

Housing George Washington's Will

A collaboration between framer and conservator results in the development of a unique preservation package.

by Anne Vazquez

In 1998, Laura Neal, owner of Fulton Framing in Washington, DC became part of an historical project. She was hired to construct the housing for a treasured national document—George Washington's Last Will and Testament (c.1799). Neal first became involved in this project when Christine Smith, a paper conservator (also in Washington, DC) contacted her. Smith had been awarded the job of repairing and housing the document by the circuit court of Fairfax County, VA. After examining the document and determining what was necessary for successful conservation, she was seeking a framer to work with her on the project.

Since being handwritten in 1799 by Washington himself, the will had been in the possession of Fairfax County for most of its lifetime. It had been stored in the county's courthouse from the time of Washington's death until the U.S. Civil War broke out in 1861. In July of that year, as Union troops from the North marched on the courthouse, the court clerk gave the will to his wife who then snuck it through Union troop lines to their daughter's house in Washington, DC. There, it was buried in the wine cellar under coal where it remained for over a year.

Eventually, the court clerk retrieved the document and brought it to Richmond, VA (then the capital of the Confederacy). It remained there until 1865 when the war ended. Fairfax County officials reclaimed the document where it remained for more than three decades, after



Shown here is the open mat package constructed by Laura Neal. In the center is the hinge construction she and conservator Christine Smith designed to connect the two mats.

which it was sent to the Library of Congress.

In 1910, William Berwick, then a conservator with the U.S. Library of Congress, assessed the document and found that the sheets were split with small losses of the paper up and down each sheet. It seems that when the document was hastily hidden in that wine cellar during the Civil War, it had been folded vertically, and over the decades the folds weakened and the paper eventually began to split.

It had been stored in the courthouse since Berwick's treatment in 1910 until Smith had the opportunity to examine it in 1998. (In 1997, it had been sent to the Library of Congress. A treatment was proposed, but never executed.)

When the will arrived in Smith's hands, it was contained in an album which had been created by Berwick. "He had realigned the pages by applying wheat flour paste on both sides



A primary goal was to house each page of the document in a package that would lie flat when folded back.

of each sheet,” she explained. “He then had applied a very thin silk gauze to both sides of each sheet. The pages were then assembled and bound into the large, leather album.” This album was an elaborate presentation, with covers of blue leather with gold lettering and silk moire lining the inside covers.

When planning a proposal for the document, Smith considered keeping it in the album format. However, upon further thought, she decided against it. “Yes, the album format kept it all together,” she explains. “But when the pages were turned, the paper would bend where the vertical splits were, causing the paper to further crack.”

Also, the silk gauze applied by Berwick had frayed and become brittle over the years, and Smith determined it could not be repaired successfully.

“My thoughts about how this should be displayed were that it should not be another album format, for one, because of the center splits,” explains Smith. “But, also, it was intended to be a last will and testament, not a book.” She decided that each of the 22 pages (with text on both sides) should be each contained in their own individual housing.

In considering how to actually house each of these pages, several factors came into play for Smith. A primary concern was that the final housing needed to withstand being handled by people not necessarily trained about such a delicate and valued item. Her goal was to create a package to protect the document all the time, whether in storage or on exhibition during special events. “The housing needed to both store and exhibit, as well as be able to be moved,” says Smith.

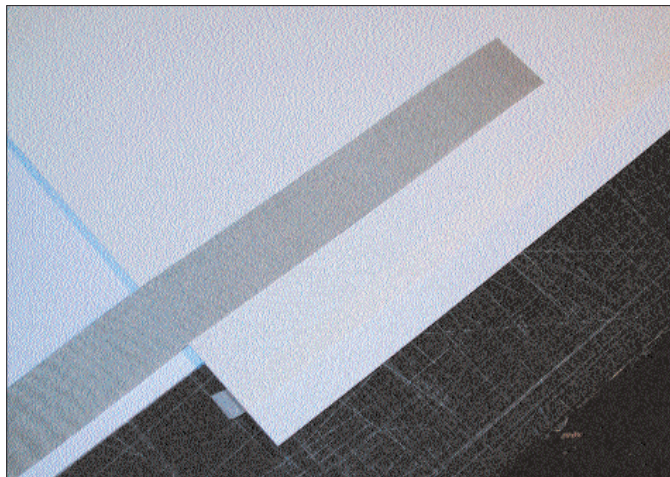
Another consideration was to not cover up any of the handwritten text. Each page of the will had been written with perfectly straight margins, which was good for creating window openings. However, the document had been trimmed over the years, and text on some pages ran right to the edge of the paper. “This meant that whatever housing the sheets were put in could not overlap the edges,” explains Smith.

Other considerations were that the solution needed to feature a two-sided window opening. Smith also did not want to place the document back into a book format. The final design needed to serve all these needs.

She conceptualized the ideas of a double-sided window mat with mat covers on both sides that would rotate 360 degrees so, when folded back, the whole package would lie flat.

Once Smith had the concept in mind, she needed to find someone to construct the housings she envisioned. She presented her concept to three framers and after some discussion, she chose Neal for the job. Neal then went to

work developing a way to bring the concept to reality for the project. She designed the hinging mechanism ultimately used for the piece. “This project was different from others I had worked on in the past with conservators in that there was a research and development phase that I



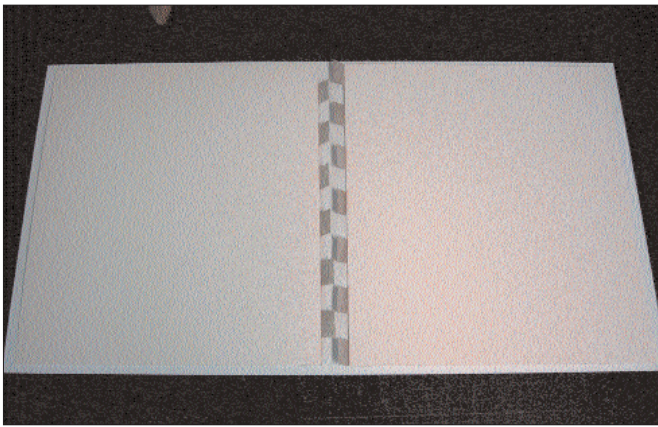
Each strip was applied across the two mats.



