#### WHAT TO DO WITH HISTORICAL MATERIALS

By Eli H. Sheldon

The historical secretary is often asked what should be done with historical materials. While the explanation can be long and involved, this short article should provide an abbreviated answer to this and similar questions.

# The first thing to determine is what is regarded as historical church material?

Any writing, bulletin, or artifact related to the church should be given full consideration as to its historical value. Even the weekly bulletin may one day be the very piece of history you need to use for information. A good historian will say, "Don't throw anything away." Boxes of bulletins or newsletters stored many years ago may make a different in how one compiles the church history. Why is it important to keep the third Sunday's bulletin from forty years ago? The answer may be in who is stated as a staffer, who sang, who served in the nursery, what activities and announcements were listed for the week, and so forth.

Over the years countless people have called from local churches asking if we have a record of a particular person who attended their church several years ago. One church called us to ask who was ordained as deacons on a certain Sunday thirty-five years ago. The one calling was ordained that day, but no one in the church remembered the date or could find any ordination certificates or records.

Unless a church sends us their church history we would have no idea of what happened on various occasions. It is of great concern when a church does not record an important event for their history.

The story is often told of some dear elderly lady who was very diligent at keeping the minutes of meetings in a ledger. She was so good at her job she would take them home for safe keeping. Because she is now in heaven, no one was able to find the wonderful notes she took. Bulletins, church business meeting minutes, church newsletters, all legal documents, and all deacon and committee reports should be filed in order, by year, and kept in a safe place. Have more than one person keep a collection of such documents, and keep them in well known safe places apart from the other person or church records.

With modern computers there is no excuse for records of every sort to not be backed up and saved for future reference. One small "thumb drive" can hold several years of information. Who knows what great information saving devices will be available in the near future.

## What do we do with non-paper items?

Again, consideration of what should be saved is needed. Who needs an old 1930's typewriter? Most churches would now love to have such an item for display purposes. What about the old pulpit? Consider keeping it. It may be of value for some

classroom for several years. One church discarded an older pulpit used by one of their young pastors. The young pastor later became world renown and a subsequent pulpit he used sold for several hundred dollars.

In our J. M. and Helen Gaskin Baptist Historical Library and Archives at Oklahoma Baptist University we have only one pulpit. It was hand made by the church pastor around 1900 and was in use the day Dr. J. M. Gaskin, who served has historical secretary for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma for 45 years, was licensed and ordained to the ministry.

With modern technology every item can be electronically catalogued with photos from every angle. All artifacts in the Gaskin Archives are scheduled for computerizing so a person anywhere in the world can see the item from various angles without actually disturbing the original artifact. An archived 4<sup>th</sup> Century B. C. mace head will be available for viewing.

Historian and Indian pioneer pastor L. W. Marks 1920's typewriter will be seen again without visiting the actual Oklahoma Baptist University Library. The same can be done on the local church or association level. Imagine your church history showing photos of items used over 100 years ago.

### How do we preserve old paper items and church records?

When churches call regarding preserving older materials, they are usually referring to paper items. The question of preservation must be met with an understanding of how much a church is willing to invest in such a project. Archiving can range from very expensive to a moderate cost.

Let us take the example of the original minutes of Someplace Baptist Church. The original minutes are now old and deteriorating. They are in an old ledger that has crumbling edges and discolored pages. Some entries made in the late 1800's were in pencil and are difficult to read. What can this church do to safeguard this history?

One must realize the records will not get any better. They will continue to deteriorate, but the process can be slowed down greatly. Preservation must take place as soon as possible. There are several things the church or association could do.

I. The ledger or documents can be photographed and then microfilmed. Depending on where you live, this process can be expensive and very time consuming. Microfilming will require special cameras, processing on to the microfilm, and the availability of a microfilm reader. Again each page must be carefully turned, preferably by one trained in archival processes. Once the material is microfilmed the original document can be stored in acid free archival containers. A local school, library, or the Oklahoma Historical Society may be able to give further information on how and where to have this process completed. The Oklahoma State Historical Society has previously offered churches the opportunity to have their histories and documents microfilmed for free, but there would be a fee to purchase the subsequent microfilm. In addition, the materials must be deposited with the society and may take several weeks or months to complete. The materials would be returned to the church after microfilming. The advantage of microfilming is researchers have found

that microfilm is very durable and is a recorded method that is not going to be replaced by electronic methods in the near future.

