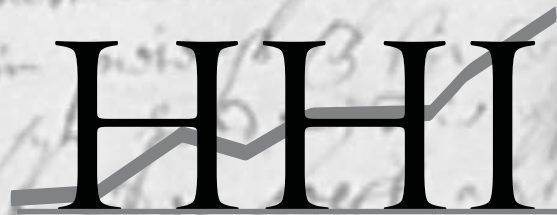


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# A PUBLIC TRUST AT RISK: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections

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Heritage Health Index

a partnership between Heritage Preservation and  
the Institute of Museum and Library Services

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## Introduction and Acknowledgements

At this time a year ago, staff members of thousands of museums, libraries, and archives nationwide were breathing a sigh of relief as they finished the work of completing the Heritage Health Index survey. The scope of the survey, covering not only conservation and preservation but also security, budgets, emergency planning, and facilities, was such that several people at a single institution were often involved in answering the questions. Those of us who planned and managed the project extend our deepest thanks to all these survey participants; without their cooperation this report would not exist. The institutions that participated in the survey are listed in Appendix E.

The Heritage Health Index benefited greatly from the guidance of individuals who represented organizations on the Institutional Advisory Committee and from the professionals who served on Working Groups that developed the survey. We are grateful for the careful attention they gave to the many issues this project presented. They are listed in Appendices A and B.

The Heritage Health Index could not have happened without the strong commitment of the Board of Directors of Heritage Preservation. Every member of the board provided us with excellent advice. Supporting us as we developed the project and helping to raise funds from its conception through completion were three board chairs: Inge-Lise Eckmann, Dennis Fiori, and Debra Hess Norris. Each believed passionately in the importance of this project, and each made contributions that were vital to its success.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services was Heritage Preservation's partner in this project. In addition to funding, staff of this federal agency contributed their extensive expertise with museums and libraries. Robert Martin, who was director of IMLS until July 2005, was a wise and stalwart supporter of the project. We are also grateful to Beverly Black Sheppard, who was Acting Director of IMLS when the project was launched and recognized its potential value to the field. Other members of the IMLS staff whose support of the project deserves recognition are

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A number of foundations joined the IMLS in funding the project, and the counsel of their staffs helped us immensely. We would like to thank especially Deborah Marrow, Joan Weinstein, Antoine Wilmering, and Jack Myers of the Getty Foundation, Ellen Holtzman of The Henry Luce Foundation, Marilyn Perry and Lisa Ackerman of The Samuel H. Kress Foundation, Frederick Bay and Robert Ashton of The Bay and Paul Foundations, Frederick Schaen of the Peck Stacpoole Foundation, and David Stam of the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation.

The Heritage Health Index benefited from the work of numerous professionals who were retained to work on the project. M. Christine Dwyer, Kim Streitburger, and Erika Soucy of RMC Research Corporation provided the professional skill to conduct the survey and tabulate and analyze its results. Doug DeNatale of Cultural Logic designed the Web-based survey. Tamara Starke and Mark Rudzinski of Aeffect, Inc., advised us in developing and testing the survey. Lee-Ann Hayek provided valued advice on statistical analysis. Lynne Heiser of in2it Creative designed the summary report and Web site. Anne Edgar advised us on how to disseminate the results to the media and the public.

The talented project staff included Nadina Gardner, Rich Vidutis, Rory House, Rashan Clark, Yael Meirovich, Daria Gasparini, and Mary Rogers, each of whom made substantial contributions to the success of the Heritage Health Index at different stages of its progress. Linda Budhinata and Lucy Kurtz provided sustained support for the project. Communications Manager Diane Mossholder and Vice President for External Affairs Moira Egan spent untold hours on the project from the time it was a gleam in our eye through the announcement of its findings at a New York news conference and dissemination of the report.

Kristen Overbeck Laise has been everything one could want in a project director. Organized,

tenacious, intelligent, precise, prescient, and humorous, she led this project from start to finish and never flagged in her commitment. The success of this project is due in large part to her leadership.

Lawrence L. Reger  
President  
Heritage Preservation

December 6, 2005

## Executive Summary

The Heritage Health Index is the first comprehensive survey ever conducted of the condition and preservation needs of all U.S. collections held in the public trust. The project was conceived and implemented by Heritage Preservation, a national nonprofit organization, in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an independent federal agency.

The survey was planned with the advice of 35 associations and federal agencies that serve collecting institutions. The questionnaire was developed in consultation with 66 leading collections professionals. In August 2004, the Heritage Health Index survey was distributed to more than 14,500 archives, libraries, historical societies, museums, archaeological repositories, and scientific research collections<sup>1</sup>, which included institutions of all sizes from every U.S. state and territory. There was a 24% response rate overall and a 90% response rate from 500 of the nation's largest and most significant collections. From a sampling frame of more than 35,000 potential institutions, the final study population was established to be 30,827 institutions. The Heritage Health Index data has a margin of error of +/- 1.5%. Results analyzed by institutional type, size, or geographic region have a slightly higher margin of error.

