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Understanding and Protecting the Masonic Book Collection at the Masonic Library and Museum of Indiana

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MSTD A517: Preventive Conservation

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ABSTRACT: This semester, research was conducted at the Masonic Library and Museum of Indiana (MLMI) to discover what steps the MLMI can take to understand, protect, and store its historic book collection. Further, this research discovered what the major forms of deterioration are within the small library and museum, and how they can be mitigated through preservation. This research, lastly, informed the decision-making for a plan to improve the library for the sake of its collection.

Introduction

This research was conducted throughout a semester at the Masonic Library and the Masonic Library and Museum of Indiana (MLMI). It consists of five shelves (double-sided) and holds at least 3,000 books. Most books are Masonic by nature, while some are more general United States or international history. The building that the library lives in dates to 1909; the entire interior is completely original, even down to the doorknobs. The building itself is stone and has few forms of environmental regulation. This significantly affects the MLMI's collection in many ways. With this being understood, this research aims to name specific agents of deterioration within the MLMI's book collection and discover how it can protect its collection through preventive conservation. This research also aims to suggest ways that the MLMI can protect its books from these specific agents of destruction.

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Preventive Conservation

Conservation

Conservation is "Intervening directly when necessary to repair damage and stabilize materials" (Library & Information Science Academy (LIS) 2024). Unlike preservation, conservation requires direct treatment of objects in poor condition. It is reactive, meaning that it requires a "…specific expertise and focuses on the physical or chemical treatment of items…" (LIS 2024). Some of the key aspects of conservation are examination, documentation, stabilization, repair, and restoration (LIS 2024). Preservation and conservation share many similarities, as they both focus on collection care and management.

Preservation

Preservation includes things like environmental control and proper storage. This is called intergenerational equity, or the notion that "Current generations have an obligation to preserve knowledge resources for future generations" (LIS 2024). This ethical moral is something that applies to the Mason's collection, as it is incredibly niche and cannot be replicated. As the stewards of this information and collection, it is the duty of the MLMI to support the best conditions possible.

Additionally, this preventative conservation approach works on saving the community memory of Freemasonry and how important it is. From the years 2019 to 2023, the Indiana Freemasons have seen an almost 7,974-member decrease (The Masonic Service Association of N.A. 2025). This is a consistent trend all over the United States because the fraternity no longer serves the same purpose it used to in the early 20th century. However, this does not discount the

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wealth of history hidden within the Grand Lodge of Indiana. It makes the collection even more worth saving, as it reminds the city of Indianapolis of its past and where its future is going. To do this, there must be a collection left behind.

The Building and Its Collection

The first crucial step in this research was understanding the environment and items within the MLMI's possession. The library and museum are housed within the Masonic Grand Lodge of Indiana. Freemasonry is a large fraternal organization for men centered around honor, brotherly love, mutual aid, and equality (Hodapp 2022, 11). Like a sorority or fraternity, Freemasons use handshakes and passwords to recognize one another. "Freemasonry teaches lessons on social and moral virtues based on symbolism of the tools and language of the ancient building trade…" (Hodapp 2022, 11). Masonry (or sometimes called the craft) has the focal point of building better men. The fraternity itself was created in medieval Europe by actual operative stonemasons who built cathedrals, castles, and other buildings. However, it is said to have 'mythical' origins that date back to the building of the Temple of King Solomon in 1000 BC (Hodapp 2022, 22). This myth can be seen reflected in the building's masonic architecture, especially in the Grand Lodge of Indiana building in Indianapolis (where the museum is found). The building itself is loaded with many allegories, even down to its basic foundations. Inside, one can find a large, continuous winding staircase that goes from floor one to eight. This is supposed to stand for a "...vehicle to impart lessons in virtue, knowledge, and personal improvement" (Grand Lodge of Nevada (GLNV) 2025, 1). Along this staircase, steps three, five, and seven serve as metaphorical constructs to teach members about many different things. The

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number three signifies the three degrees of masonry and the three principal officers within a lodge (those being the Worshipful Master, Senior Warden, and Junior Warden) (GLNV 2025, 1). Continually, the number five stands for the five orders of architecture (Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, and composite) and the five human senses. These are supposed to symbolize an appreciation for refinement, art, and the mastery of one's senses. The number seven is dedicated to the seven different liberal arts and sciences, something important to masonic lodge construction. These would be considered grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy (GLNV 2025, 2). Interestingly, we can see all three of these numbers stood for not only the number of floors in the building (that being eight), but in the name and construction of lodge rooms.

