

Conservator, Curator, Craftsman: Collaborations at Colonial Williamsburg

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ABSTRACT: Colonial Williamsburg offers unique opportunities for the sharing of knowledge and experience among the various departments. Furniture conservation regularly benefits from a wealth of resources among which are the curators and historic area craftsmen such as the cabinetmakers, metalsmiths, and textile interpreters. This paper presents two representative projects which combine various skills and personal knowledge in the course of treating individual objects. For instance, projects requiring the replacement of lost elements occasionally require consultation with the cabinetmakers from the Anthony Hay Shop, the blacksmiths from the Anderson Forge, or the founders from the Geddy Foundry.

In many cases, the conservator also provides information that enhances the knowledge of the curator and the craftsman. The collaboration of all these professionals promotes a better understanding of form, manufacturing technique, and materials, and improves on overall historic interpretation.

Introduction

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG SERVES AS a unique model for collaboration among the museum professionals at an historic site. The working relationship between the curator and the conservator is fairly typical in the daily work of furniture conservation. At its most basic level, curators administer the purely academic interpretation of the collections while conservators promote preventive measures and implement treatments of the objects when necessary. A curator's investigation of historic treatises, records, inventories, and art historical knowledge provide the parameters and inform the goals of conservation treatments.

Conservators also utilize the many talented and knowledgeable craftsmen in the historic area who are rediscovering and carrying out the 18th-century manufacturing practices. Craftsmen interpreters work daily at the bench and interact and educate the public about 18th-century historical technologies regarding their trade. Their work is based on the study of the historic record of techniques and materials, augmented by years of

practical experience. In essence, these people are the curators of the 18th-century trade practices.

While the conservator is concerned with preserving objects, the historic craftsman is primarily concerned with preserving historic processes. "Experimental archaeology," a term coined in the 1970s, effectively describes this important aspect of the craftsman interpreter. This process of learning about an activity by imitating or reenacting it is founded on the principle that given appropriate tools and raw materials, along with a working knowledge of early processes, a craftsman of today can, and probably will, develop techniques similar to those used in the past for making the same object (*Brumfield 1985*).

Some may argue that the concerns of the historic craftsmen are of marginal importance to the conservator, but every additional resource adds to our understanding and ultimately to the collective preservation of the objects. A conservator's formal or informal training promotes the learning of historic technologies to provide a foundation for

knowing the “material” object. The Williamsburg environment not only provides the opportunity to engage in the dialogue of ongoing experimental archaeology, but also directly influences treatment interpretations, thereby better preserving material information.

The following two conservation treatments illustrate the extent and value of collaboration between conservator, curator, and craftsmen at Colonial Williamsburg.

First Treatment: Virginia Tea Table

In 1991, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation acquired a mahogany tea table, circa 1770, attributed to the Anthony Hay Cabinet Shop of Williamsburg, Virginia (*fig. 1*). At that time, the auction house noted the table as having a replaced gallery and new brackets. Ronald Hurst, curator of furniture, became aware of a very similar table pictured in an article titled “English Furniture, from an American Collection” in a 1932 issue of *Antiques* magazine (*Antiques* 1932). The article attributes a British origin to the table, although it is interesting to note that the majority of the collection had been acquired in the United States.

Hurst published the following query in the June 1993 issue of *The Magazine Antiques* searching for

the whereabouts of the table: “The Mahogany Tea Table (displayed) was part of the furniture collection of S. Vernon Mann of Great Neck, Long Island, New York, which was sold at the American Art Association Anderson Galleries in New York City in January 1932 and illustrated in the May issue of *Antiques* that same year. Originally believed to be British, the table is now attributed to the Williamsburg, Virginia, shop of Anthony Hay (d. 1770), as are several other nearly identical tables, including one acquired by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in 1991. Although none of the known tables retains its original gallery, the photograph of the Mann table suggests that its gallery was intact in 1932. Readers with information...”.

Although the Mann table was pictured without brackets, close inspection of the photograph in the article reveals evidence suggesting the table had brackets at one time. Unfortunately, nothing further has been learned about the location of the Mann table.

The Mann table and the Colonial Williamsburg table belong to a group of closely related examples attributed to the shop of Anthony Hay of Williamsburg by Wallace Gusler, master gunsmith at Colonial Williamsburg and the author of *Furniture of Williamsburg and Eastern Virginia 1710-1790*.

This attribution is based on the style and pattern of carving on the tables. One of the motifs is also found on the back of a ceremonial chair made for Masonic Lodge Six of Williamsburg, Virginia, circa 1770 (*Gusler 1989*).

