

## Relics, Part 2: One of a Kind

**Peter Drummey** 00:00

[Music fades in] I'm about to open the packaging for an artifact where it's the artifact itself which might damage me rather than me damaging it. But what this is, it's a, wrapped up in tissue, for all appearances, it's a tiny mummified bird, but in fact, what it is, it's a collected specimen. This is the skin of a Blackburnian warbler.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 00:32

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

**Cassie Cloutier** 00:45

This is Cassie Cloutier and this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 01:14

In this episode, we continue our conversation with Professor Matthew Dennis, author of the book, [American Relics and the Politics of Public Memory](#). Professor Dennis discussed corporeal relics with us in part one of this discussion. In part two, we talk about natural specimens as well as objects that are given significance by the connection they have to an historic event or figure. MHS Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita, Anne Bentley and Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Peter Drummey, also returned to help us look at the remains of a Blackburnian warbler and a pair of epaulets that belonged to General George Washington. But first, we asked Professor Dennis to discuss the lengths some people will go to endow an object with historical significance.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 01:27

One story that you relate, I think I laughed out loud at this just because it's such a long walk to get to the connection with the person and you're talking about [Marquis de] Lafayette's visit to the United States, his returned to the United States, the 50th anniversary, "Lafayette beautified relics and received relic gifts such as the golden headed cane, a deputation at Bergen, New Jersey, tendered to him, quote, 'made of the branch of an apple tree under which he had breakfasted with Washington during the Revolutionary War.'" It's a branch of a tree that he and Washington...that's such a long walk.

**Matthew Dennis** 02:42

Yeah. People are dying to establish these connections and so Lafayette himself was this living relict. Another kind of relic that we could talk about. This is a survivor. Relict with a "T" back in the 19th century was often a synonym used for a widow. Somehow the surviving remnant of a marriage between a man and a woman. And so, this woman then would be referred to in the legal terms as a relict. So, she was alive, but she represented something from the past, living in the present and into the future. And so, we see this as the greatest relict of in American history is probably Lafayette, who was invited back to tour the United States, on the cusp of the eve of the Jubilee celebration of American independence. So, he toured as your listeners will know in every United State and was received with great fanfare. And people turned out in mass and showed him the remnants of the war and in a way almost wanted to have him bless them with his swords, and canes made from trees, that once maybe cast their shadow over some kind of meeting or resting place, and we have all these kinds of things. But he went through, and he was like, kind of the living embodiment, an avatar of Washington himself because he was Washington's protégé in so many ways. And he represented all these things that that Americans wanted to remember as great and connect themselves to the to the Revolution. So, these connections can be kind of distended and odd. But we can see in them a real effort by Americans to connect themselves through physical objects to this past in the way that relics kind of work their magic.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 04:22

You've already defined relict with a "T", but there's also this issue of specimens and then there's also this other question of when is a relic a trophy? That's sort of a darker element of keeping something. So maybe we'll talk a little bit about the definitions of these two items that also come up in your book.

**Matthew Dennis** 04:42

One of the things that I found really interesting, especially when going through the list of stuff that the Massachusetts Historical Society originally collected, as it seemed like a kind of vestige of the old cabinets of curiosity with many natural historical objects, and I thought this is really weird. And are these things relics? And I thought, well, not exactly. They're meant to be specimens. Now a specimen is different because a specimen is supposed to be generic or representative or emblematic of every other member of a particular species. What you want as a specimen is something that is actually typical and generic. Whereas a relic is something that's extraordinary. It has power on its own. And so I was thinking, well, what's going on here, and increasingly, it's occurred to me that some of these specimens operated in relic like ways, especially in the foundation of the first historical societies, the Mass[achusetts] Historical Society being the first and new museums because what I decided was that what we see here, or discern was that some Americans, elite Americans were trying to construct a kind of cultural and political infrastructure for America itself. What America was, what it represents. And so, in the process, they began to accumulate lots of these natural historical objects. But what we see is Americans trying to write themselves into a grander, natural and human history connect themselves into a transatlantic world of science and nationhood. And so, by constructing these new museums, they could say, 'Look, we have a place in this larger world as well with a great future,' in the same way that say, church or cathedral in northern Europe say, 'We are part of Christendom.' But now it's a secular project. And the thing about it was that America at the time, which the United States was expanding into, and across, and incorporating, was filled with all sorts of natural wonders. But those wonders were on the one hand part of a larger scientific world, but they also distinguished America as nature's nation, as a kind of place that was extraordinary on its own right. And so typical things and extraordinary things, like, say mastodons

