

ExpoTime!

The international magazine for museum professionals

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Title page: Detail of the face of St Anthony from the right wing, first opening, of the Isenheim Altarpiece, during conservation (varnish removal). Musée Unterlinden, Colmar, France. See pp. 66-69



Katryn Boodle

We the People: Conserving the State of Alabama's Defining Documents

From early 2018 through the beginning of 2019, NEDCC worked on conserving the State of Alabama's six Constitutions and their Ordinance of Secession. The work was undertaken as part of the state's bicentennial celebration and was many years in the making with support not only from the Alabama Department of Archives and History, but also the State's Legislature, who established a special Bicentennial Committee in preparation for the year-long celebration. The Archives worked diligently to prepare educational resources for the public along with several additional exhibitions leading up to the opening of "We the People: Alabama's Defining Documents". The

first venue for "We the People" was the Huntsville Museum of Art where the show opened on June 30th, 2019. The exhibition opened a second time at the Alabama Department of Archives and History on November 3rd, 2019 and ran through the end of the year. It is now available as an online as a virtual exhibition (<https://www.wethepeoplealabama.org/the-exhibition>).

Examination of the constitutions

The documents all required an initial examination to determine an appropriate treatment approach. However,



Unsecured ribbons on the 1819 constitution during the on-site examination.

this was not an easy task to do as four of the constitutions were between 20 and 43 ft long. Because of their length, the constitutions were examined in approximately 8-foot sections. This gave the conservators of NEDCC a general impression of the object's history of use and current condition. Using specialized tools and magnification, the objects were tested to generally assess and identify problematic areas that required treatment.

The long-rolled format of the Alabama constitutions was the most obvious thing that would affect the overall treatment. These rolled documents were comprised of good quality parchment sheets with few exceptions. The only items not in this format were the Ordinance of Secession, which was a single parchment skin, the 1865 constitution, which was a set of ledger pages sewn together at the head, and the 1901 constitution, which was a bound volume.

Another aspect that was immediately noted was how the parchment sheets were attached together. The 1819 constitution was held together only with ribbons, while the 1861 and 1868 constitutions were secured together with a protein-based adhesive. The 1875 constitution used a combination of the two techniques and, as a result, had the most seam failures.

The seam failures combined with the length of the documents made handling a challenge. The fact that the seams were no longer adhered together meant that a lot of strain was being placed on the attached areas of parchment unless the sheets were weighted down. From a historical context, it also meant that the document was not working in the way its creators intended, mak-

ing it unsafe for access by researchers and the public. In cases where the ribbons hung loose, they did not control the movement of the sheets as they should and caused abrasion to the ribbons every time it was unrolled. The ribbons also easily became entangled or damaged on the sides, which led to some parts of the ribbons becoming lost.

The final important aspect that the examination uncovered was that iron gall ink was used on the documents. Iron gall ink is notoriously problematic and it tends to crack so that the ink eventually flakes or becomes lost. This is a very common type of damage for parchment objects; a thicker application of the ink can cause more flaking.

After knowing these key features of the documents, archives staff were consulted to discuss the history of the constitutions, their goals for treatment, intended use, and overall preservation now and in the future. Out of this conversation, a treatment plan was created that would stabilize the constitutions and meet the Alabama Department of Archives and History's goals.

Treatment of the rolled constitutions

The first step in any treatment project at NEDCC is documenting the objects with both photography and taking additional detailed notes as needed. Due to the size of the constitutions, the documents were shot in sections on a specialized XY table in NEDCC's Imaging Lab. The set-up is ideal for large or fragile objects because NEDCC staff can move the table laterally in two directions to



Areas of friable media marked with blotter triangles.

obtain an accurate visual record of the document without having to handle or manipulate the item directly.

Once everything was photographed, more detailed documentation and testing of the object began. The treating conservator worked to secure any loose pieces, such as ribbons or separating parchment, with Hair Silk and barrier papers temporarily during this process. Until the ink was stabilized, all conservators worked with nitrile gloves to avoid accidental transfer of any loose text to their skin.

As cracked or loose ink is the greatest risk of loss, they were secured to the parchment by consolidation with gelatin before any other treatment. Due to the size of the documents, it was hard to accurately estimate how much of the text was in danger. However, there were distinct patterns of damage noted from rolling and abrasion that could be followed to ensure all inks were secured.

The magnified examination was done by going over each letter with a very small (000) brush with an Optivisor first in order to efficiently work through the 20+ ft of text on each of the documents. Once problematic areas were identified, they were marked with blotter triangles that either pointed to or underlined an area that needed

to be observed more closely under more intense magnification (250x) using a microscope.

These areas were examined and tested again under the microscope with a fine point dry brush. If the area was shown to indeed be cracked or flaking, a small amount of ethanol was first applied to hold the fragments in place and allow the consolidant to evenly flow throughout the damaged area. The application was then followed up with a dilute solution of conservation grade gelatin – 1% or 2% depending on how badly the text was flaking and the level of solubility. The area was allowed to dry and then tested again. Secondary applications of dilute gelatin were applied as deemed necessary.

