

Repair Everywhere: Interview with Emily Whitted

Harpsichord 00:00

Tegan 00:00

Welcome back to Revere House Radio. I'm your host, Tegan Kehoe, and this is the final episode of season five. Today I'm speaking with Emily Whitted, who is a PhD candidate in Public History at UMass Amherst. Her dissertation work examines textile repair work in early America. Welcome to the show, Emily.

Emily 00:24

Thanks so much for having me!

Tegan 00:26

To kick us off, can you tell me what are the questions that you answer or are hoping to answer in your research, and what excites you about these questions?

Emily 00:33

Sure. My dissertation research looks into early American textile repair work roughly between 1750 and 1850. I came to this project really curious about repair because museum collections have a great deal of early American textiles, but often repair work is not noted in catalog records. And so while I was doing research in museum collections, looking at textiles more broadly, I started noticing how many things were mended and wondering about the economic and cultural practices of repair. You know, what motivated early Americans to repair textiles? Was that only economically driven, or was that also motivated by kind of sentiment or care? So those questions were kind of my entry points. I also think there's some really exciting present day stakes to thinking about textile repair right now, as we're thinking about sustainability and the impact of textile consumption and fast fashion. I think there were...it seemed like there could be good lessons to learn from the past, if I took the time to learn about them. So that inspired me to start the dissertation project.

Tegan 01:47

Very cool. I was actually just a week or so ago repairing a pair of my own jeans, which is not something I consider myself skilled at, but is a skill I want to get better at. And I was thinking, "oh yeah, I have this podcast interview coming up. This is my homework!" The preparation is repairing a piece of clothing that needed repair after two years, and I was frustrated because it was a brand I expected to be able to keep around longer. So yeah, definitely some present day connections. I find it really interesting that museum catalogs aren't normally noting textile repair, and this is certainly getting right into the museum weeds here. I'm trying to think of whether other types of artifact often have repairs noted. And I think it probably varies. Furniture, if there's an obvious repair, if there's something that's going to be visually different, that is sometimes noted in museum catalogs. And this is something that's for -- typically for --

researchers and the museum professionals, rather than for the general public. And then, if there's something that's repaired while it is in the custody of the museum, that's typically noted.

Emily 02:50

Yeah. It's kind of a confluence of, I think, a couple different things about how museums work and the long history of collecting. The museums have -- as they began in the 19th and 20th century -- were still really motivated by collecting examples that looked pristine, or were untouched, or gave visitors kind of a sense of perfection. And that...and, you know, repair work kind of counteracts that narrative. The way we also talk about objects is often rooted in when something is made and who owned it. And I think we've been moving to kind of think more about consumption and use and what that use looks like. But we're still, I think, only arriving at conversations about repair and those layered reuses over time that causes someone to, you know, have an object in their world extended for as long as possible before they're thrown away or discarded. So those are two access points. And I would also say too that museum cataloging is one of those really skilled tasks that museum professionals have to do. I think any museum professional listening to this would say, you know, "I wish we had more time to do thorough cataloging, and we're stretched so thin. I wish we had more time for detailed, really detailed work." And that's totally fair.

Tegan 04:06

Absolutely.

Emily 04:07

But I think repair work on textiles also is a complicated form of evidence, because some mends could be done in the period in which the object was used, and some mending is done well after the time period in which it was first used. And maybe that mending is done by descendants or by future users across centuries. So it's also a quite snarled form of material evidence that I think museum professionals and conservators and creators are still thinking through how to approach and how to interpret.

Tegan 04:38

Yeah, absolutely. And, for listeners who are not steeped in the behind the scenes of museums, museums vary quite a bit in terms of whether the people doing cataloging are going to be specialists or generalists. If a museum focuses on textiles or something like that, they're more likely to have a textile expert doing that work. And something like a historic house museum is more likely to be someone who can be analyzing and recording information about a completely different medium or type of object on a given day. And that's kind of part of what makes museums go. But for researchers, I know that that can create this wildly mixed levels of information as well.

Emily 05:22

Yeah. It just means, you know, there's more avenues for researchers to be collaborating with museum professionals to all get at the answers we're looking for.

Tegan 05:31

Absolutely. And I think this is interesting, your mentioning the way that museums have evolved. Because in the past 50 years or so, there's been a turn towards social history, both in museums and in academic history. I think that that turn -- you know, talking about people's daily lives, talking about the unglamorous work -- is also reflected a little bit in, "yeah, we're not just talking about who was the most famous owner of this piece, or when was this made, how much did it cost when it was made?" We're talking about "how was this used?" We're talking about things like hand-me-downs. That's something that's definitely on my mind when thinking about textiles in the Revere House. Unfortunately, we really have very few textiles in our own collection. But, certainly, the Revere family wore clothes. And it was a large family, there were 16 kids all together, 11 of whom survived early childhood, and they're spread out over a period of years. Absolutely, some of them were wearing one another's clothes. And certainly, kids are growing and things are being altered. So can I ask, does your research touch on the repurposing and remaking as well?

