

One Hundred Years of Conservation Documentation at the Newberry Library

ABSTRACT

The Newberry Library's involvement with the world of conservation dates back to 1887, seven years before the library established an in-house bindery. By the 1930s there were twenty-six employees in the bindery, which produced two thousand bound volumes per month, including work for outside institutions and individuals. Although several fine binders were brought in to work on special collections materials, it wasn't until 1964, when Paul Banks was recruited as library conservator, that a regular conservation program began. Mr. Banks individualized treatment of books by incorporating input from curatorial staff and developing a standard documentation form that included photography. The current staff of two full-time and four part-time employees, along with a host of volunteers and interns, perform all in-house treatment and documentation. About two hundred volumes of post-1975 periodicals are sent to a commercial binder annually. This long history of over one hundred years of binding and conservation treatment produced a wide variety of documentation, ranging from bindery statistics and collection-level documentation to detailed reports for single items. Over twenty distinct types of conservation documentation have been used at the Newberry, adding to the rich history of conservation at the Newberry Library.

HISTORY AND CHRONOLOGY

The Newberry Library is an independent research library in Chicago, Illinois. It has been free and open to the public since 1894. Records related to the treatment of Newberry books go back even further, to 1887, when the library was founded. During the last 118 years a wide variety of records related to the treatment of collection

materials have been created and many still exist. We have taken a broad and inclusive view of what constitutes a treatment record, ranging from bindery schedules in the early years, through the early period of modern conservation in the 1960s, to the current digital efforts. Although our original goal in researching old departmental records focused on specific questions related to an item, what we found was nothing less than clear documentation of the metamorphosis from binders to conservators.

It is safe to say that the Newberry has always had an interest in care of the collections, although the term "conservation" was not employed until later. In 1894 the Newberry's Board of Directors passed a fairly detailed list of binding specifications. Included were directions on disbinding, sewing, trimming, and several quality levels of binding. Some of the specifications include: "in pulling books apart care must be taken not to injure the book"; "the back of the book must not be cut off for whip stitching"; and "all books must have loose spring backs" (Newberry Library Board 1894). The number of sewing stations, types of linings and endbands, number of waste sheets, and type of tooling were also specified.

During the early years, the bindery experienced very little change in leadership or technique. Between 1894 and 1968, for seventy-four years, only three men headed the department, and two of these were father and son. During this time, an assembly-line bindery style was used, with specific jobs assigned to individuals (fig. 1). For the first fifty years the most common type of binding done at the Newberry Bindery was the half morocco with marbled paper sides (fig. 2). In our research we found many suppliers' sample books of skins and decorative papers and were able to match many materials with a high level of confidence, although individual item treatment reports were not maintained. Although some full cloth was used from the beginning, the use of buckram increased and became the most common style by the 1940s. The bindery also used various "temporary" bindings, such as the Rudolph Binder.

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Fig. 1. The Newberry Library bindery in 1909. Note the sewing ladies on the right and the binders on the left. Courtesy the Newberry Library, Chicago.

Because of the similarity of binding style, along with very few existing records, we relied on ownership marks and call number labels to help date or glean information about binding practices before the 1960s. Numerous dies were created and hand tools were occasionally used with ink as well as gold leaf or foil (fig. 3). Ink was close at hand because along with the in-house bindery, the Newberry found it more cost effective to print various forms, flags, lists and cards used in the library. In 1914 a Multigraph printing machine was installed in the bindery, as well as punch-cutting machines for catalog cards. This practice seemed to wane by the 1950s, but it is important to note how closely related printing was to bindery operations.

Ernst Detterer, custodian of the Wing Collection from 1931 to 1947, designed a single-spaced bindery type that endures today. The Newberry-Detterer type defines the look of the Newberry stacks and reference shelves. Every



Fig. 3. Three different hand tools, all with various Newberry logo designs.