Once all of the damaged text was consolidated, surface dirt was removed using dry cleaning techniques. Cleaning started with a smooth goat hair brush to remove any larger pieces. Additional surface cleaning was then done using a series of conservation grade sponges to remove any finer particulates and embedded grime from more exposed areas.

Secondary materials that were not part of the original object were removed methodically. While tape had been used on several of the constitutions, none had more than the 1868 constitution, whose seams had been formerly



Conservator working at the microscope to apply ethanol and gelatin with a two-brush technique.

secured with approximately 120 inches of tape throughout the document. These tapes were both between two parchment sheets and on the verso of the object. If these tapes were left in place, they would have eventually discoloured the parchment and been impossible to fully remove due to the limitations of solvent treatments on parchment items.

The traditional tape removal methods, such as heat and solvents, cannot be utilized on parchment without potentially causing damage to the proteinaceous structure. The tapes were instead mechanically removed with a wide spatula followed by removal of residues with the mechanical methods of a crepe eraser or cellulose powder depending on how accessible the affected area was. This technique was repeated until all of the tapes were removed from each object.



Removal of a piece of pressure-sensitive tape with a spatula.

After removing the tapes, the attachment of each of the parchment sheets to one another were thoroughly tested with a microspatula and further physical manipulation of the neighboring skins on both the recto and verso of the parchment. If the adhesive was failing with light pressure, the seam was gently separated using a Teflon spatula. Remaining old adhesives were gently removed with a controlled application of a 5% methylcellulose poultice that was removed with a scalpel and allowed to dry completely under pressure.

An 8% high bloom conservation grade gelatin was chosen rather than wheat starch paste as the seam repair adhesive as the original adhesive material also proved to be a protein-based material. When sieved and applied cold, the medium bloom gelatin has a high tacking ability that would hold the skins together firmly, while still offering flexibility. The seams were pasted out with this adhesive and the seams were aligned, burnished with a Teflon spatula, and pressed to dry.

While re-attaching the parchment sheets to each other, minor mending and reinforcement of the torn parchment also occurred as deemed necessary. The 1875 constitution had the most tears due to the stress on the central ribbons, so each of these ribbons were initially docu-

mented close-up and then untied to access the parchment skins below. Lightweight Japanese tissue paper strips were pasted on with the mentioned gelatin adhesive. The repair was dried under moderate weight to ensure a good bond with the parchment. Once dry, the repair was trimmed down and cut if needed to reform the lacing area.

The silk ribbons that had been removed on the 1875 Constitution were flattened with a light heat and reinforced locally with a secondary silk. Each ribbon was laced back through the newly joined parchment and tied to match what it had historically looked like using the prior photographic documentation as a reference.



Drying of the newly adhered seams under moderate weight.

Ribbon repair on the 1819 Constitution

The most difficult part of the project was dealing with the ribbons on the 1819 constitution. The ribbons needed to be stabilized using a support fabric as no adhesive was used on this constitution, so they were the only material that held the skins together. However, the ribbons were fraying in the areas where they had been slotted through the parchment due to the rolling and unrolling of the document throughout its life. It was quickly determined that it was going to do more harm to the ribbon to remove the entire piece and then weave it back through the correct slots. Therefore, the ribbons were repaired *in situ* as much as possible.

Additional complications arose due to the fact that neither silk nor parchment responds well to moisture and while silk can stand a lower heat, parchment cannot. This meant that any work done needed to have multiple barriers that would absorb any heat that was used between the repair and the parchment.

After much thought, a very fine silk known as crepeline in combination with an adhesive that would adhere at a low heat was chosen for repair. Despite the additional work that would be needed to protect the parchment,

this was determined to be the most reversible and safe option overall. The silk was prepared and the adhesive was applied and allowed to fully dry. In doing so, the fabric was imbued with the adhesive and when heated would adhere to the blue silk ribbons in a nearly invisible manner.

Each of the damaged areas of ribbon were measured to determine how much crepeline was needed and to check the weave of the two fabrics against one another. This would allow for better alignment and prevent stress on the silk from the reinforcement material. The crepeline was lightly toned to match the ribbon with Gamblin Conservation Colors and isopropanol to prevent reactivation of the water-soluble adhesive. The ribbon and silk were aligned and the crepeline was attached with a large tacking iron on low heat. The support repair was tested for flexibility and complete attachment to the original ribbon. Additional local tacking was done as needed with a smaller fine-pointed iron.



Application of toned crepeline silk to one of the 1819 ribbons *in situ*.

