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Relics, Part 1: Corporeal Remains

Matthew Dennis 00:00

[Music fades in] You know, I think that this is the sort of thing that connection with a relic does, it has a kind of power to connect us because it's the past that actually exists in the present. It doesn't just represent the past. It doesn't illustrate the past, but is the past and so it has, it has a power to move us, and it also has the power to convince us of things.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:30

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 00:40

This is Cassie Cloutier.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:43

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 01:09

In this episode, we speak with historian Matthew Dennis about his book, which looks at relics in American memory. With Peter Drummey, the Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, and Anne Bentley, the Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita. We examine two pieces of a blood-soaked towel and a fishhook made from human bone. The inspiration for this episode comes from historian Matthew Dennis's book titled, American Relics and the Politics of Public Memory. Professor Dennis found inspiration for his work by looking at, among others, the collections of the

Massachusetts Historical Society. We asked him to discuss his background and the origin of this project.

Matthew Dennis 01:56

I'm retired now. I was for many years a professor of History and Environmental Studies at the University of Oregon and I taught various courses on the early American period, native history, and also the American public memory and history. And so, you know, I've had a long-standing interest in the colonial early national past, but also about the ways that Americans commemorate themselves, commemorate their country, the way they shape their identity, and their idea of what the nation means and should be through public culture. And so that's one of the things that drew me in particular to the subject of one of my earlier books, American Public Holidays, and now to objects, relic like things that play an important role in the construction of American history, especially as imbibed by the general public. I was very interested in memorializing public memory, and especially the history of Memorial Day and one of the things that struck me was the way that the past then was kind of collected and preserved, not just through documents, but through objects. Really the first thing that caught my interest was a weird story I had heard, and I can't even remember where I first encountered it. But it had to do with General Benedict Arnold, who before he was the world's most famous traitor, or the Americans most famous traitor was key general in the Revolutionary Army. And so, in 1775, he led an expedition up to Canada to try to attack Quebec and Montreal. But on the way up there he stopped at Newburyport, Massachusetts, and with his officers, he asked to examine the crypt where the Reverend George Whitfield was buried. Whitfield, of course, as your listeners will know, was among the most famous men in American history, American colonial history because he led this revival at the heart of the first Great Awakening, but he ended up dying early 1770s and was buried in Newburyport. So, on the way up, Arnold wanted to visit the body of George Whitfield and so he and his officers communed with it. They actually took little relics. They snipped off a bit of cassock that he was buried in and took that with him as a kind of memento. It struck me as exactly like the kind of relics that would have been collected and circulated in medieval Europe throughout Christendom. So, this seemed like completely at odds with my sense of America as this place that wasn't particularly, I don't know,

supportive of Catholicism, certainly and it saw itself as modern and not steeped in what it considered superstition. It just created a big question, why? And so, I'm interested often in my work to try to explain and analyze examine the things that I don't understand, rather than what I do understand. So, it created a kind of puzzle for me and from then on, I started to think, how is it that material objects might function in America in relic like ways that we wouldn't appreciate? And so, this book became really a kind of examination of what a relic was, in the American context, how it worked, what kind of political and social and cultural work it might do and how it was like and unlike other kinds of evidence that we as historians use. Usually, we rely on documentary evidence. But other kinds of evidence are really powerful for what they do publicly, and what they might tell us about the past as historians.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 05:29
To clarify for our listeners, can you talk about the specific qualities and characteristics that tend to make something more or less likely to become a relic?

Matthew Dennis 05:38
That's a great question. One is, if it's clear that it's associated with a person that is recognized to be really important, someone like [Abraham] Lincoln, or [George] Washington, and so anything about [Benjamin] Franklin, Franklin and Washington objects at the beginning of the of the nation's history were, you know, the gold standard, and MHS has stuff from both. So that's one thing. Another thing that will make something likely to be collected as a relic is if it has experienced some kind of radical, perhaps traumatic transformation and so the objects that would come to mind, some of these are in the collection, that have endured the violence of the civil war might be, again, something blood soaked, even if it's not Lincoln's blood, or it might be a stump that's collected from a battle site and just riddled with bullets and, and I think MHS has something like that and sometimes it's, it might just be again, an ordinary object, say I talk about in my book objects from 9/11, a wristwatch. You know, an ordinary watch, like hundreds or 1,000s of others. But this one stopped at a particular time, destroyed by the trauma of a plane crash, plane brought down by terrorist during the catastrophe of 9/11. The watch is a traumatized ordinary object that now is, in

some ways, worthless, but has been rendered priceless, because it captures a particular moment in a particular trauma, a catastrophe that occurred in the past and so interestingly enough there curators then will not try to obviously restore it to its pristine, original state, but instead, actually try to conserve the destructive impact of that event, so as to allow that object to speak to current and future Americans. Again, an object can be extraordinary because it's just weird and distinctive. It can be ordinary but made extraordinary by being associated with a particular luminary, or it can be an ordinary object transformed, perhaps by trauma and violence, so that it represents something significant that will allow people to connect directly with that violence or catastrophic event in the past.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:52

