

The Exhibit of Documents

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National Archives

A FEW months ago Edward Bennett Williams, one of our most distinguished trial attorneys, remarked that our American Government was one of laws while that of the Soviets was one of men. Mr. Williams stated that he had always felt that the difference between the two systems was dramatically symbolized by the fact that in Moscow they keep the corpse of Lenin under glass, while in Washington in our National Archives we keep the Constitution and the Bill of Rights under glass.

All of us, either as archivists or curators of manuscripts, are concerned with preserving a record of our heritage. This heritage may be national, State, or local—public or private. All of us are interested in sharing this heritage not only with those who use the records for the information in them but also with those who have an interest and pride in their heritage.

The National Archives is indeed fortunate to be the custodian for all the American people of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. The permanent display of these three great charters of American freedom has served as an inspiration for many millions of people. Busloads of school children and tourists clad in shorts may block entrances and exits, but the word *archives* does become for them not just a word buried in Webster's dictionary but a part of their active vocabulary.

The scholar and the elementary school pupil alike may learn something about history simply by examining, for example, the Declaration of Independence and the related documents on exhibit. Let me give two illustrations of this. Many of us learned a story in school for which there is really no documentation. When John Hancock signed the Declaration of Independence he is supposed to have said that he signed it in letters so large that George III would not have to put on his glasses to read it. Charles and Mary Beard have perpetuated the legend by stating that "John Hancock's name headed the list of signers on the Declaration; and it

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was written in letters so large and firm that George III could see it without his glasses."¹ As Dumas Malone says, ". . . the story of the signing has been embroidered with many colorful legends." Of John Hancock's signature he writes: "That he wrote his name in large bold letters anyone who looks at a reproduction of the historic document can see. He is supposed to have said that he did this so that John Bull could read it without his spectacles, and could double the reward on his head." So far so good. But Malone perpetuates the story by reproducing two facsimiles of Hancock's signature with the following caption: "Legend has it that John Hancock said he would make his signature large enough for John Bull to read it without glasses. His signature on the Declaration is about $4\frac{7}{8}$ inches long, on a letter the same year about $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches."²

It seems unfortunate that Dumas Malone did not visit the National Archives and view the engrossed Articles of Confederation, signed by Hancock on July 9, 1778. For on this document, barely 15 inches wide as compared to the Declaration's 24 inches, Hancock's signature is fully 35 percent larger than it is on the Declaration. Apparently Hancock always signed his name in a large, firm hand. Students of the Declaration agree that it was not the intention of the Continental Congress to send the parchment or any copy of it to King George or his ministers; furthermore, there is no record of such a transmittal. Nor should there have been, for the primary purpose of the Declaration was "to proclaim to the world the reasons for declaring independence."³

There is a quotation that I simply cannot resist, from a work of Henry Steele Commager that is used in many colleges as a sourcebook in American history. In his introductory note on the Declaration of Independence Commager states: "July 4 the Declaration of Independence was agreed to, engrossed, signed by Hancock, and sent to the legislatures of the States. The engrossed copy of the Declaration was signed by all but one signer on August 2."⁴ Only the statement that the Declaration was agreed to on July 4 is fully correct; we are also quite sure that an *authenticated* copy, now lost, was signed by Hancock, probably on July 4. The printed copies of the Declaration were not sent

¹ *Rise of American Civilization*, 1: 100 (New York, 1931).

² *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence*, p. 91, 92 (New York, 1954).

³ Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence*, p. 5 (New York, 1922).

⁴ *Documents of American History*, p. 100 (New York, 1934).

to the States before July 5, and some were sent as late as July 8; the Declaration was not ordered engrossed until July 19; and more than one signer added his name after August 2. Most of these facts are obvious from a careful study of the documents on display. Am I splitting hairs to point them out? Or are students entitled to an accurate presentation of the facts concerning this, the most cherished document of our freedom?

The extensive scientific investigations and tests made by the National Bureau of Standards have shown us how to boldly share our documentary treasures with all Americans. Ultraviolet filters, temperature and humidity controls, filtered air-conditioning systems, electronic alarms, and good exhibit equipment have made the permanent or semipermanent exhibit a possibility. Within the past decade or so we have seen archival institutions and historical societies in Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Pennsylvania, North and South Carolina, and other States install permanent exhibits of significant documents. It is my understanding that the New Jersey Bureau of Archives and History intends to install a permanent exhibit in its new building.

