The HPLHS Prop Document Collection

Welcome to the H.P.Lovecraft Historical Society Prop Document Collection.
This CD contains over 75 Adobe Acrobat PDF files, from which you can make about a hundred different authentically styled prop documents for use in role-playing games set in the 1920s and '30s. Whether you play live-action or just around the table, good realistic props and play aids can really help get your players' imaginations into high gear, and intensify the entire role-playing experience. Any game is more fun to play when you have good toys.

With years of professional propmaking experience and resources at our disposal, we at the HPLHS really appreciate highly detailed and authentic props. Andrew Leman, one of the founders of the HPLHS and an 18-year *Cthulhu Lives!* veteran, has been a professional designer of prop documents in Hollywood for the last six years. His work has been seen in movies like *Galaxy Quest, What Lies Beneath, Scream 3, Gods & Monsters, The Thirteenth Floor, The Time Machine*, and television shows like "The West Wing" and "Dharma & Greg." Some of the props in this collection got their start when they were made for industry clients. Most of them, however, have been made exclusively for role-players and the HPLHS.

Role-playing props have to live up to a much higher standard of realism and detail than movie props. In a movie, you only get to see as much of a prop as the director wants you to see. A prop is seldom on screen for more than a few seconds: if you fudge on the details or copy the same page over and over no one will ever notice. But props in a game have to be able to withstand lengthy, close inspection and hard use. Every detail is important, and it has to be consistent with the world of the game. A prop with joke text or warnings on it can actually break the mood of a game, not intensify it.

Many of the props in this collection are authentic replicas of actual vintage documents. The HPLHS has a large collection of such documents. In our quest to accurately capture the style of the time of Lovecraft, we have created over 50 custom computer fonts based on vintage sources. We have scanned type from old catalogs, newspapers, telegrams, insurance policies, drivers licenses, and other documents, and made fonts which we used to recreate those documents as digital files. A selection of those fonts is provided on this disk for you to use in creating your own props, including two fonts which are replicas of H.P. Lovecraft's own handwriting, scanned from his letters to Willis Conover.

All of the props in this collection (with one or two exceptions) were meant to be printed on an ordinary consumer inkjet printer. All have been successfully tested on a Canon S600. (A few of the props require large-format paper which might be beyond the resources of the home user.) Each PDF in the collection contains both the prop itself and instructions for printing and finishing it. The following few pages define some of the terms used frequently in the instructions, and provide suggestions on where to obtain some of the basic materials that you'll find useful in producing actual printed props from these files.

For more information, visit the prop pages at the HPLHS. www.cthulhulives.org

We hope you enjoy making the props in this collection, and that they add a new level of fun to your gaming.

HPLHS

Tips for making Prop Documents

PAPER: Although ordinary white paper will work fine for most of these props, different kinds of documents look best printed on different kinds of paper. Every prop file in this collection recommends the best type of paper to print it on. If you're going to get into making props, it's worth it to obtain a variety of papers. Most office supply stores like Staples and Office Depot sell pre-packaged assortments of specialty papers which will work in an inkjet printer. Some kinds which might come in handy: a package of nice ivory colored resume paper, a package of glossy or semi-gloss photo paper, a package of assorted pastel colors.

Some of these props need to be printed on cardstock. Buff-colored or manila cardstock will be extremely handy, and a light brown cardstock, the color of a grocery bag, will also be good for some props. And for some of the booklet-style props something even heavier, like bristol board, is a good idea. We have successfully put bristol board through the HPLHS Canon S600, but if you're worried about damaging your printer don't push your luck. You can always print two copies on thinner cardstock and then glue them together to get the thickness you need.

And some of these props need to be printed on very thin paper: 16 lb. bond works best for the Miskatonic course book and for the British passport, and newsprint works best for the Arkham streetcar transfers and the newspaper. You can get 16 lb. bond at a good office supply store or paper dealer. Newsprint is often sold in the form of sketch pads at art supply stores. So is bristol board, for that matter, and other types of potentially useful paper.

A note about parchment paper: it's the fastest way to make something look fake. It's not accurate to the period, and there's almost nothing that looks better printed on bogus parchment. Avoid it.

CUSTOMIZING: Many of the props in the HPLHS collection feature Acrobat form fields where you can type in custom information: names, addresses, dates, etc. Because Acrobat only allows you to use a certain very limited set of fonts in form fields, this feature—while being very convenient—doesn't add much to the authenticity of the prop. We have put default entries into the props which use form fields, and you can easily replace those default entries with information of your own. But for maximum authenticity, delete the entries altogether and enter such information with a real typewriter, if you've got one, or by hand.

If you're handy with page layout software like PageMaker or Quark XPress, you can do your own layout to match the blank spaces in the prop design, and use some of the HPLHS prop fonts, or any fonts you want, to customize the finished product. Print the PDF file "blank," with no custom entries. Then do your own layout with your customized info based on that "blank." Reinsert the "blank" into your printer, and print your layout on top of the preprinted prop. Might take some juggling to get the spacing just right, but the results can be worth it.

SCORING: To score something is to press a line into the paper, so that when you fold it it will fold in the right place in a perfectly straight line. Scoring is best accomplished with a burnisher: a handy tool available at art supply stores and some office supply houses. We recommend a Chartpak adjustable burnisher, as shown at left. It has a metal ball point on one end and a flat plastic blade on the other. If you don't want to spring for a burnisher, however, you can try to score paper with the duller side of a butter knife or some similar instrument.

