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Subject and Object: Exploring the Conservator's Evolving Relationship with Collection Material

INTRODUCTION

The changing relationship between conservators and cultural material has long been a subject of discussion in our field. Indeed, it was by questioning our role as conservators that in the past we transitioned from purely treating individual items to taking active roles in collections care and management: from advising on repository environment, collections security, disaster preparedness, exhibition guidelines, outreach, acquisition, and so on, leading some of us to feel like victims of our own success!

In 1971, after conducting a survey of the conservation needs of the Library of Congress's rare collections, it was calculated that 12,500 person-years of work would be required to treat all materials defined as rare at the time. To manage this workload a phased system was necessary, whereby conservators could survey and re-house large numbers of materials, placing them in archival enclosures and climate-controlled storage areas, while providing full treatment to other items that were given high priority by the custodial and conservation divisions. Peter Waters, the Chief of Conservation at the time, stated that, "significant technological advances have revolutionized the manner in which library materials are stored, used and preserved" (Waters, 1990, 35). He went on to state that technology had provided the means and the need for the phased approach to conservation at the time.

From our vantage point today, our role in collection repositories continues to expand as institutional missions evolve and grow. As a result, conservation must compete—or literally keep up—with a variety of initiatives, the most significant of which is digitization of collections. Transition, it would seem, is with us again. As one of our colleagues put it, "It is like you're middle aged people trying come to terms with a changing landscape that you're not totally comfortable with." We discussed our concerns with conservators, preservation managers, and curators in other institutions. Everyone feels stretched a little thin. Optimal thinking about conservation treatment is challenging under these circumstances.

This paper is an amalgam of our views on conservators' evolving relationships with the objects they work with, using the Library of Congress as an institutional case study for these experiences. We will discuss the stresses that are being placed on conservators' interactions with material culture through two particular workflows: exhibitions and digitization; and juxtapose them with "single-item treatment". Subsequently, we will critique factors that affect our work and how we address them. We do not seek to answer questions, rather we hope to illuminate some of the gray areas that we function in and invite discussion within our profession.

THE CONSERVATOR AND THE QUICK TURN-AROUND

It is ironic that while technology has provided us with more tools and approaches to do our work, it has also helped to erode the time we devote to close examination and treatment. In many institutions, exhibits and/or digitization projects are the main drivers of their conservation programs. At the Library of Congress, these programs are large and generate a lot of work, which translates into statistics that in turn are used as a measure of job effectiveness.

The exhibits program in the Conservation Division has one half-time and two full-time conservators. They manage the workflow, assess items for exhibition, work with mountmakers and, along with the rest of the conservation staff, treat, house, condition and install most of the objects for the program. There are 18 Library exhibition spaces and they have four to six-month rotations. The two largest exhibition spaces show between 200–280 objects each. The program also handles exhibition loans to 50–60 cultural institutions per year. To meet these needs, the exhibit conservators review approximately 1000 objects and track up to 2000 in any one year.

In recent years the pace of work has increased. One of the main reasons is that more physical space is allocated to exhibitions. In addition, the time allotted to the Conservation

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Division for in-house exhibit preparation has shrunk from a minimum of four months to between one to two months, on average. As more items are rejected for in-house exhibition by the exhibit conservators, due to lack of treatment time, they have had to increase the number of exhibition items they review. And, with a growing emphasis on the virtual exhibition experience, still more collection material must be reviewed and treated for scanning in the same way as it would if it were on actual display.

The impact of these changes on conservators has been in three areas: increased work in a shorter timeframe; less treatment, especially for aesthetic reasons; and an increased emphasis on 'stabilizing' books and other objects in situ, in lieu of treatment.

