

GERALD WARD

The Afterlife of Books: Repair, Rebinding, and the Ethics of Library Preservation

For much of my professional life, I have worked with books at the point where their usefulness and vulnerability meet. As a librarian, I want books to be found, handled, read, taught from, and used; as a book conservator, I also know how easily well-intentioned repair can erase evidence of use, manufacture, ownership, or care. A torn page, a detached board, a broken joint, a failed adhesive binding, a stain, an inscription, or a warped cover may all appear to be damage. Sometimes damage is simply damage, but sometimes it is evidence.

This is the complicated afterlife of books in libraries. Their care does not end once they are acquired, cataloged, and shelved, because they continue to have institutional lives shaped by use, repair, neglect, preservation, and the decisions we make about their future. They circulate, break, return, disappear, get replaced, receive repairs, move into special collections, are housed in boxes, become teaching objects,

or are withdrawn. Each stage involves decisions that may seem small in the moment but become consequential over time.

The central question is not simply, “Can this book be fixed?” A more useful question is, “What are we trying to preserve?” The answer may be the text, the original binding, evidence of ownership or use, signs of manufacture or earlier repair, or a local association that gives the copy meaning beyond its contents. It may also be the ability of a student to check out the book next week, or the long-term survival of a fragile object that should no longer circulate. Preservation begins when we recognize that these answers are not always the same.

Preservation is not one activity

In library work, *preservation* is sometimes treated as another word for *repair*, which is understandable because repair is visible. A broken book goes to a bench

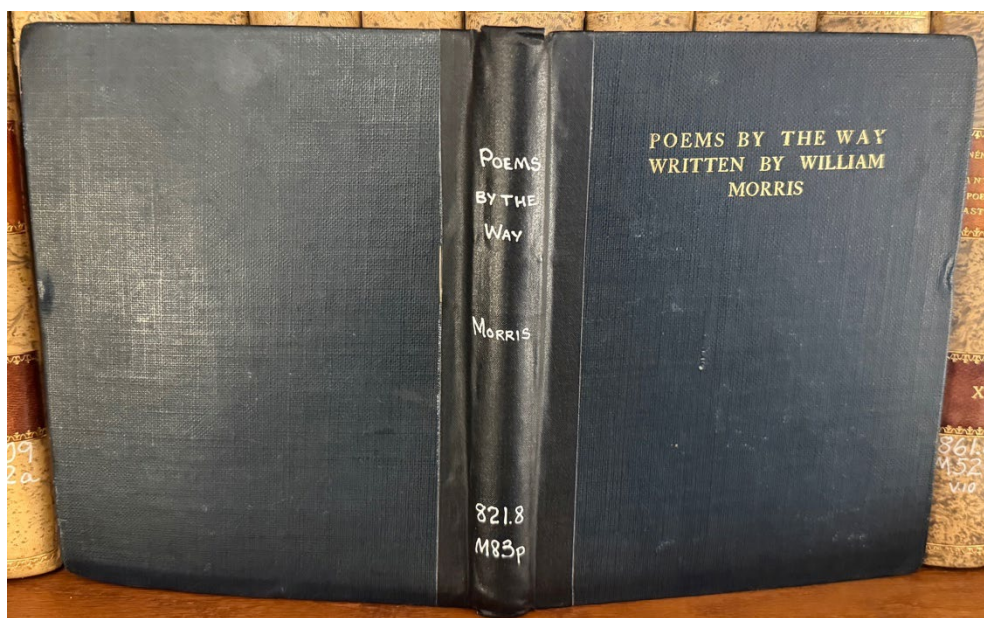


Figure 1 Crude repair with cloth tape

or a bindery and comes back apparently improved. Preservation, however, is much broader. It includes storage, handling, environmental control, disaster preparedness, binding specifications, digitization, replacement, boxing, staff training, documentation, and, at times, the deliberate choice to leave an item alone.

The American Institute for Conservation's Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice places treatment within a larger "continuum of care," emphasizing preventive conservation, examination, suitable treatment, documentation, and the possibility of nonintervention when that best serves the object (American Institute for Conservation [AIC], 1994). That last point matters because nonintervention can sound like neglect, even though in conservation it may be the most careful choice. If a book can be safely handled in a box, or if its damage is stable and historically meaningful, repair may do more harm than good.

