



*Figure 1. Sofa, Winchester, VA, c. 1790, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, before treatment. Unusual inverted bellflower inlays decorate the legs.*

# Southern Sofas

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**ABSTRACT:** The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation will open an exhibit entitled “Southern Furniture” in the fall of 1997 at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Gallery. This exhibit will examine both the depth and diversity of cabinetmaking in the south in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Two sofas recently conserved in the Upholstery Conservation Lab of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation will be included in the exhibit. The first is a c. 1790 Neoclassical sofa from a defined school of cabinetmaking in Winchester, Virginia. The second is a c. 1815-1825 Empire sofa attributed to William King, Jr. of Georgetown, District of Columbia. Neither retained any original textile upholstery material.

After a brief introduction to the histories of the sofas, the paper will review the treatment of the sofas which was a collaboration between the Foundation curators and conservators. Specifically, the paper will cover the initial examination of the bare frame, and then how that resulting information was translated into the restoration of the textile upholstery materials.

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**I**N THE FALL OF 1997, THE COLONIAL Williamsburg Foundation will open an exhibit entitled “Southern Furniture” at the DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Gallery. Two sofas recently conserved by the authors in the Upholstery Conservation Lab of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation will be included in the exhibit. The treatments of the sofas are a testament to the collaboration between the curators and conservators of the Foundation in which extant evidence and period documentation are brought together to form a cohesive, and hopefully more accurate depiction of period objects.

Ronald Hurst, curator of furniture of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, is writing an extensive catalogue that will accompany the southern furniture exhibit. He notes that sofas were an established form in the colonies by the mid-eighteenth century, however very few existed in Virginia during that period. Probate records indicate that couches and settees were far more common. It is possible that Virginians were using the term couch interchangeably with sofa, yet period written documentation in advertisements, probates, and diaries shows the contrary. During that period,

sofas and couches denoted different forms with different functions. A sofa was symmetrical with a full back and an arm at either end and was used primarily for sitting upright. A couch had little or no back and uneven arms, or just one arm, and was used primarily for reclining.

After the Revolutionary War, sofas begin to appear in probates, cabinetmakers’ advertisements, and the account books of wealthy Virginians. The sofa depicted in figure 1 is in the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation collection, and is one of the earliest Virginia-made sofas currently known. It, and another virtually identical, privately-owned sofa, were constructed in the last decade of the 1700s. These two sofas belong to a small defined school of cabinetmaking believed to have been located in Winchester, Virginia. Winchester lies in the Valley of Virginia along the 18th century Great Wagon Road that connected Maryland and Pennsylvania with Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. As a result of this heavily traveled trade route, this school is defined by high quality cabinetmaking with exuberant vernacular proportions. This is best illustrated by the unconventional bellflower inlays that are inverted and resemble fleurs-de-lis.



*Figure 2. Sofa, Winchester, VA, detail, before treatment. The webbing on the arms is original.*



*Figure 3. Sofa, Winchester, VA, detail, before treatment. Channels were cut in the top face of the seat rails to receive the webbing. Also, the webbing was nailed to the front face of the seat rail rather than doubled over on the top face.*

This design is found on several of the pieces in the defined school including the legs of the sofa.

The sofa arrived at the holding room in the Department of Collections of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in tattered modern upholstery. The only surviving original textile that remained was the webbing on the arms (*fig. 2*) and some foundation linen fragments under original rosehead nails. Thus began a thorough examination of the wooden frame by Leroy Graves, Conservator at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, for other evidence.

Channels were cut into the top faces of the seat rails to receive the webbing which allows the nailed webbing to remain flush with the top surface (*fig. 3*). In spite of making that effort however, instead of doubling over the webbing in the traditional manner, the webbing on this sofa was pulled over and nailed to the side faces as well as the top faces as witnessed by the cluster of nail holes.

Unfortunately as is often the case with upholstered American furniture, this sofa retained no evidence of the original show cloth. However the decorative brass nail evidence is quite strong, and is most unusual and intriguing. A double row of brass nails runs along the crest rail, around the arm terminals, and drops down the interior corner of the frame before running along the seat deck (*fig. 4*). This evidence is confirmed by the many brass shanks left in the wooden frame.

At this juncture, the information Graves had gathered from the frame was combined with the information provided by the curator, Ronald Hurst. There are questions regarding the appropriateness of period mattresses on sofas, and there is evidence to support both treatments. Hepplewhite depicts a sofa with no mattress in Plate 21 of his *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide*, while a Parisian salon design in Gere's *Nineteenth-Century Decoration* illustrates a sofa with a mattress. For the treatment of this Winchester sofa, the decision to add a mattress and back pillows was based upon the extreme





*Figure 4. Sofa, Winchester, VA, detail, before treatment. An unusual decorative brass nail pattern runs along the interior corner formed by the arm and back panels, and along the bottom edge of the back panel.*

depth of the seat and the relatively low height of the seat deck. Hepplewhite's Plate 21 was also the inspiration for adding tufts to the mattress and back pillows.

