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# Wooden Artifacts Group Postprints

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Wooden Artifacts Group Sessions

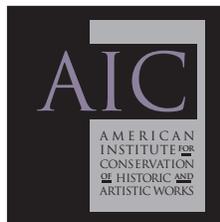
Wooden Artifacts Group

# Postprints of the Wooden Artifacts Group Session

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## WOODEN ARTIFACTS GROUP

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### POSTPRINTS OF THE WOODEN ARTIFACTS GROUP SESSION ANNUAL MEETING

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## A Ghost of the Civil War: A Man, a Flag, and a Frame

**ABSTRACT**—In January 2014, a tattered flag encased in an elaborately carved frame was found in the basement of Lowell Memorial Auditorium in Massachusetts. The flag and frame had sustained damage from use, time, neglect, previous mounting campaigns, and souvenir hunters. Camille Myers Breeze treated the flag, and wooden artifacts conservator Melissa Carr treated the frame. Members of the board of the Greater Lowell Veterans Council collaborated with insight and decisiveness about levels of restoration. The result was the rediscovery of a legacy of preservation, respect, and civic pride for a man and the flag for which and with which he died.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, staffers walked through the basement of the Lowell Memorial Auditorium in Massachusetts and never noticed the big, dirty frame propped against a piano.<sup>1</sup> Then in January 2014,

two employees stopped, looked, and called the Greater Lowell Veterans Council to tell them that they had found something extraordinary—a tattered flag encased in an elaborately carved wood frame (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Flag and frame as found in the basement of the Lowell Memorial Auditorium, 2014 (Courtesy of Richard Howe)

There is no record of when the framed flag was taken off of display, but it was likely due to the tattered and broken appearance, as well as the thick layer of soot covering all of the components. The location where it had hung was confirmed when holes in the marble wall of the auditorium's Hall of Flags were found that correspond exactly to the hardware on the back of the frame. It spent decades across from the auditorium's main doors, with their large transom lights, and directly over a forced air return.

Over the course of the fall and winter of 2014–15, wooden artifacts conservator Melissa Carr and textile conservator Camille Myers Breeze performed their respective treatments, touching base with each other to ensure that the conserved and mounted flag would fit back into the original frame. Each woman also began the journey of discovering the story of the man responsible for return of the flag to Lowell.

## 2. THE MAN

Lowell city historians Eileen Loucraft and Richard Howe had uncovered most of what we now know about Solon Perkins (fig. 2), based on the inscription on the inner frame, which reads:

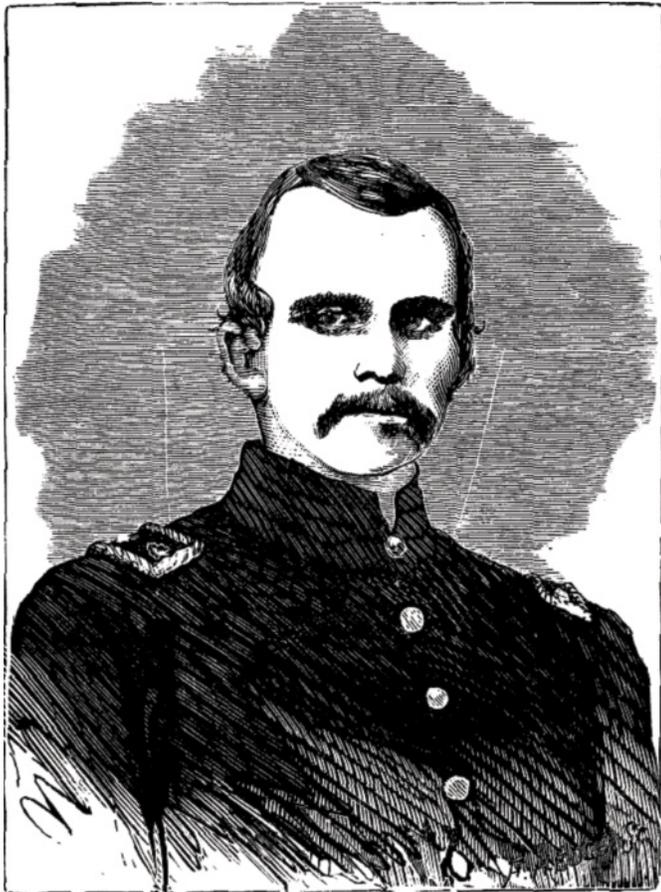


Fig. 2. Solon Perkins (C. Cowley, *Illustrated History of Lowell*, Lee & Shepard, 1868)