Exhibits, if they are well planned and presented in good taste, can play an important role in making our institutions centers of popular education. They can draw a community closer to us, they can interest scholars in our holdings, and they can also lay the groundwork for needed support of our other programs.

An exhibits program should have an objective. At the National Archives our primary purpose is "to place before the general public selected documents that have commemorative interest, exemplify the traditions and ideals of the Nation, or serve in any way to dramatize or vivify important events and phases of its history." Since our establishment we have presented literally hundreds of nonpermanent exhibits. They range from the showing of just a few items, displayed in 10 or 15 square feet of space and hastily assembled on the occasion of the visit of a distinguished personage, to major presentations of hundreds of documents, photographs, maps, works of art, and other objects that require as much as 1,500 square feet of space. The smaller exhibits may be displayed for only a few days, while the larger and more costly exhibits are usually kept on view for a year or still longer, depending upon public interest. Even exhibits of moderate size are scheduled for at least six months. A shorter period would not justify the cost, for mounting a good exhibit requires a great deal of time and the concerted efforts and skills of many people.

Before we decide to present a major exhibit we usually make a quick survey of likely exhibit items. This may come as a surprise to some who think that the 914,000 cubic feet of records in the National Archives should provide limitless possibilities for all kinds of exhibits. Unfortunately, this is not so. On some subjects there is a great deal of significant documentation; on others there is little. Frequently, too, the documentation may be uninteresting and without exhibit appeal.

Our surveys, made within a few days, include examining our fairly well documented case files containing lists of items previously used or considered for use in past exhibits, scanning major reference correspondence, checking relevant finding aids or published documentation, and consulting our reference specialists. The time these surveys take is well spent, for it enables us to avoid the greatest frustration of all—trying to document an event with nonexistent documentation. Our best exhibits, by the way, have been those that reflect our strengths rather than our weaknesses.

There are, of course, other considerations that are taken into account before a subject for exhibit is formally suggested. These are the timeliness of the subject, the potential educational value and popular appeal, and the cost in terms of men and materials.

After the subject of an exhibit has been approved by the Archivist, members of the exhibits staff undertake the detailed historical and archival research necessary to develop a tentative subject-matter or story outline. They prepare lists of pertinent, known documents that we want to examine and a "want list" of the kind of documents, maps, photos, and other items we need to cover specific topics. After review and approval the outlines and lists are circulated to the pertinent records branches, which are requested to make additional suggestions and to forward to us by a specific date the lists of exhibitable items they have turned up. The items on the lists submitted are examined thoroughly by the exhibits staff. They make a tentative selection of items to be included in the exhibit. These items are then laid out in work areas in our exhibits preparation room, where the exact dimensions of our exhibit cases can be marked off.

The entire exhibit is now subjected to a thorough review by the Director. This is a most critical review and it concerns all aspects of the proposed exhibit. There are many questions that race through one's mind during the review. Does the exhibit tell an interesting story and does it build to a climax? Are we achiev-

ing the correct emphasis and balance? Are we putting too much stress on relatively unimportant occurrences simply because we are weighed down with documentation on them? Are we making a contribution through the use of new and stimulating materials or are we merely concocting a rehash? If we are dealing with a controversy in history, are both sides or points of view adequately presented? Do the materials have a broad or a narrow appeal? Does a particular document or group of documents help or hinder our story? Are all items significant, appealing, legible, not too long (one page is always best), and sufficiently varied? Are we using copies when the originals are available? Can we find an interesting eyewitness account with human interest to balance an official report? Can we use a lighter touch or even some humor? Have we struck the right balance between documents, maps, photos, and other objects? Are we absolutely sure that there will be no crowding in the exhibit cases? Have we used enough color? Are all the key items displayed at eye level?

Questions of this type and staff discussions may result in many changes. Sometimes additional and extended research has to be done for a few items that are needed to provide the additional bit of fire essential to a good exhibit.

