

RAMSEY HOUSE REVITALIZATION PROJECT
Final Conservation Report
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Overview

In 1999, the Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) received generous support from the Saint Paul Foundation to conserve the MHS collections of the Alexander Ramsey House. The house had been given to the MHS after the death of the last descendant of Alexander Ramsey, and it contained most of the artifacts associated with the family, including furniture, house wares, clothing, correspondence, diaries, and photographs. The purpose of the Saint Paul Foundation grant was the revitalization of the Alexander Ramsey House Historic Site. One of the goals of the grant was to implement the recommendations made previously in a conservation survey funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

The IMLS Conservation Survey was completed in 1998. During this survey, the entire collection was examined by teams of curators and conservators, who collectively completed a database of information regarding the collection. When the curators examined artifacts, they entered information into the database such as the approximate date of the artifact, what it was called, and how it was used. The conservators examined the artifacts and entered information in the database such as the condition of the artifact, what it was made of, and how it could be stabilized or repaired, if necessary. The curators and conservators assigned rough priorities to each artifact, based on how important an artifact was to the interpretation of the site, how rare or unusual the artifact was, and its condition.

Priorities

These priorities were as follows: "Urgent" was assigned to those artifacts, at times regardless of condition, that were the most important to the interpretation of the site. Typically these were artifacts that were known to be associated with the Ramsey family, either by written documentation or by photographs. Even if an artifact was in fairly good condition, it was urgent that it be examined and treated first, so as to best interpret the site. "Recommended" was assigned to artifacts that were important to the interpretation of the site, but which did not have ties to the family that were as solid. Usually these items were likely to have been used by the family, and were from the appropriate period of time for the interpretation of the site (from 1872 to the 1910's), but may not have had a known direct connection to the family. These artifacts could be in very good or very poor condition. "Eventual" was the priority assigned to objects that were usually not in very poor condition, but also not very important to the interpretation of the site. "None" was the priority assigned to objects that were outside of the interpretive period, or that were not in need of treatment.

Staffing

In the summer of 2000, under the direction of Sherelyn Ogden, Head of Conservation at MHS, members of the MHS staff were assigned to carry out the recommendations of the IMLS survey, with the financial support of the grant provided by the Saint Paul Foundation. The Head of Conservation and the book and paper conservator, Sherelyn Ogden was to direct the conservation of book and paper materials and oversee an assistant. Paul Storch, Senior Objects Conservator, was to perform some treatments and to direct an assistant. The textile conservator Ann Frisina, was to perform some treatments, direct the conservation of textiles, and to oversee an assistant. The department secretary Jean Moberg helped all of the staff members coordinate their work, order supplies, and maintain electronic records. Finally, Bob Herskovitz, the head of the Conservation Department's outreach program, oversaw production of a video on the care of

family treasures. This video is to be used at the Alexander Ramsey House for tours, to teach visitors to the Ramsey House the importance of conservation and of preserving one's own heirlooms and other possessions of long-term significance. In addition to existing staff, several new temporary staff members were hired for the approximate two-year duration of the project. Rebekah Njaa was hired to work part-time on textile conservation and part-time on objects conservation, Jana Pullman was hired to perform book and paper conservation, and Tom Braun was hired to perform conservation of three-dimensional objects. Ann was to oversee Rebekah, Sherelyn was to oversee Jana, and Paul was to oversee Tom.

Members of the Museum Collections department were also involved in conservation aspects of the overall project. Members of the Historic Sites Documentation Project assigned new tripartite accession numbers to the artifacts, and Nicole Delfino, the Registrar, assisted with the management of the database.

Two outside contractors did work that touched upon conservation aspects of the project. Jackie Haley wrote The Ramsey House Historic Furnishings Plan, which detailed how the house could be better organized and arranged to better illustrate and interpret the story of the Ramsey family. MacDonald and Mack Architects wrote An Analysis of Interior Finishes at the Alexander Ramsey House Historic Site. Bob Mack of MacDonald and Mack also helped evaluate the structure of the building, and elaborated on ways that it had been altered during and after the interpretive period.

