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The Relics of Nora Saltonstall

Anne Bentley 00:04

It's a large painting. It's summer. The trees are all green. This magnificent white, cloudy sky. It's just these lovely blues and greens and whites. And she's standing in front of a river, and she's standing very casually with her hands in her sweater pockets. She's got a tie on that's loosely tied in a knot and you look at it and you think, 'Wow, I wish I knew her!'

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:33

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Katy Morris 00:39

This is Katy Morris.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:40

And this is The Object of History.

Katy Morris 00:42

A podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:46

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history.

Katy Morris 00:53

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.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:08

In this episode, we are looking at the papers and artifacts of Nora Saltonstall, an adventurous young American who volunteered with the Red Cross in Paris during the First World War.

Katy Morris 01:20

As a driver for a mobile hospital unit, Nora transported supplies and taxied wounded soldiers across the war front. For her services, she received the Croix de Guerre, the highest honor given by the French government to volunteers.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:33

After returning safely to Boston in 1919, Nora embarked on a camping tour of national parks in the American West, where she met an unexpected fate.

Katy Morris 01:44

With Stephen T. Riley Librarian Peter Drummey, we'll look at Nora's letters and diary to try to understand what it was like to work on the front in 1918 as German forces advanced on Paris.

Peter Drummey 01:56

It's almost impossible to look at the First World War and make any sense of it. It's completely outside human scale.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:05

Anne Bentley, our Curator of Art and Artifacts, will guide us as we also look at a small box of treasured items that Nora saved from her time in the war, as well as a life-sized portrait produced by the great American impressionist Frank Weston Benson.

Anne Bentley 02:21

It's just kind of interesting to look at these little keepsakes and thank the person to whom they belonged.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:34
Well, let us talk a little bit about her early life. Tell us a little bit about when she was growing up, where she was from.

Peter Drummey 02:41
She was born in 1894. She grew up both here in the Back Bay of Boston, and then they had an out-of-town house in Chestnut Hill, just west of Boston. She was the descendant of two Boston families that dated back to the founding of New England. So, her family was long settled and long held important posts here in Massachusetts. So, that's the environment she grew up in.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:08
And did any of them have any military service? Did they serve their country in any way?

Peter Drummey 03:13
The family had a tradition of public service going back to the colonial times. So, this long tradition of public service, more than military service, is probably brought them to force. So, it was not surprising in the 1910s, after 1914 where the First World War had begun, Nora Saltonstall was involved in efforts to aid the allies and also in war preparedness that is preparing the American public through volunteer service and the Red Cross and training camps that were set up for potential service in the First World War. So, she had already been extremely active in that war preparedness movement before we entered the First World War in 1917.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:10
Let's talk about her education. I assume, since she was in one of the leading families, that she had the best education.

Peter Drummey 04:17

She attended the Winsor School, an elite private school for girls here in the Back Bay of Boston, where she was both an excellent student, but also recognized as a school athlete as well. The Winsor School tried to develop the full person, the full young woman. She attended this school, secondary school, at a time when only a very small percentage of women went on to colleges and universities. So, in fact, her time at Winsor School was essentially the end of her formal education, except after studying French there, she went to and lived in Paris and attended a private school in Paris for a year after her graduation from the Winsor School. So, she had both a good knowledge of the French language and had lived in Paris and traveled in Europe before her service in the First World War. And also, I think goes a considerable way to explain her sympathy for the French cause in the First World War, but that's widely felt in the United States. France is a republic. The United States identifies with it. United States also understood at that time the deep debt the United States owed to France dating back to the American Revolution. So, our connections to France were very strong.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 05:50

So, let's talk about the timeline here a little bit. Where is she when the war breaks out? Is she in the United States?

Peter Drummey 05:57

Oh yes, she's come back from the time she spent in Paris and in Europe in 1912 and she's settled into social life here in Boston. She's a debutante, and she is very much a member of an elite establishment family. But at the same time, she is, I think, probably best known for her outdoors and athletic interest. She rides. She sails. She's especially interested in fishing, but she's a well-rounded athlete. Plays tennis and golf, but these outdoors activities take up a lot of her life.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:37

And at what point does she head over to France? Has the United States declared war yet?

