



**PRESERVING  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
RELIGIOUS DOCUMENTS**

**A GUIDELINE FOR CHURCHES  
AND OTHER RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS**

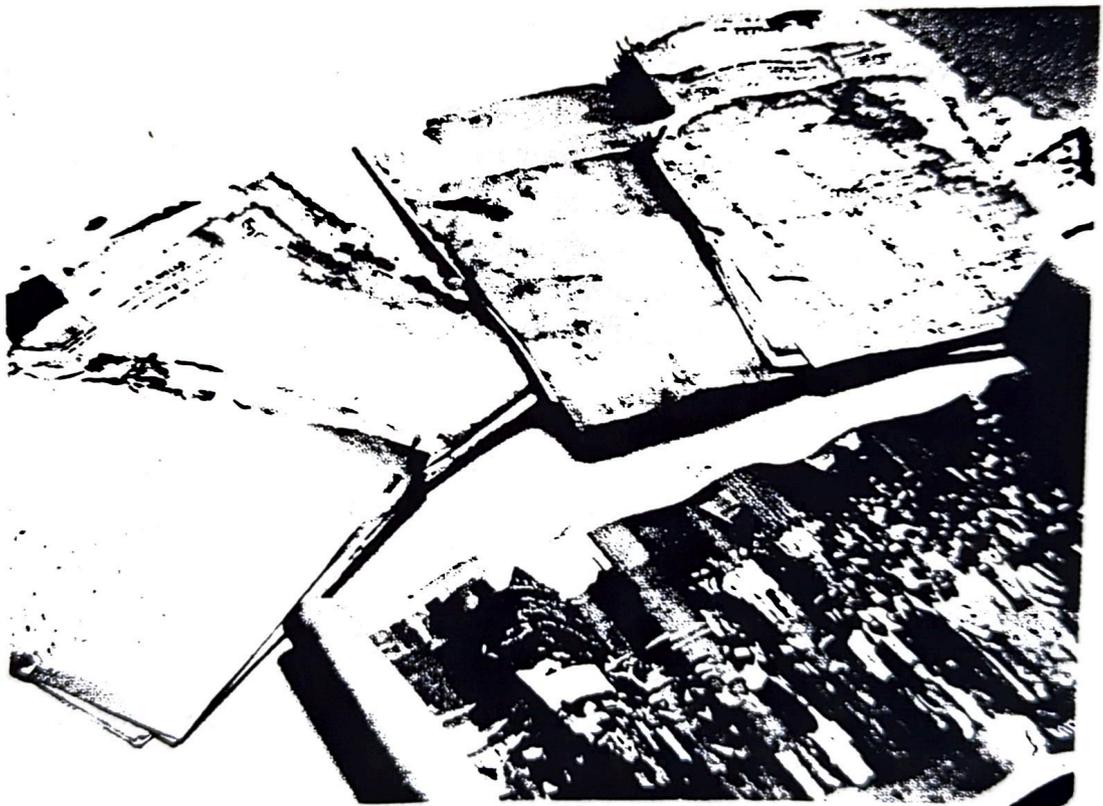
**SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE  
PRESERVATION OF THE BLACK RELIGIOUS HERITAGE PROJECT**

## FOREWORD

Your institution is of historic significance. Hence, it is important to preserve a documentary record to provide a clear and accurate account of its origins and what it has done, and to point the way toward future directions.

Unfortunately, leaders and members of churches and other religious bodies often do not think of their day-to-day activities as historically or culturally significant. All too frequently, records of their predecessors are thrown away, or boxed up and tucked away in a corner, attic or basement. Often unlabeled boxes or locked filing cabinets contain resources needed to reconstruct the history of the church, as well as significant events in African-American history. Your active commitment to securing these records is vital in order to halt the loss of the black religious heritage.

If your institution does not have one, a history committee should be established to gather documents which are scattered, and oversee the future maintenance of institutional records. The committee should talk with church elders and past ministers to find out who were the custodians of historical records. They can also discover whether papers or boxes belonging to the institution were ever put into storage. While recreating the past, the committee must also focus on safeguarding present and future records. It will be their task to see that records are secured against the threat of fire, careless disposal and flood damage. The legacy preserved will not only benefit religious leaders and scholars, it will also be available for interested individuals, who, in the quiet of their own time, wish to pursue information about their religious heritage.



