

Private libraries scramble to rescue endangered books

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SALEM, Mass. (RNS)—Inside a locked reading room atop a staircase at the [Salem Athenaeum](#), hundreds of theological books—including some nearly 500 years old—once again are stirring up debate.

It's not the subject matter that's contentious this time, since most modern-day readers have little interest in centuries-old treatises. At issue now is how to save these religious texts—and others kept in cash-strapped private libraries—from the ravages of time.

A 1564 biblical commentary by Protestant reformer John Calvin and collections of 18th-century sermons require delicate handling, as threads peek through thin, brittle bindings.

Jean Marie Prociou, director of the Salem Athenaeum in Salem, Mass., holds an old book in danger of deteriorating if the library does not get adequate funding for preservation.
(RNS PHOTO/Bryce Vickmark)

At New York's General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, librarian Melanie James says: "A lot of the religious books haven't been touched (in preservation efforts). They're kind of falling apart."

At the [Portsmouth Athenaeum](#) in Portsmouth, N.H., centuries-old books on holy topics cry out for repair in a bindery, but the library can only afford to mend a few books—and not necessarily theological ones—each year, according to research librarian Carolyn Marvin.

For some custodians, preservation means the expensive prospect of building climate-controlled environments, where temperature, humidity and lighting are set to optimal conditions for extending shelf life. One such project at the Boston Athenaeum in the early 1990s cost about \$33 million.

At the Salem Athenaeum, only books and pamphlets with high appraisal values are kept in a small, climate-controlled vault. The rest, said Francie King, president of the Salem Athenaeum's board of trustees, face a bleak destiny.

"They're going to turn to dust," King said. "We just can't afford to do what it takes to preserve them, unless someone were to give us millions."

Others fear, however, that calls for help could backfire and hasten the destruction of old books, especially those that aren't ultra-rare.

Michael Suarez, a Jesuit priest who directs the [Rare Book School](#) at the University of Virginia, says old book collections sometimes have been destroyed because custodians figured they were doomed to crumble and that the content was likely being digitized somewhere.

"Alarmist language (about books crumbling has) led to the destruction of hundreds of thousands of newspapers and books from the 19th century in particular," Suarez said. "It's a myth that these things will crumble into dust just by sitting on the shelf ... It's a myth that small libraries have a need for millions and millions of dollars that they can't possibly get."

America has only 16 private, membership libraries, where borrowing is restricted to dues-paying members. Still, they contain a disproportionate number of the nation's theological treasures. That's because these institutions commonly date to the 18th and 19th centuries, when they ranked among the top collectors of books and filled shelves with theological writings of the day.

Librarians at private libraries note that books published more than 150 years ago have at least one advantage against the elements: They're printed on fabric-based paper, which is more durable than today's paper made from wood.

Libraries can preserve most old books by taking simple, money-saving steps, such as keeping heat turned down in book stacks and avoiding exposure to direct sunlight, Suarez said.

Today, librarians disagree about the urgency of preservation efforts. James, from the New York library, sees no great rush to raise funds to save religious texts, in part because they're not frequently read, and they're not central to her institution's mission.

"A lot of the really old ones (in our collection) have been digitized," James said. "They're out of copyright, so it's just a matter of finding a copy and digitizing it."

Yet Suarez cautioned that what gets digitized might not be the best available copy of a book. Books convey more meaning than mere words on a page, he added. How they're packaged and marked up by readers long ago also add to a reader's understanding.

Another issue: Will digital books forever be accessible? Maybe not, some say.

"Archives and libraries are full of things that you can't get a reader for anymore, such as old cassettes and old film," said Jean Marie Prociou, director of the Salem Athenaeum. "You might have it there, but you can't access it. That is always a concern with digitizing. ... Whereas with a book, you're always going to be able to read it."

Suarez warns against assuming older theological works won't be of interest in years to come.

“We cannot know what the needs of future scholars, or historians 500 years from now, will be,” Suarez said. “And we are the custodians of the cultural heritage that was given to us.”