Emily 06:39

Yeah, it does! And I think that repair and reuse and repurposing and altering are all kind of linked processes as early Americans are evaluating how to stretch the life cycle of a textile as long as possible. And this motivation to stretch those textiles comes from the economic value of textiles during this period, primarily. Textiles are far and away the most valuable object an early American could own in their home. We see this in probate inventories, especially --- the stark contrast -- especially if they're imported during this period, primarily from Great Britain, potentially from France. That adds to its value. So already, early Americans are primed to be stretching those textiles as long as possible, because of its material and economic investment already. So there is no world in which an early American would wear something and throw it away or discard it without thinking about another purpose or reuse of it until it is no longer able to hold, you know, any more change. I can imagine in the Revere House, you know, any kind of repair work to extend the life of a garment as it is already beneficial. But let's say that someone is, you know, outgrowing -- especially for children -- outgrowing clothing, that one might get passed down to the next youngest. Or, especially with linen like shirts or bed sheets, that can get cut down and turned into smaller garments, where -- especially if there's repaired areas that are still falling apart -- those can be cut away. So you'll see really creative, I think, repurposing done by early Americans to maximize the use of the fabric they have at their disposal. But I would also say too that, you know, early Americans are demonstrating not just, you know, economic practical decision making, but also really personal connection with their textiles too. And so that can also motivate someone to repair something or to work towards its preservation and extend the life as long as possible. Just like we have connections to the textiles we wear today, like a favorite shirt or a favorite blanket, like those kinds of objects that we have relationships with, we will also work to keep in our lives, even if it's taking more labor or time, maybe, to do so.

Tegan 09:09

Right.

Emily 09:10

That's something that I think still feels really relatable to us today.

Tegan 09:14

Yeah, absolutely. So for in a "middling sort" middle-class family like the Reveres, typically who was doing this textile repair? And how did they learn those skills?

Emily 09:24

So, overwhelmingly, in early America, repair work for textiles was completed by women and girls. This is a type of labor we wouldn't be surprised is kind of divided by gender in the home. I would also say that men and boys are also mending textiles, but in slightly different contexts.

Tegan 09:46

Okay.

Emily 09:46

So, you know, textiles aren't just found in the home. You can find them on ships at sea or sail cloth. You can also find them in tailoring shops, which were professional men sewing in needlework trades, or in the military. So there's different contexts in which men and boys could be repairing textiles as well. But primarily if women are available to be doing the textile repair work of clothing or household textiles, then they will be the ones doing it in this period. So in the context of the Revere House, you can imagine that this work is being...and especially in middle-class families too, this could be done by women in the home, children in the home, as well as women who are hired to do repair. Repair work as a skill set is an interesting one, because you can find early Americans who are repairing clothing very simply, very quickly. It is a skill set that young girls could access quite early on. So really, anyone who can hold a needle can effectively mend. But for certain types of repair, it's also a highly varied creative skill set, especially if you want that mend to escape notice, or you really want it to be hidden on the garment or the piece of clothing or textile that you're repairing. We also see evidence of people paying other women who may be more highly skilled to do this labor, depending on the importance of the textile, and the importance of that textile in that person's life. I'll also say, too, of course, during this period, labor in early America can also mean indentured servants or enslaved men and women, too. And so you will see, depending on the specifics of the household, a great variety of who may be mending and for what reason they might be the ones doing that labor, as opposed to other tasks in the home.

Tegan 11:43

Yeah, yeah, that makes sense. And sending out something to be mended by someone with more expertise, is that...the person doing that mending, might that be kind of peer-to-peer with a middle class housewife taking in something for an acquaintance? Or is that someone who is making her primary living doing that? Or did that also vary?

Emily 12:02

It could be a combination, actually. Early American women's textile labor doesn't often follow the same kind of formal constraints as other artisan trade work during this period. A great book that discusses the needlework trades during the Revolutionary Era in early America is Marla Miller's book, "The Needle's Eye." And it discusses how women are also sewing through familial networks, through communal networks -- you know, who might be your neighbor or in your innermost local community, and who might also have the highest skill. So those records may not always be formally, you know,

encapsulated in account books, like maybe other artisan trades would be. But they can be layered in household records or women's diaries. Those kinds of references and records can be a little more difficult to access, but it shows that women's networks and relationships really influence who is doing what textile labor and why. So mending is one of those tasks that in familial groups can be done by, you know...relatives may not be in the same house, but maybe next door. Or also you might want to pay a neighbor. Or perhaps a woman who is a mantua maker, someone who's making clothing professionally. Or a tailoress, who is also sewing clothing or other textiles for some sort of pay, whether that's an exchange of money or goods or some sort of service, but with some sort of economic benefit to the to the exchange.

Tegan 13:35

No, that's really interesting. And we've already started to talk about class, because it's impossible to talk about British North America in this period without talking about class. But can we talk a little more about it? It sounds like there weren't really class distinctions to who was wearing repaired clothing, because textiles were so expensive. Were there class distinctions in what those repairs looked like, and who was doing the mending, and how the mending was done?

Emily 14:00

Absolutely, the class lens on this project is really interesting, because on the one hand, you know, this project really revealed for me, that everyone in early America is repairing textiles regardless of class. So the wealthiest people in early America, as well as the most impoverished, are still going to be walking around in mended textiles. But the class difference actually shows up in whether or not you can perceive that mended clothing. So I think we talk a lot today about visible mending or invisible mending. And of course, visible mending right now is like a very hot kind of artistic interpretation of how to, you know, point out repair work. But in early America, the best textile repair work was as invisible as possible, and most seamlessly hidden on textiles as possible. And I've seen some amazing examples in my time researching where, you know, pattern fabric is matched with another scrap of the same fabric to kind of align for a patch, or really excellently rendered fine woven darning on fabric, or Swiss darning, which is a type of repair that looks like knit stitches, so it's perfect for repairing knit fabric. Those kinds of efforts are also a reflection of class status because they take, usually, more time and light and money to execute.

Tegan 15:25

Yeah.

Emily 15:26

If you can pay someone with higher skills to more invisibly repair your textile, that's an expression of class.

Tegan 15:34

Yeah.