When we have made our final selection of items, we prepare a scale diagram showing the exact location of the items in each exhibit case. We also make an exact-size reproduction of each document, usually a negative photostat. These reproductions save wear and tear on the originals when captions are written and when mounts are prepared, and they also serve as a means to fill requests for reproductions after documents have been put on display.

At this stage our preparatory work may, for purposes of analysis, be divided into two types. The first involves the physical preparation of documents for exhibit; we shall return to this shortly. The second concerns all kinds of research, writing, and publicity activities, such as preparing captions, press releases, fact sheets, and a catalog (if one is to be prepared) and arranging for a ceremony to open the exhibit. Among these tasks are the making of plans to notify TV and radio stations, schools, and organizations likely to have an interest in the exhibit. Most of these activities, with the exception of caption preparation, are outside the scope of this paper.

Writing a good caption is not easy. It requires both a broad and a detailed knowledge of the subject matter and the ability to

write clearly and accurately. A caption should be brief, yet it should identify a document and supply background information. It may be used to bridge gaps in chronology or subject matter. As a caption is generally read by a viewer before he reads a document, it should draw attention to the document. Good captions have "punch," yet at the same time they have dignity.

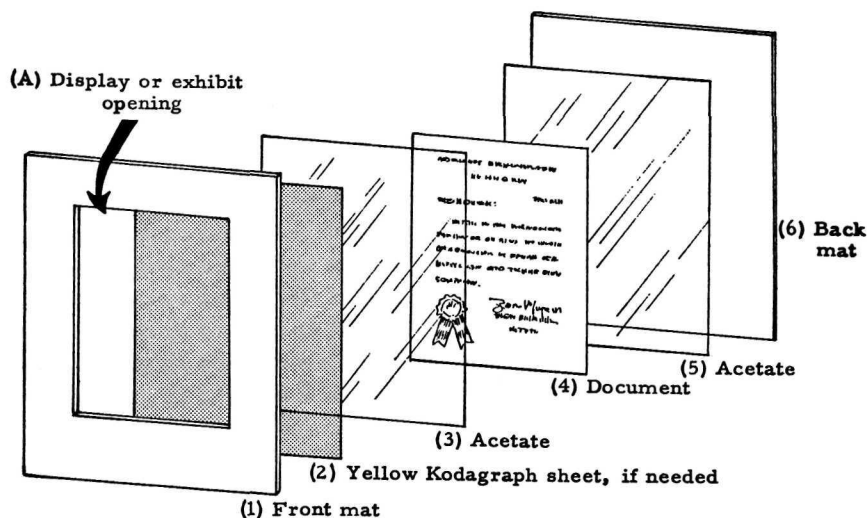
Attractive captions may be produced by using an IBM proportional-space typewriter or a varityper. With such machines right-hand margins can be justified. The paper should be the best, and the caption should be dry-mounted on a mat board and then trimmed to the desired size.

The physical preparation of records is an important phase of any archival exhibit. Documents are our business. They should never be placed on display when crumpled, torn, or otherwise in need of repair unless their poor condition is the subject of the exhibit. Nor should documents be held in place by tacks, pins, clips, or tape. Before a document is exhibited it should be flattened to remove creases; tears and holes should be repaired; highly acid papers should be neutralized; a brittle document should be humidified; and, when necessary, a document should be carefully laminated.

MOUNTING DOCUMENTS FOR EXHIBIT

An attractive but relatively expensive method of displaying documents or bound volumes is in individual plexiglass cases. Not many institutions can afford this for more than a few documents. Within the past few years the National Archives has developed a simple and cheap way of mounting documents—in matboard frames between sheets of cellulose acetate. This display unit protects documents against dust and against contamination from impurities in mat boards, and it filters out harmful ultraviolet rays. It also results, we believe, in a physically attractive unit. This method, developed by employees of the Government, is not patented but is in the public domain. The detailed specifications and lists of materials required for it follow.

The method for mounting documents outlined below will protect them from the damaging effects of dust and of ultraviolet light rays. Documents so mounted will be attractive. The components of a mounted document ready for exhibit are shown in the following sketch, which is keyed to the explanation below it.



- (1) A one-piece front mat with a display or exhibit opening (A) cut to fit the document.
- (2) A yellow Kodagraph sheet for document protection, if needed.
- (3) A sheet of clear cellulose acetate.
- (4) The document.
- (5) Another sheet of clear cellulose acetate, same size as the first one.
- (6) A solid back mat, cut slightly smaller than the front mat.