The pace of the digitization workflow and its impact on treatment is even more relentless. In the Conservation Division, the digitization program is coordinated by a full-time book conservator, assisted by three additional contract conservators (two book and one paper), and one experienced conservation technician. This team performs all of the assessment and treatment for digitization. At present, 21 scanning devices are used for rare collections and special format material. Some Library scanning is contracted to outside companies, which is done both in-house and offsite. Currently, there are 25 active digitization projects encompassing approximately 750,000 special collections items. The uniquely large scale of the digitization program necessitates that conservators on the digitization team invest a lot of time tracking items through the workflow. The collections are diverse and the conservators are required to stabilize items to facilitate the capture of an optimum image by the scanning staff. Occasionally, an optimum image may require a change in the format of an item in order to scan all textual information. Thus, for example, a book may be dis-bound, scanned and re-housed as loose leaves in a box. When scanning is contracted to a company, then a very quick turn-around is necessary as the Library is contractually obligated to meet the company's scanning goals of 900–1100 images per day.

The impact of these parameters on the conservator's workflow is manifold. Condition is assessed at an item-level, with a view to handling for scanning only. Treatment may be carried out piecemeal and is—almost exclusively— limited to stabilization. And, most revealingly, every time a new scanning device is added by an outside contractor, the workflow in conservation increases to such an extent that it would require the addition of one full-time conservator to absorb it (which has happened once). Ongoing planning for digitization continues and, at the Library, the program will continue to expand with the addition of image-capture devices, digitization contractors, and digital projects.

The problem is not with digitization or exhibition programs per se, rather it is that these programs insert themselves into the relationship between the conservator and the object and become dominant partners. Thus, the theme of the 2015 American Institute for Conservation annual conference, *Making Conservation Work*, where the conservator is a willing partner, shifts to an imperative, where the conservator is obligated to *Make Conservation Work*! We believe this approach erodes the bedrock of the conservator's work ethic and confidence.

THE CONSERVATOR AND THE STEADY GAIT

We would assert that of all the responsibilities and tasks conservators undertake and perform, one of the most important is the work that leads to an intimate relationship with the object. As in real life, such a relationship takes time and care; its path is not defined at the outset; it requires thought and flexibility; to get comfortable with it you need practice, which leads to both missteps and successes, and perhaps a combination of the two.

Now, let us look at two different projects that were completed by conservators at the Library of Congress. The decisions the conservators made and the methods they used follows a traditional "single-item-treatment" approach.

The two iron-gall-ink-inscribed leaves in Figure 1 are George Washington's handwritten notes on growing barley that are from a series of extracts from texts and notes on agriculture that Washington transcribed between 1766 and 1799. The two leaves were brought to the Conservation Division to be prepared for a loan to Mount Vernon, Washington's home in Virginia, four months later.[1]

The leaves were listed as part of a group of notes, so the conservator arranged with the curator to examine all of the notes, in order to provide context and compare the leaves' condition with that of the other items. It was during this

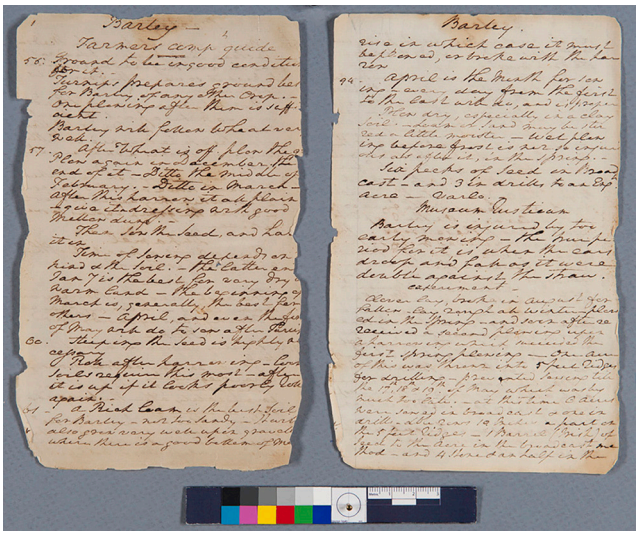

Fig. 1. George Washington's notes on barley, from Extracts and Notes on Agriculture. (before treatment)

