Solving a Historical Puzzle

BY MONICA GRAY AND PAUL LEE

ince 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.

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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).

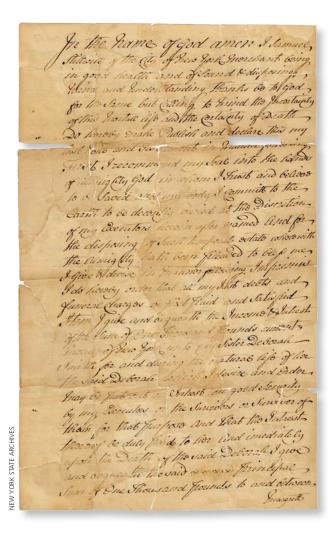
Most of the wills in this series are the manuscript originals, signed by the testators and witnesses, along with the records of probate. Overall, the records are in very good condition—with one or two notable exceptions. To our surprise, the will of Samuel Sitwell of New York City had been torn into 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.





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 on 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.