

# The Casket of Hair

**Catherine Allgor** 00:05

We call it the Rosewood Casket or the Casket of Hair and at first glance it looks a little bit like a little coffin, but it's not. As you'll see, it has four compartments and in each compartment is a lock of hair and there's beautiful engravings, identifying the hair. So, we have George Washington, [James] Madison, Mrs. [Dolley] Madison, and John Quincy Adams.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 00:35

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

**Katy Morris** 00:47

This is Katy Morris.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 00:48

And this is The Object of History.

**Katy Morris** 00:51

The podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 00:54

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history.

**Katy Morris** 01:01

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 collection.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:16**

In this episode, we are exploring the collection of hair held at the MHS. You may be surprised to learn that hair is not an altogether unusual item in archives of early America. If you search our catalog, you will find no less than 75 listings for locks of hair, and another 83 pieces of jewelry containing or made of hair. Some of them are from famous individuals like George Washington, others are the private keepsakes of ordinary people.

**Katy Morris 01:47**

To understand the meaning of this collection, we are taking a close look at one particularly interesting hair artifact held at the MHS known as the Casket of Hair. This little wooden box displays the hair of First Lady Dolley Madison and Presidents George Washington, James Madison, and John Quincy Adams.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:08**

We shall speak with MHS President Dr. Catherine Allgor to learn about the woman who collected these hair samples, Mary Estelle Cutts, the niece of Dolley Madison.

**Catherine Allgor 02:18**

Mary Cutts had this impulse to be a historian.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:22**

Along with Dr. Allgor, Chief Historian Peter Drummey will help us examine the casket and think about what it means to encounter hair in the archives.

**Peter Drummey 02:31**

I use this term casket to mean a decorated box although in this instance the hair itself is the decoration.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 02:39

Along the way, we shall speak with Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley, about the larger collection of hair held at the MHS.

**Anne Bentley** 02:48

When I'm dealing with these things, at first, I thought, "Oh, this is so creepy."

**Katy Morris** 02:55

To get started, we spoke with Dr. Catherine Allgor and her interest in the woman behind the casket, Mary Estelle Cutts. She explained to us how this interesting figure came into focus as she worked on her book, [A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation](#).

**Catherine Allgor** 03:12

I call Mary Cutts a vanishing lady. It's a trope of women's history. We have to sort of understand that when we study women who are notable or achieving, especially in the 19th and 20th century. We often have to look for the women behind them or around them that made their lives possible. And when I started my biography of Dolley Payne Todd Madison, which became [A Perfect Union](#), I was aware of one of these women I knew her as Mary Estelle Elizabeth Cutts, who I knew as a niece and she's famous for writing a quote memoir about her aunt. When I started diving into the memoir itself, I realized that most biographers or people who had used it used it as a sort of like a data sheet, a set of facts about what happened and when and dates and things like that. And I realized it didn't take much reading to see it as a deeply problematic and therefore much more interesting document than just a relation of facts. Most of it covers a period of time where Mary Cutts was not even born yet. So, it does talk about Dolley's early years and her political career, her time in Washington, but Mary Cutts is born, you know, quite late into all of this. And so right away this idea of it as a memoir becomes problematical. And then of course, I realized at different points that and how do I say this delicately, somebody lied, right? So, some things are not clear. And they're not more than not clear, they're actually obfuscated, including the year of her birth, the source of her name, her family history, and so of course, this is much more interesting to a historian

than anything accurate. So, I felt like I needed to know who this Mary Estelle Elizabeth Cutts was. Mary Cutts is the daughter of Dolley's younger sister, Anna. And so, she had a very strong southern connection, Mary through Dolley and she spent a lot of time in Montpelier with uncle James and aunt Dolley. But she was also a New Englander, related to the Cutts family. And that's why we have a Cutts collection here.

**Katy Morris** 05:14

How would you describe Mary's relationship with Dolley?

