ON THE PRESERVATION OF OLD MANUSCRIPTS.

BY JOSEPH WILLCOX.

A fervent interest in the cause of the truthfulness that should characterize all historical proceedings has induced the writer to prepare this paper for the consideration of librarians and other collectors of old manuscripts.

There is a custom which widely prevails to which the writer desires to declare his protest in the interest of historical propriety and accuracy as above indicated.

This reference is intended to apply particularly to the plan of dealing with old letters that have been worn and torn by rough usage and the vicissitudes of time.

In the opinion of the writer, in the case of such manuscripts, both truthfulness and the spirit of candour demand that they should not be subjected to the process of reconstruction, either in the matter of writing or of paper, for the purpose of misrepresenting their former imperfect condition.

Such old letters should be permitted to survive on their own merits; and their appearance of antiquity should be respected. Moreover they should be preserved from the suspicion of having been tampered with.

The paper, if incomplete, should not be reconstructed to masquerade as a part of a composite production.

The following hypothetical illustration is here given to emphasize this idea.

A man possessing an old and valuable letter presents it to an historical society, presuming that it will be carefully and permanently preserved and be subject to inspection by any interested visitor, without exciting, on his part, any feelings of suspicion.
This letter, having passed through the "regulation process" of rejuvenescence, by various additions, is finally installed among other manuscript relics of times long past.

At a later date the donor requests permission to inspect the old letter.

At first sight he distrusts his eyes; but when assured that the paper before him is the same that he presented, with horror he exclaims: "This hybrid letter, that you state was mine, is not the one that was possessed by me, and which was treasured by my father during the term of many years, with careful precautions from further ravages of time! The writing on my former letter occupied a half sheet of paper only; the other portion having been detached and lost! My letter, dated in 1730, was written on a paper made in Holland, while the outside half sheet, now attached to this, by skilful pasting, is the product of the Whatman Mill, established in England about 1760!

"Also one corner of my letter was torn off, and one edge was time-worn and rough, while this sheet now before me is substantially complete. It cannot be considered the letter that I presented!

"My letter should have been regarded like a broken statue, reclaimed from the buried ruins of an ancient city, whose incompleteness should be viewed with sentiments akin to veneration, and which should evermore be free from the ordeal of reconstruction!

"Or like a mutilated flag after long service in camp and on the march, and rescued from the field of battle; the deplorable condition of which should inspire sentiments of reverence; and any suggestion for a patchwork restoration would be strenuously resented!"

A case somewhat parallel will here be stated. In one of the museums in this country are installed a number of fossil skeletons of mammals and reptiles long since extinct. In some cases, where certain portions of these skeletons were not obtained from the fossil beds, the palaeontologist in charge of the museum substituted imitations of such miss-
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ing portions which were made with calcined plaster colored like the true fossil bones, so that visitors to the museum could not distinguish the genuine from those that were artificially restored.

An outcry of protest, against what was termed a fraud, by many naturalists, resulted in the abandonment of such a practice, and the restored portions were colored in such a manner that their true character could be recognized.

The following incident occurred within the precinct of the present writer's own experience.

An old and valued friend of mine had, through many years of labor and at great expense, accumulated a large collection of old and valuable autograph letters. Nearly all of them were prepared for preservation and reference either by his own experienced hands or by another person under his supervision.

This collection was installed in many volumes in the most approved manner regardless of expense.

Some time after the death of the former owner I had occasion to examine one of the volumes referred to. When opening it one of the first letters exposed to view contained an ancient date which I observed. Before the letter was read I examined the outside half, on the face of which no writing had been made; in order to note the character of the paper. With a feeling of surprise I stated to the caretaker of the collection: "Some person has deceived the late owner of this letter! It bears upon its back the evidence of fraud! The paper was undoubtedly made more than fifty years later than the date inscribed within it!"

After a further examination, however, I discovered that the back or outside half of the sheet, of a different make of paper, though quite similar in color, had been skilfully attached with paste to the letter, to give it the appearance of completeness.

Though strictly honest in his intentions, and following a custom of frequent use, the former owner of this collection
did not realize what, to my mind, appeared to be the impropriety of attaching a comparatively modern paper to an ancient manuscript and to be regarded as a part thereof.

In the opinion of the writer old manuscripts may legitimately be made even and level by pressing; but not made smoother than their original condition.

It would manifestly be improper to calender an old manuscript dated at a time anterior to the invention of the process of calendering.

All rents in old manuscripts should be reinforced by paper of another color or by silk veiling; but in no case should its integrity be violated by disguise.