The American Library Association's Code of Ethics frames librarianship around the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information, with an obligation to ensure access for present and future generations (American Library Association [ALA], 2021). That language helps clarify why preservation is not separate from access. We preserve because collections are meant to serve people, but we also regulate use because unthinking access can destroy the very materials we hope to make available.

This tension is familiar to anyone who works with rare books, archives, or heavily-used circulating collections. Libraries are not museums, but neither are they warehouses of disposable content. They are institutions of use **and** memory, and preservation is one of the practical ways they hold those responsibilities together.

The circulating book and the ethics of usefulness

For general circulating collections, the most ethical preservation decision is often the one that keeps the book usable. A paperback with a failed adhesive spine, a standard monograph with detached boards,

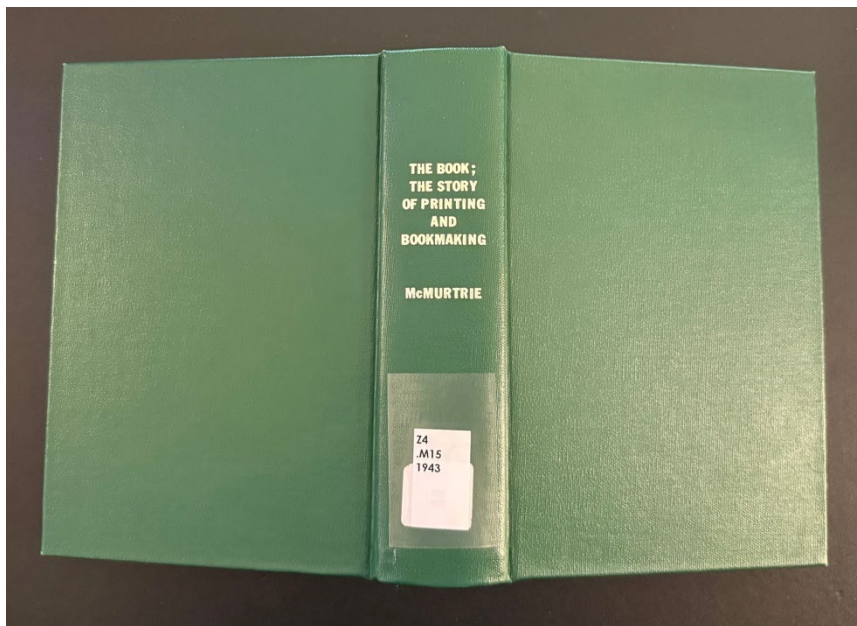


Figure 2 Rebound in library buckram cloth

or a frequently-assigned title with a broken case may not require special collections treatment. It may instead need repair, replacement, or commercial rebinding.

NEDCC's guidance on library binding is useful because it distinguishes between books valued primarily for their informational content and books with artifactual or historical significance (Northeast Document Conservation Center [NEDCC], n.d.-c). The National Information Standards Organization's library binding standard similarly addresses technical and materials specifications for first-time binding and rebinding of materials intended for library use (National Information Standards Organization [NISO], 2018). In other words, rebinding is not inherently careless; for the right book, under the right specification, it can extend the useful life of a collection and support access.

But "right book" and "right specification" are doing important work in that sentence. A general collections repair workflow still requires judgment. Is the book replaceable? Is the text block brittle? Is there a newer edition? Does the copy contain local annotations, an important inscription, or evidence of former ownership? Is it part of a donor collection? Is it being repaired because it needs repair, or because it looks untidy?

Those questions keep general collections work from becoming automatic. A circulating book does

not need to be rare to deserve thoughtful treatment, especially when poor repair can reduce usability, shorten lifespan, and create future costs. Clear criteria for replacement, repair, rebinding, and withdrawal are therefore part of preservation ethics, not merely collection maintenance.

Special collections and the danger of tidiness

The stakes change when a book has artifactual, evidentiary, or associational value. Nicholas Pickwood's essay "Determining How Best to Conserve Books in Special Collections" remains one of the clearest statements of the problem, arguing that treatment decisions must account for the historical and bibliographical value of books and warning that rebinding is not always the best course of action because it may cause significant historical and physical damage (Pickwood, 1994).