Emily 15:34

So the reverse also means that if your textile repair work is visible to others, there's going to be a negative class connotation associated with that. And some of that negative class connotation is just about your status, your socioeconomic status, assuming something about your class status. But also, it could have racial connotations as well. And we kind of see across the 18th and into the 19th centuries a correlation between visibly repaired or ragged clothing and negative racial stereotypes as well. Class, and then eventually race, begin to intersect by the middle of the 19th century around this idea of visibly repaired clothing, and what that means to be perceived or surveilled. I think that's another aspect of this project, is whether or not that perception of repaired clothing puts anyone at risk? And especially for enslaved people who might be self-emancipating from the South to the North, that kind of recognition of repaired clothing shows up a lot in runaway ads, and it can be a key factor in someone recognizing another to then report them. So there are some risks around that kind of visible repair work as well. Even though everyone is doing it, if you have the money to pay for it to be a little more hidden, you would do so.

Tegan 16:56

Yeah, that's really interesting! And I can imagine that being skilled at repair work could be really a form of community care. In a situation where, you know, having a repaired jacket is going to make someone more recognizable, if someone's able to do that for someone, that would be a real asset. That's fascinating.

Emily 16:57

Yeah. And we also see records of early Americans who are, you know, once they have more garments at their disposal...let's say they own multiple shirts. If there's one shirt that's repaired, they're not going to throw it away. They're still going to wear it. But they might wear it at home, instead of out in public where it can be perceived. So you also see this kind of, like, self-censorship, maybe, of garments that are moving away from being the best version that they can be out in the world in, but are still something they would keep and use at home to continue that life cycle as long as possible.

Tegan 17:47

Yeah. And I think that that is something that is kind of reflected in how we use clothing today. You know, class distinctions and clothing certainly still exist, but also the levels of formality, levels of "work clothes," or "casual clothes," or things you want to show off?

Emily 18:04

Absolutely. Yeah. There's still so many parallels between what an early American might want to step out in public, in their best, you know, version of what they own, versus what we do today too. Like this tension between public and private,

Tegan 18:16

Yeah, yeah. So thinking about that, now I'm thinking about my jeans again, because I did attempt a kind of an artistic, visible mending on them, because I wanted them to be not just around the house clothes, something I could wear out and I don't have the skill to do an invisible mend in the place they needed mending. And so making it look like it was a very simple artistic thing takes less skill than the work that it would take to make the jeans look like they hadn't been repaired. And so I'm kind of

wondering -- and I'm wondering if you have any thoughts about -- what early Americans would have thought of deliberately visible mending and artistic visible mending. You know, would that be wildly alien to them? Or if it had happened to come up as a trend many years earlier, they would have rolled with it?

Emily 19:02

It's a good question. I...you know, I think when I went into the museum archives for the first time, I had some preconceived notions about what kind of repair I would discover when I actually started looking for it. And often the language around early American needlework is that, you know, in the past, we had such a skill set around sewing -- which is true -- and that over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries and into the 20th, there's been this real decline in skill and needlework expression. And on the one hand, that is, that's absolutely trackable, especially when it comes to making clothing. You can see differences. But for repair work, I found so many examples of what I would consider visible mending, you know? Like that they're...not to project our contemporary lens onto them, but to see them in the present day or through present day eyes, you know, that's absolutely feeling like some sort of intentionally artistic or visible mending. And that's not what they are, but it's something that would totally you know, work today as part of that movement. Discovering that in the archives also reminded me that repair, for so many early Americans, was a task that you fit in and around other tasks. It's something you do when you have a few minutes at the end of your day and you've had an exhausting work day. Or it's something you do when you are going across the street to your family's house and you want to take some work with you that's portable, so you can be social as well as remaining productive. And sometimes those repairs are really urgently motivated, like something is damaged and you need it by a certain time, and it has to be fixed.

Tegan 20:44

Right.

Emily 20:44

Because it just fits and flows between the other, you know, rhythms of labor you do in your home, it, I think, has this, like, hasty kind of quality to it sometimes. Unless you really are allowed to kind of immerse yourself and luxuriate in a more skilled repair, or you're being paid to really do so. So they have this, you know, very visible, kind of hasty quality to them. And I actually find that quite charming. And I don't know it resonates that taking the time to repair...it's not that, you know, difficult a process to do and that everyone can do -- it was accessible to everyone to do it. And back in early America, that was, you know, motivated mostly economically. But today too, we could still be taking the time to do it, even if it looks, you know, not high quality, or is more visible than we want it to be. But I will say, for early Americans, probably looking...if I were to imagine them looking at the visible mending movement today, they would probably just have a lot of assumptions about class immediately, based on who's walking around in what, if it's very, very visible.

Tegan 21:50

Yeah, that makes sense. And what are the repairs that you've seen that you would describe as visible? What do they look like? Is it a patch in a contrasting color, or is it like a little bit of embroidery that was added, or...?

Emily 22:02

It's never, you know, artistically flourished, like, embroidery. But it is kind of this, like, mismatch in material, that you can tell that they're doing the best they can with the materials they have. And materials are still a very finite cost and factor into this type of labor. So let's say that you made yourself a garment in early America, and you cut it out and you sewed it. All the remnants of the fabric that you left behind from one you cut would be kept and saved in some sort of rag bag, usually. And those rags could become patches for future repairs. And oftentimes, early American women are specifically trying to hold on to specific types, because they know it matches something that may need to be repaired. But also you might, you might sell those rags to become paper if you need, or to have something else that's not a perfect match, but it's a close match. So you'll see kind of this, like, scrappy nature of repair work, where you can tell that they're getting as close as they can, and sometimes it's still off. There's an amazing pair of trousers in the University of Rhode Island that have amazing patches on the knees and on the seat, which happens all the time. Like, the seats of trousers are always blown out, and that's a common form of repair work that tailors do. But you can tell that first two patches, they got as close as they could to the match. And then for the seat, they were like, "I've got nothing." Like, they're blue, striped trousers, and then the patch is like a yellow check.