*Records, documents and photographs improperly stored in basements and attics and damaged by exposure to water, heat and debris.*

## **WHAT IS OF HISTORICAL VALUE ?**

In the course of their normal activities, ministers, church leaders, lay persons and others working with the church produce a variety of records that document their efforts. Among them are letters, sermons, registers of births, baptisms, marriages and deaths, minutes of meetings, audio and video recordings of services, photographs, albums and scrapbooks, works of art, and architectural plans. Business records such as account books, ledgers and legal documents are also important. Published materials might include books, hymnals, newspapers, bulletins, special event programs, annual reports and journals. All of these media document your institution's place in history.

## **PRESERVING HISTORICAL RECORDS**

Once materials of historical value have been identified, every effort must be made to ensure their preservation. There are a variety of procedures for combatting the deterioration of your records.

### **Environment**

Environmental factors that can hasten the deterioration of paper and other materials include temperature, humidity, light, pollution and biological agents.

The ideal physical environment for permanent or archival materials is an area with controlled temperature and relative humidity. The ideal temperature is 65 degrees Fahrenheit, with relative humidity of 50%. Air-conditioning can be a cost-effective means of caring for collections. The storage area should have clean air with good circulation, controlled light sources, and be free of mold and insect or rodent infestation. Food should not be stored or consumed in the area. Preventive measures must also be taken to protect collections against fire and water damage.

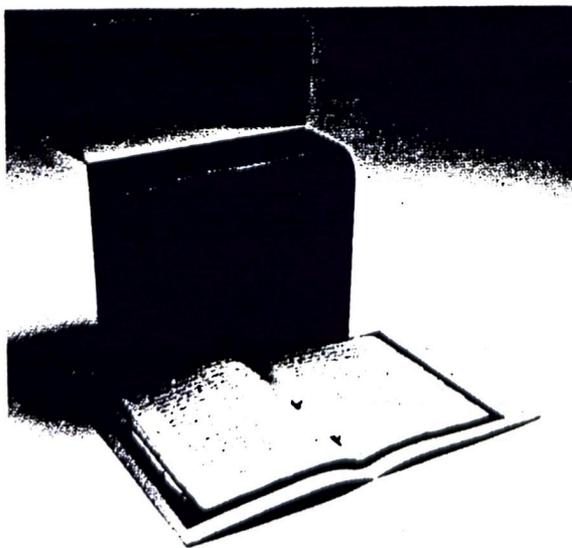
## Storage

All paper and board containers used for storing records, such as boxes, file folders, envelopes and mat board, should be acid and lignin-free and buffered with an alkaline reserve pH of 8.5. These storage materials are available in a wide variety of standard sizes and formats to meet virtually every need. Pressure sensitive tapes (e.g., masking or transparent tape) should not be used because they yellow with age and leave an acidic, sticky residue that can obscure or fade text. Metal fasteners should be removed and replaced with rust proof staples and paper clips. Rubber bands soften or become brittle with age, so should be removed and replaced with flat cotton string.

### *Records on Paper*

Most paper used today is made from wood pulp processed with chemicals to clean, brighten and prepare it for use in writing or printing. Acid, alum rosin-sizing, lignin and other elements used in processing are damaging over time. However, alkaline paper is available and is more durable for permanent records.

**Unbound Records:** Correspondence, legal documents, programs, flyers, minutes, etc., should be stored in alkaline file folders and boxes.



*The 100-year-old handwritten sermons of Reverend Alexander Crummell, Episcopalian theologian and educator, are protected through storage in acid and lignin-free boxes.*

**Unbound Oversize Material:** Posters, blueprints, architectural drawings, and maps should be stored in alkaline file folders in flat map cases. If items are too large they can be rolled with alkaline paper.

**Bound Volumes:** Sturdy items such as books, registers, diaries, ledgers and journals should be stored standing on shelves. However, they should not be jammed to the back of shelves, and large volumes should not be shelved next to smaller volumes that cannot provide support. Albums, scrap-books and other loose-leaf items should be stored spine down within folders or in alkaline boxes. Fragile volumes with detached covers or pages, should be tied with unbleached cotton or linen tape, or put in boxes or wrappers.

**Photographs:** With negatives and prints, daguerreotypes, calotypes, albumen prints, cabinet cards, cartes-de-visite, and tintypes, each image should be stored in its own envelope or sleeve. Sleeves should be made either of alkaline paper or inert plastic such as polyester, polyethylene or polypropylene, not PVC (polyvinyl chloride). Negatives are generally stored in alkaline paper sleeves. Ideally, slides should be in glass mounts. Photographs with cases or mounts can be stored upright in boxes with suitable protective dividers.



