

# SCSL Digital Collections

## Leaflet #12: Preservation Microfilming

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# Preservation microfilming

## South Carolina Department of Archives and History Archives and Records Management Division

### Introduction

Preservation microfilming is the process of recording on microfilm records of enduring value. The process forms part of an effective archival program when it is followed correctly, but it can waste time and money and can lead to the loss of valuable information when it is not.

This leaflet discusses preservation microfilming only as an archival tool; other information leaflets cover technical issues. If you are interested in the technical aspects of filming, refer to Leaflets No. 6—*Quality testing of microfilm*; No. 7—*Microfilm and Microforms*; and No. 11—*Microfilm storage*.

The Public Records Act, *Code of Laws of South Carolina, 1976*, as amended, requires that documents to be filmed are (1) slated for microfilming on a record series retention/disposition schedule, which also gives their retention period or disposal date and (2) microfilmed on a master copy that meets the Archives' microfilm standards and is deposited with the Archives for security. The microfilm standards are in State Regulation 12-200 through 12-203.

### Advantages

#### **Preserving information**

Many archival documents deteriorate because the paper they are recorded on is of poor quality or because the conditions they are stored under are adverse. If these documents are microfilmed, however, the information they contain can be retrieved regardless of the condition of the paper.





## Public records information leaflet no. 12

**Protecting the document** Archival paper documents that are handled frequently deteriorate quickly. To protect these documents, you may wish to microfilm them, use the film for research, and store the originals. For storage requirements, see our Document Conservation Leaflet No. 1 *How to take care of your books, papers, and photographs* or call the Archives' Conservation Services Unit at (803) 734-8773.

**Securing the record** Archival paper documents can be lost through theft or can be destroyed by a number of hazards like fire, water, or vermin. You can protect yourself from such losses by microfilming the records and by storing the original records or a security copy of the microfilm at the Archives as mandated in the Public Records Act.

**Saving space** You can microfilm your paper archival records, remove them from your office, replace them with microfilm, and in doing so, you can achieve a space savings of over ninety-five percent. You can store the original records that have intrinsic value and destroy the rest.

**Increasing access** Once a record is microfilmed, it is easy and relatively inexpensive to make multiple copies of it by duplicating the film. You can make the copies available for research either by placing them in your archives or office or by distributing them to other institutions like a local historical society or library.

### Disadvantages

**Cost** Microfilming records can be expensive. You must either purchase microfilming equipment and hire and train staff to operate it or contract for filming with a vendor; you will have to absorb the cost of preparing the documents for filming (removing staples, unfolding paper, etc.); and you will have to purchase microfilm readers or reader/printers. The Micrographics Services Branch of the Archives can help—it will film records of archival-permanent-value on a cost recovery basis.

**Damage to the original** Because many archival records are fragile, they risk damage during the filming process. Opening a brittle bound volume, for example, may crack or break bindings and pages. The threat of damage poses no problem when the original record will be destroyed after it is filmed; it is of great concern, however, when originals must be retained.

**User resistance** Some people are reluctant to use microfilm.





**Technical limitations** Filming cannot overcome the poor quality of an original document. If a document is faded, badly stained, or has low contrast, the microfilm image of that document will be of poor quality regardless of the capabilities of the camera and the microfilm operation.

**Technical requirements** The production of high-quality archival microfilm depends not only on the condition of the original document but also on a knowledge of technical requirements that goes beyond merely pushing a button on a camera. Without the imposition of rigid quality controls, even original documents in excellent condition can reproduce poorly.

**Microfilming records involves more than pushing a button on a camera. High-quality film is produced only by applying rigid controls.**

**Alternatives** Although microfilm preserves information effectively, it is not your only option. Explore the alternatives, then choose the method that suits you best.

**Storage** If your records are in good condition, you can store them in an archivally-sound environment to retard the deterioration of the paper. If your records are in poor condition, storage is not an option.

**Advantage:** you can retain the original document in its original form.

**Disadvantages:** the records take up space, and deterioration is slowed, not stopped.

**Conservation** You can preserve your records with conservation treatments that range from minor repairs like cleaning and mending to major undertakings like washing and deacidification.

**Advantages:** you retain your original records in a stable form; your costs may be relatively low if the repairs are minor.

**Disadvantages:** you must locate and hire trained professionals (contact the Conservation Services Unit at the Archives) to treat your records—never attempt to repair even minor tears yourself; your costs will rise when repairs are extensive; the treatments can protect documents from deterioration but cannot restore them to their original condition.





**Photocopies** You can replace an original archival document that is on paper of poor quality with a photocopy of the original printed on alkaline paper.