Figure 1. Interior of the Grand Lodge of Indiana (the building that houses the

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MLMI)

In terms of the museum's collection, it features a wide range of objects from Masonic brothers, veterans of war, items from the Indiana Masonic Home and its alumni, and a large assortment of leather-bound books. One can find things from paintings to figures to swords within the collection space on the sixth floor of the building. This space keeps a different temperature and humidity, mostly, than its library counterpart down the stairs. Half of the library's books have been cataloged and labeled, while the other half remain in too poor a condition to be labeled or have not been gotten to yet.

Figure 2: The Masonic Library within the MLMI on the fifth floor of the Grand Lodge of Indiana

This early 20th-century system does not feature any form of temperature regulation, meaning that it is set at hot or cold and that is that. This has become quite the challenge since the weather has drastically changed in the winter months. In the library space, there has been a strict

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reliance on hope and the boiler system. This has created some issues for the book collection because a large amount of it has leather bindings. This change has caused obvious drying and foxing on book covers and bindings.

Historically, book bindings were originally made to protect the integrity of the book. After the first part of the 19th century, "hand-book bindings" began to be produced in mass. As mass production started to ramp up, topics like the secretive rituals and happenings of Freemasons around the world became instant best-sellers. This is why, within the library, it is easy to find many books from both the early 19th and 20th centuries about the well-kept secrets of masonry that date back to the 1880s.

Since they were selling well and were easy to make, binders and printers started using cheaper materials and chemicals in hopes of staving off costs and supporting a large profit. However, this large production of books could not sustain the "…traditional tanning methods…" (Dewitt & Burlinson, 1977, 2) due to demand rates. Book binders started using new tanning methods that met the needs of the public while also still making a profit. This is where vegetable tanning is introduced. This process was then altered to save time in the creation of these mass-produced books. "Nineteenth-century alterations of the traditional vegetable tanning processes reduced the time for the finished product from months to a matter of days" (Dewitt & Burlinson, 1977, 2-3). This got rid of the 'protective' non-tans that were mentioned above and thus started the creation of sub-par leather book bindings. It is important to note that leather naturally ages and dries. However, the rate at which the cheaper, mass-produced books of the mid-19th century to the early 20th century within the MLMI's collection have aged rapidly.

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Additionally, it can be noted that a large amount of paper created after the 1860s (as was much of the MLMI's book collection) was made using ground wood pulp. This material can deteriorate quickly because of its acidic nature. "Paper made from chemical wood pulp…can also deteriorate because of the use of harmful bleaches and sizing materials…" (Cornell University Library 2025). This is a comforting fact to note, as it shows that the MLMI is not the only small museum and library to face this issue. However, it is the only museum and library within the Indiana Grand Lodge building that has its own unique quirks and personality. Moving forward, it was important to remember that despite the inherent vice of the historical book collection, there are still outward forces making its condition even worse.

Agents of Deterioration in the Library

Red Rot

When starting to investigate book deterioration, the first thing noticed was a significant amount of red dust. This dust was like rust in consistency, color, and odor. Since the books are standing on shelves, they tend to fall and rub onto other books around the 'infected' books. This powder is a form of acid-deterioration called red-rot. "Acid-deterioration or red rot in leather is observed in vegetable-tanned leather manufactured from the mid-19th Century onward, on various objects including book bindings…" (Lama et al. 2015, 1). Books that have this form of decay have a powdery surface with red or brown powder. The leather loses its firmness and can

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even have an acidic odor. Many books within the library suffer from this. This kind of deterioration is most seen in vegetable-tanned leather. “Deterioration of leather bindings is primarily caused by impurities that are left in the leather after the tanning process or absorbed by the leather after binding” (Dewitt & Burlinson 1977, 205). This form of tanning uses chemicals called tannins that come from the barks of trees like oak and sumac trees (Dewitt & Burlinson 1977, 205). The chemistry behind it depends on whether the skins being tanned absorb the ‘non-tans’ solution made with salt. As the century continued, leather tanning processes became extremely cheap to ensure producers still made a profit. As leather ages, it loses the natural moisture that helps protect it from drying out. However, with the combination of the acidic chemicals applied to at least a fourth of the library collection during its creation, the library itself has become a perfect storm for red rot.

