



Preventative Conservation in Neglected Archives: Large-Scale Archival Repairs in Forgotten Collections

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ABSTRACT

The archives of the American Irish Historical Society, collected since the 1890s, span a great variety of topics and material forms. Housed in a gilded-age mansion on 5th Avenue, their care and keeping is a difficult but not entirely unique challenge. This case study demonstrates the difficulty of incorporating archival standards into older infrastructure and the importance of providing access for cultural heritage collections. From May into December 2025, this is a recent look into a case of archival improvements and safeguarding.

Archival collections, though ideally held to standards, have great variety between them. Some exist within particularly small niches and are able to be held in equally small spaces; others are granted designated spaces to be hidden away (think, for instance, of

J.P. Morgan's extensive library [vault](#)^[1]). The featured subjects, amount of materials, and storage of such archives can be both a benefit and a challenge to their management. Particularly for archives housed in unique spaces, their storage must be carefully considered to meet standards laid out by the American Library Association (ALA) and other guiding organizations. Often, these standards can only be met to a certain extent, which can quickly lead to disrepair given unforeseen circumstances and changing management.

The *American Irish Historical Society* is in a decidedly uncommon circumstance. Originally founded in Boston in 1897, it moved locations multiple times before settling in its Manhattan home on Fifth Avenue in April, 1940. This building, a gilded-age mansion, is a beautiful setting for its guests and members. When purchased, the officers at the time stated explicitly that this would be the place to hold their archival collections, spanning from books to unique personal correspondences and fabric materials. However, like any old New York building, it can provide unique challenges for an archive. From poor environmental control to hidden closets, its archival storage requires creative solutions to ensure the best possible safety.

In May 2025, the archives had no active stewardship. This is from a variety of causes, exacerbated by loss of funding and changes in structure post-2020. This ongoing project has been to repair and catalog these materials, providing a safe home for materials and easy access in the midst of a complicated storage structure. This article describes the project, with the intention of providing a guideline for archival professionals working in similar scopes. Given that this is a short-form piece designed specifically for this issue of *Bridging Fields*, many details of the methodologies have been redacted for the purpose of brevity. Should readers be interested in further details, they may contact the author with questions.

Before describing this work, it should also be noted that these steps were heavily advised by other professionals consulted throughout the project. Though many names could be mentioned as useful for practical advice, the author makes a general note here Angela Kipp's 2016 book *Managing Previously Unmanaged Collections* functions well as an essential guideline for similar work. As a general recommendation, the author would also

recommend a perusal of many free digital lectures provided by the American Institute for Conservation (AIC), geared to a wide range of audiences. If ever in doubt, speak to someone with greater experience and expertise.

Initial Assessment

The issues noted in the initial assessment of the archives were multifaceted. First and foremost, the finding aids and catalogs in existence were limited and/or outdated. The ones that were most complete were (literally and figuratively) buried and difficult to access, only available on paper. Secondly, and more urgently, the physical environment the materials existed in was far from ideal. papers had been scattered around without organization. Papers had been removed from folders. Bookshelves were dusty and disorganized. Most concerning, HVAC functions had been terminated for collections spaces for an indeterminate amount of time, creating an environment that was warm, humid, and dark. In other words, perfect for mold growth. The primary step was to assess the needs in each space and place them in lists of urgency, prioritizing the biggest issues first. HVAC needed to be turned on, with stable rH (Relative Humidity) and temperature. Humidity and temperature monitors were placed in each room. Additionally, materials that were not archival had to be removed, to ensure archival rooms were utilized for their primary purposes only.

As these changes were made, notes were carefully kept on each step taken in the process. Biweekly reports, as well as spreadsheets for documenting individual tasks, were used to keep track of changes made for future archivists. Photographic documentation was also made to show issues and improvements during the course of the project, which can be seen in samples like the image below.



Above Image: Basement Archives Before v. After. Source: Lindenburg, 2025.



Above Image: Closet Archives Before v. After. Source: Lindenburg, 2025.

This initial needs survey was aided by conservation and preservation specialists, noting conditions that differed from standards. With collections that vary so widely in material, age, and condition, many different notes were required to understand the work needed for the archive to be repaired. Six months later, this work is still ongoing and many further needs are required to complete this repair work. Realistically, the work of

conservators will be needed for many of the individual objects within the archives. This said, the work of the project was to create a general state of stability throughout the collections, in order for this work to be made possible.

