

# A Clear Connection with the Past



A 1485 letter from Italian reformer Girolamo Savonarola (top left), the Oxford manuscript of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (center), and Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* manuscript are among the treasures of Philadelphia's Rosenbach Museum protected with "Mylar".

*"Mylar" polyester film helps preserve documents, drawings and photographs of great significance and sentimental value*

Within the nation's repositories of historical and literary documents, the preservation of originals is a matter of deep concern, extensive research and loving care. Temperature, humidity, acidic content of paper or damage from handling threaten to take an irreversible toll. At stake are many significant records of America's past.

One of the best known repositories of such documents is, of course, the Library of Congress. Here, skilled masters of restoration and preservation technologies safeguard American history. A few years ago, for example, Peter Waters, restoration officer of the Library, undertook the

rescue of a bound volume of legal abstracts in Thomas Jefferson's handwriting: *Abridgement of the Common Law, 1795*. Deteriorating ink had eaten holes through the center of the book. With great care, senior conservators at the Library took the book apart, encapsulated each page between sheets of "Mylar" polyester film, rebound them in two volumes, and slipcased with the original cover. Now the abstracts can be perused safely.

In smaller, lesser known but highly prestigious collections, "Mylar" also is used to preserve and protect significant and precious possessions. Philadelphia's



At Philadelphia's Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts, "Mylar" is employed in removal of deteriorated backings from old maps and other artifacts.

Richard Morris Hunt's preliminary perspective sketch of Thomas G. Appleton House in Newport, R.I., is one of 25,000 architectural drawings and photos in AIA's Washington, D.C., collection.

Rosenbach Museum & Library houses one of the world's finest collections of rare books, manuscripts and other historic documents. Among its treasures: the 342-year-old *Bay Psalm Book* (the first book printed in what is now the United States), illuminated manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*, Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

To protect such documents, the museum relies heavily on "Mylar". "In our display cases," says associate director Walter Johnson, "books are held open to interesting pages with strips of 'Mylar'. Because the material is inert, it won't cause damage to paper or vellum. And we protect unbound manuscripts in clear folders of 'Mylar' that allow scholars to use fragile manuscripts with little risk of damage from handling."

#### From Architecture to History

In Washington, the American Institute of Architects maintains a collection of some 12,000 architectural drawings and 13,000 photographs. Ninety percent of the drawings were made by noted 19th century architect Richard Morris Hunt, architect for the base of the Statue of Liberty, many New York City buildings and several of the fabulous "cottages" at Newport, Rhode Island, including the *Breakers* of Cornelius Vanderbilt and William K. Vanderbilt's *Marble House*.

Hunt's historically significant drawings went uncared for until 1978, when they were turned over to AIA and Susan Stein and Sherry Birk were brought in "to bring intellectual control and order" to the collection. Today, its contents are consulted frequently by students, re-



searchers and building restorers. A significant part of the collection is protected in folders of "Mylar".

John Lawrence, a curator at the Historic New Orleans Collection, uses "Mylar" to protect maps, photographs, drawings and prints relating to Louisiana history. The privately funded research institute also includes a library of more than 15,000 volumes and a manuscript division which includes a 1683 description of the region and documents related to the Louisiana Purchase. "We handled about 1,500 research requests last year," Lawrence says, "and we depend on 'Mylar' because it permits maximum use of irre-

placeable documents with minimum risk."

The Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts in Philadelphia specializes in the conservation of art and important documents for non-profit cultural organizations. Its director of conservation, Marilyn Kemp Weidner, says, "We use 'Mylar' extensively for long-term protection of many works of art and historical documents. Encapsulation in 'Mylar' protects them from wear and tear, moisture, dirt and air pollution. We also use it in treatment processes, such as the removal of deteriorated cloth backings from old, weakened maps, posters and other works of art and artifacts on paper.