That warning should be posted in every room where damaged rare books are evaluated, because the desire to make books look neat can be very strong. A repaired spine, clean corners, and straight boards can give the reassuring impression that something has been saved, yet for some books neatness is the enemy of evidence. Old shelfmarks, bookplates, marginalia, sewing structures, decorated papers, binder's waste, stains, pasted-in clippings, and even patterns of damage can tell us how a book was made, owned, read, stored, and valued.

Pickwood asks a deceptively simple question: how much repair is absolutely necessary to do what is required? (Pickwood, 1994). That question shifts attention away from cosmetic improvement and toward purpose. If the goal is safe handling, a fitted enclosure and limited stabilization may be enough. If the goal is exhibition, a cradle, page-opening restriction, and careful monitoring may matter more than treatment. If the goal is teaching, supervised use and handling instruction may preserve more evidence than an invasive repair.

In special collections, damage does not automatically create a mandate for treatment; it creates a need for assessment. Does the damage threaten the survival of the book? Does it make the book unsafe to handle? Can the existing structure be supported without taking the book apart? How much original

material can be retained? Can the book be read safely without erasing the marks that make it meaningful? These are not only technical questions. They are curatorial, historical, and ethical questions as well.



Figure 3 Custom four-flap phase box enclosure

Housing is treatment

One of the most important lessons in preservation is that an archival enclosure is not an admission of defeat. Housing is treatment, and a custom enclosure, phase box, wrapper, folder, or support can reduce abrasion, dust, light exposure, distortion, and handling damage without altering the book itself. For fragile or significant bindings, housing may be the most respectful intervention available.

This is especially important for libraries with limited conservation budgets. Not every institution can support item-level conservation treatment, and not every item needs it, but many institutions can dramatically improve preservation through better shelving, protective enclosures, book supports, and handling procedures. NEDCC's storage and handling guidance emphasizes appropriate shelving, protective enclosures, and careful handling for books and artifacts on paper (NEDCC, n.d.-a). These interventions may not be glamorous, but they are powerful.

Storage decisions also influence whether treatment becomes necessary at all. A large book stored upright without support may eventually need repair because gravity has done what use did not. A fragile volume shelved between heavier books may suffer abrasion and board damage, while a book displayed open without adequate support may develop strain at the spine and joints. A rare pamphlet housed loose on a shelf may be damaged simply because no one recognized how vulnerable it was.

Housing is also democratic in a practical sense because it allows smaller institutions to make preservation progress without waiting for perfect funding. A box does not solve every problem, but it buys time, and in libraries, time is often one of the most valuable preservation tools we have.

Preventive care, the unglamorous infrastructure

Preventive preservation rarely attracts the same attention as conservation treatment, yet it usually does more good. Stable temperature and relative humidity, clean storage areas, pest monitoring, disaster planning, proper shelving, light control, and staff training protect whole collections rather than individual items. AIC identifies preventive conservation as a critical means of promoting long-term preservation, including appropriate conditions for storage and exhibition and proper procedures for handling, packing, and transport (AIC, 1994).

This is where preservation becomes a matter of infrastructure. The repaired book is only one part of the equation, alongside the HVAC system, the roof, the collections storage plan, the disaster supplies, the shelf spacing, the reading room procedures, the exhibit schedule, and the staff member who notices a leak before it reaches the stacks. It is also the written policy that helps future staff understand why one book was boxed, another rebound, another digitized, and another withdrawn.

The Library of Congress' emergency management guidance makes this point clearly. Preparedness includes continuity planning, disaster services, exercises, current information, and knowing what to do in an emergency, while response and recovery depend on informed, calm, and timely action that stabilizes collections (Library of Congress, n.d.-b).

In an emergency, preservation is not a sentimental attachment to old things. It is logistics, training, supplies, and decision-making under pressure.

Anyone who has dealt with wet books, mold, pests, brittle paper, or failing bindings knows that preservation is often most visible when something has gone wrong. The better goal is for preservation to remain nearly invisible because systems are working: the roof holds, the box fits, the shelf supports the book, staff know whom to call, exhibit light levels are controlled, and the book returns safely to storage after use. Infrastructure succeeds, in part, by not becoming a crisis.

Digitization, surrogates, and the original object

Digitization is often described as a preservation strategy, and in many cases it can be one. A digital surrogate can reduce handling of fragile originals, broaden access, support teaching, and make materials discoverable beyond the reading room. For brittle or heavily used materials, digitization may be one of the best ways to preserve informational access while reducing physical risk.

