

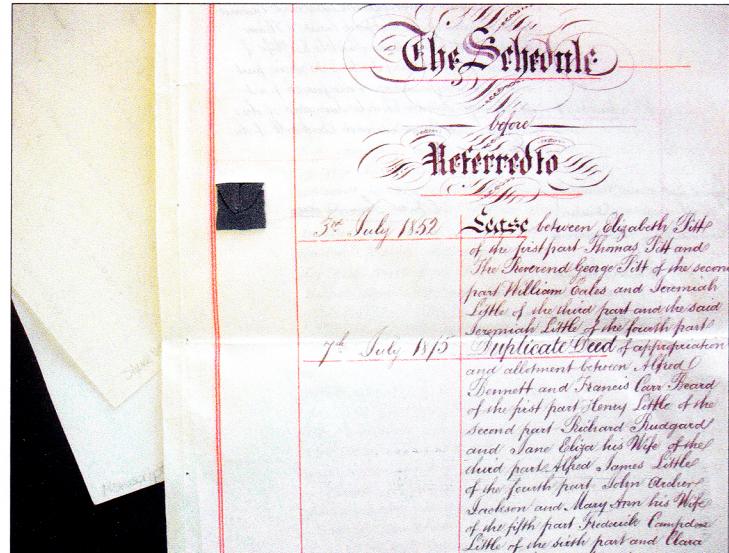
Parchment and Vellum Revisited

Used for thousands of years and still today, these materials require special handling.

The use of animal skins for recording history has long been practiced, and skins have survived from as early as Egypt 2500 BC. Vellum was the proper name given for any high-quality animal skin excluding sheep or lamb. People have long referred to refined parchment as vellum, and even though all writing skins are often referred to as parchment, the only true parchment comes from sheep. The bottom line? All vellum is parchment, but not all parchment is vellum.

Parchment

The skins from sheep are whiter and oilier than vellum, giving them distinctive visual and tactile differences. Skins are prepared for storage by soaking them in a solution of salt and sulfuric acid, known as pickling, to preserve and prevent decay. Then they are depickled, scraped, limed, and squeezed to remove moisture, then tied to a wooden frame at 21 points around the edge of the skin, and allowed to dry 5-6 days. They are then scraped for the second and third time, degreased, shaved, pumiced, purified, and



whitened, all by hand, then set aside to dry. Dried skins are cut from the wooden frame for finishing or cutting into smaller pieces.

Vellum

Though dominantly calf and goat, they are generally creamy in color and often showcase the veining of the animal. The process for preparing vellum is similar to parchment. After the hair has been removed, there is a long liming process lasting up to four weeks. Shaving of vellums takes much longer and is more difficult, requiring much greater skill. New skins are generally stored rolled; reverse rolling will lie them flat. Most vellums are sold as whole skins, unlike parchment, which is also available in rectangular shapes.

This legal page is from sheepskin, called parchment. Modern conservators, librarians, and archivists prefer to use the singular word parchment or the neutral term animal membrane.

Modern Times

In the past, the term denoted fine, pale skins of vellum used for calligraphy, creating exquisite Books of Hours; today, it is often used to imply bookbinding-weight



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Left to right: Manuscript calf vellum, slunk lightweight vellum, classic writing vellum, manuscript medium weight calf vellum, white goatskin, sheepskin parchment.

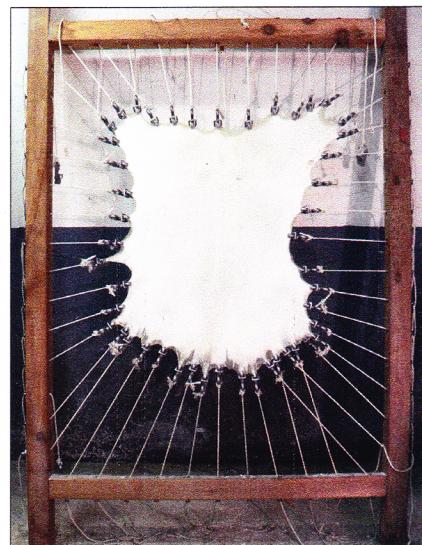
skins, leaving parchment to refer to document-weight skins, so the terminology remains confusing.