Peter Drummey 06:42

Yes, before the United States declares war, there are, of course, 1000s of Americans who are serving as volunteers, both young men in the ambulance service, the Foreign Legion and the new Flying Service, French Flying Service, and women who are serving as Red Cross volunteers, and in other capacities. She's getting prepared to do that. And then the United States enters the First World War early in the spring of 1917 and that simply moves her forward. So, she sails for France in October of 1917. She's then 23 years old.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:22

Do you get a sense of whether or not the family was supportive of this? Was there a robust discussion about whether or not she should be doing this?

Peter Drummey 07:30

This is one of the most interesting parts about the period leading up to her active service, and then it continues through the rest of her time in France. Her family are both sympathetic to the war effort. Three of the four Saltonstall children are, in different ways, active in the war effort, but it's clear to her family, and especially her father, Richard Middlecott Saltonstall, are very concerned about the danger, not just the danger of actually serving in France, but the danger of just getting there. The summer of 1917 is at the height of the U-boat crisis, the German attacks on, submarine attacks on allied shipping. So just getting to the war zone is extremely dangerous, and then she negotiates essentially with her family to both reassure them that her role will be essentially as a volunteer, Red Cross volunteer and as a social worker in Paris. And she's true to that commitment at least for a few months, but by the end of 1917 she's managed to find her way forward to volunteer for Red Cross service in a French mobile field hospital. This is an innovation in warfare where by using automobiles and trucks and motorized ambulances, the medical service could move very close to the front. So, from January of 1918, throughout the remainder of the war, and in the months after the war, she is in this medical service, but again, as a driver and mechanic and clerk, not as a nurse, except that everybody aided in this relief of the wounded, but in fact, finds her niche in this interesting setting.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:30

I think her letters home really tells a good story about her good impressions about the war effort and what's happening over there. But what I also found striking was how she describes Paris, the city, of course, that she'd been to in peacetime and one that she returns to in wartime and after France has gone through this very difficult period from 1914 to 1917 when she returns. One of the passages I found most powerful was this one from the 13th of November 1917 when she writes, she's writing this from Paris to her family. And I just want to read one passage and get your reaction to it. "When I first got here, I thought there were very few wounded, but each day, I notice more and more. The most evident are those minus a leg. They walk around on stumps and go very fast. A great many soldiers walk with canes. All the men look tired and are very serious. It is queer to be in Paris and to see no laughing faces or to hear no foolish little quarrels on street corners. Everyone goes about his business, and you feel that life is much too hard to stop and laugh."

Peter Drummey 10:43

This experience, and this is, after all, back removed from the battle zone, as it was called, is very striking, and it also is the case that the French military and civilian effort has been bled out by gigantic casualties over the first three years of the war. Nora Saltonstall is, of course, there, before the bulk of American soldiers arrive, she's also, in a paradoxical way, with her adventurous spirit, in a way she benefits from this in a kind of the cruel mathematics of it. In both the British armed forces and the American armed forces, when they arrived women and there were a large number between women actually serving in the army, or as in nurses in the army, and the very large number of Red Cross volunteers and other voluntary units, but both the British and American army kept women back from the front lines. The French simply could no longer afford to do so. Had to put people into this war effort, including making the best use they could have volunteers so Nora Saltonstall's movement towards the front is, in fact, at least in part because the unit she was attached to would be moving forward. If she was serving in an equivalent unit with the British Army or the American army, probably wouldn't have gotten so close to the front, and it meant that she also had a wider latitude of what she was able to do because of this.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:29

And her brother joins her in France at some point, right?

Peter Drummey 12:32

Yes. Leverett Saltonstall doesn't arrive in France until the summer of 1918. So, Nora and Leverett meet early in the fall of 1918 and one of the things Nora does is by that time, she's been in France for almost a year, and she didn't make an explicit promise to return home after a year, but I think her family understood it. So, she writes home to her father and says, 'Shouldn't I stay here to sort of help Leverett out?' As if she was going to be where his unit was serving. I think seeing her and having a family contact there was probably wonderful, but even she realizes how thin that argument is, so then drops it to make a more direct argument for the reason she should stay. And let me just read you her explanation. This is from October of 19 a letter to her father where she first talks about Leverett arriving. "I wrote you one letter and replied to your suggestions about coming home, but I was afraid you would not appreciate it. I just got a letter from Leverett saying he was on the move. Surely you would not want me to come home if I could be any use to him over here. Setting that reason aside, I feel as if I were just coming into my usefulness and that now, having learned ropes, I am far more valuable than a year ago. Anyway, the war will probably be over soon, so let's not worry for a little while yet. Do you mind very much me staying? If you knew how much I was getting from this experience, I am sure you would let me finish it out. If I had not come over, I would have felt not to have belonged to this generation and would have felt all my life as if there was something lacking to make me on a level with the up-and-coming crowd of my own age and thereabouts."