**Advantage:** your photocopy reproduces the original on a paper of high quality in a format that most people prefer.

**Disadvantages:** you increase bulk; your production costs are high; and an original of poor quality may not photocopy clearly.

### Keep or destroy the original?

What will happen to your original document after you film it? Will you destroy or retain it? Consider the question carefully because filming can damage a document. If you plan to destroy the document after filming, the risk of damage is irrelevant. If you plan to retain it, however, the risk may preclude filming.

Often, you will decide to destroy the original document. The silver gelatin microfilm that will hold your copy, when it is processed and stored properly, is a legally-acceptable archival medium with a longer lifespan than most commonly used commercial papers (see Information Leaflet No. 7—*Microfilm and Microforms*). You will gain little by retaining originals that are on paper of poor quality and are stored inadequately.

Some documents, however, have intrinsic value—their age, the circumstances of their creation, a signature, or some other factor gives these records value beyond the information they hold. These, you will want to retain in their original form.

### Choosing records to film

In theory, all archival records are worthy of preservation microfilming. In practice, however, governments with tight budgets know that some records make better candidates than others. Identify those candidates before you commit yourself to microfilm.

**Physical condition** Spend your money first to microfilm the records most in danger of disintegration—those that are brittle, worn, water damaged, or severely weakened in some other way. Filming will preserve the information on those records even if the originals crumble. Also consider filming records that are beginning to show signs of deterioration—a brown stain around the edge of a document, for instance, indicates acid damage. Paper with acid damage, if left untreated, will become increasingly brittle until it breaks or cracks when handled. Filming these acid-damaged records before they become fragile will both save you money and give you a better image.





**Research use** An archives does not simply preserve information. It makes that information available for research as well. Records that researchers demand constantly, therefore, are candidates for microfilming. Microfilming will save wear and tear of originals that are to be retained and will allow the production of multiple copies for in-house use or for use in other institutions.

**Security** Paper records can be lost through floods, fire, vandalism, theft, or simple misfiling. While all archival records are valuable, the loss of some—records of on-going legal value, of high replacement cost, or those that are irreplaceable— may have more impact than the loss of others. Consider filming those records whose loss would have the most impact on your office. The microfilmed copies will be secured on master negatives that are stored at the Archives.

**Legibility** The quality of a document will play a role in guiding your decision about whether or not to film. A document that is faded, is stained, has low contrast, or shows inkbleed from behind may reproduce poorly. Microfilming such documents will probably accomplish little.

**Volume** The volume of records will also guide your decision. Microfilming a large volume of records will save storage space but will cost more to film than a small volume. Because preservation options like conservation and storage are expensive, however, you may find that microfilming is the most cost effective way to preserve the record.

### For more information

This leaflet is one of a series of leaflets issued by the Archives and Records Management Division of the South Carolina Department of Archives and History.

The Archives and Records Management Division has statutory responsibility for advising government offices on micrographics. The Archives and Records Management Division also issues publications and gives advice and help on records management and archival administration.

For more information, please contact the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Archives and Records Management Division, State Record Center, 1919 Blanding Street, Columbia, SC 29201. (803) 734-7914. ■





### Public information leaflets from the Archives

- no. 1 *Legal requirements for microfilming public records (1992)*
- no. 2 *On choosing records for microfilming (1992)*
- no. 3 *Service bureau or in-house microfilming (1992)*
- no. 4 *Targeting and certification of microfilm (1996 revised)*
- no. 5 *Choosing a microfilm camera (1992)*
- no. 6 *Quality testing of microfilm (1992)*
- no. 7 *Microfilm and microforms (1992)*
- no. 8 *Choosing a micrographics service bureau (1992)*
- no. 9 *Choosing microfilm readers and reader/printers (1992)*
- no. 10 *Computer assisted retrieval systems (1992)*
- no. 11 *Microfilm storage (1992)*
- no. 12 *Preservation microfilming (1992)*
- no. 13 *Optical Disk: policy statement and recommended practices (1996 revised)*
- no. 14 *Storing records in the State Records Center (1993)*
- no. 15 *The deposit of security microfilm (1993)*
- no. 16 *Disaster preparedness and recovery in state and local government records offices (1993)*
- no. 17 *How to conduct a records inventory (1993)*
- no. 18 *How to establish records retention schedules (1993)*
- no. 19 *Photographic media (to be announced)*
- no. 20 *Editing and splicing roll microfilm of long-term or archival value (1994)*
- no. 21 *Managing E-Mail (to be announced)*
- no. 22 *Standards for microfilm service bureau certification (1996)*

