

*A Stitch in Time: Repairing the  
Original Sewing Structure on Bound Materials*  
3. A View from General Collections Conservation

ABSTRACT

Books in a circulating library collection may require decisions and techniques for repairing failed sewing that differ from those appropriate in “special” library collections. The value of retaining the original structure of the book is balanced against the need to preserve its content and the need for efficiency. In order to preserve original structure whenever feasible, in-house book repair staff may choose from a continuum of options and techniques when sewing is repaired, such as: unsupported chain stitch; unsupported link stitch; Japanese paper lining; Japanese paper with flange; tapes; and Japanese paper and cotton cambric.

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INTRODUCTION

There are several methods for repairing original sewing structures as evidenced in today’s presentations. My colleagues on the panel work primarily on what we call “special collections” or “primary sources.” These are items that may have few or only one extant copy.

In general collections conservation we repair what are frequently called “secondary sources.” The term “collections conservation” is most often applied to materials that are housed in circulating collections in open stacks. This paper focuses on repairing modern, circulating materials that must be retained and made usable for as long as they are deemed important to a library’s institutional mission.

WHAT DOES SEWING REPAIR MEAN?

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It is my general philosophy as a collections conservator to retain as much of the original structure as is possible and appropriate. In many instances an item in the circulating collections is more important for its informational value than for its artifactual value. The need to retain the written information over the physical information often drives our decision to send an item to the commercial bindery or keep it in-house for repair.

For items we do keep in-house, we must first decide whether the original sewing is strong enough to retain. If so, we will save the sewing and structure intact with minimal intervention. If the sewing is contributing to the item’s deterioration, we will remove the original sewing and re sew the text block in a manner that improves usability.

It is also important to consider how much time we can dedicate to repairing one single item. Our small lab with 4.5 FTE staff (including student assistants) has repaired, rehoused, or pamphlet-bound almost 12,000 items this fiscal year. When faced with broken sewing and the amount of time needed to repair the book, we first must decide if the item can and should be repaired. If the item is to be repaired, we will often choose to re sew or use spine linings to stabilize the text block rather than introducing new material for the purpose of strengthening or reconstituting original sewing.

WHEN DO WE RESEW?

We send as many damaged books as we can to the commercial bindery to be recased. For those items staying in-house for repair, I have several guidelines to help us decide when we can take time to re sew a broken text block.

First, we will re sew any item that we feel can be repaired but is too fragile to send to the commercial bindery. The paper must retain some flexibility and be able to withstand the manipulation of sewing.

Second, we will re sew if the text block is complete. If it is missing several pages or plates, or needs extensive page

repair it may be better to choose another option such as boxing, reformatting, or replacement.

Finally, once we start a repair and find that the original sewing is too brittle to continue, we will reconsider our options and direct the book into another more appropriate workflow.

## TECHNIQUES

We use several methods of resewing in our lab that can be categorized as either unsupported or supported sewing. We follow the standard technique of applying a lightweight Japanese paper with wheat starch paste to the spine before applying any other linings. This allows us to more easily reverse any treatment in the future.

### Unsupported Chain Stitch

The unsupported chain stitch is the technique most often used in our lab to resew text blocks or to attach new end sheets. It produces a flexible structure and is relatively quick to sew. I find, however, that it can be difficult for some technicians to learn and master, especially if they are new to this kind of work.

### Unsupported Link Stitch

I find the link stitch to be less fussy and faster than the chain stitch. It is also easier to teach and can be mastered in a short time. Because it often requires adding additional sewing holes to the text block, I consider it more invasive than a chain stitch.

### Japanese Paper Lining

In the supported sewing category, the simplest technique to use is sewing over the first spine lining of Japanese tissue. This is best used to consolidate loose sewing or a partial break in the text block such as one broken sewing station.

### Japanese Paper with Flange

I've started using this flange technique for text blocks with a single break in the sewing, that is, when you have two pieces that make up the whole text. The first step in the process is to create a free flange that extends into the text block by trimming the Japanese paper spine lining about one quarter-inch wider than the text block piece (fig. 1). The two flanges are then pasted or glued together to consolidate the text block for sewing (fig. 2).

### Tapes

Tapes are used for extra support if the text block is oversized or heavy. I paste the tapes to the spine to support the split or loose part of the text block and then sew the sections with a link stitch.

## Japanese Paper and Cotton Cambric

This technique is experimental and stems from a very brief conversation I had with Don Etherington regarding sewing new end sheets onto an already deteriorated text block. I have been using this technique to repair the staple-bound text blocks that are so prevalent in our stacks. The staples are usually rusted through and are no longer strong enough to keep the leaves together, and many have lost the tapes to which they were attached. The paper in these books is generally in good condition and remains flexible. The staples, however, are usually rusted and failing.

I start by cleaning the spine and applying the first lining (fig. 3). Once this lining is dry, I apply a cotton cambric lining with polyvinyl acetate adhesive (PVA). I then resew the text block over the cambric using a link stitch (fig. 4). The Japanese tissue stabilizes the existing sewing (or staples in this case) and the cotton cambric provides support for the new sewing. Additional linings can be applied if needed. If the staples have damaged the inner fold, a free guard of Japanese tissue can be used to help support the sewing from the inside of each gathering.

What I like about this technique is that it retains some of the original structure of the staple binding while creating a text block that can better withstand the heavy use of a circulating collection.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would like to restate that we try to save original sewing structures whenever feasible. There are many decisions to make within the context of the demands placed upon us by the collections, our users, and ultimately our institutions. My presentation today reflects a



Fig. 1. Free flange is created by extending spine lining.

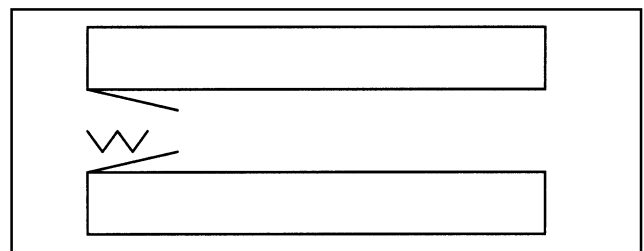


Fig. 2. Flanges are pasted or glued together to stabilize text block for sewing.

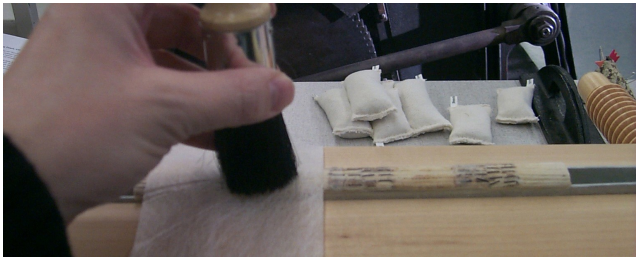


Fig. 3. Spine is cleaned and lined with Japanese tissue.

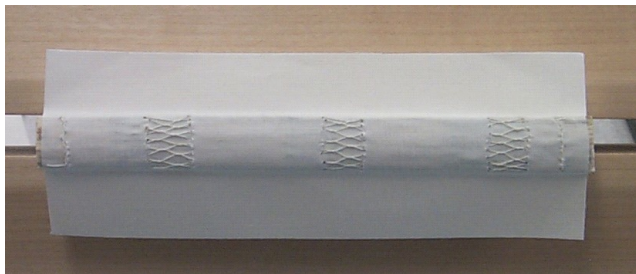


Fig. 4. Cotton cambric is glued on and the text block is sewn over the cambric.

continuum of options for retaining original sewing structures within a collections conservation framework.

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