

Copyright Deposits Show Cultural Heritage in More Ways Than One

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The archives maintained by the Copyright Office preserve much of America's cultural heritage. Included in these records are the 1899 copyright registrations and deposits that Tara Neely and Kandice Newren, 2008 junior fellows in the Copyright Office, cataloged last summer.

One might assume that the interns' findings would consist of exciting old photographs of long-ago places and personages. Or intellectual tomes newly brought to light. Or maybe first printings of music that still rings in the ear. All these items were uncovered by the tireless work of the two interns. But how about the straight pin that they found? Is such an item, useful and therefore not copyrightable, part of our cultural heritage?

You bet! Hardly noticed today, the straight pin was an important and necessary object among office supplies in the closing days of the 19th century. Used to secure papers together, the straight pin had not yet been supplanted by the paper clip. Although a type of paper clip existed, the widespread use of paper clips awaited the invention of a machine to mass-produce them. The patent for such a machine was issued in late 1899 to American William Middlebrook. The Connecticut resident's patent papers show a paper clip as we know it today: two wire ovals, one larger than the other.

The use of straight pins in the Copyright Office was confirmed by the discovery of an actual pin, an inch and a quarter long and little rusty but still holding firm the flap

of a 109-year-old envelope. This pin was used on materials relating to registration number 73169, which recorded a claim to copyright on a photograph entitled "An Old Squaw" for the Smith-Hassell Company of Denver, a well-known publisher of western Americana.

On a deposit submitted by the Beck Engraving Company, a fine art printing firm in Philadelphia, Neely and Newren uncovered other evidence of the use of pins. The company's photo of Lt. Col. Barnett mounted on a horse shows indications in the upper left corner of having been pierced with a straight pin.

This mundane bit of Office lore gives a glimpse at how our predecessors in the Copyright Office did their work and why they probably frequently pricked their fingers. ©

The deposit for registration number 62035 (below) depicting an American military officer was clearly pierced by a pin in the upper left corner. An envelope containing an application and deposit (below left) submitted by Smith-Hassell Company retains its pin.



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