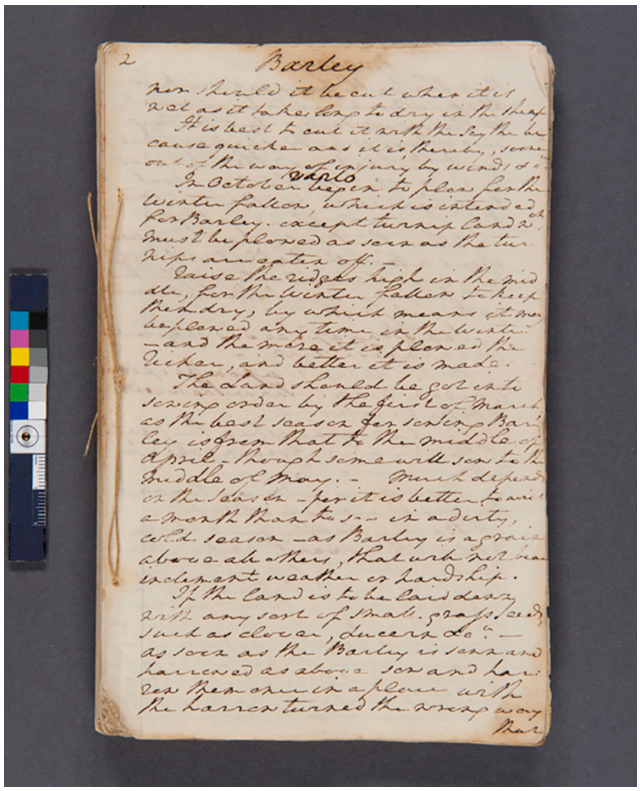

Fig. 2. Notebook from George Washington's Extracts and Notes on Agriculture. (untreated)

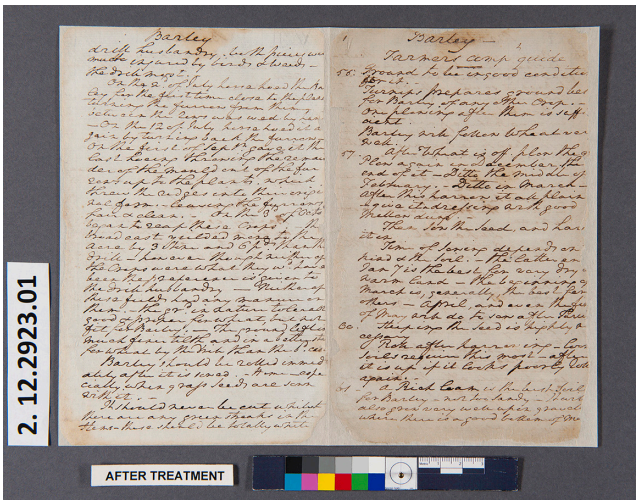

Fig. 3. George Washington's notes on barley, from Extracts and Notes on Agriculture. (after treatment)

Fig. 4. Homer Buford Clonts Collection, Map of the Pacific Ocean, recto. (before treatment)

examination that the conservator noticed the two leaves were from an existing stab-sewn gathering (Figure 2), and discovered that the separate leaves were originally joined together, forming the first, folded, single section of the notebook. There is an extant eyewitness account that Washington sewed leaves of his manuscripts together and it is possible that he may have bound this notebook himself.[2]

The two separated leaves were discolored and the outer margins of the paper were fragile, with significant tears and losses from the edges. Examination of the ink revealed indications of iron-gall-ink corrosion: discoloration around the ink, slight burn-through, and a positive test for iron (II) ions.

The condition of the paper and the ink suggested that aqueous treatment to reduce acidity and complex the iron ions was warranted. Also, the kind of repair that would be necessary to mend the leaves' edges and allow them to be reunited, would be best achieved using water-based adhesive and tissue. These repair techniques would not be recommended without prior treatment of the ink (Figure 3).

The leaves were washed, treated with calcium phytate and calcium bicarbonate, resized with gelatin, and repaired, as seen in Figure 3. By slowing down the corrosion process now, the leaves will not degrade to the point where the paper becomes brittle and hydrophobic; and to where handling and flexing would cause damage and loss to the ink-inscribed areas. Such advanced degradation would make treatment more complicated, risky, and possibly less effective in the long-term.