In thinking about the items we've covered on this podcast, we've actually covered a lot of relics. We've done an episode about hair, hair from famous people, there's lots of hair, George Washington's hair, John Adams' hair, all of that. We've got Napoleon's hair. We've got drawer of hair. The season finale for season two was about these roots of the Liberty Tree, supposedly, of the Liberty Tree. So, something that was important to the Revolutionary era, Robert Gould Shaw's sword, all of these relics and items. But the very first episode we did was about a letter that Paul Revere wrote about his ride, his third time, he wrote down his description of the famous Midnight Ride. Peter Drummey has a line in there when he's talking about the letter and I think my co-host at the time, asked him how it feels to hold it and he says, 'It's magic every time.' And there's power in the stroke of a pen in what somebody writes, and I suppose that connects to this phenomenon in the 19th century where people are collecting autographs.

Matthew Dennis 09:01

Yeah, because it's a trace. It's a trace of some luminary. I can remember actually doing my research sitting in the reading room at the Mass Historical Society and coming across a letter written by John Quincy Adams, beautiful penmanship and I don't know, it just kind of struck me I feel like I'm a little jaded, or at least, I don't know, kind of objective and removed, but it's something and John Quincy Adams is not my greatest hero, necessarily, but something about it's like, 'Wow, isn't that

interesting?' And even more so I remember when I first arrived, there was an exhibition put on by the Society, which included the pen that Abraham Lincoln used to sign the Emancipation Proclamation and so here it is, this is like, okay, an ordinary generic pen from the 19th century and it could be in a history museum, it could be showing kind of, oh, this is the kind of writing implements people used in the past and then it's just like every other one and it illustrates some aspect of social history, but this is not like that. This is the actual pen. This is the pen that he actually signed this with and again, despite myself, I think I felt the kind of tingle and it's like, wow, this is kind of amazing. And so, I think that this is the sort of thing that connection with a relic does, it has a kind of power to connect us because it's the past that actually exists in the present. It doesn't just represent the past, it doesn't just illustrate the past, but it is the past and so it has, it has a power to move us, and it also has the power to convince us of things. One of the chapters in the book is about the bloody shirt, and supposedly Republican orders after the Civil War would actually raise a bloodied garment and say, 'Look, how could you vote in any way but for the Republican ticket because your sons, fathers and brothers and you know, died for this, here's the blood to not vote this way would be a betrayal.' So, it has the power to move us and to perhaps push us to vote or to act in ways that are not completely rational, but visceral and passionate. So, relics can be the argument and the evidence all in one in ways that other kinds of say documentary evidence isn't. Although documents themselves can be like relics. And so, as you said, in the beginning of your question, we see an autograph and some of us might think, 'Wow, that does somehow connect us directly to Adams or Washington, or someone else that is worthy of remembrance, and maybe emulation.' But one of the weird things about relics is generally is that they have the power of survival longer than one would ever imagine and a lot of blood drenched textiles from Lincoln, who tragically died after being assassinated in 1865 and the MHS actually has that as well. It's not the sort of thing you put on display because it would not be sensitive and proper and, and discreet and, and it would be just too disturbing. But it's an important relic in the collection that is maybe hard to keep but impossible to get rid of.

Cassie Cloutier 12:09

We then spoke with Peter Drummey, and Anne Bentley and had them described to small pieces cut from a blood-soaked towel that had been witnessed to one of the most traumatic events in American history.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:21

I think that was the start of Matt's book was he was fascinated by these relics that are in American history, and with the link to Catholic tradition, something that one would not expect to find in colonial society, and he starts the book with this story. Something else that is a relic that we have, which again, also linked to Catholic tradition, blood. So, tell us where these are from and who the American martyr is.

