

Managing Expectations in Scrapbook Conservation Approaches

INTRODUCTION

As most book conservators know, historic scrapbooks are one of the most problematic formats found in many historical collections due to their complicated and deterioration-prone structures. However, they hold great value for historians and genealogists. While some scrapbooks contain only duplicate printed information, such as newspaper clippings of current events on particular topics or collectable printed cards or illustrations, many others contain a variety of materials such as photographs, postcards, letters, documents, and realia. Due to the nature of their construction, their previous use, and the deterioration of their contents, many historic scrapbooks are in very poor condition and present a myriad of handling and conservation challenges. These challenges range from binding deterioration and brittle paper to the—often dramatic—deterioration of their contents.

Overall, scrapbook formats are most commonly either post-bound or side-laced structures with heavyweight paper pages and cover boards of either paper or cloth. More modern scrapbooks also integrate ring-bound formats, plastic sleeves and pockets, the much-maligned magnetic pages, and many other creative but poor formats for long-term durability and preservation. The conservation concerns of the binding structures alone are significant, but compound that with the poor-quality sulfated papers and restrictive gutter openings and you've got a recipe for book structure failure even before content is placed inside. Additionally, we must also consider the preservation state of the materials mounted to the pages and how they are attached.

Generally, a wide array of paper documents and photographs are the most common materials found enclosed in scrapbooks. These can present sometimes significant but predictable challenges, but the conservation needs of such materials are well understood. However, it's the variety of other materials that may be held in a scrapbook's pages, such as balloons, felt, plastics, metals, and food items that make them simultaneously fascinating and such an incredible

preservation challenge. Further, these materials are then held onto the pages by commonplace mechanisms such as any type of tape and/or glue imaginable, photo corners, paper straps, metal pins and clips, and more. Combine this wide-ranging variability of materials mounted within scrapbooks with the predictable degradation and the physical stress placed on the scrapbook structure by the weight of these materials, and it is easy to understand why many scrapbooks show high degrees of physical damage such as embrittled pages, broken bindings, and detached artifacts.

The University of Illinois Libraries holds over 750 cataloged historic scrapbooks dating from as early as the 1870s to as recent as the 1990s with concentrations of materials dating from the 1910s and 1920s, and the 1950s and 1960s. From a condition survey performed in 2006 at our Student Life and Culture Archives, which holds the greatest number of scrapbooks, we determined that almost one-third of the total collection was given an overall condition ranking of "poor" or "very poor." Many of these poor rankings were due to the condition of the scrapbook itself (i.e., the binding and paper of the book). However, in many cases the deterioration of the attached materials inside the scrapbook appeared to be exacerbated by the poor condition of the pages and bindings. And, of course, many of the ones in the worst condition were the ones of highest interest by researchers. Therefore, a wide array of treatment approaches and methods were conducted by our lab.

SCRAPBOOK TREATMENTS

Scrapbooks are identified for treatment for a variety of different reasons, including use by students and researchers, digitization projects, exhibitions, or often just identification and prioritization by curators simply because the items are so fragile. Depending upon what type of treatment is needed, conservation treatments may be undertaken by our conservators, technicians, interns, skilled hourly staff, or a combination thereof.

Nearly 250 scrapbooks have come through the University of Illinois Library's conservation lab since it was constructed in 2006. After the aforementioned 2006 survey, many of the most maligned scrapbooks reviewed came to the lab for full treatment, stabilization, or basic rehousing. Through that

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process and in the many intervening years, our conservation staff has learned that often what sounds relatively simple in a treatment proposal may take tens or even over a hundred hours per item, with a result in many cases of an item which is still chemically unstable, physically unsound (though improved), and generally rather unsatisfying treatment.

CASE STUDIES

To help illustrate the variation and complexity of some of our treatment approaches to various scrapbooks over the years, it is useful to review several case studies: the Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) scrapbook, the University of Illinois' Council of Administration Records, and the Alton IL Printer's Scrapbook.

The ATO scrapbook arrived in our lab with severe mold and water damage and a completely detached cover. The scrapbook's structure contained "magnetic" pages with plastic guard sheets. Due to the mold damage and unstable format of the scrapbook, the decision was made to reformat the scrapbook in a reproduction binding of archival quality materials. All items were removed from the pages, cleaned of mold, some items were washed and/or mended as needed, and all were remounted using photo corners into a new album structure (figs. 1 and 2).