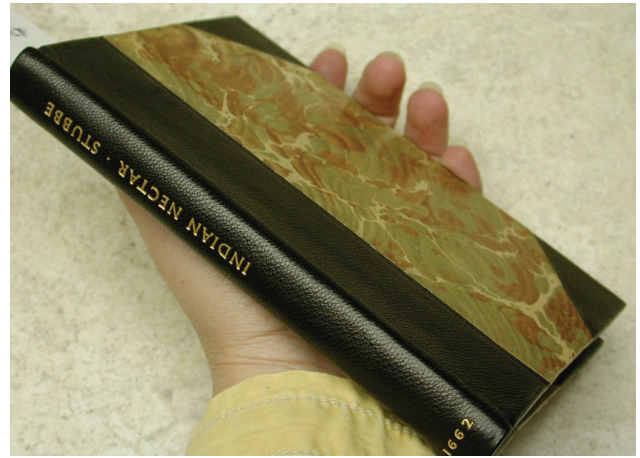


Fig. 2. This half-leather binding style is ubiquitous — it appears on bound manuscripts, incunabula, and serials for materials bound from 1887 until the 1940s.

volume bound in the bindery after 1935 received a title or call number using this typeface.

The stamping press, used in creating almost all spine labeling, is still in use today (fig. 4). Furthermore, all bindery equipment is now part of the conservation department and book conservators today must know and understand the equipment. In a typewritten 1980 *Newberry*



Fig. 4. Frederick Froelicher, foreman of the bindery from 1948 to 1968, is seen here using the Pleger stamping press. Courtesy the Newberry Library, Chicago.

Conservation Technical Note it is stated that “the studies of historical structures, materials and past binders provides the resources of structural design, materials qualities and technical approaches necessary to evolve modern conservation standard treatments” (Newberry Library Conservation Department 1980). Various ownership marks also come in the form of ink transfer stamps or embossment and perforations, depending on the “new technology” of the time. As with many institutions, the bookplate played the role of ownership mark but also served to document provenance.

Incunabula Rebinding by Elizabeth Kner

An exception to the routine binding done in the assembly line was the hiring of Elizabeth Kner, a well-known Hungarian binder, to treat forty incunabula during 1950–51. Although Kner did not produce individual treatment reports, she did leave a memoir, which provides extensive insight into her rationale for treatment and methods used. In the *Guild of Bookworkers Journal* from 1993, Paul Gehl and Elizabeth Zurawski write, “Ms. Kner obviously expresses the ideas of that period . . . [b]ut in many ways her ideas . . . were in the avant garde, especially . . . in her clear-headed vision of what was modern, and therefore directly useful to her, in the models of the fifteenth century” (Gehl and Zurawski 1993, 1).

In her memoir she describes discussions with the head of the rare book department concerning choices of the materials, components, and techniques of the new bindings and their decoration (fig. 5). To quote Kner, “Obviously, the best thing for a bookbinder in my position was to make the bindings in the manner of the old masters” (Gehl and Zurawski 1993, 6), but she made a few changes. She also wrote, “The old bookbinders glued the leather covering directly to the back of the book. . . . I put a paper tube in between to save the leather from cracking



Fig. 5. Incunabula bound by Elizabeth Kner during 1950–1951.

and also to permit easy opening of the book” (Gehl and Zurawski 1993, 7–8). Kner chose “simple, dignified bindings, good in technique and good in materials” (Gehl and Zurawski 1993, 6). She respected the authenticity of the old volumes by leaving intact structures undisturbed and wrote, “I did not bind a book which still retained parts of its original binding” (Gehl and Zurawski 1993, 11).

By the 1960s there was enormous pressure in the bindery to increase production, resulting in a decline of quality. In 1965 over 2,100 books were bound and by 1967 the numbers rose to 3,862 books. This increase continues through the 1980s. To paraphrase a later statement by Paul Banks, the apprentice-trained staff, who had had solid training, were now “up in years” with the youngest in his mid-fifties. Also, the staff had become isolated from developments in the outside world. The binders had never heard of William Morris or the Guild of Book Workers (McCrary 2000).

Paul Banks at the Newberry

In 1963 Lawrence Towner, president of the Newberry Library, hired Paul Banks as the Newberry’s first permanent conservator (fig. 6). Banks was one of many who went to Italy to advise during the Florence Floods, connecting with the emerging field of conservation. He believed in networking and sharing information, and eventually he became President of the International Institute for Conservation—American Group (IIC-AG) and the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) from 1978 to 1980.

In a 1974 American Library Association talk, Towner says:

We hired Banks in 1963, when he was running his own bindery in lower Manhattan. It was a stroke of genius.



Fig. 6. Paul Banks was the first permanent conservator at the Newberry Library. Courtesy the Newberry Library, Chicago.



