The Longfellow ~ Washington Bulletin

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Over a Century and Half of Conservation at Longfellow House

Around 1841, Samuel Longfellow bought a rolled-up oil painting of two children for 50¢ at a sale in Portland, Maine. He presented the picture to his older brother Henry, though it obviously needed a great deal of care and restoration. Henry W. Longfellow eventually spent $100 to repair the canvas and $40 more for framing. After he and his new wife Fanny moved into their house on Brattle Street, they hung the portrait prominently in their parlor for their family and guests to enjoy.

The Longfellow brothers believed that they had found a portrait by John Singleton Copley, colonial Boston's most celebrated artist. Modern analysis has concluded that the painting was by Mather Brown, a younger Boston-born artist who also moved to London during the Revolutionary War. It probably shows Harriet Sparhawk (1774-1848) and William Royall Sparhawk (1775-1798), children of baronet Sir William (Sparhawk) Pepperrell and his wife, the former Elizabeth Royall of Medford.

The effort and expense of repairing and framing that portrait was just the start of the ongoing effort to conserve the artifacts that belong to Longfellow House–Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site.

Longfellow–Washington is unusual among American house museums in having such a breadth of artifacts. The furnishings are not just antiques from the appropriate period; they are the chairs and tables and beds that the Longfellows actually used. The family kept a great many things—"They saved *socks*," says curator David Daly—and often added notes about when they bought an object or used a garment. The collection thus provides an unusually clear window into daily life in the House in the 1800s and early 1900s.

In addition, because of the Longfellow family's wealth and cosmopolitan interests, they collected a wide variety of artifacts: Japanese fans, early printed books, Dutch Masters paintings, signed first editions from friendly and hopeful authors, souvenirs printed with the poet's face, and much more. If the National Park Service simply had the job of preserving the tools and furniture that H. W. Longfellow used while writing his famous poems, that would be challenging enough. But the collections also include rare photographs of the Ainu people of Japan, Civil War uniforms, Native American moccasins, well-loved children's toys, and much more.

This issue of the *Longfellow–Washington Bulletin* is devoted to the topic of conservation at the House, with articles on the many different challenges experts face when preserving such a range of artifacts. As the Longfellow brothers discovered in the 1840s, these projects are often tough and expensive, but the results can be dazzling.

Restoring the Parlor Bell Pull: A Case Study

When the Longfellows wanted to summon a servant to their parlor, they tugged on a bell pull hanging on the wall. That cord rang a bell in the back of the House. After that signal system was dismantled in the mid-1900s, the original bell pull went into storage in the House's archives.

Last year an anonymous donor approached the Friends with a gift earmarked to replicate the parlor bell pull. Once the House staff determined that the project was feasible, the restoration required several steps: studying the remnant of the House's last bell pull, examining photographs of the parlor, and contacting craftspeople who are expert in recreating this sort of artifact using appropriate materials and techniques at a reasonable price.

Why all this effort? A bell pull was a necessary part of upper-class Victorian décor. It also helps guides tell visitors about the servants who kept the household running for the Longfellow family. A bell pull hangs in the parlor again, a reminder of little-known people who lived in the House.

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All articles written by J. L. Bell unless otherwise noted.

For more information, please visit:
www.friendsoflongfellowhouse.org for additional information linked to this issue, including color photographs and before-and-after images of other restored artifacts.
www.nps.gov/long for information on visiting the House and events there, as well as photographs, descriptions, and finding aids for its collections, garden, and archive.

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Since 1996 the Friends of the Longfellow House–Washington's Headquarters, a not-for-profit volunteer group, has worked with the National Park Service to promote educational visitor programs, scholarly access to collections, publications about the Longfellow–Washington site's history, and advocacy for preservation.

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The Longfellow–Washington site became part of the U.S. National Park Service system in 1972. Built in 1759, the House's many layers of history, its garden and grounds, and its extensive museum collections reflect the birth and cultural flowering of the nation. The House served as headquarters for General George Washington early in the Revolutionary War. From 1837 to 1950 it was the home of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, America's most popular poet, and his family.

Recreating the Fabric of a Historic Home

A house museum like the Longfellow House–Washington's Headquarters National Historic Site is designed to give visitors an accurate impression of its rooms at a particular time. That often requires reproduction textiles for draperies, carpets, and upholstery because the original fabrics are damaged, lost, or too fragile and rare for permanent display.