Policies and Procedures

After undergoing this assessment, a need for clearer policies became apparent. Though some collections management policies had been present in the past, more training and cementation of scope and access was needed. CMPs and their associated policies are not only useful for daily internal procedures, but for the purposes of grant writing. The policies that are present in archives and libraries may depend on the collections, but general lists can be found by looking through other institutions, National Archives recommendations, and supplemental material lists for grant calls.

Cataloguing and Access

The biggest focus of the project was to engage a wider audience by cataloguing and creating digital access. Given limited funding and staff, this is an ongoing task. To create some scope of an online catalog, AirTable was used to create a list that could be put online in limited portions, showcasing some amount of the collection to researchers.

Additionally, email correspondence was used to facilitate research access to the archives, guiding patrons through different collections for supervised visits. Access is the most crucial role of an archive, yet can be the most challenging to create for collections that have gone without management for some time. Though softwares like ArchivesSpace would be better suited for large collections like this, the cost for server usage exceeded the scope of funding. Further, the greatest need for the collection's access was to create transparency with the public, meaning that a preview AirTable catalog was a better fit for the needs and functions of this organization. This being said, the best cataloguing and surveying process will depend greatly on the needs of the organization you are working with.

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Above Figure: Sample AirTable. Source: Lindenburg, 2025.

As you build up basic surveys, finding aids, and cataloguing information, applying for grants which can help facilitate greater access can be a worthwhile pursuit. Keeping notes on the trends of grants can give a good idea about which parts of the collections are best fits for grants, and what support is most needed for different projects. Many grants will be most interested in providing access, but hesitant about which materials are most needed for researchers.

Next Steps

As this work is continued, a finished survey and a continued catalog are the most important focuses moving forward. In order to facilitate research, giving interested scholars a clear sense of the scope is useful, meaning that finding aids are the top priority. Once complete, a clear digital catalog with proper keywords and metadata makes access widely available, bringing important resources to a global audience.

Advice

For early career professionals, most will be familiar with archival collections that have been ongoing through many changes in the field, adapting to new standards. Coming into a collection that has been stagnant (or simply underutilized) for many years requires a different mode of thinking than what one will typically see with early work experiences. As such, when encountering these circumstances, it is best to contact specialists for advice. Reaching out to those with a background in preservation and

preventative conservation will likely be more useful than contacting someone who specializes in digital preservation, particularly if you are working in a collection that has not yet met the digital age.

In fact, it may be most useful to reach out to those who worked in archives prior to the invention of the world wide web, as they might be able to help you understand the methodologies that are most present in your collections. In this experience, work had advanced into 2020, meaning that many methodologies had used newer techniques. However, some parts of the collections had progress that had been halted in the mid-1990s, meaning that much of the information had been trapped in outdated technologies such as floppy disks.

In any case, the most important advice that this author would give was to not get caught up in weighing past methodologies against present issues. Though it is difficult to adjust collections to present standards, these changes can come gradually and the primary safety of the collections should come first and foremost.

For archivists working in big cities, there are many options available in person for advice. Joining groups like New York's Archivists RoundTable can be useful for forming professional connections to get a second thought on your project. If no one is available in person, consider joining Facebook groups like Archivist Think Tank to join a conversation and get a second (or third!) opinion. No matter how remote your archive is, you are never alone in your resources. Using books like Kipp's recommended in this article can be another saving grace if conversations (digital or in-person) are inaccessible. At the end of the day, taking one day at a time to heal your collection, keeping track of your failures and successes, and celebrating the small wins will help to keep your project steady as you move forward.

Author Bio:

Mark Lindenburg is a recent graduate of the Palmer School Dual Degree program, with an MA in English and MSLIS. He has a BA in English from St. John Fisher University. His research focuses on medieval Ireland and Iceland, with a particular interest in comparative manuscript studies. This research is informed by his professional archival experiences, using a

focus on provenance to analyze the archival placement of medieval Irish texts. He is the Lead Archivist at the American Irish Historical Society.

[1] See curator discussion of the vault here: Bevan, Sheelagh. "o22. Stop 22. The Vault." o22. *Stop 22. The Vault* | *The Morgan Library & Museum*, www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/guide/stop-22-vault. Accessed 21 Sept. 2025.

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