The materials required for mounting documents are:

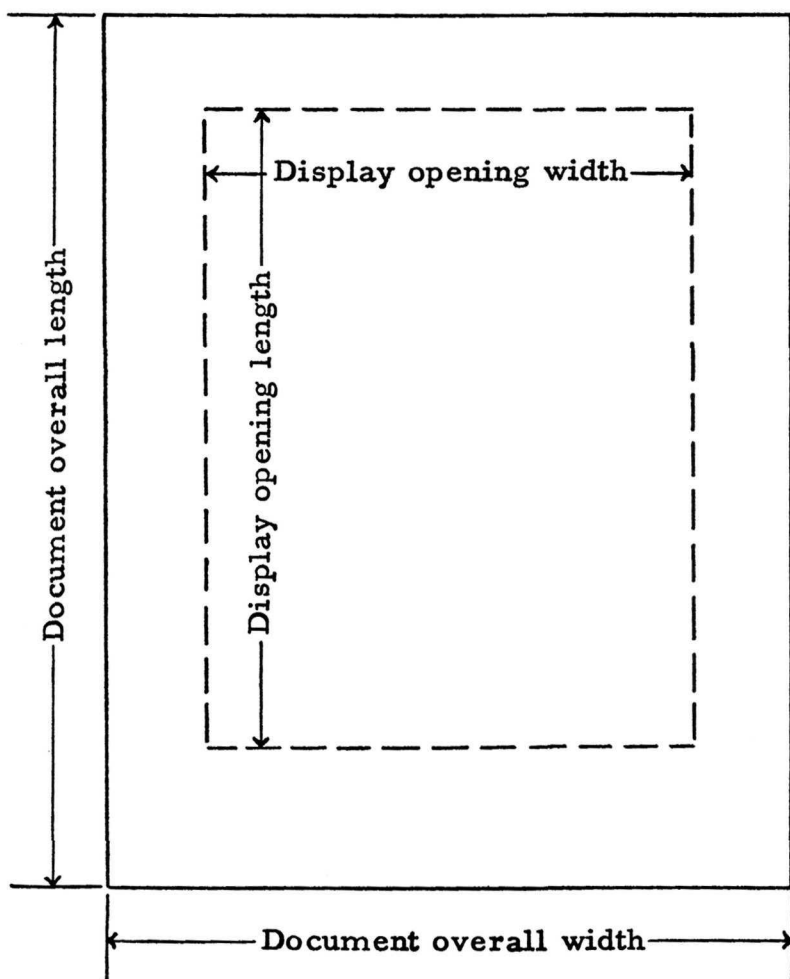
1. Clear cellulose acetate sheeting to enclose the document. Thickness—0.015". Sheet size—30" by 40". Obtainable from the Monsanto Chemical Co., 812 Monsanto Ave., Springfield 2, Mass.
2. Yellow Kodagraph sheeting to filter lights or place over the acetate-covered document. Obtainable from Eastman Kodak Co. in various sizes.
3. Mat board, white on one side and cream-colored on the other, double thick. Size—30" by 40". Obtainable from Charles T. Bainbridge and Sons, 12 Cumberland St., Brooklyn 5, N. Y.
4. Finishing brads, $\frac{3}{4}$ " long, with $\frac{1}{16}$ " or smaller shanks.
5. Staples, preferably with $\frac{5}{16}$ " legs, such as Swingline staple no. 516.
6. Eraser, art-gum type.
7. Sandpaper, very fine surface, to finish mat edges.
8. Masking tape—single-coated to cover staple legs on back mat; double-coated to hold the front and back mats together temporarily.

The tools required for mounting documents are:

1. Hammer, upholsterer's type, with small head.
2. Stapling gun, with at least a $\frac{5}{16}$ " bite, such as Swingline model no. 200.
3. X-Acto knife-cutting set with a mat and beveler guide knife.

The document must be measured in order to determine the proper dimensions of the mats. After the length and width of the document have been determined it should be safely stored and the photostat substituted for it until the final assembly of the document for installing in the exhibit case.

The size of the front mat will be determined by the size of the document to be exhibited. It is suggested that mats of several standard sizes be used.