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Figure 3: Hand of the researcher covered in red rot powder

Temperature and Humidity Damage

Additionally, within the library, there is also a large fluctuation of temperature and humidity. "Curators should, for instance, exercise the common sense preservation methods relating to control of excessive amounts of heat…" (Dewitt & Burlinson 1977, 206). Recognizing this, temperature and humidity readings were taken in two separate locations within the library every Tuesday, Wednesday, and occasionally on Thursdays of the work week. The first spot was at the farthest end of the library from the door. This spot was hit directly by the boiler vent, so there was a chance that there was some added form of humidity to the space since it still uses boiled water for heat. The second spot was closest to the door of the museum. This space is directly to the left of the boiler vent and does not receive any head-on air flow. Dewitt and Burlinson (1977) recommend that institutions keep their book storage "…as cool as possible, at least within the range of 60 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit…" (Dewitt & Burlinson 1977, 206). When recording the temperature of the two spaces, this was kept in mind.

Based upon the 22 temperature recordings done at the MLMI, there is a large jump after the boilers were first turned on.

LIBRARY 1	76
LIBRARY 2	75

Figure 4: Library temperature readings from Thursday, October 30th (the last day

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of the work week)

LIBRARY 1	84
LIBRARY 2	85

Figure 5: Library temperature readings from Tuesday, November 4th (the first day of the following work week)

This data shows that within the span of less than a week, the temperature within the library increased eight to ten degrees. This highlights the lack of regulation in the library itself. Surprisingly, Library 1 readings show less temperature in that area despite being hit directly by the boiler vent. This shows that the room lacks ventilation and regulation. After the team at the museum and library came together and created a better schedule for the boiler in hopes of finding some form of homeostasis, the temperature started to drop and become more regular. However, it still lacks the type of regulation that is necessary to protect the historical leather book collection from any form of damage. On November 6th (the last day of the work week), it was decided that the boiler should be turned on every two to three days. On November 11th (the first day of the following work week), there was a 22°F temperature difference. This is also concerning data. Despite the staff's best attempt at creating regulations, recordings still prove that the space does not have its own ability to regulate.

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Library 1	64
Library 2	58
Collection 1	73
Collection 2	72
Library 1	63
Library 2	66
Collection 1	70
Collection 2	69
Library 1	64
Library 2	62
Collection 1	66
Collection 2	65

Figure 6: Temperature recordings from November 11th, 12th, and 13th (the last day of the work week)

When it comes to humidity, the library has the same issue. According to the humidity readings, the library space has an average of 35% relative humidity. This causes the leather bindings to become very brittle, as they lose a significant amount of their flexibility. This makes the books incredibly difficult to handle. Dewitt and Burlinson (1977) suggest that libraries and museums should keep a "…relative humidity of 50 to 60 percent" (Dewitt & Burlinson 1977, 206). They continue by saying that with low humidity, the natural moisture within leather will be drawn out at forty percent humidity or lower, thus making the chance of the leather damage incredibly

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more probable. In the library space, the recorded humidity levels have gotten as low as 22% percent. This can be seen after the boiler was turned on primarily, which is interesting. However, it can also be seen that there was a large drop in humidity after it became colder outside the building. This reinforces the idea that the building itself cannot regulate and relies upon the boiler and outside temperatures for its homeostasis.

Library 1	70	23%
Library 2	72	22%

Figure 7: Temperature and humidity readings from December 2nd (the first day of the work week)

Light Damage

The last agent of deterioration within the MLMI is light damage. This was noticed during the cataloging and labeling project that is being conducted by Taylor Pastor and Lauren Freije. This consists of cataloging, condition reporting, and labeling numerous books within the library. Like displayed artifacts, many the books are not regularly moved and touched.
This has caused visible bleaching and the "…break down of paper and cloth fibers…" (National Park Service (NPS) 1993). This discoloration can be seen primarily on the spine, cover page, or borders of the cover page of the book or leaflet. Because materials like paper, cloth, and leather are particularly sensitive to light, the lower lights of the library are not enough to save the books from further damage. The effects are "…cumulative and irreversible…" (Conn 2012, 1).