Procedures

With the exception of mass-treatments, such as the collection of books, all treatments were documented both photographically and in writing. Photographic documentation consisted of before and after treatment photographs, taken with 35mm ektachrome 100 speed color slides. Occasionally, at the discretion of the conservator, during treatment photographs were also taken. The slides were labeled individually by each conservator, using a permanent black felt-tipped marker. Currently the slides are being stored with the hard-copy paper files of the treatment records, but eventually, they will be separated out and stored in the MHS photographic cold-storage vault. Written documentation of the treatments was generated using an Access database, and the records themselves will be retained permanently in both this electronic form and in hard copy.

A Curator approved each item for treatment before treatment began. First, the conservators generated descriptions of the objects' condition and also wrote treatment proposals. These proposals were then submitted to the respective curators for their signed approval, after which treatment began. After treatment was complete, a final treatment report was prepared, and the reports were printed out and stored in archival folders in file cabinets in the Conservation office. Eventually these records will be combined with the larger collection of conservation treatment files.

Book and Paper Conservation

Jana Pullman personally worked on approximately 3200 books and 437 works of art on paper, and spent a total of 1243 hours on the project. Jana Pullman's work began with a colossal undertaking: the examination of every book contained within the Ramsey collection. Because most of the books were on permanent display, Jana set up a portable cart and worked on-site for over seven months, methodically examining each book, dry surface cleaning them, mending torn pages, tipping in loose pages where necessary, pasting down loose cloth on the covers, consolidating red-rotted leather covers, reattaching spine pieces, and making mat board or polyester film (Mylar) storage enclosures for structurally weak or powdery books. Jana changed her location within the house, depending on the tour schedule, in order to have as little impact as possible on the tours. Frequently Jana would slightly rearrange the books in order to improve overall support for them.

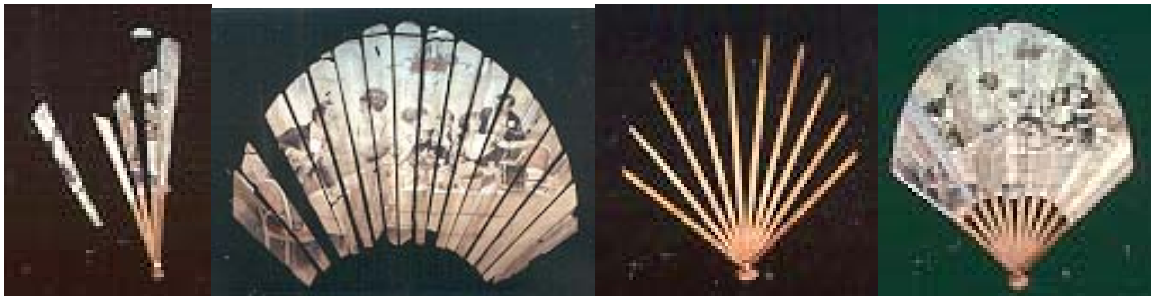
After completing all of the books at the House, Jana began conservation work on the prints and drawings in the collection, many of which had previously been removed from their frames and were stored poorly in boxes. Following treatment of these items, she rehoused them in acid-free folders and storage boxes. Later, Jana worked on large prints and drawings that were still matted and framed and hanging on the walls of the Ramsey House. At this point in the project, Jana left the Minnesota Historical Society to pursue other opportunities. Tim Herstein, a staff member in the book and paper conservation lab, resumed her work. With the assistance of Sherelyn, Tim completed treatments on over 50 framed objects, and reframed most of them so that they could be rehung on the walls of the house. These items were in extremely deteriorated condition and were in urgent need of extensive treatment. A total of 650 hours were spent on this aspect of the project.