Overall, this treatment took only 20 hours to complete and resulted in greatly enhanced accessibility and appearance. Some other scrapbook treatments have not been so rewarding.



Fig. 1. The Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) scrapbook as it arrived in the lab.



Fig. 2. The ATO scrapbook after treatment.

The University of Illinois' Council of Administration Records is a series of scrapbooks utilized to preserve early administrative records of the university. The full series of 32 volumes is used heavily by researchers in our University Archives and preservation and enhanced accessibility of the records is paramount to our university archivist. Each volume of approximately 100 leaves has historic documents (sometimes of several sheets) soundly adhered to both the recto and verso. The support paper is fragile and the bindings themselves are failing (figs. 3 and 4).

After long discussions with University Archives several years ago, the following treatment decision was made: disbind the volumes, surface clean and humidify each loose sheet to soften the adhesive, remove the documents from the support pages and reduce any remaining adhesive mass, flatten any planar distortions, mend for stabilization, and rehouse the documents as an archival collection. Although none of these steps are arduous and can be undertaken by skilled hourly staff and interns in our lab, the number of steps and sheer repetition for the large bindings means that each volume necessitates nearly 100 hours of contact time, which is a very significant staff undertaking when extended out to all 32 volumes. Combining the heavy treatment time with the stabilization-level treatment approach to the final documents results in a less-than-satisfying use of our staff time (figs. 5–7).

Finally, there is the Alton Printer's Scrapbook, which entered our lab as the centerpiece for an upcoming exhibition on early printing in the State of Illinois. Through discussion with the curators, it was decided that many items would be removed from the scrapbook for the purposes of mounting the exhibit and that, after the exhibition, all items would be removed and stored as an archival collection. While similar in basic treatment approach to the Council of Administration Records, this item varied significantly in several key factors. First, the printer's scrapbook was created by the printer themselves and was an historic artifact in its own right; second, there was some (though limited) writing on the support pages



Fig. 3. An exemplar Council of Administration Records volume, before treatment.

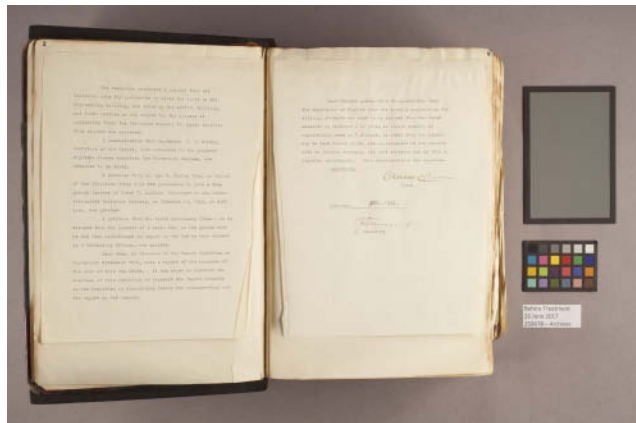


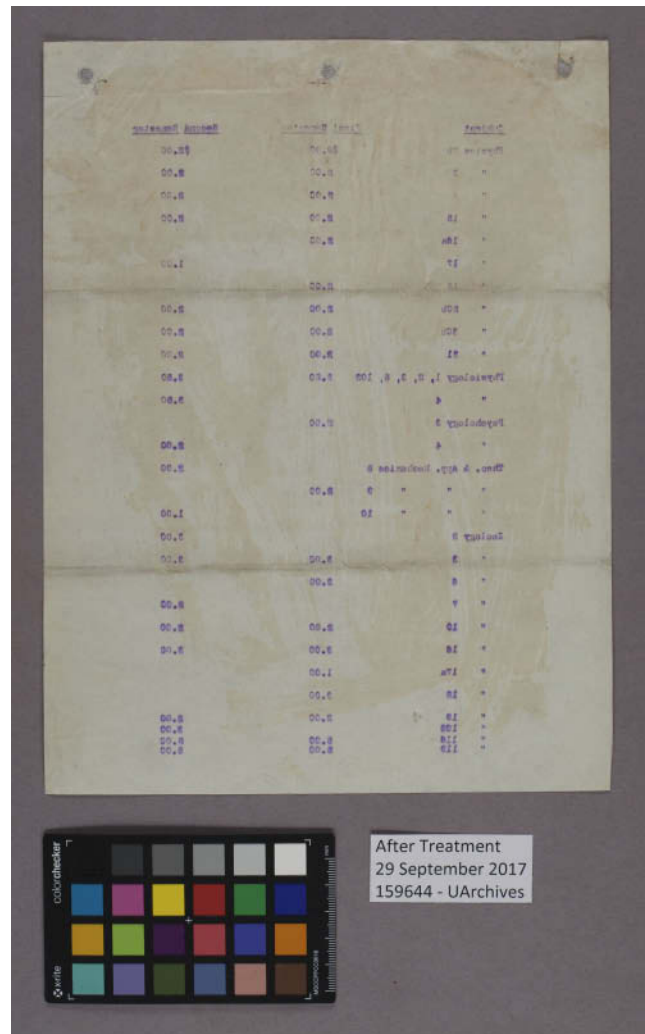
Fig. 4. Council of Administration Records volume, before treatment.