that Thomas Jefferson believes might still be running around out there in the interior of the continent were both typical of something that had existed in the past could be classified, perhaps in a kind of Linnaean framework, but also was distinctive of America. And even more so some of the monumental wonders, the natural wonders natural bridge, or these mountains that were taller than the Alps, all these physical features that were monumental. And so, the while monument originally started as a kind of, to be understood as a human made thing. Increasingly, by the 18th century, in the 19th century, a monument could be a natural wonder. And we see this kind of shading from natural to historical objects. And so, people would talk about a kind of natural architecture, that is, it was built by nature, or by God, but also, in a way by Americans. And so, all of these things kind of ran together and natural historical objects became relic like things that would distinguish America make Americans proud and make them think perhaps, that they were in a country that had a real destiny. There's a kind of odd project there.

**Matthew Dennis** 08:05

Okay, so trophies, some relics clearly were collected to speak in a way of American greatness and triumph and domination. And so just the collecting, often of native of objects that were not treated, like the corporeal remains of white Americans, or, and respected in that way, could then be a kind of devalued into really kind of more natural historical objects. But what they also signaled was white American colonial domination and victory. And so, they could kind of reside in cabinets like the one at the MHS, or museums that were popping up at or in people's collections and kind of trumpet American greatness and destiny. And then it becomes darker as the American history progresses with other kinds of trophies, some of them pretty macabre that were gathered through the conquest of native people and beyond the Civil War with a lots of trophies collected. And then into the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century, I have a chapter in the book called atrocious relics, where I try to grasp and analyze the really horrific things collected by white supremacist in the course of lynching. Material objects that would declare white supremacy, intimidate the victims of that lynching of that oppression and violence and continue really until the whole practice was publicized and condemned by the NAACP really in the early 20th century, and that wider exposure transformed objects of exultation and white supremacy into ones of shame for

the nation. So, there's a quite a trajectory of these objects that can signal American greatness, but also kind of represent really embody the oppression of and the trauma of the American past.

**Cassie Cloutier** 10:06

We then spoke with Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, to learn about a particular natural specimen held at the Historical Society, and how it made its way into the collection.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 10:20

Many of the natural specimens that the MHS used to hold, of course, are now across the river in Cambridge, I think, did we give them to the Harvard Museum or MIT or some other institution like that. But we do have some.

**Peter Drummey** 10:36

Confusingly, we gave natural history objects from our collection and ethnographic objects, to both the Peabody Museum part of Harvard University and the Peabody Museum in Salem, now, the Peabody Essex Museum. There was a logic to this, that is the Essex Institute and Peabody Museum, when they were separate, collected materials for voyages from Salem, and were especially strong from voyages to the Pacific, and elsewhere. So, there was some attempt to put things that connected with those things, and then a range of ethnographic objects from Native Americans really, throughout the United States that the Historical Society had accumulated went to the Peabody Museum at Harvard University, but there's an overlap and confusion between them, and especially for things to do with the voyages to the Pacific. But I'm about to open the packaging for an artifact where it's the artifact itself, which might damage me rather than me damaging it. But what this is, it's a, wrapped up in tissue, for all appearances, it's a tiny, mummified bird, but in fact, what it is, it's a collected specimen. This is the skin of a Blackburnian warbler. And like any long, departed living specimen, it's a faded version of itself, but it was essentially accidentally preserved. That is two teenagers, college students at Harvard in the 1870s, who were both very enthusiastic about bird watching and identifying birds set out in 1877 to compile a list of the summer birds of

the Adirondacks [Mountains]. And they did this, one of them the person perhaps with more expert knowledge, even at that very young age, Henry D. Minot. He compiled the main list, and then his young friend, Theodore Roosevelt added to it sort of exotic birds, birds that would not necessarily live there naturally. I'm not sure that he was correct about this, but the bird itself is a Blackburnian warbler, which if people have seen this bird, it's a small warbler. It has brilliant yellow coloring, and this very interesting triangular black eyepatch. The coloring changes over time and is different in male and female specimens. But nevertheless, is a vivid bird to see in life. But in fact, was an interesting specimen and the reason this survival of this is accidental, the Minot family gave an extraordinary gift of family papers to the Historical Society. And included in them was correspondence of Henry D. Minot who had a brief but very interesting life. His professional life was spent essentially analyzing the routes of railroads in the American West and I think, perhaps in Mexico as well, not so much the actual planning of the railroad route but analyzing whether this made good business sense to invest in the railroad. And he travelled very widely, and at a very young age was given very substantial responsibilities because very large economic investments were being made on the basis of his analysis and reports. Perhaps even more important than his role in business enterprise, he retained this extraordinary interest in birds and identification of birds throughout his life and continued this locally here in Eastern Massachusetts and in the neighborhood of Boston, and then elsewhere as he traveled as well. He carried this to the point that in his busy business life when he was young, he carried for it this enterprise that he had begun with young Theodore Roosevelt, and wrote an essentially a survey of American bird species, especially in this part of the country.

