

Smithsonian trying to save Jefferson Bible

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The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — When Thomas Jefferson was 77, he went back to a project he had been thinking about for decades. Sitting in his Monticello home, using candlelight and a knife, he cut New Testament verses in four different languages from six books to create his own Bible. Jefferson, saying he was selecting his own “morsels of morality,” removed verses on any miracles and the Resurrection.

For more than 116 years, the Jefferson Bible, as it is known, has been an iconic possession of the Smithsonian Institution. Now, conservators and curators have removed the 86 pages from the original binding and

is examining every inch to stabilize its condition, study words and craftsmanship, and ensure that future generations can learn more about the artifact and the man.

In the paper conservation lab recently at the National Museum of American History, the team showed pages from the small red book, put together like a scrapbook. The pages, with verses glued on each side, are brittle and stiff (90 percent show damage). Jefferson used a mix of animal glue and starch as an adhesive. The handsewn binding is tight, making the spine rigid. On one table in the basement workshop, Jefferson's title page for “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth” is elaborately writ-

ten in his clear hand.

“There are 12 different types of paper and seven different types of ink,” said Janice Stagnitto Ellis, the museum's paper conservator.

Jefferson was meticulous, she said, leaving precise gaps in each book as he removed the verses that supported his religious and moral beliefs. He used two English texts, as well as two French and two Greek and Latin, arranging his selections in chronological order over four columns.

He was also an editor. “Apparently, he didn't like the construction here of ‘for as in a day,’ so he edited out the ‘as,’” explained Ellis, pointing with a micro-spatula to the little square where he had eliminated the word.

“This is a private document he created for himself,” said Harry Rubenstein, the chair of the museum's political history division. “He never sold it because he didn't want it to be public. He wanted to avoid bringing back the arguments that he was anti-Christian.”

The conservation is estimated to cost about \$225,000 from public and private funds. Completed in 1820, the book stayed in Jefferson's family until the Smithsonian bought it from a great-granddaughter in 1895. Once the effort is completed, the book will be reassembled, using its original sewing holes and Moroccan leather cover. It will be displayed for four months, beginning in November, and a website will be launched.