A third table in this group is in the collection of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History in Washington D.C. This table was originally owned by George Washington at Mount Vernon, and came into the collection of the Smithsonian Institution as part of a group of objects confiscated during the Civil War from Arlington, the home of George Washington Parke Custis, George Washington’s grandson (*Hurst 1993*).

This table is virtually identical to the Colonial Williamsburg table in the applied foliate carving on the rails and legs. Brackets



Figure 1. Virginia tea table before treatment, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation collection.



Figure 2. Close-up view of the tea table before treatment, comparing the modern gallery (upper band) with the original carving on the rail (lower band).

are not present, but there is clear evidence for their previous existence. Unfortunately, this table also displays a replaced gallery and is therefore not much help in interpreting the proper gallery or the brackets on the Colonial Williamsburg table.

A fourth table is in a private collection in Norfolk, Virginia. This table is also attributed to the Anthony Hay shop and is the most highly developed of the group, displaying a serpentine shape on all four sides. While this table also displays a replaced gallery, the foliate carving along the bottom of the rails and on the sides of the legs is original. Although much more developed than a simple bracket, this carved element seemed to provide the only glimpse into the artist's intent regarding the possible style of the missing brackets.

The last table of this group was recently discovered in Winchester, Virginia by Mack Headley, the current master of the reconstructed Hay Shop. This table descended in a Virginia family and is also virtually identical to the Colonial Williamsburg table, but is missing brackets and its gallery, and has a replaced top.

Close inspection of the gallery on the Colonial Williamsburg table (*fig. 2, upper band*) shows carving that is stiff and underdeveloped when compared with the applied carving on the rails (*fig. 2, lower band*). Also, the fretwork on the

gallery appears out of proportion to the applied fretwork on the rails. The lighter, more delicate fretwork seen in the picture of the Mann table (*fig. 3*) appears more appropriate.

Since the 1932 picture of the Mann table provided the strongest gallery design evidence available, Hurst decided to use this information for interpreting the new gallery on the Colonial Williamsburg table. While the conservation of the table was carried out by David Arnold, a postgraduate intern in the furniture conservation lab, the gallery was made by the cabinetmakers in the Anthony Hay shop. It took 70-80 hours to saw out the fretwork of the gallery by hand (*Salisbury and Loftheim 1996*).

These raw pieces were then given to Arnold to integrate into the table.

In 1991, the auction house selling the table listed the brackets as modern. When the table was delivered to Colonial Williamsburg, a cursory inspection turned up no evidence to dispute this assessment, although two brackets were noted as appearing older than the rest. At this time the



Figure 3. Tea table previously in the Vernon S. Mann collection, whereabouts unknown.



Figure 4. Close-up view of the tea table during treatment, comparing an original bracket (in place) with a modern bracket (in hand).

A closer examination of the brackets confirmed this reassessment. The foliage on the legs and rails, areas of original carving, shows a clear similarity of style when closely compared to the original brackets. Figure 4 shows one of the modern brackets (in hand) next to one of the originals (in place on the table). A short glance does not reveal the subtle differences between the two brackets. But by studying corresponding details the differences become clear. The modern bracket appears clumsy and disjointed, with crude veining. The original bracket has a graceful flow and more appropriate proportions, which are lacking in the modern version.

Norfolk table seemed to provide the only evidence for the appearance of original brackets.

Later, when Arnold was assessing the nature of the table's coating for cleaning, he turned up some startling information. The two older brackets displayed a complex coating history that was very similar to that found on the obviously original components of the table. Based on the coating evidence, the two brackets now appeared to be original to the table.

In order to save time, rather than carving six new brackets, Arnold decided to cast them from one of the originals. Since both of the original brackets were left-hand, casting two more was a straightforward task. But there was not an original to use as a prototype for the remaining four right-hand brackets, so a more creative approach was needed. One of the modern right-hand brackets was used as a model to cast a profile of the bracket shape. The veining on this profile was filled in with epoxy and the shape was slightly reworked to make it closer to the shape of the originals (Arnold 1996).



Figure 5. Virginia tea table after treatment, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation collection.

A new mold was made from this pattern and four brackets cast from this mold. These four brackets were then given to Wallace Gusler, master gunsmith and former director of conservation, so he could carve the veining. Wallace's experience and knowledge as both curator and carver, along with his familiarity with this group of furniture, made him the obvious candidate for the refinement of the brackets.

Figure 5 shows the finished table with its new gallery and six new brackets, a combined collaboration between the curatorial staff, the conservation department, the Anthony Hay Cabinet Shop, and the Gunsmith shop.

