Gouverneur Morris and the History of Disability

Jenny Reiss 00:00

[Music fades in] There are people from the 18th century where we usually say like, 'Oh, that person's interesting. I'm not sure we want to be friends with that person.' People say that about Adams sometimes, like, 'I'm not sure I would want to be friends with John Adams. But he's a really interesting guy.' I think I would want to be friends with Gouverneur Morris. I want to take him out to dinner and talk to him. I think he's a really interesting guy. And I would really urge beyond all the disabilities stuff that the more people get interested in him.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:37

[Intro music begins] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 00:40

This is Cassie Cloutier.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:42

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.

Cassie Cloutier 01:12

On this episode of The Object of History, we learn about the growing field of disability history, and the life of founding father, Gouverneur Morris, with Jenny Reiss, a PhD candidate at the University of Pennsylvania who studies the relationship between gender and disability and colonial America and the early Republic. With Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita Anne Bentley and Curator of

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Rare Books and Visual Materials, Mary Yacovone, we take a look at and learn more about some objects relating to disability history in the MHS collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:50

Historians are perhaps familiar with disability history, disability studies, but for a lot of readers of history and the general public, they might not be so familiar with this field of study. Could you speak a little bit more about disability history when did it start?

Jenny Reiss 02:07

So, it started as sort of a legacy to some of the other historiographical fields that developed in the '60s and the '70s. So, it doesn't really start until sort of the '80s and the '90s. It sort of benefits from all the insights that we've learned from gender history and racial history and class histories of that sort of mid-20th century flowering of historiography. And there were a few people, Lennard Davis and Douglas Baynton, who sort of come out and say, 'We need to think about disability as an identity category as well, that also sort of intersects with all these other identity categories that we now understand really impact how people exist in the world and the lived experience of people in the world.' And it's also very much influenced by the disability rights movement which really gets underway in the 1970s and 1980s.

Jenny Reiss 03:01

Judy Heumann who, unfortunately, just died, was a huge activist. She was profiled in the Netflix film *Crip Camp*, which I recommend everybody watch. That sort of activism later on in terms of the American with Disabilities Act, which was passed in 1990, in which I've been a beneficiary of, that activism really continued to spur historical interest in disability as an identity category that matters when we read history, and we think about history.

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Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:33

Tell us about how you developed your dissertation idea. Are you interested in early America, and you looked at disability studies or were you interested in disability history and looked at early America?

Jenny Reiss 03:43

My own personal story is sort of we say in history longue durée. So, I identify as disabled. I have mild cerebral palsy, and as a very young child, I got interested in history, in part and I sort of joke that maybe this says something about my own psychology, in part because I didn't think people like me existed in the past. And so, I could sort of dress up as someone who lived in colonial America and pretend to be someone who lived in colonial America and not have to deal with the restrictions, the pain, the sort of bodily embodiedness of being disabled. So, that's how I got into early America. I've been very interested in early America my entire life. I did some other things. And when I came back to become a historian, I knew I wanted to study early America. And while I was contemplating doing a PhD, I went to a bunch of lectures, including one by a professor named Tom Foster, who has written on gender and sexuality, but he had written a couple of pieces on Gouverneur Morris. He's the sort of founding father that's known as the Penman of the Constitution. He wrote the 'We the People' preamble to the Constitution.

Jenny Reiss 04:57

One of Foster's pieces was really about Morris' multiple disabilities. And this blew my mind because I had never heard of a disabled founding father. And I was really interested in what it must have been like for him to exist as a disabled person in this period where I had thought, no disabled people existed. So, I got very interested in Gouverneur Morris. I have sort of a current side project on Gouverneur Morris that I'm working on. And that really is what got me into disability history and disability studies because when I went to go look at Gouverneur Morris' diaries, I really had to think about them in terms of the disability theory and the sort of disability work that has already been done. And so, I sort of did a deep dive into that. And I've always been interested in women's history and history of the body. When I was an undergrad, I did some work on that. And when it

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came time to think about my dissertation project that was really what I wanted to think about. We always talked about sort of, are you doing 'me-story', right, like my own history. And I'm not because it's not me in the 18th century. But my interest in it has been a little bit of a reflection of my own experience.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:06

Not all of our listeners may know who he is.