Now, let us imagine a different outcome. Suppose the leaves were only stabilized for the exhibition and time was of the essence; treatment would involve repairing the edges alone and the conservator would not have time to investigate the relationship between the two leaves: their origin, the relationship between them, and their artifactual significance. While there is no detriment to the leaves—or rather the *section*—during exhibition, there is no long-term benefit.

Our second example in Figure 4 is an Eastern Pacific map from World War II that belonged to Harold Clonts, a signalman third-class for the United States Navy, who served in the Pacific Theater from 1943 to 1945. It is part of the Library's collection of artifacts and supporting documents for the Veteran's History Project. The Project was established in

2000 by an Act of Congress, with a mandate to collect and preserve veterans' accounts and experiences in American wars, from World War I onwards.

On the recto of the map, Clonts charted the path of the ships that he was stationed on, beginning with his departure from San Diego, California. On the verso, Clonts recorded significant events throughout his two years of service, on three different ships, at sea and in various ports, and sometimes under attack (Figure 5).

Since Clonts retained the map and constantly updated it, and given that it returned with him to the United States after the war ended, it is entirely logical that its many folds would need to have been repaired and reinforced multiple times with pressure-sensitive tape. The variety and quantity—more than 30 feet!—of tape, the different stages of oxidation of the adhesive, the short-fibered paper, and soluble media made this a very challenging project. The acrylic tape was especially difficult because, although the carrier released and peeled off fairly easily, a residual layer of tacky adhesive remained firmly attached to the paper surface. The adhesive had to be removed mechanically with great care to minimize disrupting the paper and the media. Throughout the treatment, the conservator constantly had to evaluate and adjust her technique; she called upon her thirty years of experience as a bench conservator, which provided both the expertise and the confidence necessary to complete the treatment successfully, as shown in Figure 6.

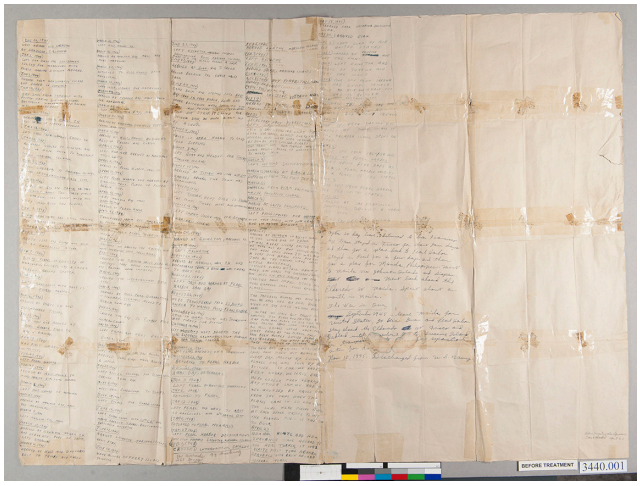

Fig. 5. Homer Buford Clonts Collection, Map of the Pacific Ocean, verso. (before treatment)

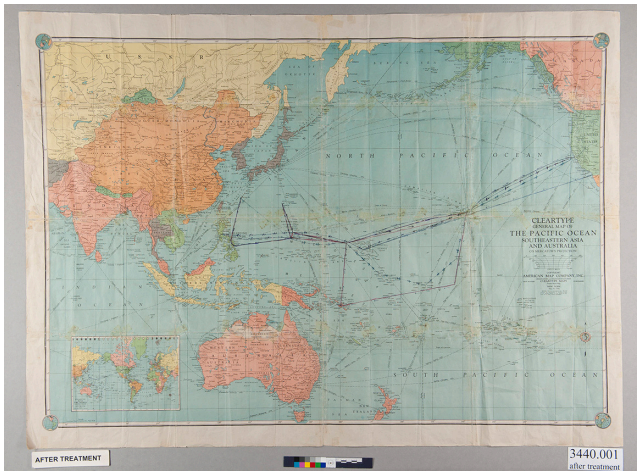

Fig. 6. Homer Buford Clonts Collection, Map of the Pacific Ocean, recto. (after treatment)

Again, we can look at a different outcome. Let us say this map, and the large collection it pertains to, was selected for digitization. The map would be rejected for scanning because the workflow would not allow sufficient time for it to be treated; further, in its pre-treatment condition, shown in Figure 4 in raking light, an optimal scan could not be made.

