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**Relic furniture in Victorian America**

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**University of Delaware (Winterthur Program), 1993**

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**RELIC FURNITURE IN VICTORIAN AMERICA**

by

**Elaine Will Kuncio**

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Early  
American Culture

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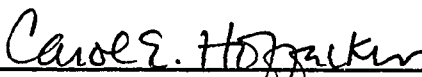
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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines America's nineteenth-century fascination with relic furniture. It attempts to identify the motivating forces behind this fascination, and to determine what Victorian American values and desires were reflected by the relic objects created during this time.

Research focused on nineteenth-century diaries, letters, magazine articles, and other documents containing references to relic objects of the period. In an attempt to understand the psychological forces underlying the potency of relic objects, modern psychological analyses of the importance of myth, religion, place, and memory were also explored.

In the minds of Victorian Americans, relics--imbued with potency associated with past people, places, and events--survived as tangible proof of people and events that played vital roles in America's history. The relic objects they created and preserved provided nineteenth-century Americans with material evidence of their country's origins, and helped them confirm their own place within America's historical context.

## INTRODUCTION

The Victorian age in America is often regarded as an era of excess and eccentricity. The material culture of the period reflects both characteristics. It was, in many respects, excessive: furniture was overstuffed, rooms were over-decorated, every nook and cranny of a typical middle-class Victorian home was occupied by a decorative object or subjected to some type of ornate detailing. In terms of the eccentricity of the age, perhaps one of the most eccentric expressions of the time emerged in the form of relic furniture.

Produced primarily during the middle and late nineteenth century, relic furniture was fashioned from materials that had specific associations with the past. Any piece of relic furniture derives its significance from the material from which it is made, be it wood from a famous felled tree, or fragments of a previously standing, historically significant building. This paper will examine the nineteenth-century relic furniture phenomenon and attempt to explain some of the motivating forces behind the creation of relic furniture in Victorian America.

## RELIC FURNITURE IN VICTORIAN AMERICA

In order to understand relic furniture, one must first understand the term "relic"--both the narrow definition of the term, and the meaning it assumed in the minds of Victorian Americans. Primarily, the term has religious associations. In this context, a relic is defined as

some object, such as part of the body or clothing, an article of personal use, or the like, which remains as a memorial of a departed saint, martyr, or other holy person, and as such is carefully preserved and held in esteem or veneration.

Examples of holy relics are virtually innumerable, ranging from the relatively obscure--the remains of Saint Ursula, preserved in St. Ursula's church in Rome; vials of blood belonging to Saint Januarius, housed in Naples Cathedral--to those religious relics that enjoy more widespread recognition, even outside of the Catholic church. These include fragments of the "true cross" upon which Jesus was crucified, thorns from the crown that had been placed upon His head, and one of the most celebrated (and closely analyzed) relics, the famous Shroud of Turin. Bits of

saints' bodies, as well as objects associated with these holy martyrs, are enshrined in reliquaries all over the world and continue to be revered by the faithful. The expansive realm of relics has been classified by the Catholic church into two distinct categories: first-class (also referred to as "real" relics) are actual remains of a saint's earthly body. Second-class relics, sometimes called representative relics, are objects that were closely associated with the living saint, or that had been physically touched to the saint's remains. In the eyes of the church and in the minds of the faithful, both types of relics are regarded as holy, and deserving of profound veneration.

When placed in a secular context, the term "relic" can be much more broadly defined. It can apply to "a precious or valuable thing," "something kept as a remembrance or souvenir of a person, thing, or place" (such as a lock of hair from the head of a loved one), or simply "that which is left behind." In the minds of Victorian Americans, the word was defined with even more precision. Within the vocabulary of the age, something was accurately and explicitly considered a relic if it was an "object invested with interest by reason of its antiquity or associations with the past." Of even greater importance was a relic that existed as a "surviving

memorial of some occurrence, period, people, etc." This type of valuable relic, one which could be associated with a long-ago event, represented something grand.