Yet digitization does not preserve everything. It can capture text, images, and some visual features of binding and use, but it cannot fully preserve structure, weight, texture, opening characteristics, paper behavior, sewing, smell, or three-dimensional evidence. Nor does a digital copy eliminate the need to preserve the original when the original has artifactual value.

The Library of Congress' mass deacidification program shows how preservation decisions often involve careful selection rather than blanket treatment. The program excluded materials already available or scheduled for microform or digital format, duplicates, and volumes too brittle or structurally compromised for treatment, while focusing on acidic materials that were central to institutional collecting priorities and physically sound enough to undergo the process (Library of Congress, n.d.-a). That selection logic is instructive because preservation is not simply doing everything possible to every title. It is matching method to material, mission, risk, and future use.

In local libraries, the equivalent decision may be less technical but just as important. Should a brittle local history volume be digitized, boxed, repaired, replaced, or moved to special collections? Should a circulating copy be withdrawn if a stable electronic version exists? Should a heavily annotated copy be retained even if the text is widely available elsewhere? These decisions require both collection knowledge and preservation judgment.

Documentation as institutional memory

One of the quietest but most important preservation practices is documentation. AIC requires permanent records of examination, sampling, investigation, and treatment, while Pickwoad similarly emphasizes the need for written reports that explain what was done, what materials were used, and what alterations were made (AIC, 1994; Pickwoad, 1994). Documentation matters because conservation decisions are rarely final, and future librarians, archivists, conservators, faculty, students, and researchers will inherit their consequences.

In practical terms, documentation does not always need to be elaborate. A major conservation treatment requires a formal report and images, while a simple circulating repair may require only a local note or workflow record. A decision to box rather than repair may be documented in an item record, spreadsheet, or treatment log. What matters is that the decision remains visible.

Without documentation, preservation suffers from a kind of institutional amnesia. Future staff may not know whether a binding is original, whether a board was reattached, whether a stain was tested, whether a book was boxed because treatment was deferred, or whether a withdrawn copy contained evidence worth noting. Documentation turns preservation from an isolated action into institutional memory.

It also documents ethical restraint. If no treatment was performed because nonintervention best served the object, that decision should be recorded; otherwise, the next person may see only an unrepaired book and mistake restraint for neglect.

What the afterlife of books asks of us

The afterlife of books asks libraries to resist simple categories. A damaged book is not always a preserva-