Tegan 22:02

Oh wow.

Emily 22:02

"I dunno, we did our best." So there is contrast like that. And then sometimes you'll see, like...there's a great women's pocket in the collection of the Connecticut Museum of Culture and History, where you can tell they're just piecing together everything they can to make it a finished item, and also repairing it to keep it going. So, I don't know. There's something really, I think, also creative about, you know, you have a finite amount of materials. What can you create from that to repair the object in front of you that needs fixing? It's just a different way of working your brain.

Tegan 24:08

Yeah, yeah, that's really cool. And can you tell me more about your research process? So you've mentioned several times specific objects, and a little bit about what you're learning from them, from just visually examining them. Can you talk more about what information you're getting from studying the physical artifacts? And are you also studying documents, and what kind of information are you getting from them?

Emily 24:28

Yeah, my research process really began with the objects in museum collections first. That was really important to my methodology, because I wanted the objects to then lead the archival inquiries. So I went into museum collections across the east coast in the beginning of my dissertation research, to start searching through as many mended textiles as I could find in their collection, which was a delightful process, because we...you know, we've talked about kind of the struggle with cataloging records. And I would do, you know, keyword searches beforehand for the museum's catalog database,

and say, you know, maybe there's 12 items that pop up. And then I'd go into the museum, and the curators and I would be digging through, and then maybe we'd find 50 things instead, you know.

Tegan 25:13

Wow, yeah!

Emily 25:14

So we were...it was kind of this collaborative joint discovery often, where we would realize, "oh, there's so much more here than any of us realized!" And it also helped me drop any preconceived notions I had about what repair work might look like in the period, and it showed me the variety. And I think that was really helpful to then go into paper records, because if I had done the reverse...paper records really flatten repair work. It loses some of its texture and vibrancy when you look at it through paper, because they just describe it by, you know, "mending." You're like, "well, ok." And you can learn a lot through paper about, you know, rhythms of mending and who's doing the mending. But you...you're like "what does the mending look like?" Because textiles don't get broken the same way, like every form of damage is unique in some way. So you know that there...I'm so glad I did it this way, because you get exposed to this creative thought process through repair work first, and then it adds substance to all the paper records that you find afterwards.

Tegan 26:19

Yeah.

Emily 26:20

So objects first then paper. And my archival digging has really taken me in a lot of different places for this work. My dissertation is organized through chapters that focus on one particular object that's repaired as like an access point into a broader theme about repair work. Some of those are chapters that focus explicitly on women's labor and textiles that were used in the home or worn, but others have taken me to mending in the maritime world, or during the American Revolution. So I'll look at things like marine insurance records-

Tegan 26:54

Wow.

Emily 26:54

-or orderly books for the American Revolution, and letters about supplies between Continental Army leaders. So there were a lot of expectations I had of where to look, but by letting the objects lead me, it went in directions I never would have thought to initially start digging into. And they've been really, really fruitful.

Tegan 27:13

That's really great. I've been thinking about a couple different things as you're talking about that, because nationally, we're in a period of a good deal of 250th anniversaries, and so certain parts of the Revere family story and certain parts of Boston's story are things we're a little bit more focused on. And so 250 years ago, the Siege of Boston had just ended. So there had been, you know, this 11-month

period where traffic in and out of Boston was very restricted. And a few years earlier, Parliament had closed the port of Boston. And so again, you know, the movement of goods was really restricted. And we're also approaching the point where Paul Revere joined the Massachusetts militia. It was his second time serving in the military. He had also been in the French and Indian War. And so I imagine that there were points where he was repairing his own clothes, and he ended up, some of the time -- some of his service -- he was able to be very close to home. But not all of it. So can you speak a little bit...you know, have you encountered what repair work looked like in these sort of choke points, and also talk a little bit more about what it looked like in the military?

Emily 28:13

Sure, yeah. This is a great question, because it's a big topic and a timely one. Mending during the American Revolution is a fascinating way to look at how networks of supplies and you know, material goods as well as people, are put under pressure and also under the microscope in Boston, or of these other occupied cities during the war. Obviously, supplies are something that early Americans are focused on, and are experiencing extreme shortages for. Textile shortages during the war were acutely felt by many. I will say that early Americans have always been really good at smuggling, and the war only encouraged them to smuggle more. So yeah, there were ways to access textiles. But you know, so much of what they had relied on prior to the war was imported and in...during the war, they felt the loss of those networks and had to create new ways of trading. Some of that eventually would come through France too. So there was also a very robust privateering or piracy linked with the military too. So they were getting as many textiles as they could through as many means as they could, but overwhelmingly, textile supply shortages are felt across the Thirteen Colonies.

Tegan 29:29

I'll note that we have some documentation that on a small scale, textiles were also a means of smuggling. Because there are stories of people bringing food or other objects that weren't allowed through a particular checkpoint at a particular time, either on their person, secreted in their clothing, or in their bedroll. So textiles are part of smuggling in that way as well.

