

**Treatment of a late 19th century “Peerless” Portable Washstand
Manufactured by the Hale & Kilburn Manufacturing Company
48 & 50 North Sixth Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

Richard Sherin, The Strong Museum, Rochester NY

The Strong Museum in downtown Rochester, New York is quickly evolving into a major museum of material and social culture of the United States ---particularly the northeast--- during the era of industrialization, 1830-1940. This recent and rapid professional growth dictates that the staff spend considerable time developing and refining ways of working effectively and efficiently with one another. We use a ‘team approach’ in the planning of all of our exhibitions, both large and small. Essentially, a member of each division that will be involved in the effort collaborates from the very beginning on the production schedule. As a result, deadlines are met in a systematic and orderly fashion. To be truthful, however, the system is not yet perfected.

Our most recently-opened major exhibition ---”Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport, and American Society, 1830-1940”--- included among its 600+ objects the piece that is the subject of this paper. Being the first - and presently the only - conservator here at the Strong Museum, with but one assistant to help me, necessitates that I plan our work carefully. The Exhibit Team, which always includes the Museum Conservator, must submit a final list of objects to be used to the Conservation Division as much as...for major exhibitions such as this one...a year or more in advance. Rarely are additions to this list permitted; however, deletions are welcomed if they’re made before work has begun.

Using our ‘Exhibition Planning Worksheet’, my assistant and I record the work needed on each object during our initial examination. We then prioritize and establish a workable schedule using another conservation worksheet which is completed by the curator(s) involved. This Curator’s Worksheet is primarily for the purpose of extracting from the curator(s) early-on any and all information about the selected objects ---with respect to their accurate historical representation--- which will assist the Conservation Division in the planning of its work. Our work schedule is designed to chronologically follow the exhibit script, which is very helpful as opening day approaches because the Exhibits Department follows the chronology of the script as well during installation, making it easier for us to stay ahead of them. Once our work schedule has been set up we begin. To help us sustain our enthusiasm during many hours of tedium i.e. photographic documentation, routine surface cleaning, etc., we each select an object with interesting if not challenging problems on which to expend a bit more effort. In order for the two of us to prepare a large number of objects for an exhibition, many must by necessity receive only a minimum of attention, receiving only what they absolutely need to stabilize them for exhibit. As many of you would I’m sure agree, such an interesting project helps one to maintain one’s sanity in the period prior to the opening of a major exhibition. The treatment of this washstand helped me through our most recent “tribulation”.

According to the editor of Victorian Furniture¹,”Only recently have researchers, dealers and collectors turned their attention to the furniture made in Philadelphia in the second half of the 19th century. Few documented examples from this period have been identified, and the majority are products of the most fashionable firms in the city.” Moving through the latter 19th century, a period of intense industrialization in cities such as Philadelphia, we see important changes occurring in furniture production. Many

furniture makers felt threatened by the invention of various labor-saving devices and machines. Those who were trained in the traditional techniques of handwork were, quite understandably, very resistant to change...as were many of their customers, in fact. For this reason, newspaper advertisements of the day continued to emphasize skilled craftsmanship at the same time that increased mechanization was being touted as an improvement in the trade. This dichotomy reflects the inherent conflict of industrialization; older cabinetmakers were afraid that the new methods would mean a loss of jobs while younger ones, knowing no other way of making furniture, were barely concerned. Also at issue was the attendant loss of quality. This fear of a decrease in quality explains the constant emphasis on handfinishing and “fine craftsmanship” by manufacturers during this time.

Regarding the constant references to “the most up-to-date machines” or “all the machinery and tools... of the most approved patterns”, we need only to recognize the Victorian traits of competitiveness, class consciousness, and conspicuous consumption. The aim of most 19th century machinery was not automation but output...to meet the needs of the growing numbers of potential customers.

The Victorians were very much concerned with their social class. Their preferred furniture was extremely ornate because they equated “ornateness” with degree of refinement - the more ornamentation, the more highly-refined.

“And refinement at the popular level was perceived as a form of progress - the process of perfecting and proliferating the technology and productive activities which increased human comforts and embellished basic needs, especially in the context of the private household...a sort of Victorian version of the General Electric appliance advertisements of the 1950’s which trumpeted ‘Progress Is Our Most Important Product’.”

Firms which are known today as having produced high-priced “handmade” custom furniture used the term ‘cabinetmaking’ in their advertising, whereas the firms which are known to have incorporated a variety of the new machines and techniques more often referred to themselves as ‘furniture companies.’ Such a company was the firm of Hale & Kilburn. In 1875, it employed -on the average- 200 workers... making it the largest in Philadelphia. By comparison, the three leading companies in Grand Rapids each employed an average of 430 workers at this time...clearly making the Midwest ‘ahead’ of Philadelphia in terms of volume production.