Jenny Reiss 06:10

Gouverneur Morris is known as the Penman of the Constitution. He was the sort of lead person on the Committee of Style during the Constitutional Convention. And therefore, he was the one who basically decided sort of the arrangement of the clauses of the Constitution and sort of he did a little word smithing. And actually, the original preamble was quite different than the, 'We the People' preamble that we all know today. And it originally was couched in terms of the states. And he made the conscious decision that the Constitution was created by the people and not of the states, which is a sort of separate issue. But it's a very interesting issue when you think about sort of our federal system. He was born in the 1750s on an estate in what is now the Bronx, and his father was a judge. And the family had been granted some lands in previous generations by William III. So, they're sort of one of these big landholders in New York. However, he was the only son of a second marriage, and he had older brothers. So, he wasn't expected to inherit the land. And so, he was basically sort of prepared for a career in the law. So, he went to King's College, which is now Columbia University, and prepared for a career in the law and eventually did become a lawyer. And when he was at King's College, he goes back to visit his family and he gets severely burned when a kettle of boiling water topples onto his right side. And it was described later sort of as having all the flesh taken off years later. So, it was probably sort of a full thickness burn, and he was in his teens. And so, he would have grown, his arm would have still grown, and he probably would have had scar contractures, which may have limited the mobility of his arm. And then just after he lost his second election to the to the Continental Congress, he got into a carriage accident and had to have his left leg amputated just below the knee. And so, for the rest of his life, he had these two sort of acquired

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impairments. When the revolution broke out, became a staunch patriot. One of his older brothers Staats Long Morris and his mother, Sarah were both loyalists and Staats Long actually joined the British Army and ended up marrying into the British aristocracy. So, Gouverneur is involved in the New York Provincial Congress. He then gets elected to the Second Continental Congress and serves in the Second Continental Congress, moves to Philadelphia. And then he loses a second election for the Continental Congress, and then gets involved with Robert Morris, the colonial financier, who's not related to him, but they were friends and business partners, that Robert Morris becomes a sort of de facto first treasury secretary under the Articles of Confederation and Gouverneur Morris is the second-in-command. So, he does a lot of work in the early government. And then he goes to the Constitutional Convention, representing Pennsylvania. He ends up going to Europe and becomes the U.S. Ambassador to France, at the height of the French Revolution. He does some traveling in Europe, comes back to the States. He marries and has a kid and gets involved in the Erie Canal. He gets involved in the grid project, putting the grid onto New York City, and then he dies in 1816.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:27

Let's talk about representation of people in the 18th century. Henry Knox, he had an accident if I recollect. I was just at the Museum of Fine Arts the other day, and I saw the portrait of Knox and his I think the wound is on his right hand, and it's hidden, resting on something you can't really see it. And you saw something similar. You've written about something similar with Morris as to how he's portrayed in portraits of him, right?

Jenny Reiss 09:54

It's interesting in terms of Morris' physicality and portrayal. So, there's a difference between imagined representations of Morris from later periods. So, for example, the most popular biography of Morris is by Richard Brookhiser, it's from the early '00s. And the cover of that book has this picture of this man sitting in a big chair and his sort of pegleg is sort of stuck out for everyone to see. That is an imagined image. There is no contemporary image of Morris where he shows his prosthetic that just doesn't exist. And in most of the images that I've seen, he's actually sitting