STEPPING BACK

Ideally, from a Library of Congress collections management viewpoint, the workflow for collections should mimic Figure 7, where conservation resides in one location on the life cycle of the object, after cataloging and research access. The main point illustrated by the diagram is that conservation activities are conceived as separate, with their own discrete workflows and goals. Of course, it is assumed that conservation has a consultative role in each of the other activities, as seen in Figure 8, whether it is reviewing items for acquisition or storage, adding value to catalog records, or treating an item in order to facilitate cataloging or research access.

On the other hand, Figure 9 illustrates what happens more often in practice, where collections go directly to digitization. Rarely do the digitization-focused conservators try to fit a typical conservation workflow into the digitization schedule, because usually there is no time to include complex treatment considerations. For the digitization workflow, conservation acts in an auxiliary capacity to further the goals of the digital program alone. It has a single role—stabilization for image capture. Although the Conservation Division has a place at the planning table for both exhibition and digitization programs, we do not set the scope of these programs. Our sole responsibility is that the objects are made accessible and are not damaged in making them so.

CONSERVATION IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

Where there is a true partnership with conservation, or where conservation sets the scope of a project, then preservation of the materials for future access is the goal, with present access as an added benefit. Where the emphasis is placed, shapes our conservation activities. An example of such a project is the Peggy Clark Collection, acquired by the Library of Congress in 1998. The collection was selected in 2006 by the Music

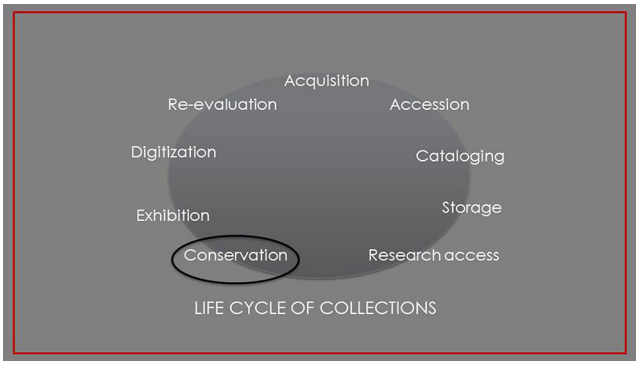

Fig. 7. Life cycle of collections with conservation as a separate step.

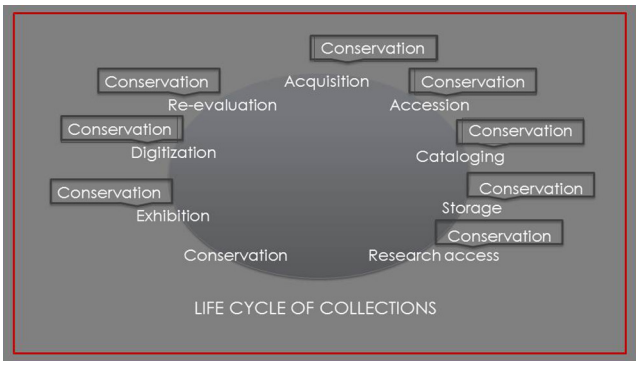

Fig. 8. Life cycle of collections with conservation in an auxiliary capacity for the other steps.