of the printer's scrapbook; and third, the adhesives, papers, and formats of the attached documents varied far more greatly in the printer's scrapbook (fig. 8).

So, while the exhibition was successfully mounted in the spring of 2018, several of the items identified to be separated from the scrapbook could not be removed without risk of significant damage due to intractable adhesives and fragile paper supports. The result is that after many hours of treatment, only a small subset of the documents in the whole volume were removed and conserved, leaving many in the scrapbook with a now-uncertain future as to whether any more will be removed or not (figs. 9 and 10).

THE NEED FOR A MORE STANDARDIZED APPROACH

As yet more scrapbooks continued to come into the lab, it was collectively agreed that some sort of "expectation framework" to help communicate treatment levels, final outcome expectations, and better time management might be



Figs. 5 and 6. After treatment, documents from the Council of Administration Records showing basic stabilization efforts.



Fig. 7. A completed Council of Administration Records in archival collection format.



Fig. 8. A two-page spread from the Alton printer's scrapbook, before treatment.

advantageous— or at least it couldn't hurt. Following on this decision, our first step was to see if any other library conservation labs had such a framework or guideline in place. As such, the framework was envisioned not as a dictation to our conservators, but merely a tool to frame the scope and depth of treatments and to manage the expectations of curators and collection managers.

A query was sent to the Conservation Distribution List (ConsDistList) as well as the American Library Association's Preservation Administrators Discussion List (PADG) in the fall of 2017 asking for any existing guidelines or documentation which would help standardize or contextualize treatment expectations for scrapbook conservation. While the query garnered several responses, only one institution responded as to having something similar, but it was not a formal guideline, more of an internal framework. So, having no real models to work off, we developed our own.

THE SCRAPBOOK TREATMENT GUIDE—WHAT IS IT AND HOW CAN WE APPLY IT?

The resulting guide, included in full as Appendix A, consists of several sections: Section 1 is an introduction to scrapbook structure and common failures, section 2 contains a few questions for curators in preparation for framing a treatment approach, and section 3 contains descriptions of the variously proposed treatment levels that are meant as a contextual guide to conservation staff as well as curators to better guide treatment expectations and priority setting. These different treatment levels contain descriptions of possible common treatment approaches and repetition levels that might be included, as well as general time ranges considered to be appropriate for each level. The inclusion of the time ranges was considered significant as it is our only "commodity." By listing time ranges versus just listing the types of treatments, conservators can help curators better understand how more intense scrapbook treatment approaches might require other treatments to be pushed back in priority. Lastly, the guide concludes with several treatment approaches to be avoided without just cause, including partial treatment and disbinding.

The guide was piloted on a scrapbook that was already sent to the lab and pending a treatment proposal. The scrapbook, an early sports history of the university dating from the late 1800s, presented all the typical challenges of an historic scrapbook including ribbons, pins, folded broadsides, detached objects, and extremely brittle support pages in a side-laced binding structure exhibiting many detached pages. The guide was utilized to present the owning archivist with treatment options at several of the treatment levels contextualized therein, ranging from enclosure only to midrange stabilization to full treatment. Utilizing the guide from a conservator's standpoint was very helpful in creating proposals for all treatment levels and in considering what level and types of repairs are truly necessary to make an item usable without necessarily undertaking full treatment. While the archivist responded that the proposal of various treatment levels and their explanations was helpful, she had a strong desire for full treatment and would not consider any midlevel treatment options in this case. Would the curator have been more comfortable with a midrange treatment option, the guide would have served to articulate more clear expectations for the time and depth of treatment to whomever then undertook the treatment in the lab—be they the proposing conservator, technician, or hourly employee.

