

The Bayly Couch, circa 1820, Baltimore

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Introduction

Colonial Williamsburg recently added to its small collection of classical Baltimore painted furniture by acquiring a spectacular suite attributed to Hugh Finlay of Baltimore, Maryland. The suite, consisting of seven pieces, was originally owned by Josiah Bayly (1769–1846) of Cambridge, Maryland. Born on the Eastern Shore in Somerset County, Maryland, Bayly practiced law and served as the attorney general of the state from 1831 until 1846. The suite descended in the family to Mr. E. Bayly Orem, from whom it was acquired in 2002. Originally part of a larger set, the “fancy” suite now consists of a couch, two pier tables with “marbled” tops, and four side chairs, including four upholstered and three caned slip seats, for winter and summer use, respectively (Priddy, 2004). The focus of this paper is the study and treatment of the couch, which retains its original upholstery foundation and a majority of its show cover (fig. 1).

The suite is strongly in the Greek revival style popular in early 19th-century America (Cooper, 1993). In addition to the Grecian forms, the furniture is distinguished by the rosewood grain-painted and gilt overlaid finish decoration. The pier tables and chairs are highlighted similarly by gilt decorations on their most prominent surfaces (fig. 2). On the table apron are displayed two identical patterns of gilded motifs. Each of these templated gold-leaf patterns features a winged thunderbolt framed by crossed canons inside an oval of an acanthus vine, and flanked by the scrolling foliated vine, which terminates in a cornucopia. The apron, boldly turned pedestal, X-stretcher and turned feet all feature gold and yellow highlight striping. The lower stretcher brackets are decorated with a stylized anthemion elongated to fill the space. The pedestal is further punctuated around its middle by six stamped-brass rosettes. Four more identical brass plates terminate the anthemion scrolls on the X-stretchers.

The chairs also feature a single thunderbolt-and-canons grouping on the crest rail. The stay rail is decorated with a central anthemion surrounded with scrolling vines and ending in partial anthemions at each end. The chair rails, stiles, side seat frame members and legs are made of tulip poplar, with white pine in the rear seat rail, and hickory stretchers. Four upholstered loose, or slip seats, are composed of white pine frames with tulip poplar front molded edges. The three surviving caned loose seats are framed in walnut, with applied tulip poplar half-round front moldings, and white pine rear square moldings. The chair frame consists of ring-turned stiles, which are round-tenoned into a tablet crest rail and T-shaped seat rails. The stiles are mortised to house a tenoned stay rail. The caned seats were painted yellow originally, but the replaced cane is not painted. The chair frame, lower front stretcher and leg ring turnings are highlighted with gold and yellow stripes. The sides of the T-shaped rails are also painted with an anthemion at the rear, a scrolling yellow outline reaching forward and surrounding two rosettes at the front.

