It’s not all on the net: Identifying, preserving and protecting rare and unique federal documents

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1. Introduction/issues

The notion that all the government information that researchers will ever need is available, or shortly will be, in a user friendly, electronic form on the Internet, is a far cry from the reality facing most government information professionals. Paper and microfiche, the familiar, tangible products of the Government Printing Office, remain a substantial part of most federal document collections. Although GPO is on the path to a “more electronic” environment it is not likely to become a paperless agency anytime in the next several years, if at all. Consider that in their 1998 fiscal year report GPO indicated that they had distributed over 140 million pieces of fiche and paper products, and this did not include direct mail or distribution from USGS and the National Imagery and Mapping Administration. The fact that paper will be with us in the Federal Depository Library Program well into the next century was highlighted by Dan O’Mahoney of Brown University in Government Documents Quarterly:

while increasing amounts of information will be available in electronic format, there are substantial (and growing) physical collections of government publications that will continue to reside in depository libraries. The information contained in these collections is useful, but the costs of digitizing this material are too staggering to even contemplate at this time . . . the care and management of these physical collections will continue to be an issue for the [FDL] program and for its participating libraries.

While it is certainly true that the amount of tangible products has decreased, hundreds of paper and fiche products, many of which do not have an electronic counterpart, continue to arrive every week at depository libraries around the country. This on-going flow of tangible

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products, particularly paper, raises several important concerns (continued bibliographic
control, space needs and providing public service support are just a few) for participants in
the Federal Depository Library Program. Identifying and preserving those items that have
historical or intrinsic value because of their rare or unique publication qualities has remained,
unfortunately, a low priority. It is not that the issue lacks importance, but with so many other
pressing needs facing the government documents community developing a preservation plan
for older documents is much further down on the list of “things to do.” This in turn has
created a looming crisis for government information professionals and library administrators:
how to deal with the wealth of tangible material in our document collections; material that
is increasing in both research value and in “collectiability.”

This paper will offer a brief introduction on means to identify rare and unique federal
documents, will discuss some of the preservation options currently being utilized in docu-
ment collections and will consider if the current interest in digitization offers government
information professionals a viable means of responding to the growing preservation problem
that rare or unique paper documents present.

2. Recognizing the coming crisis

One of the earliest published efforts to focus solely on the importance of identifying and
preserving unique government publications was a 1931 article by Virginia Dickerman. In
this seminal work Dickerman traced the development of government printing and offered a
list of the very evaluative factors that continue to be used to identify and treat unique
government products in our collections: condition of publication, rarity of the information
content, special/historic association, illustrations or maps, and age.

In the rare book community an early effort to promote government publications as rare
materials and specialized research tools came with the publication of the 1956 Rosenbach
Fellow in Bibliography lecture: The Books of a New Nation. While less concerned with
treatment this important essay helped to draw the attention of bibliographers and historians
to the wealth of material available in older U.S. government documents. In the intervening
years since 1956 the attention given to documents as a separate class of rare materials
languished. The American Bicentennial, and the years leading up to it, saw an interest in
exhibits and increased concern for the preservation of major historical documents—the
Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation—but little effort focused on the
day to day publications of the federal government.

In the mid to late 1980s interest in the protection of rare government documents re-
emerged in the library community starting first with a survey of 116 ARL Collections
conducted by David Morrison and Nora Quinlan. The survey, which looked at preservation
practices then in place for government document collections, was unfortunately never
published, although it was shared informally with many in the documents community. The
effort to spread the word about the need to preserve government publications received a big
push forward with the creation in 1988 of an ad-hoc committee by the American Library
Association’s Government Documents Roundtable (GODORT). This committee, working
with other ALA groups, including the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, sponsored a
workshop on the topic of identifying and preserving rare government documents. The handouts from this program were subsequently gathered together and published by ALA and GODORT as a resource packet for all document librarians and distributed in 1993 via GPO. In 1991 Mark Thomas, Aimee Piscitelli and Julia Rholes undertook a survey of 237 libraries to determine the scope of vandalism to the U.S. Serial Set and preservation efforts then underway. This excellent survey provided a much needed “snapshot” of how libraries in the early 1990s were responding to the need to treat some portions of the document collection as rare material. In 1996, shortly after the ad-hoc group became an official part of ALA/GODORT, the Committee on Rare and Endangered Government Publications began to consider the prospects of surveying the entire depository community to ascertain the extent of preservation efforts for the U.S. Serial Set. Based upon professional experience working with the set and the results of the earlier survey many of the GODORT Committee members had a gut feeling as to what the results would be but it was still thought worthwhile to make the effort. The survey results were presented at ALA’s Annual Conference in 1998 and published in GODORT’s journal—DttP. Out of this effort came several additional articles all of which contributed to raising awareness of the need to evaluate government publications in the same way as other rare and unique items in an institution’s collection.

