



FIGURE 1 White and gold painted stool, Tudor Place.

# DID GEORGE WASHINGTON SIT HERE? FRENCH FURNITURE IN THE AMERICAN PRESIDENT'S HOUSE

*Ron Blank—Furniture Conservation Training Program, Smithsonian Institution*

## ABSTRACT

A white and gold painted stool from Tudor Place, an historic house museum in Georgetown, is the most clearly identifiable object in the group of “Green Drawing Room” furniture that George Washington purchased for his presidential home. It is a remarkable document of those original furnishings. Since the stool is well-described in presidential papers, it also documents the state of the furniture arts at a very specific point in time. This paper will present an overview of investigative research carried out at the Smithsonian Center for Materials Research and Education. Elements of construction and restoration will be discussed: the woods, the upholstery materials, the paint history. Evidence of the earlier materials discovered is evaluated with descriptive documents from the first President's letters and account books.



## INTRODUCTION

**G**eorge Washington's diary entry for April 16, 1789 contains a poignant passage: "...I bade adieu to Mount Vernon, to private life, to domestic felicity; and with a mind oppressed with more anxious and painful sensations than I have words to express, set out for New York..." (Fitzpatrick, 1971).

After his first inauguration on April 30, 1789, George Washington occupied the Osgood residence on Cherry Street, which was provided by Congress for the President. The President's House was a home for his family, his staff, and the servants and slaves who attended them. It also served as the office of the Executive, a tradition that continues to this day. In February 1790, the President moved into a more commodious residence, the Macomb House on Broadway, which was the recently vacated home of the French Minister plenipotentiary, and paid £ 665 for the furnishings. In November 1790, when the Federal government moved to Philadelphia, the presidential entourage occupied the Morris residence on Market Street.

Within 100 years, progress and the passage of time had erased all but sketches of the first President's houses in New York and in Philadelphia. The furnishings had been disbursed through inheritance and auctions.

In April 1889, the city of New York hosted the “Centennial Celebration of the Inauguration of Washington.” A “Loan Exhibition of Historical Portraits and Relics” was gathered at the Metropolitan Opera House. A group of photographs were exhibited, showing objects that had remained in family possession and were remembered as part of the original group of furniture purchased from the Comte de Moustier. Our story begins here. It is the story of the original furnishings of the President's House. It is also the story of the family that inherited



FIGURE 2

the legacy.

#### THE FAMILY LEGACY

John Parke Custis, son of Martha Washington and her first husband, died at an early age. His widow, Eleanor Calvert, and four children survived him. The two younger children, George Washington Parke Custis and Eleanor “Nelly” Parke Custis were raised by their grandparents at Mount Vernon. They also lived in New York and Philadelphia during the presidential years. The two older daughters, Eliza Parke Custis and Martha Parke Custis, were raised by their mother and her second husband.

Martha Parke Custis married Thomas Peter, the first mayor of Georgetown. With the legacy of \$8,000 left by George Washington, they purchased one five-acre city block in Georgetown and built Tudor Place. One of their daughters, Britannia Peter Kennon, inherited the house and furnishings in 1852 and lived there until her death. Successive generations of the Peter family lived at Tudor Place until 1984.

The Washington relics were divided among family members after Britannia died in 1911. An inventory entitled *Division of Mt. Vernon Things at*

*Tudor Place* remains archived there. Two items on that list are important to note here:

- “105. White and gold stool (used in Phila.)”
- “116. Writing desk, mahogany.”

In 1802, Martha Washington willed Martha Peter her “...writing table and the seat to it standing in my Chamber” (Fields, 1994). That desk was part of a group of furnishings purchased from the departing French minister, the Comte de Moustier, in February 1790. Inside were found the only two letters known to survive from George Washington to his wife. The desk was returned to Mount Vernon in 1939 and may be viewed there today.