Over the past twelve years Nancy Barnard has recreated window draperies for three rooms on the ground floor of Longfellow–Washington: the dining room, music room (often called the library), and blue entry. Barnard has worked for many other historic properties and for private clients as well. Among her New England projects are work at the Jeremiah Lee Mansion in Marblehead, the Codman House in Lincoln, and Rough Point in Newport.

For house museums, Barnard's job sometimes requires "reproducing what was there" based on samples, photographs, and other evidence. Sometimes it means filling in holes based on deductions about period fashions. Cost is always a consideration, Barnard adds: "My job—put it all together as inexpensively as possible while being accurate."

The Longfellows saved samples of the music room's red mohair curtains, pieces of the hardware that supported those draperies, and even a painting of a woman in the room. Barnard studied all that material for evidence. For example, the number of rings for each curtain showed how many pleats were in the original draperies.

Barnard's next step was to develop what she calls "a sense of the fabric." The thickness, pattern, and depth of a textile are vital to how it looks and hangs. However, in many cases a fabric just like the original is no longer available. Mohair costs hundreds of dollars per yard now, for instance, so Barnard looked for a similar velvet at a lower cost.

In some ways reproduction fabrics are superior, especially for museums hosting many visitors each year. Silk starts to disintegrate as soon as it is hit by ultraviolet light, but today a variety of synthetic threads can match the look and behavior of silk while lasting much longer. Barnard gladly uses polyester or nylon for easier maintenance where it does not affect a piece's appearance.

After choosing the fabric and designing the draperies, Barnard produced the pieces. She sews all the hems of her draperies and bed hangings by hand, using machine-stitching only in areas that visitors cannot see. Likewise, she sews on hooks by hand and attaches linings in the appropriate period style. For the music room and blue entry curtains, Barnard commissioned a weaver to make custom tiebacks in wool based on the surviving artifacts and photographs.

The result: rooms that once again have the look that the Longfellows knew, giving visitors a more accurate sense of their Victorian taste. With good maintenance and protection from sunlight, the draperies Barnard supplied to the House should last for decades.

Restoring America's Favorite Poet's Favorite Inkwell

Displayed on the center table of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's study are three inkstands. All three belonged to the poet, but the biography by his brother Samuel described Henry as using only the one made "of French china."

Longfellow's inkstand of choice was made of green and white porcelain. It had three quill holders, a well for ink, and a central cylindrical ink reservoir with a bronze screw top. French words on that top say it was made under a patented design that won a silver medal in Paris in 1839. The screw top connects to a ceramic block inside the central cylinder. When the bronze top turns, the ceramic block lowers into the cylinder, thereby displacing enough ink from the reservoir into the exterior well to allow the user to dip a pen.

Ink from this piece may have been used to compose some of Longfellow's poems, or during his translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia* into English. Perhaps he used it while writing letters to his best friend Charles Sumner or to his son Charles during his travels across the globe. Old photographs of Longfellow's study, some dating as far back as the 1860s, show the inkstand on the center table, further documenting its association with the poet.

At some point in the late 1960s or early 1970s, this inkstand was damaged. When the National Park Service assumed stewardship of the Longfellow House, several pieces had become detached and the entire base had been poorly repaired and covered with some sort of clay. In an attempt to match the paint on the inkstand's remaining original portion, that clay had been crudely painted green, white, and gold.

Due to the inkstand's close association with Longfellow, and its poor condition and appearance, it was a high priority for conservation work. In 2005, the state of Massachusetts granted money to conserve the piece, and a professional conservator was contracted to treat it.

Treatment was a complex process consisting of several different stages. First the crude clay repairs were removed by soaking the inkstand in distilled water for two days. The object's surface was then cleaned with ethanol. Broken elements were reattached, and all missing pieces recreated using acrylic pastes and silicone molds. Finally, the recreated parts of the inkstand were carefully painted and coated to match the original.

As a result of that careful work, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's inkstand can now be displayed to visitors as it appeared during the poet's life. —*David Daly*

Learning from the Past, Improving Conservation for the Future

Often the road to the conservator's shop is paved with good intentions. Well-meant efforts to preserve or display an artifact can end up making it look worse or even harming it. Conservators must sometimes undo previous preservation efforts in order to prevent more damage.

Sometimes earlier attempts at restoration have had poor results. For objects decorated with gold, such as gilt picture frames, it was common for people to fill in holes with bronze paint. At first that looked good, but over time the bronze oxidizes and turns brown. Fortunately, bronze paint is easy to remove.