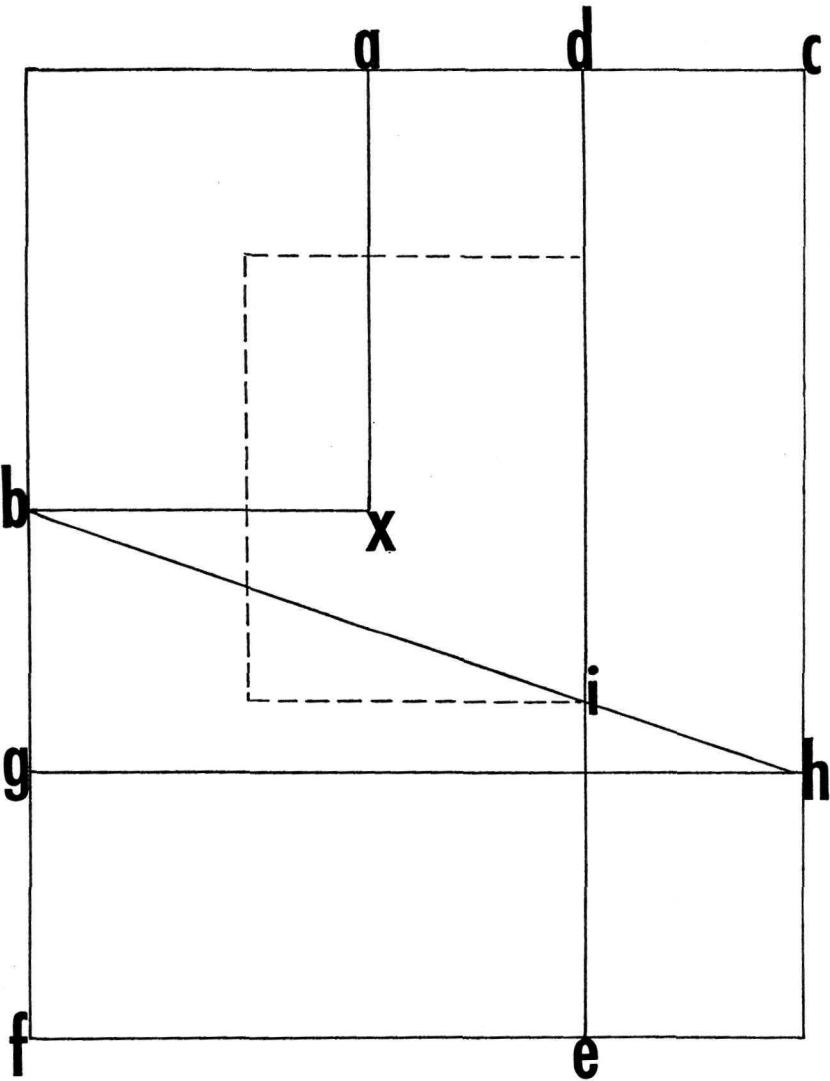


The following table is useful in determining an appropriate mat size:

<i>Document Size</i>	<i>Mat Size</i>
5" by 7" or smaller	8" by 10"
Over 5" by 7", but not over 8" by 10"	11" by 14"

Over 8" by 10", but not over 12" by 14"	16" by 20"
Over 12" by 14", but not over 16" by 20"	22" by 28"

There may be times, of course, when documents of unusual shapes or dimensions will be exhibited. In such instances, commonsense should prevail. The dimensions used should be such as to enhance the appearance of the document and make the finished display unit look well balanced and in harmony with any other units exhibited with it.



The next step is to determine the size of the exhibit opening in the front mat. Ordinarily it will be slightly smaller than the overall size of the document to be displayed so that the edges of the document will not show. If the document is torn or frayed on the edges or if one or more edges have not been cut straight, the size of the opening may be adjusted to hide the imperfections.

Once the size of the exhibit opening has been determined, the next step is to find the placement for that opening. Take the front mat and on the cream-colored side follow the steps indicated below. *Use a pencil and a light touch.* (See sketch on p. 83.)

Step 1. In the upper left-hand corner draw two lines, *a* to *x* and *b* to *x*, which will enclose an area with dimensions equal to those of the exhibit opening.