Nineteenth-century Americans were fascinated by the past, not only by the heroic pasts of ancient and distant civilizations, but also by their own young nation's more immediate past. At that time, however, much of America's past remained largely undocumented. As diarist George Templeton Strong observed in 1854,

We are so young a people that we feel the want of nationality, and delight in whatever asserts our national 'American' existence. We have not, like England and France, centuries of achievements and calamities to look back on; we have no record of Americanism and we feel its want.<sup>1</sup>

Historically-frustrated Americans like Strong therefore attempted to fill this void by forming historical societies, introducing various historical publications, and establishing museums. Museums and the objects within them played a vital role in the documentation of the past. To the Victorians, a record of the American experience would not be complete without objects--actual relics of the past. A written history was valuable, but an acceptable record would also include *things*. So

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<sup>1</sup>Diarist George Templeton Strong as quoted in Elizabeth Stillinger, The Antiquers (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1980), p. 3.

nineteenth-century Americans began exhaustively collecting and preserving any and all objects--antiques--that could be connected with their country's past.

The criteria used to define an antique during this period were somewhat different than the criteria applied today. As Elizabeth Stillinger has pointed out, in the minds of nineteenth-century collectors, an American antique

was not the product of a distinctive American culture, representing an identifiable period and style. Instead, it was regarded as a piece of history--appreciated in direct proportion to its degree of association with past events or persons, especially famous or heroic ones.<sup>2</sup>

According to this definition, relics would have been the most valuable and potent of all antiques, and as such, were highly prized.

John Fanning Watson, who has been called the "first historian of American decorative arts," was one of Victorian America's most prominent relic collectors. Although "not an objective, scientific historian," he has been accurately described as "an antiquarian typical of his day."<sup>3</sup> And typically, he collected antiques not

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<sup>2</sup>Stillinger, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Frank H. Sommer, "John F. Watson: First Historian of American Decorative Arts," Winterthur Newsletter, Vol. VII, no. 2 (February 24, 1961), p. 3.

because of their artistic merit but because of their value as association items--that is, items associated with the past. Watson was particularly fascinated by relics.

Among the bits of relic wood collected by Watson were "woods from various important buildings, trees, and ships" which he had "fashioned into picture frames, furniture, chests, and snuffboxes for himself and his friends."<sup>4</sup>

Although pieces of relic wood were sometimes collected and preserved in their original state (e.g., portions of tree limbs or sections of bark), these fragments were commonly used to create functional objects. Watson's crafted relic objects and other pieces of American relic furniture, made from many different relic trees, survive as evidence of this Victorian practice.

Perhaps no tree provided more wood for the fabrication of relic objects than Hartford's renowned Charter Oak. According to legend, it was in the hollow of this tree in 1687 that Connecticut's 1662 charter was successfully hidden from British forces sent to retrieve the document. The heroic oak was thereafter hailed by the people of Connecticut as the patriotic protector of the colony. On August 21, 1856 the ancient, weakened tree fell to the ground during a violent thunderstorm.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

Reaction to the oak's demise was immediate and dramatic.

As described in an 1856 account of the event,

The report of its fall brought thousands of people to visit it, who bore away acorns, sprigs, leaves, and parts of limbs.... A photographic view was taken of it as it lay. At noon, a dirge was played by Colt's Armory Band over the fallen tree, and at sundown the bells of the city were tolled, as a token of the universal feeling that one of the venerated links which bind these days to the irrecoverable past had been sundered.<sup>5</sup>

The immense tree was divided into portions of various sizes, which were carefully parceled out to collectors and antiquarians. Some pieces of the Charter Oak were left completely unworked. Robert Trent notes that "These curious portions of wood, many of which still have the bark on them, were known as 'relics' during the period."<sup>6</sup> Other fragments were highly worked and artistically fashioned into complex pieces of furniture. Several different types of smaller objects were also made from the oak, including gavels, snuff boxes, pieces of jewelry, and picture frames. Many of these items were clearly functional and meant to be used, while others were viewed

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<sup>5</sup>Sylvester Bliss, "The Charter Oak," The Historical Magazine, Vol. I, no. 1 (January, 1857), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Trent, "The Charter Oak Artifacts," Connecticut Historical Society Review, Vol. 49, no. 3 (Summer, 1984), p. 130.

primarily as exhibit pieces. John H. Most produced a number of Charter Oak items that were put on exhibit in both the Main Building and the state's Connecticut Cottage display at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia boasted its own famous American tree: the "Liberty Elm" or "Treaty Elm," under which William Penn allegedly signed his famous treaty with the Delaware Indians in 1681. The tree fell victim to a windstorm in 1810, at which time it was estimated to be almost three hundred years old. One relic piece from the Liberty Elm was a small chest owned by John Fanning Watson (now in the collection of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum). Painted on the inside of the lid is a watercolor image of the stately elm tree, and below that an inscription which reads, "The great Elm Tree of Kensington, an emblem of the unbroken Faith of Wm Penn, who held his Treaty with the Indians under its shadow. This box is made of its wood of yr 1810." Pieces of other relic woods make up other parts of the chest. As a tag glued to the interior of the box explains, two inlaid mahogany stars are "of the House in St. Domingo, where Columbus dwelt," and the chest's walnut edges are made from a walnut tree, famous because it was "once one of a cluster of Forest trees fronting the Hall of Independence."