Second Treatment: North Carolina Open Cupboard

The second treatment involves a circa 1800 open cupboard from North Carolina, acquired by Colonial Williamsburg in 1936. This object

experienced a long period of interpretive use in Colonial Williamsburg's historic area until the early 1980s (*fig. 6*), at which time it was removed from exhibition because of problems with its condition.

As part of the recent emphasis on the study and interpretation of southern furniture, the cupboard was brought into the furniture lab for examination and treatment in 1994. As part of a larger proposal, Ron Hurst requested that the modern butt hinges be replaced with more appropriate examples.

Hurst contacted the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston Salem, North Caro-

lina for information on a similar cupboard in their collection. Both cupboards are part of a related group of case pieces attributed to Randolph or Chatham Co., North Carolina. These pieces share the following common features: an ogee molding that frames the facade, sawn cornice elements, the apron shape, similar hinge forms, and similar paint schemes. All of them are known to display a horizontal strap on the door side of the hinge, terminating in either a spade or a diamond, with a variety of forms existing on the stile side of the hinge. The cupboard in the MESDA collection displayed a simple "L" shaped pintel (*Hurst 1992*).

Close examination of the facade of the Colonial Williamsburg cupboard reveals evidence left by the original hinges showing the outline of "rat tails" on the stile flanking each door, and straps terminating in diamond shapes on the door portion of the hinges. Daniel Kurtz, a summer intern from Buffalo State College, closely examined all the imprints and holes left by the early hinges on the facade, and created a detailed drawing showing the shape and exact dimensions of each hinge (*Kurtz 1994*).

Dan then enlisted the help of Peter Ross, master blacksmith at Colonial Williamsburg's Anderson Forge, to make a new set of hinges. Peter wasn't surprised at the variation in size. To him these were utilitarian hinges and the variation was within the tolerance of a production setting, in which a blacksmith would have forged each hinge in about five minutes.

But this assignment was going to be more challenging. The blacksmiths at Colonial Williamsburg do not make slavish copies, but well researched reproductions of eighteenth century objects. By understanding the colonial craftsman's intent, and using the tools, materials and processes of the 18th century, their reproductions generally exhibit the natural variability inherent in pre-industrial artifacts. In this case Peter had to think ahead of his hammering to try to predict how the metal was going to spread, and whether there was enough material to fit the parameters of the pattern without the hinge looking overdone. Rather than five minutes, each copy took an hour to forge (*Ross 1996*).



Figure 6. North Carolina cupboard as seen in use in the historic area, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation collection.



Figure 7. Close-up view of cupboard hinge with the door moved slightly to one side to show the cut hinge pintel.

A number of the hinge nail holes in the doors and stiles contained remnants of old nails. David Arnold, who completed the majority of the treatment, created a secondary method of attaching the doors to the cupboard in order to leave those remnants untouched. Since the few holes without remnants were insufficient to support the hinges and the weight of the doors, the new hinges serve a purely aesthetic function (Arnold 1996).

Dave soldered false nail heads onto the front of the hinges at the location of the nail holes, and undersized nail shanks onto the reverse side of the hinges at the location of the heads. The hinge nail holes in the cupboard facade were filled with a wax mixture and the hinges simply pressed into their locations. The new method of securing the doors made it necessary to cut the hinge pintels (*fig. 7*) so the doors could simply be lifted out of the facade. This figure also shows Peter's interpretation of the hinge with the rat tail on the stile and the strap on the door. Figure 8 shows the final aesthetic interpretation of the cupboard.

It is important to note that in cases like the tea table and the cupboard, where new elements are made to compensate for loss or to replace an earlier misinterpretation, these new elements are marked with the date in a discreet location to clearly distinguish them from original material. In many cases, especially for metal parts, punches are used to stamp the numerals onto the surface.

As conservators we often draw from many resources in order to better understand the objects we are faced with preserving. While it is important for us to be knowledgeable about historic processes, tools and materials, we often don't have the luxury to practice 18th-century methods with such focus and with such regularity. The craftspeople in the Historic Area of Colonial Williamsburg are uniquely qualified to understand the subtleties of 18th-century manufacture and design, or the maker's intent, through their "experimental archeology". They provide another perspective which adds to the collective body of information about 18th-century material culture. As conservators, our collaboration with curators and crafts-



Figure 8. North Carolina cupboard after treatment, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation collection.

men brings together a wealth of understanding of these objects, which better equips us to address their preservation.

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