**Catherine Allgor** 05:18

So Dolley was probably not a great mother. However, she was a great aunt. So, she loved her sister Anna. I mean, she loved her all of her sisters. She called Anna, her sister-daughter, and had Anna with her always and then Anna has the good grace to marry a congressman. So that means she's going to be with Dolley for big chunks of the time. And Anna, as I said, went on to have a passel of children. She has a bunch of boys. And then at some point, she has her first daughter, and Dolley has this wonderful letter where she writes to Anna's husband and said, "Oh my God, it's a girl. I can't believe it's a girl. Now, tell me, in your rush to write to me, tell me if you've got mistaken. Please tell me it's a girl." And Ann says right away, she says, I'm adopting this girl as my own. This is Dolley Cutts. So, she is naming after Dolley, loves Dolley. She says, "I want her. She's my own daughter." And these two girls become the recipients of all of this auntly love.

**Catherine Allgor** 06:18

There's a suggestion in the sources that she thinks of Mary as a little bit more of a flibbertigibbet, if I may say and that Dolley is much more sort of feet on the ground, a little bit more dependable, less flighty. And so it might be that in the 1830s, or '40s, when Dolley Madison, maybe if she does think about doing this memoir with one of her nieces. She might have thought of Dolley, but she's dead at that point. So, Mary loses her sister again, very young. And so, in some ways, Mary is the one that's left, but Dolley should have known that Mary would rise to the occasion because even though at the end of her memoir, Mary says, "Oh, I put my pen down and I'm so dissatisfied because I feel

like I haven't done a good job." She really does do a good job and really goes to bat for her on in ways that I hoped would make Dolley proud.

**Catherine Allgor** 07:18

So, in my quest to discover who Mary Estelle Elizabeth Cutts was, I came to the Historical Society. But what was interesting is this beautiful little artifact, we call it the Rosewood Casket or the Casket of Hair. And in case that seems terribly romantic to you, that's actually officially what it's called. And at first glance, it looks a little bit like a little coffin, but it's not. As you'll see, it has four compartments. And in each compartment is a lock of hair. There's beautiful engravings identifying the hair, and we just brought it down from the stacks. And as we pass through the office, Katy, I noticed you said, "Oh, my gosh, it's so small." And I find that true of artifacts, as you see them often, up close, you think they're massive things.

**Peter Drummey** 08:04

I truly think that listeners, even in a video, have a difficult time, unless someone is holding something to understand its physical dimensions. So, I've picked up the casket. I use this term casket to mean a decorated box, although in this instance, it has four compartments, and it's covered with glass. So, the hair itself is the decoration, but it's rosewood and elegant with brass fittings, but it's about six inches long. It's a little higher than it is wide but essentially, six inches by almost two inches by a little less than two inches. So, something small, that's just a little bit too big to fit in your hand. But I believe clearly to pick up and look into it and see these locks of hair on display and hold it and move it and see it more closely. Which means for us today, it's a wonderful thing to show as an artifact but I think people are thinking about the box rather than its contents, because in the remove of it and it's a display case itself. So, a display case within another display case is the thing you're looking at.

**Catherine Allgor** 09:14

So, we have I wouldn't say a lot but quite a nice little chunk of George Washington, I think from a younger period. It's sort of a brown hair kind of thing. Madison which would mean James Madison

in the naming practice of the day, that would be a man so that's James Madison gray hair, Mrs. [Dolley] Madison, and John Quincy Adams.

**Peter Drummey** 09:33

I suppose having any hair that you had some strong sense was Washington's would be wonderful no matter what it is, but it's just a few strands of his hair. And I think it probably was more logical, probably tied with a ribbon or something like that earlier on but very little of Washington's hair. The next person and this is going left to right is James Madison, and there's a larger sample of his hair But again, it's a lock of hair that sort of come apart and is very light fair hair. I believe Madison retained the sort of style of hair with a cue sort of ponytail on through his life. He dressed very much as he had dressed as a young man, even though he lived well on into the 19th century. So, Mary Cutts would have known him as old fashioned in appearance but has more hair, but it's sort of I think, was probably more of something like a lock of or cutting of hair. And third, we have Dolley Madison's hair, which is nicely gathered together, so it fits nicely into this container, and looks to me like what hair should be how it should be presented and displayed.