This grouping of trees associated with Independence Hall prompted the creation of other pieces of relic furniture. A chamber suite manufactured by Philadelphia cabinetmaker George J. Henkels was "made from the wood of an old maple tree that grew in Independence Square and was over two hundred years old, having been planted about 1650 and cut down in 1875."<sup>7</sup> This suite of relic furniture was also displayed at the Centennial Exposition.

Walnut from another Independence Hall tree, along with a portion of the Treaty Elm, was used in the construction of the so-called "Liberty and Equality Chair," designed by John Fanning Watson and built by William Snyder in 1838. This impressive chair (currently on display at the Atwater Kent Museum in Philadelphia) contains several other relic pieces, including more mahogany from Christopher Columbus' St. Domingo house, oak taken from William Penn's house in Letitia Court, a bit of cane seating from a chair once belonging to William Penn, wood from the United States Frigate Constitution, and perhaps the most remarkable piece of this relic collage, a "portion of hair from the head of Chief Justice Marshall, in the centre of the chair, under a glass case ...

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<sup>7</sup>J.S. Ingram, The Centennial Exposition Described and Illustrated (Philadelphia, 1876), p. 382.

procured by William H. Moore, undertaker, after Mr. Marshall's death."<sup>8</sup> (This glass-covered personal relic is no longer a part of the chair; at some point it became detached, and its whereabouts is no longer known). This chair was a composition of elements, each intended to excite in Americans an awareness of and admiration for their country's early years. As a whole, the chair was valued, even venerated, because of the powerful associations of its many relic elements with a grand American past.

Yet another elm tree was made famous by important activity that took place beneath it. It was under an elm which once stood on the common in Cambridge, Massachusetts that George Washington supposedly took command of the Continental Army in 1775. Although the tree itself stood until 1923, a limb which fell during a storm in 1857 was obtained by Charles H. Clarke of Cambridge. Clarke did nothing with the limb for several years, but by the time of the 1876 Centennial Exposition, he had used the relic wood to build the "Washington Elm" chair.<sup>9</sup> This imposing piece of furniture, featuring an embroidered image of a standing George Washington on the upholstered back, and

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<sup>8</sup>D.W. Belisle, "A Singularly Historical Chair," History of Independence Hall, 1859, p. 362.

<sup>9</sup>Rodris Roth, "Pieces of History," The Magazine Antiques (May, 1972), p. 876.

surmounted by a large, carved wooden eagle, was another of the many relic objects displayed at the Exposition.

Another "Washington Chair" was fashioned from the wood of a house in New York City that was occupied briefly by President Washington in 1789. The chair was given to the New York Historical Society by Benjamin R. Winthrop in 1857. Writing in 1889, Martha J. Lamb provides this description of the chair:

A bust of Washington, in a wreath of laurel, forms the centre ornament of the upper part of the chair. The front of the seat bears the escutcheon and arms of the United States, while the arms of the city and state of New York are carved in relief on medallions. The legend is inscribed on a silver plate, inserted in the back of the chair.<sup>10</sup>

Lamb proudly reported that the chair "graces the platform of the audience-room of the New York Historical Society," and is "occupied by its president on public occasions."<sup>11</sup> The Washington Chair therefore served as both an exhibition piece and, on important occasions, a ceremonially functional object.

Relics associated with President Andrew Jackson were also made into pieces of furniture. Hickory trees that grew on the grounds of Jackson's home, the Hermitage,

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<sup>10</sup>Martha J. Lamb, The Washington Inauguration (New York: White & Allen, 1889), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

were transformed into two chairs and a hatrack. This rustic suite, dominated by the hatrack with antlers and powder horns, was displayed at the Centennial Exposition. Hanging on the hatrack were other Jacksonian relics, including, as described in Harper's Weekly,

the brush of the red fox killed by Jackson, after a chase of many miles, which resulted in the death of his favorite horse, 'Jim Snow.' The white horse tail which hangs from the rack opposite the fox brush is a relic of this renowned hunter.<sup>12</sup>

The entire grouping therefore memorializes not only Jackson, but also his loyal hunting companion and the objects of their hunt.

