

Solving a Historical Puzzle

BY MONICA GRAY AND PAUL LEE

Since 1787, wills and other papers relating to the estates of deceased persons have been filed in the Surrogate's Court in each county of New York State. The New York State Archives holds early wills probated with the provincial secretary, the Prerogative Court, and the State Court of Probates. Most of the wills were probated before 1787, ranging from 1665 up to the early 1800s.



As part of an ongoing project to improve access to our colonial-era Probated Wills, Historic Conservation Technicians Paul Lee and Peter Wolfgang have been making digital copies of records and recording names for *New York State Court of Probates Probated Wills* (record series J0038-92, sub-series 2).

Most of the wills in this series are the manuscript originals, signed by the testators and witnesses, along with the records of probate. Overall, the records are in very good condition—with one or two notable exceptions. To our surprise, the will of Samuel Sitwell of New York City had been torn into pieces and sewn back together with fine silk thread. Although the will was accepted by the court and probated on July 7, 1767, it was not possible to read the will due to the stitching and overlapping edges. Lee undertook the task of fitting the pieces together and repairing the document to make it readable once again.

The document was taken to the conservation lab for examination under different types of light and to discuss treatment options with the head of conservation, Cher Schneider. It appeared that the two leaves were sewn together, which served as a preservation method to hold the torn bits in place over the centuries. Treatment methods were discussed. Should the original state or the repaired option take precedence? It was determined

This description was included with the record, which was originally held by the New York County Surrogate's Court and later transferred to the State Archives from the Queens Borough Public Library in 1992.

The will of Samuel Stillwell is a curious document in that it was torn in very small pieces and then laboriously sewed together. Stillwell went insane shortly before his death and tore up all personal papers. He was of a noted New York family.

The will was accepted and probated on 7 July 1767.

In the Name of god amen I comace,
 Titius of the City of New York Merchant being
 in good health and of sound & disposing
 Mind and Understanding Thanks be to god
 for the same but willing to hind the Uncertainty
 of this mortal life and the certainty of death
 Do hereby make Publish and declare this my
 last Will and Testament in manner following
 First I recommend my soul into the hands
 of almighty god in whom I Trust and believe
 to succeed and my body I commit to the
 earth to be decently buried at the Discretion
 of my Executors hereinafter named And for
 the disposing of such temporal estate which with
 the heavenly hath been pleased to bestow
 I give Dispose in manner following I give and
 Give hereby enter that all my debts due and
 several charges of first hand and satisfied
 them I give and bequeath the Success & Interest
 of the Sum of One Thousand pounds current
 Money of New York unto my Sister Deborah
 until she die and during the natural life of her
 the said Deborah which I devise and Order
 may be paid out of Debts or good security
 by my Executors or the Survivors or Survivor of
 them for that purpose And that the Duties
 thereof be duly paid to her And immediately
 upon the Death of the said Deborah I give
 and bequeath the said several principal
 Sum of One Thousand pounds to and between
 my Executors

New York City of a certain Dying Person and Will of Record
 with all the Estates and Conditions therein being and being
 in Queen Street in the said City and Town of the
 said James Duane It is my Will and the Will by this
 present Writing give Devise and bequeath the same as follows
 I give and bequeath the said several principal
 Sum of One Thousand pounds unto my Sister Deborah
 until she die and during the natural life of her
 the said Deborah which I devise and Order
 may be paid out of Debts or good security
 by my Executors or the Survivors or Survivor of
 them for that purpose And that the Duties
 thereof be duly paid to her And immediately
 upon the Death of the said Deborah I give
 and bequeath the said several principal
 Sum of One Thousand pounds to and between
 my Executors

that repairing the sheet to its original form would allow the document to be read, while a record of the torn version would be maintained through documentation and imaging.

Treatment began with careful surface cleaning of the sheets with conservation-grade erasers. Then Lee carefully snipped and removed the fine silk threads, working left to right along the rows to keep the pieces in order. He determined that the first leaf was complete and there was some loss of the second leaf. Using a light table, Lee painstakingly aligned the edges of each torn paper to recreate each leaf. He was pleased to discover that the edges were still crisp and hadn't frayed over time or through abrasion, allowing the recreation of the texts to be legible on each leaf.

To stabilize the aligned pieces, Lee mended the tears with small rectangles of pre-coated,

heat-set tissue which he and Wolfgang made in the lab. Heat-set tissue is a very thin, conservation-grade Japanese paper with a coating of non-damaging adhesives, developed by the Library of Congress. The adhesive is heat-activated, so when the loose pieces of the sheet were in the correct place, Lee applied a small "mend" of heat-set tissue with a small tacking iron to activate the adhesive along the edges of the two pieces. The process is reversible and the tissue can be removed without damage to the document.

You can soon see the results for yourself—the will is readable once again, and will be available online in our Digital Collections. Check out the progress that Lee and Wolfgang have made on digitizing probated wills by searching that term at digitalcollections.archives.nysed.gov. ■