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**Metro**

# Athenaeum conservators work to restore past

Grants of \$250,000 fund conservation of Confederate papers at Boston Athenaeum

By **Brian MacQuarrie** | GLOBE STAFF    FEBRUARY 17, 2014



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

**Conservators use various methods to repair and clean items**

A stone's throw from Paul Revere's grave, Evan Knight wears a white lab coat as he scans a tool set that includes a chalk-colored chunk of vulcanized rubber and gauzy fiber from a mulberry bush.

Before him, on a high, wooden table in the historic Boston Athenaeum, lies an Extra edition from the Charleston Mercury newspaper in South Carolina, dated Dec. 20, 1860.

"The Union Is Dissolved," the headline reads in large, bold letters, proclaiming that South Carolina had become the first state to secede from the Union in the momentous, final months before the Civil War.

This page from the Mercury, one of only three known to exist, has been meticulously repaired in the Athenaeum's climate-controlled conservation lab, which received \$250,000 in grants to restore its world-class Confederate collection.

The lab is a quiet, brightly lit place, full of earnestness and delicate craftsmanship supplied by two full-time staff members and a conservator on a fellowship. It's also something of an anomaly in a world consumed by exploding access to instant digital information: a place where the printed word from long ago is a treasured, coddled commodity.

"We have a lot of our past in these books," said Dawn Walus, chief conservator at the 207-year-old Athenaeum, a private institution whose members have included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau.

The lab's mission is daunting, and not only because of the time-consuming precision required to restore torn paper and frayed bindings. Boston's oldest library, which sits on Beacon Hill behind the Granary Burying Ground, has 130,000 rare books in its collection of 750,000 volumes.



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The circulating library is restricted to Athenaeum members, but outside researchers can make appointments to study rare books inside the five-story building, a National Historic Site completed in 1849 at 10½ Beacon St. The first floor and galleries are open to the public free of charge. Membership starts at \$200 per year and provides access to the other floors.

**Jeanne Goodman's work involves restoring a large illustrated bird anthology that is two volumes.**

Joe Bagley, the city of Boston's archeologist, said he has used the Athenaeum's collection for research and described the lab's work as critical.

"Historic objects are nonrenewable resources and once they are gone, they can never come back," Bagley said.

The Athenaeum is one of several institutions that make Boston a center for library and art conservation, according to Peter Drummey, librarian at the Massachusetts Historical Society, founded in 1791.

In addition to the Athenaeum, which Drummey described as a "treasure house," the Northeast Document Conservation Center in Andover is probably the most important independent conservation laboratory in the country, he said.

In addition, the Associates of the Boston Public Library, as well as the Massachusetts Historical Society, have made preservation of their rare collections a top priority.

Walus called the lab work at the Athenaeum "a combination of art and science" in which books are restored as close to their original form as possible. If blue, vegetable-tanned goat leather was used on a bird anthology in 1864, the same type of leather and tanning is sought for restoration.

"We like to use as compatible a material as possible," said Jeanne Goodman, 29, who is working in the lab on a fellowship.

Such attention to detail was not always the norm.

Although the Athenaeum has been conserving printed and handwritten books and manuscripts for 50 years, bookbinders did much of the early work, “which often meant rebinding the book for better or for worse,” Walus said.

Goodman has been charged with restoring the bird anthology, the lengthy title of which — “The New and Heretofore Unfigured Species of the Birds of North America” — summons a time when economy of words was not usually considered a literary virtue.

Goodman’s work involves repairs to 24-by-19-inch pages that show life-size hand-drawn and hand-colored lithographs. Her labors even include tiny improvements such as removing fingerprints from fragile paper that has been turned and handled for 150 years.

On this day, the book, published by American zoologist Daniel Giraud Elliot, is opened to drawings of two bright red cardinals. “I love paper,” Goodman said. “It’s very tactile.”

A benefactor is picking up the \$3,000 cost to restore the two-volume anthology, Goodman said, through an “adopt a book” program that singles out vulnerable works for conservation. Other money for the lab’s work comes from a variety of sources, including Athenaeum endowments and gifts. No government funds are used.

Walus said the library is also digitizing many of its books. In the end, she said, that cutting-edge process is simply preservation by another name.

“Like most libraries, it is not our goal to digitize the entire collection, but rather to choose items that are unique and of historic, artistic, or literary value. To date, approximately 12,000 items are online,” Walus said.

While digitization gains momentum, the conservators have enough hands-on work to last for their careers — and longer.

For the 31-year-old Knight, a conservator who joined the Athenaeum staff in 2012, that work is currently focused on the Confederate artifacts: 4,100 manuscripts, pamphlets, posters, and government documents that show the Southern home front and its bureaucracy and comprise one of the world's three best collections on the subject.

“The study of the Confederacy will be greatly enhanced,” Knight said.

Many of the documents found their way to the Athenaeum through Northern officers and soldiers who collected the artifacts during the Union army's advance through the South. Other material might have been sold at auction in the North after being seized from Confederate shipping that failed to break through the Union blockade of Southern ports, Knight said.

The works include the defiant declaration of secession by the Charleston Mercury, a medical field manual with instructions for battlefield surgery, and a joint resolution in 1865 from the Confederate Congress that disparages a peace conference with the Union.

“This may have gone up the ranks to Jefferson Davis,” the US statesman who became president of the Confederate States, Knight said of the resolution.

The collection also includes a poster promoting a “grand concert” to benefit Confederate soldiers and their families, for 50 cents a ticket, in Lauderdale County, Ala. In a crude jab at the author of “Uncle Tom's Cabin,” a novel that galvanized support for the antislavery cause, the poster announced that “Aunt Harriet Beecher Stowe” would sing a new song in which a slave who escaped from Virginia had become disillusioned and “concluded to return home.”

The library received two grants totaling \$250,000 from Caleb Loring Jr. of Beverly, a trustee emeritus who died in November, to preserve the Confederate papers. “We would not have been able to treat the collection without that grant,” Walus said.

The restoration process is generally slow and painstaking. But the work is also a wondrous journey — “It’s a great experience,” Knight said — even if much of that work fixes the tears, rips, and smudges left by thousands of long-gone Bostonians.

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