“Under this flag at Clinton Louisiana June 3<sup>rd</sup> 1863 Solon A. Perkins was Killed.” Born in Lancaster, New Hampshire, on December 6, 1836, Perkins and his family relocated to Lowell when he was just 4 years old. According to Howe’s Blog, after graduating from Lowell High School, Perkins “immediately became engaged in the world of international business, working for several years in Buenos Aires and for several more in Valparaiso, Mexico. In these places, he became fluent in both Spanish and French, skills that became invaluable during his military service in Louisiana” (Howe Jan. 18, 2014, “Solon Perkins: 1836–1863”).

The Perkins flag, as it is known, is one of two Cavalry guidons referred to in a letter written by Major General Benjamin F. Butler of the 8th Massachusetts Volunteer Militia. Reprinted in the Lowell *Daily Sun* on December 15, 1894, Butler’s letter says, “The two sashes in this box belonged to two of the bravest cavalry officers I ever knew . . . The larger one belonged to Capt. Solon Perkins 1st lieutenant of the second company, Mass. unattached cavalry, who was killed near Port Hudson, La., in June 1863. Both were dear friends, and better or braver men never lived” (Howe Jan. 19, 2014, “Civ. War S. Perkins Saga Cont.”).

The newspaper article goes on to say that Butler’s letter and the Perkins flag were “to be put in Memorial Hall.” Twenty-one years after the date of the article, a devastating fire hit Lowell Memorial Hall, taking with it many relics of Lowell history. Fortunately, prior to her death in 1896, Mrs. Perkins had gifted the flag to Charles L. Knapp, a Lowell banker and philanthropist. It is possible that Mrs. Perkins gave him the flag because she felt that he would keep it and do her son honor in a public way. According to Knapp’s wife Mary Sawyer Knapp, it was they who “carefully preserved [the flag] by mounting under glass in a beautifully hand-carved frame.” Mrs. Knapp donated the flag to the new Lowell Memorial Auditorium in 1929, constructed 7 years prior. The flag was installed at the auditorium on November 12, 1929 (Howe Jan. 19, 2014, “More on the Civ. War Flag Mystery”).

## 3. THE FLAG

The approach for conserving the Perkins flag was developed over the course of discussions with Jack Mitchell, Bob Marshall, and other members of the Greater Lowell Veterans Council. At every juncture, decisions were made expeditiously and with great thought. When asked whether they wanted to compensate for missing parts of the flag, including the two tips, they decided that the story of the flag was better told with the colors of the missing areas restored (fig. 3).

The flag was glued and stitched to a brittle sheet of cardboard prior to 1929. The stripes were easily released by cutting the stitches, but the canton was heavily adhered. For ease of handling, the cardboard was broken along existing tears in the flag, and the canton and stripes were separated. At this point, all available surfaces were lightly cleaned with chamois, which was



Fig. 3. Bob Marshall and Camille Myers Breeze removing the Perkins flag from the frame

found to be less abrasive than vulcanized rubber or a cosmetic sponge, followed by low-suction vacuuming.

The canton was carefully released from the cardboard with a combination of ethanol, a heated spatula, and mechanical action. After adhesive and paper residue was sufficiently reduced, a large number of gold painted silk star fragments remained more or less in the location where they had been glued 100 years earlier. To consolidate them before they disintegrated further, “star dummies” were created.

The star dummies were made of a combination of BEVA gel, water, ochre acrylic paint, and Jacquard antique gold Pearl Ex pigment, mixed until the color was an adequate match. This thermoplastic paste was painted onto synthetic taffeta, allowed to dry, and cut into the shape of the flag’s stars.<sup>2</sup> Using a tacking iron, a star dummy was adhered behind each of the flag’s 34 fragmented stars. After conferring again with the Greater Lowell Veterans Council, it was decided that the star dummies should

be left intact rather than cutting away any unused portion of each star. The star dummies were lightly tacked with an iron to a sheer blue taffeta underlay, and stronger areas of the canton were hand stitched with fine polyester thread (fig. 4).

