

Hi, I'm Kitty Nicholson. I'm supervisory conservator at the National Archives in Washington, DC.

In 1952 the Declaration of Independence came to the National Archives. It was on display constantly through the intervening decades.

There was a need to do a major renovation of the National Archives buildings. We knew it was our one window of opportunity to go in and to take the documents off display, do conservation treatment and design new encasements.

There was no manual on how to open the encasements. They'd been sealed with the intention they'd be sealed in perpetuity.

We were able to use a sharp cutting tool to cut through a lead ribbon that held the top and bottom pieces of glass together.

Then there was a free-floating piece of glass directly against the parchment. Will something stick to the glass? You don't know when something's been in contact for 50 years. Is it going to stick, is it not? But it lifted off cleanly.

And as we lifted off the inner glass we saw the Declaration again for the first time in almost 50 years.

And the new encasement design, the document rests on a platform.

The platform is black and the encasement interior is black and so the effect is that the parchment is floating in this black surround.

There is a mystery on the Declaration of Independence, at the bottom left corner, right here. You can see fingerprints, there's the faint gray impression of a hand, a handprint. And we really don't have any good historical evidence for whose handprint it is or when it happened.

And we would love to see a large 19th-century photograph of the Declaration to see if that handprint was there.

So if you've got an old photograph kicking around let us know! And if you can come and see with your family, see that handprint, that is the true mystery of the Declaration.