

## SAA Museum Archives Section

Working Group

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Processing Manual

The Historic New Orleans Collection

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SAA Museum Archives Section Working Group Example

# **PROCESSING ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS : A GUIDE**

**NEVER USE PEN ON ANY DOCUMENT – ALWAYS USE A PENCIL.  
PROCESSING BEGINS ONLY AFTER THNOC OWNS THE MATERIAL (i.e. it is accessioned)**

**REMOVE HAND JEWELRY (rings, bracelet, watch, etc.)**

It's wise before handling material of any sort – whether paper documents, paintings, books, or other 3 dimensional objects – to remove rings or wrist jewelry. Jewelry can scratch, snag, tear, or otherwise damage items.

## **STEP ONE: ASSESS CONDITION OF MATERIAL**

Are there problems with the material that may require it to be segregated from other collections? Here are some common problems with archival materials, and instructions for how to respond:

### Insects

If material has fresh evidence of insect infestation (roaches, silverbugs, waterbugs, etc.) it should be immediately placed and sealed in a plastic bag or a plastic bin or other container with a lid, to prevent contamination of other material. Have the material transferred to the closet in the WRC garage(the dirty closet) so that it can go other items to be fumigated. If evidence appears to be old, check all of the material carefully to make sure that there are no live insects and/or eggs, and use your best judgment as to whether or not the material should be fumigated.

### Mold

If material has evidence of mold or mildew, put the item in a plastic box or bag and isolate it from other material (as above) so that there is no spore migration. Active or live mold may look dark, and fuzzy. Inactive mold usually looks like white or grayish powder

Live molds thrive in moist environments, high temperatures, stagnant air, and darkness. If you think an item has live mold, bag it, remove it to a conservation area, and remove the item from the bag so that it can begin to dry. Consult a curator for further procedures. Usually a conservator will have to be consulted.

If the mold appears to be inactive, and removal is appropriate, do so outside. Do not attempt to remove mold in an enclosed area that will not afford proper protection to your person and the collection. Inactive mold can be removed by using a very soft brush and lightly brushing the powdery mold off the item. Do not rub the mold, it could become embedded in the material. Consult the WRC assistant director or a curator for more detailed information.

It goes without saying that your hands should be washed thoroughly after handling all old material – whether contaminated or not.

## **STEP TWO: DETERMINE ARRANGEMENT OF MATERIAL**

The arrangement of archival materials according to their original order, function, or purpose is a fundamental principle of modern archival science.

Respect for the original order of archival materials guarantees their essential integrity and historical accuracy and also preserves the value inherent in the original grouping and ordering of materials.

Arrangement can be chronological, project-based, named or location-indexed, or any other intellectual order. Different arrangements may be used in different parts of the same collection. It may be necessary to examine most or all of the material in a collection to determine its overall and internal arrangement, assuming it has one. Make notes for your reference. These can be kept in the accession file, and/or the manuscripts working files.

If you are certain that the collection has no discernable prior arrangement, you can impose one that is logical and that facilitates access to the material. Use your best judgment and consult with the WRC assistant director or a curator for guidance.

## **STEP THREE: PREPARE MATERIAL FOR ARCHIVAL STORAGE**

If there are items rolled up, loosen the roll to let the material relax. Weights may be used on some items to lessen the curl of the paper. Material can also be flattened between large books for several days.

Conservation work such as removal of fasteners, metal paper clips, staples, pins, rubber bands or easily removable tape is done at this time. Remove material from any rusty 3 ring or other binders and put the items into a folder, being careful to *maintain original order of the material*. A plastic paper clip can be used to keep items together; or a strip or sheet of archival paper can be wrapped around items to keep them together.

If the original binder has value as an artifact or has historical significance, it can be kept, but if it has no discernable importance or value, and if there is no information in or on the binder, then discard it; if there is anything written in or on the binder, photocopy it, then discard the binder.

Always keep in mind the preservation of the item and the fact that people may have to handle it. If a newspaper or document is old, or fragile, use archival sheets to leaf pages so they won't have to be touched to be turned. Or if a fragile item is put

into a mylar sleeve and there is nothing of note on the reverse, back the item with an archival sheet of paper so that the paper is between the item and the mylar.

If the item is small enough, photocopy it and leave the photocopy with the object as a reference. Future copies can be made from it, thus saving wear and tear on the original item.

In pencil, write the accession number on the reverse, lower right corner of each document, paper, book, photograph, magazine, etc. For photographs and other items that won't take a pencil mark easily, use the Schwan pencil (it's like a grease pencil). Do not use a lot of pressure in writing the accession number on any material as this could damage the item.

If at all possible, apply the accession number to every item, including artifacts. If writing it in pencil is not possible, label the piece with an attached string tag, a string tag attached to the outside of the wrapping, and accession number on the outside of the box as usual.

Numbered items are put into legal size, non-acidic, archival folders, and boxes.

Newspaper clippings are very acidic and should be leafed front and back with acid-free paper.

