have \$2,000 to buy boxes. So with those, you know, the metal file cabinets, the three ring binders on the table, the milk crates on the floor, what's your advice? How do you kind of start to make some, you know, good choices about rehousing these materials so that six months from now they're not maybe in those containers?

BILLY: Well, I would say, first off, in that particular situation, get the milk crates off the floor.

There's nothing wrong... Again, like as I tried to make clear, you know, we're talking about an ideal. So if you have to use milk cartons, and they have to be on a table in the basement, that's better than on the floor and nothing, you know. So, start there.

Then the second step would be to free up space, which you could easily do with the three-ring binders. You start there, you can at least get a better sense of the bulk of material you're working with.

And like I suggested, Home Depot boxes are so cheap that you can at least start there, gather everything together, and then down the line, if you're able to get more money, you can move on.

Zack, if you want to add to that.

ZACHARY: That pretty much sums up what I would say.

Another option is in the world of Amazon and online shopping, someone in your community is going to have a stack of boxes that they've been meaning to tear down and throw in the recycling bin for the last four months, and they haven't gotten around to it.

I'm not talking about myself at all, ever. [Laughter]

Those are also perfectly fine, especially temporary options that are going to be better than, as Billy said, having something on the ground.

If... kind of following up on what Billy said, if at minimum we get stuff off the ground, we're already gonna call that a win.

The ground is where flooding, and damage, and other types of things that can cause damage is gonna happen, is gonna probably start on the ground before going up.

So anything that raises things off the ground is always a top priority.

KYLE: Well somehow in that, the time of answering that, the number of questions has exploded.

So question number one from Emily Ross: Books. Better to box books or not?

You know, so Zack, you got a bunch of books behind you. When should a church box them up, and when is it better to leave them out?

ZACHARY: There are, as Emily points out, there are pros and cons to either.

So for archival materials, we generally put our archival volumes into boxes for organizational purposes, for space saving purposes, for helping to minimize friction and mishandling and damages that can be caused by either of those. We tend to box our materials.

Print materials, anything that's been mass produced for sure is generally gonna be safer to keep on a, on a bookshelf somewhere.

But it's the unique materials that we're trying to minimize damage primarily.

There are downsides. Boxes can trap odor. There is gonna be less air circulation.

But long... and that is, it's not the best, there's no single perfect answer there.

But for what we do, we tend to for the archival, for the unique materials, focus more on trying to make sure that they're going to survive physically long term.

KYLE: Several questions here about larger-size materials.

Timothy Larson asks, you know, if you have church banners or quilts?

Robert Kalayjian asks, if you have architectural plans, roll... should these things be rolled up, or should they find boxes the size of them?

What do you do with those?

ZACHARY: Yes.

So, for fabric materials, basically, and this goes into a bit more of the museum world, which is a little bit out of my expertise. So, what I am saying here is based off of my knowledge and education and what other museum experts have told me over time. Because I've reached out to museum people a bunch for these types of questions.

For fabric materials, best case scenario is that you have what are... usually fabric boxes. They're just kind of large, flatter versions of some of the Hollinger boxes that Billy showed. Think of, like a clamshell, on a kind of super large scale. And to lay fabric in there as flat as possible.

If you have something that's a banner, then usually those are super long. What you end up doing then is you'll end up having to fold it in on itself, kind of like a infinite, infinity sign a bunch. Well, you'll end up doing there is use tissue paper to... on those corners, on those loops to sort of reinforce them so they're not folding in flat.

Because if you fold fabric flat over time, that fold will just become permanent. The fabrics will essentially bend and stretch to become that flat edge, that flat folded edge.

KYLE: So what we haven't talked about here is fire and fire protection. And there's several questions, really good ones here.

Alice White says her church was incorporated in 1714, and they're still in the original building. Fireproof cabinets, you know, is that something?

And then Elizabeth Shehadi says, you know, we have a fire coded file cabinet for our storage. Is the file cabinet a useful way to store items?