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It is recommended that most collection materials should only be on display for "…three to four months…" (Conn 2012, 4). However, since the library doubles as book storage, some have bleaching that shows the outline of the book next to or in front of them.

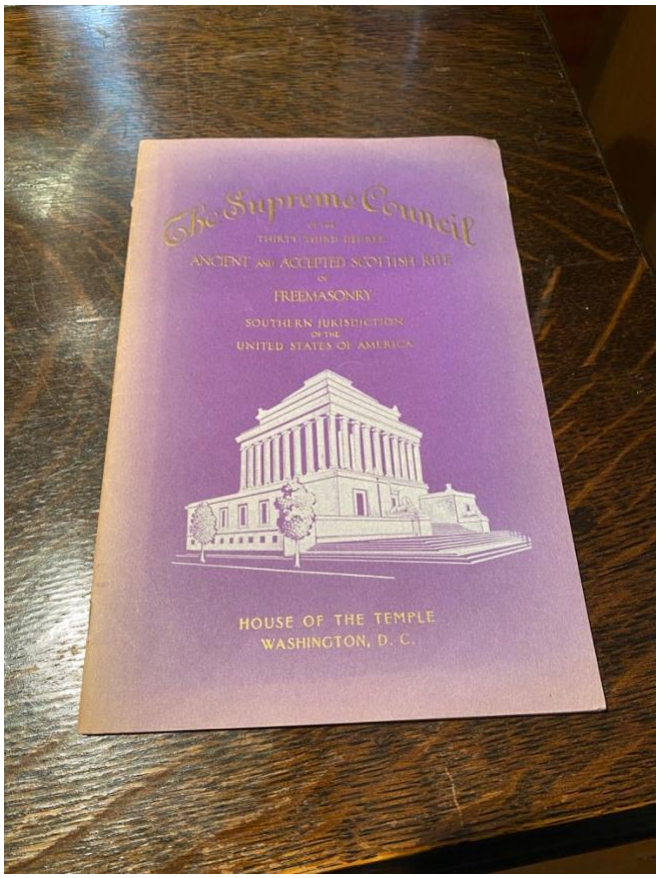

Figure 8: A light-damaged book found within the MLMI's collection

Steps That Should Be Taken for the Betterment of the Library

With the conclusion of this research, the library and museum staff have begun taking steps to improve the environment for both their book and artifact collections. It has provided good evidence to support starting the preventive conservation journey at the MLMI.

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The first step could be finishing the cataloging and labeling projects in the library. This would allow library staff to take inventory of all the books in the library and find the ones that are in the worst condition. Additionally, this process was a good assist when trying to find the agents of deterioration within the library itself. This is because it has, and will, continue pushing staff to analyze each book individually within the collection to gather the information needed for the cataloging process. This was how things like red rot and light bleaching were found within the collection. By looking closely at all the books, it gives a good indicator of whether there are any 'hot spots' of deterioration. For example, the proceedings books shown in **Figure 2** were badly infected with red rot. Books that did not have the same form of acidic damage still had accretions from the leather books becoming powdery. This raised the issue of what exactly the library should do with these books.

The second suggestion is creating and supporting a better storage space for older, more unique books with leather bindings. This space should have good ventilation, so that air can flow throughout the room and deter mold. Additionally, it should be a cool temperature with a medium humidity level of 50-60% (Dewitt and Burlinson 1977, 206). "Ideally, book storage areas should be air conditioned in order to filter out atmospheric pollutants and to maintain temperatures conducive to the preservation of leather" (Dewitt & Burlinson 1977, 206). However, the MLMI is a smaller institution and might not have the room to create or house this special collection space.

