

Preservation Planning in Archives

Paper by Bonnie Rose Curtin
based on the presentation at the 1990 AIC Annual Meeting

Abstract: The National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA) received a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) to develop and publish a *Guide and Resources for Archival Strategic Preservation Planning (GRASP)*. GRASP's purpose is to help archivists develop comprehensive preservation plans in their own repositories and within cooperative communities. It is not a technical guide for conservation treatments. GRASP consists of a manual workbook, interactive computer assisted survey, and a resource compendium of preservation readings and citations. Archival preservation challenges and the development, design, and field tests of GRASP are described by the project director.

In 1988, a two year national cooperative preservation project, largely funded by a grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) and jointly sponsored by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA) and the Georgia Department of Archives and History began. The project's mandate was "to provide a clear, distinctive, archival preservation planning tool that archives can apply to consider facility, staff, administrative, and collection requirements to assure adequate and systematic preservation of an institution's holdings and/or information of enduring value."

I will discuss the preservation challenges facing archives and manuscripts today and how the NAGARA publication, a *Guide and Resources for Archival Strategic Preservation Planning (GRASP)* may help to meet these challenges. Also, I know that when I listen to a presentation, I hope to hear information that I can put to immediate and practical use. Therefore, I will conclude by touching on two specific concepts that you may want to consider adding to your mental "toolbox."

I have already mentioned the project's financial benefactor, NHPRC, with which many of you are already familiar. However, you may not have heard of NAGARA. Its purpose is to improve the management of government records and archives throughout the nation. Membership in NAGARA is open to federal, state, and local governments, their officials, and others concerned with government records programs. It is an adjunct member of the Council of State Governments.

In 1986, NAGARA issued a report prepared by archivist Howard P. Lowell, *Preservation Needs in State Archives*; it concluded that "a preservation crisis confronts this nation's state archives. Most do not have adequate plans or resources to handle the preservation requirements of their holdings."

Although there is no recognized standard for an effective archival preservation program, Lowell's data (collected from a survey questionnaire and selected site visits to state government archives) revealed that most repositories had severely limited or nonexistent environmental control, disaster contingency measures, storage space, budget, and staff hours suitable to address preservation essentials. Lowell stressed the gravity of his findings by linking them to chronic preservation problems. For example, he observed that government agencies were still using highly impermanent grades of paper; in some cases, records had significantly deteriorated before they even reached the archives. Also, these agencies were producing an ever-increasing range and quantity of records on expensive and transitory machine-dependent media.

The part of the report that I found most compelling was that only nine of forty-three reporting archives had any kind of policy statement relating directly to preservation. This is alarming because by international consensus, preservation is a primary part of the three-fold archival mission to: (1) identify and acquire, (2) preserve, and (3) promote the use of records of enduring value. If you look at legislative codes, general policy documents, organization charts, and position descriptions, you would certainly see clear and abundant evidence of parts one and three of this mission.

When the word "preserve" is used at all, it generally means one of three things. First, it may mean that documents are kept on a shelf rather than (intentionally) being destroyed. Second, it may mean that there is a conservation treatment unit. Sometimes this unit is considered to be a "fix-it" shop. Increasingly, staff in these departments are assigned comprehensive preservation responsibilities, but are not provided with training, authority, or funding to meet the challenge. Third, preserve sometimes means that records are microformed. This is not to say that preservation activities have been altogether neglected. Traditions are strong, although they are often outdated and constraining. Archivists are also spending time and money on preservation, although these outlays are often ad hoc, fragmented, and not necessarily identified as preservation.

On the other hand, there has been progress in all organizations concerned with documentary and cultural property. Museums and research libraries have led the way.

A leader and model for NAGARA was the 1982 Association of Research Libraries Office of Management Services' publication, *Preservation Planning Program Manual* and *Resource Notebook* prepared by Pamela Darling. (The notebook was revised in 1987 by Wesley Boomgaarden.) Using this model, NAGARA proposed the development of a similar instrument geared instead for the archival setting.

