

**Putting Our Best Feet Forward:
Shoes Get Conserved at Historic Deerfield**

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Shoes, like clothing, say a lot about their wearer. Size, materials, decoration, and height of heel can reveal clues as to the gender and status of wearer, as well as occasions on which they were worn. Wear marks and soiling can attest to frequency of wearing and environments inhabited or walked in. Even alterations, either contemporary or later, reveal changes in size or ownership as well as changing styles. All of these factors influence the condition of shoes in museum collections today.

Two pairs of extraordinary woolen shoes in the collection of Historic Deerfield each presented their own stories and resulting exhibition challenges for the museum. One, a pair of women's shoes, was a gift to the museum in 1976 by Mr. and Mrs. Kendall Bancroft. The other, a tiny pair of child's shoes, was purchased with the Mr. and Mrs. Hugh B. Vanderbilt Fund for Curatorial Acquisitions. In planning the show, we knew these objects had important stories to tell. But condition problems needed to be addressed before they could be put on view.

Patterned Wool, Problem Wool

Dating to the 1730s or 1740s, these women's shoes feature an eye-catching fashion fabric of pink and green brocaded wool on a cream wool ground, covering both the upper and the heel of each shoe. Inside, the shoes are lined with a bleached linen fabric around the sides, and a brown leather insole. These shoes are known as straights - not characterized by a right and left shoe per se, but able to be worn on either foot. Like some women's styles worn today, the high heels of this pair are impractical, and suggest, along with the fabric, purchase and ownership by a wealthier woman.



The straps would have been secured onto the wearer's feet by a buckle. Length 9", width 3"; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Kendall Bancroft. 76.095.1.

One of the shoes retains its paper label indicating that they were made by Jonathan Hose (c. 1699-1769), a cordwainer, or shoe maker, working in the Cheapside area of London. Although the history of ownership of the shoes is not known, Hose was one of several 18th-century shoemakers exporting his finished goods to the colonies.

Wool is a protein fiber that provides a tempting treat for insects, as indicated by the numerous holes and areas of loss in the brocaded material. These losses significantly weakened the fabric. Lacking an adequate stiffener around the back quarters of the shoes, the fabric had sagged and wrinkled, further deteriorating the wool. In addition, the shoes were enlarged after their initial construction, either to accommodate the growth of the original owner or, more likely, for a subsequent wearer. This alteration required splitting the fashion fabric at the vamp (over the wearer's instep), and a piece of the fabric acting as a gusset was inserted opposite the orientation of the rest of the fabric. Previous attempts at restoration, done without the benefit of today's technology, had also begun to fail, most notably the visible adhesive used on the heels. All of these conditions put stress on the shoe, and threatened further deterioration.



Montreal textile conservator Eva Burnham had her work cut out for her. She began by cleaning the surface of the brocaded wool. De-ionized water was steamed onto each shoe to remove the adhesive at those areas of the heel where glue had been applied. A compatible, matching fabric was then applied directly around the heels, serving as an under layment. The original wool was then reattached using a neutral pH adhesive. The same under layment fabric was used to

support other areas of loss on the shoes, and then stitched into place with silk thread. In total, Burnham spent more than 30 hours bringing these shoes back to life.

Little Shoes, Big Problems



Probably made from an existing quantity of fabric, the uppers of one shoe are pieced both horizontally and vertically across the tongue, vamp and throat. Length 3.5" width 1.25"; Mr. and Mrs. Hugh B. Vanderbilt Fund for Curatorial Acquisitions, 2001.56.1.

The other pair is a pair of child's shoes made from a pink-colored wool fashion fabric. The shoes are lined with both wool and linen around the sides, and have a brown leather insole lining the bottom. The outer edges of the wool fabric are bound with linen ribbon. The fastening for the shoes consists of matching pink silk ribbon ties. A note dated 1888 that accompanied the shoes at the time of purchase indicates a history of ownership by members of the Root family of Connecticut, made for an ancestor named Wealthy Peck Bardwell in 1763.

As with the women's wool shoes, this child's pair saw a lot of wear and tear and showed significant soiling and insect damage. These factors contributed to several areas of loss in the pink wool, as well as considerable damage to the binding itself. Inadequate support caused wrinkling in the back quarter much like that seen on the women's pair.

To begin her treatment, Eva cleaned the outer surfaces. She applied matching wool to back those areas where original wool had degraded. The linen binding that remained on the shoe was covered with matching silk crepe, a sheer fabric used for stabilization, and then stitched with hair silk. The silk tie ribbons were likewise stabilized using hair silk. Eva then crafted custom-made inner supports using cotton stockinette and polyester batting. The shoes, particularly the silk ribbon, remain extremely fragile, yet Eva's hard work has stopped serious degradation and helped them look their best for display.



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