Peter Drummey 12:52

In a country that has, at least in its understanding of itself, had a separation between it doesn't have a recognized state religion, and make that separation and try to avoid that. Nevertheless, it certainly is the case that there are essentially public objects that take on this sort of sacred role and we have an unusually well, they are literally identical. They're from the same piece of cloth but came to us from different routes. These are two pieces of cloth, one measuring about two and a half inches by two and a half inches square, and one large part of maybe a smaller square of cloth with a corner removed. And these were a towel used to try to stop the bleeding of Abraham Lincoln on the night of his assassination. He didn't immediately die. He was carried to a home nearby and lingered for several hours before he died and in the course of that time, between when he was shot and when he died, he bled onto this piece of toweling supplied by according to the letters that have come along with these objects by Department of War clerk Augustus Clark.

Anne Bentley 14:15

This is a scrap from one of the towels used on Abraham Lincoln after he was shot at Ford's Theater April 14th, 1865, and it was cut from a larger bloodstained towel by Augustus Clark, and this was sent to our governor at the time, John Albion Andrew on May 5th, 1865. And the letter

that came with it says, “Governor John A. Andrew sir, enclosed please find a piece of cloth that is stained with the blood of our lamented President Abraham Lincoln. I was one of several who helped to convey him over from the theater to the house where he died and remained there all night. I also have a lock of his hair and have already had several offers from different parties who are desirous of obtaining it for a relic. Being a Bostonian, I thought I would mention the fact to you thinking perhaps the state may wish to secure it. I’m very respectfully your obedient service, Augustus Clark.” So, I have no idea what happened to the lock of hair. But we do have this scrap of towel that came with that note, and it is eight centimeters square, and it is very, very dirty huck toweling. Huck is a form a weave that has rows of double threads very prominently spaced in alternating rows, and you take embroidery floss, and you weave through these two raised threads in different patterns that form geometric patterns. And so, it’s huck embroidery. It was originally white huck toweling. It is now dingy gray, and in one corner of it, there is very pale orange brown remains of the blood stain that was on this piece that he sent to Governor Andrew and so we got it in 1921 when Governor Andrew’s children Edith and Henry Hersey Andrew gave us a collection of artifacts from their father’s estate, and then excitedly in 1977, an anonymous donor gave us another piece of huck toweling and our old friend, Augustus Clark is sending this one to his uncle with a little bit more information than we got from the letter to the governor. And on April 16th, 1865, again, from the Ordnance office in the War Department. Gussie begins his letter, "Dear uncle, you have, of course heard all the particulars of the dreadful death of the president on the 14th instant. But as I was an eyewitness of the latter part, I will endeavor to explain matters. At 10 and a quarter o’clock, I was looking out of a window of a house opposite the theater and seeing a large, excited crowd rush from it. I, thinking someone might have been robbed, ran downstairs and across the street into the theater, and then heard the awful words, Lincoln is shot. I sprang off towards the stage over the seats, everyone being in the wildest commotion, and on reaching it saw lady reaching over the right-hand box second tier. It was the daughter of Senator [Ira] Harris of New York. I clambered up, seized her hand, and drew myself into the box and there on the floor lay Abraham Lincoln dying. His wife near him shrieking and moaning. Major [Henry Rathbone] Rathburn [sic] and a few others nearby several of us lifted him and carried him out to the street and finding his carriage gone, I said, ‘Take him across the street.’ He was carried into the house I had just left and

deposited on a bed. His clothes stripped off. He was shot in the head on a line with the left ear about two inches toward the back of the head. The ball was round and entered about three inches in a line towards his right eye. He was breathing very heavily, and his pulse fluctuated from 105 to 42 in about three hours. The blood soon begun to settle under his left eye and blackened the whole side of his face. Mrs. Lincoln soon came over and was hardly sane all night and is now quite low. Laura Keene came over with her but did not stop. His son came in about eleven and was much agitated. Soon all the members of the Cabinet rushed in with grief and terror depicted on their faces. Many senator and members arrived during the night. The street was cleared of all strangers and a great military force stationed around the square. [Edwin McMasters] Stanton was there issuing orders to all parts of the Union and seemed to do most of the business. News came about 11 that [William Henry] Seward was fearfully stabbed, and it seemed to strike terror into the hearts of all. Major Rathburn [sic] was wounded badly in the arm and fainted twice before his wound was dressed and he got home. Mrs. Lincoln came into the room seven times during the night and felt dreadfully. She fainted twice and fell over onto the floor. I remained in the room all night long and did all I could to help the best surgeons that were there, but no attempt was made to extricate the ball as he was pronounced fatally wounded at first examination. He lingered on till 7:20 am when he breathed his last in presence of the members of the Cabinet, several senators, and others. Mrs. Lincoln was not in the room at the time of his death. The body at nine o'clock was taken to the White House and has been embalmed. I got a lock of his hair and a towel saturated with the blood of the best man that ever was president and a friend of the South. They now have a president that shall show them no mercy and they deserved none. I will enclose a piece of the towel for you as a relic. The folks are all well and hope this will find you, and your family, the same. Give my love to all and excuse this writing as it is quite late, and I am very nervous. I am as ever yours truly, Gussie." That is an eyewitness account of Lincoln's death. So, this is a much smaller piece than the one sent to the governor and there's a tiny square this has been cut out of the corner of the bottom of the square and again, it is the same toweling, and it is discolored in the same manner and there is very very faint brown remains of bloodstains on it. You know, we get these two pieces of cloth cut from the same towel in two different collections two different times. Sometimes it's very interesting working on our collections with we get these confluences or these strange coincidences.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:09