Emily 29:49

I love that. Yeah, there's so many possibilities when you...textiles are just one of those, you know, areas where you can kind of tuck as much as you want into them. So in the military, in particular, textiles that had often been imported from Britain were now no longer available as reliably as they needed. And they were specialty textiles that they really needed, like sailcloth for sails for the Navy, or canvas for knapsacks or for tents, or broadcloth for regimental uniform coats as well as blankets. So in the American Revolution, soldiers are not only experiencing extreme shortages that are causing them to exist in various states of undress across the war. We have a lot of soldiers accounts of men who are going completely naked or who are only having blankets. It depends, you know, year to year, what you're looking at. But really consistently across the war, those shortages are felt by soldiers. And it also inspires a lot of repair work, of course, because these textiles are so needed and suddenly more valued than ever before in the military. So soldiers are having to learn, many of them for the first time, how to pick up a needle and repair clothing or other textiles that they're using in their military camps. They're also relying on networks of soldiers who already know how to sew, like tailors who might have enlisted

in the Army. And you see this a lot, where soldiers are kind of just looking around who's in their camp being like "who can do this?"-

Tegan 31:24

Right.

Emily 31:24

-and either paying or trading some sort of service for textile work. And they're also relying a lot on women's labor in camps and at home. So depending on the proximity that you were to your home base, if you had women -- you know, wives, sisters, mothers, daughters -- who could do that labor. There are robust exchanges of textiles happening all the time between soldiers and their families back home. They may send things back to be repaired or replaced in order to get new ones. They're writing back to ask for, you know, shirts or stockings. This happens a lot. Soldiers are even taking furloughs or, you know, leaves of absences, specifically to go home to get more textiles. Those records show up all the time. But then there's also women who are in military camps, who are sometimes known as "camp followers," who are doing labor in the camps, including laundry as well as textile repair, cooking food. There's also women who are settlers, you know, selling alcohol or food or small items to soldiers, as well as female family members who are living with their male relatives who are enlisted in the army, like soldiers wives or daughters, or officers wives. And so those networks are really important, and soldiers are consistently relying upon any women they can find to do that labor, and if they did not have needle skill before, are often expressing a need to do that, especially when it comes to laundry. Yeah.

Tegan 32:57

Yeah. Yeah. Now that's really interesting, and I imagine that has reappeared in a number of different war settings in different time periods, especially when there's that highly gendered division of labor. But also the soldiers are...presumably don't have a lot of time or energy for this other task that takes time and energy.

Emily 33:13

Soldiers have more time than you would think, when you're encamped.

Tegan 33:17

Yeah.

Emily 33:17

But it...you can see a real tension, I think, between the wish of the Continental Army to get soldiers to do some of this textile-based labor, usually over concerns of cleanliness and trying to keep clothing and blankets washed to prevent disease. The health and wellbeing of the camp is one way to understand textile labor, for sure. And soldiers are really resistant to doing that labor and are wishing to outsource that to women if possible. And that's like a common lament in orderly books in the period is, you know, military leaders are like "why won't these men do their own laundry?" or "we're begging them to get a little cleaner." (Laughs) You know, there is that tension about them not wanting to undertake that labor if there are women available to do so. But there are also, you know, really vibrant accounts of soldiers who are writing, talking about sewing in the military camps, sometimes learning from other soldiers that

technique. So when there is downtime, especially when they're, you know, wintering -- especially Valley Forge -- you know, they have time on their hands to do this, if they would like. But some are really resistant to learning, and others are just trying to, again, outsource that to folks with better skill sets.

Tegan 34:24

Yeah, that makes sense.

Emily 34:25

It just shows also, again, this larger trend of mending. I think that for those who had better skill sets, if you could direct that labor to someone who could do it more skillfully, or if you could afford to do so, you would do so.

Tegan 34:38

Yeah, that makes sense. Can I ask about a type of documentation that you've been mentioning? What is an orderly book?

Emily 34:45

Sure! Orderly books are a form of record keeping for the Continental Army during the American Revolution. This is a type of document that many military officials keep. But it's usually a daily record of what's happening in the military in a certain encampment.

Tegan 35:01

Okay!

Emily 35:02

So, let's say at Valley Forge, while the Continental Army is there, someone is assigned to write down everything that happens during the day, especially if it comes to formal directives by the military.

Tegan 35:13

Okay.

Emily 35:13

So it can have as mundane, you know...announcements of what regiments are there at the time, or who's moving where, or directives from General Washington about who should be getting what rations. It can be really mundane. But actually, many orderly books are the best place to find the top down directives coming from Washington about women's presence in the camp and textile repair work, or textile labor in general that's happening in the camps. He's specifically directing women who are in the camps to start washing for certain regiments. He also is, again, regularly asking soldiers to be washing their clothing and washing themselves. He's reallocating certain groups of tailors who are enlisted in the military to turn their labor to making and repairing soldiers' clothing. So those kinds of directives around textiles are really important threads of evidence for me as I'm looking through these formal military records.

Tegan 35:14

That's fascinating! And I think it just goes to show how much of life textiles touch or are touched by, that your research is so diverse. Because you're looking at something that's pretty much everywhere people are.

Emily 35:14

Yeah, they...you know, I often say that early Americans live in a material world first. You know, we think often through writings and paper. But I think I would say that early Americans are best understood through the objects they leave behind. And for textiles, it is such a pervasive form of object. For any of them, you cannot go a day without using them in some way. They're deeply intimate and personal. They're worn on the body, but they're also part of this soft infrastructure of your life. You know, household furnishings, upholstery on your furniture, the curtains on your window, the sheets on your bed, the bags that carry your grain in the military. Like, there's so many realms in which cloth is an essential component of how someone would operate and move around in their daily life.