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down. So, there's no way that he could have been sort of desk level and above. And there's this interesting painting of him and Robert Morris, since they were so close business partners, and Robert Morris is standing up, and Gouverneur Morris is sitting down. And he's sort of angled in a way that you see sort of his left upper body is most prominent in the image. And I found that very interesting, knowing what I know about his arm, and knowing what I know about his leg. And actually, it's interesting because most people, if they've done a little deep dive into Morris know about his leg, they don't necessarily know about his arm. He didn't really talk about. It was mostly covered all the time. Like I said, there was one mention of it in the records of the Constitutional Convention. But sort of thinking about that is really interesting that he has the means to say to the painter, this is how I want to be portrayed. When he was in France, there's also the sculptor [Jean-Antoine] Houdon actually made a bust of him that is also sort of all over the internet that people can see. However, there's this interesting story that people always talk about Morris when they talk about his physicality, which I find very interesting to unpack. The same sculptor Houdon was commissioned by Virginia to produce a full-length sculpture of George Washington and George Washington was pretty tall. He was over six feet tall, and so was Morris. Morris is very tall, and Houdon is in France, Washington is in the United States, and Houdon needs a model. And so, Morris actually poses for Houdon to give him the correct proportions. And the actual statue is full length, so it shows legs, no, obviously no pegleg, right, because it doesn't represent Morris it represents Washington. And from the diaries, and from people's reactions to him. He's a pretty fit guy, probably because of the I think the compensation that he had to do when he was using the prosthetic because you use different muscles, when you can't use certain muscles, you compensate with others. And so, it's interesting, that story is often trotted out to say like, 'What an imposing figure he must have been, he posed for the statue of George Washington.' But I find it very interesting because one the statue is imagine in the end, it's not a statue of Morris, it's a statue of Washington. It's sort of used as a like, 'Oh, let's forget that he was disabled, let's not think about his disability.' And for me, as a disabled person, it's not everything in my life. It doesn't encompass my entire existence as a person, but it does influence who I am. And I can't imagine that having the disabilities that he had, acquired disabilities that he had, that that didn't influence his life. And I think we have a poorer understanding of him as a human being and as a statesman and as a

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diplomat, and as a politician, if we don't think about his disability and think with his disability when we think about him as a person.

Jenny Reiss 13:39

From 1789, to the end of his life, so starting from when he goes to Europe, he kept a diary. It's a very detailed diary. I am pretty confident that it was not written for public consumption because it is very frank. It's very frank about his sexual escapades because he's married at this time. It's very frank about bodily functions. It's very frank about different people. And so, the diaries were just edited and put online very recently 2017. Earlier segments of the diaries had been published by some of his descendants. They were sort of bowdlerized versions, and so deep COVID, I got online and I read 2,000 pages of all of his diaries and I specifically wanted to think about how the content of the diaries may or may not have reflected his self-consciousness as an impaired person and thinking about sort of his privileges as a rich white man, but also how that interacted with his disability, which is not necessarily a positive reflection, or it could be. Disability doesn't necessarily mean one thing, right? And so, my interest was is does he make it mean something positive or does he allow people to think negative things about his disability? That was the project, but I really did this deep dive and really tried to bring all that I was learning about disability studies and disability theory to bear on the content of the entire diaries.

Jenny Reiss 15:05

The diary and various biographers have talked about how active a person he was. He regularly exercised. He regularly rode horses. Later in life, he'd go up to see his property in upstate New York, and he go down there in boats on rapids, you know, rapids. And at one point, there's this story he tells of, you know, walking up several hundred steps in a church in Europe, and he was able to do all of those things. But I think we have to think about the sort of physicality of doing those things with the prosthetic in a way that I think other biographers haven't necessarily done because given the way that he would have to have, say, walked upstairs with that prosthetic, he would have had to have swung his leg completely from the hip joint. And so, when you think about the stress that it puts on your hip joints, and the pain that he must have experienced and just even

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on his full leg, the compensatory movements, right? I mean, just with my disability, I have two relatively functional legs, and I still have compensatory pain because there's some muscles I can't use, so I have to overuse others. When I was reading the diaries, I was really attentive to that, and really thinking about that. He's had a full life. He did lots of other things, and other people are just in other parts of his life. But I was particularly interested in sort of thinking about his physical movement through space.