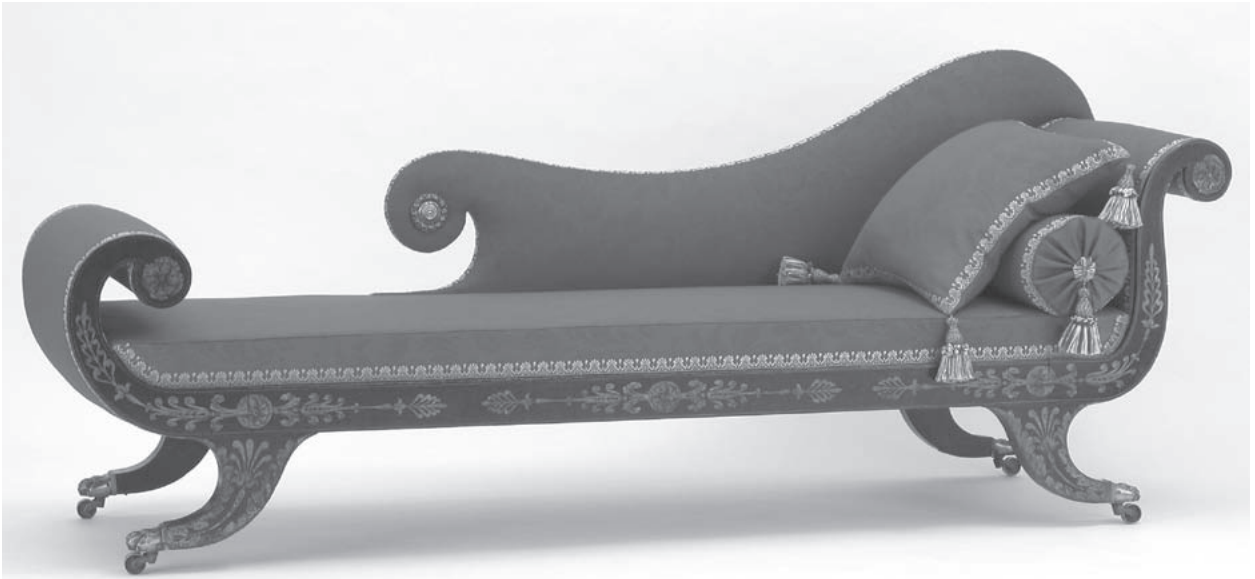


Figure 1. Overall after treatment. Note the addition of the knife-edged cushion with tassels, and the covered bolster.



Figure 2. Before treatment, side chair with caned seat and table.

The couch, so-called because of its incomplete back, features a Grecian design like the tables and chairs. A partial serpentine back stretches from a full-height scrolled arm across to a scrolled end just above the seat—near the opposite end lower scrolled arm. The back is screwed to the back of the scroll arm, and along its length from under the removable mattress frame. The frame is constructed entirely of yellow poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), joined by traditional mortise and tenon, but also reinforced with auxiliary nailed corner blocks. The painted finish is a layering of a gray-colored primer, with black and then red paint making up the rosewood graining. For the gilt highlights, an oil-based size is applied following a template. The use of a template is confirmed by the repeated irregularities and overall dimensions found in similar motifs. Yellow, white and red oil-based glazes were then brushed over the gold leaf to complete the three-dimensional effects imitating applied gilded bronze hardware. Finally, a natural resin varnish was applied to protect the whole.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the brothers John (1777–1851) and Hugh (1781–1831) Finlay were the dominant figures in Baltimore’s well-established painted furniture industry. In 1809, architect Benjamin Henry Latrobe (1764–1831) designed a suite of seating furniture for James and Dolly Madison’s oval drawing room at the White House and selected the Finlay shop to produce the forty-two pieces. Although destroyed when British troops burned the White House in 1814, Latrobe’s surviving drawings indicate that the pieces were ornamented with Greek and Roman emblems executed in shades of red, blue and yellow with gilt accents. This important commission must have influenced the Finlays’ subsequent production of bold, up-to-the-minute designs in the archaeologically correct new classical mode that was then sweeping the cabinetmaking centers in Western Europe. Over the next thirty years, the Finlays, working together and individually, remained in the vanguard of the Baltimore trade in painted furniture. The design for the individual pieces as well as the suite was popular in painted Baltimore furniture of the period.

The Bayly couch appears remarkably similar to one photographed in the 1890s (unpublished) that is known to have been purchased by Humberton Skipwith from Hugh Finlay in 1819 (currently in a private collection). In 1819 Skipwith purchased furniture from Hugh Finlay, including a sofa, a pair of card tables and 32 chairs (Skipwith Papers, 1819). The couch relates to two others based on the documented Skipwith family couch. One survives in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The other, along with a well-preserved window bench, is found in the Kaufman collection (Cooper, 1993). The suite also relates to the ornamentation on a suite of furniture known to have been produced by Hugh Finlay for James Wilson of Baltimore, which is now owned by the Maryland Historical Society (Weidman, 1972).

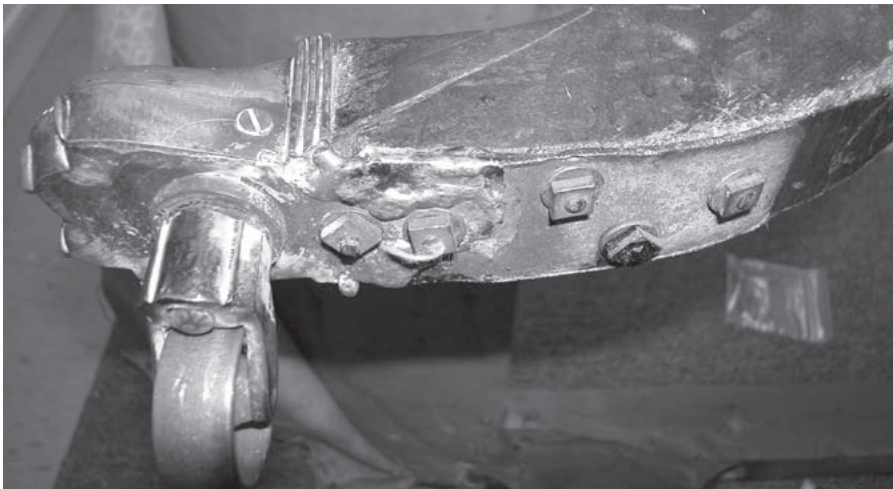


Figure 3. Before Treatment, leg with breaks and poorly restored strap repair.