Tegan 36:02

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. It makes me sad talking about this, that we don't have more information about how the Revere family themselves related to cloth. One of my favorite objects in our collection is an embroidery sampler that was made by a great granddaughter of Revere's. And so that's textile, but it's very different, because that was probably not a hobby, that was probably part of her education that she was doing that, and she was getting an upper class education. But it's also, you know, something that is very personal, because she would have spent hours and hours on it. It's a very detailed cross stitch sampler that has a verse on it, and the alphabet. And I just love it because it is so material. And not to say that a serving dish is not also material culture, but there's...I don't know. There's something about textiles, at least for me.

Emily 38:06

Yeah, I'm right there with you. That sampler sounds lovely, and I think it's a good reminder too, that so much of needlework that survives from early America is also predicated by so many other pieces that we probably don't have. And so samplers are often...when they're at their most aesthetic, their most skillfully rendered or embroidered, it's probably one of the last one of many other simpler ones that they had to produce in some sort of educational instruction that was tied to household management. So those earlier spaces are where maybe girls are learning repair work. Or cross stitch is really first learned to mark on clothing for laundry marks so that when you have your clothing sent out -- if you do do that -- you'll know who it belonged to, and then can return it appropriately. So they're all these compounding skill set. You start very simple, and then by the end, when you can culminate in some sort of beautiful needlework picture, you know that all those other skill sets had to come first for them to express this more decorative aesthetic version.

Tegan 39:17

Yeah.

Emily 39:18

So I always like to think of those layers. They wouldn't have been able to get there without those first, earlier skill iterations.

Tegan 39:25

Yeah, that's a really good way of looking at it. And of course, it is the sampler that becomes the heirloom, and that is saved, and that doesn't need repairs, because it's not an object of use in the same way. Or if it needs repairs, it might be lesser,

Emily 39:36

Yeah.

Tegan 39:36

And can I ask you your opinion on some kind of myth busting that I've heard in the history spaces that I think I have found really useful, but I haven't asked a textile expert about it? There's this popular myth that people were shorter "back then." And often the general public doesn't have a specific idea of what "back then" looks like. But research shows that in the American Revolution -- you know, our "back then" -- the average height was about an inch shorter than the average height today. So they were shorter, and also not that much. And a lot of textiles that are in museums are fairly small, and I have heard that that's contributing to people's belief that people were shorter back then. And I've also heard that the reason is because those are the ones that haven't been remade as much; that you have something big and it gets cut down, and that's what ends up in museum collections. Has your research shed any light on whether museums really do have textiles that are smaller than the average textile that might have existed at the time?

Emily 40:38

Yeah, this is a great question, and it's absolutely good myth to bust. It's one of my favorite to bust, so I appreciate you asking. People were not smaller back then. Often in the museum world, what I would refer to this as is "survival bias," which is that we know that, especially for textiles, the portion of what actually survives across centuries from early America to eventually make it into a museum collection is only a very small cross section of what existed in the period. And there's all sorts of reasons why someone would save textiles instead of repurposing and reusing. And some of that, of course, is sentimental, and that's often a good indicator of why they're saved. You know, sometimes it's associated with someone's wedding or like a major life event. Sometimes you'll see children's clothing that is saved because the child had died and they're keeping a piece of clothing. Those kinds of sentimental motivators are absolutely one reason. But if we think about it in the context of textile alteration and repurposing based on value, larger sizes of things are easier to be cut down and used again. So proportionally, what is surviving in collections may look smaller because they're either not able to be worn by somebody else, or not able to be repurposed in a certain way that we would expect other fabric to be used for. So there is absolutely a bias and kind of slant towards what is saved in museum collections that's not reflective of a broader representation of clothing in the period. But I also see all the time what we might consider to be larger sizes of clothing that also survives. And I think that's a really important counterpoint to the things that are tiny, to remind us, you know, bodies back then are also looking very different across a spectrum of shapes! And clothing and textiles would have reflected that too.

Tegan 42:31

Yeah.

Emily 42:32

So no, they were not smaller "back then."

Tegan 42:34

I'm actually thinking about a conversation that I had with our curator recently. We have a fair number of t-shirts in our collection, because we collect commemorative items. We collect things...you know, people riffing on the Midnight Ride story with a Paul Revere on a motorcycle, and things like that. So we have a fair number, and someone was offering to donate something that we were interested in for the collection. And David said, "if possible, let's get a small or extra small, because we don't need to take up the extra storage space of a larger shirt in our collection when this isn't for anyone to wear," which I thought was a really funny...you know, is anyone going to be looking at our collection 100 years from now going, "oh, they were smaller back then, look at all these small t-shirts." And it's just like, "no, he just doesn't want the bigger box."

Emily 43:20

Yeah, those choices, of course, make perfect practical sense from a museum storage standpoint. But then yeah, will generations down the line be like, "oh, everyone was wearing an extra small t-shirt?" We don't know, but certainly possible! Those kinds of biases we have to think about when we think about the broader collection as a whole, and what is there and what isn't there?

Tegan 43:39

Yeah, and with the extra small t shirt, whether that amount of fabric difference matters in collection storage, whether that's real or a joke, is...it is and it isn't?

Emily 43:49

Yeah.

Tegan 43:50

Because the...you know, it does add up.

Emily 43:51

Yeah.

Tegan 43:52

We have probably twenty t-shirts in our collection.

Emily 43:54

And I would say again, for most museums, like every inch matters when it comes to storage. So yeah, they'll take what they can get.

Tegan 44:01

Yes. I had an instructor in grad school who said to the class, "what's the final frontier? And what...you know, just think, think, like pop culture, what's the final frontier?" And we'd say "space." She said, "yes! Space is the final frontier. Remember that in your museum careers." And yeah, every inch matters.

Emily 44:17

I love it. Yeah, yeah, there's...I often say that there's no museum that's actually happy with their storage conditions. They always wish they had more space.

