

Keeping a Record

By Heather Whittle Wrigley

Church Magazines

Visitors to the Church History Library pore over carefully preserved journals, newspapers, and family histories near the lobby of the Church History Library, where bold lettering high on the wall reads, “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you” (D&C 21:1).

From the time the Prophet Joseph Smith received this divine mandate in 1830 to the present, a vast Church record in the form of historical documents, textiles, and other objects has been

Employees of the Church History Department work behind the scenes to preserve the Church’s—and your—history.

not only kept but also preserved, thanks to a small but dedicated team of conservators.

Church Conservation

Church conservators’ main concern is the preservation of records—stopping the natural processes of deterioration.

On the fourth floor of the Church History Library, in a state-of-the-art conservation lab, conservators perform tasks such as layering translucent Japanese paper over small tears in brittle,

decades-old pages and salvaging nearly unusable photo negatives. The repaired or stabilized work is then placed on a bookshelf for easy access or filed away in sophisticated temperature- and humidity-controlled vaults where it can be monitored regularly.

Only two blocks away at the Church History Museum, skilled hands sew mannequins, polish metal and wood, patch quilts, and create mountings and supports for displays. Much of their work is displayed in the museum or sent to historic Church sites, while some of it is prepared for storage.

“*Keep* means ‘to preserve,’” Church conservator Christopher McAfee said. “It doesn’t mean just to write a history but to make sure that it lasts.”

Church conservators share a common sentiment that every



Christopher McAfee removes tape from an original 19th-century document.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WELDEN ANDERSEN

item, from the prophets' journals to personal family histories, has inherent value.

"It's a feeling that if someone cared enough to keep it, then I had better care," Brother McAfee said. "We're protectors of the collection."

A life that is not documented may quickly be forgotten, he said, and just as tragic is the loss of or damage to any of those documents.

"It's scripturally mandated that we keep a history," said Jennifer Hadley, conservator in the Church History Museum. "It helps us to remember what the Lord has done for His people."

Conserving Documents

The conservation lab deals with a wide variety of documents, including books, journals, newspapers, scrapbooks, and photographs. Each item is treated uniquely, according to its condition.

Interesting instruments and machines—a cutter, gold stamper, channel binder, and ultrasonic encapsulator to name a few—are placed around the spacious lab, to be used as each project dictates.

Often a book's cover is removed and the spine cleaned and repaired. Tears in documents are filled using high-quality Japanese paper, whose longer fibers improve strength while maintaining the paper's flexibility. Conservators use a paste made from wheat starch and water as a glue. The existing structure is reinforced, allowing as much of the original to show through as possible.

"We're not trying to make it look perfectly new," Brother McAfee said. "We try to maintain the integrity of the work. Everything we do is reversible."

Another method of conserving documents is washing. Papers are immersed in baths of filtered, deionized water and, lastly, alkalized water. With each bath, the water and chemicals pull

out dirt and neutralize acids in the paper to slow deterioration.

Conserving Textiles and Objects

Conservators are also charged with preserving objects that are relevant to Church history—textiles, furniture, paintings, and so on.

"Everything has a story, a history behind it," said Sister Hadley. "Everything we have is connected to the Saints throughout the international Church."

The museum is full of historical clothing, books, paintings, models, and other objects—saddles,

tools, even a model of the interior workings of the Salt Lake Tabernacle. Conservators who work with such objects have to be inventive as they face each new object and, with it, a new challenge.

"Each piece is as individual as each person," Sister Hadley said. "Each has specific needs and a specific solution."

Every object is carefully studied. Conservators often collaborate in deciding what action to take to conserve an object. Most objects are cleaned and stabilized. Whatever action is necessary to stop the processes of deterioration is taken. Sometimes this involves deacidifying an object, reinforcing its original structure, coating it to protect it from its environment, constructing a case that will hold it, or creating a support or mount that will mold to it and support its structure. Sometimes an object simply needs dusting.

A bonnet from pioneer days was unraveling, so a simple round support was sewn to help it retain its shape. In addition, Sister Hadley added an

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Kathy Cardon trims papers in the conservation lab.

identical piece of silk over the original, connected by tiny hand-stitching.

James Raines, self-described “catchall conservator,” works on any object that does not fall under documents, textiles, or paintings. The handle of a leather whip, filled with lead shot, had torn, causing it to lose its flexibility and posing a health hazard as the lead escaped. Conservators removed the remaining lead shot and placed an acrylic rod in the handle to restore its original shape and flexibility.

“It’s about preserving the artifact as it was in that moment of history,” Sister Hadley said. “For me, preservation provides a tangible connection to the past.” ■