I want to talk real quick about this one other object that does appear in your book. I don't think you actually saw it. We do have it, and this is the only object in the collection aside from hair is made from a human body part and that's human bone shaped into a fishhook. Supposedly, the bone of Captain [James] Cook the English explorer. So, you talk about this item in your book, what are your thoughts about it?

Matthew Dennis 21:52

It was very interesting when I came upon it. I came upon other corporeal relics as well mentioned, as far as I can tell, these were lost at least by the 1830s, a thigh bone found in the James River in Virginia, a scalp that was collected from the northwest coast during the some of the explorations that first broaching of the mouth of the Columbia River. And that's a very complicated, interesting story. The fishhook is just a really weird object, and I didn't quite know what to make of it. In the explanation in my notes says, "This was the hook which accompanies this note written to the corresponding secretary of the society. The hook which accompanies this note I received from Deacon Jacob Williams, formerly an officer in my church who requested me to present it in his name to the Historical Society. It was given to him by his son, Jacob Williams, who received it from a man who attended Captain Darby who died at Washu [sic]," I think they made a Oahu, "one of the Sandwich Islands," that is the Hawaiian Islands, "in 1802 and who Darby received it from an Indian chief," an Native Hawaiian man, presumably, "who said, that the prong of the hook was made of one of the bones of the celebrated navigator, Captain Cook." Cook had died in 1779, after quote, unquote, discovering Australia and the Sandwich Islands, the Hawaiian Islands. So, providence isn't great. The connections are weird and tenuous. But this is an age of discovery, Second Age of Discovery in which European powers and the new United States were trying to really kind of pioneer new trade routes and perhaps I don't know that they thought of colonies yet. But in the Pacific, the far Pacific, which had trade with China and Japan and other places, that's Spice Islands was a very important component of the new American commercial policy and that kind of trade that made Salem, Massachusetts in the early 19th century, the richest community per

capita in the new country. You could see how it could be seen as an important object that would connect Americans to that past, but also to an ongoing imperial project. That and the scalp was actually of a white American who supposedly had died at the hand of native people in Queen Charlotte's Island, which is present day British Columbia. This captain had died in this conflict and then later, the man who collected it had somehow found the persons who supposedly responsible for this murder, confiscated the scalps from that native person, and then sent them along to the MHS. They were cataloged and they were in the collection, but went missing, I think, in the 1830s. And I thought the fishhook had as well and it may be that some of those things were I don't know like this is just pure speculation on my part, but some of the things may have gone missing on purpose. I wouldn't be surprised because the Society was really reconsidering the role of its cabinet. That is its collection of objects in with its manuscripts and printed materials and all that and some stuff was obviously very important to keep but some stuff was increasingly more difficult to keep and didn't fit with the collections, and some things that were not necessarily unsavory, but were say natural historical objects might more reasonably fit into ethnographic collections that would emerge and ultimately find their way to Harvard [University] and Yale [University] and other places like that in Peabody Museums. So, the fishhook again, it's one of those things that is kind of puzzling and disconcerting. But I can imagine it as a kind of, period piece, a period object.

Anne Bentley 25:31

This is a piece of bone that is about two inches long, and maybe five eighths of an inch wide, and about an eighth of an inch deep, that has been carved into a hook and it is wrapped at one end with cord that has been braided and then tied into a slip knot. We have what purports to be a fishhook, made from the bone of Captain James Cook.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:00

And we probably cannot confirm that unless we have DNA from Captain Cook.

Anne Bentley 26:05

Exactly, but we did, however, figure we could at least determine if it was human bone.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:12

And is it?

Anne Bentley 26:12

It is! In 1996, the hook was examined in the lab of the Kendall Whaling Museum by their staff and determined to be made from human bone.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:23

How heavy is it? It looks pretty light.

