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“History Is Slipping Away as Collections Deteriorate, Report Says”

By Lynette Clemetson

PITTSBURGH, Dec. 2 - Slipping on a pair of white gloves, Joshua Fox, a curator at the Soldiers and Sailors National Military Museum and Memorial here, motioned toward a tattered bunch of silk in a musty attic storage room. It was the battle flag of a Pennsylvania regiment dating from the Civil War era, disintegrating after decades of inattention and poor climate controls.

Alongside it, a painted silk flag kept for years in a cramped glass case had hardened to the point of cracking. "I'm afraid to even touch it," said Mr. Fox, who has no staff conservator. "It would probably crumble right in my hands, so I just leave it be."

Conservation advocates say the neglected flags are among millions of items in American public collections that may be lost unless they receive urgent preservation attention. In a study to be released on Tuesday in New York, Heritage Preservation, a Washington-based conservation group, reports that many such collections are threatened by poor environmental controls, improper storage, inadequate staffing and financing and poor planning for emergencies like floods.

The report includes data from more than 3,000 institutions, among them museums, historical societies, government archives, libraries, scientific organizations and universities.

"There is not the luxury of time with many of these collections," said Kristen Laise, the director of the research project. "All it takes is a few bad decisions, a flood or other emergency, a low funding period, and the damage can be irreparable."

The report details the preservation needs of an estimated 4.8 billion items, including art, scientific specimens, books, manuscripts, photographs, film, recordings and digital material. Of the holdings chronicled, about 820 million were determined to be in urgent need of preservation.

Roughly a third of the institutions surveyed acknowledged that they lacked adequate knowledge of the condition of their collections, and half said they had no written long-range plan for their care. Respondents were granted anonymity to encourage frank participation, said Ms. Laise, though the report does mention some specific case studies. Mr. Fox, the curator at the Soldiers and Sailors Museum, estimated that it would cost \$5,000 to \$15,000 to repair each flag -- a sum the museum cannot afford. "Our organization here struggles just to keep the doors open most of the time, let alone pay for these flags," he said.

One goal of the survey, conducted in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, is to help institutions assess the state of their collections and their needs relative to those of other organizations around the country. Another is to convince government agencies, private foundations and

governing boards of institutions that they need to direct money not just toward acquiring objects, but also toward their preservation.

"Like personal health, preventive care pays off in the long run," Ms. Laise said. "And the price tag for solutions is often not as high as the cost of what could ultimately be lost."

Environmental hazards pose the greatest threat to collections, the report says. Inconsistent temperatures and high humidity can lead to mold, warping, severe drying and general deterioration. Ultraviolet rays in buildings with poor controls cause documents and textiles to fade, and pollutants in the air can cause harmful chemical reactions.

Even large institutions with staff conservators face challenges. At the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the hides of the museum's celebrated African elephants are deteriorating from unstable climate controls. Conservators spent more than a year evaluating the hall in which they are displayed and are now working on stabilizing conditions there.

Some well-intentioned preservation efforts of the past are in desperate need of updating, the report says. A 200-page book containing Boston town records from 1634 to 1660 was treated in the 1930's with cellulose acetate, considered the best protection against mold at that time. Conservators have since discovered that cellulose acetate breaks down over time, producing a vinegarlike odor. Without updated preservation, the book now "smells just like a Greek salad," said John McColgan, deputy archivist for the City of Boston. After consulting the Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover, Mass., the city determined that it would need to raise \$10,000 to restore the volume, he said.

Beyond lacking proper storage environments and conservation care, 80 percent of institutions have no plan for protecting their collections in an emergency. In one case detailed in the report, about 1,400 boxes of archaeological artifacts at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe, N.M., were soaked when a ruptured hot water pipe at an off-site storage center flowed undetected for nearly 24 hours last year.

When the Ohr O'Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Miss., was hit three months ago by Hurricane Katrina, a collection of pottery by George Ohr survived because it was kept in a secure building. But the storm and subsequent floods washed away the museum's 19th-century frame house, carrying with it much of the museum's collection of African-American artifacts.

In some cases, it can take decades to find the wherewithal to remedy the effects of such disasters. Carole Huxley, who as deputy commissioner for cultural education oversees the New York state museum, library and archives, says that conservators on her staff have been working for several years to restore 12,000 pages of Dutch Colonial records damaged in a fire in the New York State Capitol in 1911.

And though the State of New York has an emergency plan and a conservation team that meets on a regular basis, the staff contends daily with a leaky roof and pipes in its aging building in Albany. "Every day, we are aware of what's been lost, what is fragile and how much of our history is always at risk," Ms.

Huxley said. "We have a 370-year backlog, and we can never catch up until we put these items in a better environment."

According to the survey, 80 percent of institutions lack paid staff dedicated to the care of collections. At 70 percent of institutions, staff members need additional training to perform proper maintenance. More than three-quarters of institutions do not specifically allocate money for preservation in their budgets.