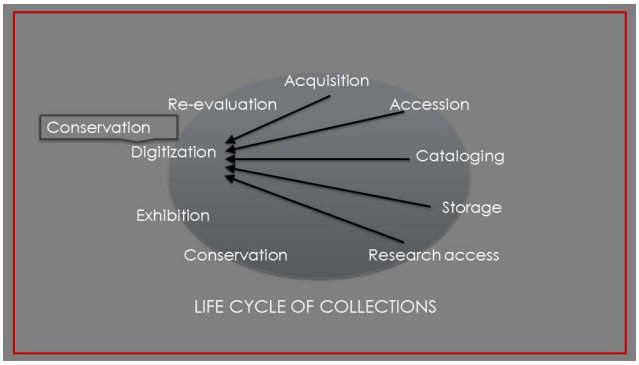

Fig. 9. Life cycle of collections illustrating shortcuts to digitization with conservation working for digitization goals.

Division for conservation, in preparation for its transfer to custom-built off-site storage. Peggy Clark was the foremost lighting, costume and set designer for theater in the United States from 1940's to 1970's; important works include the original productions for the *Sound of Music* and *Peter Pan*. The collection contains photographic, print, and other visual material documenting Clark's theatrical productions. While the collection had been superficially accessioned, it had not been cataloged or even unpacked. Conservation staff decided on a multi-tiered approach to preservation that included: preparing the collection for the off-site storage facility; creating housing solutions to enhance access to individual items; and treating individual items to prolong their useful life, for example, pigment consolidation and tape removal.

The project required five years to complete, from assessment to the final report (the team was not working exclusively on the project during this time). Conservation staff assessed and rehoused 34,000 works on paper, sketches and textual records; 8,000 photo-reproductions and photographs; 700 3-dimentional objects; and 100 bound volumes. Based on their findings, 5,000 works on paper, 1,000 photo and photo-reproductions, 75 3-D objects and 18 volumes were treated. Of additional benefit to the Conservation Division was that a team of preservation technicians received on-the-job training in assessment, characterization of media and process, and the development of housing solutions; and the conservator for the project developed a new method of hinging friable art-on-paper. The lessons learned from working on the Peggy Clarke Collection, such as creating more efficient workflows and requiring clearer descriptive information, have honed our approach to other theatrical production collections that the Library has acquired.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we chose to focus on the Library of Congress to illustrate the issues we face in approaching our work because of the size of our institution and our own experiences here. The Library has a collection of 175 million items, and it expands by the tens of thousands on a weekly basis. As with any large institution, the strengths and weakness in the system and its workflows are magnified. And thus we hope that, through our own examples, we have touched on issues that conservators observe in their own institutions and in conservation activities related to their collections.

Against the backdrop of conservation workflows articulated above, we would like to explore the concerns that moved us to write this paper at the outset: mainly how we view ourselves and the state of our practice.

Are we becoming generalists and losing our specialized skills?

As we become generalists we lose our specialized skills, at least as they relate to actual treatment. When we begin our training in conservation it is through an exposure to general principles, then we hone in on our specialization, and build our expertise through study, practice and observation. This knowledge is as prone to erosion as any free-standing structure. As Tom Albro, former Head of Conservation at the Library of Congress, stated in 1996:

> The nature of the craft of conservation is a solitary one, made up of repeated ordinary tasks enhanced by unconscious innovation. Fine work is based on accurate observation, guided

> by an unspoken but always evident just-out-of-reach perfection. Because of its anachronistic nature, the continued existence of the conservation profession in the modern world is as fragile as the objects it cares for. It is, however, one of the few ways we have of indicating to future generations what we really stood for. (Albro, 1999, 93)

What is the value of accrued knowledge for complex treatment?
As implied in the quotation above, the value of accrued knowledge from treatment practice and examination is unquantifiable. Many conservators achieve a high degree of expertise, and some just exist in conservation nirvana at the deep end of the pool. A conservator uses all of the senses when engaging with an object; and the more experienced the conservator, the more honed are the senses. Treatment choices and decisions are made confidently and efficiently, based on nuanced observations that would be extremely lengthy to catalog and tease out, and which the conservator may have made without conscious thought.