Photographs are normally stored in a mylar pocket. If a document is fragile, put it in a mylar pocket (smaller sizes are available), then put it into the archival folder.

If original material is filed/stored in an original folder or a folder made by the collection's original owner or compiler, make a photocopy of any label, writing, or other information on the folder. The original folder can then be discarded (it is more than likely non-archival and acidic). Keep the photocopied label with the original material that will be accessioned and processed. Write the accession number and folder number at the top center of the photocopy. This photocopy is not included in the item count.

The same holds for oversized envelopes used to store material, but not original to that material. Simply photocopy any relevant information written on the envelope, and then discard it (as it is more than likely non-archival and acidic). Keep the photocopied information with the original material as above. Again, such photocopies are not included in the folder's item count. Otherwise, if the envelope is original to the material and contains a postmark, stamps, a signature, or other information that may be of interest to a researcher, then always keep the envelope.

If an item is too large for the legal sized archival folder, it should be placed in an oversized folder, with a label on the outside of the folder (see No. 3. below) identifying the accession number, collection name, folder number, and number of items. The oversize folder will be stored in an oversized box.

If the item is too large for the oversized folder, it should be placed in an oversized mylar enclosure suitable for a flat file drawer, with a label on the outside of the mylar (see No. 3 below) identifying the accession number, collection name, folder number, and number of items. (Prep has mylar in different sizes.)

Make a dummy folder for all items stored in oversized boxes or mylar sleeves in flat files.

Store books, pamphlets and magazines, with the spine down. 

For oversize scrapbooks, give Jason the dimensions to see if he wants to order Hollinger boxes, and where he may want the material stored.

If the scrapbook contains newspaper clippings (that may be old, fragile, and crumbling) leaf a few pages with acid free paper, wrap the scrapbook in acid free tissue paper, and block it in with ethafoam in an oversize folder or oversize box.

Newspaper clippings, especially if they are numerous and are from local papers for which we have a microfilm copy, need not be opened completely or put in oversize folders or mylar sleeves. Leaf the articles with acid free paper within the acid free folder. If the clipping is from a rare or older newspaper, or the article is significant, it should be housed in an oversize folder or, if fragile, in a mylar sleeve.

Maps, prints, charcoals, pastels, and other framed objects are ordinarily unframed. Handle charcoal or pastel works of art with extreme care, since pigment could be lost or damaged through careless handling or bumps. Charcoals and pastels are fragile should be stored in a sunken mat with a glassine cover; do not place these in a mylar sleeve. Maps, prints, photographs, etc. are ordinarily stored in a mylar sleeve. Write the accession number in pencil on the lower right corner of the reverse of the object.

The accession number for a cloth item or piece of clothing should be written in black permanent ink on an appropriately sized piece of linen binding. After writing the accession number on the binding, wash with soap and water to remove excess ink, then let the label dry thoroughly. Tack the label onto the fabric, with two or three stitches on each end of the label, in an inconspicuous place so that if the item is displayed, the label is not visible. Labeling materials are located in the Curatorial/Registration area.

Cloth items are very acidic and should be protected from the environment, as well as from itself, with archival tissue paper. Clothing, tote bags, aprons, etc. should have a layer of tissue placed inside so that cloth does not touch cloth. If there are straps, ties, or handles, wrap them in tissue as well. If the item has to be folded, the fold must be as loose as possible, with a layer of protective tissue between fabric parts, and a roll of archival tissue supporting the fold to lessen the damaging

affect of creases. Neither bubble wrap nor foam is recommended as it may off-gas.

#### **STEP FOUR: PROCESS MATERIAL FOR ARCHIVAL USE**

Once items have been placed in archival folders, the folders will have to be labeled. An important element included on each folder is the item count. An item is a distinct physical unit, regardless of the number of pages. If a group of documents has been bound together, they are considered one item. A letter and an enclosure are considered one item and should stay together, regardless of differences in form of material; but the envelope, although housed in the same folder as the letter, is counted as a separate item. A legal document with an attachment (will and codicil) is one item. Distinct financial documents that were attached when originally filed, such as a bill and receipt, are counted as separate items. An Agenda or meeting notice and accompanying material are considered one item. A bound item (book) may be described as one volume.

Photographs in an envelope are counted individually. Count the envelope as a separate item. On the finding aid, make a note "photographs with envelope."

Loose photographs are counted individually.

Photographs contained in a letter inside an envelope are counted as: envelope and letter with # inserts, (i.e. envelope and letter with 2 inserts, 4 items) . On the finding aid, make a note "letter with inserts (photographs) and envelope."

Negatives inside an envelope are counted as separate items, and the envelope. Is counted as a separate item. If the negatives are a strip containing a number of images, count only the strip, not the images. On the finding aid, make a note "negatives with envelope."

Slides in a box are counted individually, the box is counted as a separate item, and usually the slides are left in the box. If slides are put into a "slide sleeve" the original order may not be maintained, and the slides could be compromised if the sleeve should bend or slump in the folder or box. On the finding aid, make a note "slides with box."