The guide was also shared with all curators for feedback on how useful they perceived it to be in helping to better articulate treatment goals and expectations. While all curators responded positively, few had any constructive feedback on how it might be improved, which caused some concern as to its utility when time came to implement it. To garner more critical evaluation, the guide was shared with several past and present conservators who were familiar with our lab and the treatment of scrapbooks within our collections. This review garnered much more

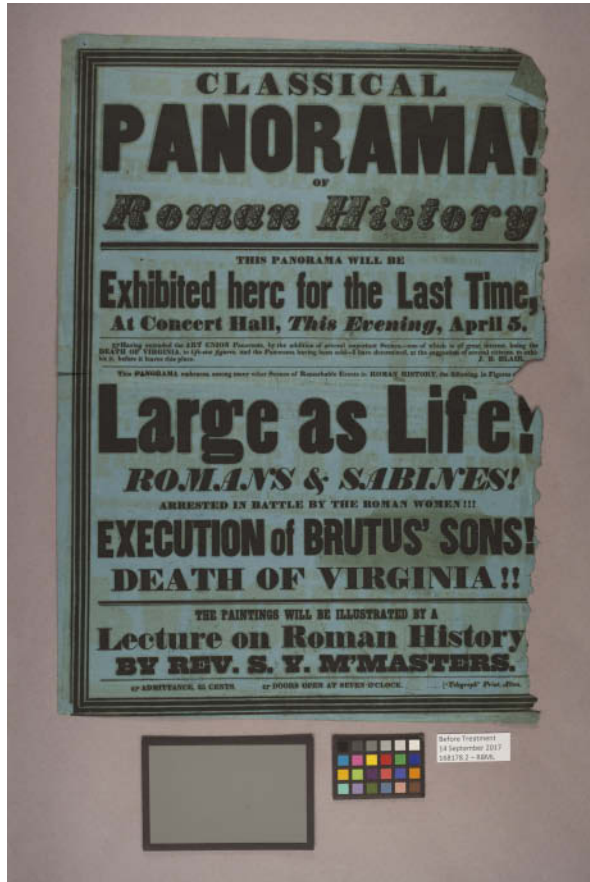


Fig. 9. One of the broadsides removed from the printer's scrapbook, before treatment.

significant constructive feedback, several elements of which are already included in the version of the guide presented here. However, the most critical question has yet to be answered: Will this document really change anything in our treatment approaches and our curators' expectations? Only time will tell.

NEXT STEPS

It is our hope that the Scrapbook Treatment Guide will prove useful in several ways: to better contextualize treatment approaches, to improve communication for the desired extent of repair for curators and those performing repairs, and to give the conservation staff a better ability to “dial back” from complex full treatment approaches, which is often considered to be our only option for scrapbook treatments. The guide will also encourage conservators to propose various levels of treatment for consideration instead of automatically proposing treatment options already assumed by the curators. Lastly, we hope that by providing treatment time range references for curators in context of different treatment options, it will lead to better treatment prioritization within the broader context of treatments in our lab.

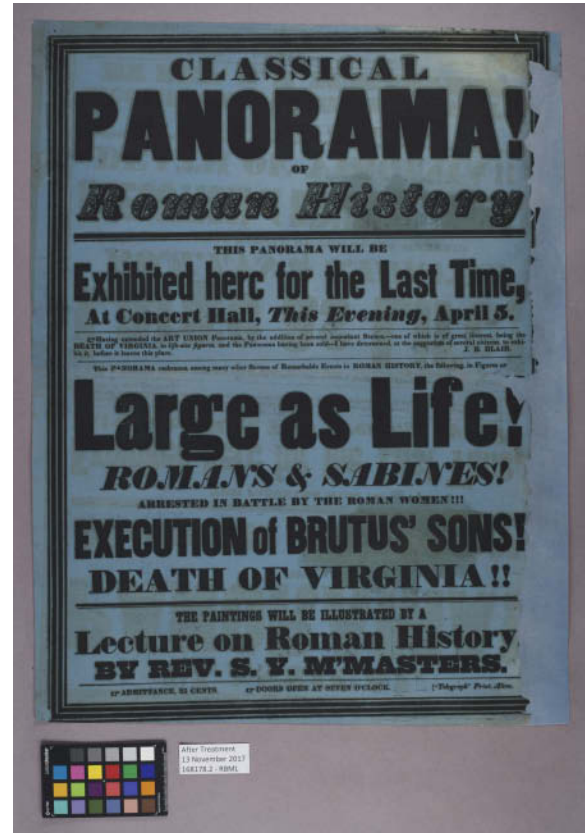


Fig. 10. One of the broadsides removed from the printer's scrapbook, after treatment.

