

# Cherished Possessions

## Artifacts from Carroll's Early Families

1780 - 1900

"Ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them."

-Walter Benjamin, *essayist and book collector*



Walter Benjamin's quote was certainly true of Carroll's early families. The objects they owned and used can tell us much about their lives. Decisions they made regarding their material possessions—including the objects they acquired and where they displayed them in their homes—provide insight into their beliefs, values, ideas and opinions.

Carroll County consisted of both rural and urban communities with distinctly different cultures; yet in some ways their material lifestyles were remarkably similar. Families provided for their comfort with fashionable and everyday furniture. They acquired decorative objects and utilitarian wares, and they displayed images of their family members. Most families also retained a small collection of sentimental objects that were their most cherished possessions. These they protected and handed down through the generations in remembrance of some special event—a sword from an ancestor's military service in the Civil War; a door lock that was touched by George Washington.

The Historical Society has culled a few of these "cherished possessions" from its collection of 40,000 objects. Many have not

been exhibited in more than 25 years. They tell the story of how some of Carroll County's early families lived and prospered. (*Sampler, worked by Susannah Root, 1816.*)

## Objects of Comfort: High Style & Vernacular Furniture

Before 1830, most American furniture was commissioned or “bespoken.” Patrons who wanted a breakfast table, sideboard or set of chairs hired a cabinetmaker who handcrafted their furniture to order.

In urban centers, bespoke furniture reflected the latest European styles. Artisans used design books to craft furniture from expensive primary woods like mahogany and walnut. They often embellished their designs with carvings, inlay, veneer and painted decorations. The result was an expensive, high-style furniture form that appealed to a segment of the population who could afford the very best.

Rural cabinetmakers produced a “vernacular” or everyday version of high-style furniture. Using readily available woods from local forests, country cabinetmakers (many of whom were also farmers and coffin-makers) combined stylistic elements from urban centers with local cultural influences to produce a distinctive regional furniture style. Working primarily for friends and neighbors, the country cabinetmaker produced well-made, affordable furniture that appealed to simpler tastes.

Carroll’s early families could choose from both high-style and vernacular furniture for their personal comfort. During the 1830s, the Winchester family of Westminster purchased a high-style Baltimore sideboard with “plumed” mahogany veneer, turned Doric columns and carved lion’s paw feet. The sideboard was used for displaying the family’s imported porcelain and matching sterling flatware. At the same time, Uniontown cabinetmaker Jacob Glazier (1795-1850) was producing a distinctive style of vernacular furniture that was less expensive, but no less distinctive. Glazier’s chests-of-drawers combined high-style elements, such as lightwood inlay and mahogany veneer, with construction techniques commonly found in the German communities of nearby southwestern Pennsylvania.

The Historical Society’s furniture collection includes examples of high-style bespoke furniture, such as the pair



of circa 1815 Baltimore “fancy” chairs, from the Long and Crapster families of Taneytown, as well as vernacular furniture, including the circa 1870 walnut rocker made for the Weaver family by Uniontown chairmaker and blacksmith, Joseph Longenecker (1834-1909). Other vernacular pieces in the collection include George Shriner’s circa 1780 Chippendale desk and the circa 1825 walnut drop-leaf table from the Nusbaum and Hull families of Taneytown. Both pieces descended in the families of the original owners until they were donated to the Historical Society in the 1990s.

Industrialization and mass production put an end to bespoke furniture. By the mid-19th century, personal comfort was found in manufactured furniture, such as

Joshua and Margaret Yingling’s circa 1875 rococo revival sofa. Factory-produced furniture became the norm in Carroll County households, and entire suites were sold ready for placement in Victorian parlors. (*The parlor of the home of Dr. J. Howell Billingslea, 189 East Main Street, Westminster*)

## Decorative Objectives: Porcelain, Silver & Glassware

Residents of the area that would become Carroll County had access to an array of consumer goods and decorative objects beginning in the late 18th century. This was primarily due to a series of improved wagon roads that connected the region to the shipping ports of Philadelphia and Baltimore. By the first decade of the 19th century, imported porcelain, silver and glassware could be found in Taneytown, Westminster and the surrounding countryside.

Jonas Crumbacker proudly advertised in 1818 that his dry goods store in Uniontown had just received, “For Sale Cups, Saucers, Dining Plates, Twislers, Muffins – also a large assortment of glassware, consisting of Double Flint and Common Tumblers, Cruits, Pint and Quart Decanters.” (Engine of Liberty and Uniontown Advertiser.)

But increased consumption of consumer goods also reflected changing attitudes in American culture. By the turn of the 18th century, a “consumer revolution” was underway that resulted in the accumulation of domestic objects for utilitarian purposes.

