APATOSAURUS UPDATE

Readers of Smithsonian Preservation News will recall the story in the Summer 1990 issue on the topiary apatosaurus dinosaur located at the southeast corner of the National Museum of Natural History. Since then, its creator Walter Howell, Office of Horticulture, was asked to create a second apatosaurus for the Jack Nix School in Atlanta, Georgia. The students named it "Nixie." Natural History's apatosaurus, yet unnamed, may be relocated to the Constitution Avenue entrance of the museum in mid-May.

A.B.

THE ART ROOM IN THE CASTLE

The office of the Under Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, was originally the music room of the Institution’s first Secretary Joseph Henry while he resided on the second floor of the Castle’s east wing. After Henry’s death in 1878, the rooms on the second floor were converted to office use. In 1900 the former music room was converted by then Secretary Samuel P. Langley to the "Art Room." The room’s new purpose was to house the art collection of the Smithsonian.

The Smithsonian’s art collection had its modest beginnings in 1849 with the purchase by Joseph Henry of the George P. Marsh collection of engravings. Henry felt that engravings were the only fine arts objects the newly formed institution could then afford. He thought that engravings "furnish us with translations, authentic and masterly, of the best creations of genius in painting and sculpture..." The collection formed part of "The Gallery of Art" which grew to include paintings, sculpture and...
plaster casts of Classical sculpture. The art collection was exhibited in various locations in the Smithsonian Building: paintings in the second floor Picture Gallery and sculpture in the West Range. After the disastrous fire of 1865, the surviving objects of art, which included the Marsh collection, were temporarily sent to the Library of Congress and the Corcoran Gallery of Art for safe-keeping until such time as a suitable fireproof room could be constructed.

Plans for this room began in 1894. In 1896 the Board of Regents provided for the return of the collections to the Smithsonian’s care. The room and its furnishings were designed between 1899 and 1900 by the architectural firm of Hornblower and Marshall. By 1899 some of the furnishings had been built, most notably a large table for the center of the room and a pair of ingenious print files, now lost, which were used for the storage of prints and portfolios. The original blueprints for these cabinets, preserved in the Smithsonian Archives, show an elaborate system of hardware which enabled the drawers to be raised to an almost vertical position for viewing the prints. Unlike the file cabinets, the table survived and has been recently reinstalled in the room.

The year 1900 saw the room’s completion with the furnishings and art collection in place beneath a plaster frieze modeled on copies of the Elgin marbles from the Parthenon, a reminder of the much admired art of Antiquity. Subsequent remodeling changed the room by extending the frieze to all four walls. The frieze is intact to this day in the room. A second large oak table, also designed by Hornblower & Marshall, was added to the room’s furnishings. These additions, along with uniformly framed photographs by Adolphe Braun of portraits by eminent masters of art, formalized the appearance of the room. Langley was involved to a great degree in all aspects of the room’s design and furnishings. Not only did he approve all floor plans and designs for the furniture and picture frames, but he also specified the type of wood to be used... quarter sawn white oak.

Langley simply referred to the room as "The Art Room"

Feeling that the title "Gallery of Art" was too ambitious for the collections at that time, Secretary Langley simply referred to the room as "The Art Room." His hope was that the former designation would eventually be justified by the future increase of the collection. The Art Room, with its print collection and books relating to art, functioned as a study center or reading room for artists and art historians. As the Smithsonian's art collection grew in size and importance, the print collection's importance diminished. By 1931, the room reverted to office use and the print collection was dispersed throughout the Institution. Langley's wish, however, had been realized with the formation of the National Gallery of Art. This was later renamed The National Collection of Fine Arts when the present National Gallery was established and is now The National Museum of American Art.

R.S.

