



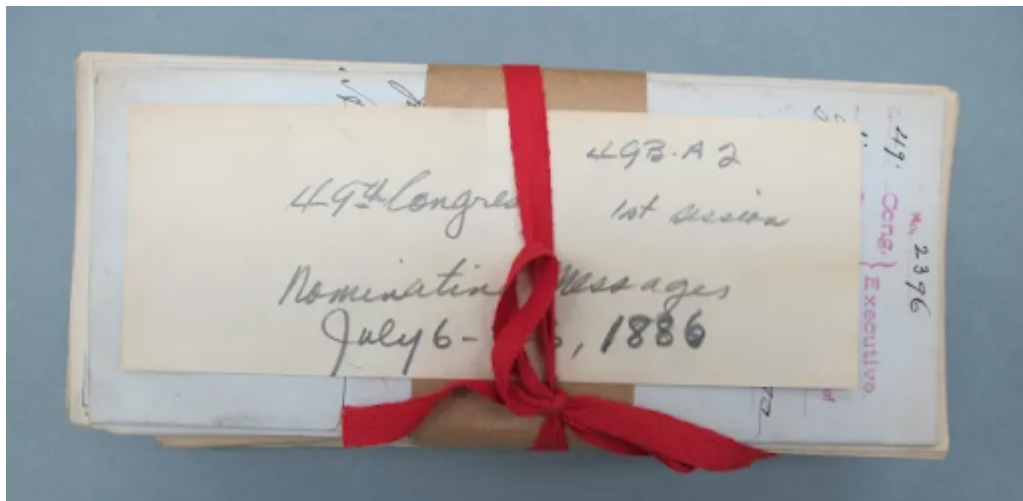
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Holding it Together: Historical Fasteners in the National Archives Catalog

Ribbons, thread, sealing wax, grommets. Do you have a favorite historical fastener? Join us as we cut through the red tape in this week's newsletter to bring you stories of various document fasteners found in the records at the National Archives.



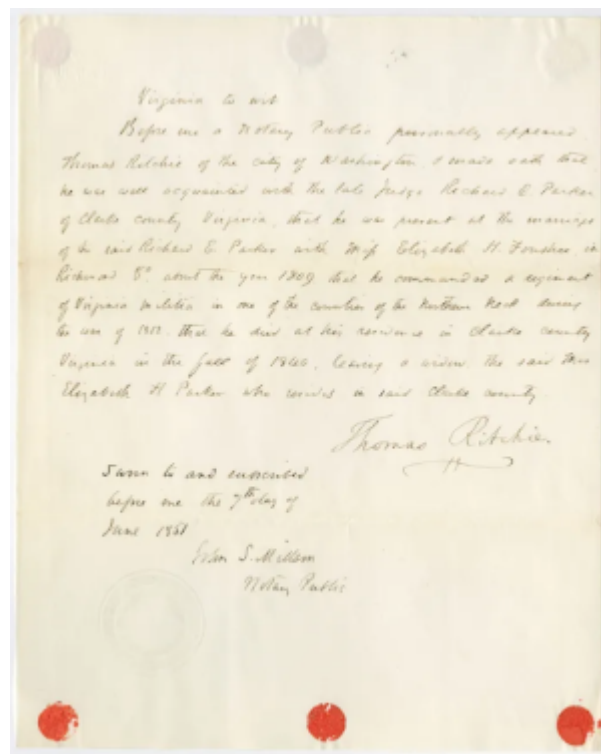
Original red tape keeping a bundle of documents together. Government documents were wrapped in red ribbon or tape, so that you would literally have to “cut through the red tape” to gain access to these records. (Photo by the National Archives)

In the centuries before the self-inking notary public's stamp, U.S. government clerks and secretaries used brightly-colored silk ribbons, wax seals, and embossed paper seals attached with wafers to verify the security of important documents. Learn more on the Pieces of History blog: [Holding It Together: Before Passwords—Ribbons and Seals for Document Security](#).