Jenny Reiss 16:25

He's an amazing, an interesting character. He was anti-slavery. He was one of the most vocal people at the Constitution Convention against the three-fifths clause. He had very progressive views towards women. Part of why Foster started looking at the diaries is because they recount his relationships with various women in France. And he has very sort of what we would understand as progressive views about sort of mutual pleasure and sort of equality of men and women. The diaries are just they're also very pithy and he's very smart. They're very funny. There are people from the 18th century where we usually say, like, 'Oh, that person is interesting. I'm not sure we want to be friends with that person.' People say that about Adams, sometimes, like, 'I'm not sure I would want to be friends with John Adams, but he's a really interesting guy.' I think I would want to be friends with Gouverneur Morris. I'd want to take him out to dinner and talk to him. I think he's a really interesting guy. And I would really urge beyond all the disabilities stuff that more people get interested in him.

Cassie Cloutier 17:19

We then invited Jenny to join us as we examined some items related to disability history in our collections. Anne Bentley, the Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita and Mary Yacovone, the Curator of Rare Books and Visual Materials described and answered questions about these items.

Anne Bentley 17:36

I have here a noctograph that belonged to William Hickling Prescott. He lived from 1796 to 1859. He was a chronicler of Spain and her colonies, and when his eyesight failed him, he had to turn to

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this noctograph in order to continue writing his histories. A noctograph is a contraption for someone who is blind essentially and cannot see when they run out of ink in a dip pen. They have this contraption that they can use to write using paper on carbon using a lined frame so that they can write evenly and to know when they've come to the end of a page. So, our noctograph is very elegant. It's a folder covered in red Morocco, it's 10 and a quarter inches high by eight and a half inches wide. And when you open the folder on the right-hand side, attached to the center of it is a hinged frame with brass wires, 13 of them equally spaced horizontally, and when you lift this and place a sheet of plain paper underneath it, it fits perfectly. And you lower the frame, you now have a surface that someone who cannot see can use to write evenly using an ivory stylus that is included with this lovely set. So, what William Hickling Prescott would do is write, write his histories and then his secretary would read them to him, and he would correct and edit them orally with his secretary making the corrections for him. And every book he wrote, he wrote on this particular noctograph. This one was apparently bespoke for Prescott because it's stamped W. H. Prescott, backslash London in gold on the front cover, and it was manufactured by Ralph Wedgwood Jr, of London. And the stylus is a lovely little ivory pointed stylus that it had to be sharp so that when you press down on the paper, you pick up the carbon from beneath and it still actually works. It's not a sheet of carbon, but it's a plate of some sort of material that acts like carbon and if you put in a fresh sheet of paper and use the stylus, you can still make marks, not great ones, but you can still make marks.

Anne Bentley 19:58

So, I have a second contraption here. This dates from about circa 1890, that belonged to historian Francis Parkman. Francis Parkman lived from 1823 to 1893. And this happens to be a wet cell battery, and it's contained in a wood case with a brass handle, hook lock at front and a hinge lid that contains a paper label that signed by the maker Thomas Hall of Bromfield Street, Boston around 1890. And the case, the wooden case is eight inches high by six- and three-quarter inches wide by seven inches deep. So, the unit has the original glass battery acid jar with the original three electrodes still attached to its cap. And it has a long spring-loaded plunger to activate the unit by pushing the center's zinc electrode into the fluid electrolyte. And this unit was capable of producing

direct or alternating current and two heavy duty spring metal electrical wires join the acid jar to a black panel that has two brass knobs and five output terminals that are labeled PN, PP, SN, SPN and SP and there should be an adjustable induction coil located beneath this panel, but we haven't opened it to look.