An aluminum solid-support panel was obtained that fit exactly within the flag’s inner frame. The panel was covered with 1/4-in. Polyfelt followed by beige cotton poplin. Over this mounting surface, a ghost image of the flag’s missing areas was created using three colors of synthetic taffeta. Rather than hot cutting the edges of the taffeta, which produced an uneven beaded edge, a 1/16-in. line of 2.5-mil BEVA film was used to prevent unraveling. The striped portion of the flag was lightly stitched to the panel before the canton portion was incorporated.

An overlay of undyed silk Crepeline was chosen as a barrier between the flag and a sheet of UV-filtering acrylic. Before application, the flag was covered with a piece of tissue paper and then the Crepeline was rolled onto a tube. Starting at one end,



Fig. 4. Comparison of the canton after removal from the cardboard (left) and after stabilization with star dummies (right).

the flag was carefully checked for particulate matter and any fragments of silk were straightened before the silk Crepeline was unrolled and the tissue was slid out from beneath. When this delicate process was complete, fine polyester thread was used to stitch around the perimeter of the flag, encapsulating it between the Crepeline and the panel.

Rather than wrap the edges of the silk Crepeline overlay around to the back of the panel to be stapled or sewn, which would subject them to contact with the antique wood frame, another strategy was employed. A 1/8-in. strip of 2.5-mil BEVA film was adhered to the outer edge of the panel's face, and the Crepeline was lightly tacked down. The silk could then be trimmed with a scissor without fear of unraveling.

A 1/8-in.-thick sheet of UV-filtering acrylic was pre-drilled around the perimeter with enough holes to accomplish a pressure mount.<sup>3</sup> The acrylic was placed over the flag, and screws were sent into the top of the panel. We had anticipated that these screws would be visible when the inner frame was placed over the flag, as the frame has a very narrow lip. So a 1-in. window mat was created out of Larson-Juhl Artique mat board with a linen texture. The mat was adhered to the top of the acrylic face with 3M double-sided #415 tape, masking the screws (fig. 5). Although the mat will get soiled over time because it is not protected by the acrylic, this was an inexpensive way to maintain the highest standards in the integration of the mount and the historic frame.



Fig. 5. Flag after pressure mounting and before final framing.

#### 4. THE FRAME

The decoration on the white oak outer frame includes the company banner, an eagle in the upper right corner, something missing in the upper left corner, a saber belt and buckle, a saber, a rifle, the list of towns where Perkins' company fought (both before and after he died), a Cavalry Corps badge, and the dates



Fig. 6. Frame before treatment

of the war (1861–1865). On the painted and gilded inner frame is the inscription of Perkins’ date and place of death (fig. 6).

When the frame arrived for treatment it was a filthy broken mess. Parts were missing from the rifle and the sword, the finish was discolored and stained, the paint was flaking, and the gilded lettering was almost unreadable. Treatment began with the replacement of the missing portions of the carvings on the outer frame.

After some Internet research and crowd-sourcing, it was determined that the rifle was not a rifle at all but a full-scale replica of a Joslyn .52 caliber carbine, made in Stonington, Connecticut, in either 1862 or 1864. The original carver almost certainly had an actual example of the carbine in front of him to copy. For the conservation treatment, multiple photographs from several angles sufficed. Interested readers can

query “Joslyn .52 caliber carbine” and find images that correspond to the carving.

On the carbine, the trigger and trigger guard were reduced to stubs, and the sight and hammer were missing entirely. After modeling the parts in white pine to resolve design and fabrication questions, the pieces were reproduced in white oak. The trigger and trigger guard elements were reattached with small pegs at the connecting points. The sight and hammer were reattached directly with fish glue (fig. 7).

After more Internet research, it was determined that the saber was a replica of a typical Civil War—era saber, with the original having a brass hilt and leather wrapped around the handle. Again, interested readers can query “Civil War saber” and find images that correspond to the carving.



Fig. 7. Carbine carving with replacements

Four stubs were all that remained of the carving of the original hilt. After much trial and error in white pine to get the compound curves and negative spaces right, the missing parts of the hilt were fabricated in white oak and reattached with small pegs at all of the connecting points (fig. 8).

Re-creating the missing parts of the carbine and saber hilt required no speculation; the photographs provided the necessary information. The one area of missing carving that was not replaced was in the upper left corner, where a broken stub protruded slightly. There was no photograph for what would have been there and the decision was made not to guess. The stub was left in place and the area cleaned and filled so that it would not distract.