Katy Morris 13:09

Having been introduced to Nora's remarkable life, we asked curator Anne Bentley to help us take a closer look at some of the artifacts carefully preserved by the Saltonstall family. What had Nora saved from her time in the war? What could these items tell us about her experiences?

Anne Bentley 15:00

There's this little trove of mementos, relics of Nora's time in the war. The family kept and gave to the society with her letters. One was a small leather bag, and maybe it's, you know, eight or nine inches wide by about six inches high, and it has a shoulder strap, and it's very, very soft leather. So, I would imagine she kept her papers in that because it's not terribly deep and it's not terribly big. So, it strikes me as being something useful like that, to keep papers in, keep a pad in, keep your pencil in. And speaking of pencils, one of the fascinating things that she has is a pencil. It's about the size of a lipstick case, but it's flat and it's silver with the initials "NS" engraved on it, and you pull the cap off, and inside is a flat pencil.

Katy Morris 15:58

That's just marvelous. It looks like such a little treasure, such a beloved little item that she must have toted around with her.

Anne Bentley 16:05

Clearly, she did use it because it's short and she kept the "US" pin that goes on your collar, that and a couple buttons.

Katy Morris 16:13

Would she have had some kind of uniform, or would she put these on her regular clothes?

Anne Bentley 16:18

They had uniforms because in her letters home, she talks about how unflattering they are. How she wished she could get a better uniform. But there are the buttons, the Red Cross buttons, that were made in France. And then there are, interestingly enough, two fused bullets, and certainly in the

letters that I was able to access, there's no mention of these, and why these particular bullets were important enough for her to keep. The Croix de Guerre is with those, and it was commissioned in 1915 to recognize acts of bravery in the face of enemy, specifically mentioned in army dispatches. Hers is bronze, and it is a Maltese cross. And at the center of this there is a round button that has on the obverse, at the front of it, it's got the head of the French Republic crowned in laurel with the inscription, "La République française." And then on the reverse side, it simply got "1914-1918." It's suspended from a ribbon that has green stripes interspersed with crimson stripes, and at the center, pinned on to the suspension ribbon is the five point bronze star, and if she had been mentioned in several dispatches, she would have gotten more stars.

Katy Morris 17:45
What does it mean to be mentioned in a dispatch?

Anne Bentley 17:48
In order for you to be considered worthy of the Croix de Guerre or any military award, you have to be mentioned in a field dispatch that describes what you did that entitles you to receive an award. When she writes to the family, what does she write? Sixteenth of December 1918, she says, "I suppose you got the cable about my Croix de Guerre. It is all tommyrot, and we all feel silly about taking them. Agnes and Betty Blakeman got them for the same thing as I working under fire in March." In parentheses, "not true." "Susan Ryerson Patterson, Mimi Scott and Mrs. Parrish also got them. So, you can see that I am far from being alone in my glory. There's a regular business of appreciative Croix de Guerre going on because it is such a simple way of pleasing people." So you can see she was not at all impressed with her medal and the dispatch translated reads, "Mademoiselle Saltonstall, Eleanor driver, American Auto-Chir Seven, volunteer American motorist of unfailing bravery and resolution rendered very important services, notably during the German attacks on the regions of Noyon and Lassigny from March 25th to 30th, 1918, traveling day and night to villages beaten by artillery and threatened by the enemy, tirelessly carried out a series of evacuations, saving many children, the elderly and the sick. Gave during these days the finest example of ardent devotion and beneficent boldness." Though, so these all, all these lovely little

things, except for the purse, were packed in this keepsake box of wood that it's, you know, maybe a little bit bigger than this, the size of a deck of cards. The base of the box has been tinted blue, and it has been inlaid with this absolutely delightful, little delicate wooden bow inlaid into the top of the box. And the family kept these little treasures in this box. She probably put them all in there herself, "my mementos from the war."

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:16
So, the war clearly changes her, and we can probably see that in the letters that she sends back right from '17 through '18. This change in her tone, her nature, in some way.