The stool has been the subject of much interest since it remained in the family. It was described in 1891 as “...One white & gold stool, a piece of the furniture used by Gen’l Washington while President in New York & Phila...” (Kennon, 1891). That quote comes from the unpublished memoirs of Britannia Peter Kennon. It was also described by Armistead Peter III in 1969 in a private publication entitled *Tudor Place*, “The Louis XVI piano stool...was Mrs. Washington’s piano stool and should be taken care of by those into whose care

it may come.”

#### MATERIALS OF CONSTRUCTION AND RESTORATION: THE WOOD

The stool is circular with neo-classical styling (*fig. 1*). It stands 19.5" high at the crown and 16" in diameter at the upholstery edge. At the top of each stop-fluted leg is a cube, called a *dé de raccordement*, decorated on one face with a carved acanthus medallion set within a square rosace. The stool was constructed from four turned legs joined by mortise and tenon to four apron sections sawn to form the curve. Tenons at each end of the apron sections are inserted into mortises chopped into the cube at the top of each leg.

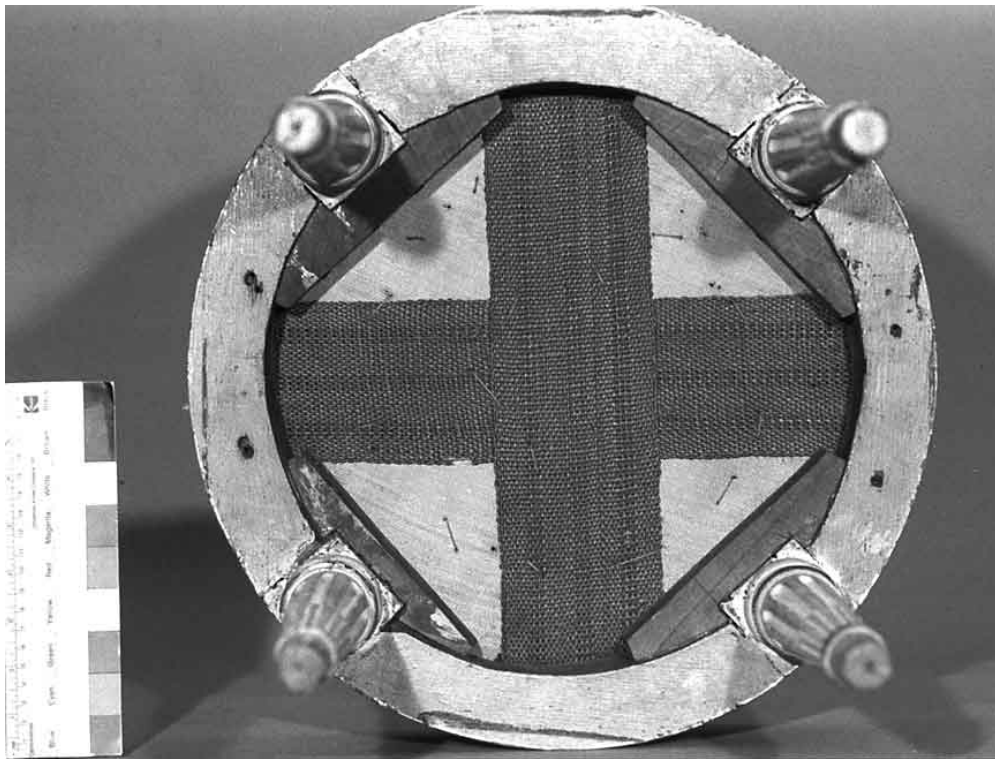
The project began with an unusual event. In February 1997, one of the applied acanthus medallions was discovered lying on the floor at Tudor Place. Replacing the detached element was a simple task. A close examination to discover the cause raised even more questions about the recent history of the object. Conversations with the curator revealed a long list of queries and responses that had accumulated in the files. Philippe Lafar-

gue, formally trained in traditional French chair-making techniques at the École Boulle and at the Mobilier National in Paris, was asked to examine this object and offer some advice.

