

# Removing Large Paper Items from Flat Files

Use care in handling moldy materials. Mold is dangerous to people and collections. It is “contagious” and can broadcast spores through natural air movement, mechanical systems, and on people. When possible, work under in consultation with a specialist.

## Wear Personal Protective Equipment

Wear personal protective equipment at all times. At minimum, N95 or 100 dust masks or reusable respirator masks and gloves should be worn.

## Identify and Assess

Assess the situation:

- Determine if there are single items or drawers with priorities for salvage. Priority items include but are not limited to items that are wet, moldy, have sensitive media (like photo emulsions, water-soluble inks, etc.) or very reactive structures (art, documents on skins, blotter, glassine, etc.)
- Locate the best possible facility for storage of large items and flat file drawers. Even if not ideal, the room should be chosen for safety, security, and the best possible environmental conditions. Lay out work areas – either on the floor or tables, designating locations for working and for collections storage.
- Develop and use an inventory system to track changing locations of collections. Written and photographic documentation are recommended, especially if computer access is limited by an unreliable electricity source.

## Collect Labor and Resources

- A minimum of 2 people is preferred to move large collection items and large flat file drawers.
- Useful supplies will include carrying supports for moving collection items, including things like plastic sheets, cardboard, white bed sheets, window screens, museum supplies (cardboard, plastic Mylar, blotter, Pellon, etc).
- Large plastic trash bags are useful for discarding non-collections items, such as damaged folders.
- Collect equipment if possible and needed. Electricity is likely to be required. Equipment may include fans, dehumidifiers, and high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filtered vacuums.



## Removing Drawers

1. Using two people, slide drawers out carefully. Determine if there is a locking mechanism, or if the drawers must be tilted to slide out on the tracks. Use care to avoid accidental damage. Carry each drawer individually to the new storage room.
2. Flat file drawers may be stacked individually, ideally lifted from the floor to allow air circulation. In limited floor space, drawers may be stacked perpendicularly to one another.
3. Before removing collection items from drawers:
  - Reassess the capabilities and limitations of the staff, space, and supplies
  - Reassess the collections' condition, determining any priorities for salvage
  - Document individual items before and after removal of the drawer, noting both collections conditions and location changes
4. To remove items from the drawers:
  - Support all items as they are moved. This can be done by sliding a support under the folder as it is slide carefully and lifted at a slight angle from the drawer.
  - Open the folders carefully and discard all folders and interleaving papers that are damp, wet, or moldy. Carefully transfer the collection item on to a clean support and allow to air dry, or re-house as safely as possible
5. Continually re-assess the situation and conditions of the collection. If possible, and with both testing and care, mold may be reduced from collections by cleaning with a HEPA-filter vacuum. Consult with appropriate specialists for guidance and training.
6. Metal flat files may be cleaned using dilute solutions of alcohol, bleach, or ammonia. Never mix cleaning solutions (like ammonia and bleach, which will cause severe lung damage). Use care to thoroughly wipe and dry. Wood flat files may be permanently mold contaminated.

*Collecting institutions affected by an emergency event should contact the National Heritage Responders for additional response advice: 202.661.8068 or [nhr@conservation-us.org](mailto:nhr@conservation-us.org)*