- 2. A second current process is scanning and digitizing the document. The church should realize that with modern technology and advances, any materials digitalized may become obsolete quickly when a "new" electronic method of storage is created. Current examples are seen in cassette tapes, to VHS, to DVD's, and hard drives, to floppy disks, to thumb drives. Once the material is stored electronically, it will require reprogramming to the more modern means as they appear on the market. Within ten years or so, the means used to read the materials may no longer be available. The advantage of digitalizing is the materials can be accessed by anyone with a modern computer and read at home or in the office anywhere in the world.
- 3. The third option is the simplest and least expensive. That is to make copies of the ledger or other materials on a good copy machine. As mentioned previously, all processes may cause further damage from handling. In reality, the ledger and other items will not be getting any better with age. One person told of laying their church ledger open and placing a sturdy weight piece of white bond paper, for example, 40 pound bond, on the pages and then carefully turning the ledger over onto the copier glass. By carefully sliding the paper out they then had a good flat image to copy. Then the ledger was carefully turned back over, and the next page was copied in the same fashion. In any case, make more than one copy of each page for storage of the materials in more than one place. Fortunately, bond paper is almost acid free and the process will not significantly harm the older materials. The advantage of this process is the records will be printed and available at the local church or association level.

#### What else can be done?

After producing a good record of the materials the church might now consider further preservation of the original document. The ledger, documents, or papers can now be stored in acid free archival boxes. Acid free boxes actually help in pulling out acids from the materials. In addition, common white bond paper is also near acid free and if placed between sheets of old records will tend to draw the acids out of the materials. It would be best to replace the bond paper about every six months so the acids absorbed out of the documents can be discarded and new bond paper will help even further in drawing out still more of the destructive acids.

If a one page document is to be preserved it can be encapsulated, but this must be done carefully. Do not laminate important documents. The typical lamination process will lock in the acids and you will one day discover your precious document has turned dark and unreadable.

Encapsulation requires acid free polyester film for proper viewing and handling. Often a polyester film called "Mylar" is recommended. Before encapsulating a document cleaning and deacidification should be done. Unfortunately, those processes are too lengthy for this writing. For example, single documents can be carefully flattened and cleaned with a soft-bristled brush. Deacidification must be accomplished using professional archival acid removers, and should first be used on a less significant area to assure it will not damage the document.

Other materials such as cotton gloves, "3M Scotch Brand" double-sided tape, very soft lint-free cloths, and other items need to be used.

### How Can I Get More Help And Information?

There are several good sources. The Oklahoma State Historical Society located in Oklahoma City, occasionally offers a quick class on the subject. They also have resource people who might be able to help you with your questions. You can contact them at <a href="https://www.okhistory.org">www.okhistory.org</a> or at (405) 521-2491. They are also the folk who can microfilm your church records.

A good second source is to order the book *A How to Manual for Your Church's History*. It was produced by the Baptist History and Heritage Society in 2002. The book covers all aspects of writing and preserving a church history, but has one chapter of 23 pages that deals with preservation of records. You may order the book from the Historical Secretary office by sending a check for \$13.00 dollars which includes shipping and handling to Historical Secretary, Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, 3800 N. May Ave., Oklahoma City, OK, 73112.

A third option might also be available. If you would like to have a writer's conference at your church or association please e-mail the historical secretary at <a href="mailto:esheldon@bgco.org">esheldon@bgco.org</a>, or call (405) 942-3800, Ext. 4112 or 4117. Please understand that such a clinic would require a minimum of 15 people and a cost of \$20.00 per person. The clinic (conference) would be a one day event of approximately five hours (including lunch).