**Catherine Allgor** 10:49

At first glance, when I first saw it, it solved at least one mystery, which is what color was Dolley Madison's hair, which sounds a little bit frivolous. But there's a lot in the literature about Dolley Madison, there are descriptions of her physical presence, her quote, unquote, beauty or charisma and much is made of what she looks like. And the startling contrast between her black hair and her very pale skin and her very blue eyes. And these are not in my work, I don't just see these as the kind of usual, you know, commenting on women that were very used to, or even celebrity mentions in my work, I see these descriptions of her functioning as a kind of political analysis. So, what she looked like the fact that as a matter of fact, she was not beautiful by the time people saw her in her 40s. So, it was interesting to me that her hair was not black, but a very dark brown.

**Peter Drummey** 11:39

And then because most of the surviving images of him show him balding, with very sparse hair. We have a very impressive sort of something between a lock and a clump of John Quincy Adams's hair, which again is a very fair, but it's sort of like, I don't want to sound like making a joke about this, but this must have been a considerable sacrifice on his part if he gave someone this much hair as an adult.

**Catherine Allgor** 12:08

Now, I know this sounds a little bit odd. But that part isn't the strange part of this story because people of the time 18th century, 19th century, 20th century people put a lot of store into the idea of collecting the hair of dead people. As a historian of early America, when you open those boxes, you got to be prepared for hair, you know, it's just there.

**Peter Drummey** 12:28

This is something really quite common in the 19th century, that is to preserve a lock of most often, a beloved, a husband, a child, a wife, someone personally connected with you. But there's also collecting locks of hair of famous notable people that might be in the United States, a political figure or writer or simply an eminent person. And this is kind of a combination of both because three of the people James and Dolley Madison, and John Quincy Adams, Mary Cutts would have known personally, but she born in 1814, could have no personal memory of George Washington. And I used to say the world is divided up into people who think this is very strange, and even maybe something a little make you a little uneasy, and people who think it's wonderful. And then over time, it turned out there was me who thought it was wonderful, and everybody else on the other side of that equation, and now I found kindred spirits. It's not an enormous number of people. Most people find it a little strange. Even when I was bringing the casket down to show you today, someone on our staff realized what it was and sort of shrank back from the cart that was carrying it on. I thought, "Thank God, we didn't meet on the elevator, this would have been really uncomfortable." And truthfully, it's the physical manifestation of something that so draws me to this field. That is when you read someone's papers, or especially their diary, have a connection to

them. Sometimes I feel like I have a connection with people from the past where I feel I know and understand them even in some respects differently, but as intimately as people who I know and this is literally part of them. That's come down to us. It's me being surprised at the color of James Madison's or George Washington's hair.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 14:40

The more we looked at the casket with Peter and Catherine, the more curious we became about other hair held at the MHS. We asked MHS curator Anne Bentley, to show us a few more examples and help us understand what today feels like a highly unusual practice.

**Anne Bentley** 14:57

We have here a lock of Napoleon's hair.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 15:01

Wow!

**Anne Bentley** 15:02

This Napoleon's hair is enshrined in an easel that is created of black stone basalt, stone that has gold frills on it. And it's got this gold inscription in Latin that tells us what this tiny, tiny little thread of blondish hair is and you can see that this is a long-established custom of saving memorials of departed famous leaders, people, statesmen, orators, poets.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 15:31

There are so many questions here. For example, how on earth do we know?