### **Peter Drummey 15:10**

This is all by way of a long-winded introduction to the discovery of this bird skin. When someone was processing Minot's papers, which included this correspondence these letters written to him by Roosevelt, they were going through it and I think what probably came upon what was a, perhaps a bulky but not really unusual letter, probably assuming it was multi-page still in its envelope, and opened it up and unwrapped it and there was this tiny bird skin wrapped up in the letter, as you might put something in a letter you sent to someone. Not expected and not knowing the

background circumstance of what I've just described that is the logical connection. Be honest, this is where to examine birds you often shot them in order to have a specimen you could examine more closely. It was perfectly logical, I think, at least in his mind for Roosevelt to wrap up this bird skin and send it off to his friend Minot but I think Minot examined it and then just wrapped it back up and put it back in the envelope that came in. And there it sat for a very long time, until it was rediscovered at the Historical Society, oh, more than 40 years ago.

**Cassie Cloutier** 16:32

Anne Bentley, Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita, joined the conversation as we examined the specimen and told us more about how it was preserved.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 16:41

Anne, tell me the precautions you're taking.

**Anne Bentley** 16:44

These animal specimens, especially from the 17th, 18<sup>th</sup>, 19th centuries are all preserved with arsenic. So, since I'm kind of close to these while I'm opening them, I'm masked up because I do not want to breathe this.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 16:57

When Peter showed me this, it's just so precious and fragile.

**Anne Bentley** 17:01

I suppose they saved their wings because by the time they've shot these poor little things, not much left of the head or the body. But we have one set of wings, which is these little guys are about seven centimeters, which is two and three quarters inches long. They are black at the shoulder with a little white feather and then a lovely grey. The outer is dark black, I think. I don't know which ones these are because one set of wings was identified as a Blackburnian warbler by Lew Stevens, Curator of

the Live Animal Center of the Boston Museum of Science in 1996. He was not able to identify the other set of wings.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 17:47

So, the story that I heard is that that specimen came out of a small parcel in the recent history of the Historical Society.

**Anne Bentley** 17:58

Yes, the Minot family gave us the H. D. Minot papers in 1953. And they were listed by Henry Davis Minot as 'Ornithological relics of my Adirondack excursion with Theodore Roosevelt, June 1877.' The two wings we just looked at and then the two that you say Peter identified as Blackburnian warbler, which is the birds. These are the actual birds, tiny little thing with its legs and feet are crossed. And it's sort of in profile. It's like a mummy that's been just laid down flat, and kind of squashed. It's tiny, tiny little beak and little head and it's got a lovely orange yellow throat. And a speckled white belly and lovely dark head with a little bit of patch of white feathers right above the beak. Very pretty, but very tiny. I mean, this, this whole thing, you know, end to end stretched out flat like that. It's 10 centimeters, which is four inches. And at its shoulders, it's only three and a half centimeters is one and three eighth inches. Tiny, tiny little sharp beak. I have no idea why one would do this. H. D. Minot was a nature writer.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 19:14

Well so was Roosevelt, right? I mean, this is how they were going to learn about nature or collecting specimens. And we know that it is preserved in arsenic?

**Anne Bentley** 19:23

Oh, yes. Because it's the only way you preserve them. So many museums that had animal specimens that have taken them off display. You go to museums, and there would be these lovely things on top of cases, not under glass or anything. So, they discovered that they were slowly poisoning



themselves. I've taken off my gloves, but I still want to get my hands anywhere near me until I wash them.

**Cassie Cloutier** 19:51

Professor Dennis told us about some of the first items he encountered while researching American relics at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 20:00

What was the first item you looked at when you came to the MHS, if you remember.

**Matthew Dennis** 20:05

I remember seeing the swatches of Lincoln's blood saved on a towel. And that's a very interesting story. The MHS actually has two representations of that two pieces of that same towel sent to it through different means that originated from the same place. There's other things that are kind of more benign or uplifting. And one of the ones that I thought we might talk about is Washington's epaulets, which is just a great object and the collection that came in fairly early. And I think, in some ways emblematic of the project that the Historical Society was trying to accomplish. It came into the collection as a donation from David Humphreys in 1804. And so, he sent it along, and he wrote this about what they might represent, not just in the present, but in the future. "I put into your hands, a pair of epaulets, which were in habitual use by General Washington at the successful Siege of Yorktown in Virginia, and which were worn by him in the day when he resigned his commission as Commander-in-Chief to Congress at the close of the Revolutionary War. These may, therefore, without employing a very bold figure of speech, be denominated the dumb that is silent, and imperishable witness of his glory as a hero and patriot." So, he's saying, Humphreys saying, talking about these objects, although they can't actually speak, they speak, they speak loudly, and represent embody the patriotism of Washington. "However, we may sometimes be inclined to think too lightly of events, which are so familiar to us from having there happened in our own age, what an association of interesting things may not the view of anything, which was present on those glory occasions produce in the minds of future generations." So, he's saying, like, 'We might take this for