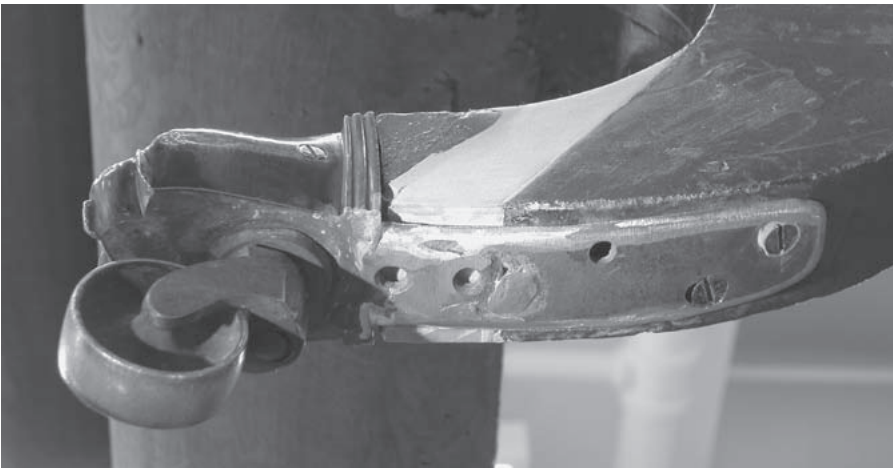


Figure 4. During treatment, leg with filed strap, fills and reversed counter-sunk bolts.

Couch Study and Treatment

The couch was successfully treated in the spring of 2004. The treatment consisted primarily of structural, paint and upholstery stabilization followed by a careful and limited surface cleaning, and a re-fitting of new upholstery show cover and trim.

Structure

The couch frame survives in relatively good condition. Several breaks and subsequent repairs in the frame reflect the inherent weakness of the design.

Sometime in the past, the proper right front and proper left rear legs were broken off near the castor shoes. Curved yellow poplar legs such as these are inherently weak because of the cantilevered weight they bear. They tend to fail near the bottom just above the casters where the bearing weight is furthest removed and the longitudinal wood grain is shortest. Each had been badly repaired by the addition of poorly-fitted wooden fills, and elongated iron screw-plate bottom tabs that were roughly soldered onto the original short tabs. The long tabs and legs were drilled through to receive machine bolts with nuts on the bottom (fig. 3).

The treatment carried out featured disassembling the poor fills and removing the castor shoes, properly realigning and regluing together with new poplar. Both breaks required some filling with Araldite® bulked paste epoxy. In order to pre-

serve the evidence of the former repair, and take advantage of the drilled holes, the strap-tabs were retained. The tabs were filed down to minimize their visibility, correctly aligned, and reattached using only two of the existing five bolt holes. The bolts were cut shorter, and the tab holes were countersunk to allow the flat-heads to fit in plane and from the bottom. The bolts were then waxed and set into a matrix of Araldite epoxy in the holes, thereby omitting the bulky nuts altogether (fig. 4). The unused holes were also filled with epoxy to solidify the leg. The result is a smoothly finished, original-looking top surface, and a low-profile tab support that is removable and only visible from the bottom.

The left arm scroll was broken in two places and also suffered from poor past repairs. The arm scroll repair involved removal of the previously added metal straps, cleaning of the fractured surfaces, and regluing. In order to increase the strength, a brace was added to the inside of the scrolls, between the show cloth and the wooden ribs.

Surface and Finish

Once the structural repairs rendered the couch more stable, the dark and discolored surface coatings could be dealt with. Cross-sectional analysis of finish layers supports the evidence provided by provenance and stylistic similarities that all seven pieces were part of the same original suite. The painted surfaces are in fair condition and retain most of the original gilt and painted decoration. The layers consist of gray ground primer, black paint and red graining paint, followed by varnish size and gilding, then red and tan design line work oil paint. Except for the red graining, the layering of the finish decoration is similar to that found on the documented suite by John Finlay sold to John Ridgely of Hampton House in October of 1832. On the wood was first prepared a gray paint primer, then black oil paint followed by varnish gilding mordant, gold leaf, colored design line work in oil paint and finally a top varnish (Hastings and Bigelow, 1993). Microscopy of the finish layers revealed not only the layering sequence but also some of the pigment identification by dispersions of the pigments.