In the 1970s, people thought the best way to preserve leather-bound books was to rub their bindings with linseed oil and lanolin. Unfortunately, when the Longfellow family's thousands of books were packed away in boxes while the House was refurbished from 1998 to 2001, those substances leached out of the bindings. As a result, a few pages of some volumes became stained. The House's curators continue to look after those books with care, but they no longer use lanolin and linseed oil.

A happier example of fixing previous methods involves a 1776 letter signed by George Washington. One of three Washington letters in the archive, this one mentions the poet's grandfather Peleg Wadsworth. It was mounted on cardboard, presumably to make it easier to display. Not only do modern practices recommend against such mounting, but that cardboard was manufactured with a lot of wood pulp, which produces acid that gradually eats away at paper.

Thanks to a grant to the Friends from the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati, a hereditary organization founded by officers in Washington's army in 1783, that letter went to the North East Document Conservation Center for care. Specialized conservators were able to remove Washington's letter from the cardboard and stabilize its condition. They also placed the document in a polyester film envelope to reinforce it and to protect it from dirt, handling, and atmospheric pollution. It is now in an acid-free folder in the Longfellow–Washington archives, protected by climate control and security, and available to researchers.

Might our current best practices in preservation turn out not to be the best treatment for all artifacts? There is no guarantee that we have all the answers, but we do have the experience of past generations in what *not* to do. That is one reason why conservation is a never-ending task.

Meet a Friend: Furniture Conservator & Historian Robert Mussey

Robert Mussey is one of New England's experts in historical furniture conservation. As he describes in this interview with the *Bulletin*, the firm he co-founded worked on several pieces from Longfellow House–Washington's Headquarters over the years. On September 26 Mussey delivered the first James M. Shea Lecture on the Longfellow–Washington collections.

How did you get into furniture conservation?

I started out originally as a cabinetmaker. Almost all the shops then did some sort of repair of antique furniture, and I got interested in that work. After a while I realized I was never going to be a great furniture designer. That was my original idea, but I didn't have the visual design sense that requires. But I was getting more and more interested in restoration projects and the research they involved. I loved combining knowledge of history, chemistry, technology, and antiques. So I interned at the Henry Ford Museum, which had a very strong conservation department, for two years.

After I moved to New England, I set up a conservation shop at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities—now Historic New England—for ten years. S.P.N.E.A. didn't have the budget for me to work full-time on its own collections, so we took on jobs for other institutions as well. That meant I had access to furniture from many, many museums and historical societies around New England. I got to spread the word about new standards of furniture care, and to bring those standards to smaller museums who never had a professional inside their buildings.

In 1989 I started a private firm with John Driggers as my partner. We've now sold that business, and I'm mostly retired, though I still work nearly full-time doing historical research, writing, lecturing, and consulting. We worked for clients all over the eastern U.S., including the White House and the State Department, which both have wonderful collections of furniture. John was in charge of conserving all 100 desks in the U.S. Senate over several years.

What are the different approaches to conserving furniture? How has the field changed?

Every one of our clients had a different set of criteria and a somewhat different philosophy. Generally we were more conservative than our clients, trying to convince them to take a more careful approach to preserving their pieces. Our strength was research. We did a lot of chemical analysis and microscopy—for example, looking at layers of paint to determine which was the appropriate one to restore. Of course, all that analysis takes money. Another aspect of the business was figuring out what we could do for a reasonable budget.

Back in the 1970s, there was really no field of furniture conservation. There were restorers, but approaches based on actual historic research and science were not established. Over time the field developed standards of care. I've seen a lot of change, not just in museums and other institutions but also among collectors.

For example, many clients used to send their antique chairs and sofas to be reupholstered by modern commercial upholsterers. But upholstery styles, techniques, and appearances have changed a lot over time. The techniques of 1810 were different from 1840 and 1880. Almost no upholsterer working today outside the museum field knows how to recreate the right look for a chair made many decades ago.

We take a more careful approach to upholstering in order to save the frames as well. Every tack in a frame is like a tiny wedge into the wood. If you look at some old chairs, they almost look like they've been eaten by insects, but those holes are the result of traditional upholstering. We've adopted other techniques for attaching the upholstery that don't put all those holes in the wood.

We also use historic photographs to figure out the right loft and shaping of the padding, the right colors and patterns of the fabric. We try to use underupholstery fabrics that will last and not cause damage, such as linen, which is chemically very stable, instead of jute. Where a fabric doesn't show, we can use polyester, which is also chemically stable.

What sort of work did your firm do at Longfellow House–Washington's Headquarters?

