

Historical Society of Pennsylvania Conservator Preserving History One Document at a Time

By Sam Donnellon

Tara O'Brien's job as the Director of Preservation & Conservation Services at The Historical Society of Pennsylvania is challenging, rewarding, enlightening and educational.

Just don't call it stress-free.

"The downside of this job is the weight of responsibility we have not to do damage," she says. "It's a lot of pressure. I think about it daily."

She has to. The condition of the 21 million books, pamphlets, photos and artifacts that take up a big chunk of the 19 rooms in the Society's five-story building on Locust Street is as varied as the subject matter contained within. Founded in 1824, HSP contains one of the largest family history collections on the East coast, containing genealogical material from every state east of the Mississippi River one of the nation's largest archives of historical documents. These documents, some that trace as far back as the 16th Century, come to the Society in a wide range of conditions, and often in glaring need of repair.

There are also some 600,000 books, pamphlets, serials, and microfilm reels; 20 million manuscripts; and over 300,000 graphics items, making it one of the nation's largest non-governmental repositories of documentary materials.

Recently, HSP has been in the news because of its Constitution collection, which includes one-of-a-kind drafts of the early United States Constitution, along with one of just 13 copies of the first official printing. Another one of those copies was auctioned off by Sotheby's on Nov. 18 for \$42.3 million, a record for a historical document. HSP considers its copy of the first printing to be priceless and has no plans to ever sell it.

Currently the only conservator on the staff, O'Brien's tasks include repair and care of the Society's physical collections, packing and housing materials safely, even humidifying rolled up documents and flattening them. Five floors and 19 locked rooms sounds like a lot, but then again, 21 million is a big number too.

Some books can be re-bound with little risk. Others are too fragile or fragmented to dare to. Mold, light, and poor storage before the materials arrive – each offers a unique challenge to skills O'Brien has acquired and honed since taking over the conservation work for HSP in 2007.

Lives and events literally unfold in front of her eyes each time she is tasked with the conservation of submitted materials, or even stored ones in need of TLC to preserve them.

Preserving a cookbook owned by First Lady Martha Washington, was just plain fun. Another cookbook from the mid-1800s, found while rummaging through a third-floor room looking for something else a decade ago, has added to her own recipe repertoire.

And then there are those frequent moments when she is tasked with something more impactful. A former California high school art teacher who came east to get her Masters in Fine Arts from the University of the Arts, O'Brien has become somewhat of an amateur historian through her job at HSP. Rarely a day goes by where some piece of significant American history doesn't pass through her hands.

An example of that was when she was tasked with preserving the log book of Philadelphia abolitionist William Still, often called "The Father of The Underground Railroad." Still is credited with helping as many as 800 enslaved people escape to freedom, and his meticulous accounting of where each person came from, where they were headed and the impetus for their bold escapes not only allowed for many to eventually reunite with loved ones, but provided an incredible, living insight to the perils and bravery imbedded in those efforts.

"Coming from Southern California, I didn't know very much about it," O'Brien says. "And then to hold that book in my hands and actually read it. It was an incredibly humbling experience. I was thrilled that we had Martha Washington's cookbook. But it can't hold a candle to the Still diary for its importance to history."

Items in the Society's massive collection vary in importance. The preservation efforts do not. What might seem a trivial document or artifact to one person might trigger the interest or understanding in another. It's why O'Brien will carefully house anything she can't preserve, hoping time and technology will outrun any further erosion that might occur.

And if that's not possible? That's when her skills and experience become invaluable. Three years ago, a large family collection of important items and documents that was submitted was too moldy for anyone to do any research on. O'Brien researched extensively mold remediation and presented her findings to HSP's Collections Committee. They decided that a quick and low UV exposure treatment would effectively kill the mold without damaging the collection.

"It has been cleaned," she said. "It doesn't smell. It's fully available for researchers. It's a risk. We still don't know what's going to happen 10 years down the road. The light could have hurt the structural integrity of the paper. Access to the collection won out over the risks. We can learn from it. We can also watch it safely. In 10 years, if you start to see something, there may be newer technology that can be used."

In the meantime, she says, "Anyone in the library can take a look at it, not just someone wearing a respirator." Watching visitors react to items she and other Society members see every day has been yet another lesson learned over the years.

“We'll show a group of teachers something with Ben Franklin's signature on it, and they will be so excited,” O'Brien says. “We see this every day. It doesn't have quite the novelty for us anymore. But when we see that, we remember how privileged we are to be around these things.”