**Anne Bentley** 15:36

This particular lock of Napoleon's hair was given to Edward Everett, our great statesman by Lucien Bonaparte. So how do we know? Where does it come from? Well, this came directly from the family probably at the request of Edward Everett. So that's one of the famous. On the other hand,

we have this charming gift for my aunt Persis Russell, which is a darling little braided hair wreath that has been tied to a little piece of paper with a pink silk ribbon, and a little poem that says, "This lock of hair I once did wear but now I trust it to your care from your nephew."

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 16:20

And when is that from?

**Anne Bentley** 16:22

This one dates from about 1800. So, so there's long, long practice of sentimental gifts of hair, especially among wives whose husbands were seafarers. You often find miniature portraits and, on the back, you have what we call a hair chamber with the husband's hair, sometimes braided flat, sometimes just a curl under glass so that the wife would have a memento of her husband to wear. These were pendants. They were sometimes brooches; they could be mounted in a bracelet. These were sentimental gifts, but you contrast this living hair living person wedding gift with this, which is the hair of George Frisbie Hoar was a Massachusetts senator. His first wife died. And he cut off they cut off her braid of her hair.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 17:20

Oh, okay. Okay.

**Anne Bentley** 17:22

And, and slipped his wedding ring and her wedding ring on it.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 17:27

That's a substantial amount of hair.

**Anne Bentley** 17:29

Well, this was her braided hair. Yes, it's about 11 inches long. And she had brunette hair and it's tied at the top, and it's lost. I guess the ring was at the bottom to hold a bit. Yeah, yeah.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 17:46

Okay. So how did he preserve it? How do we preserve it?

**Anne Bentley** 17:52

Hair is indestructible. That's one of the reasons it was the perfect item to act as a memento. Hair does not disintegrate. It's there.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 18:05

It looks alive. It looks like it's from someone who's living. It's like, it looks, I'm half expected to come alive.

**Anne Bentley** 18:12

When I'm dealing with these things. At first, I thought, "Oh, God, this is so creepy." One of the things I try to do when I'm working with these collections is try very hard to put myself in the time and the place of the people who are collecting these. Why are they doing this? What does it mean to them and the further into research we got that the more understandable it is in our day and age, it's inconceivable with videos on your you know at the touch of a button on your phone. It's inconceivable for us to think of a time when death was so final, was so final that the only thing you had left of your loved one was a lock of hair. Just try and think about what that would mean to you not to be able to hear that person's voice after 5, 10, a lifetime living without them not to be able to see them. Only the wealthy could ever afford portraits and even miniatures, you had to be very well off unless somebody in your family was particularly gifted and could draw or sketch or watercolor or you could scrape together the money to get a silhouette made only the very wealthy could have an image of their ancestor their lost one the love of their life their child but anybody could cut off a

lock of hair from their dead loved one and tie it up and put it in a safe place to keep as a connection as a reminder that this person lived and walk this earth and meant something to you.

### **Anne Bentley 18:53**

So, Anne, anyone can cut off hair and that is already an emotional and material connection. But it seems like there's a different level here of those who can take that hair and have a jeweler embed it in something.

### **Anne Bentley 20:13**

It runs the gamut from the most basic braid to our latest gift, which is very, very astonishing. This is high neoclassical mourning pendant. This is for a father and son who died several years apart. Thomas Adams, no relation to our Adams died September 9th, 1796, at the age of 33. His son Thomas Adams, Jr, died April 9th, 1788, at the age of 17. So after father died, this neoclassical mourning, miniature was painted on ivory, and it was encased in this oval large oval frame that has a hair chamber on the back, and it looks under this light, it looks like it's got a black glass surround. If I were to shine a flashlight on the back, that would be cobalt blue, there's surround that goes around this, it's stunning under the right light. So, this is this is very high end. And you see on the back that the hair of both has been flattened and placed into a pattern. This sort of work in the hair chamber of a mourning pendant, this was done by professional hair workers. By the 1840s, more and more of this very, very professional hair work was done on a grander scale because the mechanization of jewelry, and the growing middle class in America meant that more and more Americans could afford the luxury of a mourning pendant because it was pretty much almost factory that they'd create the locket. And all you had to do is take the hair and the locket to somebody who practice hair weaving and hair manipulation and they could create whatever you want to put in that locket. And so, more and more people were able to indulge in this sort of high-class mourning. By 1851 Boston alone had 15 people or 16 people actually who specialized in hair work.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 22:26

I honestly did not know this was a career path.