On top of the original coatings on the Bayly couch are layers of dirt and grime, restoration varnish and a mixture of dirt/grime and wax. This study provided the basis for the treatment of the finish.

The decorative surfaces of the couch were well-preserved, featuring only one later restoration varnish on the front and sides. This darkened and obscuring coating, together with a dirt and grime interlayer, was removed with organic solvent mixtures followed by an aqueous detergent to remove lower embedded grime. The front and sides were then revarnished with MS2A resin. The minor losses in the gold and paint decorative surface were minimally in-painted over the new varnish coating. The couch was paste waxed overall, including the back, which was not revarnished but left in original condition. The result of the surface cleaning and revarnishing is a slightly lighter surface with the maker's design intent of the gold, painted highlights and rosewood background more obvious.



Figure 5. (left) Wheel and yoke, silicone rubber mold and polyurethane patterns for brass casting—to replace the modern wheel (lower right corner).



Figure 6. (above) New brass wheel and yoke with original caster shoe.

Hardware

The hardware was cleaned with a mild detergent in order to remove dirt and grime. The areas of brass without any original tint lacquer were avoided. Other areas of exposed brass were lightly polished with precipitated chalk in ethanol, then coated with Incralac® acrylic lacquer. One of the caster wheels was missing. A new one was cast in brass by the Geddy Foundry from Colonial Williamsburg’s historic trade program. The wheel was molded in silicone rubber by the conservator, and then patterns of the wheel and yoke were cast for modeling by the foundry. Note that the original caster wheel and yoke were not disassembled but molded as one, thereby requiring multiple castings and assembly of the patterns (fig. 5). After

filing, assembly and sympathetic dark patination, the new wheel was tint-lacquered with Orasol® dyes in Incralac®, matching surviving remnants on other areas of the casters (fig. 6). Although analysis of the surviving areas of tint-lacquer was not carried out, these small areas did seem to resemble the look and solubility of period recipes. Worth noting, one such period recipe reads, “To Make Gold Lacker for Brass...Take of the clearest and best seed lac one pound, of dragon’s blood one ounce, pound them well together; add a pint and a half of the best spirits of wine, set it in a warm place to dissolve, strain it and it is fit for use” (Mussey, 1987).



Figure 7. (top) During treatment, with all surviving upholstery materials.



Figure 8. (left) Detail of back with original stamped wool. Note well-preserved lower-right area that was covered by the bolster and probably a knife-edged cushion.

This recipe was replicated experimentally in order to further understand the color intended on the original brass.

Upholstery

One of the most remarkable aspects of the couch was revealed after the removal of the later covers (figs. 7 and 8). Discovered under two reupholstery campaigns were the original show cloth, tape trim and underupholstery (fig. 10). Because the rare surviving show cloth is in fair to poor condition and little more than two thirds of it survives, it was decided that a new reproduction cover would be added in such a way that the original would be both protected and accessible.



Figure 9. Crepeline and fabric-covered Nomex edging fastened into existing holes with stainless-steel pins. The new cover is laid on before it was stitched to the edging.

The surviving original upholstery materials as well as added covers were preserved in this treatment campaign. The modern restoration covers were removed, carefully documented and stored flat in acid-free boxes. The original underupholstery was first couched and then encapsulated with Crepeline® (a silk organdie, open-weave, nonabrasive lining fabric). A new red stamped-wool show cover and silk and wool tape trim was applied both to protect the remaining original textiles, and to interpret the maker's intent more closely. The new fabric and tape trim was purchased from Context Weaver's in England (fig. 9). The bolster was also covered with fabric and trim closely mimicking the original, and following the wear patterns, a loose knife-edge cushion with trim and tassels was fabricated to lie over the single bolster.

Due to specific shrinkage patterns, the original loose mattress frame had become increasingly tight within the couch frame over time. With the planned addition of the new cover, subsequent removal for study could cause joint stressing and extreme abrasion of the surviving textiles. In order to minimize these conditions, a new slightly smaller mattress frame was constructed. New foundation upholstery and show cloth was applied to the new mattress frame, which was then fitted into the original couch frame.

Because of its obvious significance, the original mattress frame and its foundation upholstery were also carefully treated. The foundation cover was humidified and stitched to Crepeline®. The webbing and foundation fabric were also humidified to relax the folds, and torn webbing secured with a Crepeline® sleeve. The entire foundation upholstery is supported from beneath using a non-intrusive Plexiglas® system.