Skins are sought after for their longevity because of their complete lack of acidity due to the cleaning and purification processes. No two skins are alike in color, weight, and texture, so allowing them to remain in their natural, unmounted state is mandatory. Physically mounting a skin using any process restricts it

from the natural expansion and contraction it craves through variations in relative humidity. Preservationally, a skin document or diploma should be sink mounted or conservationaly mounted with corners or edge strips. If a document is slightly buckled, it is simply part of the total effect and appearance and should be allowed to thrive. Authentic animal skins are more limited to university diplomas in the United States; in other parts of the world, they are more widely used for everything from wedding invitations to royal proclamations.

Conservation

If a cracked, wrinkled, or rolled document has been brought in and needs to be made flat, the best advice is to contact a conservator. If it has become dry and brittle, forcing it flat



Skins are stretched out on a herse, a frame for drying skins, kept under tension and scraped while it dries. Courtesy of Cornell University Library Conservation

could crack it. Relaxing and flattening a cockled document may involve soaking in water then slowly drying between Pellon and blotters beneath a weight, but pressure methods of flattening do not always preserve



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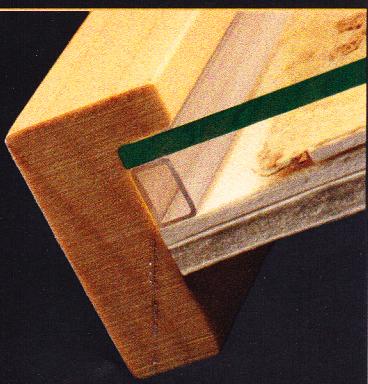

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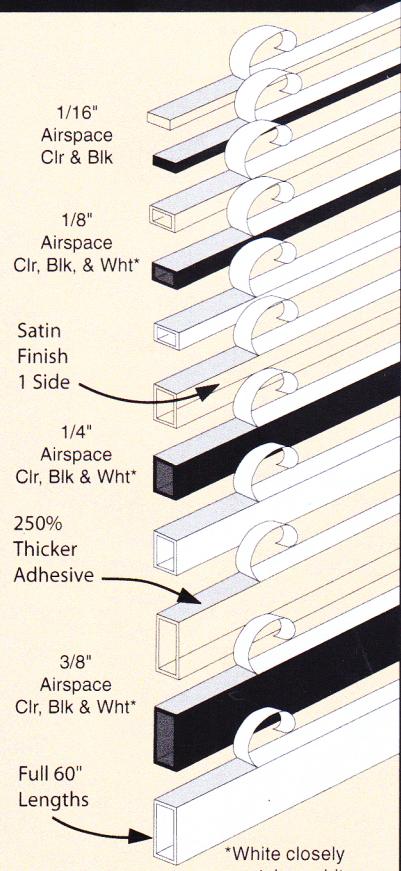


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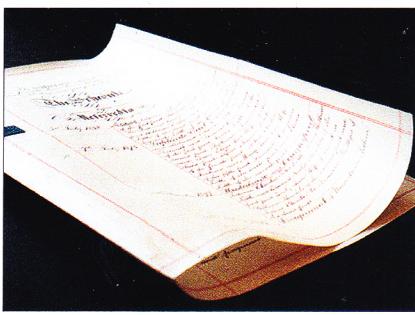


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This 1852 sheepskin parchment ledger sheet has been encouraged to curl through the application of tolerable heat at 180°F, but excessive pressure.

the original character of parchment. When tensioning, skins are washed again, then stretched out on a herse (a frame for drying skins) to be kept under constant tension and scraped while it dries. (Locate a conservator in your area by visiting the American Institute for Conservation online.)

Maintaining a stable storage environment of $64.4^{\circ}\text{F} \pm 2^{\circ}$ with a relative humidity of $55\% \text{ RH} \pm 5\%$ is also highly recommended; otherwise, the benefits of having flattened parchment may be reversed. Light can cause fading and discoloration, while heat and humidity can cause skins to warp, crack, mold, or deteriorate. Wear gloves when handling and cleaning. Dust and other particles may accumulate on the surface of these materials, so use a soft brush to gently remove any dust or debris, and use neutral-pH, archival materials for storage, and UV-protective glazing for display.

