Oyster Bay Historical Society Takes up Atlas Digitization

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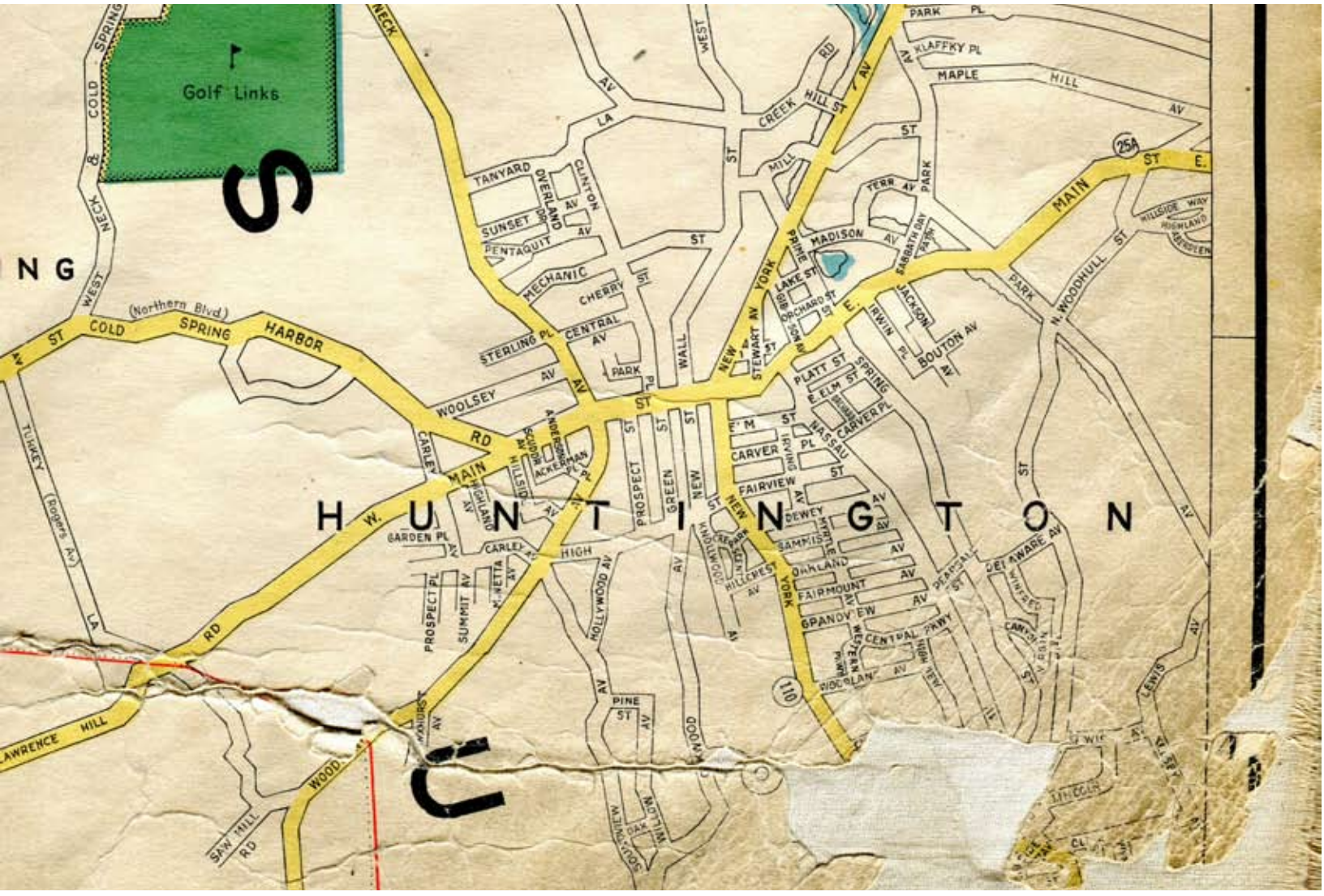


Example of the damage found in Hagstrom's 1932 Atlas, Plate 2. Photograph courtesy of the Oyster Bay Historical Society.