The Heritage Health Index asked institutions to report on all aspects of conservation and preservation and to estimate the quantity and condition of the collections for which they have a preservation responsibility. The survey results provide the first data on all the holdings of U.S. collecting institutions. More than 4.8 billion artifacts are being cared for nationwide, including rare books and manuscripts, photographs, documents, sound recordings, moving images, digital materials, art, historic and ethnographic objects, archaeological artifacts, and natural science specimens. The survey reports that U.S. collections are visited 2.5 billion times a year.

The information the Heritage Health Index collected on the condition of collections supplies

baseline data that will be useful in measuring future preservation efforts. It is significant that for collections of almost every type, about 30% of artifacts are in unknown condition. In the case of bulk cataloged archaeological collections, recorded sound collections, and moving image collections, more than 40% are in unknown condition. Of collections known to be in need<sup>2</sup>, unbound sheets cataloged by item rather than linear feet, such as ephemera, broadsides, philatelic and numismatic paper artifacts, have the highest percentage at 54%. The percentages of collections types in need are as follows:

Unbound Sheets, cataloged in items	54%
Historic Objects	28%
Unbound Sheets, cataloged in linear feet	24%
Natural Science Specimens	23%
Art Objects	22%
Archaeological Collections, bulk cataloged in cubic feet	21%
Photographic Collections	21%
Archaeological Collections, individually cataloged	19%
Books/Bound Volumes	16%
Digital Materials	15%
Recorded Sound Collections	14%
Moving Image Collections	12%
Microfilm/Microfiche	7%
Online Files	5%

However, because such significant percentages are in unknown condition, the amount of collections in need is likely to be much higher.

The Heritage Health Index data points to environmental and storage conditions, emergency planning, staffing, and funding as the aspects of collections stewardship with the greatest needs. If these are not addressed, many collections are at higher risk for damage or loss.

The most urgent preservation need at U.S. collecting institutions is environmental control. The Heritage Health Index documents that 26% of institutions have *no* environmental controls to

1. Referred to in this report as "collecting institutions" or "institutions."

2. Defined as in need of treatment to make the collections items stable enough for use or in need of improved housing or environment to reduce the risk of damage or deterioration.

mitigate damage from temperature, humidity, and light. Highlighting the importance of protecting collections from environmental factors are the findings that 59% of institutions have had their collections damaged by light, 53% by water or moisture, and 47% by airborne pollutants.

At 59% of U.S. collecting institutions, storage space to accommodate all collections safely and appropriately is lacking. At 65% of institutions, collections are in need of treatment due to improper storage. Nearly one-third have an urgent need for additional storage facilities, renovated storage facilities, or new and/or improved storage furniture.

One of the most alarming Heritage Health Index statistics is that 80% of collecting institutions do not have an emergency or disaster plan that includes collections, with staff trained to carry it out. Because of this, more than 2.6 billion items are at risk. Only 26% of institutions have copies of vital collections records stored off-site in case of emergency. It is essential that a collecting institution experiencing a disaster have a record of its holdings.

Only 20% of institutions have paid staff—whether full-time or part-time—dedicated to conservation or preservation responsibilities. Instead, many institutions depend on assigning collections care duties to other staff as needed, to volunteers, or to external providers. Staff training for conservation and preservation is needed at 70% of institutions, the most common need cited in the Heritage Health Index survey. Due in part to inadequate staffing levels, basic information about the content and condition of collections is incomplete: 39% of institutions have a significant backlog in cataloging their collections and 70% have no current assessment of the condition of their collections.

The instability of preservation funding is another issue that the Heritage Health Index details. Less than a quarter of institutions specifically allocate funds for preservation in their

annual budgets; 36% rely on other budget lines to fund preservation; 40% do not allocate for preservation. Only 13% of institutions have access to permanent funds, such as an endowment, for preservation. Despite the survey's broad definition that included any expenses related to collections care, 68% report that less than \$3,000 was budgeted for preservation in their most recently completed fiscal year. Only 2% of the total annual budgets of U.S. collecting institutions was spent on preservation in the last fiscal year.

Based on the findings of the Heritage Health Index, Heritage Preservation recommends that:

- Institutions must give priority to providing safe conditions for the collections they hold in trust.
- Every collecting institution must develop an emergency plan to protect its collections and train staff to carry it out.
- Every institution must assign responsibility for caring for collections to members of its staff.
- Individuals at all levels of government and in the private sector must assume responsibility for providing the support that will allow these collections to survive.

A summary of the Heritage Health Index results has been published in *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections*, an illustrated booklet. A full report with graphs and tables is available at [www.heritagehealthindex.org](http://www.heritagehealthindex.org). *A Public Trust at Risk* and the Web site feature case studies that describe the conservation challenges and successes of institutions throughout the U.S.

*A Public Trust at Risk* has been provided to all survey participants, as well as members of Congress, foundations, and national and state associations and government agencies that support the work of archives, libraries, historical societies, museums, archaeological repositories, and scientific research organizations.