The NAGARA Preservation Issues Committee and two National Archives staff members have served as an administrative and advisory team for the project as follows:

Administrators

Brenda S. Banks (Assistant Director, Georgia Department of Archives and History)

Howard P. Lowell (State Archivist, Delaware Bureau of Archives and Records Management)

Team

Alan Calmes (Preservation Officer, National Archives and Records Administration)

Frank B. Evans (Assistant Deputy Archivist, National Archives and Records Administration)

Louis Manarin (State Archivist, Virginia State Library)

Joanne A. Mattern (Deputy State Archivist, Delaware Bureau of Archives and Records Management)

Genevieve Troka (Archivist, California State Archives)

The team established criteria for *GRASP*. It should (1) apply to both archives and manuscript repositories and to their wide variety of record formats, (2) be useful to both small and large repositories, and (3) accommodate differing (often minimal) levels of time and resources available for planning.

To ensure broad applicability, a draft of *GRASP* was tested over a period of sixteen months in twenty-three repositories. The team selected test sites representing diverse budget levels, staff sizes, geographic locations and climates, record material formats and ages, record quantities, and as it turned out, administrative postures.

As project director, I made two (three day long) site visits to seven test repositories: one local government archives, one nongovernment historical society with a strong manuscript collection, two state government archives already supporting active preservation programs, and one state government archives with significant manuscript holdings in addition to government records. Participating repositories were as follows:

Seven Official Test Repositories

Florida Bureau of Archives and Records Management

Hawaii State Archives

Illinois State Archives

Maryland Historical Society

Oregon State Archives

Troup County Archives of Georgia

Vermont State Archives

Adjunct repositories were the state government archives of Alabama, California, Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

The *GRASP* methodology is based on a generic strategic planning formula that consists of four phases. In phase one, problems and opportunities are identified and analyzed. Then, long, intermediate, and short range goals and objectives are selected. In phase two, specific steps to organize human, information, and material resources are identified and laid out in a calendar of activities. In phase three, the plan is implemented. Phase four is a mirror of phase one; results are gathered and analyzed in preparation for another strategic planning cycle.

In phase one, surveys are often used to discover current strengths and weaknesses. My research on existing preservation led to the question, could it be possible to use a computer to conduct a general preservation survey? Not just a survey to collect and compile numeric data (e.g., about the percent of records in "poor" condition), the survey that I had in mind would ask questions about policies and activities that pertain to a repository's total approach to preservation responsibilities. Fortunately, project host, the Georgia Department of Archives and History has staff members who are quite knowledgeable about information technology. Archivist Peter Schinkel recommended a type of interactive computer program that uses artificial intelligence and is technically called an "expert system." Expert systems emulate the interaction that a user might

have with a human expert. Discussions at the American Library Association's Emerging Technologies Interest Group during the 1989 ALA Mid-Winter Meeting confirmed to me that an expert system would be an excellent device to conduct a general preservation self-study. Moreover, it was possible to develop an expert system program within the timeframe of the project.

The final form of GRASP consists of three coordinated tools:

1. The *GRASP Computer Assisted Self-Study* asks multiple choice questions about preservation issues affecting all aspects of archival functions. The computer program uses artificial intelligence to derive and report prioritized suggestions for preservation goals and objectives tailored to the individual repository's situation.
2. The *GRASP Manual* is a corpus of preservation planning strategies. For each objective, it provides specific suggestions for a plan of work. It also provides instructions for using all three GRASP tools.
3. GRASP Resource Compendium contains over 600 pages of readings and over 30 pages of citations to additional resource materials that help guide preservation planning and implementation.

Of course, *GRASP* offers more than a planning structure. It is based upon certain premises. Among these is that preservation is an essential consideration throughout the record lifecycle. To explain, archivists believe that documentary records have a "lifecycle." They are born when created by someone, they have a useful life, and then they either die or are permanently maintained. The lifecycle concept underlies many of the strategies archivists use to carry out their functions - thus it should be so for preservation too. There is also the premise, based on another archival tenet, that preservation programming proceeds from the most general to more specific levels. Robert Sink (Archivist and Records Manager, New York Public Library) recommended using the archival principle of "levels of control" as a structure to organize archival preservation programs. For example, archivists choose to physically arrange and describe records at the group (i.e. collection) level, series level, box level, folder level, or item level. Each option is potentially the right choice. However, a good plan would not recommend arranging records at the item level before determining their context at the collection (or even box) level. Likewise, a good preservation plan would not concentrate on treatment of individual items without placing treatment into a more general framework. Another premise is that the archives administrator should play a strong and continuing role in planning a preservation program because it does, in fact, extend across other functional operations (e.g., arrangement and description, reference retrieval and refiling). Administrators cannot and should not be expected to play a day-in-day-out role, but neither can they treat a preservation program as an isolated or concomitant operation (i.e., the fix-it shop approach).