The Rare and Endangered Government Publications Committee is currently working on a survey instrument that will allow the Committee to identify the location of particularly rare 19th century documents and to develop internet resources on preservation that are geared towards the needs of government information professionals. A discussion of these issues and a link to the Committee’s internet Serial Set inventory project may be found on the Committee’s website at http://www7.tamu-commerce.edu/library/govdocs/rgep.htm.

Other groups besides GODORT have also expressed interest in the effort to identify and protect rare and unique federal documents. In Ohio several institutions were involved in a project to improve bibliographic access to historical federal documents in their collections. The Historical Cataloging of Government Publications in the Five Colleges of Ohio provides researchers with an extraordinary source for identifying unique federal resources and, by providing improved bibliographic control, aid in the identification and protection of these valuable historical items. The Patent and Trademark Office, with the help of the Patent and Trademark Depository Librarians Association has undertaken a similar effort to identify and provide electronic access to the wealth of unique scientific and technical information that make up many older patent collections. The National Agricultural Library, in conjunction with a number of Land Grant institutions, continues its efforts to identify and preserve important government documents, both federal and state, related to agricultural life in America.

3. What are rare federal documents and why should we care?

What, exactly, are rare or unique government publications? The answer to this is as broad and multifaceted as the libraries that make up the Federal Depository Library Program. Certainly for federal documents, the American State Papers, early volumes of the U.S. Serial Set, and early reports of the Smithsonian’s Bureau of American of Ethnology would all
qualify. But what about federal items of more recent vintage? At the website of a major dealer in antiquarian legal materials some of the items listed for sale included a 1946 report from the Bulletin of the Women’s Bureau: *The Legal Status of Women in the United States of America, 1938–1945*; a bicentennial history of the United States Court of Claims; and a 1922 General Land Office Circular on “Regulations Under the Timber and Stone Law.” While none of these are particularly rare the fact that they were being offered for sale confirms that there remains an interest among book collectors for government documents. This should persuade librarians to be more alert to the conditions and shelving status of older government publications in their library.

The Ohio historical documents cataloging project mentioned above also demonstrates that there is a demand on the part of researchers for this unique material and a need for improved bibliographic access to these historical government publications. Many of these publications have often been overlooked in document collections because of the focus that document collection clientele have on gaining access to current information. That many document collections often hold overlooked materials of value to researchers and collectors was also brought out in a series of e-mails on GOVDOC-L that discussed the discovery in a library’s document collection of several reports on the internment of people of Japanese origin during WWII.

Federal government documents provide the resources for the analysis of contemporary issues as well as the backbone of much of the research conducted in American history. William Miller in his book *Arguing About Slavery* offers a brief essay recounting his use of the *Congressional Globe* and the *Register of Debates*, two early nineteenth century unofficial “official” compilations of Congressional activity. Richard Landon, in discussing early American imprints during the GODORT 1988 program on Government Documents as Rare Books, stated that “the contents of these often unassuming pamphlets constitute the foundation of historical records for much of the continent.”

### 4. Selecting rare documents for preservation

In order to identify effectively material that might need protection staff involved in a preservation program ought to be familiar with the collection and its use patterns. The obvious historical materials are not always the best candidates for preservation. An institution with a strong aerospace engineering program may find it more important to protect early NASA publications then parts of the *U.S. Serial Set*. Local needs should always be a factor in determining what documents might be worthy of preservation. In the survey of the *U.S. Serial Set* conducted by GODORT’s Rare and Endangered Government Publications Committee several respondents indicated that they did not protect the entire Serial Set but only those publications relevant to their mission. For example, a library in New Mexico responded that they preserve all material that deals with their state, while another, a service academy library, protects only those documents related to their branch of the service. Again, local need and knowledge of the collection will go a long way in determining priorities of material to protect.

Age as a factor to consider when deciding whether or not to preserve document material
is important but is not a consistently reliable tool by which to select material for preservation or protection, as some of the publications offered by the bookseller mentioned previously will attest. Still, library staff should be alert for those materials produced during the early part of the 19th century and make an effort to ensure that at the very least they are accounted for bibliographically. As most librarians now realize, items produced around the middle of the 19th century are often in much better physical condition than material produced at the outset of the 20th century. These publications may not require immediate conservation work but being able to account for the item will be a major asset in assuring the item does not “disappear.”