Treaty of Paris, 9/3/1763 [National Archives Identifier 299805](#)

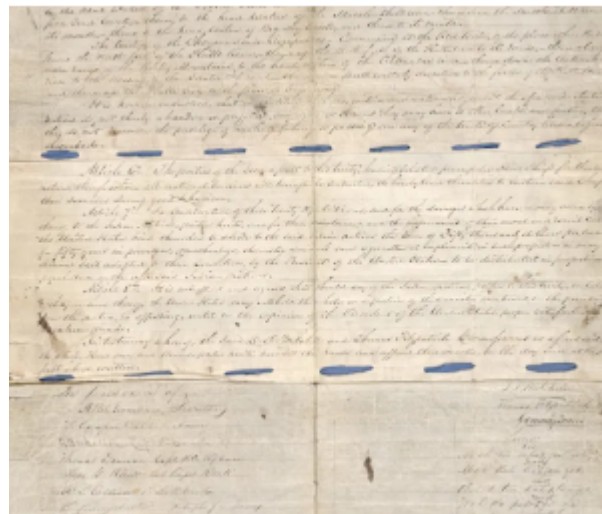
A small, raised dot of red on a document—is it sealing wax? Not always. In some cases what looks like sealing wax is actually a wafer seal, sealing wax's cheaper cousin. Wafers are thin, flat, baked adhesive discs made from starch, binders, and pigment that were used for joining and sealing documents during the 17th through 19th centuries in Great Britain and other European countries and their colonies. Although they were usually red in color, they were produced in a variety of colors and sizes according to their intended purpose. Learn more on the Pieces of History blog, [Holding It Together: A Seal—Or Not?](#)



Examples of wafer seals appear on this land bounty application from 1851, where the wafers from the now-separated papers are clearly visible at the bottom, and the wafers at the top are visible

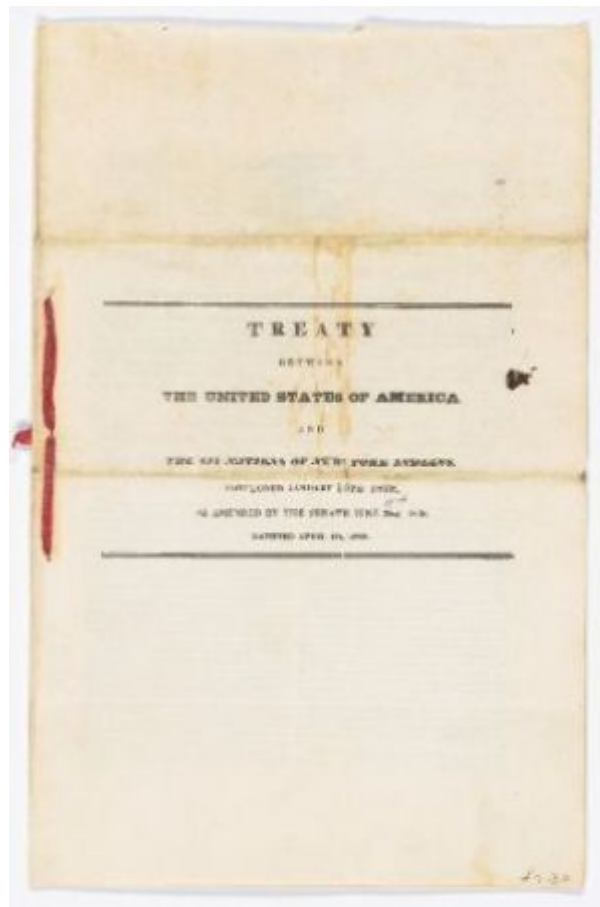
through the paper. Bounty Land File for Colonel Richard E. Parker, 1851. [National Archives Identifier 27494175](#)

Even in the decades when the oldest records in the National Archives were being created, government clerks and officials had access to many different ways to hold documents together, including ribbon, pins, thread, sealing wax, and wafers. With a store of silk ribbon or cotton tape nearby, they could easily attach documents to each other by cutting two slits in the paper and feeding a ribbon through them. This would let them quickly bind several sheets together into a pamphlet, or sew sheets together to create a longer piece of paper.



