

# Artifacts

## CONSERVATION CENTER for Art and Historic Artifacts

### All the News That's Fit to Exhibit



Today's news, tomorrow's bird-cage liner. That's the traditional view of newspapers. Written on deadline and skimmed over breakfast, the daily paper was never intended to be handled like a Shakespeare folio. After all, while great literature is eternal, even the greatest newspaper is just 24 hours from being yesterday's news.

The first draft of history, though, can be awfully helpful to those looking to write the second, third, and fourth drafts. Thus from the beginning, newspapers have maintained archives. Although not technically classified as ephemera, these collections have treated and processed newspapers to meet their own internal needs: articles have been clipped from the page for organizational purposes, shrunk down onto microfilm for easy storage or, more recently, transferred into digital form for easy searching.

Along the way, the actual look of the original papers has often gotten lost. Smartly laid out and often quite beautiful, American dailies wooed readers with design as much as with look, creating masterpieces like *The New York Times*. And while the internet might give you a chance to read their copy, and your local library might have a dusty depiction on microfilm, Washington's Newseum gives fans of



the form a chance to see the originals on full-sized broadsheet and tabloid — the way they were meant to be seen.

Set to open on the National Mall in October 2007, the Newseum is partnering with CCAHA in the conservation and housing of some 300 newspapers, news magazines, and even a few board games, the majority of which will go on permanent exhibit. The newspapers date from 1681 to the present, and include such famous headlines as the assassination of President Garfield, the Rodney King trial acquittals, and the U.S. hockey victory over the Soviet Union in the 1980 Olympics. The Newseum collection comes from all over the country and includes both the big-city dailies and newspapers from places like Topeka, KS, Anchorage, AK, and Memphis, TN.

The challenges for conserving and preserving newspapers parallel the challenges in preserving ephemera. As Lois Olcott Price writes in her 1997 article *Preservation of Ephemera*, "Since these materials were not meant to last, the paper and printing processes chosen were often the cheapest that would accomplish the purpose." The same is certainly true of newspapers. Intended as a daily record of events to be thrown away or recycled shortly thereafter, newspapers have not aged gracefully. Modern newsprint contains wood pulp, a component that renders the paper susceptible to discoloration and the brittleness of aging. (This is in contrast to early newspapers pre-1850, which include rag content and fare a bit better.)



A sampling of early American newspapers

The newspapers and news magazines from the Newseum collection will receive minimal treatment while at CCAHA. Generally, the magazines, newspapers, or anything on acidic paper lignin will be treated with Bookkeeper spray. This spray deposits an alkaline reserve onto the paper, hedging off further degradation and leaving the artifact in better condition. The newspapers will be bathed in calcium de-ionized water, de-acidified with magnesium bicarbonate, air dried, and, if necessary, mended. Those newspapers that were bound together into large volumes and experienced brittleness and loss will either be backed to compensate for the loss visually or will be mended with toned Japanese paper. Everything will be encapsulated.

Newspapers and ephemera are not only a record of the daily events in our lives, but are also a record of how we live — our customs, our values, and our taboos. The look and feel of these artifacts, the layout, and the ads all contribute to a better understanding of our popular culture. As the Newseum itself believes, news is history in the making — conservators and archivists have the important responsibility to ensure that this history survives.