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The MDAH Historical Map Collection On the Move: Preservation and Access

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The maps known as the MDAH Historical Map Collection came together in the 1970s as a "special collection" of largely published, monographic maps of the Southeast region and the state of Mississippi dating from the late sixteenth century through the late nineteenth century. Considered to be the most significant maps held by the department, many of these maps could be found in standard map bibliographies for America and the large group of Mississippi city and county maps by a variety of publishers and a collection of early twentieth century U.S.D.A. county soil maps for Mississippi. It is important to note that this broad collection of roughly 1500 maps, with publication dates through the late twentieth century, is only a portion of the MDAH map holdings. Notably, maps found in many state agency official record series, manuscript collections and the U.S.G.S. topographic map collection are managed separately and not included in the Historical Map Collection.

Preservation and access to the Historical Map Collection in the Charlotte Capers Archives and History Building also evolved from the 1970s, but came into sharp focus as serious planning for the new William F. Winter Archives and History Building was underway in the late 1990s. In 1998, custody of the collection was transferred from the paper Archives Section to the Published Information Section, which was responsible for the acquisition, cataloging, and management of other published collections such as books, serials, and vertical file material. At the time of the transfer, individual archival folders and MARC catalog records had been completed for about 40% of the maps. Primary bibliographic access was still considered by library patrons to be the map card catalog file arranged alphabetically by geographic name, even though an online public access catalog contained the MARC records that had been completed for the collection. An Informix database for the collection was also used by the staff as a reference resource. The collection was physically maintained in the closed stacks of the Capers Building, in over-filled standard horizontal five drawer steel map cabinets.

To prepare the collection for the move and relocation in the future William F. Winter Archives and History Building, its completion then projected for 2002,

the goal of then Archives and Library Division Director, H.T. Holmes (now MDAH Director) was staff completion of individual MARC catalog records and archival folders for all maps in the collection, and the reorganization of the collection. The reorganization of the collection, already underway, was based on five folder sizes and an in-house call number that incorporated both folder size and a cataloging accession number. The new number would replace at least three other groups of call numbers used in the past. These three projects went hand in hand and were viewed as providing a standard for preservation and access to the collection. Some details and results of the work follow.

It was clear that housing maps in individual archival folders would achieve the greatest overall preservation of the map collection. The majority of the maps were still residing in flimsy 10 pt. paper stock folders holding a dozen or more maps grouped together by one of several in-house call numbers. It was not a pretty sight. Retrieval of maps required a physical search, often by more than one staff person, and resulted in direct handling of many individual maps in the group folder in order to locate and then return the one requested. So many of these maps were rare or historically significant that logic was clearly on the side of individual folders.

Since the Historical Map Collection was being reorganized by folder size, it had been previously determined that five archival folder and/or board sizes were appropriate and would be standard for all maps in the collection. The five archival folder and board sizes are as follows:

Folder Size A	38 x 50 cm.	(15 x 20 in.)
Folder Size B	55 x 71 cm.	(22 x 28 in.)
Folder Size C	76 x 101 cm.	(30 x 40 in.)
Folder Size D	88 x 114 cm.	(35 x 45 in.)
Folder Size OS	101 x 150 cm.	(40 x 60 in.)

A survey of map and folder sizes had to be completed so that folders could be made in advance of the other work.

Following the general guidelines of the Northeast Document Conservation Center in "Storage Solutions for Oversized Paper Artifacts," for construction of folders with inside polyester covers, and more detailed department guidelines, folders were constructed to size from archival, acid-free, lignin-free, 20pt. (0.20") folder stock. Two folder sheets, cut to size, were held together on the left outer sides by acid-free, gummed linen tape. The archival board housings (OS and optional C and D sizes) were constructed from archival double-walled corrugated board, polyester sheets, and double coated film tape. The advantage gained by this type of archival housing is the dual benefit of the archival folder and polyester encapsulation. Every archivist knows that full encapsulation can speed the deterioration of acid-laden, untreated documents.

Handling and retrieval of maps was a very large threat to this very fragile single-sheet paper format. The maps in these folders had much greater support and protection and were less likely to be torn or otherwise damaged. The maps could be pulled and filed without being touched by retrievers and seen and used without being touched by library patrons. The advantage of mounting large and oversized maps on archival board under a polyester cover was especially evident. Handling and retrieval of oversized maps, kept in two stacks on top of groups of map cabinets in the Capers Building, was a nightmare that happened with each request. It was generally the case that many of these oversized maps would need to be moved, requiring at least two people, to get to the map requested. This meant another large surface was required but not always available for the maps that had to be shifted. The oversized maps that had been mounted on the previously described archival boards were supported and protected and not subject to the great physical stress of movement that oversized maps even in heavy-duty folders typically receive.