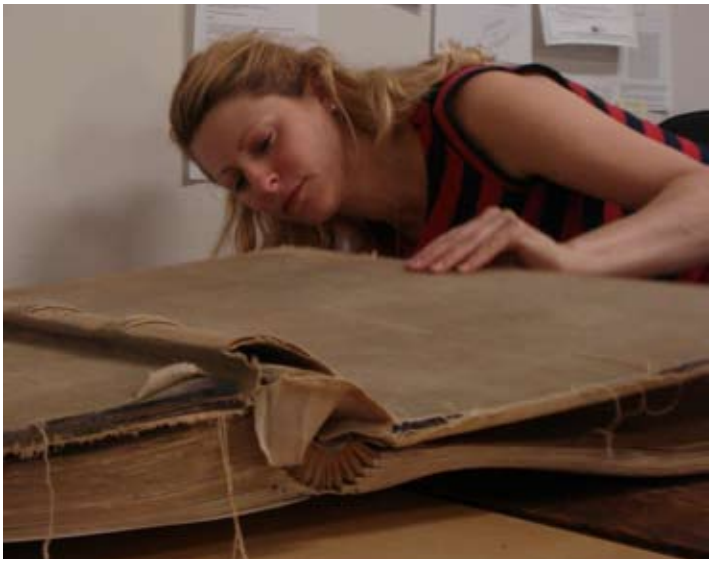
The digitization of the atlases in the Oyster Bay Historical Society archives collection, specifically the atlases concerning Oyster Bay and its surrounding villages, has been on my wish list for some time. Almost all of the atlases in our archives show a tremendous amount of wear due to their age and use. This preservation tactic will allow our staff and patrons to continue to access the information while keeping the atlases physically intact. For the past two months, the Society has been scanning the maps (or plates) of our atlases with the eventual goal of having a digital copy available for research use. With the help of volunteer archivist Mike Kim, the process has been running smoothly, and much has been accomplished in a few hours each month.

Outside of the pure fascination that most people have with all things cartographic, some have questioned what practical purpose there is in keeping these outdated materials. I have always defended their value in fields of study such as urban development, or for tracking environmental or geographic changes, but anyone involved with a property dispute can best argue their importance. It surprises me how often these atlases are requested, and due to their repeated use they become more and more at risk. With every lift from the shelf or turn of the page, another tiny piece of the map falls away. I am thinking specifically of Hagstrom's 1932 *Street, Road and Property Ownership Map of Nassau County, Long Island, New York* (Hagstrom Company Inc., New York), whose paper maps, 21.5" x 15.5" in size, are glued to muslin for stability and sewn into the spine of a now-worn, painted-canvas cardboard binding.

Given the large format of these maps, each plate has to be scanned in four sections. It is my feeling that it is better to have overlap than to miss any critical information. The point of this project is to protect these atlases from further wear, while still providing users with full and complete access to the information they contain.

We use an EPSON Perfection V300 Photo flatbed scanner with a 12" x 9" scanning surface. This scanner is small, but for the moment it is what we have and what our finances will permit. There are much larger scanners at our disposal at other nearby organizations, but they do not open sufficiently to allow an object to lie flat on the surface, a paramount consideration when we are dealing with an awkwardly large and occasionally heavy object like an atlas. For our purposes, I decided to scan with 48 bit color and to a 600 dpi resolution: higher than a typical document requires, but small enough to keep the file size manageable.

Avoiding further damage to the material while scanning has been another concern. Naturally, I do not want to rip, tear, or crack the atlas's plates or spine any further than they have already been. Using some leftover pieces of shelving (coated pressboard) from our library, I was able to create an "island" around the scanner surface to add support to the whole atlas. This setup worked especially well for scanning the 1906 *Atlas of Nassau County, N.Y.* (E. Belcher-Hyde, Brooklyn, New York), which is such a heavy volume that it was nearly impossible for one person to manage it safely. Manipulating the atlases shook loose dirt and bits of string, which would appear on the images during preview. Using a new, small, synthetic bristle paintbrush, we cleaned each plate of debris, and then we swept the scanner surface for any dust or flakes left from the brittle edges of the plates — reminders of damage done by unstable temperatures and humidity. After previewing each scan for maximum flawlessness (we want to do this only once), we saved the scanned images with a notation of the specific areas covered in the scan. When these smaller scans are complete, we will combine each piece in Adobe Photoshop to create a replica of the entire plate as it appears in the atlas. Once finished, this project will provide a digital replica of the plates most requested by researchers and interested parties, with no further damage to the original atlases. Information without all the heavy lifting.



Above: Archivist Nicole Menchise with the 1906 atlas weighing in at approximately 80 lbs. Right: Volunteer Archivist Mike Kim keeps a close eye on the 1932 atlas. Photographs courtesy of the Oyster Bay Historical Society.