Anne Bentley 21:29

There are two eye sponges attached to wood and nickel handles attached to the output terminals PP with the rose wire, and SP with the green wire. And essentially what this is, is the very crude beginnings of electroshock therapy. In the 1870s, electricity was the in thing for medical use. People were dreaming up all kinds of uses for current direct and alternating. And unfortunately for a lot of people, these kinds of home batteries were considered quackery because really didn't produce enough electricity to do anything, fortunately, because so many people were buying these and using them indiscriminately. And it would have been pretty horrible to electrocute yourself while trying to fix your poor eyesight. It's an interesting aspect of medicine in the 1870s, which is when it began, and it actually went all the way to 1920. Companies were making these home batteries. The sponges on the eye pads are pretty hard at this point. But, from the looks of them, they got quite a bit of use. All of these medical things I look at I just count my blessings. I have to say I'm glad I live in an age where things can be fixed, for the most part.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:47

Do we have accounts of him using the device?

Anne Bentley 22:51

No, we don't have an account of him using this device. It came to us through all of his artifacts that came from the colonial society who owned the home he lived in. And there were a lot of artifacts and items which they felt belonged with his papers, which are here. So, these were given to us to go with the papers.

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Jenny Reiss 23:12

More of them sort of an interesting comment from my own sort of interest and research in women's health and women's medicine. This is the same time that you're seeing devices like the one that's just been presented. You're also seeing the advent of the vibrator as an early electrified device and then eventually becomes a home device in the same period to sort of alleviate the various constellation of symptoms that were understood to be particular to women and people that had uteruses. So, it's just it's very interesting to see the various different uses that electricity was put to in this period.

Cassie Cloutier 23:58

Mary Yacovone continued our tour of objects relating to disability history in the MHS collections.

Mary Yacovone 24:05

First thing I have for us today are a trove of letters from Laura Bridgman, who was the first deaf blind student to be educated at the Perkins Institute for the Blind. And we have four folders of letters from Laura to one of her teachers, Mary Swift Lamson. And this connects to the noctograph that Anne talked about later because you can see in her letters, the perfectly straight lines, the result from using the frame to write with, but also is very striking about her letters is the pressure that's required to write with one of these devices because on any given sheet of paper, you see her writing, but then you see a heavy embossment of the writing on the back of the page, which is just interesting. It shows you how much she had to work at producing legible writing. In fact, this letter to Mary Swift Lamson that I have here. She's writing from her summer house in New Hampshire, and she says, 'We have so many cloudy days. The sun is obscured by clouds very frequently, and I am tired of writing along. It makes my side feel achy and also my hand.' So, it was a great physical effort for Laura to write letters, but they're perfectly legible and show us how the noctograph resulted in legible writing for the blind.

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Jenny Reiss 25:36

I was wondering if you could possibly speak a little bit more to Laura Bridgman at Perkins because it's one of the earliest specialized institutions for the disabled.

Mary Yacovone 25:49

She was one of the earliest students as well. She was born in 1829 and she started attending Perkins right before her eighth birthday. Samuel Gridley Howe, who was the founder, heard about Laura's case and went up to visit her family in New Hampshire, who were just farmers. They were just regular people who had no time or energy leftover to educate Laura. So, he pretty easily convinced them to send Laura down to the Perkins School for the Blind. And she pretty much spent the rest of her life there. They found that when she graduated from Perkins at about age 20, they sent her back to New Hampshire, but her health rapidly deteriorated because she missed the company and companionship of her teachers. She went back and spent the rest of her life at Perkins with trips to New Hampshire in the summer to spend with her family.

Jenny Reiss 26:37

Yet, it's a really interesting story because you're seeing through her life, the sort of beginnings of the institutionalization of people with disabilities and the medicalization of people with disabilities in the period that I study, which is just before this. She would have just been educated to the extent that she could have been at home and interacted with sort of the people around her as best she could. By the 1830s we're sort of now seeing these institutions that are springing up to actually more formally and properly educate and care for people with disabilities. But, you know, there's it's a very good thing for a lot of people as it as it was for Bridgman. But it also meant that she spent her whole life there, right? And so, she didn't have more complete life by seeing other things or going to other places, right? And so, it was good for her. But in other cases, we see sort of later, institutions aren't always positive for the disabled, and there's some really good historical literature on that. And so, I just I find Bridgman store really interesting because you're seeing just the beginnings of in her for the period that she's talking about. And then you get Helen Keller after

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that, who's sort of more famous, and I believe travels a little bit more and you so you're seeing the legacy of Bridgman in Keller.

