



**CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT**

**Bid Number:**  
2025.07.01



(For more condition photographs, please see object file)

**Date:** October 24, 2025

**Contact:** Chris Matos  
George Hail Free Library  
530 Main St.  
Warren, RI 02885  
401-245-7686  
director@georgehail.org

**Object:** Snuff Handkerchief  
**Object ID:** 2024.07.15.22

**Description:**

Handkerchief, plain weave cellulosic fibers (either linen or cotton), copper plate printed with a political scene featuring portraits of five individuals surrounding a scene of a courtroom trial. Additional motifs include floral vines with roses, wheat heads, and potted palms, all of which are notable for their symbolism. Handkerchiefs such as these were used by men to sneeze into and to wipe their faces after taking snuff, as the designs obscured stains. By the late 18th century, many featured popular events or personalities, and could be used to denote political affiliations casually.

Originating in England ca. 1800, this handkerchief recounts the 1794 Treason Trials against parliamentary reformers John Horne Tooke, John Thelwall, and Thomas Hardy, who were defended in court by the Hon. Thomas Erskine (1st Baron Erskine) and Vicary Gibbs Esq. The three defendants were political activists and key leaders in the London Corresponding Society (LCS), which advocated for constitutional reforms to allow a more democratic representation in Parliament. The ideological struggle between republicanism and monarchism in the wake of the French Revolution caused unrest in English society, leading Prime Minister William Pitt to restrict civil liberties and prosecute those ‘radicals’, such as the LCS, suspected of trying to overthrow the monarchy. Blocks of text printed on the handkerchief state the following:

(Top middle ribbon) “The Trials of Glorious Acquittal of the Triumphs of the Friends of Constitutional Reform British Liberty”

(PR text block) “I have opposed & always will oppose the right of Despots to prevent any people from framing a government for Themselves. The people of England have a right to change their government if they please. They will not if you use them well but it is to the denial of this principle all the calamities of these trials are to be imputed if such evidence be held sufficient to affect a mans life. I have probably now in my house sufficient to hang me & my whole family. May God enlighten and direct your minds. Erskine”

(PL text block) “I cannot entertain a moments [sic.] anxiety for my client. It is impofsible [sic.] that with an English Jury he can stand in danger. In a case of treason the law says the proof must be plain manifest. The proof here is plain manifest that is for the Prisoner, there exists no criminality in the case he is pure and must therefore be acquitted I do not scruple to affirm & from my heart I believe a ruder shock cannot be given to the Constitution & glorious laws of this Kingdom then [sic.] convicting the Prisoner of High Treason. Gibbs”

(Bottom middle text block) “In the memorable month of Nov. 1794 were these – Gentlemen Tried at the old Baillie on a charge of High Treason and a Verdict Given in their Favor of NOT GUILTY by an Independent & Impartial Jury of their Countrymen The evidence adduced so far from being sufficient to substantiate the charge of Compalsing [sic.] the death of the King proved them to be the true friend of their Monarch by being friend to the Constitution and enemies only to its abuses In Testimony of their esteem and gratitude to the illustrious defenders of their liberties and lives THE PEOPLE drew them in triumph from exclaiming Erskine & Gibbs Liberty and the CONSTITUTION for EVER”

The handkerchief was owned by Joshua Kennett, as evidenced by a laundering stamp in 4 places.

**Measurements:**

Height- 22 ½”  
Length- 25”

**Category:**

Textile  
Personal Gear/ Personal Assistive Objects/  
Handkerchief

**Location:**

Box 4  
Display Case 102  
Charles Whipple Greene Historical Collection  
George Hail Free Library

**Condition Analysis:**

Fair

Overall fair condition with discoloration and embrittlement throughout due to ageing and acidification of cellulosic fibers. Scattered small holes suggest possible insect damage (silverfish), but no evidence was found in the storage box. A large, previously repaired (darned) area is present on the PL side of the central oval. A large vertical tear ~ 2.5” is on the lower PR side next to the portrait of Erskine.

**Recommended Treatments:**

Remount in a sink mat to avoid any further tearing. Complete fiber identification and test for the possibility of aqueous cleaning with an anionic surfactant. Stabilize tear and consolidate with a crepeline support.