

Preserving history Here's how to keep that historic newspaper for years to come

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Tomorrow's fish wrapping and yesterday's news. Labels such as these have been applied to old newspapers for decades.

But the terrorist attack in New York City and Washington, D.C., on Sept. 11 and the continuing developments in the story as the United States retaliated on Sunday have brought a new respect for yesterday's editions.

"This has been a major event that has changed the way we look at our lives, our country and our world," said Sheryl Ogden, head of conservation at the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul, Minn. "A lot of people want to be able to remember and pass these memories along."

Just as our parents and grandparents have vivid memories of the stock market crash of 1929 or the day President Kennedy was assassinated, the terrorist attack and the military action that follows are stories will share for decades to come.

The newspaper is one of the few chronicles of a defining event in history - or in our personal lives - that we are able to hold in our hands.

Librarians and historians preserve newspapers from around the world in carefully controlled environments and transfer them to microfilm or electronic images. They are such an important record that, since the early 1980's, the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Humanities have been working together on the United States Newspaper Program, which locates, catalogs, and preserves newspapers published throughout the country.

But how can individuals save that historic front page.

The key is to place the newspaper in an acid-free, stable environment, that is cool, dry, dark and free of insects, Ogden said. The more stable the environment, the longer the newspaper will last.



WHY NEWSPAPERS DETERIORATE

Newsprint introduced an important change in paper production. Up until the 1850s, all paper had a rag content, making it last for centuries.

Newsprint, however, is made by grinding wood into sawdust-like particles, boiling the short fibers and forming them into sheets. Little of the lignin that binds cellulose fibers together is removed. The lignin causes acids to degrade the cellulose. Papers discolor, become brittle and disintegrate.

Eighty percent of newsprint is made this way and has an expected useful life of fewer than 50 years, even with care.

To preserve papers for generations, it would be best to hire a professional paper conservator, but there are steps you can take at home to lengthen the life of newspapers you want to save.

The best way to ensure the newspaper lasts for decades is to make high quality photocopies on acid-free and buffered paper, Ogden said. To tell if the copy will last, see if you can smear the ink. If so, the image may flake away over time, she said.

DISPLAYING PAPERS

If you want to display a page, rather than framing or mounting an original sheet of newsprint, frame the photocopy.

Newspapers quickly turn yellow and start to become brittle when exposed to sunlight or fluorescent light. Whether you frame the original or a copy, the paper should be lit with incandescent light and framed using acid-free mat paper as backing. You may also want to use acid-free polyester sheets as an overlay mount.

UV-filtering glass will reduce fading, but the paper should not touch the glass as it may eventually stick to it.

Never put pressure sensitive tape on the paper or laminate the paper.

PRESERVING THE ORIGINAL

To keep the original newspaper, it is best to start with a copy of the newspaper that has not been handled or folded several times.

The most practical method is to buy acid-free and buffered boxes and folders available through archival supply companies. The alkaline buffer added to the boxes neutralizes the acids given off by the paper, so that the folders and the box protecting the newspaper will last longer.

The boxes should be close to the size of the newspaper.

If you are saving more than one paper you will need a folder for each newspaper. The folders should be the size of the box - not the size of the paper. This will prevent the papers from sliding around inside the box.

If you are saving clips, you can store them in acid-free polyester sleeves and place them inside an archival quality box.

WHERE TO STORE THE PAPERS

After you have preserved the paper, avoid uninsulated attics or damp basements. Find a dark, dry environment where the temperature is relatively stable, such as the top shelf of an interior closet.

Heat is an enemy of newsprint. It speeds chemical reaction. The ideal temperature for newsprint storage is between 65 and 70 degrees. A relative humidity of

40 percent is ideal. Mold and the warping of paper fibers occurs when the humidity reaches 70 percent.

Insects can be attracted to cellulose, glue, paste and leather. Don't store newspapers near food. Routinely check to make certain the area is clean and dust-free.

GOING A STEP FURTHER

Those who want to make certain the paper is preserved for generations may want to hire a professional conservator. The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic works in Washington, D.C., offers referrals throughout the country.

Some experts recommend storing the newspaper flat, not folded in half as it is sold. They also recommend inserting acid-free, buffered sheets of tissue between each sheet of newsprint or inserting each sheet in an acid-free polyester sleeve before placing them in acid-free boxes.

In most homes, though, it would be difficult to find space to store entire newspapers this way, Ogden said.

Finally, even if you take all of these steps, the newsprint itself contains acids that will continue to degrade the paper. There are ways to treat - or deacidify - the paper which will delay yellowing. Experts recommend that such treatments be left to professionals because the products can be toxic.

"Newspapers do deteriorate quickly, but that deterioration can be slowed dramatically with a few precautions," Ogden said.

Dava Aiken Tobey writes for the Star-Banner in Ocala, Fla. Ann Maloney, an editor with the NYT Regional Newspapers, contributed to this report.

Conservation resources

Check with the local historical society for resources for products and information about preserving historic newspapers and other precious documents.

If you are interested in hiring a professional conservator, the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic works in Washington, D.C., offers referrals throughout the country. You can reach them by calling (202) 452-9545 or visit the Web site at <http://aic.stanford.edu/>.

Catalogs for products are available from the following companies:

Light Impressions, Rochester, N.Y.
(800) 828-6216
www.lightimpressionsdirect.com

Gaylord Bros. Partnership Services, Syracuse, N.Y.
(800) 448-6160

University Products, Inc., Holyoke, Mass.
(800) 762-1165
www.universityproducts.com

Metal Edge, Commerce, Calif.
(800) 862-2228

Sources: Clarke Historical Library Preservation Web site, www.lib.cmich.edu/clarke/pres., the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul, Minn., and the Williamstown Art Conservation Center in Williamstown, Mass.