Fig. 7. The Newberry's first conservation lab. Gary Frost in the foreground was hired in 1969 and began working in the conservation lab in 1970. Courtesy the Newberry Library, Chicago.

Banks is the most opinionated, arrogant, intransigent, insufferable, and uncooperative son of a bitch I have ever known . . . and I would trust him absolutely with any manuscript, book, illumination, work of art, or rapid-transit transfer we have. The reason is that Banks's basic philosophy is . . . if you don't know, don't do it: never do anything that is irreversible. One of Banks's greatest attractions is that he knows when he doesn't know. (Towner 1993)

Paul Banks was on the cutting edge of the new science of conservation. Analytical equipment was used for the first time as part of an object's examination. Paul Banks worked at the Newberry for eighteen years before leaving to begin the first master's program in library conservation at Columbia University. The Newberry's first conservation lab, originally called the technical department in 1964, focused on single-item treatment (fig. 7).

The bindery, which was located on a different floor of the building and had functioned as a strict assembly line, started to change in the 1970s (fig. 8). Under the direction of John Dean, most staff moved with their batches, performing multiple operations. New bindery staff members were conservation-oriented binders and many considered it a stage in their conservation training.

The bindery remained a separate entity from the conservation lab until the late 1980s, although better conservation practices and materials were incorporated in daily work. Departments, names, and titles of individuals changed a great deal, reflecting the growing pains of the field of conservation. Norma Janik began as a bindery technician and thirty-one years later retired as the collections conservator.

Today's department of conservation services provides physical care for all of the library's collections. Routine duties include environmental monitoring, creating protec-



Fig. 8. The bindery during the 1970s. Courtesy the Newberry Library, Chicago.

tive enclosures, treatment of materials, training of staff and readers, and exhibit and loan preparation.

DOCUMENTATION

During this long history, the Newberry has created a wealth of records — about twenty types in all. Among these are records of materials purchased, instructions on how to use thymol, freezer logs for batch treatment of damp or infested materials, exhibit and loan records, and the accident book. Although some of these are quite humorous to us now, these types of records provide us with information about life and work in the bindery.

Since the 1960s, we have accumulated a variety of individual item examination and treatment reports produced primarily by the conservation lab. The reports document not only the item's treatment, but also the evolving profession of conservation. Through the last forty-one years we see increased specificity, the introduction of analysis, consideration of the object's historic context, and formalized participation of other library personnel in the decision-making process.

Because several forms were in use at any one time, these reports will be discussed thematically, not chronologically. The reports contain some similar types of information that can be grouped as item identification, description and condition, treatment proposal and treatment, and images. Additional information is often included.

Item Identification

All forms of binding and treatment reports, even back to the 1887 bindery schedule, make some attempt at item identification, often including call number, author, title and date. This is critical when attempting to research an object's treatment history and to differentiate it from similar materials.

Fig. 9. The Newberry’s earliest type of single item treatment report, used in the early to mid 1960s, does not include a space for the call number.

Our earliest type of single-item treatment report (fig. 9) dates from the mid 1960s and is titled a “Special Binding Order.” It was clearly intended for use by both conservation and the bindery, as the heading lists “Paul Banks, Conservator” and “Fred Froelicher, Foreman.” The short title is used to identify the item, but there is no space to note the call number. As with a traditional binding slip, this form probably stayed with the item to provide directions to the person or persons performing the treatment. After the binding or repair was completed, binding slips were typically discarded. By the act of adding the call number to the form, as was done for these extant forms, it makes it possible to keep them in order for future reference.

Our FileMaker Pro database was introduced in 1999. Although any field may be used to search the database, the call number remains particularly important as it is used to link text with digital images in related databases and because our printed final reports are filed by call number.

Description and Condition

Description and condition were not routinely recorded until the 1960s. For the first time the item was being examined and analyzed as an artifact. Its description was noted and the condition was documented as a valued part of the item’s history and critical in its preservation.

The conservator’s role began to evolve as an expert in historical structures and materials. The function of the book became an important goal. Changes were now made with reference to the book’s past. The conservator had to fully understand the craft of binding in order to execute even an appropriate examination. An individual, rather than an assembly line, often performed all phases of the treatment.

Fig. 10. This 1970s treatment report is the first to have designated description and condition sections.