John Driggers handled most of the shop's projects for the Longfellow House; I just got to see the pieces come in. One of them was the eighteenth-century French clock. We didn't work on the clock movement; that was done by a clockwork expert, and I don't recall if the order called for that to actually keep time. But John worked on the clock case and the metal mounts.

The case has what is called Boulle work veneers (pronounced "bool"). That's a technique using brass and tortoiseshell and sometimes gold in fancy marquetry inlays. Over time, the wood of the underlying case shrinks, which distorts the metal and can cause it to bulge out a little. Then those pieces can get knocked off and lost. To restore Boulle work requires removing the inlays and then slightly cutting or reshaping them so they'll fit into the slightly smaller spaces. By law you can't cut tortoiseshell now, so we sometimes use polyester pieces that are made to match the original.

The brass "ormolu" mounts had been damaged by aggressive use of commercial polishes, leaving a leprous and dull appearance. The original fire-gilding used to coat the brass was done by heating an amalgam of gold with mercury, which produces mercury fumes, highly poisonous. That technique has been illegal in the U.S. since the late 1800s. (In France, they're still fire-gilding with mercury.) Here we try to recreate the original ormolu look with dyed coatings, which are close to accurate, especially in the context of a house museum.

While you visited Longfellow–Washington early this summer, David Daly showed you a chair that had been labeled as having been in the House during Washington's tenure. You took one look at it and identified it as from the first decade of the 1800s. What details did you see?

That was an English Regency form adapted by Boston furniture-makers. The design for that chair back was first published in London in 1803 in Thomas Sheraton's *Cabinet Dictionary*—it isn't known before then. In 1808, Thomas Seymour of Boston advertised furniture he made to that design as "altogether new." So that chair could not have been around for Washington's visits to Cambridge in 1775-76 and 1789. It could have belonged to the Craigies, though.

There's a similar set of chairs that's been linked to John Hancock, but he died in 1794. In that case, it's clear that set was owned by his widow Dorothy, who had gone on to marry Captain James Scott. (A governor's widow marrying a ship's captain—that caused a lot of talk in Boston.) When Dorothy (Hancock) Scott died, there was a private auction of her property, and it looks like different relatives bought the chairs in the set and split them up. Some have come to the Museum of Fine Arts, and some are at the Davenport-Wakefield Estate here in Milton, and a couple might still be in private hands.

In what ways is the Longfellow family furniture notable for an upper-class Victorian New England family?

The Longfellow family furniture is interesting in that it includes quite a wide range of styles from over a century. There are pieces from the Craigies and the Appletons, and pieces that Fanny and Henry received as wedding gifts from Nathan Appleton when they married and moved into the House. Those are in what we now call Classical style—it used to be called "Empire," but that's gotten a bad name. Then there are Rococo Revival and high Victorian pieces that the Longfellow family purchased later. "Victorian" itself encompasses a range of eclectic styles. The collection also includes a lot of Asian furniture.

For me, that speaks to the family's sense of wanting to maintain their connections with the past and with different parts of the globe. They didn't feel a need for a totally coherent interior all in one style. They coordinated fabrics in a room, but in some rooms they were happy to combine styles.

What's the "Appleton connection" to the Longfellow House furniture that you spoke about?

I consulted the archives at the House to look at the receipts for furnishings that the family bought when Henry and Fanny married in 1843. They received numerous pieces of new furniture made by George Archbald of Boston in an 1820s Classical style—nearly twenty years after its first popularity. We don't know for sure why, but that might have reflected Fanny's fondness for the style of furniture she grew up with, or a wish to blend her new furniture with pieces that would be coming to the House from Beacon Hill.

There's been quite a bit written about the Appleton family's furniture, including pieces they bought from the Boston furniture maker Isaac Vose. Diana Korzenik of the Friends has done a huge amount of study on the Appleton household, and she graciously sat down with me to share her research. In addition to my talk for the Jim Shea Lecture series, I gave a paper about the Appleton-Longfellow furniture at a conference at Winterthur this spring, and that will become a chapter in a book on "Four Centuries of Massachusetts Furniture," to be published by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts.