Treatment Examples

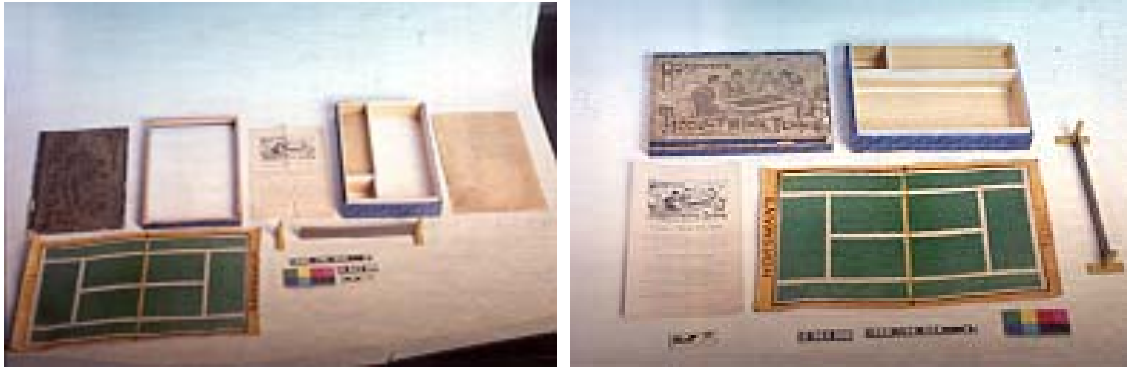
This print had hung in the parlor, probably for around 100 years, and the paper had become very discolored from light exposure, atmospheric pollutants, and from the acidic wooden materials used to mat the print in the frame. The print was removed from the frame and washed in deionized water. This bath, and subsequent treatments with a gentle hydrogen peroxide bleaching solution followed by bleaching with lights, removed most of the staining and discoloration. Then the print was deacidified with magnesium bicarbonate. It was flattened, dried, and resealed inside its frame using acid-free matting materials.



This paper fan is an example of a treatment that spanned both the paper conservation lab and the objects lab. It was apparently a memento that Marion Ramsey kept from one of her trips to Paris. It was in such poor condition that it could not even be opened, although it was clear that there was a printed image on one side of the fan. The fan was disassembled, and the paper pieces were washed, flattened, and dried. When the fan was reassembled, the picture could easily be seen.



Another example of a treatment that spanned both the paper conservation lab and the objects lab was this children's "tiddledy winks tennis" game, which was in its original cardboard box. The box had become extensively damaged and was in many pieces. The label on the top of the box was very dirty, and almost impossible to read. However, when it was dry surface cleaned, it was much more clear, as is seen in the pictures below. After treatment, all of the parts of the game could safely be stored inside the box again.



The original paper instruction sheet was still present, but was torn and crumpled. This was dry surface cleaned, humidified, flattened, and backed onto a new piece of archival paper.



Book and Paper: Future Priorities

There are still more prints and drawings hanging on the walls of the Ramsey House that could use conservation treatment and rematting. There are also numerous historic photographic images in the collections, many of which would benefit from the attention of a photographs conservator. Additionally, these photographs would benefit from being identified as to the photographic process used to produce them, and other salient historical information. At some point in the past, most historic photographs at the Ramsey House were reformatted, and the originals were stored away, while facsimiles were placed on display in their stead. During this project, many photographs were found that were apparently missed during this process, and these photographs would benefit from being archived and reformatted. Additionally, many of the tasks outlined in Jackie Haley's furnishings plan seem to encompass work that will require the input and assistance of the paper and book conservator. These tasks include evaluations of the historic wallpapers.

Objects Conservation

Paul Storch personally worked on 17 artifacts and spent a total of 140 hours on the project. Tom Braun personally worked on 256 artifacts and spent a total of 2629 hours on the project. Intern Patricia Measures personally worked on 19 artifacts and spent a total of 312 hours on the project.

During the two-year span of the project, all of the three-dimensional artifacts classified as “Urgent” were conserved, totaling approximately 180 objects. Approximately 80 of the “Recommended” artifacts were also treated, though there are still approximately 600-700 of these artifacts to treat. Additionally, virtually all of the “Eventual” artifacts still need treatment, which amount to approximately 500 objects.

