

Tape Removal Methods for Paper Railroadiana

By David Hamilton

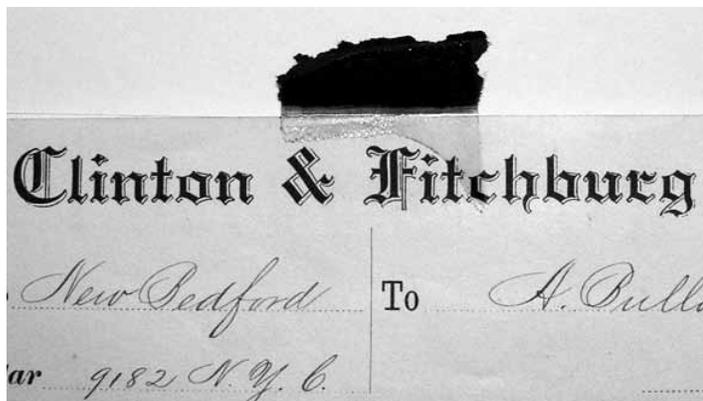
In previous articles, we reviewed some of the archival cleaning and storage methods that are available for the conservation of paper antiques and collectibles. In the next few installments, we'll take a look at some of the techniques that can be employed to repair minor wear to books and paper railroadiana. While rare or seriously damaged items are best left to professional conservators, it is usually possible for the average collector to handle minor issues. One area worth covering, that has not yet been discussed in this column, is the removal of tape from paper items.

As was stated in previous articles, it is important to understand that individual items will react differently to cleaning or repair and may even be permanently damaged. Anything that is rare or valuable should only be handled by a professional conservator. In the process of cleaning papers, I have accidentally torn off pieces, creased corners and worn holes through pages. No matter how much care is taken, something will eventually get damaged. With this warning in mind, we can take a look at a fairly simple way to remove tape from our paper railroadiana.

Tape is actually just an adhesive held in place by some type of backing material. While on the surface it appears to be a good product for use in paper repair, even acid free tape will damage paper over the long term. Most of the adhesives



Tools for tape removal are readily available at art supply and craft stores: rubber cement "eraser," hobby knife, artist's paint application spatula, and tweezers.



Books and ephemera are often repaired or mounted with tape, causing damage over the long term.

used in tape are oil based, and will eventually stain paper and even seep through to damage adjacent papers, or the front of a page if the back is taped. Unfortunately, tape is probably the most commonly used product for making repairs to paper collectibles and for mounting items in scrapbooks. Sooner or later, we will acquire something that has been taped and will want to remove it.

While conservators use specialized equipment for this type of job, we can get by with a more simple technique that doesn't require a big investment in hardware. The tools required for our tape removal method are readily available at any good art supply store and around the house. Items needed include: a hair dryer, a thin edged artist's spatula, flat tweezers, a hobby knife, and a rubber cement clean-up

square, also called a rubber cement eraser. Some type of weights (or just some books) will also be needed to hold the paper in place while it is being worked on. Any clean, flat surface with good lighting can serve as a work area.

Once the tools are assembled, and the paper is laid out on the work space and weighted down, the first step is to remove the backing from the adhesive. This is accomplished by heating the tape with a hair dryer, held about two inches away from the surface of the paper. Although it hasn't happened to me yet, it is possible to burn paper by applying too much heat, so it is important to keep a close watch and only heat it for a minute or two at a time. Care must also be taken to direct the air flow straight down, to avoid tearing the paper.

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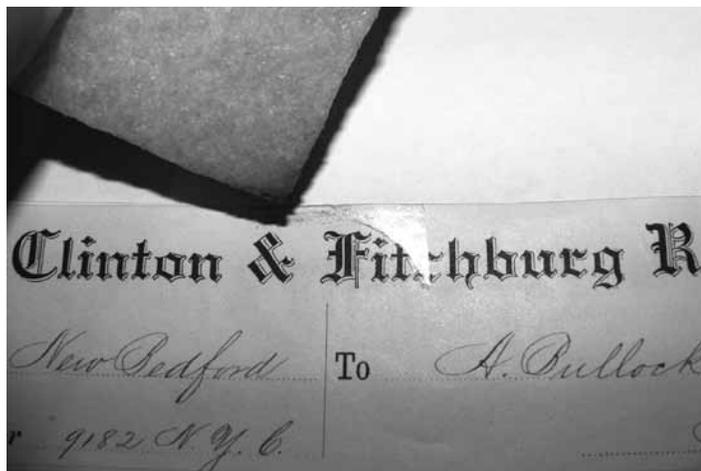
The tape's backing is removed by heating it with a hair dryer and slowly lifting it off with an artist's spatula.