Earlier forms used checklist-style descriptions to sort, for example, leather from cloth in the work flow; however the 1970s form shown in figure 10, which was commonly used into the early 1990s, is the first to have designated description and condition sections. By the 1990s the reports began to be more open-text based. There were fewer limitations and fewer guidelines. The current database makes use of drop down menus to select common entries, but these are usually augmented by additional text.

Treatment Proposal and Treatment

Consulting with curators, receiving approval for proposed treatments, and describing the actual treatment are now standard practice. Often earlier forms were annotated or have attached notes to indicate the rationale, describe conversations with curators, or note approval of the proposed treatment by the head conservator. In the earliest forms, it is difficult to tell what was proposed and what was actually done (fig. 11). Specific information, such as identifying the adhesives used, was not usually included.

Increasingly over time the examination and treatment information became longer and more detailed, often overflowing the space allowed (fig. 12). Treatments were increasingly proposed and performed by the same person. While most reports do fit onto one page, the current database potentially allows for approximately fifty pages of text to be entered. No one yet has come close to overflowing that capacity.

Images

Drawings, contact sheets, slides, digital images, and other visual aids have been used to augment reports. Black-and-white contact sheets were stapled onto form reports with negatives filed separately (fig. 13). Drawings can be seen on all types of reports or as attachments to

C () MATERIALS: Endlinings _____
 Covering _____
 Sides _____

STAMPING: Stamp in gold() Blind() Black() L _____

REPAIR OR RESTORE: Minor repair and refurbishing _____

Reconstruct as original Semi-restoration() I _____

Harden comers() Tighten in case() Head and _____

New endlinings() Reback Use old spine() _____

Recover comers Completion or tooling _____

Treat with: Saddle soap() Potassium lactate sol.() _____

BOXMAKING: Folding cloth box Slipcase() Chemise _____

MATERIALS: Covering _____

Fig. 11. In the earliest forms it is difficult to tell which treatments were proposed and which were actually done.

sewing scraps used W&W w/ SC 6000 11/24/2003 E2

Treatment Report

Test pH with strips and distilled water, p.216 =5; collate: 90 and 133) and number lower right corners of front in pencil shows some lettering imprinted; photograph; check records to see if marbled and white endsheets are contemporary with text and endpaper (white) are similar but not identical; dry clean spine, leather too degraded to be able to save, cut to gobs of glue; mend chips, tears losses; my page numbers unlf RF32-3,35,RF124-5-8-40-52... .62,236,244,246,286,320,338,380; dry clean with scum-ex (lightly and sparingly); most outer i.e. joint conjugate leaves with jap tissue -- also much men signatures in same way with wheat paste and methyl cellulose re sew on 6 raised cords with linen thread : sew on new Dove linen hinge (sized with wh/mc); round, line spine with jap just shaped with hand; handsewn linen endbands; new board board, lined (2 layers inside, 1 outside) with permalife shaped boards, including back cornering at edges and inside lace in cords; cover in aluminium retanned calfskin (alre Karen Crissalli at Bookbinders Warehouse), note [hard to p in between turn-ins with archivart, then Dover to balance then Dover doubleures; same leather label stamped; package fragments and store with _____ number back plate and put

Fig. 12. By the 1990s the amount of information recorded in description, condition, and treatment sections often overflowed the allotted space.

Treatment Report

SPINE LINING REMOVED WITH ML. BOOK DISBOUND DRY. FOLDS CLEANED OF ANIMAL GLUE. SIGNATURES (2) WASHED IN TBP WATER. OUTER SHEETS OF EQUISLE MENDED WITH JAP + GOLD WITHEIN WHEAT PASTE. BOOK RESEWN ON CONCERTINA GUID ONE FOLDED SHEET OF SOME NOBEL AS FLY SHEET FROM + BACK. BOARD PAPERS ONE FOLDED ECTE MENS OF CONCERTINA. TURNED 35 B. SEWING ALL LONG CONSERVATION THROUGH SEWING STYLE WITH PIP + SET. ONE PAPER LINING EXPLIES. + 2ND LINING EXPLIES. DOWN SADDLES. PAPER CASE FASHIONED ACCORDING TO GENRES. SOME PAPER USED. DIEU DOING PAPER CASE + LAMINATED TO INCRE FIRM AND LAMINATE ADHESIVE USED WAS BLEND. SHEETS TOOK OUTLINE TYPED (ST. SPINE WAS GENTLY POWANED AND NOT BLEND). IN BOARD INSIDE CASE ERT STRENGTH. TEXT ATTACHED TO CASE WITH PIA - IN 2 STRIPS LUMINATED. LINING JUST OUTSIDE OF JOINT AREA. BOARD PAPER TIPPED DOWN FOR THE ONLY. DROP SPINE BOX CONSTRUCTED. BOOK PLICE ATTACHED WITH ML. BOARD MADE LABELS EXPLIES TO CASE.