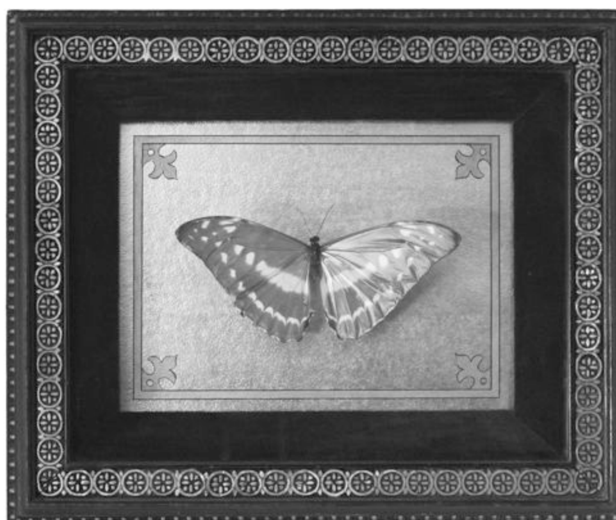
There's clearly a lot more yet to be discovered about the Longfellow family furniture. I found four pieces that almost certainly belonged to the Appletons first, but Archbald's pieces haven't been completely identified. And then there are later pieces in the collection. They need more research—did some come from New York? It will be exciting to see what more can be discovered.

Robert Mussey and retired Site Manager James L. Shea chat after Mussey's September 2013 lecture in Shea's honor.

The Wide-Ranging Challenges of Object Conservation

Some conservators specialize in paintings, textiles, furniture, books, or documents. But the most wide-ranging area in the field belongs to "object conservators," who work on nearly everything else. These skilled technicians must develop expertise in a wide range of materials and techniques since they never know what might be coming their way.

Many artifacts from the wide-ranging Longfellow–Washington collection have passed through the hands of Margaret Breuker, Conservator in the Collections Conservation Branch of the National Park Service. "My father is a surgeon, and my mother is an artist," Breuker says, and skills from both professions are useful in her job. Breuker was studying classical archeology when she first met a conservator and realized how much that "hands-on science" spoke to her. She went back to school, adding to her knowledge of both organic chemistry and studio art. After internships and fellowships at various museums, she joined the N.P.S. and has been with the agency for twelve years, working out of the Historic Architecture Conservation and Engineering Center in Lowell.



Breuker explains that the first major theme of conservation is "Do no harm." An artifact might be dirty, dilapidated, and deteriorating, but the last thing a conservator wants to do is cause more damage. Thus, "A good part of our job is to *think* about how best to handle and treat an object before we do it." For example, the Longfellow–Washington collection includes a butterfly that Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz had mounted in a box and given to his friend Longfellow. Some of the ornamentation on the outside of that box had broken off. But fixing that exterior might jar the insect inside. Butterfly wings are, after all, known for being delicate.

Breuker therefore decided to open the box and remove the butterfly to a safe container. Her workshop is in an old Boott Cotton Mills factory building, offering a lot of space but noisy exposed HVAC systems. She waited to the end of the workday and asked for the building's air conditioning to be turned off while she moved the butterfly to a temporary new home.

The goal of decorative-arts conservation is to improve and stabilize an object's appearance so that viewers can appreciate it as a whole once again. However, the modern profession has another strict rule: "Ensure that what you do can be undone." Conservators use reversible adhesives, removable paints, and materials that on close inspection are obviously distinct from the original. For Agassiz's butterfly box, Breuker cast epoxy moldings in the shape of the original wood decoration and painted them to match the original. The result is an object that looks like the gift Longfellow received, but a future conservator will have no difficulty distinguishing the new epoxy from the old wood.

Breuker has used similar techniques on other objects from the Longfellow House. For example, on the table in his study the poet kept a small woven basket to hold scraps of paper. The basket was woven of grass and straw, and some strands had broken off over the years. To fill in those areas, Breuker used Japanese paper twisted and painted to look like the grass, which she wove in and affixed with a removable adhesive. Where the basket needed more structure, Breuker used stronger Tyvek toned to match the basket color. The result is a stabilized artifact that looks much the way it originally did on Longfellow's table.

Another tough object from the Longfellow–Washington collection was a wind-up doll of the Civil War general Benjamin Butler. Toys are often hard to conserve because they can be made of multiple materials and are sometimes quite worn. By the time Gen. Butler made his way to Lowell, his head had been pulled off and lost a lot of paint. His cloth uniform was soiled. The Longfellow family had kept the toy's original cardboard box, but it was also ripped and dirty.

Breuker consulted with her colleagues, Senior Conservator Carol Warner and Chief Conservator Brigid Sullivan, on how best to approach that assignment. Reattaching the general's head was a particular challenge since the original metal connection was bent and it is very hard to fix bent metal without causing more damage. But such challenges are "what's fun about being an objects conservator," Breuker says. "Eventually we figured it out." Among the team's decisions was to "inpaint" the head to restore Butler's face, but in a way that made its surface look a bit worn, like a toy that has been played with.