Heat and Moisture

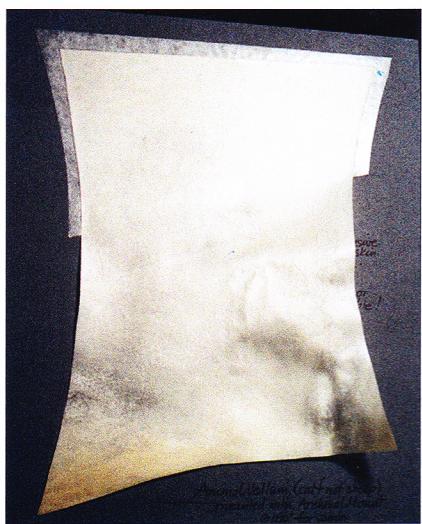
Reactions to heat and moisture together can be severe. This section is not to encourage flattening or mounting but rather to illustrate what may happen if attempted.

Occasionally the customer will demand they want it flat, regardless of its natural tendency to buckle through moisture expansion. Although mounting may be possible, it

should be discouraged. Documents, certificates, and diplomas should be treated as a fine art original. Museum mounting using rag materials and no adhesives should always be stressed.

Parchment cannot be immersed in water because the lime may be removed and the skin could wrinkle and go transparent; plus, exposure to heat could result in irreversible shrinkage. Since parchment is hygroscopic, changes in RH and temperature results in cockling. Traditional methods of hinging using paste and Japanese tissue can also result in cockling around the hinge as the skin expands and contracts.

Vellum will often tolerate a higher temperature, or moisture, than parchment. Applying heat alone to skins will not radically affect them as long as it is not too hot. Care should always be taken when applying heat of any kind, though 160°F for three minutes to set any low temperature tissue is very safe. The 5" x 7" vellum sample below was first soaked in distilled water, then allowed to freely air dry under no pressure, encouraging the lower right corner to cockle. The left side was then pressed flat at 160°F using a mechanical press. The



The sample on the left has been dampened and air-dried, while the one on the right has had moisture and heat at the same time.

top portion was then dry mounted to 4-ply mat board using BufferMount tissue at 165F for three minutes and cooled under a glass weight.

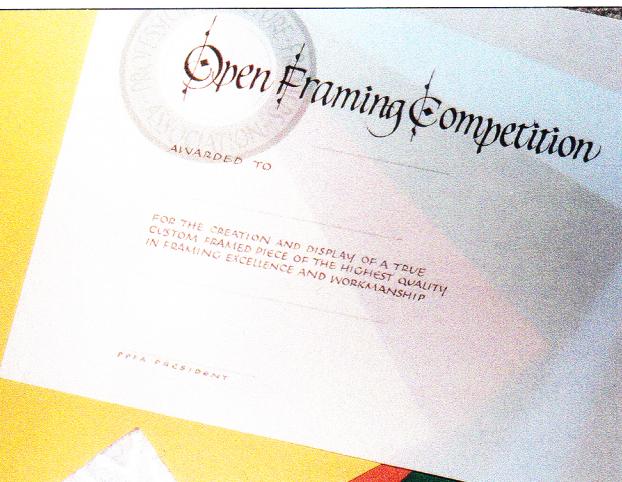
A combination of heat and pressure while damp will slightly shrink most vellum, while it may do major damage to parchment. The left sample illustrates parchment that has been dampened and air-dried. There is about 5% natural shrinkage due to the original stretched cleaning process. The right sample illustrates the damage resulting in applying both moisture and heat to the parchment at the same time.

Both stretched and mounted ver-

sions of presentation are unnatural to vellum and parchment, for it assumes an inconsistent character from the true natural look. If archivally hinged, skins should be placed 1/8" from the glazing for room to breathe by using a sink mount and neutral-pH window mats. When cared for, these archivally preserved masterpieces should last for many generations.

Artificial Parchment and Vellum

The terms parchment and vellum are also used in the paper making industry to refer to artificial versions of these materials. Imitation parchment



Translucent vellum paper was used to print PPFA award certificates.

lose fibers prepared from fir trees or plants such as cotton or flax, and are manufactured to resemble the mottled surface and texture of animal parchment.

Imitation vellum is made from plasticized rag cotton or fibers from interior tree bark. It is similar to translucent frosted glass, and it is durable enough for printing, writing, and crafting, being used for invitations, certificates, diplomas, and blueprints.

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