Peter Drummey 20:35
One thing that's going on and her papers are extremely important for this that we should probably think about. We have these wonderful letters she writes home that were all carefully kept. And the way you can tell the level of action is that there are letters written from hotels when she's on leave or back from the front, but also some of them are just scrawled notes where she wants to continue this contact, this reassuring contact, but there's simply no time for it, these long, exhausting days. At the same time, she's keeping a diary. So, we have what she reports to her family and then, essentially, a day-by-day account of her own everyday life. Now the diary is not as satisfactory as we would hope, because it's a form of diary we don't see, I think, today, except maybe in an office planner that is each page has the date, but has the same date for five years, so you really only have space to write a line in it. But what's wonderful about this starting it when she's in the United States, before her active service begins, you see this domestic life here in Boston and at Chestnut Hill and the year, early years of the war is underway, but her active participation, it hasn't begun. Then you see her year in the war recorded, and that's where you see where a letter or note to her parents or family saying things are lively here, and I don't have time to write, and then in the diary, she'll write, "Spent the night in the in a cave." I think this is sometimes literally a cave. Sometimes, I think these are wine cellars, but underground and fearful because of the bombardment taking place. So, you have this sort of opportunity to see that what she was writing home was telling people that

everything was fine, whereas her own brief notes give you a window into this world where everything was not fine.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:52

While Nora sought to reassure her family, her work on the front was growing increasingly dangerous. I asked Peter what we know about the experiences she was reluctant to share with her family members.

Peter Drummey 23:05

She estimated that she had traveled more than 1000 miles, driving people and equipment and passengers and the wounded from one place to the other. And this is across essentially a moonscape. This is the regions that have been heavily bombarded for years. There are parts of this battle zone where all the trees have been knocked down, all the buildings knocked down, and the topsoil essentially removed, so that the photographs, the dramatic photographs from that period, look like fighting taking place on the moon. She also was very proud. She suspected she was the woman sleeping as far forward as any woman was allowed to do as places were captured. So, this was at times, extraordinarily dangerous and extraordinarily dangerous, not just when she was in the battle zone, but paradoxically, in the spring of 1918 after her unit moved, she had an opportunity for a brief leave in Paris. And this is more than 50 miles from the great German advance. It comes very near to Paris but doesn't reach it in the spring of 1918, but the technology advance had made it possible to strike Paris. Germans start firing extreme long-range artillery upon Paris from 75 miles away, which would simply explode, destroying buildings or killing people on the street. And this was truly a terror weapon.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:42

The more we learned about Nora's life, the more we wondered how the war had changed her. Was Nora the same person when the war came to an end, and what would she do now that her volunteer work was no longer needed?

Peter Drummey 24:56

She stays in France after the armistice 'til February of 1919, and she has become, in some respects, of veteran by this time, and the way she sees the world, self-assured, self-reliant, really found herself in the service. Paradoxically, that means when she comes home to the United States, she's at a loss what to do next. Her family are, of course, extraordinarily happy to have her back, but at the same time, they detect a kind of what I interpret as a different person. But even she says how they're concerned about her restlessness. She decides to go to the west, to take a trip through the national parks. And she travels with the widow of man who's died in the First World War and that woman's young son, and they go auto camping. She's at the beginning of something new in the world, and that is she's driving from Southern California to Yosemite and then north to Crater Lake, and the idea is they'll travel from park to park and then drive back across the United States. So, they're going to have a real adventure. It connects her with her life from before, a life that I suspect might have in 1919, seemed unimaginable, and in letters home, she described as being like a dream. This was simply this glorious environment and landscape. There's a wonderful picture of her climbing across the snowfield so she can fish in the lake, and then a brilliant picture of her holding up her catch. She's sort of full of health and beaming with the place and the success of her fishing, all those things connected to this wonderful trip and also perhaps decompressing from this time spent in Europe and this extraordinary pressure that had been upon her.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:06

And then tragedy strikes.

Peter Drummey 27:08

This photograph of her at Crater Lake is essentially it's not the last day of her life, but the boy that they're traveling with is not feeling well, and it turns out, has contracted typhoid. So they go to Portland, Oregon, where he's treated and recovers. They essentially cancel the rest of their driving trip, and she contracts typhoid herself and dies very soon thereafter, on August 2nd, 1919. So, this photograph we have her is not from literally the end of her life, but it's the end of the way we think about her, the end of her letters. She continues her Line a Day diary. So it goes from these

adventures in France to these driving adventures, kind of notes on where she is and what they're doing, but it's, it's a wonderful and then awful end to her life, and it means that for the extended family, her letters and diaries are both this connection to her, but they're also, in an interesting way, they're relics of her, essentially, her letters and diaries become artifacts.

Anne Bentley 28:30
And after her death, her family commissioned an absolutely beautiful portrait of her.

