



Art Conservation *and tales from the road*

Covered in rawhide, lined with polka-dotted paper, and resting on wooden runners set lengthwise along its base, the dome-topped trunk likely spent many hours in the 19th century filled with goods and bouncing along unpaved roads while tied to the back of a wagon or carriage.

Its traveling days are over now, and the trunk resides at the Lewes Historical Society in Lewes, Delaware, which received it as part of a bequest from local antiques collector and dealer John Farrace (1903-1989). Recently, however, the trunk took a short trip to the Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library in Wilmington, where it became a treatment project for WUDPAC Fellow and objects major Miriam-Helene Rudd.

Miriam-Helene's research indicates that the trunk was made in this country between 1800 and 1850. It has no label, and it is not known where Farrace obtained it, but it resembles other trunks with better provenance from the same period. Most of those bear labels of trunk makers in Pennsylvania (especially Philadelphia), Virginia, and Massachusetts who were working during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Furthermore, protein analysis identified most of the leather as North American deer.

Prior to its arrival at the historical society, the trunk probably was stored in humid places like attics or sheds. Even so, after two centuries, the trunk's wooden box was stable. But the six pieces of attached external rawhide were stiff, splitting, and lifting away, while the decorative strips of leather were friable, torn, and delaminating. Corrosion was evident on nails and studs, and some of these were missing. The paper lining was stained and exhibited tears, abrasions, and losses. Evidence of previous pest infestation like larvae and missing hair was also visible, while dust and grime had been absorbed by the porous rawhide and leather leading to soiling, staining, stiffness, and increased susceptibility to degradation.

Miriam-Helene's goal was to stabilize the trunk and slow further deterioration. She first placed it in an anoxic chamber for 30 days to ensure that no live pests remained. She also cleaned the trunk's exterior and interior with a HEPA filter-equipped vacuum, a soft brush, and cosmetic sponges and humidified, reshaped, and consolidated both the rawhide and the leather. To re-join split edges of the rawhide, she introduced paper mends, and to secure the reshaped rawhide she returned the used metal tacks to their original locations, bulking the wooden holes and introducing new tacks as needed. When Miriam-Helene completed her treatment, the trunk was returned to the Lewes Historical Society.



ARTC Spotlight—July 2023

The University of Delaware's Art Conservation Department educates and trains professional conservators who are well versed in the treatment, analysis, documentation, and preventive conservation of individual artifact and archive collections. For more news about our students and other department activities visit our web site at www.artcons.udel.edu.

Top: Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation Fellow Miriam-Helene Rudd vacuuming the surface of the trunk. Above: Miriam-Helene clamping the hide at the front of the trunk to dry in position after humidification. Left: Detail of the front of the trunk, open, before treatment and front of trunk, closed, after treatment. (Images: Lara Kaplan, Caroline Shaver, and Miriam-Helene Rudd.)