granted, but, but future generations will not, and they'll be moved and inspired by this.' And so, it suggests that memory is not something that is just residual but has to be constructed and cultivated. And so, we have the memory of Washington, the greatest American who ever lived, and Humphreys and others would argue, especially at that time. Maybe he's been surpassed by Lincoln, or maybe someone else. But these were going to do cultural and political and patriotic work in the collection. He wrote, "These badges of military distinction formerly attached to so illustrious a personage, and always destined by the substance of which they are composed to exist with a long series of future generations may perhaps be deemed worthy of being preserved among the frail insignia of human greatness by the Historical Society of Massachusetts." It's this kind of florid and self-deprecating speech, but, but yes, there they are. They're still there more than 200 years later, and I think probably they still intrigued if not move people who look at them.

**Cassie Cloutier** 22:52

Peter and Anne joined us as we took a closer look at these epaulets.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 22:57

Moving to a noncorporeal object with a connection to an historical event and an historical figure.

**Peter Drummey** 23:07

Yes, these are the epaulets, that is the shoulder decorations that George Washington wore on his uniform with the letter that accompanies the gift and stamped in gold on the box that the Historical Society had made to hold the epaulets. Maybe you can read from your side of the table what it says there.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 23:31

So, it says, "Epaulets worn by Washington at the Siege of Yorktown and at the resignation of his commission at Annapolis, December 23rd, 1783, presented by his aide Colonel David Humphreys, to the Massachusetts Historical Society, August 27th, 1805."

**Peter Drummey** 23:54

Essentially what these are, and they're sort of hard to describe a little more than six inches wide. And then there's this gold gilt wire that hangs down over the break in your shoulder along the top of your sleeve. And they have these wonderful buttonholes at the other end of them so you can button them onto your uniform. So, you can wear your uniform coat either fully decorated. They're not particularly heavy. They're very delicate, so I'm not going to pick one up. I don't think they would make you stoop shouldered from wearing them, but you might want to protect them because they're reasonably decorative and delicate for something that's essentially signifies your rank and authority. Although I suspect most members of Washington's army could pick him out without figuring out who is wearing epaulets. We have them because David Humphreys was a young poet from Connecticut, talented young writer graduate of Yale [University], one of the so called, 'Yale Wits.' Humphreys served in the Revolution essentially from 1776 onward, but from 1780, he was picked out to be one of Washington's aides, that people who kept his correspondence, wrote up copies of orders, who delivered messages. Washington would have described his aides as his family. That's more of a military term at the time. But it's very hard not to get the impression that these were in fact, like having several adult sons living in your household. Alexander Hamilton is certainly the most famous of these aides. Washington was wonderfully politically astute in the sense he was commanding a Continental Army, not an army of Virginians. So, he selected aides to essentially represent not all the colonies all at the same time, but he had picked people out essentially from everywhere to serve this role. And some came and went according to their promotion, or what happened to them in the course of the war. So, Humphreys was in the Revolution, essentially, from 1776 on, and he was there right at the very end, but for several years, he was perhaps most closely attached to Washington. The story is that other aides described Humphreys as being the favorite. I don't think that was necessarily a flattering term in their minds, but someone who seemed to get more attention. And Humphreys wasn't the only aide. But I think there were only two aides left at the end of 1783, after the formal peace that ended the Revolution. After essentially the breakup of the Revolutionary Army, Washington traveled to Annapolis, where the Continental Congress is meeting in the state house. The state house that Maryland uses till this day. But if you go in it, there's a wonderful painting in the chamber of the state house of this ceremony where Washington

surrenders his commission. We're talking about artifacts, that's an interesting thing, not in our collection. But an interesting thing too that is your commission is not your recognition of your rank and responsibility alone. But it's a physical object that you carry with you as the demonstration that you hold that rank and authority. So, in physically giving it back to Congress, Washington was indicating his formal resignation. And in the painting of this that hangs, and the chamber of the state house, which is, as I understand it, imaginative a few people who were in the Continental Congress may or may not have been there that day because people came and went. But the figure that stands out, there are two aides standing behind Washington, and one who looks like a younger version of himself, wearing much the same uniform, but standing behind his shoulder is David Humphreys. He's right there at Washington's side. And is to me, the sentimental part is Washington and Humphreys ride a long way so that they'll be at Mount Vernon on Christmas Eve the following day. It's not just ending his service to the America and the Continental Army but returning home. So, this was an important homecoming, and I think he really wanted Humphreys to remain there at Mount Vernon.