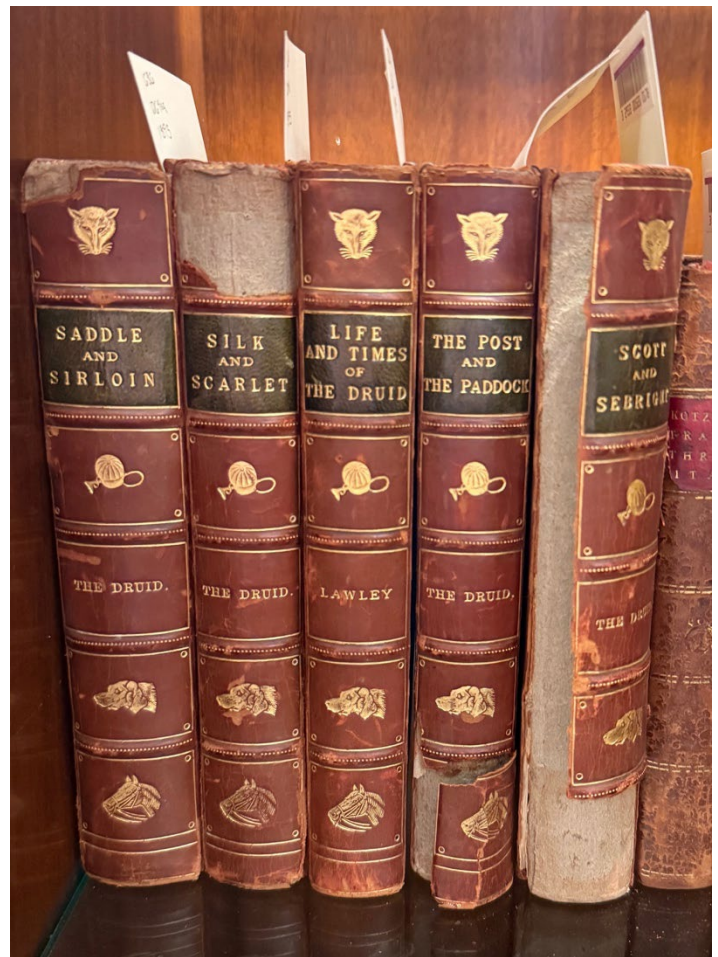


Figure 4 Untreated books with brittle spines awaiting treatment

tion failure, and a repaired book is not always a preservation success. A box can be a treatment; a withdrawal can be responsible; and a digital surrogate can expand access while still leaving important evidence behind. A circulating rebinding can serve the mission beautifully, just as a special collections rebinding can destroy what made the book worth keeping.

For those of us who work with collections, the practical challenge is to build systems that make good decisions more likely. That means training staff to recognize when an item needs special review, separating general collections repair from rare book conservation, writing better bindery specifications, and budgeting for boxes, shelves, and disaster supplies rather than only for dramatic treatments. It also means documenting decisions and accepting that preservation is not always visually satisfying.

Most of all, it means remembering that libraries preserve books because books continue to work on us and for us. They carry texts, but they also carry use, ownership, craft, neglect, care, institutional choices,

and human touch. Their afterlives are not accidental; they are shaped by policies, budgets, habits, training, and ethics.

In a previous Lagniappe article, I argued that libraries function as democratic infrastructure when they move information, sustain access, coordinate public work, and preserve evidence. Preservation belongs in that same conversation. It is one of the quieter forms of that infrastructure, keeping collections usable, evidence available, and future readers from inheriting only the results of our convenience.

The work is often ordinary: a box made, a hinge mended, a book left alone, a disaster plan updated, a note added to a record, a staff member trained to cradle a volume instead of forcing it flat. But ordinary work is how collections survive. Preservation is

not only what we do after books break; it is how we decide what kind of future they should have.

Author Notes

Column editor Gerald Ward is Assistant Director and Head of Archives & Special Collections at High Point University Libraries.
gward@highpoint.edu



References

- Adcock, E. P. (Ed.). (1998). *IFLA principles for the care and handling of library material*. International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. <https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/pac/ipi/ipi1-en.pdf>
- American Institute for Conservation. (1994). *Code of ethics and guidelines for practice*. American Institute for Conservation. <https://www.culturalheritage.org/conservation-at-work/uphold-professional-standards/code>
- American Library Association. (2021). *ALA code of ethics*. American Library Association. <https://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>
- Library of Congress. (n.d.-a). *Mass deacidification*. Preservation Directorate. <https://www.loc.gov/preservation/about/deacid/index.html>
- Library of Congress. (n.d.-b). *Emergency management*. Preservation Directorate. <https://www.loc.gov/preservation/emergprep/>
- National Information Standards Organization. (2018). *ANSI/NISO/LBC Z39.78-2000 (R2018): Library binding*. NISO. https://groups.niso.org/higherlogic/ws/public/download/18990/Z39.78-2000_R2018.pdf
- Northeast Document Conservation Center. (n.d.-a). *Storage and handling for books and artifacts on paper*. NEDCC Preservation Leaflets. <https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/4.-storage-and-handling/4.1-storage-methods-and-handling-practices>
- Northeast Document Conservation Center. (n.d.-b). *Storage furniture: A brief review of current options*. NEDCC Preservation Leaflets. <https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/4.-storage-and-handling/4.2-storage-furniture-a-brief-review-of-current-options>
- Northeast Document Conservation Center. (n.d.-c). *Guidelines for library binding*. NEDCC Preservation Leaflets. https://www.nedcc.org/free-resources/preservation-leaflets/7.-conservation-procedures/7.1-guidelines-for-library-binding?__cf_chl_f_tk=Ja_sZDng7k9aBaW9k6Dal5jlnlIdmQ5BJusW0hIWGdI-1783371142-1.0.1.1-AiM78xelFvclN6QUchBudNNHZYDHruADO5SONiGron0
- Pickwood, N. (1994). Determining how best to conserve books in special collections. *The Book and Paper Group Annual*, 13. American Institute for Conservation. <https://cool.culturalheritage.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v13/bp13-07.html>