Figure 10. Upholstery conservator Leroy Graves peels back the two (completely intact) late-19th and 20th century show covers revealing the original cover and tape trim with anthemion pattern.

Study

As often occurs in conservation, once an object's treatment is begun, further study ensues. The Bayly couch was no exception. For instance, during the removal of the caster for the installation of the new replacement wheel, it was discovered that the caster had never been removed (the modern wheel post was simply press-fit into the hole). The removal of original screws revealed that they were die-cut, and they were photographed to become yet another datable example of early nineteenth century technology. Furthermore, under the caster screw plate was found a small scrap of newsprint in an early nineteenth-century style with shipping news of the day. With further research, this scrap of evidence may provide a key to the actual date of manufacture. In another case, the repair of a broken block revealed a die-cut nail of the type with cutting-burrs on the same side of the nail. Although assigning dates to machine-cut nails is risky business, the evidence of this particular technique generally reinforces the practice of using very up-to-date materials.

In the finish analysis, one color in particular was sought for identification. The yellow striping in Finlay-attributed furniture has been identified as chromium yellow, as it was in this couch. The importance of chrome yellow again illustrates the application of modern materials sought after by the Finlays. The yellow pigment was identified from the decorative striping as a result of analyzing dispersed pigments. Chrome yellow was discovered in 1797 and mentioned several times by various experimenters in the first decade of the 19th century (Gettens and Stout, 1942). In 1814 noted Baltimore art collector Robert Gilmore reported that chromate of iron was found in the Bare Hills area seven miles north of Baltimore. Gilmore wrote, "Perhaps in no part of the world has so much been discovered at one place: it furnishes the means of preparing the beautiful paint called the chromic yellow, with which carriages and furniture are now painted in Baltimore"

(Humphries, 2003). The Finlays painted both types of objects and could very well have been using the color as early as 1813. The application of modern technology is telling of the methodology employed by craftsman such as the Finlays in the early nineteenth-century—the dawn of the industrial age.

Further comparison of known Finlay-attributed furniture of the same period is planned in order to learn more about the specific pigments and binders in the paint films and protective coatings applied at the time the pieces were created. This information will offer additional insight into the Finlay attribution, add to the expanding body of knowledge about Baltimore painted furniture of this period, and provide qualitative reference data for evaluating potential future acquisitions.

Conclusion

The proposed project for the remainder of the suite features treating one of the two tables and two of four chairs. The decision to selectively treat some of the objects and leave the others for comparative study is determined partly on the condition of the furniture, but also on the need to interpret different states of preservation. The range of object conditions presents more flexibility for exhibition. Both the table and the chairs in the worst condition were selected for treatment in this case. The table with the flaking paint and heavily over-varnished and now obscured top is a likely candidate to clean, since it requires somewhat invasive yet mandatory stabilization. The other table retains a good portion of its original decorated surface—especially its marbled top, with little discoloration of the surface coating(s). Likewise, the two chairs with the worst repairs and the most paint loss are the most suitable candidates for carefully cleaning and in-painting to the level consistent with the couch.

Colonial Williamsburg is committed to the investigation and sharing of knowledge regarding the Colonial period and by close association, the Federal period immediately following. The interest and promotion of these exciting and most recently acquired artifacts is crucial to communicating the continuing commitment to our mission in the museum. The treatment of the table and chairs following soon after the couch will ensure sympathetic appearances for exhibition, as well as preserve the overall suite for future study.

The suite represents some of the most celebrated early achievements of artisans from the period immediately after our country's founding. The suite's firm attribution to the Finlay shop and its known family history make this a valuable addition to the known objects in its class. Unlike only a few other rosewood-patterned individual objects from this period in our collection, this surviving suite represents an emerging pattern of decoration and mass production that could be afforded by a wider clientele for the first time in our country's young history. It also signifies an expanding regional trend in marketing and distribution of the decorative arts trades.

In *Southern Furniture 1680–1830*, published in 1997, Ron Hurst states,

...popular conceptions of Chesapeake history are still too frequently colored by romanticized images of life on the “old plantation.” The real story of the region’s varied peoples, their living conditions, and the cultural and economic forces that shaped their environment is far more arresting than the prevalent moonlight and magnolias version. (Hurst and Prown, 1997).

One of those very real early American people was a prominent state attorney general named Josiah Bayly, who lived in the town of Cambridge, Maryland, along the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. The suite’s history of manufacture in Baltimore, distribution to a rural town, ownership and use help us to better describe the life of this region and period.

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