So what do you do when you know that you're in something that might be more fire prone than, you know, than we are here at the library? Is that a consideration?

ZACHARY: Yeah. If you're starting from ground zero, and you don't have anything that's fireproof or a fireproof cabinet or anything, it's not the first thing we would suggest you purchase.

I imagine those are really expensive pieces of furniture. If you have them already, though? Yeah, that's... those are perfectly fine to use.

They're gonna be metal, so they're not gonna be off-gassing. They're going to... they're not gonna be an active danger to the collection themselves. So, yeah, they're perfectly fine to use.

So if you have them, awesome. If you can afford them, certainly look into it.

It's not something I'm very knowledgeable about personally, so I can't really say what their costs are and if that's worth it. But I imagine it probably is if you can afford it.

BILLY: I would also add to that that if you're able to acquire even a small storage space, consider taking the extra time to sort of identify what you consider most important.

I know it can be a little much trying to give something value, but if you have your church's original deed or, you know, original covenant, consider putting that in a fireproof locker first.

And maybe some of your financials from the eighties don't necessarily need to be as safe. So make those decisions as you have to.

KYLE: Several questions in here about plastics and plastic boxes.

I know when I move, I'm more likely to want to use kind of like a plastic Tupperware container than a wooden... than a paper box.

Any thoughts on whether plastic containers are... if there any downsides to using them?

ZACHARY: The quick, simple answer to hopefully get some more questions is that plastic also off-gases. Outside of very specific types of plastic, it also off-gases just as much, if not more, than things like wood.

So plastic isn't usually the ideal container.

KYLE: Great question here about ripped paper. And you didn't talk much about scotch tape. Not that that's what this question is asking, but if a paper is ripped, is it possible to use an archival tape to make it whole?

Is taping desirable, or should we be doing something else?

BILLY: For that particular situation, I would actually suggest—I mentioned it briefly—but, mylar sheets.

If you had some... say, for instance, it's, you're talking about a single sheet of paper, just as an example. And it's ripped either right in the middle, up and down, in half, the mylar sort of acts almost, it's not sticky, but it acts basically like a glue that keeps the pages connected without damaging them any further. So I would suggest going that route.

Please don't use tape, scotch or otherwise.

But yeah, mylar sheets or something equivalent would definitely be good.

Even if you throw it in an archival folder, depending on how ripped it actually is. If it's in that folder and it's secure, it's not really gonna get damaged more.

If it's something that's getting continually used, definitely go for the mylar, which is available at all major archival retailers.

ZACHARY: Archival and bookbinding tape absolutely exist.

They are best used by paper preservationists, which is its own field, actually, beyond even what archivists do, which is why we don't use it. It's... their use is very specific, and for very particular types of paper, and for particular types of damage.

So we tend to go as broadly as possible. So, yeah, the mylar, which is held together by static cling, or as Billy said, even just keeping something in a single folder, even if it's in multiple pieces, if it's just in that single folder kept together like that, those materials will stay together in that folder so nothing will get further damaged or forever lost.

KYLE: Several questions here about hanging files, metal, you know, sort of lateral files or hanging file folders. Is that an option in, for preservation?

ZACHARY: If that's what you got, use 'em.

Again, it's gonna be another case of don't go out and buy them for... if you're just starting from scratch or if you need more materials, they are not necessarily what I would go out today and buy. But if you have them, there's no real reason not to use them.

Be a little bit careful around the edges of... those metal hangers, they are an immovable object, and they can get caught on other paper or cardboard really easily and cause damage.

So just, if you do have to use those or if you have them already and are using them, just make sure you're careful around those metal hangers. Again, paper and immovable metal is not always the safest combination, but if that's what you have, they're perfectly fine otherwise.

KYLE: I love this question from Diane Fiske. She asks, if you take the staples out of the meeting minutes, how do you keep each meeting minutes separate from each other?