Tegan 44:26

(Laughs.)

Emily 44:27

Yeah, perfect does not exist.

Tegan 44:28

Right, right. Well, I love how much this conversation has been about the nitty-gritty of museums, which makes sense because it is such a material-focused conversation. But I do also want to bring it back briefly to the time period that you study. And just generally, broadly speaking, what's one thing that you wish more people understood about this period?

Emily 44:49

I mean, I think I said it earlier, but I'll say it again, because I think it is the takeaway is, early Americans are living in a material world. The objects they surround themselves with and use daily shape their experiences. In many cases, shape their experiences maybe more powerfully than what they could write or what is written around them. And I think that tangible, object-focused lens on early America gives a richer understanding of how, you know, regardless of your status or place in the world, how your intimate worlds are constructed. I think that gives us a kind of proximity that, I don't know, I think we're all craving to folks in the past to better understand their lives and their worlds and their choices. And I think objects are the way to do that.

Tegan 45:39

Yeah, that's great. Well, thank you so much, Emily for being on the podcast today. This has been fascinating.

Emily 45:44

Thank you so much. It's been a treat.

Tegan 45:48

Next we'll hear from a couple of our interpreters here at the Paul Revere House. So if you will virtually follow me, we'll step inside.

Derek 45:54

Welcome back everybody to our little segment where we interview our interpreters. My name is Derek Hunter, and today I am joined with:

Greg 46:08

Greg Schofield!

Derek 46:10

And Greg, how long have you been here at the museum?

Greg 46:13

I've been working here as an interpreter for just over a year now.

Derek 46:16

Cool. And what brought you to us?

Greg 46:18

I specialized in public history when I got my bachelor's degree. So when I moved all the way out here to Massachusetts, American colonial history is what brought me. And the Paul Revere House is the place to be when talking about the revolution, I think.

Derek 46:34

Yeah! I mean, this is certainly the place to talk about colonial revolutionary history.

Greg 46:38

(Laughs)

Derek 46:38

So one of my favorite questions to ask is, what do you wish people asked you more about? Like, what do you wish you could talk more about in the house?

Greg 46:46

I always get the most excited when I can talk about the house and its place in the wider Boston neighborhood, both the North End and the city as a whole.

Derek 46:58

Yeah.

Greg 47:00

Because so much of talking about Paul and his efforts in the Sons of Liberty and beyond are part of that wider picture of America becoming its own nation.

Derek 47:12

Yeah.

Greg 47:13

So talking about why this house was the one Paul ended up moving into, the part it played in the earlier neighborhood and the neighborhood as it evolved in the 1800s. I always really like talking about that larger context within (inaudible).

Derek 47:32

Yeah, I think what's so cool about our job in particular is that people come in, I think, with a very particular idea of like, what they're gonna learn. They think they're gonna learn about like, "oh, it's just the Midnight Ride and Paul Revere. He was on a horse. The British are coming." But then they learn about the culture of the area, who the people living around the area were, what the house was for so many different kinds of people throughout Boston history. And it's such a great starting point into learning, to so much more.

Greg 47:57

Exactly! Every time I can talk about the flower store, or the Italian bank of the downstairs, is a good day. (Laughs)

Derek 48:06

I love to bring up the bank. Yeah? People always like, "what? This was a bank??"

Greg 48:09

It was a bank. It was tenement housing. It was a mansion. It was-

Derek 48:13

It was Paul Revere's house.

Greg 48:16

It was Paul Revere's house!

Derek 48:17

Yeah, which might be the coolest. But we're probably biased, a bit.

Greg 48:20

Ahh, yeah. Only a little.

Derek 48:22

As interpreters, we're there to, like, kind of bring the history to life. So what do you like to bring from your own background, I guess?

Greg 48:23

A lot of what I've ended up talking the most about, when given the chance, is this side of Paul that would have existed within those four walls, right? The Paul that was not necessarily just a political activist or an industrial powerhouse, but the Paul that was extremely competitive at card games.

Derek 48:51

Yeah.

Greg 48:51

Right? We have so many letters, both from his friends and acquaintances, but also just between him and his wife, showing a very human side of Paul that we don't always get with these larger than life figures.

Derek 49:06

Right.

Greg 49:06

Especially someone like Paul who is memorialized in a poem meant to galvanize revolutionary action.

Derek 49:14

Right.

Greg 49:15

So we don't talk about the Paul who had so many children and-

Derek 49:21

So many children.

Greg 49:21

Sooooo many children. But even once they moved out, he had a full house.

Derek 49:27

Right.

Greg 49:28

Right? He liked to come home to a noisy home.

Derek 49:31

For sure.

Greg 49:32

And a Paul who wrote love poems for-

Derek 49:36

I know. I love the love poems.

Greg 49:37

-his second wife. Truly, in my opinion, middling poetry. He-

Derek 49:40

Yeah.

Greg 49:40

He was not an excellent-

Derek 49:44

No, but they were cute.

Greg 49:45

They were cute! Yeah, he had these ideas from his heart-

Derek 49:50

Yeah.

Greg 49:50

-often about his wife, which is another very human emotion-

Derek 49:55

For sure.

Greg 49:56

And felt the need to write them down when the moment struck him, on the back of sales bills. As he's lounging in his mansion home, he called it, right over on Charter Street. So every time people want to know about these other things on the table, there's always some extra bit we can talk about.

Derek 50:15

Right.

Greg 50:16

The human Paul Revere.

Derek 50:17

Yeah, some little factoid you can bring and kind of make him a little bit more human. I mean, I guess all the founding fathers are mythologized to an extent, but I don't know if any of them are as mythologized as Revere is.