FURNITURE CARE AT HOME

The Smithsonian Furnishings Collection in the Smithsonian and Arts and Industries Buildings is maintained by the Office of Architectural History and Historic Preservation's Peter Muldoon. With almost 3,000 pieces, the Smithsonian Furnishings Collection is an important collection of 19th century American decorative art objects. The collection is unique in that the objects are in use daily. Users of the collection may be interested in knowing how to care for furniture at home, whether antique or not.

Peter’s OAHP colleagues wondered if any techniques Peter used to preserve collection pieces would be applicable to care of furniture at home. During a mid-morning break in his shop, Peter explained the pros and cons of home furniture care. Peter’s shop is located in the northwest corner of the Castle basement, next to the hustle and bustle of the Commons kitchen. Walking into Peter’s shop, one enters an oasis of calm, enveloped by the sooth-
ing strains of Mozart. Three shelves of furniture patiently await Peter’s expert touch. One is struck by the variety of tools, cabinets and machines (all inspected by OEMS once a year). Carving chisels, clamps, hand tools, planes, and routers are carefully arranged on shelves, while paints and solvents are stored in large fire-proof cabinets. A small closet to the rear is full of hardwoods, specially-aged.

"All my finishing work is done by hand."

Although this vast array of equipment was daunting to the novice, Peter explained. "The importance of the equipment is for the accuracy I can achieve through these highly-calibrated machines, although I do a lot of work with hand tools. All of my finishing work is done by hand. I do have the ability to recreate molding with machinery. I can take a piece of walnut and reproduce it, as in the case when a molding is missing. It takes a lot of time to reproduce molding. Most of my work is repairing the furniture, though, and making it servicable because it is in use."

When people inquire about the care of home furnishings, "it is usually after damage has occurred," Peter says ruefully. "It’s not a good idea for an owner to take on a repair. What’s really recommended is preventive care for the owner of any furniture, including good antiques. That’s the most important thing an owner can do." When asked how preventive care is achieved, Peter says "The most important thing a person can do for a wooden piece of furniture is to create a stable environment for it in terms of relative humidity, temperature with the atmosphere. This natural material is constantly seeking to be in equilibrium with the atmosphere." Peter elaborated, "try to keep the movement of the wood’s ex-

Cleaning furniture with a clean damp cloth.

P}


tive, and air quality. Sunlight is also a potentially damaging, reactive influence, particularly on finishes." "Wood is an organic material which has a cellular structure. When it is taken from a tree, the moisture in the cells begin to evaporate as soon as it is cut. As the wood seasons prior to its being made into timber before furniture construction, it loses moisture content until it approaches an equilibrium expansion and contraction to a minimum by keeping the temperature of your house at a constant, fairly low level."

Peter suggests keeping furniture out of direct sunlight, away from heating vents, and in a maintenance-free humidifying system. "I don’t have a humidifier at home," Peter said. "Instead, I place decorative bowls filled with water around the room. I
keep the bowls near my plants. I think it’s healthy. What’s healthy for furniture is also going to be a healthy living environment." Peter admitted that this water-in-bowls system was not perfect. "A humidifier might be better, but they do take a lot of work to maintain." As an afterthought, Peter stated the obvious. "Just don’t put your bowls on your furniture!"

"Simply clean and polish, that’s all there is to it!"

As to caring for antique furniture, Peter said "keep it clean. I use a slightly moistened, clean soft cotton cloth with a little bit of mild dish soap. This can be used to remove build-up from furniture sprays. I then seal the piece with a paste wax. The preferred material for our collection pieces is a microcrystalline wax. However, one can use a household pastewax as well, as long as it is polished on thinly." Peter recommends the same kind of care for contemporary furniture and says that spray wax is acceptable. "If you’re going to use a spray wax, spray the wax on your cloth, never on the furniture. Simply clean and polish and that’s all there is to it! You don’t want to use it very often, though, because you don’t want to create a build-up. Use spray wax one week, and a clean cloth the next," Peter suggests. "Twice a year, go over your furniture with a clean damp cloth, perhaps with a minute amount of dish soap, to remove any build-up."