The above listing of American relic furniture examples is by no means complete, but it provides a broad sampling of the types of relic objects that Victorian Americans were producing, collecting, and displaying. Clearly, and not surprisingly, most of the relic objects created had direct associations with prominent American men, such as George Washington, William Penn, or Andrew Jackson. If such personal associations were lacking, the relics could at least be securely linked to America's colonial past. For example, a tree that once stood in front of Philadelphia's Independence Hall qualified as a

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<sup>12</sup>Harper's Weekly Magazine (November 18, 1876), p. 929.

relic simply because of its proximity to the birthplace of democracy in the new republic.

Just as the Catholic church has defined different types of religious relics (first-class and second-class), the broad category of relic furniture (and other secular relic objects) can be divided into different subgroups, and a typology of Victorian relics can be created by drawing distinctions among objects based on the level of association a relic object has with the past. The most remote (and therefore least powerful) type of relic is any object which is valued simply because the material of which it is made is quite old. None of the American relic furniture here discussed would fit into this category, since all of the pieces have a more immediate association with past people and/or events. An object that is valued because it is made of material that is both old and distinctive of person and/or place can be classified as a secondary relic. For example, the chair containing wood from the New York City home where Washington once stayed would be included in this category, by virtue of its association with Washington. Finally, an object made from material that has intimate connections with a distinct person and/or place at a particular time--that is, at a significant point in a distinctively American history--qualifies as a primary relic.

The primary relics treasured by the Victorians included objects made from the tree that sheltered William Penn when he made his treaty with the Indians, the elm under which Washington gathered his troops in 1775, or from the immense oak that protected Connecticut's charter. Because of their vital connection to key points in America's past, relics from trees that played important roles in America's history were the most valued and the most powerful of Victorian American relic objects. While primary relics were clearly the most potent, all relics were respected and venerated by nineteenth-century Americans because they possess a very real power, a multi-faceted power which derives from a number of sources.

One basic element of the power of relics can be attributed simply to their antiquity. Nineteenth-century references to American relics rarely fail to mention their impressive age. Even when the exact age of a relic is unknown, there is a definite awareness that the tree which spawned the relic was on the earth for a considerable amount of time, having been living and standing, quite literally, for centuries. Samuel Bliss admitted in 1857 that the "age of the Charter Oak there are no means of determining, its interior parts having begun to decay before the settlement of Hartford, two hundred and twenty

years ago," yet he enthusiastically estimated that the tree had endured "the blasts of a thousand winters...."<sup>13</sup>

Trees in general were regarded by Victorians as among the most majestic of nature's ornaments. Writers and poets such as Lydia Sigourney reminded Americans that an impressive tree stood as "a monument of the goodness of the Almighty."<sup>14</sup> Magazines of the period frequently featured articles singing the praises of trees, especially those of considerable longevity. J.S. Barry's "Old Trees," published in an 1859 issue of Atlantic Monthly, begins with the statement, "Old trees are living epochs in the history of world."<sup>15</sup> He describes with deep emotion the sense of wonder that human beings experience when they ponder those "monuments of vegetable life," which "attest to the boundless magnificence of nature."<sup>16</sup> Inevitably, Barry makes the comparison between the lifespan of a tree and that of a man, and even of entire civilizations. In some parts of the world there are trees, he proclaims, that are estimated to be anywhere from four thousand to six thousand years of age, "perhaps dating back to the

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<sup>13</sup>Bliss, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup>Lydia H. Sigourney, Scenes in My Native Land (Boston: James Munroe, 1845), pp. 119-121.

<sup>15</sup>J. S. Barry, "Old Trees," Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 34, no. CCVI (December, 1874), p. 676.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 685.

beginning of the earth's historic period!"<sup>17</sup> Barry marvels that trees such as these "have witnessed the gradual rise, the steady progress, the final decline, and even the extinction of a race whose history has sunk into oblivion, while the trees themselves are still alive!"<sup>18</sup> Trees far younger than these are still regarded as ancient and venerable, and are referred to by Barry as "relics" even before their eventual demise and subsequent transformation by man into discrete relic objects.