*The Baptismal Register of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, New York City, is maintained in its original format and also preserved in a more permanent microfilm format for use by researchers.*

## **Other Formats**

**Microfiche and Microfilm:** Microfilm should be stored on inert plastic reels in alkaline boxes, inside vertical baked steel enamel cabinets. Microfiche should be enclosed in alkaline sleeves, within baked steel enamel cabinets. These items should be inspected every two years for blemishes or deterioration and replacement copies made when necessary.

**Phonograph Records:** Phonograph records (shellac and vinyl) should be shelved vertically at all times. They should not be allowed to lean or slant, because they are vulnerable to warping, which could result in distortion of sound. Rigid dividers should be used to separate shelves into compartments of no more than twenty records each. Records should never be stacked or allowed to extend over the edges of shelving units. Cellophane wrappers found on album covers should be removed because they respond to changes in temperature and relative humidity and could cause warping.

**Magnetic Tapes:** Magnetic tapes should be protected from stray magnetic fields created by electrical motors and other sources of magnetic energy to avoid erasure or sound alteration. They should be stored in polyethylene bags to prevent exposure to dust. Vertical storage on shelves is also recommended. Since magnetic tapes deteriorate with use, it is wise to use copies and store the originals. Tape position, rewinding and fast forwarding should be monitored by a designated individual as the longevity of the tape depends on its everyday care. Cassette tapes are not permanent. They should be copied onto 1.5 mil polyester reel-to-reel tape.

**Videotapes:** Videotape is prone to the same kinds of problems as magnetic tape such as the risk of damage through contact with dust, stray magnetic fields, and degradation during playback and rewinding. Since it is not a stable medium, videotape should be copied onto 16 or 35 mm film or laser videodisc for a permanent record. The use, handling and maintenance of videotapes should be monitored by a designated individual.

**Computer Disks and Equipment:** Computer disks and equipment should be protected from water spillage, electrical current surges and high humidity and temperatures. Equipment should be plugged into surge suppressors. Information on disks should be transferred to computer tape or printouts for permanent storage.

### **Disaster Preparedness**

Every permanent record and document storage area should have a written disaster plan. A good plan includes the following:

- A layout of the building
- Storage locations for records and documents
- Salvage priorities (what is most important to save when a disaster occurs)
- A designated supervisor for salvage and clean-up
- Instructions for the proper handling and treatment of damaged items
- Professional consultants for arresting deterioration and restoring damaged materials
- Service technicians for malfunctioning computer equipment
- Structural engineers and other technical consultants to handle facilities damaged by fire, smoke or water

A copy of the plan should be given to the history committee, maintenance staff, security staff and other caretakers.

## **REGIONAL CENTERS**

The following regional centers can be contacted for guidance on preserving your historical records:

**Balboa Art Conservation Center  
P.O. Box 3755  
San Diego, CA 92103**

**Conservation Center For Art  
and Historic Artifacts  
260 South Broad Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19102**

**Northeast Document Conservation Center  
Abbot Hall, School Street  
Andover, MA 01810**

**Pacific Regional Conservation Center  
Bishop Museum  
P.O. Box 9000 A  
Honolulu, HI 96819**

**Rocky Mountain Regional Conservation Center  
University of Denver  
2420 South University Boulevard  
Denver, CO 80200**

**Texas Conservation Center  
Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum  
P.O. Box 967, W.T. Station  
Canyon, TX 79016**

**The Upper Midwest Conservation Association  
Minneapolis Institute Of Arts  
2400 Third Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MI 55404**

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

It is hoped that this booklet will serve as a useful guide and information source for churches and other religious institutions which recognize the urgency of instituting appropriate plans for safeguarding and preserving their records and documents of historical value. The details for preservation and care of materials in acceptable environments were written by Cheryl Ann Shackelton, Preservation Administrator, and reviewed by Diana Lachatanere, Head of Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Victor N. Smythe  
Archivist, Preservation of  
the Black Religious Heritage Project

*Text photographs by E. Lee White.*

If you would like to help preserve materials documenting the African-American religious heritage, please contact Victor Smythe, Project Archivist:

Preservation of the Black Religious Heritage Project  
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture  
515 Malcolm X Boulevard  
New York, NY 10037-1801  
(212) 491-2226

Howard Dodson, Chief



Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture  
The New York Public Library