Step 2. Divide the remaining space, *a* to *c*, in half to locate point *d*; then draw the line *d* to *e* parallel to the edge of the mat.

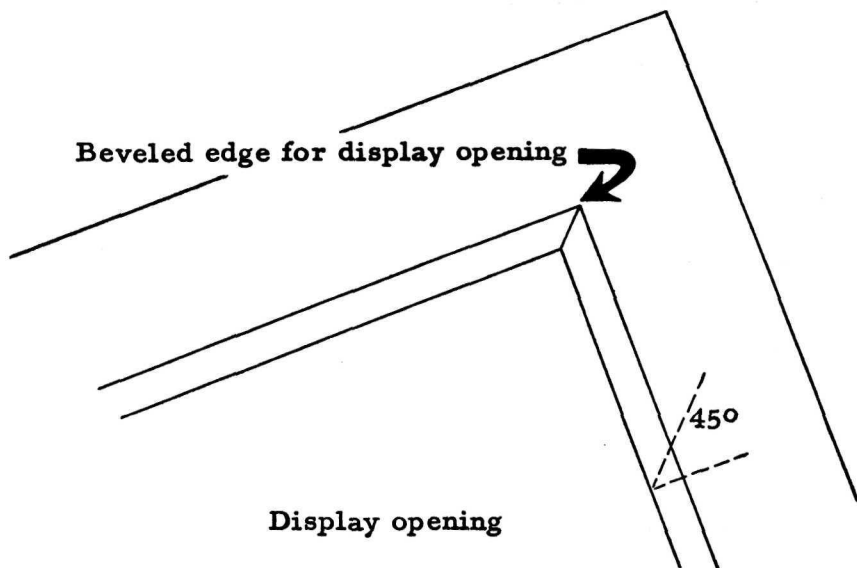
Step 3. Divide the remaining space, *b* to *f*, in half, locating point *g*; then draw the line *g* to *h* parallel to the bottom of the mat.

Step 4. Connect points *b* and *h*. The intersection of this line with the line *d* to *e* gives the point *i*.

Step 5. Draw again the figure of the document display area with its right edge on the line *d* to *e* and the lower right-hand corner on point *i*.

Step 6. Cut this figure out with an X-Acto knife and guide, taking care to complete all straight cuts without removing the blade from the mat. The front mat is now ready for sanding.

When cutting the front mat, a more finished appearance can be had if the exhibit or display opening is beveled at a 45° angle, as illustrated below.



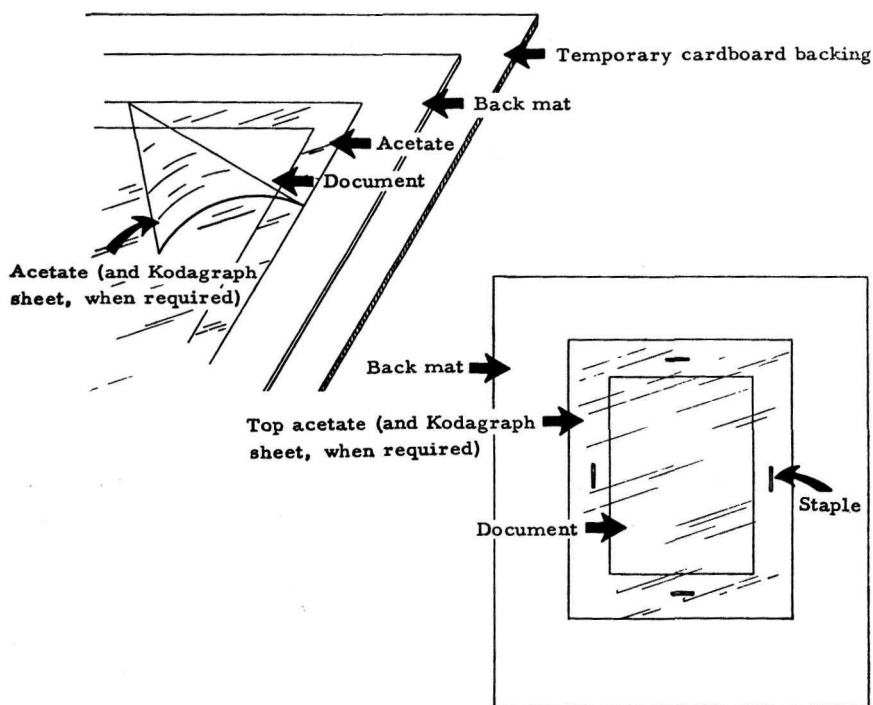
The back mat should be cut $\frac{1}{4}$ " smaller on the top and one side than the front mat. This allows for some adjustment when assembling the two mats and helps prevent the edges of the back mat from showing.

