On The Other Side

Hidden treasures abound on the backsides of historic documents

Lee Ann Potter

In the soon-to-be-released Walt Disney Pictures feature film, National Treasure, an adventurer embarks on a hunt to find a treasure, whose hiding place is indicated by a map in invisible ink on the back of the Declaration of Independence. In case you were wondering, while the movie’s plot is purely fiction, there is indeed writing on the back of the original, signed Declaration of Independence. But it is not invisible, nor does it include a map. The writing on the back of the Declaration reads,

“Original Declaration of Independence
dated 4th July 1776”

and it appears on the bottom of the document, upside down. While no one knows for certain who wrote these words, it is known that early in its life, the large parchment document (it measures 29¾ inches by 24½ inches) was rolled up for storage. So, it is likely that the notation was added simply as a label.

As this little-known information about the Declaration suggests, the backside of an historical document can reveal interesting details about the document’s history as an artifact. The details might relate directly to the document’s travels, its owners, or handlers; or they might offer clues to the economic, social, and political conditions at the time of the document’s creation.

Eighteenth and early nineteenth century letters, for example, were folded and sealed shut with sealing wax because envelopes had not yet been invented. The address was typically written in the center of the last page of a folded folio so it could be seen when sealed shut.
Additionally, the address can often provide insight into information not necessarily contained in the text of the letter. For example, the backsides of many of the letters submitted to Congress by the various states transmitting their Electoral College vote counts for the 1840 presidential election read simply, “To the President of the Senate of the United States/Washington City.” This small amount of information serves as a reminder of the requirements of Article II, Section 1 of the U.S. Constitution—that electoral vote counts be submitted to the president of the Senate. Another interesting example is the letter sent by Thomas Jefferson in February of 1803 to George Washington accepting the appointment to become the first secretary of state. The backside of the letter is simply addressed to “George Washington/President of the/United States.” It was stamped in black ink “Richmond Feb 13/Free.”

In addition, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century government documents were tri-folded and often their backsides contained endorsements that revealed who received the document, when it was received, and often a brief synopsis or comment—much like a routing and transmittal slip used today. The after action report on the Battle of Gettysburg that Robert E. Lee submitted to the Confederate secretary of war, James A. Seddon, is one example. Its backside includes, among other notations, a message from Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, indicating that he had read the document “with satisfaction” on August 5, 1863. Other nineteenth century examples include thousands of petitions and memorials submitted to Congress that were tri-folded and annotated with the date received and committee of referral.

Also, at times when paper was in short supply, information was frequently recorded on both sides of a page or written on the back
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Of all Sorts, at the Old Experienced TACKLE SHOP kept by

GEORGE R. LAWTON,
SUCCESSOR TO
EDWARD POLE.

No. 32, Great Dock-street, between Front and Second-streets, near the Drawbridge, Philadelphia. Where may be had a large complete and general assortment of all kinds of FISHING TACKLE, for the use of either Sea or River, viz.

F L Y, trolling, bottom bag, and all other sorts and sizes of fishing rods, either hollow or solid, plain or ringed,
Plain and Multiplying Braids, Whorls,
Horse, hair, silk, hardest, silk-worms gur, Indian Graft,
Hempen, Cotton, Lay, and Angling Lines,
Deep-speed, for Sea or River Fishing, ready fitted,
Trimmers for Pike Fishing,
Cork Floats, a variety with either Goose or Swan Quills,
Artificial Flies, Mohrs, Hackles, Minnow, Caddis, Grass Hoppers, Dibberies, Frog, Mouse, Birds, Caddis, &c.,
for Trout and other Fishing,
Bell Silk-worms Gut, Indian-graft and Weed,
Leads of various Patterns, for Black Point and other Fishing.
Bell Kinky and Common Fishing Hooks of every Size, either loose or ready Hung, on Silk, Hair, Silk-worms Gut, Indian-Graft, or Weed,
Double and Treble, Spring and Lead Snap Pike, and Eel-hooks wired,
Bass, and Plain Salmon, Jack, Pearch, and Trout-flies,
4, 5, 10, & 12, Stave Round and Flat Pocket Reels, ready fitted.
White and Yellow Gimp, for Pike Fishing,
Fishing Rackets and Aprons,
Dream Bottles and Flasks, covered with Leather,
Casting Minnow, Landing, Snop, and Crab Nets, &c. &c.

