



QUESTIONS

for Mary Schobert

CCAHA's Director of Conservation is our veteran staff member—here for 35 years! She looks back on favorite projects and tells us how CCAHA has changed over the past four decades.

When did you start working at CCAHA? What was your position?

I began on the first working day of 1982. I was hired as CCAHA's first Conservation Technician. While completing my MFA, I had worked in a book conservation lab. Jobs at that time were slim for artists, and I realized that I really enjoyed the conservation work. The conservator I was working with recommended CCAHA.

How has CCAHA changed while you've worked here?

Obviously, it's grown a lot—we've added a book section, preservation services department, and digital imaging lab. On top of that, it has professionalized. At that time, conservation was still working to establish itself as a profession that required graduate degrees and an ethical code and not simply a craft learned here and there.

What were some of your favorite projects?

You know, it's funny—I think of myself as an artist and a visual person, but many of the things that come to mind aren't images, they're written texts. We had documents from the Missouri District Court; things like the freedom suits, lawsuits filed by or on behalf of persons of color held in slavery—fascinating and memorable documents that changed our country. Another project was the letters of William Smith, the provost of the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania) that we worked on for the University Archives and Records Center. He wrote in the most beautiful way about the death of his wife and several others in his family from the yellow fever epidemic in 1793.

What were some of the most difficult projects?

Many of the most technically-difficult things we do are also the most common. Though it's neither glamorous nor uncommon, removing pressure-sensitive tape from newspaper comes to mind—it's very difficult. I also once treated a platinum print by Thomas Eakins that had insect damage and required inpainting. It was very difficult, but I loved it, so it didn't feel difficult!

What has been the most rewarding aspect of this work?

First of all, seeing the objects that come through the lab is always a thrill. There are some days I just can't believe spending time with these objects is my job. As a conservator, I also feel lucky because I can contribute to the preservation of these objects as well.

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of working at CCAHA, however, has been the staff. I've had the privilege of working with wonderful people—intelligent, dedicated, and mission-driven. Conservation has been a collegial field from its foundation, and CCAHA staff members are always eager to share knowledge. It's also been so satisfying to see so many successful conservation careers launched in part by a fellowship year at CCAHA. Our fellows have gone on to play such a meaningful part in the development of the field.

—AMY HEUER