**Anne Bentley** 22:29

The demand was so great that people made a living simply creating these magnificent works of art. And it wasn't just for jewelry. They would take the strands and flatten them and starch them so that they became almost hair paper as it were. And then they could cut this hair paper into various shapes and glue them onto a backing. And that went under glass for pendants, or they could create three-dimensional hair sculptures from the hair. So, you know you get everybody's locks of hair in the family and create these intricate bouquets out of different colored hair with beads and little feathers and little. It's just amazing, amazing stuff out there if you Google hair work.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 23:17

We are just not imaginative enough anymore. We think we look at hair and we say, "Oh, it's hair." Whereas a century and a half ago someone looks at hair and says, "I can make something with that."

**Katy Morris** 23:37

With some context from Anne the casket was beginning to make a little sense to us. But that's not all there was to the story. The casket contains not only the hair, but also has a very small drawer that stores the original scraps of paper that Mary Cutts used to hold the precious locks. To understand this last layer of the story, here again is Catherine Allgor.

**Catherine Allgor** 24:04

So, it came from as a gift commission and made by Moorfield Storey in 1916. He was a gentleman of governance here at the Historical Society, a collector. So obviously, he had collected these pieces of hair and decided they were important enough that he was going to commission this absolutely adorable little casket and all in all, it's a sort of charming, slightly macabre little artifact from the past. But the interesting part is that Moorfield Storey wanted to also preserve the how around this. So he created a little cabinet at the bottom of this, and in it are the screws of paper that these pieces

of hair had been wrapped in, and it becomes clear that it was the family historian Mary Estelle Elizabeth Cutts, who set out to not only get autographs from famous people, but solicited these bits of hair and saved them and so this is what Moorfield Storey discovered and decided to enshrine.

**Katy Morris** 25:05

Did you say screws of paper? What does that mean?

**Catherine Allgor** 25:10

Yeah, so someday, someone much smarter than I am is going to write a very learned book about the use of scrap paper in women's lives. It's just one of those things again, like the hair that I see that women will preserve or write things, and they will be very thriftily using scrap paper. In fact, Emily Dickinson wrote many of her poems on scraps of paper. And so, these are these are bits of sort of scrap paper sort of torn off, and then she took the hair, and we think she just kind of wrapped it in the paper. But what I find really poignant in about these pieces of paper, though, some of them are identifiers. One says George Washington's hair, is that she used her father's letters as part of the scrap paper. And I wonder about that. And I think it had to say, I think it was her way of making a sort of bid for historical prominence. Like, my father was Richard Cutts. He was, you know, Congressman from Maine and very important and lived in Washington and had many political posts. And so, it's, it's part of her sort of something that a woman in the 19th century would always have to assert, is her right to be in the space her right to assert her right to write. And so, this was her way of doing that.

**Catherine Allgor** 25:10

And I found in the whole thing, this incredible metaphor for women's history. Here was this woman, she's operating in the mid-19th century, she's operating in a world quite different from the world of her aunt who was, you know, really an 18th century woman. So, Mary Estelle Elizabeth Cutts is in a world where women are supposed to be part of what we call the cult of true womanhood. And, you know, pious, pure domestic, and certainly, you know, not trying to make a bid for fame or have jobs like historians. And yet Mary Cutts had this impulse to be a historian. And

when I understood that when I saw this little casket, I understood a lot more about what brought Mary Cutts to that quote, unquote, memoir, and all of the complicated things she was trying to do. She's trying to make up a bid for historical significance for her subject, her aunt and for herself.