Physical condition is one of the most common methods used to select material for protection. In fact, in many instances ‘age and condition go hand in hand. When using physical condition as an identifier of government documents that warrant some type of preservation or protection it is important to keep in mind that a copy already in poor condition, with worn or missing pages, or poorly bound will require some type of treatment to make its continued use a reality. Condition can be, and often is, more than just a negative. As Charles Seavey has pointed out in his essay on “Government Graphics” there are many unique positive qualities of a publication that contribute to making a federal document rare or unique.20 Illustrations, maps and charts are several of these unique qualities—the intrinsic values—that should not be overlooked when embarking on a preservation plan for government publications. These unique, positive qualities can often enhance the monetary value of an otherwise unassuming document making it a prime target for thieves.

Finally, the unique intellectual content of government documents needs to be considered. Some of these qualities include—landmark or controversial laws, Congressional hearings of particular significance, the Iran Contra Hearings or the hearings on Robert Bork’s Supreme Court nomination are two examples, and areas where the Federal government has conducted groundbreaking original, scientific, technical and/or social research.21

Selecting material for any type of preservation activity requires an institutional commitment to treatment, knowledge of the collection and a careful weighing of many variables, some of which will be institution specific, to determine priorities and levels of treatment for federal document materials.

5. Preservation activities/options

What types of preservation efforts are currently underway in the documents community? In the survey of the U.S. Serial Set conducted by GODORT’s Rare and Endangered Government Documents Committee one of the big surprises for the survey coordinators were the results of the questions dealing with active preservation activities in document collections. While many in the library community recognize the importance of developing preservation programs for rare and unique material, the survey results suggested that, at least for the U.S. Serial Set, very little actual activity had been undertaken.22

Of the types of specific preservation activity considered in the GODORT survey 50% or 130 out of 260 respondents to this group of questions, indicated that no preservation or conservation activity was underway. Of those who did respond to specific types of activity,
24% are utilizing phase boxes to house fragile material, 4% are engaged in removing maps and images for encapsulation and 3% are creating mylar jackets for individual reports. Forty percentage of the respondents in the survey—representing the largest group of respondents (the overall percentages are slightly more than 100% as some respondents provided a positive response in multiple categories)—listed a variety of individual efforts in the “other” category, including:

- Treating leather bindings and returning the documents to the shelves
- Sending non fragile items out for rebinding
- Acquiring replacement pages via ILL and recopying onto acid free page, then tipping into the volume
- Relocating 19th century material to restricted storage/access areas
- Having the collection professionally dusted and vacuumed
- Replacing paper copies with fiche (either commercially or GPO produced)

Surprisingly, no library that responded to the survey mentioned reformatting material, either for microfiche or digitization, as a means of preservation for government documents.23 The most important preservation activity though is not an action taken on the material but one applied to users and staff—education. This effort should strive to integrate preservation in the daily activity of the institution and its clientele. Due to the limited number of responses to the preservation questions in the GODORT survey the Committee felt that there may be a further need to identify how preservation decisions are made within institutions housing federal document collections.

6. Is digitization the answer?

There are numerous digitization projects underway or currently in place and it sometimes seems as if every library in the nation that has something unique, or believes that it does, is in the process of scanning this material and making it available on the Internet. This includes many government information collections as well. Some of these new resources reflect an understanding of what digitization has to offer in terms of creating unique research tools while others appear to have been created with little thought given to the critical nexus of electronic image/text, available technology and the computer skills of researchers.24

Within federal government agencies there are several very good examples of how digitization can take tangible resources and by creating an original context in which to use them, provide a whole new level of understanding. One of the most familiar is The Library of Congresses’ “A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation.”25 Agencies as diverse as the National Archives and the FBI have also taken advantage of scanning technology and the Internet to provide access to unique government information that was originally available only in paper.26

In academic libraries one of the most ambitious and well-designed access projects is the effort by staff at the University of North Texas to digitize the publications of the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR). This project began when the University of North Texas entered into a partnership agreement with GPO to provide access to
electronic material produced by that agency. After the project got underway a decision was made to expand the ACIR resources available on the website by borrowing and scanning older publications that were not part of the material provided by the Agency or GPO. The ACIR project, and the developing “CyberCemetery” at University of North Texas, has the potential to serve as a model of how to acquire, scan and provide access to federal documents originally produced in a tangible format.

What do these very different projects have to teach government information professionals about the preservation of historic federal documents? The first, and possibly the most important point, is that none of these projects are viewed solely as a preservation effort. The digitization of rare or unique government documents is not considered preservation. This is particularly true since many scanning efforts involve damage, if not outright destruction, of the original item. Nor is it appropriate to talk of the “permanent public access” of digitized materials on an Internet site as if that meant these newly created electronic resources were now more permanent than they had been in their original format. This distinction is recognized by many involved in the creation of electronic resources from paper federal documents. In an electronic mail exchange with Gary Menges of the University of Washington’s Allen Library he explained that their efforts to digitize Native American treaties and government reports related to Pacific Northwest Indians was seen as an “access project, not a preservation project in the sense of scanning for preservation per se.” This point was made even more clearly in a report published by the Council on Library and Information Resources:

Though digitization is sometimes loosely referred to as preservation, it is clear that, so far, digital resources are at their best when facilitating access to information and weakest when assigned the traditional library responsibility of preservation. Regrettably, because digitization is a type of reformatting, like microfilming, it is often confused with preservation microfilming and seen as a superior, if as yet more expensive, form of preservation reformatting. Digital imaging is not preservation, however.