If we are lucky, the tape will start to curl up on its own, but often it will need some encouragement. If it is still firmly attached after several minutes of heating, a corner can be carefully picked up with a hobby knife. In most cases, however, the tape will be flexible enough to work it loose with an artist's spatula. By applying heat while gently working the spatula under the tape, the backing will begin to peel off of the paper. Once a reasonable amount has separated from the paper, it can be slowly removed with tweezers. The key word here is "slowly," as the paper will be torn if the job is rushed or too much pressure is applied. It is the heat that is doing the work of expanding the tape, and we are just helping it along.

After the backing has been removed, there will still be a substantial amount of adhesive remaining on the paper. The next step is to remove this residue, using a rubber cement pick-up square or eraser. While the adhesive is still warm, a corner of the eraser is gently rubbed over it in a circular



The eraser is lightly rubbed in a circular motion until small clumps of adhesive begin to form and stick to it.



Once the tape's backing has been peeled away, the remaining adhesive can be slowly and carefully removed by rubbing it off with a rubber cement "eraser" tool.

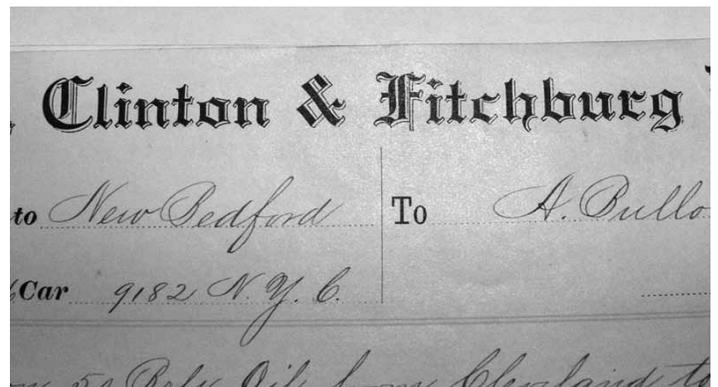
motion. Some patience is required during this step, as it usually takes a few minutes to get any visible results. It is very important to resist the urge to rub faster and press harder, or the paper will be torn and ink removed. Occasionally reheating the area with the hair dryer will keep the adhesive in a workable state.

Once the adhesive begins to stick to the eraser, it will start to form small clumps that will aid in picking up more residue. As this happens, the rate of removal will increase dramatically, and larger areas of the paper will start to look clean. Excess adhesive can simply be picked off the eraser by hand, and stubborn areas of residue should be guided toward the edge of the paper. Once again, it is extremely important to work slowly and carefully, reheating the paper as needed. Once the paper no longer feels tacky, then everything that can be removed by this method will be gone.

At this point, there may still be a light stain on the paper, caused by acids or oils in the adhesive. Unfortunately, there isn't much that can be done to clean it, even with more extensive conservation treatments. If the tape was applied

more recently though, most traces of it will be removed and further damage will be prevented. Needless to say, the sooner the tape can be removed from a newly acquired item, the better.

For papers where the tape had been used for mounting in a scrapbook, all that remains is to clean any remaining dust or dirt and store or display it in an archival enclosure. If the tape that was removed had been applied to make a repair, then the decision must be made as to what type of new repair will be made. When possible, the best course of action is to



Very little evidence of a recently applied piece of tape remains after the removal process is complete.

leave the item in unmended condition. If display or planned use requires that repairs be made to avoid additional damage, then a reversible method should be employed. In a future article, we'll take a look at some of the archival quality repair products that are available.

It is always exciting to find an old scrapbook at a garage sale or a box at a flea market that contains some unusual timetables, tickets or other memorabilia. Generally, taped items are considered to be less desirable and thus command a much lower price than they would in perfect condition. With our tape removal techniques, we can turn those junk shop bargains into nice pieces for our collections.