Greg 50:28

Yeah, every other founding father tends to have some great skill that they are...

Derek 50:35

Yeah.

Greg 50:35

...that is attributed to them. And that skill can be applied to a wider variety of things. Samuel Adams is a firebrand.

Derek 50:45

Right.

Greg 50:45

So as much as he is writing all these letters, he's going out making speeches and making connections with people.

Derek 50:53

Yeah.

Greg 50:53

Joseph Warren is "the doctor," so that brings this idea of humility and compassion to the man behind the myth.

Derek 51:02

Yeah.

Greg 51:02

But Paul Revere being known for a few hours of his life around one midnight-

Derek 51:08

(Laughs) Like, literally a few hours.

Greg 51:09

A few hours. And those few hours that, when later in his life, he wants to be credited anonymously for these stories, brings a very different view of this person who had 83 years of existence.

Derek 51:26

I know. I think one of my favorite things as an interpreter is that somebody will walk in and then walk out and think, "wow, that sounds like a person," or like, "wow, I could envision myself in this time period for a moment." I think we are so removed from the colonial era.

Greg 51:42

Absolutely, yeah.

Derek 51:44

I think that's...it's a little portal into, like, a very different, I don't know, headspace overall.

Greg 51:49

Absolutely! And talking about...even when we have to talk in more broad strokes, because it's, you know, impossible to know anything for certain in this field, 100%...giving people even those broad strokes of living back then, of when it's overcast outside-

Derek 52:09

Right.

Greg 52:09

-do I have to put more effort into showing people things because it's just dark in the house.

Derek 52:15

Yeah.

Greg 52:15

Even with our electric lighting, it's dark, it's still dark.

Derek 52:18

Yeah, it's a moody place, I think, to be in. Yeah.

Greg 52:21

Yeah. And talking about why different styles came into fashion, all sorts of art history that reflects the tastes of the people who lived there.

Derek 52:33

Yeah.

Greg 52:35

People love the decor. People hate the decor.

Derek 52:38

I know, there are a lot of opinions about how it looks.

Greg 52:41

(Laughs) Yeah! Right? About which era of the house is the prettiest, whether they like the yellows or the exposed wood. But they go in, and that means that they're engaging with the same thoughts people would have been engaging with way back when.

Derek 52:58

Yeah. I love to say, like some of this was the same wood that Paul Revere was staring at when he woke up in the morning, you know? Like it's the same stuff, which is so bizarre, I guess, to think about. Like it is literally the same piece of wood.

Greg 53:09

It's the same stuff. And he would wake up and he would look at the wood, this fixer upper of a house that he moved into-

Derek 53:17

Right, yeah.

Greg 53:17

-thinking, you know, "I gotta repaint it. I gotta sand it down. My kids are gonna get splinters." You know, right?

Derek 53:25

Yeah.

Greg 53:25

All sorts of very human thoughts,

Derek 53:27

Yeah. That is what's so cool about being at a house museum, is like, you get to talk about the mundane. You get to talk about the boring, in-between stuff. But that's what's like....that's what we miss, I think in the big ideas. That's what you miss in the Midnight Ride.

Greg 53:41

Yes.

Derek 53:42

You don't know about the guy, you know?

Greg 53:44

Just recently, a few months ago, when we replaced the roof on our home, I remember I was speaking to my parents about it, about how I was at the house when we were doing this thing we only did every couple decades, right? We're replacing the roof, and we have to make all these considerations. And my parents sat me down and said, "Greg, we replace our roof on our home every 20 to 30 years as well."

Derek 54:07

Right.

Greg 54:07

"That's just what you do with houses."

Derek 54:09

Yeah.

Greg 54:10

That's something that's been rotating in my head ever since, is, "this is a house."

Derek 54:14

Yeah.

Greg 54:15

Right? It's a museum. It is over 300 years old. But it's still a house, and so many of the steps we take to preserve its history and talk about the legacy are rooted in the fact that it is a house. I always talk about when, whenever the many, many children come up right, the floors would have still been creaking the same way you can hear today.

Derek 54:39

Yes, yeah.

Greg 54:41

And that gets the widest eyes as they imagine all the little feet running around-

Derek 54:47

I know.

Greg 54:47

-as Paul is downstairs holding a business meeting.

Derek 54:50

They must have been so loud. Like, literally so loud.

Greg 54:54

(Laughs) You know, pots and pans are echoing up from the cellar.

Derek 54:58

Yeah.

Greg 54:58

And apprentices and children are all living life in a very crowded space.

Derek 55:06

Yeah, you get to feel the real like physical aspects of history in the house.

Greg 55:10

Yeah.

Derek 55:11

Alright, well, thank you so much for talking with me. I always love to hear people's different perspectives on the house.

Greg 55:16

Oh, thank you for having me. This has been a lot of fun.

Derek 55:19

Yeah! Okay, thank you everybody for listening. That's all we have today.

Tegan 55:27

Thank you for tuning in to Revere House Radio. I'm your host, Tegan Kehoe, and I am the Research and Adult Program director here at the Paul Revere House. Our production team for this season includes Derek Hunter, Mehitabel Glenhaber, and Adrian Turnbull-Riley. Thank you to RP Hale for the use of his performance on the harpsichord as our theme music. If you're listening online, we encourage you to subscribe in your favorite podcast app so you never miss an episode. Revere House Radio is a production of the Paul Revere Memorial Association, the nonprofit which operates the Paul Revere House Museum. You can find more information, subscribe to our mailing list or social media, or become a member on our website at www.paulreverehouse.org. Or, come visit us in Boston!