Mary Yacovone 28:06

The next items we have are from another student at Perkins School for the Blind. She graduates in 1912. And we have her braille slate so that you can write braille. It's a clipboard type device with a stainless-steel guide so that you can emboss the braille, which is very cool, as well as her braille wristwatch. These artifacts were owned by a woman named Anastasia Walsh. She graduates Perkins in 1912 and becomes the first blind woman to take the civil service exam, and actually ends up working for the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind as a stenographer. These artifacts represent sort of the educating the blind, and then sending them out in the world to work and giving them the adaptive devices that they need to sort of function to be able to tell what time it is. And the invention of the Dictaphone was a huge boon to blind students because a lot of them were trained in typing at Perkins, and then they could just take dictation from the Dictaphone. And they were employed in banks and like, like Anastasia, they were employed by the Mass. Commission for the Blind. So, they're really another evolution and getting people out into the world and working.

Jenny Reiss 29:15

Yeah, exactly. We hear horror stories about institutions a lot of the time, but there's also these very positive stories about institutions that are actually training people to engage in society as opposed to just sort of being stuck at home and it also shows how much labor and being part of the workforce is really part of integrating people with disabilities into society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:38

Give us the dimensions if you can about the objects and tell us how the watch works.

Mary Yacovone 29:44

The braille slate is a wooden clipboard device about 11 by 14. The top there is a piano hinge under which there are two sharp points which when you lift the clip and slip a piece of paper in and then

put the clip back down, it holds the paper in place. There are eight evenly spaced holes along each edge of the clipboard into which the braille guide fits. And the guide has four rows for braille characters. So, you would go along and make the punches in the guide for whatever letter you were trying to create. Then when you reached the end of the line, you would move down to the next hole for the next four lines of type. The interesting thing about this is that you enter your characters from right to left so that they can then be read from left to right. So, it's backwards and in heels like Ginger Rogers.

Mary Yacovone 30:40
The wristwatch on first examination looks like a standard lady's wristwatch. It's Swiss made. Face is about an inch in diameter. It has a stretchy stainless-steel band and a white face and black hands. But when you press the stem of the watch, the lid pops open, and the face actually has dots you could touch with your finger and tell what time it was. When I was researching the watch to prepare to come talk about this, I came across a scrapbook of clippings that were put together by Perkins. They recount the story of another blind typist employed at a bank and her boss is leading this other guy around the office and says to him, 'This is a blind typist' and he says, 'Well, she can't be blind. She has a wristwatch.' The boss says, 'Oh, no, she's blind.' And has the woman demonstrate her wristwatch. What time is it? She tells them exactly what time it was and the visitors mind is blown.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 31:40
Jenny, what did you think of those items?

Jenny Reiss 31:44
They're amazing. It's actually quite rare to find a lot of objects from disability history and so just to see them and that they've been preserved. It sort of tells a whole story as we discussed. One wristwatch tells us so much about what it meant to be blind and what it meant to integrate into a seeing society. The battery is to electrify your eyes, tells you so much about the ideas about medicine and ideas about how you can fix and change the body. And of course, Laura Bridgman is very interesting to me because she represents the sort of inflection point in the history of disability

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that I'm very interested in looking at earlier bits but to understand that things changed in disability history just around that time.

Cassie Cloutier 32:45

[Outro music beings] To look at the objects discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast. The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Jenny Reiss, a PhD candidate in history at the University of Pennsylvania, Mary Yacovone, Curator of Rare Books and Visual Materials at the MHS, Anne Bentley, 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 Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.

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