ZACHARY: So this is probably getting to what might be one of our next web presentations, but I'll tackle it very quickly. Is that, intellectually speaking, it kind of doesn't matter if they all run into each other necessarily, as long as those documents themselves indicate what their date is or have some other indication of where a document begins and where one ends.

As long as they're kept in, or are in order, in original order, someone leafing through that document is going to be able to find the meeting that they're looking for, which is one of the reasons why, like more recently, I have gone through the meeting minutes of our board meetings here at the CLA for the last 70 years. And each year is just one giant stack of all of the papers in chronological order.

So if you're looking for specifically the March meeting of 1974, you just leaf through those papers until you get to the meeting. That starts with March 3rd.

KYLE: Is it okay if there's not page numbers on these to write them in? Are we allowed to make interventions in the historic documents?

ZACHARY: Yes.

KYLE: Okay.

ZACHARY: In pencil. [Laughter]

Oftentimes it's more work than it's worth, but I will sometimes write little notes if I know something about a document. Like a document has been mis-dated.

That's happened a few times in even the board records recently. So I'll just write a little note that says "correct date" and write a little, just a little tiny note in pencil.

But yes. Always, if you're gonna, if you are gonna write something, pick a spot that doesn't have other text. Make it somewhat innocuous and small.

And always, always, always use pencil.

KYLE: There's far too many, far more questions than we have time to answer. And I want to be respectful that folks have other things they need to get to.

Rochelle Stackhouse asks a fantastic question, which I think is a great final one.

So you've done all this work. How do you decide what to keep at the church building and what is historically valuable enough that it should be archived someplace like the Congregational Library & Archives or a local library, historical society, or museum.

So, some of these churches going back to the 17th century, what things should stay on site, and what things should come to us?

BILLY: That's a great question.

My initial answer would be it depends, but going a little deeper, so let's kind of break it down.

So if you're, say, in Boston, right? You're near us. Your community has access to it's... to our location. I would say you could give us basically everything that you don't need for, say, tax purposes or whatever sort of material you have for the last couple of years.

If you do end up working with a historical society, a university, or nearby museum, keep that in mind and just hold on to things that you feel your organization wants to hold on to.

Now, I know that sounds a little amorphous, but, you know, if you have a particularly well-read, well-loved pastor, and you have his sermons. And your organization, or your community, likes to be able to have access to those, maybe you don't want to give them to someone.

But maybe your historical society also doesn't want them. I think it's a really good decision to make in a committee, just sort of sit down as a group and sort of go through what stuff you don't want to leave, and then start from there.

Here at the CLA, we typically don't like taking or breaking apart collections too much. When things are scattered to five different archives, it makes it really hard to get the full picture.

So, long story short, it unfortunately depends.

But Zack and I are here. At least for the CLA, our job is to help you with that.

So if you have questions, thoughts, concerns about that particular topic, please, we put our emails in the chat, and I would highly suggest just reaching out to us because your individual situation could be completely different.

The thing that we usually say here is, we were trying to help out a church in Alaska. And, you know, we purposely were trying to have them go to somewhere in Alaska.

But if that doesn't work out, you know, we're here. So, I hope that helps a little bit, and do feel free to reach out.

KYLE: That's great.

You know, we are the national library for Congregationalism in the United States and across North America.

We are... like to think of ourselves as always the place of last resort, if nothing else. So, please send it here.

You know, scholars come in here every day trying to tell the story of Congregationalism across the country.

Billy's point is a very good one about if you have an active community that's... congregation that's still going. Putting the records someplace a thousand miles away isn't gonna make them very accessible.

But, you know, there's a reason we have large collections from New England and from western... you know, from western and eastern New York and also from the, you know, from the Midwest.

So, but, always reach out to us. We are very happy, and we will give you honest answers and help open as many doors as possible.

Because at the end of the day, preserving your church's history, its memory, and its mission is the most important part. That's what we're here to do.

So, everyone, thank you so much.

Have a blessed Lent and look forward to more events in our Church Stewardship Initiative.

Take care.