And so finally we come to the Strong Museum’s #83.402.

It was immediately apparent that the piece had problems and needed considerable attention if it was going to be ready for the exhibition. Aside from the obvious dirt, damages, and old repairs, a number of questions about the construction, function and completeness of the washstand quickly presented themselves. And so a search was conducted to find out if any illustrated catalogues existed. While we were unable to locate a depiction of our precise washstand, we did find an ‘Illustrated Price List of Jan. 2, 1888’. Eight different models of the Peerless stand were then available, as open-top stands in cherry, walnut and oak, and as desk-top stands in mahogany as well.

The first question to answer was whether we had the former or the latter. Certainly, our example did not

now have a desk-top ...but did it once? Since our particular piece was unfortunately not illustrated in the price list and we could find no extant model number, a determination could not be made in that way. There could be no evidence of any desk-top ever having been hinged (as it would have been, from the depictions we did have) to the front edge of a horizontal board directly beneath the pediment-shelf unit because that board-if it ever existed-was no longer there. But, there also was unexplained two (2) presently-"unused" screw holes in each frontmost underside corner of the pediment-shelf unit itself. These holes, it was obvious, once held screws which secured hinges (also missing), and these (hinges) had to have been once attached to something...namely, the horizontal piece that apparently had been previously removed for some reason.

The best conclusion(s) that could be reached at this time could be summarized in the following way:

- a) The pediment-shelf combination {one unit) was once hinged to something, probably a horizontal board that is now missing.
- b) This arrangement would have enabled the pediment- shelf unit to be tilted forward to provide access to a metal reservoir (also now gone) for manual filing.
- c) It may have been that a desk-top was also once hinged to the now-apparently-missing horizontal board...as it would have been, according to the depictions of other similar stands and also according to a drawing that accompanied the patent applied for by Henry S. Hale on Jan. 12, 1878 and approved by the U.S. Patent Office on April 9th of that year. All show that both desk-top (if it existed on this particular model) and the forward-tilting pediment-shelf unit were hinged to the same piece...whether a horizontal board, or a vertical piece as the patent drawing indicates.
- d) Since there was no (other) evidence of a once-present desk-top...such as marks or discolorations of the marble top on which such a top would have rested, we concluded that our example had originally been, and continues to be, an open-top model with at least one integral piece missing.

Because of time constraints and the desire to look further into this situation later on, a restoration of this aspect of the piece was postponed in favor of other needed treatment.

The areas of horizontal decorative fretwork at both sides of the carcass had been broken, become detached, been repaired improperly, and were missing some significant sections. This condition provided an ideal opportunity to safely and inconspicuously lift a wood sample to be sent to the Forest Products Laboratory in Madison, WI for identification. It proved to be cherry (*Prunus*). Both open-top and desk-top washstands were available, at least in January of 1888, in cherry².

The needed repairs were made -- removing old adhesive residues, regluing old breaks, removing nails, etc. -- and the missing pieces were fashioned out of mahogany (*Swietenia*). To further distinguish the restored portions, they were sealed and finished after light staining with shellac. Under UV, they fluoresce a bright orange rather than the distinct green of the original varnish.

With the exception of the sink basin, all plumbing mechanisms were also missing. Again, because of limited time, all that could be restored was the drain pipe directly into the catch pail in the cabinet below.

A straight pipe assembly was pictured in one of the washstands in the 1888 Price List.

Cleaning the piece, then, became the one remaining task to make the washstand at least visually suitable for exhibition. Examination under UV revealed the extent of the disfigurement caused by layers of overlying grime.

After the requisite cleaning tests were performed, both a solvent-based cleaning solution and a water-based cleaning solution were formulated. They were used in the following order:

- a) 20% Vulpex Soap* in VM&P Naphtha
- b) 10% Vulpex Soap in cool, deionized water
- c) Clean deionized water 'rinse'
- d) 10% Vulpex Soap in VM&P Naphtha
- e) 5% Vulpex Soap in cool, deionized water
- f) Clean deionized water 'rinse'
- g) Final 'wipe-down' with VM&P Naphtha

The cleaning procedure is notable for the alternating (back and forth) between a solvent-based solution and a water-based one. This is effective to clean away, in a controllable fashion, the various layers of accumulated grime, including applied polishes and waxes. The cleaning was checked periodically and frequently under UV to maintain evenness. Greater care was taken as the removed grime became less apparent on the cleaning cloths. Though fairly diluted, Vulpex Soap is alkaline and can have an undesirable effect on the underlying finish...especially its uppermost regions, because of the character of its naturally-occurring oxidation.