If boxed, glass slides should be counted individually, the box counted as a separate item, and the slides left in the box. The box should be wrapped in tissue and enclosed in bubble wrap or encased in ethafoam before placing in a Hollinger box. On the finding aid, make a note "slides with box."

Folders are labeled thus: Top leaf, center, write the collection title (do not use the donor name unless it is part of the title); top right, write the folder number if it is one of a series, with the item count directly underneath; second leaf of folder, left corner, write the accession number; center, write any essential information

to identify how the original material was housed or other important or identifying information.

MSS call #	Collection Title	Folder #
Accession No.	(Date, series, other information, etc.)	Item Count

The Collection Title is assigned by the curator and used on folders, box labels, and at the head of the Preliminary Inventory (finding aid).

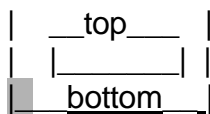
Folder numbers are assigned after the items are arranged, and corresponds to the folder number of the item entry in the finding aid. Folder numbers are assigned to folders consecutively throughout the entire collection, and do not start over in each new box. If there is only one folder, it is not necessary to put Folder 1.

The Accession Number is assigned by the Registrar at the time of acquisition. It should be noted in pencil on the back of the item (lower right corner), or on the original housing, and on the second leaf, left side of the folder.

Date, Series, or other Information is not necessary on a folder, but is a useful aid to arranging re-housed items in series and chronological order. Later, it may aid the reference personnel in retrieving the correct items for a patron, especially in the event there is an error in the folder numbering.

### Mylar Pocket and Label Placement

Insert the item into a Mylar Pocket so that the item is right side up with the bottom of the item on the bottom (closed end) of the sleeve.



The label is placed on the bottom left corner of the pocket with the following information:

- Accession Number
- Collection Name
- Number of Items
- (Folder Number) - if there are a lot of folders

## Oversize Folders and Label Placement

Leaf paper between items in the oversize folder

The label is placed on the bottom left corner of the front of folder with the following information:

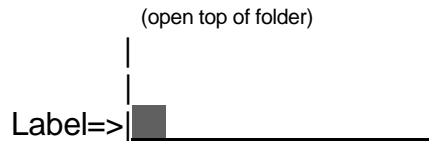
(Label size 1" x 1-1/2")

Accession Number

Collection Name

Number of Items

(Folder Number) – if there are a lot of folders



Put the folder in the oversize box with the fold of the folder at the drop down side of the oversize box. The label should be easily seen at the lower left corner.

### Box labels.

Box numbers are used to identify the sequence and number of boxes that complete a collection. It is not necessary to put the box number if there is only one box. Box labels should be acid-free and contain the following information aligned at the left margin (not centered):

#### 5" Hollinger box:

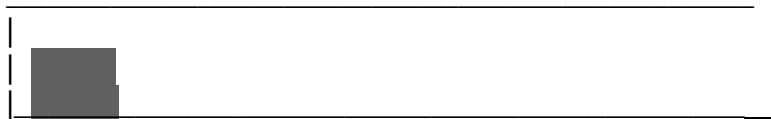
TITLE OF COLLECTION (inclusive dates)
Box # ___ of # ___ Folders # ___ of # ___
(See also oversize box)
Accession No

#### 3" Hollinger box:

Title of Collection
Box# ___ of # ___
Accession No.

Be sure to list on the label items that are in other storage areas: (See also oversize box), (See also Flat file) etc.

### Oversize Box





Type on the label the accession number and the collection title of all material stored in the box. Place the label on the left front corner of the oversize box.

Box labels should be typed and applied only after processing and housing of the materials is complete. Temporary identification (writing on the box where the label will eventually go) should be used while the collection is in process.

### **STEP FIVE: MAKE A PRELIMINARY INVENTORY OR FINDING AID**

The next step in processing a group of manuscripts is the creation of a finding aid, or calendar, or inventory list, to aid the researcher in locating items of interest. The basic parts of an item description are as follows:

**Title of Collection** – must correspond to the assigned title of the collection.

**Accession Number** – List the assigned accession number

**Item Count** – list the approximate item count; this can also be presented in linear feet, or number of boxes

**Inclusive Dates** – indicate the span of years covered by the material

**Identification of item and description of contents** – a summary description of the contents of a box or a folder.

See our existing finding guides for guidance on formatting and description. All inventories will be reviewed by the WRC ass't director.

In general, once an inventory or preliminary finding guide has been completed, you must do the following:

- Make 3 copies: one to be included with the collection (place at beginning of box 1); one copy for the MSS working files on ANX3; and one copy for the Registration department's accession files.
- Save an electronic copy on our network in the MSSCAT directory.

A preliminary inventory should be made for donations over 10 items. Depending on the size and value of the material, and the amount of time at your disposal, this inventory can be fairly detailed (each item listed separately in either chronological or original order) or fairly general (material grouped into broad categories with inclusive dates). No matter what sort of inventory is made, it is important at this point to get a general idea of the dates covered by the material and a fairly accurate item count.