**Katy Morris** 27:37

I said this to you that it is smaller than I expected. Was it smaller than you expected?

**Catherine Allgor** 27:42

You know every time I see it, yeah, it because I see it mostly on photographs. So, it is and this is rosewood here. This beautiful, lovely kind of brown-red wood and this is a brass top, and you can see the hair and see Washington's very just a little bit of gray there.

**Katy Morris** 28:00

Yes, it looks like we have the least of Washington.

**Catherine Allgor** 28:03

He was popular, you know?

**Katy Morris** 28:05

There was a lot to go around.

**Catherine Allgor** 28:06

And interestingly, James Madison's hair, you can see this gray, so probably Mary got that from him. Dolley's hair is quite brown. So again, must be an earlier Dolley.

**Katy Morris** 28:18

And quite fine. The other ones they sort of look like little nests of hair.

**Catherine Allgor** 28:25

It's also interesting to me so we have this beautiful little casket here with the in lovely script the identifiers Washington, Madison, Mrs. Madison J. Q. Adams, but Mr. Storey wanted to be part of history too. So, it's a gift of Moorfield Storey 1916.

**Katy Morris** 28:41

And what are you seeing on the bottom?

**Catherine Allgor** 28:42

Yeah, I realized it has a tag. It says, "Washington, Madison, Adams hair." So, we're not even acknowledging that Dolley Madison's hair is in here.

**Katy Morris** 28:55

That says it all. So then underneath, there's a little tiny draw. How high is that? Do you think like not even like a half inch maybe?

**Catherine Allgor** 29:06

Maybe, maybe a half inch drawer?

**Katy Morris** 29:08

And a tiny round pole?

**Catherine Allgor** 29:11

Yes. So exquisite. It had to have been done for this.

**Katy Morris** 29:16

Can you open it?

**Catherine Allgor** 29:17

Yeah. Yeah. So here is one. That is a letter from Richard Cutts. And then on pencil it has [John Quincy Adams] J. Q. A's hair.

**Katy Morris** 29:34

So that's her handwriting?

**Catherine Allgor** 29:35

Yes. Yeah. And this is James Madison's hair 1836 and that could have been that was right before he died. So, this is probably from his corpse, Katy. This is probably from his corpse.

**Katy Morris** 29:48

Let's just cut to it.

**Catherine Allgor** 29:49

Yeah, if it's 1836 he died. They cut up hair.

**Katy Morris** 29:53

It's it feels so foreign to me. I can't imagine going to someone, can I have a little of your hair for posterity?

**Catherine Allgor** 30:00

Well, I think so. But talking to Peter Drummey, in this very room, and I was with my beloved mother-in-law, Lois Jacobs. And I don't get the hair thing either, but Peter does, and so does my mother-in-law, they get it, they get the whole idea, they get the hair thing and why you'd make jewelry out of it. So, I think it's one of those things that still divides us, Katy.

**Katy Morris** 30:22

I understand wanting the hair. I can't imagine asking for it.

**Catherine Allgor** 30:26

Yeah, there you go.

**Katy Morris** 30:26

That's the part that gets me.

**Catherine Allgor** 30:27

But again, it's about a vocabulary of significance. You would actually be very flattered to be asked for your hair. But you know, I know that parents of certain generations, my generation kept hair from the baby's first haircut. So, I think...

**Katy Morris** 30:41

My mother did that.

**Catherine Allgor** 30:42

Yeah, I think people are still doing it.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 30:44

[Outro music fades in] To view the objects in this episode, and to learn more, visit our website at [www.masshist.org/podcast](http://www.masshist.org/podcast). If you enjoyed the show, help us spread the word and share the episode with your friends. This podcast is produced by the research department at the MHS. We would like to thank Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Anne Bentley, Curator of Art and Artifacts and Dr. Catherine Allgor, MHS president and the author of Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government and A Perfect Union: Dolley Madison and the Creation of the American Nation. Music in this episode was provided by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and by Kosta T. Thank you for listening.