Repositories are currently using *GRASP* to strengthen policy documentation, restructure budgets, write position descriptions, prepare grant proposals, select consultants (such as those from the AIC referral system), begin state wide assessments, upgrade reprography (e.g., microfilming) programs, and plan new buildings, as well as bring better quality to daily operations such as shelving practices.

Early in 1991, each state government archives will receive two gratis copies of *GRASP* from NAGARA with the request that one copy be made available for loan to other repositories and organizations concerned with preserving archives and manuscripts. *GRASP* will also be available for sale by the Society of American Archivists, 600 S. Federal St., Chicago, IL 60605; Telephone (312) 922-0140; Telefax (312) 347-1452.

As promised earlier, I want to touch on two concepts that may be useful to you when you collaborate with an archivist. The first concept concerns the definition of a "record." If you aim to preserve a documentary record, then it's useful to have at least one explicit definition of "record." A definition used by some archivists asserts that a record is only a record if it meets three criteria. One, it must have information. This could be text, symbols, sound, color, etc. Second, it must have media (i.e. physical form). Examples include paper and ink, magnetically encoded polyester film tape and a playing machine, and paper layered with chemical emulsion. The third criterion is not quite so obvious. The information must be reproducible. For example, if you and I have a telephone conversation, we will meet the first two criteria. However, there is no record once the conversation is over.

When you make a decision to preserve a record, you are always working with these three components and the relationship between them. This is just as true for a document in excellent condition as it is for a document in poor condition. For example, if an archivist tells you that a document is an artifact, then you know that every effort should be made to protect the integrity of the second criterion - media. You might also recommend to the archivist that certain research and exhibition requirements can be filled by a reproduction of the record, even if the record is in excellent condition. On the other hand, sometimes an archivist is really only concerned with keeping the text, but s/he takes it to a conservator because it is damaged. The original record might still be kept, treated, and used unless there is a cheaper option or the original record media is inherently poor and cannot be depended upon to embody the information. In the latter case, it may be cheaper and/or easier to transfer criterion one - information, to a more stable media. Many possibilities and contingencies exist. Most archivists are still in the early stages of learning to take appropriate action, whether that means replacing a record with a preservation photocopy or routing it to a conservator.

The second “practical” concept may help the conservator to encourage the archivist to develop more effective, less ad hoc, approach. The concept is “appraisal.” It is closely related to the preceding definition of a “record.” Appraisal is the keystone of all other archival functions, including preservation. Appraisal is the archivist’s assessment of legal, administrative, historical, artifactual, aesthetic, monetary, and other values. Appraisal is more than deciding what records to keep and what records to throw away. Appraisal is a prediction. It determines whether records should be kept one year or one thousand years. It determines the relationship of one record to all others. Moreover, it is the basis to identify, in detail, the relationship between information and physical form. As a conservator, it behooves you to become acquainted with appraisal terminology used by archivists so that both of you can establish a common understanding as grounds to determine appropriate preservation and conservation measures.

The Archives and Library Information Center at the National Archives (National Archives, ALIC NNRS-L, Washington, D.C. 20408; Telephone: (202) 501-5423), Society of American Archivists (600 S. Federal St., Chicago, IL 60605; Telephone: (312) 922-0140) can refer you to literature about general and preservation related archival issues. These organizations and many regional and state professional groups offer (reasonably affordable) workshops and conferences that can help to stimulate and improve communication between archivists and conservators.

If you are interested in the potential to apply computer expert systems to conservation, you may want to read my article entitled "Is Conservation Ready for Artificial Intelligence?" in the of the *Abbey Newsletter*., volume 14, number 1, February 1990, pages 1-2.