However, digitization does share some attributes with the goals of traditional preservation activities. Certainly the decreased handling of a resource is one of the most obvious and not something to be considered lightly (although this could also be achieved by microfilming). Paul Conway, Head of Preservation at Yale University has outlined several ways that digitization can immediately provide improved access and still meet the preservation needs of unique library resources:

- **Protect Originals.** The most common application of digital technologies is to create copies of sufficient quality that they can be used for ready reference.
- **Represent Originals.** A digital copy may represent the information content of the original in such detail that it will meet most of the research potential of the original.
- **Transcend Originals.** In some instances digital copies hold the promise of a product that can be used in new ways that the original could not.

The news coverage of President Clinton’s impeachment provides an example of how digitization to facilitate access can fulfill some (or all) of Conway’s examples. The impeachment saw a run by journalists, scholars and the general public on many institutions’ copies
of the Andrew Johnson impeachment hearings and related documents. While not particularly rare, these hearings represent the only previous occasion that a President of the United States was impeached. Because of this unique content, several government document collections and commercial publishers took the step of creating a digital copy of the material and providing access to this version through their web sites. By cutting down on the handling of the original Johnson hearings and materials these institutions took an important preservation step.

In spite of the hold that the Internet and technology has on many government information professionals, digital technology is still in its infancy. While creating a digital version of a rare or unique government publication offers an exciting opportunity to improve awareness of an otherwise underutilized resource, the decision to preserve a government document in electronic form by reformatting the item (i.e., scanning) brings with it a host of unresolved issues related to reliability of the new resources. These include questions of longevity regarding the recording medium, how often the medium must be updated, how to migrate from older to newer electronic storage media, what method will be used to archive the electronic material and how to produce the electronic resource in a cost effective/labor efficient manner. Many government agencies and academic institutions are working to resolve the functional questions related to digitization but the answers are not yet there.

Unlike a book or government report in paper, an electronic product requires additional resources, a computer and/or software, to make it accessible. Library administrators and government information professionals who approach digitization as a means of preservation, or for any other purpose, must also consider what equipment will be necessary to make the files accessible now and in the future. Will new equipment need to be purchased or will existing equipment be maintained? Both of these options represent an expensive undertaking in an era of flat, and sometimes declining, budgets. Creating a digital resource from paper remains an expensive, labor and hardware intensive project that does not yet represent the most cost effective means of preserving rare or unique federal documents.

Does digitization offer government information librarians a means of long term preservation for rare, unique or endangered federal documents? If our first duty is to ensure that the information in our collection remains available to our clientele in the most reliable, easily accessible format digitization as a means of preservation is not the answer. Converting from paper to an electronic storage medium remains too volatile, too expensive and, at this juncture, too uncertain to risk these unique resources on.

7. Conclusion

Paper and microfiche, the familiar, tangible products of the Government Printing Office, are going to be with us well into the future. Along with the continued delivery of physical products the material already in document collections will continue to demand our attention. There remains a pressing need to identify those federal publications that are unique, rare and/or endangered and to prepare for their preservation. The digitization of federal government documents offers the potential for improved access but is not, because of the many questions still unanswered about the life span of electronic storage mediums, an appropriate
course for preservation of this valuable material. The more familiar preservation methodology of converting to microfiche at this point offers the most efficient, long-term solution to the preservation of our nation’s historical record.

What should we, as government information professionals, do? At the risk of adding one more task to our respective lists—many of us are already understaffed and, occasionally, overwhelmed by the need just to keep up with new forms of information—if we are going to protect our paper collections for future users we must be involved in our institution’s preservation decision making process. That may mean attending another library committee meeting, building stronger working relationships with our colleagues in special collections and/or archives and most importantly, advocating for our collection to be included whenever library administrators begin talking about the need to preserve material. We must develop plans to identify, preserve and share information about our efforts and we must become more forceful advocates within our institutions and to our primary clientele about the importance of preserving the rare and unique federal publications that make up our government depository collections.

Notes and references

the GODORT Serial Set Survey.” Administrative Notes, v. 19, no. 12 (October 15, 1998).
15. Electronic mail message from Jim Shaw to the GOVDOC-L list, April 10, 1999.
23. Ibid.


29. Electronic mail communication between Gary Menges and the author. April 1999.