What compromises are inherent in the shifting priorities and changing roles for conservators?
There are compromises of skill and judgment inherent in shifting priorities and changing roles for the conservator. In the Conservation Division at the Library, all of the conservators are involved in activities outside of the realm of treatment, as in training, assessments, exhibitions, research, disaster response, emergency remediation projects, outreach, and writing and presenting papers. Thus, we are all called away from the bench, which makes it challenging to maintain a high-level of engagement with in-depth conservation treatment and examination. The more tasks we absorb, the harder it is to give any one full attention. Years ago a manager stated that a senior conservator should be able to take on a complex treatment and be able to do it in ten minutes stints between other more important tasks. As we know, it takes ten minutes to clear our heads, settle down and re-engage with an object.

This increasing division of a conservator's resources leads to questions such as, are we to create types of conservators within and outside of institutions? Do we retain generalists in-house and send high-value treatment to technical virtuosos in private practice and regional centers? Or, as a result of shifting conservation priorities in institutions, are we creating a two-tiered system?
Institutionally, the junior conservators treat, and the ones with technical expertise do less or none, but are paid more. Unlike in the medical profession, there is little financial incentive to be technically expert in our field.

Other issues come into play in such scenarios. Conservation treatment skills atrophy with dis-use and practitioners may grow risk averse and chose well-worn decision-making paths that may or may not be in the best interests of the object. According to behavioral scientists, when confronted with choice, human beings are more likely to choose the path of least resistance, especially when decisions are more complex. The safe and easy approach does not always serve a field that ideally continues to grow and become more sophisticated.

By meeting the ever-growing demand for access, are we serving cultural institutions optimally?
If we are reacting to an institution's mission then we could state that we are serving its mission, however we may not be fulfilling *all* of our responsibility to the institution's collections. As conservators, our role is to conserve collections for continued future access. But we are asked to make present access a priority with only the *possibility* of future access as a goal. For the most part, when faced with the juggernaut of stabilization for present access, we take solace in the principles of reversibility, statistical management of light levels, and occasionally hope in the existence of a principle of benign neglect.

At the Library, we are fortunate that we can maintain and extend our treatment skills as management continues to invest in us; however, our colleagues involved in the digital and exhibit workflows best experience many of the stresses that continue to erode away at and reshape our profession. Occasionally, compromising and choosing a more immediate treatment is acceptable; but, consistent compromises that are less than ideal for the objects, leave us dissatisfied and questioning ourselves and our abilities. In our desire to care for collections and not put them at risk at any cost, we are responding to demands for immediate access. We are treating for present consumption, while our training is based on treating for the future. The assumption, at least for digitization, is that culture and objects do not change. But the fact is that what is meaningful to people does change over time, and if we do not retain our mission, which is to help extend the life of collection materials, our cultural institutions and preservation personnel will be held culpable.

To conclude on a positive note, we see conservators as practical, service-oriented, problem-solvers, who care deeply for the collections and materials they work with, proactive where possible, and always reactive where necessary: we *make conservation work* in a variety of circumstances. In fulfilling our responsibilities as conservators, the one compromise we make, from our perspective, is with that most precious commodity: time; and all of our subsequent decisions follow from there.

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NOTES

1. The exhibition at Mount Vernon was *Take Note! George Washington the Reader.*

2. A.C. Isaac, Associate Curator at Mount Vernon, quotes a letter from Washington's step-granddaughter, Nelly Parke Custis Lewis, on January 31, 1852 to her cousin, Lewis W. Washington, where she describes seeing Washington stitch together the initial text of his farewell speech: "I always passed the door of his Office in my way to my Grand Mother's chamber at the head of the steep stairs, which landed close to his door—That door was generally open, & I have been sent to his room with messages, & at night have passed the door & seen him writing as I passed to ascend the stairs with Grand Mama. When his work was completed, he called me from her chamber & requested me to bring him a Needle with silk to sew the leaves together—The Address was in his hand when I gave him the needle & I saw him sew them in the form of a Book; the only circumstance I could not take an oath on, is the color of the silk. It was a spool of tambouring silk, light blue or light lead color."

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