

V. PRESERVATION PLANS AND SURVEYS AT THE CENTER FOR LEGISLATIVE ARCHIVES

Holdings Maintenance

The physical preservation of records is central to the mission of the National Archives and Records Administration. Since 1997 the Center has been involved in a NARA-wide effort to focus on preservation of records by establishing preservation performance goals and completing a series of Risk Assessment Surveys. Goals established by the Center include:

- flattening documents and copying thermofax records to archival bond
- transferring records from metal trays to acid-free boxes
- updating housing of high-use records
- continuing conservation treatment on the "treasures" of Congress

Each year the Center reports on progress in each at-risk group and reevaluates priorities. These ongoing efforts help the Center better allocate its preservation resources and identify potential problems that must be addressed to preserve Congress' records.

Historic and Intrinsicly Valuable Records

While the archival records of Congress are valuable in the aggregate, with more than 150,000 cubic feet currently stored at the Center, the preservation of records of the highest historic and intrinsic value has been one of the Center's major activities during the past five years. This effort resulted in the creation of a special vault area to house hundreds of House and Senate records that dramatically highlight the history of the Congress and the nation. Many of these records have received special conservation treatment before being placed in the vault. The Center plans to expand this collection of significant documents. Ongoing reference and outreach work continually identifies new documents of extraordinary significance, which are then transferred to the vault and logged in a special data base. For example, the multi-year effort to produce "Congress and the Shaping of American History," an educational resource for high schools, both draws upon the current collection in the vault and adds to it when significant documents are located in the course of research for the project. Staff is also build-

ing a collection of state-related documents in the vault to highlight the intersection of important milestones in state histories and congressional activity.

The Center's effort to identify, preserve, and house these valuable records in the vault has supported other high-profile projects. The National Archives exhibit staff, for example, mined this special collection for its current Rotunda exhibit, "Treasures of Congress." Many of the records from the vault were also photographed, digitized, and placed on-line as part of the National Archives' Electronic Access Project. To support this agency-wide endeavor, the Center created a data base to list and describe the documents selected from House and Senate records. The vault has also provided a suitable unified space to show some of the most significant documents to members of Congress and other special visitors. The renovation of the National Archives building includes plans for the construction of a new, larger, and permanent vault to store the documentary treasures of Congress in the years ahead.

Long-term Projects

The Center plans to continue its work on five additional long-term preservation projects. First, Center staff survey the records of the first fourteen congresses to determine which records need additional laboratory conservation treatment, such as mending, cleaning, or encapsulation. The microfilming of these records will be completed as an intermediate step that will allow the eventual conversion of the microfilm to digital images. Second, oversized and rolled records are thoroughly evaluated by Center staff and conservators to determine the optimal method of housing these records. Third, Center staff survey members' credentials to identify those that require flattening or include gold or wax seals, colored ribbons, or other ornamentation that may necessitate a special housing or conservator treatment. Fourth, the Center identifies appropriate bound volumes suitable for treatment or disbinding to facilitate access. Finally, Center staff consult with conservators to determine the most effective method of preserving the hand-colored maps and illustrated records that date from the earliest years of the federal government. While the documents have fared well over time, the Center takes the necessary steps to ensure that these unique records are flattened, stabilized, and properly housed. When the present NARA-wide move preparations and building renovation are completed, the document conservation staff will have more time to assist with these ambitious initiatives.

Special Media

In addition to particularly fragile textual records, special media records pose unique and urgent preservation challenges. As these records, such as videotapes and audiocassette, are transferred to the Center from the Capitol, they are forwarded to the National Archives at College Park's Special Media Archives Services Division. The state-of-the-art lab and stringent temperature and humidity controls at the College Park building offer the optimal environment for the proper preservation of these fragile records. The videotapes of the House and Senate floor proceedings, for example, are stored in a controlled climate of 65 degrees/30% relative humidity. Many of the floor proceedings videotapes were recorded on $\frac{3}{4}$ " umatic tape, which is currently obsolete. The division's current five-year audiovisual preservation plan proposes to begin reformatting obsolete video formats, including the early floor proceedings. The requisite equipment and staff technical expertise will ensure efficient access to the special media materials generated by congressional committees.