It is not surprising that Victorians were fascinated by the sheer age of relic material. During the nineteenth century science was playing a more visibly active role than ever before, and startling new discoveries were being made about the age of the continent and of the earth itself. Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection was published in 1859, throwing open to broad discussion many possibilities regarding the origin of the earth and of the progression of the human race. At roughly the same time, scientists and photographers were exploring and recording the vistas of the American West. They were captivated by one of their most spectacular discoveries--California's giant trees.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 678.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

J.S. Barry included these trees in his 1859 homage to "Old Trees." Although impressed by the age of these trees, Barry readily admits that he was awed chiefly by their monumental size. He was not alone in his admiration. Writing in 1862, Bayard Taylor called California's giant trees America's "truest antiquities," and urged all Americans to visit the West so they might see these magnificent trees, which he compared to the great Pyramids of Egypt.<sup>19</sup> John F. Sears, in his study of nineteenth-century American tourist attractions, explores the ability of these massive trees to spark the Victorian imagination and to ignite feelings of national pride:

As cultural monuments the Big Trees were not only unique to America, but like the walls of Yosemite reminded the nineteenth-century visitor of the architectural monuments of the Old World.<sup>20</sup>

Acknowledging the importance of the trees' antiquity, Sears stresses that "More important, they were very old and thus compensated for America's lack of venerable buildings and ruins."<sup>21</sup> In this sense, America's old and massive trees--even in their natural and unworked state--

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<sup>19</sup>Bayard Taylor, At Home and Abroad: Second Series (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1862), p. 177.

<sup>20</sup>John F. Sears, Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 144.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

helped to put her on a par with other countries whose recorded histories stretched back for centuries. It was all part of a growing awareness of the possibility that, as historian Thomas Schlereth has put it, "in the beginning there was not the word, nor the thing, but the plant."<sup>22</sup> Vegetable life had thrived on American soil long before the first rumblings of human activity were heard on the continent, and as the "monuments of vegetable life," old trees were very nearly worshipped by Victorian Americans, as were objects made from such ancient relic material.<sup>23</sup>

Also contributing to the value of an American relic is that relic's association with a place significant in American history. The supposed site of an historic occurrence is sometimes marked by a tree, and that tree becomes the marker that claims to pinpoint the exact location of an historically memorable event. Relic objects made from such trees are always remembered and described as such; those relics that can be traced to a specific point of origin automatically possess a powerful place-association that greatly increases their potency.

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<sup>22</sup>Thomas J. Schlereth, Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Research Press, 1990), p. 38.

<sup>23</sup>Barry, p. 685.

Much has been written about the importance of place within the human experience. On the most rudimentary level, each and every worldly place can be defined according to its latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates. But the sense of place as it relates to human experience has a much more personal dimension. In one of his many discussions of place, Mircea Eliade merely states the obvious when he reminds us of the existence of "privileged places, qualitatively different from all others--a man's birthplace, or the scenes of his first love, or certain places in the first foreign city he visited in youth."<sup>24</sup> It is a simplistic yet undeniable fact--different places hold great importance in the varied lives of all individuals. It is equally true that certain places hold meaning for entire groups of individuals--to societies as a whole. If the members of any group can identify with a common place or places of origin, the ties within that group are strengthened, as are, it should go without saying, the group's ties to that particular place. Hence, any object that is associated with a group's commonly recognized place of importance is likely to be valued by the group not only as a symbol of that place, but also of what is in turn symbolized by that place.

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<sup>24</sup>Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1959), p. 24.

A place is made distinct and memorable by the experiences that occur there over time. In Eugene V. Walter's analysis of the importance of place, he points out that "A place has a name and a history, which is an account of the experience located in that position."<sup>25</sup> The history of a place thus determines what Walter calls the quality of a place. By his definition, "the quality of a place depends on a human context shaped by memories and expectations, by stories of real and imagined events--that is, by the historical experience located there."<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that both real and imagined events are present in the quality of a place. The mythical history of a place informs the quality of that place with as much (if not more) force as does that place's actual history. Thus, both "memory and imagination, crucial elements in the quality of a place," act together to "shape what is called the spirit of a place."<sup>27</sup>

Places are made important, and their quality affected, by many different forces. Mircea Eliade has quite thoroughly examined what he identifies as one of the most elementary (yet most powerful) types of place: the

