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Bonus: The Witch's Bureau

Katy Morris 00:00

Hi everyone. I'm Katy Morris, and this is the first bonus episode of The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. If you haven't already, we recommend you first take a listen to episode six, A Petition for Rebecca Nurse, which explores one woman's experience of the Salem Witch Trials through documents held at the MHS. In today's bonus episode, we're introducing you to another object in our collections related to the trials, the so called, 'Witch's Bureau.' This intriguing piece of furniture has long been shrouded in mystery and left more than one MHS staff member scratching their heads. You'll hear from Chief Historian Peter Drummey and Curator Anne Bentley as they explain how the bureau came to the MHS, the documents that link the furniture to the 1692 trials and the clue that led them to finally solve the mystery. We hope you enjoy.

Peter Drummey 01:01

The so-called Witch Bureau. It's a chest of drawers that we don't know very much about it, other than it's in the style of the woodworking shops that had begun in Salem in the 17th century.

Anne Bentley 01:15

It's a New England make. It's oak with the secondary woods of maple and walnut, and the probably the back and definitely the drawers are made of white pine. And when you look at this piece, it's a very, very architectural piece of furniture. It's almost like a four-story house where the base is very large to accommodate the stories above it. It's almost a square piece of furniture. The drawers are graduated in size, smallest at the top, largest at the bottom.

Peter Drummey 01:50

It's surprisingly elegant for something from the late 17th century. There's a lot of detail in it. There are these wonderful little pillars that decorate the drawers in a kind of geometric pattern, and they're ebonized. They're blackened to offset the natural wood color of it.

Anne Bentley 02:12

The pulls, originally, when they were making chess pulls, are generally wood, but by 1680 these are lovely brass, almost teardrop pulls that suspend from a little star plate. I've always looked at this chest, and having had to open the drawer several times, wondered why on earth they would use such tiny, tiny, little, delicate drawer pulls on such massively heavy drawers because the wood in these drawers is half an inch thick.

Peter Drummey 02:48

There's been repairs made to it over time. The top is replacement, and it was probably originally on ball feet, and now they're relatively ordinary square feet. But it's, again, it's something more elegant than you would than you imagine in a 17th century New England countryside house in the sense that these small drawers are on the top, and then two drawers of the same size, and then a wider a bottom drawer to make a wonderful kind of symmetry and then these pattern of decoration.

Anne Bentley 03:21

It's a very complicated piece. It's a really nice piece of joinery, nothing, nothing jumps out at you as being awkward, which is the mark of a very fine piece of furniture. It's just a piece that you look at and it feels secure. There is nothing anxiety making about this piece. When you look at it, you feel secure, and you feel that that it will hold what you need it to hold and and look beautiful doing it.

Peter Drummey 03:57

It came to the Historical Society from the estate of William H. Sumner, an enthusiastic antiquarian and collector of all sorts of interesting objects. And among the things he had were pieces of furniture which were either connected to famous people or furniture that had associations. And one of the pieces was a chest of drawers that, in his will, it says, 'A chest of drawers from the middle drawer of which a witch leaped out, who later was executed on Gallows Hill in Salem.' The problem with the description is there is no middle drawer.

Anne Bentley 04:41

It had just been accepted as the Salem Witch Bureau from 1872 until modern times. Furniture historians have been very interested in 17th century furniture. For the past 25, 30 years, they have been really taking a good look at it and in recataloging the so-called Salem Witch Bureau in our collection. I thought, well, a

good place to start would be the depositions, reading the depositions. So, going through them, the only deposition that actually mentions a piece of furniture is the deposition of Timothy and Deborah Perley.

Peter Drummey 05:20

And they claimed the specter of a neighbor named Elizabeth Howe had haunted and tortured their daughter Hannah when she was a child. This is back more than 10 years before the witchcraft hysteria and the Perleys were convinced that what was happening to these afflicted girls in Salem was the same thing that happened to their daughter, Hannah, who they described her as wasting away to skin and bones under the assault of these attacks and dying years before the 1692 event. In any case, within their testimony, there is the statement made by Ruth Perley describing how Elizabeth Howe would come and visit and talk and be nice in person to their daughter, Hannah, but then appear as an apparition. And once Hannah describes how the apparition appeared to her and she leaped over a bureau which the Sumner Witchcraft Bureau is 42 inches high, so it's quite a leap. And then said that Elizabeth Howe had her apparition had run in and out of the oven, which is also not just leaping out of the drawer, the chest of drawers, but running in and out of the oven. If this is where this tradition comes from, it's kind of a story compressed and changed over time. It goes from being Hannah leaping over the drawers to escape the apparition, to being the apparition appearing out of the drawers, and then the apparition appears in and out of the oven. So, this is a lot. This is a lot to put upon this handsome bureau that we have in our collection.

Anne Bentley 07:06

In preparing for this talk, Peter and I were discussing this piece of furniture, and something that he said made me think.

Peter Drummey 07:19

Sumner Witchcraft Bureau is 42 inches high, so it's quite a leap.

Anne Bentley 07:28

I need to go back and refresh my memory on the deposition. The exact words of the deposition and their deposition states that Samuel Perley's daughter Hannah, upon seeing goode Howe at his house, being suddenly scared, leaped over a chest and said, 'There's that woman. She goes into the oven and out again before falling into a fit.' And in going over that and going over General Sumner's bequest, his will, the words in his will, he calls this the Witch Bureau. But in 17th century New England, a chest was not a chest of

drawers. That is the mistake that General Sumner made. The chest was a ubiquitous piece of furniture, except if you were extremely poor, everyone had a chest, a simple rectangular box with four sides, a bottom and a top, a lid that was probably hinged into which they stored their clothing or their linens or their valuables, and it could be used as a seat. It could be used as a sideboard. It could be used as a table. So, when you look at what they're saying in their deposition, yes, it's perfectly possible that in in terror, somebody could scramble over a chest. But when you look at our chest of drawers, pretty nigh impossible. One, because a chest of drawers is set against a wall, and two, because this is a pretty high piece of furniture, there are four graduated drawers in it, and it's quite tall. So that is the answer to the conundrum, how could anybody hop over this particular chest of drawers? It was a chest, not a chest of drawers. So that solves the problem. So, this is no longer really the Salem Witch Bureau. Here it's more the Joint Bureau given to the Society in William Sumner's bequest of 1872. But that's the fun thing about looking at our collections like this, because they're never static. Everybody's always learning. You never know everything there is to know.

Katy Morris 09:57

[Outro music fades in] To view the objects in this episode and to learn more, visit our website at [Masshist.org/podcast](https://masshist.org/podcast). If you enjoyed the show, help us spread the word and share the episode with your friends. This podcast is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We want to thank Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Steven T. Reilly Librarian and Anne Bentley, MHS Curator of Art & Artifacts. Music in this episode was produced by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and by Chad Crouch. Thanks for listening.