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Early American Wallpaper Recovered from George Washington Waxwork

A Window on 18th-Century Manufacturing and Design

WASHINGTON, DC---Tudor Place Historic House & Garden conservators and curators received a rare glimpse of early American interior design this week with the discovery of a well-preserved sample of block-printed 18th-century wallpaper. The roughly 10-inch piece had been used on a handmade cabinet belonging to George Washington and his wife. Martha Washington's granddaughter, Martha Custis Peter, and her husband, the founders of Tudor Place, purchased the cabinet in 1802 from Mrs. Washington's estate.

The wallpaper had covered the top of the Washingtons' piece, a wax and shellwork tableau crafted by New York entrepreneur Samuel Fraunces in the 1780s. Its discovery and conservation portend other valuable insights likely to emerge from study of the Fraunces piece, which is undergoing a two-year, \$37,400 conservation project involving specialists in wax, textiles, and paper. The Richard C. von Hess Foundation, based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is funding the project.



LAYER BY LAYER. Conservators removed this patchwork of ca. 1850 wallpapers from the cabinet to reach an earlier, more intact sample below. The brittle paper was stained and torn in several areas.

Image courtesy Tudor Place Historic House & Garden. Photo by Amy Byrne.

"We are thrilled with this significant discovery and look forward to further research opportunities presented by the samples," said Tudor Place Executive Director Leslie Buhler.

Adding further interest to the paper's discovery are indications that it was manufactured by a burgeoning domestic industry, rather than in England. A few American wallpaper manufactories were established by the end of the 1700s, and some produced papers that surpassed the quality of British or French imports, notes Curator of Collections Erin Kuykendall. "The simple, repeating floral pattern printed in pink and green is typical for late eighteenth-century American-made wallpapers," she said. "Further research may help identify a specific American manufacturer or retailer."

Decorating walls with printed papers from England, France, or America was common in elite and middling American households by the late 1700s. Samples rarely survive, however, due to paper's inherent fragility and householders' tendency to remove or paint it over time. And samples like this one, over 10 inches in length and bearing multiple design repeats, are particularly rare. Wallpaper samples that do survive are most commonly found sealing the backs of picture frames, covering and lining books, or lining the interior of boxes and trunks, making this an unusual find.



The unusually large, late-18th-century sample is block-printed with a vine pattern. Its vivid pink and green paints were well preserved under later layers. The entire sample will be cleaned and conserved.

Image courtesy Tudor Place Historic House & Garden.
Photo by Nancy Purinton.

The waxwork paper sample bears a polychromatic floral-and-vine stripe design block printed on laid paper and appears to be torn around the edges. Conservators found it under two additional layers of paper applied over time. The middle piece was a monochromatic blue wallpaper of a lesser quality in extremely poor condition. The outermost layer consisted of a patterned wallpaper dating stylistically to the mid-19th century that had been cut into multiple pieces and attached in a sort of patchwork.

"We were surprised by the excellent condition of the eighteenth-century paper, despite a significant accumulation of soiling trapped above and below the layer," noted conservator Nancy Purinton, of Purinton Preservation, Inc. During the three days removal process, conservators first humidified the layers to relax the adhesive binding them. Next, using special spatulas, they gently lifted each layer onto a piece of archival fabric inserted beneath it. Using the fabric as a support, they then lifted each paper away from the wooden case.

The wallpaper removal is one of many complicated procedures involved in the overall conservation of Fraunces's rare wax and shellwork tableau depicting the Greek warrior, Hector, bidding farewell to Andromache as he returns to battle. Fraunces, who served as steward of the Washingtons' presidential household in Philadelphia, operated Manhattan enterprises including the Queen Charlotte's Head Tavern near Wall Street and the former Vauxhall pleasure gardens on the Upper East Side.



Tudor Place Historic House and Garden, a National Historic Landmark in Georgetown's Historic District, is a house museum distinguished for its neoclassical architecture, decorative arts collection and 5.5-acre garden. Built in 1816, it was home to Thomas Peter and his wife, Martha Custis Peter, granddaughter of Martha Washington, and housed six generations of the Peter family over the course of 180 years. Open to the public since 1988, the historic home is one of our nation's historic gems.

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