After both mats have been satisfactorily cut and checked for size against the photostat, they should be smoothed down along their cut edges with a fine-surfaced sandpaper. They are now ready for assembling.

In assembling the display unit, use the back mat as the mounting surface for the acetate-enclosed document, and the front mat as the frame and a guide to placing the document. Trace the exhibit opening from the front to the back mat after putting them in proper alignment.

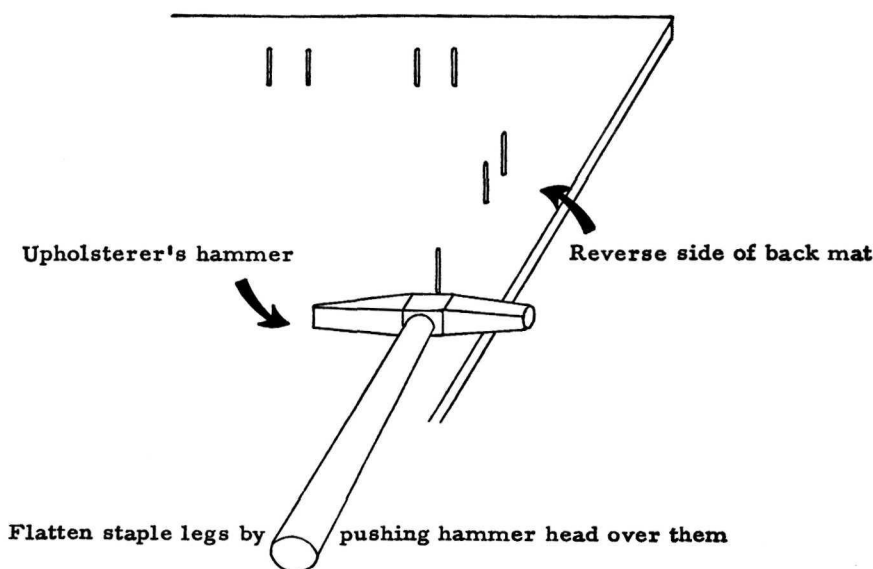
Next, cut two sheets of cellulose acetate with both dimensions one inch smaller than the back mat. This clear acetate can be used in exhibit cases that have Kodagraph-filtered light sources and a low level of surrounding illumination. If there is no filter over the case light, or if the nearby lighting is bright, an additional piece of yellow Kodagraph sheeting should be inserted on top of the clear acetate to act as a filter. Never put the Kodagraph sheeting in direct contact with the document.

Temporarily place a scrap piece of corrugated cardboard under the back mat to cushion the impact of the staples. Center one sheet of acetate over the traced exhibit opening on the back mat. Flatten and place a staple in two opposite corners to hold it secure. Place the actual document on this acetate sheet by the aid of the marked opening on the back mat. Place the second



piece of acetate, and a Kodagraph sheet if needed, over the document, and check its position again by using the front mat's opening. When the acetate sheets enclosing the document are centered correctly, staple them to the back mat, taking care to keep the head of the stapling machine at least $\frac{1}{8}$ " away from the document's edge when stapling.

Now remove the corrugated backing and flatten the staple legs by running the blunt end of a hammer over them, as shown in the illustration below. Cover these flattened legs with single-coated masking tape to prevent scratching.



The assembled unit can now be combined with the front mat on the display panel. Fix the back mat in its proper place on the display panel. Then place the front mat over it and nail the completed unit to the panel with a small-headed brad in each of its four corners. A strip of double-coated masking tape can be used temporarily to hold the two mats together while attaching them to the panel. If desired, place several strips of tape near opposite edges of the back mat and press the front mat down on it in correct position. Attach to panel as described before.