PERFORATING: To perforate something is to cut or punch a series of slits or holes in the paper, so that it can be torn in a specific place, usually in a perfectly straight line. Perforated documents in the real world are usually produced on huge industrial machines that are beyond the reach of your average gamer. There are several homegrown ways you can perforate the props in this collection. There are a number of kinds of rotary cutters that you can get with a perforating blade. You can also use a dressmaker's pounce wheel, which is a very cheap item you can get in the notions department of a fabric or craft store. A pounce wheel won't give you the best results, but it's a cheap and easy solution. If you have access to a sewing machine, you can use it to perforate documents by running paper through the machine without any thread. Use a short stitch length and the needle will punch a nice series of holes. Here at the HPLHS we've rigged a sewing machine with a special round brass punch which cuts small clean holes in the paper like old-fashioned postage stamps.

Perforating devices:
Top Left: A perforating blade for a Fiskars rotary cutter.
Bottom Left: a Carl brand desktop personal rotary trimmer. Comes with interchangeable blades, including a perforating blade. Costs about $24 at a good office supply store.
Top Right: A Fiskars brand handheld rotary cutter. Can take any of multiple types of blades.
Bottom Right: A dressmaker's pounce wheel, also known as a tracing wheel. Not the most effective tool, but the cheapest.

CUTTING: Although a few of the prop documents in this collection are designed to be 8½ x 11 inches, most have to be cut out from the page. Crop marks, solid black outlines, or color boundaries always indicate where to do the cutting. Do not use scissors for cutting: it's very difficult for anyone to get a truly straight edge with a pair of scissors. We highly recommend investing in an X-acto or similar craft knife with replaceable blades. Change blades often: everything is much easier with a sharp blade. Also invest in a steel ruler. Plastic, wood and aluminum rulers can be cut by the X-acto knife, and will quickly get chipped and won't be straight anymore.

Here's the best way to cut a perfectly aligned straight edge. Place the tip of your knife blade directly on a crop mark or solid black outline that you want to cut. Push it down slightly so it goes into the paper. Then put the one end of your steel ruler snug up against the knife blade. Position the other end of your ruler so that it passes directly over the next crop mark or along the outline. This lines up the ruler perfectly. Lift the knife and then cut along the edge of the ruler. Once you get the hang of this technique, you'll find you can very quickly cut numerous perfectly straight edges.

Another tip for cutting: put the ruler over the part of the paper you want to keep, so that if the knife slips for some reason you're not cutting into the prop itself, but only into the part you were going to throw away anyhow.

ROUNDED CORNERS: Some of the props in this collection look best with rounded corners. Although you can certainly round them by hand using an X-acto or other craft knife, there are a number of specialty cutters that can do it for you more easily and reliably. Thanks to the growing hobby of scrapbook-keeping, there are all kinds of novelty scissors and punches available at your local arts & crafts store. You can get corner rounders, scissors that cut a wavy or postage-stamp edge, and punches that punch out little shapes like hearts and diamonds instead of just old-fashioned round holes.

GLUING: Many of the props in this collection require you to glue one piece of paper to another, or glue the front of the prop to the back. We highly recommend using a glue stick or a dry adhesive applicator, as shown at right. Don't use spray glue: it has toxic fumes, the overspray creates an unholy mess, and it's usually so sticky that one mistake will ruin the prop. Ordinary white glue, on the other hand, is usually too wet and will wrinkle the paper too much. Glue sticks and tape adhesive applicators are the cleanest and easiest to work with.

STAPLES: Some of the props in this collection call for stapling pages together. In the '20s and '30s there was more variety in staples than there is today: nowadays it's all completely standardized. Ordinary staples will work for most of the props, but for the matchbooks and the Miskatonic undergraduate course book you might want to use heavy duty staples.

TAPE: Some of the props in this collection call for tape binding: wrapping some tape around the spine of a booklet to hide the staples. Cloth gaffer's tape is by far the best tape for this purpose. It comes in a variety of colors and widths, it's very durable, and it looks very good. You should be able to find it a good hardware or art supply store.

RUBBER STAMPS: A lot of these documents would have had dates and/or other information stamped on them with a rubber stamp. In some cases we've replicated that look in the prop itself. But in other cases we've left that out. For added authenticity, you might want to get a do-it-yourself rubber stamp kit, like the one shown at left, at an office supply store. You can make your own date stamps, etc., to add these convincing details.

PHOTOS: Some of these props, like passports and drivers licenses, call for a photograph to be added. In the '20 and '30s, of course, such photos could not be printed into the document the way they are today: they were always attached separately. If you have a photo of the player for whom the prop is being made, use PhotoShop or some similar program to make it black and white, and print it at an appropriate size on glossy photo paper. Cut out the photo and glue and/or staple it into position on the finished prop. Passport photos were usually embossed or stamped over as well, to reduce the chance of forgery.

PUNCHES: Some of the props, like train tickets, streetcar transfers, and stock certificates, call for holes to be punched in the finished product. Although any ordinary hole punch will serve the purpose, the hole it makes is usually a little too big. It would be more authentic to get an actual ticket puncher, which are often available on eBay. If you don't want to go that route, you can get a novelty paper puncher at an arts & crafts supply store which will punch a smaller hole, or a hole in a different shape than the standard round.

FIXATIVE: The ink used in most inkjet printers is not waterproof, and can smudge or run. For props like these that will be handled extensively and may be splashed with blood or sweat or ectoplasm, it is a good idea to spray them with a fixative to help prevent smearing. We highly recommend Pressline clear fixative spray: it has worked very well on all the test props we've made. There are several other brands available, however, and you can probably find at least one of them at a good art supply or office supply store. You should test the brand you buy before spraying a prop you want to keep. Some kinds of fixative on some kinds of paper actually bead up the ink and will ruin the prop rather than protecting it.