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<sup>25</sup>Eugene Victor Walter, Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 117.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

place of origin. According to Eliade, every society has its own "origin myth" or "cosmogonic myth," which he describes as "that which explains the creation of all things. In other words, it is the myth of ultimate origin."<sup>28</sup> These myths of origin are among the most powerful of any society's collection of myths. The classic origin myth of the Christian world is that of Adam and Eve in the Garden, which attempts to explain the origin of all human beings. But Eliade points out that all societies experience a series of "origins," and some form of the origin myth is utilized again and again to explain each transition of a society from one stage of being to another. Whenever the need arises to explain "how, starting from a different state of things, the present situation was reached," it is some form of the origin myth that "narrates and justifies a 'new situation'...."<sup>29</sup> It may seem that this reliance on cosmogonic myth-making might apply only to "primitive" cultures, but this is not the case. Eliade reminds us that "The desire to know the origin of things is also

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<sup>28</sup>Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality (New York: Harper & Row, 1975, c. 1963), p. 21.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

characteristic of Western culture."<sup>30</sup> Eliade further asserts that

The eighteenth century, and especially the nineteenth, saw a multiplication of disciplines investigating not only the origin of the Universe, of life, of the species, or of man, but also the origin of society, language, religion, and all human institutions.<sup>31</sup>

Victorian Americans were eagerly exploring and documenting the origins of the United States, itself a human institution. It is therefore not surprising that nineteenth-century Americans venerated those American relics that could be solidly linked to their nation's beginnings. The trees which were transformed into the most valuable primary relic objects were trees that were somehow involved in the creation of the new republic. The Liberty Elm was the site of Penn's treaty with the Indians, the signing of which launched an important chapter in the gradual acquisition of colonial land; the Charter Oak sheltered Connecticut's royal charter, thereby protecting it (and symbolically, the colony itself) from violent repossession; the Washington Elm marked the site where General Washington first gathered America's revolutionary Army. All of these places would endure as places deeply significant to the nation's origin, and the

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 76-77.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

trees that stood as landmarks at each historic location would later be transformed into primary relic objects. These relics survive as symbols of the experiences that had occurred at each of these all-important points of literal and symbolic origin, and they serve to reveal, as well as preserve, certain vital elements present in America's own myth of origin.

Relics, then, were valued by Victorian Americans because of their age and because of their association with significant places--particularly places of origin. Doris Fanelli has further suggested that a religious or quasi-religious element is an integral part of the very nature of relic objects. Fanelli defines a relic as

an item with an association to a person, place or event that is commonly recognized by a small or large group. The person, place or event may not have originally been of a religious nature, but over time it assumes a quasi-religious status in the group's mind.<sup>32</sup>

As symbols of these quasi-religious persons, places or events, the relic items themselves can be seen as possessing quasi-sacred qualities.

Although it is not always obvious, there is a religious dimension to the Victorian relic phenomenon, and period writings reflect this. Many nineteenth-century tributes refer to the Charter Oak in religious terms,

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<sup>32</sup>Doris Fanelli, unpublished letter dated July 23, 1986.

calling it, for example, "the Mecca of Patriot Pilgrims from every part of the country," and "the sacred trysting place of patriotism...."<sup>33</sup> Bliss recalled that before its destruction, the Connecticut tree was "regarded with affection and veneration by the people of that State, and has been a kind of Mecca to all persons visiting Hartford City."<sup>34</sup> Among the many relic objects fashioned from the wood of the fallen tree were Charter Oak crucifixes, which were advertised in Hartford newspapers shortly after the tree fell. In his detailed article of the Charter Oak and the relic items it yielded, Robert Trent admits that the significance of these crucifixes, "outstanding for their ambiguous mingling of the sacred and the profane," is puzzling: "Were they meant to suggest that the Charter Oak preserved religious liberty? Or that God's purposes and Connecticut's were one?"<sup>35</sup> At least one nineteenth-century writer believed that God's and Connecticut's purposes had indeed been intertwined. In an 1805 tribute to the Charter Oak, the writer observed that within eight years after Connecticut's charter had been concealed in the hollow portion of the tree, that cavity had closed,

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<sup>33</sup>George D. Curtis, Souvenir of the Centennial (Hartford, Connecticut: Geo. D. Curtis, Pub.), 1877, p. 211.

<sup>34</sup>Bliss, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup>Trent, p. 137.