The French craft guilds were highly evolved by the 1790s. The wood was cut, the stool assembled and the tenons fixed in position by the joiner. The holes were bored through the front and the pins left protruding in the rear. The placement of the pins is not necessarily planned to correspond with the eventual decoration. “The chairs were constructed in separate parts...which were assembled by mortise and tenon joints and strengthened by wooden plugs usually inserted without glue...the joints loosen less readily with time and wear than those of contemporary English chairs” (Watson, 1973). The stool then goes to the carver who shapes the acanthus and chops the recess out to fit.

A close examination of figure 2 shows the pins protruding; in this case right through the face of the square rosace that surrounds the medallion. Underneath the medallion the pin heads are proud

FIGURE 3





of the surface. This damage is the long-term result of previous repairs.

The support blocks visible in figure 3 were added inappropriately in two separate restorations. The block shaped from beech is attached with old nails. The three cherry blocks were attached with a synthetic adhesive in a later restoration. They were probably added to shore up loose joinery, but they limit wood movement. The ash legs and aprons and tenons can expand and contract normally. The joinery pins that protrude on the surface were shorn flush on the backside to accommodate the support blocks. The pins stood still when the elements around them shrunk. The acanthus dropped off after the pin heads underneath pushed it to the brink.

Three of the four acanthus medallions remain intact. They are presumed to be original attachments; each fits exactly within the individual chopped recess. Slight differences in dimension were noticed when one of the medallions was removed to mold a replacement for the missing element. The wood shavings used for identification were removed from the backside at that time. The medallions were carved from *Liquidambar styraciflua*, a diffuse porous hardwood, commonly called red or sweet gum, native to North America and China.

Dr. Harry Alden of the Smithsonian Center for Materials Research and Education (SCMRE) identified sweet gum as the wood used for the three extant carved acanthus medallions, ash (*Flaxinus* sp.) as the wood used for a selected example of the joinery pins, cherry (*Prunus* sp.) as the wood used for three of the four support blocks. Ms. Donna Christensen, formerly of the Forest Products Laboratory signed wood identifications on February 10, 1989 for a selected sample removed from a support block: beech (*Fagus* sp.), and on February 10, 1990 for a selected sample removed from an inside apron surface: ash (*Flaxinus* sp.). Dr. Alden confirmed the use of ash for

all legs and apron sections macroscopically.

#### MATERIALS OF CONSTRUCTION AND RESTORATION: THE CUSHION

It was obvious from the initial examination that the stool was re-upholstered. Jute webbing measuring 3.5" wide with dark brown stripes is visible under the entire upholstery package in figure 3. Jute furniture webbing was first produced in Scotland and not for many years after the stool was constructed. "The earliest webs...which contained jute were dated circa 1840; they all had jute in the warp only and one of them showed flax to be mixed with the jute. The author proposes that if jute is found in a webbing, its earliest date is not likely to be before the 1830s, the early work with jute being directed towards coarse sacking materi-



FIGURE 4

Tudor Place Foundation, Inc., Washington, DC.



FIGURE 5

als and ropes” (Milnes, 1983).

The stool in figure 4 was photographed, along with all of the inherited family relics, for the Centennial Exhibition of Washington’s First Inauguration in New York City in 1889. The upholstery work appears recent in this photograph when higher, rounded crowns were in fashion. One hundred years earlier, when the stool was new, the upholstery would have been fashioned with a pillbox shaped cushion, a hard edge and a lower profile.

Figure 5 shows the puffy crown with a rolled edge that protrudes beyond the profile of the apron. The gold silk damask was damaged at that point. The show cover may have been re-used. In figures 2 and 5, a narrow curved seam is visible just above the gimp upholstery trim. These hand-stitched seams occur on opposite sides of the crown and measure 21” seam to seam, a traditional width for damask prior to the introduction of the broadloom in the 1880s. Remnants were added to each side of the fabric to accommodate the width measured over the crown.