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APPENDIX A

SCRAPBOOK TREATMENT GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Historic scrapbooks are one of the most problematic formats found in many historical collections due to their complicated and deterioration-prone structures and materials. This guide is meant to assist curators and collection managers in describing damage, understanding repair options and limitations, and considering factors that make scrapbooks unique objects within our collections. For the purposes of this guide, scrapbooks are defined as bound (or originally bound) objects on which papers, photographs, and other materials have been attached. Although photographic albums have many similarities and some of the following may apply to repair

considerations for photographic albums, they are not inherently considered the same as a scrapbook.

SCRAPBOOKS AS PHYSICAL OBJECTS

Certain scrapbooks contain only duplicate printed information, such as newspaper clippings of current events on particular topics or collectable printed cards, etc. Others contain a wide variety of materials such as photographs, postcards, letters, documents, and realia. In either case, scrapbooks can serve as a valuable resource for researchers. Unfortunately, due to the nature of their construction, their previous use, and the deterioration of their contents, many historic scrapbooks are in very poor condition and present a myriad of preservation challenges. These challenges range from binding deterioration and brittle paper to the—often dramatic—deterioration of their contents. Due to this, scrapbooks often present significant handling and display challenges.

Despite their challenges, it is important to consider the scrapbook in its entirety as an object, not just as a container for smaller objects. Standard practice for storage of any historic scrapbook should involve a well-fitted, preservation-quality enclosure. This may be either a custom measured enclosure, or a standard box with interior modifications to properly support the item in storage. If a scrapbook is fragile but not yet broken, in almost all cases an enclosure and careful handling will be the extent of treatment necessary. In instances where the scrapbook is damaged in some way, consideration should be given to whether repair is advisable. This is most pressing when the damage may present significant handling concerns, which could result in further damage to the artifact with use. In instances where risk of increasing damage is paired with an historic or strong potential for high use, more intensive treatments may be necessary. *Disbinding of scrapbooks simply for ease of storage is generally avoided unless the scrapbook format was only originally an archival organization method, and not a creative output.*

OVERVIEW OF TYPICAL SCRAPBOOK FAILURES

Support Paper Failure. The most common condition issue with scrapbooks is deteriorating strength of the support paper, which is frequently of poor quality and embrittled/discolored.

- Overall Embrittlement: Overall paper has become brittle and may be breaking along edges, in gutters, or failing at points of attachment.
- Gutter Fractures: Paper is breaking along the gutter edges, parallel to the spine.

Page Attachment Failure. Similar to gutter fractures, this damage is due to paper strength failure at the point of attachment, but focuses on damage due to stress/wear against hardware or mechanical failure. This can be exacerbated by planar distortion of the pages, if it exists.

- Page attachment failure at posts, laces, rings, etc.
- Hinge attachment failure of adhesive or other attachment of page to a hinge or stub at the gutter

Binding Failure. Fairly common damage found in older scrapbooks, or those that have been heavily handled or overfilled with memorabilia (thus creating stress).

- Hinge Damage: Damage may occur to either the internal or external hinges of the cover. If external, this compromises the attachment of the cover board and spine. If internal, it compromises the attachment of the textblock to the cover.
- Loss of Cover Components: Scrapbooks may lose one or both boards and/or their spines. However some scrapbooks, particularly post-bound formats, may not have a spine covering originally.

Mounting Failure. Materials can be mounted to a page using a wide variety of materials, often varying methods are used within one scrapbook. Many of these methods will also fail over time for a variety of reasons.

- Glue: Glue damage may include loss of tack (detachment), staining, and embrittlement. In limited cases, there may also be sticky adhesive migration.
- Magnetic Pages: These pages, covered with a tacky paraffin-based substance, can lose tack or the adhesive can migrate into the ephemeral items.
- Corners/Straps: Both of these methods do not involve any adhesive applied directly to the items, however they can fail mechanically (tear) or corners mounted to the support paper can suffer from adhesive failure
- Tape/Stickers: Like glue, tape damage may include loss of tack (detachment), staining, and embrittlement. In limited cases, there may also be sticky adhesive migration.
- Lamination: Basically, two giant pieces of pressure-sensitive tape; damage from lamination often involves ink feathering, discoloration, or shrinkage of the plastic film.
- Other methods may include pins, staples, paper clips, sewing, etc.