Thus armed, Graves designed an upholstery conservation system that preserves the frame while reproducing the appropriate period aesthetic. On more than one occasion, visitors to Colonial Williamsburg have sat upon the collection objects.

Thus a concern when designing an upholstery system is to provide a rigid but lightweight substrate. Graves achieves this most often with sheet copper and/or Plexiglas. For this treatment, the seat deck was constructed of 1/4" Plexiglas with a 24 gauge copper facing for the front face of the seat rail. Debbie Juchem, a visiting textile conservator from Colorado, shaped the Ethafoam that was used to recreate the seat stuffing and upholstery roll profiles.

Ethafoam alone was used to recreate the upholstered profile of the removable back. Joanne Hackett, a pre-program intern, and Graves encased the foundation work in linen in preparation for the applying of the show cloth and edge finishing.

Unsatisfied with available modern, synthetic replacement materials because of their poor handling qualities and final appearance, Graves prefers to use the period materials for stuffing. Thus Jean Mitchell, a Colonial Williamsburg interpreter volunteering in the upholstery lab, stuffed the mattress with curled horsehair, and Hackett stuffed the back pillows with down.

The show cloth, chosen by Ronald Hurst and Linda Baumgarten, the curators of furniture and textiles



*Figure 5. Sofa, Winchester, VA, overall, after treatment.*

respectively, is a green moreen fabric, or a watered worsted wool. The show cloth decision was based upon a related easy chair in the Foundation collection that retains a large fragment of the original green moreen show cloth. Anne Battram, visiting upholstery conservator from SPNEA, and Lucy Vinceguerra, a volunteer, applied the show cloth over the linen-encased substrate with hot melt adhesive, Velcro and metal fasteners, and hand stitching. The decorative brass nail pattern was recreated by applying the brass nails to the gimp which in turn was glued to the edges.

Edging for the cushions was applied in the traditional manner of handstitching the cord to the edge seam, and then stitching the gimp around the cord. Period examples of this technique are illustrated and discussed by Morrison Heckscher in Edward Cooke's *Upholstery in America and Europe from the Seventeenth Century to WWI*.

All of this work culminated in the completed conservation treatment of the 1790s Winchester sofa, one of the two earliest Virginia-made sofas presently known (fig. 5).

The next sofa, and a matching side chair, date to 1815-1825 and are an important addition to Colonial Williamsburg's growing southern furniture collection (fig. 6). The sofa is attributed to William King, Jr., a Georgetown, District of Columbia cabinetmaker in business from 1795 to 1854. The King attribution is based partially upon the provenance with the Clement and Margaret Smith family of Georgetown. As president of the Farmer's and Merchant's Bank of Georgetown in the early nineteenth century, Smith was a prominent client of William King's; King provided the complete mortuary services required when Clement Smith passed away in 1839. The attribution also rests in similarities with other known King pieces. In 1818, King was commissioned by President James Monroe to make a set of twenty-four chairs and four sofas for the President's House to replace those destroyed by the British troops during the War of 1812. The carving on the White House suite and the carving on the Colonial Williamsburg sofa are of the same hand.

The sofa arrived at Colonial Williamsburg having been completely reupholstered in 1985. The sofa



*Figure 6. Sofa, Georgetown, District of Columbia, 1815-1825, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, before treatment. An applied wood strip on the top face of the seat rails takes the place of a constructed hair roll.*



**Figure 7. Sofa, Georgetown, DC, detail, during treatment. Joanna Ruth Harris, coauthor, locks the non-intrusive upholstery conservation back panels together like a jigsaw puzzle. Also note the copper construction of the arm panels.**

was constructed with a slip seat, much like a side chair, and was upholstered with the same techniques. The original webbing was nailed to the top face of the slip seat frame signified by the cluster of nail holes. The foundation linen was nailed on next, fragments of which can be seen under the nail heads. The question of added rolls was handled interestingly with the slip seat. Instead of the more common method of hair or straw rolls, rounded-off strips of wood were mounted to the top faces of the rails creating a taut, shallow well for the seat deck stuffing. The construction of the arms reinforces the idea of a taut profile since very little room was allowed for the pulling through of two layers each of top linen and show cloth. The only evidence of the original show cloth or trim was a few multi-colored threads found under a nail head on the underside of the slipseat. The decorative brass nail evidence was much stronger as the pattern in many instances left not only the shank and nail hole but the shape of the head and the imprint of the textile weave pattern. Examination showed that there are two sets of early nineteenth-century decorative brass nail patterns on the front of the slipseat, a top 3/8" row and a bottom 1/2" row. Impossible to distinguish which brass nail pattern came first, the decision was made to recreate the 3/8" pattern since it continued around the arm terminals

and beneath the carving, while the 1/2" pattern, found only on the slipseat, actually sits too low to fit in the rabbet of the frame. The 3/8" brass nail pattern changes to a 1" spacing along the crest rail on the rear of the sofa, consistent with the practice of conserving brass nails in less visible areas.

