

The Public Historian at Home
Episode 4: Preserving Antique Chairs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i7DU3-zMU6Q>

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A Collaboration with the Rutgers University Alumni Association

Transcript

[Description of opening: The opening depicts a fast-motion video of the host mixing up green milk paint powder with water. The words “THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN AT HOME” appear at bottom in all caps in a black sans serif typeface. The video transitions to the Rutgers University-Camden logo onto the screen. The opening is accompanied by upbeat music.]

[Scene 1: Nicole Belolan is depicted leaning against a brick wall with paint splatters. She has long brown hair swept to the side. She is wearing glasses, pear earrings, and a pastel-striped shirt. Nicole Belolan says the following.]

Hi, I’m Nicole Belolan, and I’m the Public Historian in Residence at the [Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities at Rutgers Camden](https://march.rutgers.edu/). And welcome to The Public Historian at Home.

[Scene 2: Viewers see a photograph of the front of a brick house with wood trim. There is a small subcompact car parked at left.

There are large cedar trees surrounding the house. The movie effect makes the house look like it's in an old silent movie. There are birds signing in the background.]

[Scene 3: This scene takes place in a basement. The host is standing in front of a white wall and is next to a short wooden table. There is a chair with failing green paint at left. The chair is wooden ladderback chair with a wooden seat. The host is wearing a blue and white checked shirt and blue corduroy pants. The host says:]

Hi, welcome to the Public Historian at Home. Today we are going to be focusing on just one object this chair.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, we loved to go antiquing every weekend. We wouldn't always buy something, but we'd occasionally find treasures that we simply had to come home with. And this chair is an example of one of those treasures. I got it at [PhillyReclaim](#), which is an architectural salvage non-profit in Philadelphia. It's right across the river from us—so, right across from us in Riverton. It's in northern Philadelphia. Architectural salvage places are great if you're working on preserving your own home. You can buy giant mantels that you can put in your living room or big columns that you can use to replace rotted out porch columns with. They also have antique [bath]tubs and sinks--smaller things too like plates. Things like doors and windows. And sometimes they carry furniture as well.



[Scene 4: A photograph of the chair the host is talking about runs across the screen. The chair is outside on a sunny day and is turned three-quarters to the viewer's left. When photograph the comes up on the screen, it is accompanied by a cheery chiming bell. The scene reverts back to the host in the original basement spot.]

On the way out of the warehouse one day, I walked by this chair after buying something else and picked it up and went back inside and bought this as well. It was a five-dollar deal, and I couldn't be happier. I couldn't wait to take it home to make it a part of our lives in our house in Riverton.



[Scene 5: A photograph of the back of chair the host is talking about runs across the screen. The chair is outside on a sunny day. When the photograph comes up on the screen, it is accompanied by a cheery chiming bell. The scene reverts back to the host in the original basement spot.]

This particular chair, I knew, based on the style of it probably dated to the nineteenth century or so. This style of chair was actually popular before then in the eighteenth century too. I'm not sure if the green paint remnants you're seeing are original to when the chair was first made, but they're certainly pretty old. I did clean this chair, and I sanded it very lightly because I wanted to prepare it for painting. I decided that even though it has a fairly newer seat—this originally would have been leather, or maybe rush or splint. And, even though it was missing a spindle, which we're having replaced (you can see that that is missing here—there are two holes here where one of these spindles would have

been)—I decided I wanted to repaint it. And I used the green paint as [a] guide. I decided to use milk paint, which is relatively non-toxic. And I just went on their website and picked a color that was fairly close to what I was seeing. I wasn't intent on matching it perfectly. And as you can see, when this video started, I was mixing up that paint with water because that's how you make it into paint that you can actually use. And I've tested it here. The paint that's on here already was definitely more blue, but, I really like this color. I think it's gonna make this chair look really nice and more usable for our purposes. Now, if I were working in a museum and this came into my collection, [I] probably wouldn't do too much to it. Museums tend to prefer for their artifacts to remain as they are as they come into the museum. But, again, since this is my house, my five-dollar chair, I can do what I want with it. And I'm really excited to add it to what we have upstairs.



[Scene 6: A photograph of the bottom/underside of chair the host is talking about runs across the screen. The chair is outside on a sunny day. When the photograph comes up on the screen, it is

accompanied by a cheery chiming bell. The scene reverts back to the host in the original basement spot.]

Most of the things that we have in our house—we're trying for them to date to maybe between 1916 when the house was built and perhaps into the 1930s or so. This particular chair was certainly made before this house was built. So, very conceivably a chair like this could have been in this house at some point in time. Now it's here, which is a lot of fun to think about. [It's a] really ordinary chair, very common. There are a lot of them in museums. If you found one like this and wanted to learn more about it, if you didn't have easy access to reference books, you might check out some museum collections that you can find online. Check out websites like the Winterthur Museum. The Winterthur Museum is in Delaware. Or the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. They have a great museum down in Virginia. Both those museums have large furniture collections, and they're a great way to research your antiquing finds.



[Scene 7: A photograph of the host's left hand on one of the chair legs of chair the host is talking about runs across the screen. The chair is outside on a sunny day. When the photograph comes up on the screen, it is accompanied by a cheery chiming bell. The scene reverts back to the host in the original basement spot.]

So preservation isn't just about preserving the outside of your house or big projects like preserving or redoing or restoring a bathroom, it's also about the inside of the house and the things inside your interior. Those things include furniture, they include people, they include activities, they include the sensory environment, like sounds and lighting. Furniture is a part of that too, and I hope that when all this is over, we all have more opportunities to go antiquing and that you find a treasure to take home as well. If you do find something, send me an email. I'd love to see it.

[Description of conclusion: The closing depicts a fast-motion video of the host mixing up green milk paint powder with water. The words "THE PUBLIC HISTORIAN AT HOME" appear at bottom in all caps in a black sans serif typeface. The video transitions to the Rutgers University-Camden logo onto the screen. The opening is accompanied by upbeat music.]

Resources

Best Practices and Materials

Clara Deck, "The Care and Preservation of Furniture & Wooden Objects," The Henry Ford, 2016,
<https://www.thehenryford.org/docs/default-source/default->

document-library/the-henry-ford-furniture-amp-wooden-objects-conservation.pdf?sfvrsn=2.

Material Collections, Healthy Materials Lab at Parsons School of Design, <https://healthymaterialslab.org/material-collections>

History-Secondary Sources

There are many books that would help you identify furniture. Consult with your local librarian depending on your specific need. You might also enjoy the book listed below that also discuss furniture.

Kenneth L. Ames, *Death in the Dining Room and Other Tales of Victorian Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

Jennifer L. Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Katherine C. Grier, *Culture and Comfort: People, Parlors, and Upholstery, 1850-1930* (Rochester: Strong Museum, 1988).

Charles F. Hummel, *With Hammer in Hand: The Dominy Craftsmen of East Hampton, New York* (Charlottesville, Published for Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, University Press of Virginia, 1976).

History-Primary Sources

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Online Collections, <https://emuseum.history.org>.



Henry Food, Digital Collections,
<https://www.thehenryford.org/collections-and-research/digital-collections/>.

Historic Deerfield, Online Collections, <https://www.historic-deerfield.org/collections>.

Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, Online Collections,
<https://mesda.org/collections/mesda-collection/>.

Old Sturbridge Village, Online Collections,
<https://www.osv.org/explore-the-village/exhibits-and-collections/search-the-collections/>.

Winterthur Museum, Online Collections,
<http://museumcollection.winterthur.org>.

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