According to family tradition, fabrics from their collection of Washington relics were used to recover other pieces. An article in *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* one year after the Centennial Exhibition in New York City featured the family relics. “A portion of [a] superb gown was used to cover a low arm-chair of walnut, studded with brass nails, which Mrs. Washington sent to Mrs. Peter upon the birth of her first child, and her own first great-grandchild, M. E. Eleanor Peter” (Armstrong, 1890).

After consulting with upholstery conservator Elizabeth Lahikainen and the staff at Tudor Place, the show cover was removed. We intended to replace the fragile damask and look for evidence of earlier upholstery. Our suspicions about the damask were confirmed. The selvage edge of both sides of the fabric remain intact. We had hoped to find extra padding attached to the original upholstery cake. We discovered that the original cake was entirely replaced with a hand-sewn burlap cake. The only evidence that remains of the original upholstery are

occasional wool fibers and square brass shanks.

#### MATERIALS OF CONSTRUCTION AND RESTORATION: THE PAINT

The stool is painted white with gold appointments on the rosace, on turned sections of the leg, and along the bottom edge of the apron. The white painted areas display a dull, flat sheen; paint very lean in medium. A type-written paper label was attached to one of the legs in 1911 when the Washington family relics were inventoried. The current appearance of the stool must date back that far. The photo in figure 4 was taken prior to 1889. At some point the entire surface was painted black. The black layer is apparent at the edge of every loss the object has suffered through the intervening years.

The stool was examined at SCMRE in June and October 1998. Walter Hopwood, Organic Chemist at SCMRE, scraped selected areas of three paint layers and examined them for organic binder components. Portions of each sample were initially crushed whole on a diamond cell and the infrared spectrum determined. The instrument used was a Mattson 4326 Upgrade Fourier-trans-

form Infrared spectrophotometer/Spectra Tech IR Plan microscope. The organic components of the samples were extracted in ethylene dichloride. The infrared spectra of the extracted portions were determined and compared with the whole sample spectra. The remainders of the extracted portions were also employed for gas chromatography after further chemical extractions. The instrument used was a Hewlett-Packard 5890 gas chromatograph with a 30m x 0.25mm DB-1 column. The effluent was detected with a Hewlett-Packard 5972 mass selective detector (quadrupole). Ron Cunningham, Senior Conservator at SCMRE, analyzed the individual layers and particulate components of two imbedded samples. The instrument used was a JEOL JXA-840A Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) with a Tracor Northern [now Noran] TN-5502 energy dispersive x-ray spectroscopy (EDS) system. Figure 6 is an SEM photograph of a spalled sample from a gilded area. The back-scattered image reads as follows: dark color indicates lower atomic numbers and light color indicates higher atomic numbers.

The following description of the individual layers is listed from top to bottom:

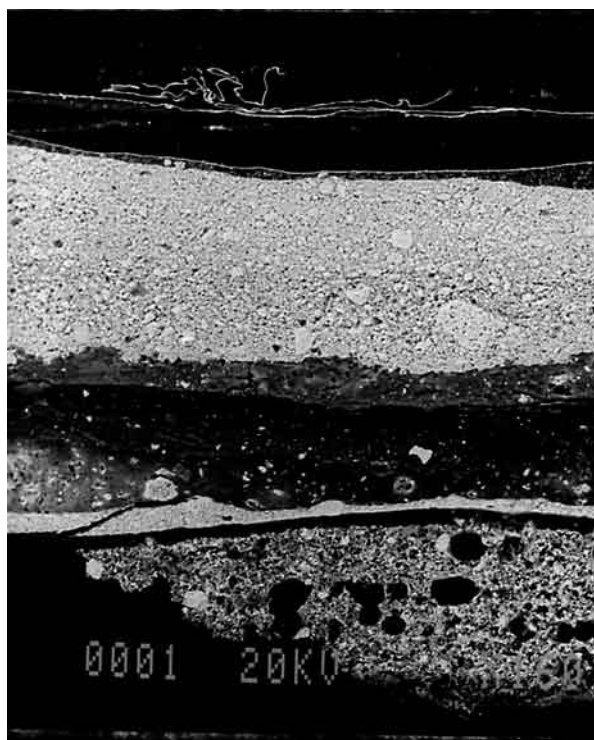


FIGURE 6

- L-1. Gold
- L-1. Oil size
- L-1. Gold
- L-1. Clay bole
- L-2. Lead white oil paint
- L-3. Degraded layer
- L-4. Varnish resin black paint
- L-5. Lead white paint
- L-6. Resin
- L-7. Gesso