Katy Morris 28:37
Yes, so do you want to spend a little time now talking about the portrait. It's such a phenomenal piece.

Anne Bentley 28:43
As I say, it's just, it's just a remarkable portrait. It's just these lovely blues and greens and whites, that's the main color palette, and she's standing very casually with her hands in her sweater pockets. She's got a tie on that's loosely tied in a knot. It's summer. The trees are all green. This magnificent white, cloudy sky behind her, and she's standing in front of a river, and the light is coming down on her, such that her head and her shoulders are illuminated. It's a large painting, and she's shown three quarter lengths, and it's a life size painting.

Katy Morris 29:25
Yes, it's enormous. The first time I saw it, I think I actually gasped just at its largeness. The light coming out of it is incredible. And I didn't, I didn't know the story of her, and yet I felt I instantly knew who this woman was. Do you think her character comes through in this?

Anne Bentley 29:44
You know, she just she looks, she looks like somebody who's, who's interest….She's almost ready to speak. She's a direct look at you. There's no gazing off into the distance. This is somebody who's paying attention. She's relaxed and she's outdoors, which she obviously loves. So yes, this is an

incredibly accessible face and person and painting. You look at it and you think, wow, I wish I knew her. And just the fact that it's a beautiful painting just adds to it. It's a typical Benson. He was known for his plein air portraits of women and children, but he is best known for his evocative use of light, light reflections, light filtering just outdoors light. And it was such an appropriate choice of artists for this young woman to see her standing there on the banks of a river under green dab of leaves. And even for him, it feels a little bit unfinished, not that it is, but it's so light and so evanescent and so glowing that I have always thought that it really, truly embodied a life cut short. This, this beautiful soul cut short. The interesting thing is that the face, everything of the face, is much more finished than the painting around her is because he's not able to do it from life. So, he needs to make her look like Nora. And clearly this was the photo that the family felt most looked like their Nora. You know, the more you look at it, the more you realize the face doesn't quite match the rest of the painting. It's much crisper. There's more detail. It's less impressionistic. It's a finished face. The rest of it, consequently, appears unfinished.

Katy Morris 31:40

Yes, I don't think I noticed that until you pointed it out. But now that I see it, it's, it's kind of like the rest of the painting is, I think you said it was effervescent, like it's just all about to float away and yet you're holding on to her face. It really kind of mimics the way you remember someone you know that you hold on to some kind of core image, but it's already slipping away.

Anne Bentley 32:02

Yes, which is what leads me to think of the life cut short, the unfinished portrait, the unfinished life. And just the irony of it to her parents worried the entire time she was in Paris, and the minute she got home, they didn't have to worry anymore. And six months later, she was gone, and this, you can bet, cast a very long shadow on that family and nobody ever forgot her, even those who never met her in person.

Katy Morris 32:33

Yeah. What a what a living memory. And to grow up with that portrait in the family home, you could, you couldn't forget her. One other thing that occurs to me looking at this painting is just how, how modern she looks. You know, that she's in a like there's something kind of masculine in her, in her stance and clothes, and the way her hair is up, and the way that reflects, you know, her service in the war, and just, I just, I'm wondering about and any thoughts you have on the way she maybe stepped outside of the roles for women in her time.

Anne Bentley 33:06

Oh, she really did. She was one of these tennis playing, outdoor, hiking, camping, not at all the way you think of a debutante. She was, she was much more modern, I think, in her pursuits, and nothing seemed to faze her in her work in France, and she preferred driving the truck and all that entailed fixing the engine, oiling things, repairing things, changing tires. When it came time to just get in there and get dirty and do the hard work. She was right there. Clearly, she had a sense of adventure beyond the norm, but she never got to vote.

Katy Morris 33:49

Oh, wow, that's a really remarkable context to think about.

Anne Bentley 33:53

Yeah, history has a way of tripping you.

Katy Morris 33:57

Right because, as we've been saying, she's so modern and yet...

Anne Bentley 34:02

And yet... and yet.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:03

[Outro music fades in] To view the object in this episode and to learn more, please visit our website at masshist.org/podcast. You can also email us your questions and comments to podcast@Masshist.org. We would love to hear from you. If you enjoyed the show, help us spread the word and share the podcast with your friends. Stay up to date with our latest episodes by subscribing on iTunes, Stitcher or wherever you listen to your podcasts. The Object of History is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Anne Bentley, our Curator of Art and Artifacts and Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian. Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and by Chad Crouch. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.