Anne Bentley 26:26

It is pretty light, maybe an ounce. It's not terribly heavy. It's flat. It's interesting that it's three dimensional, and that it does have depth, but it is quite flat and it has a pronounced hook at the curve and there is a channel or fuller that has been carved specifically right at the bottom of the base, which is quite thick and I assume that that there is a reason for that, but not being a fisherman, I wouldn't presume to say what the reason was. It is a yellowish ivory. Fresh bone and ivory is quite white, but as it ages, it mellows into a very pale yellow or tan, which is what this is, and there is a defect in the bone, which is kind of interesting at the bottom of the hook. It almost looks as if a bookworm had eaten it. We're all familiar with bookworm holes here in ancient libraries. So, it looks like that. So, I presume that's a something that happened in the bone or on the bone at some point. It's not part of the actual carving.

Cassie Cloutier 27:30

Peter elaborated on the hook and its significance.

Peter Drummey 27:34

When this fishhook was given to the Historical Society in 1804. It was simply presented as a fishhook made from a bone of Captain Cook, who had been killed during the course of his third voyage in the Hawaiian Islands. It's the Sandwich Islands as described at the time of the gift. So, this is long after his death. But at the same time, the circumstances of his death, the circumstances were such that there was a general knowledge that his body had been dismembered, and that parts of it might have been used as sacred objects or trophy objects, or some combination of those, that having corporeal material from your enemy might sort of bring power with it or show a sign of respect for your enemy that had been killed. But in any case, in the islands of the Pacific, including Hawaiian Islands, there were fishing hooks made with human bone. These are many places where there are no metal objects. So, they're using other materials for a whole range of essentially useful objects and what's interesting about this, and there's been some argument about this is where a fishhook is a practical useful tool, which this is, but also may have some symbolic meaning in the sense of have a sacredness or bring with it power because of who the bone is from. That it was a bone of Captain Cook seems like a gigantic stretch of the imagination. We could be proved wrong, but it's at the same time, this is long after Cook's death. It's I think being used as an exchange object that is essentially souvenir almost where you would exchange perhaps this object from material that sailors on a ship might bring there.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:41

His reputation as an explorer would have loomed large. People would know him, and hence maybe the great interest in this specific item. It's not just a human bone fishhook. It's a human bone fishhook made from Captain Cook.

Peter Drummey 29:57

The fact that it's physically connected him would be very powerful both within the Hawaiian Islands and then to certainly in England and the American colonies, and he was so admired and the thing to remember is accounts of his voyages were essentially published contemporaneously and illustrated. He brought back many artifacts. But he became this heroic figure over time, but right in

his own lifetime, and especially following his death, right within the Massachusetts Historical Society itself, one of the first efforts that Historical Society did as an enterprise was when a biography of Cook appeared by an English Minister Andrew Kippis. Kippis made the claim that during the American Revolution that the Continental Congress had authorized an attempt to capture Cook if his voyage of exploration came into American waters, and the Secretary of the Historical Society, Jeremy Belknap pushed back against that, that the United States coming into being our government would authorize the capture of someone on a voyage of exploration to benefit everyone was such that he thought was an aspersion on the new United States. This is writing after the Revolution and years after the death of Cook in Hawaii, so that Jeremy Belknap wrote to essentially all the people he knew who had been active in the Continental Congress, when this discussion had taken place to see if any of them could recollect it, or refute it that gather evidence to demonstrate the case and he surveyed James Madison and John Adams and people that he either knew directly or knew of who would be in position to be able to say, and some could not saying anything more than they couldn't recollect any such thing, some were active elsewhere, wouldn't have been there at the time when such a discussion to take place. But he gathered enough evidence, and it's published in an early volume of the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society and the letters they sent to him are here in our collection. But he was able to send this information to Kippis and Kippis acknowledged his error, essentially retracted that claim. But here's people in the new United States, making sure that it's understood that we would not in fact, participate during the Revolution in something that attacked a scientific enterprise that had a larger mission than simply to gather navigational information or other practical useful information. One of these enterprises was essentially to put the ship early on in Cook's voyages to put his ship where that could gather information for observing the transit of Venus across the face of the sun. It's an important astronomical calculation coming out of it, but other things as well. It shows that his reputation loomed large, I think, everywhere in Europe, and in America, I was going to say in the English-speaking world, but I think it went much farther than that. And this is a great era of exploration as well that this has taken place in.

Cassie Cloutier 33:41

Matthew Dennis discusses several other types of relics in his work. In the next episode, we shall examine several more objects inspired by Professor Dennis's publication, which include a natural specimen discovered unexpectedly while processing a collection, and a very special set of epaulettes.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:05

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

Cassie Cloutier 34:22

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