Before the replacement carvings were toned, the outer frame was cleaned. The soot and dirt mostly washed off with a 2% solution of triammonium citrate, pH 8.0, and the streaks and stains went with them. After cleaning, the replacement carvings were toned to blend with Golden Fluid Acrylics and tinted shellac.

Whereas the outer frame was disfigured by dirt and missing carvings, the inner frame was disfigured by dirt and severely flaking paint on two of the four sides. Before addressing either, several cross sections were taken to determine if the frame had been repainted and if that might be a factor with the flaking paint. The cross sections revealed that the entire inner frame had been prepared with the same ground layers and then the green or gold applied over them, with no additional paint layers or coatings after that.

A cursory examination of the back of the frame provided the explanation for why the paint was flaking so badly on two sides only. The wood on the left (facing) and top was vertical grain, whereas the wood on the right and bottom was face grain. Paint holds better on vertical grain than on face grain, hence the failure on the right and bottom.

The flaking paint and gilding were set down with Lascaux Medium for Consolidation, after which the surfaces were dry-cleaned with erasers and wet-cleaned with a 2% solution of



Fig. 8. Saber carving with replacements

triammonium citrate, pH 7.5 (fig. 9). Some streaking and blanching resulted, but that was corrected with the application of a 5% solution of Paraloid B-72 in ShellSol A100. Paint losses were compensated with Golden Fluid Acrylics.

Finally, the two frames were reassembled and the back built out to accept the thickness of the flag in its acrylic casing.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Solon Perkins died in Clinton, Louisiana, a town that appears about halfway through the list on the right side of the frame. The Greater Lowell Veterans Council, 152 years after Perkins



Fig. 9. Inner frame inscription during cleaning

died, took it as their duty to restore the flag and frame to its rightful condition (fig. 10) and return it to the Lowell Memorial Auditorium Hall of Flags.

It hangs between plaques listing the soldiers from Lowell who died in the American Civil War and tells an enduring, entirely current story of love and respect.



Fig. 10. Lowell Memorial Auditorium Hall of Flags, 2015

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## SOURCES OF MATERIALS

Aluminum solid-support panel and UV-filtering acrylic  
SmallCorp.  
19 Butternut St.  
Greenfield, MA 01301  
413-772-0889  
[www.smallcorp.com](http://www.smallcorp.com)

BEVA gel and BEVA film  
Conservator's Products Company  
PO Box 601  
Flanders, NJ 07836  
973-927-4855  
[www.conservators-products.com](http://www.conservators-products.com)

Crepeline, Paraloid B-72, and Lascaux consolidation medium  
Talas  
330 Morgan Ave.  
Brooklyn, NY 11211  
212-219-0770  
[www.talasonline.com](http://www.talasonline.com)

Golden Fluid Acrylics and Jacquard antique gold Pearl Ex pigment are available from art supply stores.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

MELISSA CARR trained as a chemist and cabinetmaker before completing her graduate work in the Furniture Conservation Training Program at the Smithsonian Institution's Conservation Analytical Laboratory. She also studied at the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo. She specializes in the conservation of wooden objects and Asian lacquer from the 13th to 20th centuries. Her private firm, Masterwork Conservation, provides services to major museums, institutions, and private collectors. Address: Masterwork Conservation, 69 Webcowet Road, Arlington, MA 02474. E-mail: [hiattcarr@verizon.net](mailto:hiattcarr@verizon.net).

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Gütermann Skala polyester threads  
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Larson-Juhl Artique mat board is available through Larson-Juhl and your local framer.

Polyfelt (1/4 and 1/8 in. thick)  
University Products Inc.  
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ShellSol A100 is available from  
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#### ENDNOTES

1. A video of the flag being removed from the storage room can be viewed in “From Ragged Glory, a Piece of Lowell Civil War History Unfurled,” published by Grant Welker in the *Lowell Sun* on January 24, 2014. A video of the rededicated flag being unveiled with the help of the conservators may also be viewed in “Civil War—Era Flag Takes Its Rightful Place in Lowell Memorial Auditorium,” published in the *Lowell Sun* on June 1, 2015
2. Although the exact formula used for the Perkins star dummies was not recorded, several versions of this mixture have proven successful in other conservation applications.
3. The knowledgeable staff at SmallCorp advised on how close a hole can be safely drilled to the edge of the acrylic. They likewise determined how many holes were necessary to accomplish the pressure mount.