Preventive maintenance is the best way to care for your furniture. "Furniture should be easy to live with. There should be a compatibility between humans and [the] objects they’ve created over time," Peter says.

A.B.

RICHMOND’S NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK: THE WHITE HOUSE OF THE CONFEDERACY

If President of the Confederate States of America Jefferson Davis could return to Richmond, he would find the area around the White House of the Confederacy greatly changed. On the grounds surrounding his residence during the Civil War are the steel and concrete buildings of the Virginia Medical Center. The short walk to the Capitol, designed by Thomas Jefferson, is dotted with commercial buildings. Only a few lone brick mid-19th century houses remain in the area, including the Valentine Museum of the history of Richmond and the house of Robert E. Lee, now a restaurant.

The one thing Davis would not find altered is the White House of the Confederacy. Declared a National Historic Landmark in 1966, this house underwent a meticulous twelve-year restoration which culminated in its reopening two years ago.

The house was constructed in 1818 by Dr. John Brockenbrough, a wealthy Richmond banker. During his twenty-six years of ownership, Brockenbrough made several changes to the interior of the two-story stuccoed brick home and erected several outbuildings on the property. In 1857 Lewis Crenshaw, a Richmond flour manufacturer, purchased the house from James A. Seddon. To accommodate his large family, Crenshaw added a third story and redecorated the house in the latest style. Crenshaw’s period of ownership is reflected in the house today.

Richmond was named the capital of the Confederacy in May 1861. The newly-formed Confederate government purchased the Crenshaw house, furnishings and grounds for its president, Jefferson Davis and his family and the Davis’ oc-
ocupied the house in August of that year.

During the war, the house became the war headquarters of Jefferson Davis where he met with his generals in the dining room. Today, one can visualize the dirty boots and shoes worn by the men when looking at a floor cloth placed beneath the dining room table to protect the woven reproduction floral carpet. The dining room table is strewn with papers, pens, food and drink which give a feeling of immediate occupancy.

Davis and his family vacated the house on April 2, 1865 on the advice of General Robert E. Lee. On April 3, Abraham Lincoln toured what was left of the burned Confederate capital and visited the empty Davis residence.

In 1890 plans were underway to demolish the house...

After the Federal government withdrew the last of its troops in 1870, the city of Richmond auctioned the contents of the house. Fortunately, a complete inventory of all objects was made prior to their sale. The city installed a public school in the building. In 1890 plans were underway to demolish the house and replace it with a new school building. A group of prominent Richmond women purchased the house and in 1896 opened it to the public as the Museum of the Confederacy.

When the Museum of the Confederacy moved out of the house to a new building nearby in 1976, the restoration of the White House of the Confederacy began. Photographs taken in 1865 of Union officers standing outside the house were used to restore the exterior. The Historic American Buildings Survey recorded the house in a series of drawings.

Thousands of letters, books, diaries and newspaper articles were studied for the interpretation of the interior. An exterior and interior paint analysis was done, and fragments of the original draperies and wallpaper were reproduced by Scalamandre. Architectural details of the interior were reproduced from 1895 sketches. Many pieces of furniture used by Davis and his family were donated to the house. The accuracy of the restoration is a joy to behold. The White House of the Confederacy is open Monday through Saturday, 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, and on Sundays from 1:00 pm to 5:00 p.m. An hour long tour of the residence is given by guides who are well-versed in the history of the house. Richmond is a two-hour drive from Washington, and it is well worth the trip.

A.B.

NEW OAHP STAFF MEMBER

Heather P. Ewing, a 1990 Yale University honors graduate, joined OAHP's staff in January 1991 in the position of architectural historian. She interned with OAHP during the summers of 1987 and 1988 and prepared a paper for publication on the architectural history of the National Zoo. She continues to conduct research on the Zoo in addition to her current studies of the Smithsonian Building.

A.B.