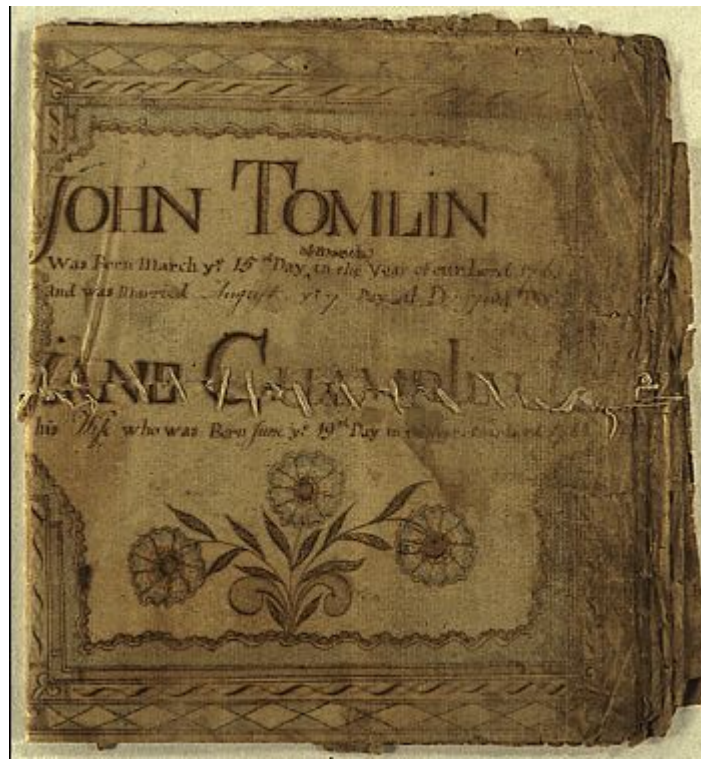
This treaty is composed of several sheets of paper sewn together: the use of blue silk ribbon highlights the diplomatic importance of the treaty. Treaty between the United States and the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapho, Crow, Assiniboin, Gros Ventre, Madan, and Arikara Indians at Fort Laramie, Indian Territory, 9/17/1851, image cropped. [National Archives Identifier 12013686](#)

Before the invention of stapled bindings, the “pamphlet stitch” was common to sew short texts together—though most used plain thread, not silk ribbon. After this treaty was printed, the sheets were folded into pages, and the pages were sewn together to form a pamphlet:



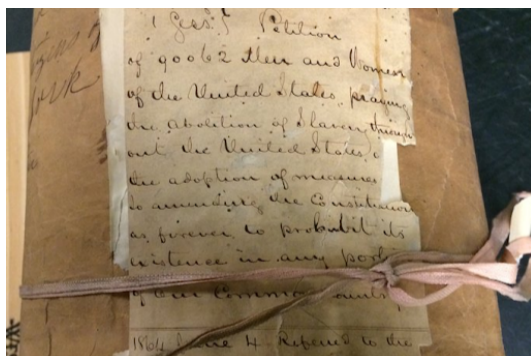
Printed Copy of the Treaty Between the United States of America and the Six Nations of New York Indians, Concluded January 15, 1838, as Amended by the Senate June 11, 1838, and Ratified April 4, 1840. [National Archives Identifier 176561681](#)

Some documents were attached or repaired by even simpler methods: threading a needle with a piece of linen thread, and sewing a torn document back together, or attaching papers with a loop of thread, as shown in this heavily-worn fraktur. Learn more on the Pieces of History blog [Holding It Together: Ribbons in NARA's Records](#).



Illustrated family record (Fraktur) found in Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land-Warrant Application File W6302, for John Tomlin, Virginia. [National Archives Identifier 300246](#)

And last but not least, red tape! While [red tape](#) may be used in the metaphorical sense these days, it used to refer to literal red tape: a narrow ribbon made from cotton or linen, dyed red. This was used by government clerks for all sorts of purposes, from tying bundles of related papers together, to sealing official documents, to tying shut envelopes. Learn more on the Pieces of History blog [Holding It Together: From Red Tape to Grommets](#).



Staff take out a document bound with faded red tape during Take Your Daughters and Sons to Work Day at the National Archives. Photo by Jeff Reed, National Archives

Special thanks to Rachel Bartgis, conservator technician at the National Archives in

College Park, Maryland. This feature was adapted from Rachel's ["Holding it Together" series](#) on the Pieces of History blog.

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COVID-19 Update

The National Archives is committed to the health and safety of our visitors and staff. We are closely monitoring the situation regarding COVID-19, and we are working with public health officials and our counterpart agencies to monitor and respond to the evolving conditions and following CDC guidelines.

For more information, visit <https://www.archives.gov/coronavirus>

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