**Anne Bentley** 28:44

They're these wonderfully fluid epaulets and unlike the epaulets that we're so used to that are quite stiff, and sort of perch on your shoulders. These are French epaulets, and they are very, very fluid being made of solid gold wire. It's like a thick thread that is woven in a herringbone pattern, gold textile that you're handling, it's about an eighth of an inch thick, goes to the shoulders, where the double row of coiled gold stands up in, that's all stiffened with a little padding and silk threads and little linen thread to give it a little stiffening. And to that is attached the fringes, which again, are coiled gold in a couple of different patterns. They're just very, very elegant, very beautiful things.

**Anne Bentley** 29:33

So, Washington surrenders these to Congress. Does Congress give them back?

**Peter Drummey** 29:37

No, not the epaulets.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 29:38

Not the epaulets, his commission?

**Peter Drummey** 29:40

His commission. I assume is essentially, you know, essentially written out document with a formal address to him. I don't think it was a blank form completed manuscript. I think that probably survives as a record in I would assume in the National Archives, or maybe in the Library of Congress which has a wonderful collection of Washington's papers, before there was a National Archives. The epaulets would be personal. So, he could give them as a gift to someone. The commission would be a formal document that would be physically returned.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 30:19

Is there a story behind why Humphreys gave them to the Historical Society?

**Peter Drummey** 30:24

No, but I think he had spent a lot of time collecting materials for a life of Washington. The Historical Society and I use that name as shorthand, but it was our name at the time of our founding, said that it was setting out to collect the national history. So, I think the other state institutions were just coming into being. I don't think there was no formal National Archives for more than a century on into the future. There were records kept by the State Department and then the Library of Congress took on the role in lieu, it was the Reference Library of Congress, but it was also a repository of records. But I think he wanted these to be safe. But I think it's more than that. I think he was really thinking about the future, and how would someone see something directly connected? It was wonderful of him having this with this personal attachment to it, but he was putting this into its private organization, but into public hands. This was going to be a publicly available artifact.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 31:40

What about relics for the future? How can we know if something will have any power?

**Matthew Dennis** 31:45

Yeah, that's a great question. And in some ways, it builds on something we were talking about earlier, which is that we're in a moment of public memory and consciousness of that. And I guess we have been for a long time. It's certainly people have collected for a long time. And here with Humphreys, we're going all the way back to the very beginning of the 19th century. But nowadays, we're aware that we're going through fraught and powerful times. You know, we've just gone through a pandemic, for example, that was transformative, affected lives around the globe, in ways that we hadn't seen at least for 100 years since the one following World War One. And we're going through all kinds of political developments that again, unprecedented really, since the Civil War, I think. People are aware of these things. They're aware that, that we have to chronicle our present because it will be a significant past for future Americans. And so, there's a lot of collection going on by all sorts of historical museums and organizations. The relics of the future I talk about in an epilogue to my book and so what we see for example, is collections of the first vial of vaccine used to vaccinate a nurse for it at the New York area hospital. We see a collection of Dr. Anthony Fauci's a model of the Coronavirus that he used to imagine its impact and to explain it to others. We see even the collection of some of the detritus of the January 6th insurrection. The Smithsonian, for example, went in and collected because these are significant historical objects that tell us about the past and will connect us to it in the future. I mean, some of those things were so fraught and so contemporary, that after collected, they had to be recollected because they constituted evidence in a criminal proceeding. So, people are aware of this became especially aware of it in the wake of September 11th, 2001, where 9/11 objects were collected and are in museums. And we have an entire museum, a new and very interesting kind of memorial museum in New York in lower Manhattan, commemorating that horrific event. Steel and refuse from that event now are in that museum and a lot of other places around the country and in fact around the globe. This collecting mentality is clear, and this need to collect the present because it is bound to be an important past. It's really all around us and ongoing.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 34:24

[Outro music fades in] To look at the items discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at [www.masshist.org/podcast](http://www.masshist.org/podcast).

**Cassie Cloutier** 34:41

The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Matthew Dennis, Professor of History, Emeritus at the University of Oregon, Peter Drummey, the Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Anne Bentley, the Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita, and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Chad Crouch. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.