During the second year of conservation work on the Ramsey House collection, the Conservation Department decided to hire a summer intern from one of the conservation training programs. Patricia Measures from the Sir Sanford Flaming Program in Ontario, Canada, was offered the position. Patricia worked with Tom on the project for eight weeks during the summer of 2001. Tom and Patricia worked on nine treatments together, all of which were large pieces of furniture that they treated on-site at the Ramsey House. Patricia’s assistance on this project was extremely cost effective, as she and Tom were able to complete far more together than Tom could have by himself. Patricia and Tom also spent a considerable amount of time improving the storage of artifacts in the house overall, particularly in the main storage room. This work greatly improved the storage of many artifacts, and by adding additional shelving, increased the amount of storage space available in the storeroom.

Treatment Examples

One of the largest objects to be treated was a sleigh that had been stored in the basement of the Ramsey House. It was in several pieces and was very dusty and moldy. The most important action to take was simply to get it out of the basement, where its condition was steadily worsening. After the sleigh was cleaned, repaired, and reassembled, it was placed on a specially designed rolling support that allows it to be easily moved by one or two people, and it is now in long-term storage at 1500 Mississippi, an off-site storage facility belonging to the MHS:



As the sleigh was cleaned, it was discovered that it was covered overall with very fine pin striping. Here is an example of how the pin striping was revealed:



This silver epergne was prominently displayed at the Ramsey House and was deeply tarnished to an overall deep black color. Additionally, there were several broken pieces that needed to be reattached. The dramatic before and after treatment photographs below illustrate what a difference this treatment made. The tarnish was removed with a combination of chemical means and mild abrasives. Afterwards, the metal was thoroughly degreased, dried, and then coated with Agateen, a special lacquer that is an effective barrier to atmospheric oxygen and sulfur dioxide. This coating insures that the silver will not visibly tarnish until about ten years have passed.



Many of the furniture artifacts at the Ramsey House were damaged in a way that is common for furniture of this age. The glue used to assemble them had dried out, and wooden pieces were frequently lost. A common type of treatment for furniture with this problem was to use silicone mold-making compounds to make molds from other parts of the object, which are similar to the lost part, and are still extant. These molds were then used to make plaster casts, which were consolidated, painted to look like wood, and glued into the space left by the lost fragments. Here are during treatment slides of a picture easel from the parlor that had part of its foot missing, which was restored using this method:



The pictures below show a broken handle from a drawer on a bookcase. The handle was made of an early wood composite material, and part of the handle had been broken and was lost. Using one of the other extant handles from the drawer, a silicone mold was made, the missing part of the handle was cast in plaster, and toned with paint to match the color of the wood. After treatment the drawer handle again looked complete.



Another typical treatment for the furniture was restoring lost veneer. This console table shown below had extensive losses to the veneer along the bottom edge. These were filled with archival cardboard held in place by an adhesive. Small cracks were filled with conservation-quality putty, and the fill was toned with paints to match the surrounding areas of veneer. A final clear coat of a long-lasting acrylic varnish was added to restore the high gloss.



The small decorative picture frame shown below had been broken into many pieces. Fortunately most of the broken edges matched up, and when all of the pieces were reassembled, virtually the entire frame was intact. Some minor infilling and gilding was performed in order to mask minor losses overall.



This Japanese tea caddy made from Japanese lacquer was badly cracked, and much of the gilding had been worn off. The cracks were stabilized, the holes filled in, and fortunately, enough of the original design remained that all of the abraded gilding could be inpainted, and the overall appearance was greatly improved.



Objects: Future Priorities

An obvious area for future priorities would be the remaining “Recommended” and “Eventual” treatments. Additionally, many of the tasks outlined in Jackie Haley’s furnishings plan seem to encompass work that will require at least the input if not assistance of the an objects conservator. One of these areas is conservation work on the upholstered pieces of furniture, mainly some very badly deteriorated pieces in storage at 1500 Mississippi, which were identified by Jackie Haley as being important to the interpretation of the site. This work would probably be done between both the objects lab and the textile lab.

