

GPO Preserves Historic Reports

Information Can Be Lost as Rare, Old Books Fall Apart. GPO Ensures People Still Have Access

“I can’t praise the bindery enough for ramping up its book repair program to be able to do this kind of work again,” said GPO Preservation Librarian David Walls.

Walls is speaking of a successful pilot project to repair and preserve 25 volumes of Annual Reports for the Department of the Interior (DOI) Library. This work to repair old materials is work that historically GPO did often for Federal agencies. In recent years, GPO has taken steps to reinstate that business model, hiring teammates who have the skills to repair books.

“We have an agreement with the Department of the Interior Library to preserve the Department of the Interior Annual Reports,” said Walls. “It’s a title that goes from 1849 all the way to the 1960s.”

The DOI Library serves as a Preservation Steward (an official GPO partner) for the DOI Annual Reports, working in partnership with GPO to preserve the National Collection of U.S. Government Information.

“I recognized that although libraries had agreed to keep this content, the content was so old that it might not be usable to the American public,” said Walls.

While Walls, who has been a Preservation Librarian at GPO for 11 years, headed up the strategy side of the DOI project, GPO Bookbinder Beth Kerr served as the primary book conservator performing all the repairs on the damaged volumes. Kerr has been working at GPO for five years but says book preservation has been a passion of hers

for nearly 15 years. Kerr notes that nearly all of the 25 volumes in the pilot needed some kind of repair.

“As books age, the paper can become more fragile, and even the simple act of turning a page can cause it to tear or crumble,” said Kerr. “Some of the covers and spines needed to be replaced entirely due to significant damage.”

Kerr says that damage could look different depending on the book. Sometimes the boards had separated from the spine, the spine itself was missing, or, in the case of leather-bound books, the material covering the book had degraded to the point of leaving powdery “red rot” behind. In other cases, the covers just needed a little extra reinforcement along the hinges to make sure they wouldn’t completely split apart in the future. On average, it took Kerr between one and a half to two hours to fix each book, but some books took as long as six hours for her to fix.

“I’ve worked with conservators many years over my career,” said Walls. “It was fun to be able to see GPO hiring people and building up that opportunity to do this kind of work.”

Walls and Kerr first conducted a test of repairing 25 volumes from this collection to experiment with workflow, payment, and process.

“During this initial project, we selected 25 volumes in a variety of conditions,” said Walls. “Some of them were in really poor condition because of wear and tear. Others were just in need of a little



From left to right: GPO Bookbinder Beth Kerr, GPO Preservation Librarian David Walls, and Director of the Department of the Interior Library George Franchois worked together to conduct a pilot program to repair 25 volumes of Department of the Interior Annual Reports.



GPO Bookbinder Beth Kerr reviews the extent of the damage on each volume to see if repairs would be effective in preserving contents.



The two coverboards of this report from 1886 had come completely off. GPO Bookbinder Beth Kerr reattached its coverboards and put the report in an enclosure to provide additional support.

structure.”

Walls worked with Kerr to figure out what repairs needed to happen.

Kerr begins her process by writing up a condition report and documenting all necessary repairs to make the book serviceable again. Kerr’s repair process involves brushes, glue, repair tissue, cloth and boards for making replacement covers, and specialty tools like microspatulas or a tacking iron.

“My goal in every repair is to save as much of the original book as possible,” said Kerr. “If I need to replace anything, I want to match the original as closely as I can.”

Kerr typically uses wheat starch paste and Japanese tissue to repair tears in a book’s pages. If that method doesn’t work, she uses heat-set tissue, which is tissue with an adhesive on the back activated by applying heat. Next, she works on the cover, repairing damaged areas with more tissue that has been toned to match the colors.

“Anything that is too damaged to be repaired gets replaced with more durable components that match the original as closely as possible,” said Kerr. “My teammates have even helped me recreate the original gold stamping on new covers so they look almost identical to the old ones.”

Some books still need extra protection once the repairs are done. Paperback books with weak and brittle pages are given “handle with care” messages for those who need to use the book. In these cases, Kerr also



From left to right: GPO Preservation Librarian David Walls, GPO Bookbinder Beth Kerr, and Director of the Department of the Interior Library George Francois present a book that was reproduced in the same style as the original and got a new cover.

makes a custom enclosure for the book on GPO’s Gerber boxmaking machine, using archival corrugated board to make sure the book will not be trapped in an acidic environment.

In December 2021, Walls and Kerr visited the DOI Library to show George Francois, Director of the DOI Library, their work. Walls says Francois has been “very supportive” of the pilot program and describes Francois as “a champion for Government information”. During their DOI visit, Walls and Kerr received approval from GPO Superintendent of Documents Laurie Hall to complete repairs on another 25 volumes. Walls says his group hopes to conduct cost modeling so GPO can complete similar projects for other Federal agencies.

“Our focus for the future is on materials that are old and rare and are permanently held materials,” said Walls. “Our goal is to make these items



The original marbled paper sheet of this annual report was detached at some point in its history and lost. GPO Bookbinder Beth Kerr found similar paper to the original. It no longer looks like it’s missing anything.

last longer for users. We want it to last forever if possible.”

Walls says that GPO also works with libraries to find other copies or replace copies of publications that have been destroyed in floods or fires.

“Our goal is for any member of the American public to go to their local Federal Depository Library and not have to think about the fact that at one point the

book they’re using had to be repaired,” said Walls.

“I am truly honored to be able to keep these books alive for future generations of researchers,” said Kerr. “Information can get lost as books degrade and fall apart. Knowing that I’ve played some part in ensuring people will still have access to that information is incredibly fulfilling.”