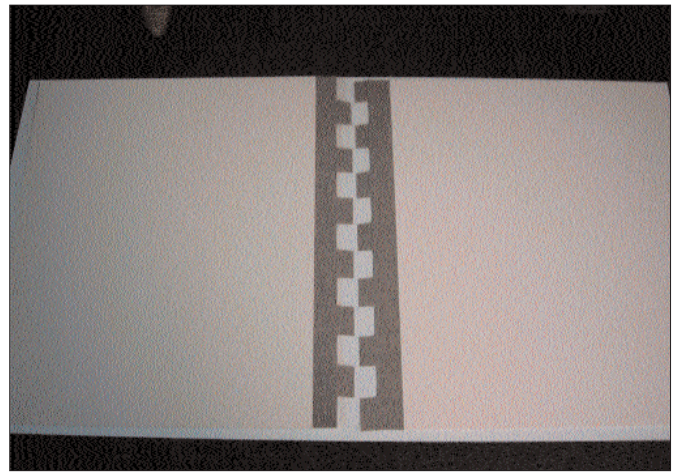
Weight was applied while the hinging strips dried.



Dovetails were cut from each strip.



The tabs were constructed to alternate with each other.



Shown here is the view from the outside of the package.

needed to perform,” she says. “Christine respected my role in the project and what I had to bring to it as a framer.”

Since an overriding concern was that the will would be handled by a variety of people once it was returned to the Fairfax County Courthouse, it was important that the housing be “foolproof.” In developing the hinge mechanism, Neal considered using linen tape. However, she and Smith decided against it since linen tape can get brittle over an extended period of time. “We realized that the linen could become stressed and there would be no one on hand to fix it,” explains Neal. “Also, we wanted a hinge construction that would not unravel.”

Neal consulted with Terry Boone, a book conservator in University Park, MD. With Boone’s help, she determined that the hinges would be made of a type of linen often used in book conservation, and a thin Japanese paper. The adhesive chosen was a polyvinyl acetate. (Boone also participated in the project in another capacity. She was chosen to construct the storage boxes for the matboard housings—made of the same board used to create the actual housings.)

When deciding on the matboard for this project, both Smith and Neal agreed that Alphasag Artcare from Nielsen Bainbridge was best to protect the document. Smith explains she was concerned with the iron gall ink that Washington had used to write the will. Because of the tendency of this type of ink to autodegrade (degrade itself with gasses that it releases over time), she wanted to use a housing material that would minimize further damage.

“Because iron gall ink is a potential problem and the will would eventually be stored in a ‘non-museum’ climate, I decided to err on the side of zeolites so to speak,” explains Smith. The zeolites contained in the matboard would act as molecular “traps” to keep any gas from damaging the document.

It All Comes Together

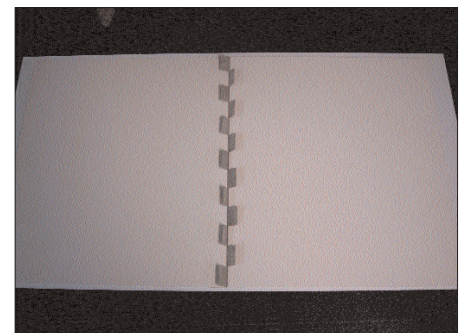
The actual construction of these housings was performed in Neal’s shop and occurred over an extended period of time. Great care was given to each of the 22 mat packages. As Neal explains it, each of the window mat openings were cut to rest $\frac{3}{16}$ " away from the perimeter of each page of the will.

She used strips of Japanese tissue paper to bridge the gap between the paper and the inner edge of the mat window. (This was the same Japanese tissue Smith used to repair the losses on the will.) These strips were adhered with the same adhesive used for mending the pages during Smith’s repair—freshly made wheat starch paste with methylcellulose.

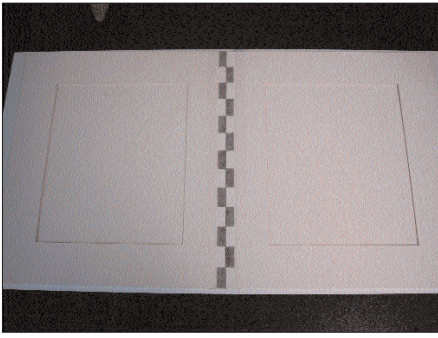
T-hinges were used to attach the document along the top edge. At bottom right and left, tacking hinges were used. This was hinged to only one of the mats.

The mounting construction took into careful consideration the possibility of the document being jarred and torn from the matboard. The Japanese tissue mentioned above (TOSA tengujo) was chosen for not only its conservation properties, but its lack of weight. Therefore, if jarred, the tissue would rip before the document.

As both Neal and Smith describe it, this project took a good deal of time especially with the collaborations back and forth. They both found it incredibly rewarding, not only because of the item they were protecting, but also because of the research



Shown here are the interlocking tabs after completion.



The tabs were each glued the opposing mat.

and development that went into the project.

The newly housed document was returned to the Fairfax County Courthouse in August of 2002. When Smith recently contacted officials there on the status of the will, they told her they felt very comfortable handling the document for its various displays. The collaboration of framer and conservator was a success. ■