The third suggestion is to use a technique that requires one to wrap red-rotted or light damaged' books. This allows the book to still be used by the public without creating any further

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damage through transportation, storage, or handling. This has been implemented at the MLMI and has so far been a success. The first step when wrapping books is to gather the supplies needed. This would include acid-free paper, twill tape (non-adhesive), a pencil, a ruler, and a pair of scissors. Once these are gathered, one should start to examine all books that are being cataloged for signs of red rot, most importantly. The criterion for wrapping includes whether a book is rubbing off on those around it, if it is falling apart, if pages or the cover is falling off, or if it is a manuscript. If it is a manuscript and has original, inked writing, it will be incredibly important to protect it from light damage and fading. After a book is found that needs to be wrapped, it should be placed with its cover facing up. The pencil should be used to write the book's catalog number on the front page. This is done so that the book has a catalog number on it and around it, in case the paper wrapping gets lost. The paper should be cut in a way that cocoons the books, like wrapping a present. After this is done, the book should be wrapped so that when the tape is tied, it is on the opening side. This is so the knot does not warp the book's spine or another book around it. The twill tape should be tied across the middle of the book vertically, and then again horizontally. This technique has ensured that books that are falling apart will stay together. It has also allowed the staff at the MLMI to label the deteriorated book. This is incredibly important, as it lets visitors and staff find the objects easily. These catalog numbers have been recorded into the MLMI's Library Catalog Master list.

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Figure 9: Books within the MLMI that are wrapped in acid-free paper and labeled

The third best suggestion to better the library would be to look into "Passive climate control…" (Cornell University Library 2025). This is in reference to having a sustainable climate within a historical building through passive action. "Sustainable buildings are designed and constructed in ways that achieve energy savings and a tolerable internal climate" (Cornell University Library 2025). Cornell University also says that when trying to create a sustainable climate, it is important to consider the location of the building and the structural materials. Looking at the Grand Lodge of Indiana building through this lens, it would make sense to run the boiler every other day during cold weather. Because the building itself is made of three feet worth of stone, it holds heat for a decent amount of time. There is no natural shade, so if the sun

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is hitting the building, it heats the stone. Further, since the building does not have a modern HVAC system, it would also make sense to do passive actions to create a microclimate in the spaces that need it. This would look like covering windows hit directly with sunlight and increasing air circulation throughout the building. Vents or small windows close to the ceiling should be open to create more air movement. This not only helps create a more sustainable climate but also fights things like mold. Further, bringing in humidifiers into the library space would aid in maintaining a safe relative humidity level.

Conclusion

In the end, there was hard evidence shown to prove that the MLMI must take steps to preserve its historical book collections. Through preventive conservation, however, the institution will have the ability to protect some of the better-condition items within its library collection. To understand what steps must be taken, agents of deterioration like red rot, temperature and humidity dysregulation, and light damage were found. Red rot was shown throughout many leather-bound books within the collection that have severe foxing. Further, these books rub off onto other books and even the staff's hands, as shown in **Figure 3.** Additionally, the evidence to show the need for a sustainable climate came from the temperature and humidity data that was recorded on every Tuesday, Wednesday, and occasional Thursday of each work week. This data showed that the temperature and humidity within the library space shift significantly based on the outside weather conditions and the use of the boilers. To mitigate this, it has been suggested that the museum and library do passive actions, like creating a form of ventilation within the space. The last form of deterioration, light damage, was seen through the

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bleaching of books and pamphlets alike. This discoloration is from books consistently being in the light of the library and not being moved. This could be avoided if a new storage space were created for books that require special conditions (like the whole collection). Another tactic used to protect the books was wrapping them in acid-free paper. This wrapping process protects books from light damage, as well as red rot damage, because it keeps books covered and together. Therefore, if something falls off a book, it will remain in the wrapping paper. This will help when the public would like to use a book in poor condition. Lastly, the research also proves the importance of finishing the cataloging and labeling project that the library staff are conducting. This project forces staff to work closely with every book within the library. When handling books, it is easier to recognize red rot or light damage. It also offers a way for books to be 'diagnosed' or determined to conservative intervention.

The MLMI is a part of a special building and almost acts as a living ecosystem. The books within the library can be found within this little Masonic society. In order for them to thrive and be sustainable, they must have the proper conditions to do so. Simply by doing this research, the small library has taken a step in the right direction. However, there is a lot more to do. Let this research be a form of persuasive evidence of the necessity of preventive conservation within the Masonic Museum and Library of Indiana.

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