Ephemera Deterioration. Due to the infinite range of materials that can be mounted (or laid) into scrapbooks, many different types of deterioration are possible. However, most fall into one of three classes:

- Deterioration of a chemically unstable item (dye fading, silver mirroring, paper discoloration, etc.)
- Deterioration of an item due to contact with adjacent materials (adhesives, papers, interleaving, and other ephemera), often resulting in localized staining or deterioration

- Deterioration/damage due to physical stressors, including use

Included within the considerations here should be items that can cause risk to other items near it, including (but not limited to) food items, rubber, some plastics, felts, pressed plants, and suedes.

Other Damage. Although a wide range of damage can fall into this category, the most common “other” types of damage include mold, insect damage, water damage, damaging previous repairs, and pages which are stuck together.

STANDARD TREATMENT LEVELS

To better approach scrapbook treatments, the conservation program recommends considering proposed scrapbook repairs or treatments in the following levels. These levels are not meant to be prescriptive, but instead are meant to guide archivists, curators, and conservators in their practical and philosophical approach to the level of treatment intensity and physical intervention on the object to create a common goal and understanding on treatment expectations. Examples of each level are described and examples are given for each including expected treatment time ranges.

Level I (Stabilization Only). This treatment is appropriate for nearly all historic scrapbooks, as all will benefit from a well-fitting enclosure. Options may include a custom-sized enclosure, outfitting a commercial/standard box with interior fittings for a better fit to item, or actions such as interleaving. Estimated treatment time: under 2 hours.

Level II. This treatment level incorporates a minor conservation treatment that alters or repairs the artifact but is typically only one necessary treatment type and not a combination of treatments. Treatments may include reattaching a few (<10?) loose items, binding repairs on cloth or paper bindings (such as spine reattachment, board reconstruction, hinge-reconstruction, etc.), repairing a few pieces of mounted or unmounted ephemera (<10?), unmounting of a few (<10) materials from pages (due to a variety of reasons), or the replacement or rebuilding of a page attachment mechanism, such as replacing side lacing, rebuilding posts, etc. Estimated treatment time: under 5 hours, frequently under 2.

Level III. This treatment level involves more invasive treatments to the object and more intervention by the conservation staff. It may involve several treatment approaches in one scrapbook. Examples of treatments may include reinforcing or rebuilding page attachment (stubbing, mending gutter breaks, or repairing punched holes), isolated separation of blocked/stuck pages (<5), moderate levels of reattaching loose items (11–50?), moderate levels of repairing ephemera

(11–25?), moderate levels of unmounting items from support pages (11–25?), isolated page reinforcement with polyester film, and mold remediation or cleaning that does not involve removing any ephemera from support pages nor disbinding. Estimated treatment time: 5–20 hours.

Level IV. This is the most advanced treatment level and involves either treatments that are a combination of many individual approaches or extensive, repeated treatments over a whole volume. Examples of treatments may include extensive separation of blocked/stuck pages (>5), high levels of reattaching loose items (>50), high levels of repairing ephemera (>25), high levels of unmounting items from support pages (>25), extensive page reinforcement with polyester film, and mold remediation or cleaning that involves removing ephemera from support pages and/or disbinding. Estimated treatment time: >20 hours.

Level V. This is the most advanced treatment level and involves all treatment approaches covered in Level IV, but are either greater in number or treatment intensity. Estimated treatment time: >50 hours.

TREATMENT APPROACHES TO BE AVOIDED

Other, less common treatment approaches may be considered only when there is significant cause for such an approach by a curator or archivist. In general, however, conservation recommends against the following treatment approaches.

Partial Treatment. This approach often takes place in relation to an exhibition or digitization effort. However, it leaves an item only partially repaired, which can lead to stress or separation of items from the original context.

Disbinding. As stated above, disbinding of a scrapbook changes the context and intent of the original artifact. While there are particular instances (books exclusively of business records or clippings, for instance) where this may be appropriate, most historical scrapbooks with a variety of ephemera should ideally not be disbound unless there is no other viable repair option available.

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