Most often objects just need a thorough cleaning. Soot is a common problem in historic houses that were once lit with candles and gas lamps. It tends to settle on light fixtures near the ceiling, which often received less cleaning than other furnishings that were easier to inspect and reach. Breuker has enjoyed some projects cleaning the light fixtures at Longfellow–Washington because that work has "let people see how beautiful they were again."

Attention to such details helps to restore the "whole feeling of a room," Breuker says. "It's always great to work on star pieces, but to see the House come together is really gratifying."

Keeping Silver Shiny

Most historic silverware has been polished many times over the years, gradually removing some of the precious and shiny metal.

On silver objects N.P.S. Conservator Margaret Breuker uses a mild polish made of fine calcium carbonate powder—"precipitated chalk," available in drugstores—mixed with water or denatured alcohol. Less abrasive than some commercial polishes, such a paste removes only minimal silver from an object's surface.

For a silver object meant only to be displayed, Breuker might also coat its surface with a clear lacquer.

Paying for Preservation

All the expert work of conserving, restoring, or replicating objects at Longfellow–Washington costs money, naturally. The National Park Service has a conservation facility where the staff does excellent work, as described on the opposite page. But those experts have to look after objects from many national parks within the limits of their department's budget.

For several years after 1998, the federal government's Save America's Treasures program was very helpful in preserving the House and many of the objects inside it. However, that grants program was zeroed out in federal budgets after 2010. In a period of "sequestration" budgets, we don't expect to see a similar program anytime soon.

Furthermore, often the best course is to send an artifact out to a specialized conservation firm. That's where the Friends can help. By seeking grants and donations, we can make that work possible, sometimes faster and more flexibly than the federal contracting system would allow.

Sometimes organizations make gifts or grants to conserve particular items. A few years ago, curators had determined that a shelf in the music room was not strong enough to hold up a small but solid statue of J. W. von Goethe. As a result, Longfellow's tribute to the German poet had to go into storage. Members of the Goethe Society of America visited the House, learned about the situation, and made a generous gift that provided for the shelf to be repaired. Now Goethe once again looks out over the music room.

Friends members have also made generous gifts for conservation, either for specific objects or for the staff's top priorities. Without Friends support, the House curators can often merely try to preserve objects from further damage. Without Friends support, some of the most interesting artifacts in the House must be kept out of public view. We hope you will consider the benefits of museum conservation when you join the Friends or renew your membership. Thank you.

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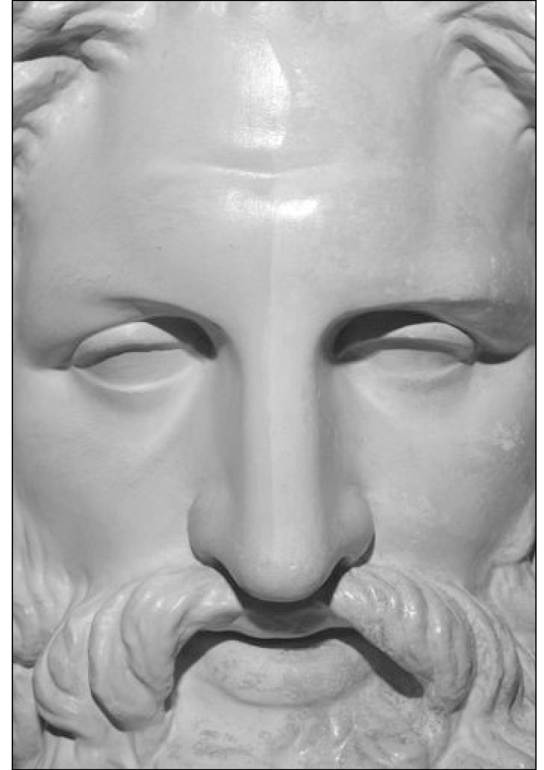
Spotlight on Objects: Throughout This Issue

Left: This historic photograph of the Longfellow family's front parlor shows an artifact to the right of the fireplace that had not been displayed for years. To read more about how it was restored this year, see page 1.

Right: The monumental head of Zeus is one of many plaster and marble sculptures on display in the House. That statuary needs periodic cleaning, and a few years ago the National Park Service brought in a team of professionals and students to do that job. Halfway through the cleaning process, Zeus sported a vertical line down his nose showing how much grime had been removed.



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Cambridge, MA 02138