Carolina reeds for reed makers or fishing rods by the thousand or single one.
All kinds made to country store keepers and others purchasing quantities to fill again.

Any orders from town or country, will be as carefully attended to, and as duly executed as if personally present.

All kinds of Fishing Tackle, repaired and made to any pattern.

From an experience of upwards of thirty years, and the complete and general assortment of Fishing Tackle kept at this Shop, it is expected that purchasers can be supplied better and on more reasonable terms, than any other shop in the United States, as he always has a large stock on hand.

At the same place may also be had a general assortment of FOWLING TACKLE.

N. B. Gentlemen going on parties of pleasure, in the Fowling or Fishing way, either to Black Point, Sea or River, or any other place, may be completely furnished with any kind of Fishing or Fowling Tackle, at the shortest notice.

N. B. Ready money for any quantity of Carolina Reeds, White Horse Tails, Silk Worms Gut, &c. &c.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Large hook</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>82.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dropper Line</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India Line</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sportsman's Hack</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Line 1 reel</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Received the above articles

[Signature]

Capt. 1st USN of Bath
of a page used for an earlier, unrelated purpose. The Emancipation Proclamation, signed by President Abraham Lincoln, for example, was originally written on two folios that were folded into four sheets. The sheets were, at some point separated, and the text appears on the first three sheets of paper—pages one and two are back to back, pages three and four are back to back, page five is a single sheet with no writing on its back, and the last sheet is blank on both sides. An earlier example is a bill presented to the government by George R. Lawton, an auctioneer from Philadelphia, for supplies used by the Lewis and Clark expedition, dated May 18, 1803. The document, reproduced on pages 378-379, lists various articles of fishing tackle that were received by Meriwether Lewis and is written on the back of a printed broadside. Another Civil War era document in the holdings of the National Archives that has an interesting backside is a flag design for the Confederacy that was submitted for consideration on the back of a sheet of wall paper.

Sometimes notations on the back of a document acted as certifications or were necessary to fulfill the obligations of the front of the document. The back of an enrolled act or resolution of Congress contains the attestation phrase “I certify that this Act originated in the Senate (or House of Representatives),” and is signed by either the chamber’s clerk or secretary. And the back of a check or Treasury warrant can include an endorsement in the form of a signature. The back of the Treasury warrant for Alaska, for example, was signed by the Russian minister in Washington, Edouard de Stoeckl. By endorsing it, he allowed for the transfer of $7.2 million from the U.S. Treasury to Russia and the transfer of Alaska to the United States.

Finally, the information contained on the back of an historical document can serve as a reminder that the value of a document is not just in its obvious content, but also in its obscure content and its physical form—that the unexpected notations and material prompt questions and generate interest that can lead to exciting historical research and a deeper understanding of the past.

Note
All of the examples cited in this article are in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration. The Declaration of Independence, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the public laws are in Record Group 11, General Records of the United States; the Electoral College transmittal letters are in Record Group 46, Records of the United States Senate; Thomas Jefferson’s letter is in Record 59, General Records of the Department of State; Robert E. Lee’s report is in Record Group 109, War Department Collection of Confederate Records; the Lawton receipt is in Record Group 92, Records of the Office of Quartermaster General; and the Alaska Treasury Warrant is in Record Group 217, Records of the Accounting Officers of the Department of the Treasury. Images of the Emancipation Proclamation are available on the website of the National Archives at www.archives.gov/exhibit_hall/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/ and both sides of the Treasury warrant for Alaska are available at www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/alaska_migration/cancelled_check.html.

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