With staffing always in short supply for map work, the hundreds of folders required were constructed over a period of three to four years by a part-time conservator with exceptional skills and many years of conservation experience, and a new employee with several additional assignments unrelated to conservation. The conservator did additional conservation work as required on the maps, including paper mending, old tape and label removal, encapsulation for maps that had been de-acidified, and double-sided folder construction for many double-sided maps. Trained by the conservator, the new employee, with a natural aptitude for conservation work, made the majority of the maps folders. This natural aptitude, as well as physical energy and stamina, seem important considerations in assigning inexperienced and previously untrained staff to this demanding work. The talent or absence of talent for this work becomes quickly evident. Both of these employees worked not only on map repair and folder construction, but also on a variety of conservation projects required to prepare collections for the move to the new building.

The project of cataloging and re-organizing the collection was supervised and coordinated by the section head. The decision had been made that bibliographic access to the collection would be provided by a full MARC catalog record for each map. Since there would be no card catalog in the new William F. Winter Archives and History Building, no card index for maps, and no forms for hand-written requests by patrons, MARC access was essential for maps as for all other collections and was part of the overall retrospective conversion of the card catalog as well as many paper-based archival finding aids.

Maps in the Historical Map Collection were being cataloged more or less in chronological order from an inventory based on the date of situation. In keeping with a practice begun in the early 1990s, part-time contract catalogers were hired from 1998 through 2002 to catalog or assist with cataloging. The

section head and division director also became catalogers as time drew short in 2002.

Many catalog records for the better-known maps were found by a project cataloger with access to OCLC WorldCat, so that MARC records were downloaded and then revised to include the MDAH call number, additional name, topical, and geographic headings as required, standard and local notes, and of course, holdings and item records. However, it was a surprise to see that a large number of published maps at the state and local level were unavailable in OCLC. The old map card catalog index could have been enormously helpful, but was found to contain too many inaccuracies to be used for the project. All cataloging was done with the original map in hand so that all the data needed for the catalog record could be taken directly from the map or verified as needed. It was the significant duty of section staff to pull and organize maps for the cataloger, proofread catalog records, put maps in new folders of the correct size, print labels with the new call number, attach labels to folders, and re-organize the maps according to folder size and new call number.

Organizing the map collection by folder size was clearly a good preservation choice. Uniform folders stacked together in map drawers provide a flatter, more even storage for maps than stacked folders of different sizes. Again, a primary gain is the ease of retrieval. Folders and maps are handled less because they can be located with less searching. When it came to the actual move of the Historical Map Collection to the new Winter building, the huge advantage gained by the reorganization of the collection by folder size was dramatically evident. The uniform stacks of the smaller A and B size folders were easily grouped in manageable numbers and tied together in neat bundles, and in general, all of the folder sizes could be lifted and placed in the custom flat wooden cases designed for the move, with minimum stress to the maps.

While the above projects were being done, other preservation measures, such as space and storage, were being planned for the new facility. New five-drawer steel horizontal map files based on archival specifications were to be purchased for storing the collection. Primary concerns were relieving the crowded, over-filled drawers in the Capers Building, providing enough space for twenty years of growth, and solving the problem of storage for the oversized maps. The planning resulted in almost doubled storage space, with an increase from nineteen standard five-drawer map files to thirty-two standard files. The increase in files has allowed enough space that map drawers can be partially filled, as recommended, with many additional drawers left empty for the future growth of the Historic Map Collection.

Planning storage for the oversized maps included specifications for oversized five-drawer files. Finding a manufacturer (Mayline, Inc.) was a challenge solved by staff of the architectural firm for the new building. Four of the oversized five-drawer files were acquired in addition to the standard files from

this company and are now, because of their size and location, a visible jewel (for some) of the Historic Map Collection in the Winter Building.

The three goals of providing new housings, MARC catalog records, and collection reorganization for the historical Map Collection were largely achieved in time for the move to the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in September 2003. The collection has also benefited, along with all collections, from the superior environmental controls provided for the closed stacks. About five percent of the collection remains uncataloged, although MARC records were completed in 2004 for the collection of early twentieth century Mississippi county soil maps.

Future plans for ensuring preservation of and access to the collections include digital imaging. Maps are already digitally imaged in conjunction with public orders from patrons, scholars, and corporate clients, who tend to prefer digital scans over the photographic reproduction of maps from oversized negatives, the previous department standard for filling these requests. The Mississippi county soil map collection that was just cataloged, a very brittle collection from the early twentieth century, is on the list of imaging projects for 2005. Considerations such as map condition, size, use, copyright status, and staffing will affect future map selections for the new medium.