The Parchment Stretcher at the Maryland Hall of Records

By GUST SKORDAS

Maryland Hall of Records

THE parchment stretcher at the Hall of Records at Annapolis is a device for removing wrinkles and creases from parchments, particularly those which are too large to be placed in a press. The purpose of the device is not, as the name implies, to stretch parchments, but simply to flatten them. The term "stretcher" is used, because the fundamental principle of the device is the application of constant and even tension to the parchment while it is in the presence of sufficient humidity to make it soft and pliable without actually being wet.

The parchment stretcher consists mainly of two wooden frames lying in a horizontal position one above the other and supported on four wooden legs. The frames resemble storm windows without the glass panes. They are about 40″ x 50″ and are made of ¾″ x 1¾″ cypress. A lattice work of string is stretched across each frame by means of brass screws set about two inches apart in the outer edge of the frame. The lower frame rests upon and is bolted to angle irons which are fastened to the legs. It is so located that a distance of three inches separates it from the upper frame which is flush with the tops of the legs. Angle irons also support the upper frame, but the bolts which run through it into the angle irons are used merely to prevent it from sliding. No nuts are used in order that the frame may be easily removed. Long iron rods run between the legs of the stretcher in order to reinforce it. The upper row of rods serves another purpose as well. A square of half-inch minnow netting is suspended from the rods by means of wire hooks so that it lies midway between the two frames.

The first step in preparing to flatten a parchment is to remove the top frame. A large piece of oil or wax paper is laid upon the lattice work of strings strung across the lower frame. A damp white blotter, approximately the size of the parchment, is centered upon the paper and is completely covered by another piece of oil paper. A third piece of oil paper is laid upon the minnow netting and the parchment is opened up and laid flat upon it. A row of three inch spring-type paper clips is

fastened to the four outer edges of the parchment as close together as they will go. The lips of the clips are covered with wide rubber bands to avoid bringing the metal in contact with the parchment which, of course, would leave rust marks. After all the clips have been applied, a wire hook, to which is attached a length of string with an eight ounce sinker at the other end is hooked into the upper eye of each clip. The string is strung along the netting and over the nearest iron rod in such a fashion that the sinker is suspended several inches above the floor; thus exerting a constant pull upon the segment of the parchment to which it is attached. The sinkers should be applied in opposite pairs, preferably by two persons working together, so that the parchment will not be pulled out of shape .After all the sinkers have been fastened, another piece of oil paper is used to cover the parchment. The top frame is then put in place. A piece of oil paper is laid upon the strings, a damp blotter placed upon it and another piece of oil paper used to cover the blotter. Every other day the top blotter is sprinkled with water in order to renew its moisture content. This provides sufficient humidity to keep the parchment pliable and therefore it is not necessary to dampen the bottom blotter. The average parchment will take about three weeks to flatten, but naturally the time required will vary with the condition of the parchment.

It will readily be seen that this method of flattening parchments is very slow. However the average archival agency in this country does not have many parchments in its collection, and the lack of speed is no real inconvenience, especially since the demand on the operator's time is slight. If an agency should have a large number of parchments to treat, time may be saved by placing the smaller ones in a press using the same principle. A damp white blotter is sandwiched between two sheets of oil paper. The parchment is flattened out as well as possible upon the top sheet of oil paper. It in turn is covered by another damp blotter which is also housed within sheets of oil paper. The whole is placed between heavy gray chip boards. One or more such combinations may be placed between plywood boards. They are then placed in a press for about three hours. During this time, there is no pressure on the parchments other than the weight of the boards. At the end of the three hours, the parchments will have absorbed sufficient moisture to be pliable and easily handled. They are removed from the press smoothed out and placed between fresh sheets of oil paper and dry blotters. If the parchment has any seals on it, an extra blotter with holes cut into it to fit the seals should be slipped in between the upper blotter and oil paper. This will be sufficiently thick to protect the average seal, but sometimes two or more blotters may be needed. It is

also possible to remove the seals before beginning the treatment and replace them afterwards. This procedure is especially recommended where the seal is appended to the parchment by a ribbon rather than applied directly to the parchment.

With the seals thus protected, the parchments may be returned to the press and pressure applied. The following day, the blotters should be renewed again, but after that the parchments may remain in the press until the week is over when they should be thoroughly flattened. It is recommended however that they be inspected daily. Small parchments which are unusually wrinkled or which have unusually stubborn creases may be placed in the stretcher for a day or two or longer if necessary and then inserted in a press.

Both of the methods described above have proven highly successful at the Hall of Records. The advantages of the stretcher are (1) it can accommodate larger parchments (2) the seals do not have to be removed (3) the parchment can be easily inspected. The only disadvantage is the length of time required.