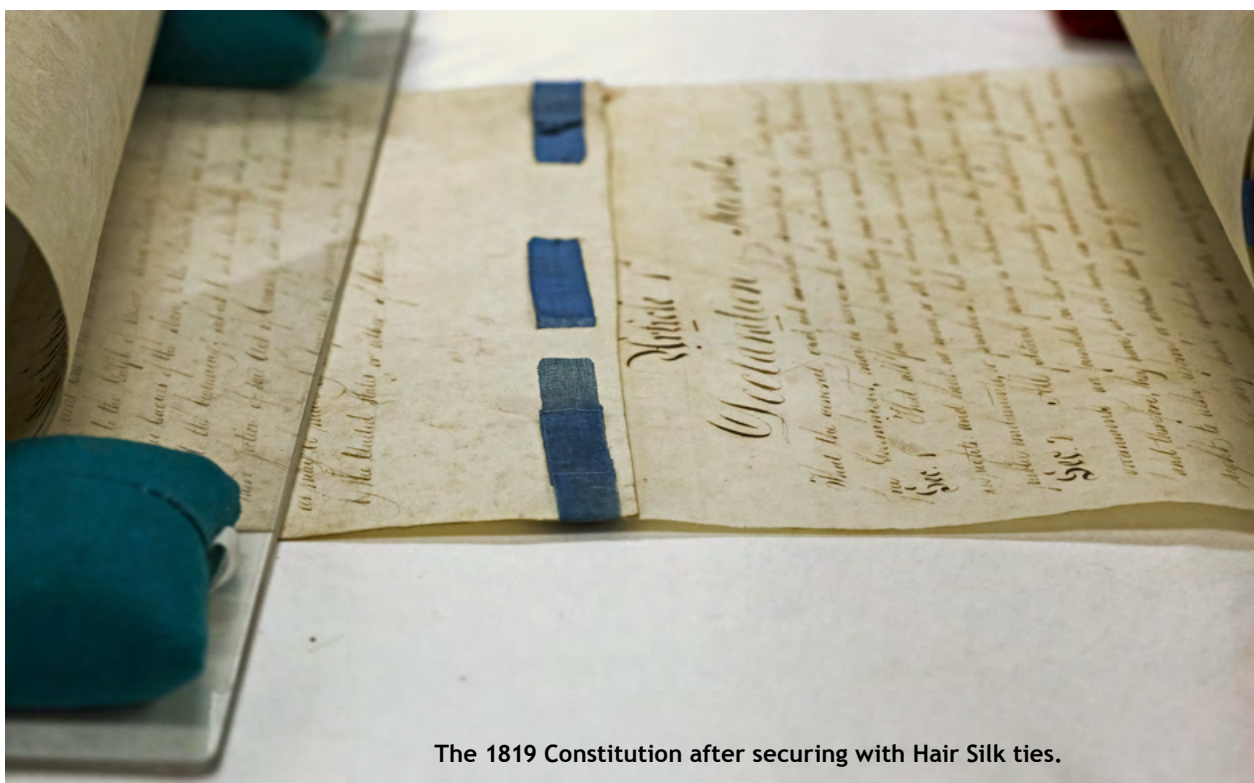
Once repaired, the ribbons were rewoven as needed, tightened lightly, and secured using a toned Hair Silk tie to prevent them from slipping. The result was something that secured the loose ends in a reversible way without adding a significant number of secondary materials. The work done will be visible only under close examination.

Creation of specialized housings

The final step for these objects was to construct a housing that achieved the following goals: First, it had to support the object so that it was not crushed under its own weight in storage. Second, it needed to improve access and overall handling of the constitutions. And finally, it needed to be visually pleasing for the purposes of the “We the People” exhibition as the constitutions would remain on the support tubes during the exhibition to minimize stress.

First, an archival tube was cut to be slightly larger than the constitutions and covered in neutral toned paper. The edges of the paper at the ends of the tube were cut, folded inward, and burnished before being permanently attached to the interior of the tube. A second piece of the cover paper was cut to fit the interior of the tube and attached with a conservation grade adhesive around the edges. Like the exterior paper, it too was burnished and allowed to dry.

For the best protection of a rolled object, it is recommended that they are suspended in boxes on tubes larger than the piece. However, as the constitutions’ tubes would be used in the exhibition, they needed to be close in size to that of the documents. This required that ad-



The 1819 Constitution after securing with Hair Silk ties.



The 1819 Constitution in its custom housing.

ditional interior furniture be constructed to pad out the permanent housing in order to accommodate the exhibition.

Volara spacer supports were cut with a void in the center to act as a buffer and allow a suspension tube to be secured inside. The constitutions were then carefully rolled onto their prepared tubes to ensure proper alignment of the object before confirming that the Volara supports ensured the constitution didn't touch the sides of the box or other interior furniture.

The constitutions were covered with a polyester wrapper to prevent it from unravelling and the document, along with all the supports were fit into their respective boxes for return to the Alabama Department of Archives and History and the "We the People: Alabama's Defining Documents" exhibitions.

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Materials (ordered from Talas unless otherwise indicated):

Gelatin, USP (100 bloom) & Photographic grade (220 bloom)
For an explanation of Bloom strength, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloom_\(test\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bloom_(test))
Crepeline, Natural
Hair Silk, 2 strand
Volara, 1/2" thickness
3" Archival Tube, MasterPak
<https://masterpak-usa.com/collections/archival-rolling-and-storage-tubes>
Gamblin Conservation Colors
<https://conservationcolors.com/price-list/>
Heerbrugg Switzerland Wild M3Z Microscope with AmScope Halogen attachment

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