The cleaning was taken only as far as was deemed safe. But the resulting improvement in surface clarity and overall appearance was dramatic. All wood surfaces were then given a thin coat Butcher's Wax and buffed with flannel.

While more research on this piece and its maker is needed, and more restoration as well, the washstand now looks much more complete than it did and is again pleasing to look at. Hopefully, there will be time to complete the treatment in the near future.

* Vulpex Soap - a potassium methyl cyclohexyl oleate with a pH of 10.5-11.5. Available from Conservation Materials, Ltd.

Notes

1. Victorian Furniture - Essays from a Victorian Society Autumn Symposium, edited by Kenneth L. Ames, published in 1982 by The Victorian Society in America, p.87, "Philadelphia Furniture Makers and Manufacturers, 1850-1880", by Page Talbot.

2 As the furniture industry grew, the use of choice wood(s) began to be compromised. The result often was a piece of furniture which was literally a hodgepodge of several different woods with less and less thought given to color, grain, grain direction, etc. To compensate for the inevitable unevenness in appearance, pigmented finishes were commonly applied to make these "cheaper, machine-made pieces" look more consistent...to pull the pieces together visually*. Our Peerless washstand appears to have a thin, reddish, pigmented 'coating' under(?) the layer(s) of clear finish. This, combined with the heavy grime layers, caused us initially to think that the primary wood was mahogany...or perhaps even walnut. And it may be that it is indeed one of these two woods; there's no reason to think that the same wood was used throughout the piece. The bulk of the cabinet may possibly be 'disguised' mahogany or walnut, with cherry being used only for the fretwork simply because a piece was handy that particular day.

*This was done with many white oak Arts and Crafts Period pieces. A pigmented brown "lacquer" was applied to even out natural color variations and variations resulting from the ammonia fuming process. It is still being used today by manufacturers for 'fine furniture' such as Kittinger in Buffalo, to even out the color and to "accent" or "antique" the final finish.



THE PEERLESS PORTABLE RESERVOIR WASHSTAND.

DESCRIPTIVE.

THIS invention is well known, and its merits thoroughly appreciated. A few words, however, as to its make up and operation may not be out of place. This washstand is suited alike to the necessities of country, town, or city, having all the advantages of a stationary stand, yet is entirely free from any of its disadvantages, such as "sewer-gas, lack of water, danger of overflow," etc., so frequently appertaining thereto. There are many places both in offices and private dwellings where it is impossible to have a water supply and drainage system of the kind that is usually provided where water-works exist. There are also many places where the common washstand set is unsightly and inconvenient, and yet where it is specially desirable to have the facilities for washing available. This stand supplies this need perfectly. The supply comes from the reservoir located in the back of the stand at the top, flowing from a self-closing faucet, which is operated by a neat nickeled thumb-press. *No pump is required* to force the water into the basin, and the reservoir being of large capacity does not need frequent replenishing; the latter is of easy access and can, therefore, readily be kept clean, pure, and sweet. The discharge of the water from the basin is by means of a removable plug, and the waste is caught by a pail proportioned to the capacity of the reservoir, making an overflow a matter of wilful carelessness or neglect. In schools and in offices where plumbing is not supplied, it will be found invaluable. When made in desk form its real use as a washstand is completely concealed. For details as to sizes and prices see accompanying Price List.

REMEMBER: No Pump! No Bowl! No Pitcher! No Sewer-Gas! No Overflow!



PATTERN No. 11½.

Made in Walnut.

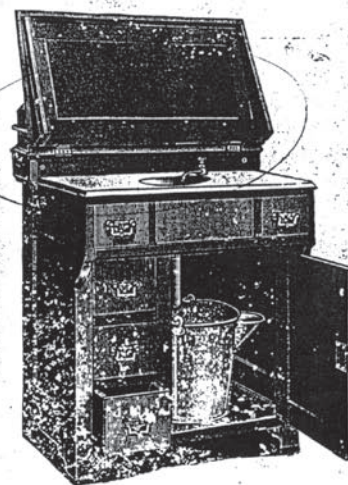
Has five drawers, with nicely moulded edges; billiard-cloth on top of desk; ornamental in design. This stand is nicely finished and every way desirable.

We also illustrate on this page, a desk washstand with desk-lid raised—showing marble-slab, washbowl, faucet, etc., underneath. A mirror can be fitted into the underpart of desk-lid if desired.

Cut also shows the galvanized water-bucket for receiving the waste-water from a hose connected with the bowl. The tank which supplies the bowl is concealed at the back, but is easily accessible.



No. 11½—Washstand.
Desk Top.



Desk Washstand.
Desk-lid raised.

For sizes and price see Price List.