With the examination complete, the upholstery conservation system was begun. Again, with a concern being a rigid but lightweight system, Graves chose 1/4" Plexiglas for the seat deck. Like the Winchester sofa, the stuffing profile was achieved with shaped Ethafoam adhered to the Plexiglas with PVA hot-melt adhesive. The interior panels of the arms were constructed of copper bent to conform to the profile of the arms. The exterior arm panels did not need to address the concerns of visitors sitting, and the greatest concern was to reduce the weight of the upholstery

conservation system. The authors experimented with a method for impregnating linen and wire mesh screen with polyester resin. Substantial enough to serve as a support for the stuffing, show cloth and brass nails, this mix of materials was still flexible enough to conform to the curvature of the arms.

The encasing of the back with an upholstery substrate was achieved by sandwiching the vertical frame supports by friction fit. The interior front panel consists of shaped Ethafoam while the back is merely a panel that locks into the front like a jigsaw puzzle (*fig. 7*). This exterior backing was constructed of a sheet of NOMEX, a polyamide polymer manufactured by DuPont. The results were less than satisfactory given that the hot melt adhesive did not adhere well and the material is not a cheaper alternative.

These upholstery support systems and Ethafoam profiles were softened with a layer of polyester batting covered by a layer of woven black cotton. The black cotton serves merely to disguise the white Ethafoam and batting from the relative open weave of the hair show cloth.



As mentioned previously, there were fragmentary threads found of original show cloth or decorative trim. Because of the insufficient material and the cost of reproducing several colors, Hurst and Baumgarten chose a period appropriate striped green hair cloth for the show cloth. The show cloth was applied with hot-melt adhesive, Velcro strips, and handstitching. The decorative brass nails with clipped shanks were inserted into pre-drilled holes and glued to the edges of the support systems with PVA hot-melt adhesive. Decorative cord was chosen to edge the front of the slipseat and was handstitched in place.

The curators, Hurst and Baumgarten, drew upon period design sources for appropriate cushion arrangements. There are numerous examples illustrating the aesthetic tastes of the 19th century in such period publications as Ackermann's and Whitaker's in which the upholstery is crisp and taut and the pillows overblown and inviting. The curved shape of the arms indicates that the sofa was designed to include bolsters. The covering of the bolsters with the striped hair cloth is loosely adapted from a Currier and Ives print entitled "The Four Seasons of Life: Old Age." The draping pillows over the bolsters are taken from Parisian designs for a day-bed in a niche. And the back pillows with

pinched corners are taken from a conglomeration of couches illustrated by nineteenth-century English furniture designer J. Taylor.

The tassel design was taken from a group of period tassels in the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation collection. With price quotes as exorbitant as \$1500 a tassel, Graves decided to make the twenty needed tassels in-house. The period tassel was scaled down to fit the proportions of this Georgetown sofa. Mark Kutney, CAL/Smithsonian intern, turned the needed twenty wooden cores on the lathe and then drilled out their centers. The wooden cores were stained green in preparation for their covering with threads. Reminiscent of quilting parties, volunteers joined the authors to work on the tassel construction.

The skirts for the tassels were constructed by wrapping the threads around the metal straight edge. The wrapped top edge was stitched with a locking back stitch, and the threads were then removed by slitting the bottom edge. The skirts were both tied and glued into place around the wrapped wooden cores. All of the tassels were then glued and stitched to the pillows completing the treatment (*fig. 8*).



*Fig. 8. Sofa, Georgetown, DC, overall, after treatment.*

The conservation treatments of the 1790's Winchester sofa and the 1820's Georgetown sofa were complex and challenging. Each treatment was approached individually and was allowed the luxury of time for full examination and re-creation. As a result, the treatments contributed to the growing body of knowledge on period upholstery as well as being successful minimally intrusive upholstery conservation systems.

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LEROY GRAVES is a native Virginian who has been with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation for thirty years. He was one of the first furniture conservators for the Foundation and began the upholstery conservation program at the Foundation in the early 1980s. He has contributed his extensive knowledge and experience in eighteenth-century upholstery materials and techniques to Cooke's *Upholstery in America and Europe*, the *Upholstery Conservation Symposium Postprints*, and is contributing to the upcoming issue of Beckerdite's *American Furniture*. Address: P.O. Box 1776, Williamsburg, VA 23187

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