Before the American Revolution, household furnishings, family portraits and decorative objects were seen as rare symbols of power reserved for the elite and privileged. The very best decorative objects had always come from England or France, and those who could afford it imported their goods. But by the early 19th century, attitudes and buying habits began to change. Domestic objects were becoming more common in America. Following the War of 1812, a new sense of patriotism gripped the nation and Americans began to “buy local.” Soon consumer goods became symbols of an individual’s growing economic and social position.

A general attitude regarding “basic comfort and decency” began to manifest itself in the American consciousness. Previously acceptable living conditions were no longer adequate. Primitive and rudimentary table settings, which had been commonplace before the Revolution, were considered “uncivilized” in American households by the first decades of the 19th century. Communal meals from wooden or earthenware bowls yielded to individuals dining on matching porcelain dinner services, which were displayed on sideboards in specialized “dining rooms.”

This consumer revolution paralleled the rise of the American middle class. As incomes and prosperity increased in the 19th century, Victorian families who hailed from more humble origins scrambled to acquire the trappings of success that narrowed the gap between vulgarity and respectability. Conspicuous consumption became the norm. Parlor suites of furniture, decorated porcelain, jardinières, and pattern pressed glass, sterling flatware services and other objects were purchased and displayed by those who wanted their neighbors to know they had made it.



One clear example of the consumer revolution can be seen in the Victorian library. Many rural families with little or no formal education acquired reading materials for libraries that no one would use in an attempt to display a sense of gentility and refinement, thus eliminating the distance caused by class differences.

*Close-Plated Salver, 1785-1790, Probably Sheffield, England. Property of General Mordecai Gist; gift from George Washington.*

## Personal Objects: Photographs of Carroll County

During the 19th century, technological innovations made it possible to view the world in a new way – not through the artist’s brush but through the camera’s lens.

The daguerreotype, developed by Jacques Louis Mande Daguerre in France in 1839, was the first successful method of photography. Previous to this, photographic images could not be fixed and gradually faded away. Daguerre’s method of using a light-sensitive silver salt applied to a plate of copper proved to be extremely stable. The treated plate was placed in the camera, exposed and then processed to create the final image. There is no negative involved in the process so making multiple copies of an image requires making multiple exposures on separate plates.

Because of the materials involved, daguerreotypes were very costly. And so the search continued for an economical photographic process. In the 1850s, Frederick Scott Archer introduced the ambrotype - an adaptation of Daguerre’s process, using a glass plate, rather than copper. Though ambrotypes were less expensive, the image was not as sharp as a daguerreotype. At almost the same time, Adolphe Alexander Martin developed the tintype, which used a similar process to produce an image directly on a thin sheet of iron. Though tintype images were often of poor quality, they were very inexpensive and became widely popular, especially during the Civil War when soldiers posed proudly in their new uniforms in images they sent home to their families.

These images do have limitations. Because of the long exposure time required by the earliest processes, most images are posed studio portraits. Subjects dressed in their best to have their photograph taken so the clothing of every day is rarely recorded. Early street scenes often appear deserted simply because those passing by did not remain long enough to leave an image.

With the introduction of glass plate negatives in 1851 it was finally possible to produce unlimited paper copies of an image. The low cost of these new images made it possible for almost everyone to have their picture taken. Parents regularly took their children to the local photographer to have their portrait taken. Multiple copies of photos were produced and given to family and friends and the family album became common in American homes. Companies began commercial production of stereographs which provided American families with images of famous people and places from around the world.

George Eastman’s introduction of roll film and the Kodak box camera in the 1880s made it possible for anyone to be a photographer. These first small cameras were purchased already loaded with film for 100 photographs. When all the film had been used, the camera was returned to Kodak’s labs, where the film was processed, prints made and the camera reloaded with film for return to the customer. As technology improved, photographs began to record events as they happen and candid shots of everyday life became common.



Thirty photographers lived and worked in Carroll County during the 19th century. From large cities such as Westminster to small communities like Uniontown, they captured the faces of Carroll County. Old and young, men and women, rich and poor – all are preserved in the photographs passed down through the generations of Carroll County’s families.

*The Bish family, c.1890: front row, left to right - Ephraim, Joseph, Jane, Reuben, Alfred; back row, left to right: Noah, Ezra, Silas*



*Studio Portrait, 1890s*

*Florence Barnes Duress, Florence Nusbaum, Florence Englar, Addie Manahan, Cora Lambert, Allie Frounfelter, Dr. Jesse Myers.*

---

The Historical Society of Carroll County wishes to express its appreciation to the following for their support:

**Principal Underwriter**

BB&T

**Sponsors**

Legg Mason, Inc.

Myer's 140 Photo

Northrop Grumman, Inc

**Friends of the Society**

Farmers and Merchants Bank

Hill Development Group LLC

Tevis Oil/Modern Comfort Systems

Westminster Union Bank

Cherished Possessions: Artifacts from Carroll's Early Families, 1780 - 1900 is currently on view in the Sherman-Fisher-Shellman House.

Gallery guide written by C. Robert Harrison and Catherine Baty