EVALUATION: BOOK SEWS WELL + LIS FIRM. SUCCESSFUL FOR FUTURE USE ON CONCERTINA + DRY TREATMENT. WHITE TO BOARD ELP.

3/16/01
4/1/01

2 FULL SHEETS CONCERTINA PAPER

Fig. 13. Contact sheets were often stapled onto the report with negatives filed separately.

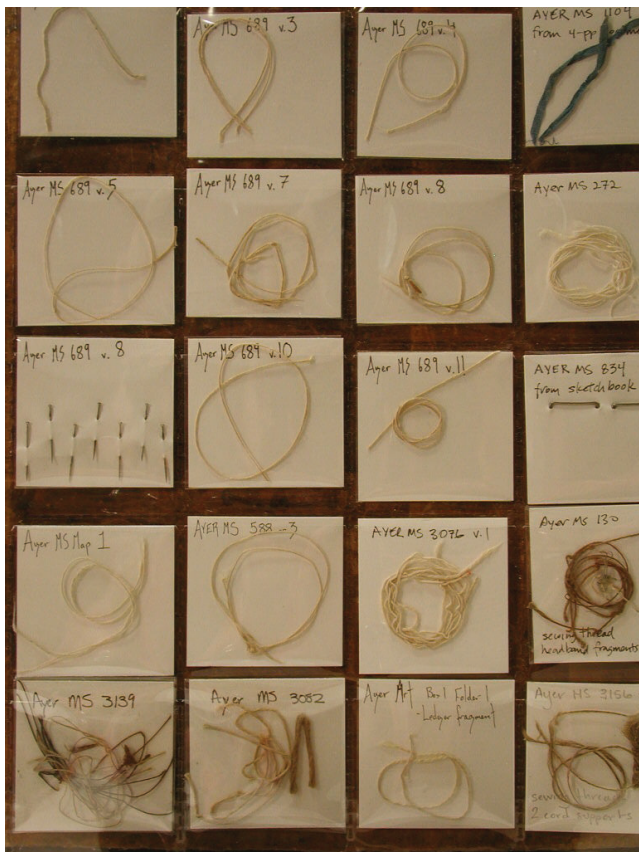


Fig. 14. While most fragments are housed with the object, the Thread and Debris file is used to house very small fragments.

explain a particularly complex mount or box. Color slides may be filed as a separate slide file or with the text reports. Digital images are included in the database. They are printed out using an Epson printer with pigment-based inks.

Other Information on Reports

Many reports typically include other types of information such as priority, costs, and reporting the existence of fragments. Treatment priority or academic and monetary value of the object may be represented in the treatment proposal section, but have often been in a separate curatorial section. Costs, in terms of both materials used and staff hours, are recorded. Fragments can provide important documentation of the object's structure and condition before treatment. They are usually housed with the object, but have also at times been attached directly to the report, included in a fragment file, or placed in our "Thread and Debris" file (fig. 14).

Current Documentation Challenges

Our current documentation challenges are shared by many other institutions. Changes in technology, cross-referencing our roughly twenty types of documentation, developing consistent terminology, setting minimum doc-

umentation standards, and preservation and access of records are the most significant challenges that we currently foresee. At first we thought that we would be able to somehow shuffle all of our records into our database and everything would be easy. While the database is a useful tool for searching and cross-referencing, it cannot replace the other types of documentation.

CONCLUSION

The Newberry Library's Conservation Department has come a long way since 118 years ago when the first skilled craft binders began in their work. During the forty-one years since the first permanent conservator came on staff, the goals of caring for the physical materials have expanded and changed. Through the years, the documentation of treatments has also changed as the field of conservation matured. The movement in the last few decades has placed more responsibility on the conservator. The binding slips have evolved into checklist treatment reports, moving then toward open-text reports. We can only hope that what we are producing now will be useful and relevant in the future.

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