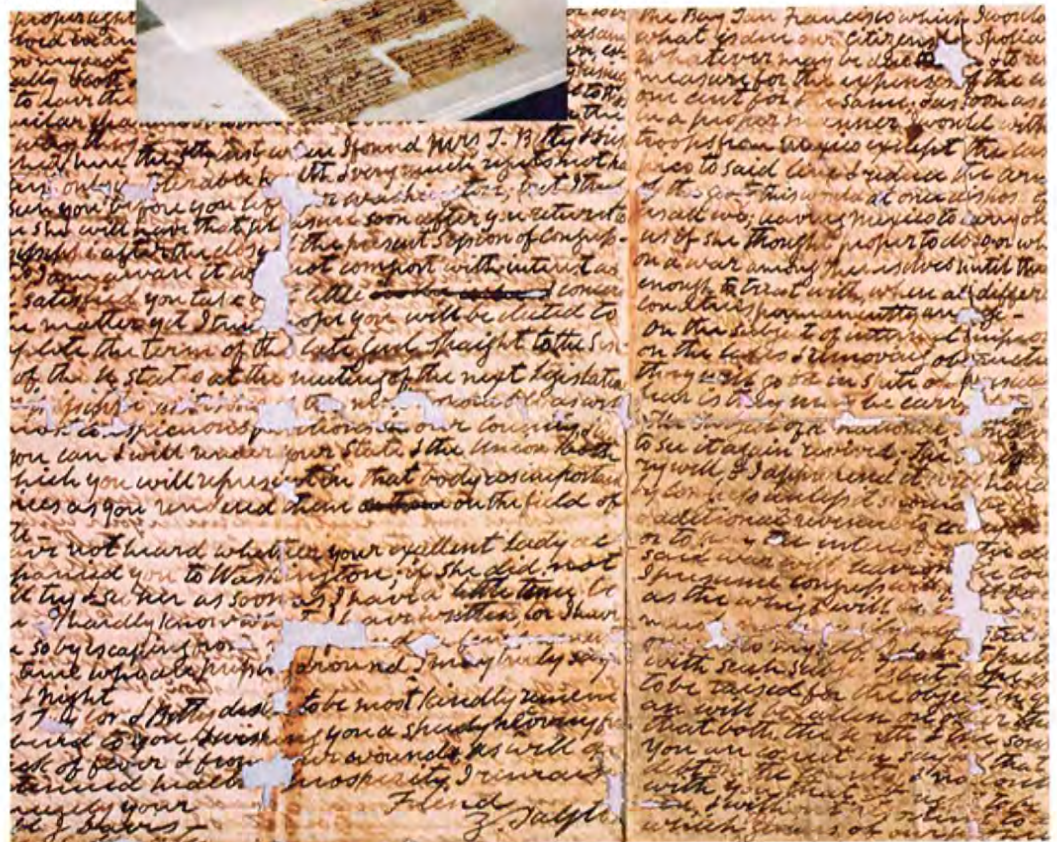
When wetted, the paper clings to the 'Mylar' while the cloth is peeled off and a new, stronger backing can be adhered. The wet paper also slides easily over the 'Mylar' so that, with careful manipulation, tears can be realigned from the back while checking the alignment from the front through the 'Mylar'."

**"Mylar": Choice of Experts**

Carolyn Horton of New York City is an international authority on book and paper restoration and preservation, serving private collectors, institutions and business firms. "Once it was common practice to laminate documents between sheets of cellulose acetate under heat and pressure," she says. "But since the process isn't easily reversible, it isn't used much anymore. Now we put important documents in envelopes of 'Mylar' because it's the strongest, most inert material for the purpose."

Henry Wilhelm, president of Stability and Preservation Research Corporation, Grinnell, Iowa, is the author of *The History and Preservation of Contemporary Photographic Material*, to be published early in 1983. "Traditionally," he says, "the photographic industry has used PVC, cellulose acetate and glassine to protect prints and negatives. Now it's switching to 'Mylar' because of its long-term stability, non-reactivity and the fact that it lies flat, without ripples. Prints in 'Mylar' can be examined without removing them from envelopes, thus avoiding dirt and fingerprints. In a file of prints in traditional envelopes, chemical migration from improperly processed prints to adjacent ones could endanger an entire file. 'Mylar' isolates prints from one another, preventing this migration."

Although most institutions and conservators make their own film coverings of "Mylar", several U.S. companies make and market products using the clear, transparent film to protect documents, photographic negatives and prints, stereo view cards and postcards. For names of manufacturers of such products, write to: PRESERVATION, *Du Pont Magazine*, Wilmington, DE 19898. ■



Dozens of fragments (top) of a letter from Gen. Zachary Taylor to son-in-law Jefferson Davis were reassembled by the Restoration Office of the Library of Congress and encapsulated in clear "Mylar" polyester film.