L-1. Two layers of gold (the top layer is on oil size, the earlier layer is on bole).

L-2. The white paint layer contains a lot of inorganic material (lead) and very little organic (natural ester oil) binder. This would account for the flat appearance. Wax was also detected.

L-3. There is a degraded coating on top of the black layer.

L-4. The "black" layer is more complicated than a single layer of black paint. It appears to be a resinous coating with particles dispersed within a varnish medium. It is a natural resin component similar to kauri copal and a greater percentage of organic binder (dried linseed oil), than the top (white) layer. This layer was meant to be reflective in light; it contains traces of iron and distinctive pigment particles, including: red clay particles, blue-white lead particles, and yellow-orange particles with a white center, which are also lead.

L-5. White lead paint.

L-6. Unidentified resin.

L-7. The gesso is foam-like and water-soluble. It fractures easily. This may account for the deep losses associated with each dent. The air bubbles are also a clue that the stool was never meant to be gilded because the gesso was mopped on rapidly in a single thick layer.

An interesting discovery to report is another, earlier color layer. A resinous green layer was found. It occurs on the face of the square rosace and as highlights on the acanthus medallions. A sample was located in a group of spalled fragments collected from the examination table. On that sample, the black layer and the white "restoration layer" are also present and both are on top of the green layer. Analysis of the green layer indicated no pigment particles that show green, but copper is dispersed generally within the medium. Black and white lead particles were identified.

#### MATERIALS OF CONSTRUCTION AND

#### RESTORATION: SUMMARY

The stool is constructed in a manner consistent with the practices of French chair-makers. If one assumes that the acanthus has always been there and that cabinetmakers utilized locally available materials, it probably was made in America. The wood used (ash) was preferred by American chair-makers. The acanthus is carved from a wood (sweet gum) that only grows in North America and China.

The stool is white with gold appointments today. That may be an imitation of the white and green appearance we have detected. The green appearance may have been meant to imitate gold. For some reason, the Washington's, their granddaughter or their great-granddaughter had it painted black. We cannot determine from chemical evidence when the stool was repainted and gilded. Three of the support blocks are attached with an adhesive that postdates World War II, but the paint, specifically in the vicinity of the paper labels "105" and "Mt. Vernon" on one leg, cannot post-date 1911.

The upholstery cushion was entirely replaced. That is not uncommon or unexpected. The yellow damask fabric that covered it until recently may be important historically as well. We are searching for evidence of an earlier fabric that was fastened with brass tacks.

A fabric fragment in an envelope labeled "Mount Vernon furniture covering" by an unidentified family member is also part of the collection at Tudor Place. The fabric is blue-green damask with a flower pattern, wool in the warp and silk in the weft. We cannot prove that it came from the stool. However, green wool fibers were found on the tacking rebate. And "silk and worsted damasks" are frequently mentioned in Washington's account books.

#### A FINAL QUERY: DID GEORGE WASHINGTON SIT HERE?

Many documents survive from George Washington's lifetime; 64,786 in the Library of Congress



collection were microfilmed in 1964. He and his secretaries kept detailed records of purchases and their correspondence offers historians incredible insight into their daily lives. A few of those that describe the furniture of the Green Drawing Room or the disbursement of those objects are quoted below.