Another area outlined in the Haley report requiring future work are the lighting fixtures, many of which apparently are inconsistent with the current interpretation of the house. There are also numerous architectural elements, wood work, the main stair banister, door hinges, door knobs and other hardware throughout the house, which were not included in the IMLS survey, but are in need of conservation work, such as cleaning, repair, or restoration. Additionally, there are many oil paintings and gilded frames at the site that are in dire need of cleaning and stabilization. Since there is no paintings conservator at the MHS, the paintings on canvas were not addressed during this project, although Tom treated several gilded frames that were in fragmentary condition.

Textile Conservation

Ann Frisina personally worked on 33 artifacts and spent a total of 741 hours on the project. Rebekah Njaa personally worked on 107 artifacts and spent a total of 3360 hours on the project. Conservation Intern Jamie Ballard assisted Ann and Rebekah on many of these

treatments. Through their work, nearly all of the textile artifacts listed as “Urgent” and “Recommended” were conserved.

Treatment Examples

The textile fan pictured below was in terrible condition, as the laminate structure had come apart, and the fan could not be handled without causing damage. Additionally, several of the sticks were broken. The fan was made out of a textile/paper/textile laminate. When the laminate was disassembled it was realized that the paper was completely disintegrating due to its poor quality. The textiles were cleaned, and after the sticks were repaired, the laminate structure was reassembled onto the original sticks, using a new piece of archival paper.



The rare parasol pictured below is made out of ivory and white silk textile, which has an intricately woven black silk lace cover. As received, the black lace was severely torn, had major losses, and was literally hanging off the parasol in pieces. A major reason for this damage was that the parasol had no way to be stored in a stable manner. Rebakah removed the black lace from the white silk, repaired the lace, reassembled the parasol, and constructed a storage support that would help preserve the parasol for many more generations.



Textile Conservation: Future Priorities

Upholstered furniture is an urgent need for conservation within the Ramsey collection. Many of the recommendations outlined in Jackie Haley’s furnishings plan encompass work that will require the input and assistance of the textiles conservator. These recommendations include

evaluations of the historic carpets, wall coverings, curtains, and lambrequins. Since so many of the prioritized artifacts were treated during this project, no urgent priorities remain for textile conservation within the artifact collection, other than a few ongoing conservation needs.

Video

An outreach video was produced, intended to be shown to visitors to the Ramsey House in order to teach them the concepts of conservation, and to make them think about preserving their own family treasures. It is geared toward 5th and 6th graders, but it is just as suited to an adult audience. The video shows how the personal mementos of today are the artifacts of tomorrow and thus need to be preserved, and then goes on to show how this is done. In other words this video introduces people to conservation and shows how it is relevant to them. The video runs ten minutes with a minute and ten seconds of credits. It includes closed-captioning for the hearing impaired and audio description for the sight impaired. The project was directed by Bob Herskovitz and was carried out by a committee of staff members from Conservation, Museum Collections, Sites, Exhibits, and Education. Upon completion, copies of the video were sent to the St. Paul Foundation, the Ramsey House, and several selected departments within MHS. Bob Herskovitz worked on the production of the video for a total of 124 hours.

Administration

Sherelyn Ogden, Head of Conservation, spent a total of 1538 hours coordinating and implementing conservation activities for the project. Administrative Secretary Jean Moberg spent 544 hours on administrative activities.

Conclusion

The conservation component of the Ramsey House Revitalization Project was a success. It was a collaborative effort involving staff across three divisions of the MHS that resulted in filling the most urgent treatment and storage needs in the Ramsey House. In all, approximately 9200 hours were spent by conservators preserving artifacts. More than 4120 artifacts were treated and are now stable enough to be exhibited in the house without risk. In addition, the appearance of many of the treated objects has been improved and is now more in keeping with the way they looked during the period of interpretation of the house. More, of course, remains to be done. But as a result of this project, future work can be prioritized and planned effectively. In short, thanks to the grant from the St. Paul Foundation, a vast number of the valuable artifacts in the Alexander Ramsey House have been stabilized and this important part of Minnesota's history preserved.