Account book entry for additional furniture, in George Washington's handwriting:

"January 24, 1793. G. Barteau. 6 Chrs & 2 stools. G. Drawg [Rm?] £ 32.11. [?]" (Winterthur Library: Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts, No. 65 x 571)

The name of George Bertault, who advertised himself as an "Upholsterer, from Paris" in the Philadelphia General Advertiser on April 12, 1793, appears 15 times in the Presidential Household Accounts between 1791 and 1797.

As he prepared to retire from public life President Washington personally inventoried the household furnishings, in February 1797. From the list entitled *Bought from the Count de Moustier*:

"6. Chairs and two stools added to the Green furniture. £ 32.11. [?]" (DLC: GW, Series 4, Roll 110)

The Green Drawing Room Furnishings were offered to John Adams, "...at such reduced prices as he, or any other, should adjudge them to be the worse for ware..." G. W. to Mrs. Robert Morris. (Fitzpatrick, 1940)

From the list entitled *Articles in the Green Drawing Room which will be sold*:

"6 small do [arm chairs] do do ['green flowerd damask'] added £ 24.15. [?]"

"2 round stools do do...£ 5. 5. [?]" (DLC: GW, Series 4, Roll 110)

George Washington wrote to Bartholomew Dandridge, nephew of Martha and secretary to the President, who stayed in Philadelphia with Tobias Lear to complete the transition. "April 3, 1797. Mr. Lear informs me that the president [John

Adams] has declined, finally to take any part of the furniture in the Green drawing room..." (Fitzpatrick, 1940)

After President Adams declined, the furniture was offered at public auction on March 10, 1797 by Footman & Co in Philadelphia. Tobias Lear reported the results in a letter to the former President. "March 15th 1797...The furniture of the Green Drawing Room & other Articles sold at Auction went off very low indeed." (Fitzpatrick, 1940)

George Washington died in December 1799. Thomas Peter was an executor. The contents of the estate were assessed in "...An Inventory &c. of Articles at Mount Vernon With Their Appraised Value Annexed." In the "New Room," the two-story large dining room, were listed "two round Stools" valued at 6 dollars. (Prussing, 1927)

Undoubtedly the "white & gold stool" at Tudor Place is one of the round stools mentioned in these documents. No other object from this group is so well described. George Washington may never have chosen to sit on this stool, but he had ample opportunity during the last six years of his life. It was continuously in family possession from 1793 until 1984, and under the care of the Tudor Place Foundation since then.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the Tudor Place Foundation and their staff in the preparation of this paper. I am also indebted to the Smithsonian Institution for supporting the research.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Armstrong, W. 1890. *Some new Washington relics*. The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine (XL): 14-22.

Carroll, J., and Ashworth, M. 1957. *George Washington: first in peace*. Completion of biography by Douglas Southall Freeman. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Decatur, S., Jr. 1933. *Private affairs of George Washington*. From the Records and Accounts of Tobias Lear, Esquire, his Secretary. Boston: The Riverside Press.

DLC: GW. 1964. *The George Washington papers*. Library of Congress. Washington, DC: Library of Congress.

Joseph E. Fields, ed. 1994. "*Worthy partner*": *the papers of Martha Washington*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Fitzpatrick, J., ed. 1971. *The dairies of George Washington, 1748–1799*. Volume IV, 1789-1799. New York: Kraus Reprint Company.

Fitzpatrick, J., ed. 1939. *The writings of George Washington, 1745–1799*. Volume 31, January 22, 1790-March 9, 1792. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.

Fitzpatrick, J., ed. 1940. *The Writings of George Washington, 1745–1799*. Volume 35, March 30, 1796-July 31, 1797. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office. Kennon, B. 1891. Gleanings. Unpublished dairy. Washington, DC: Tudor Place.

Milnes, E.C. 1983. *History of the development of furniture webbing*. Leeds: E. C. Milnes.

Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography. 1905-1907. *Washington's household account book*. Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography (XXIX-XXXI).

Peter, A., III. 1969. *Tudor Place*. Georgetown [Washington, DC]: Private Printing.

Prussing, E. 1927. *The estate of George Washington, deceased*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company.