"as if it had fulfilled the Divine purpose for which it had been reared."<sup>36</sup>

Some of the most vivid religious imagery regarding American relics can be found in Martha Lamb's 1889 centennial remembrance of George Washington's inauguration. In this document Lamb imaginatively tells of the ceremonies surrounding that 1789 event, and much of her rhetoric has an unmistakably religious ring to it. Following is her description of Washington's ceremonial march to New York, amid the admiring throngs awaiting his approach:

... the chieftain's journey towards New York from Virginia was like one continuous triumphal procession. Cities, towns, and villages vied with each other in doing him honor. Men, women, and children of all ages, classes, and conditions gathered by the roadside, and often stood in waiting for many hours to see him as he passed by. Their love was manifested in countless impulsive ways--sometimes by shouts, and then again by tears.<sup>37</sup>

Such was the adoration for America's first president that "Old men, who had left their plows in the field and tramped over the hills and through the valleys from distant settlements, broke down when he appeared and sobbed like children," and "Mothers brought their infant babes from afar, and held them high above their own heads,

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<sup>36</sup>Unnamed author, as quoted by Bliss, p. 4.

<sup>37</sup>Lamb, p. 15.

so that they might say in after life that they had actually seen the great Washington with their little eyes!"<sup>38</sup> Also in honor of Washington, "Guns were fired, triumphal arches were erected," and, in a scene strongly reminiscent of Jesus' ride over Jerusalem's palm-covered streets, "flowers were strewn in the roads over which his carriage was to pass."<sup>39</sup>

Relic objects closely associated with Washington, who was admired with an almost religious fervor, might indeed have been regarded as quasi-sacred objects, as were other relics associated with people or places of unusual significance. Primary relics were clearly symbolic of, and provided a link to, memorable people or places and the events that occurred there. It has been observed that in the minds of Victorian Americans, many ostensibly secular places acquired a somewhat sacred character. John F. Sears points out, for example, that certain nineteenth-century tourist attractions took on "transcendent meanings and functioned as the sacred places of nineteenth-century society."<sup>40</sup> "In a pluralistic society," Sears notes, awe-inspiring places such as Niagra Falls and Yosemite

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Sears, p. 7.

"provided points of mythic and national unity."<sup>41</sup> He draws a distinction between sacred places which belong to a sect or religious group, and those such as tourist attractions which serve as "the sacred places of a nation or people," and might be more properly termed "cultural monuments."<sup>42</sup>

The places in which events associated with America's origins had transpired can also be seen as powerful cultural monuments, possessing the same quasi-sacred status. An essential component of any primary relic's power is its perceived ability to retain and transmit some of the quality or spirit of a specific place even after the associated persons are long gone, the events long past, and the relic itself has been removed from that particular place. It follows that relic objects--made from fallen trees that had once stood upon quasi-sacred sites--might have been viewed by Victorian Americans as quasi-sacred objects which contained an element of the sacred that everyday objects did not. As already discussed, a sense of the past, and particularly of origins, is important to individuals, families, and to entire societies. For the Victorians, struggling to document their country's history and eager to celebrate

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

its origins, perceiving the past as a once-vivid reality was especially important. To make the past more vivid, the people and events of the past had to be made accessible--kept alive, in one form or another, by any means available. The human attempt to achieve this should not be viewed as unusual or unnatural. Quite the opposite is true. W. Lloyd Warner has interpreted all of human culture as "a symbolic organization of the remembered experiences of the dead past as newly felt and understood by the living members of the collectivity."<sup>43</sup> Warner's analysis contends that

The human condition of individual mortality and the comparative immortality of our species make the most of our communication and collective activities in the larger sense a vast exchange of understanding between the living and the dead.<sup>44</sup>

This communication between the living and the dead takes many forms. Of course, the manifestation of the living-dead, present-past connection varies widely among cultures. Some non-Western cultures (that would have been viewed by nineteenth-century Americans as primitive) believe that they live in the constant presence of their deceased ancestors, whose immediate presence continues

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<sup>43</sup>W. Lloyd Warner, The Living and the Dead: A Study of the Symbolic Life of Americans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 4.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

through their spiritual occupation of everyday entities such as trees, rocks, and streams. The living members of such societies are thereby always surrounded by the spirits of people who preceded them, and by the past itself, which continues to live among them.

The Victorian American sense of reality, by contrast, did not allow for the immediate presence of sacred spirits of the past. Within such societies, "The souls of the ancestors cannot be called up ritually from the past to live in the present as they are in the totemic rites of simpler peoples."<sup>45</sup> Nineteenth-century Americans, therefore, had to find other ways to communicate with the past, and had to discover other ways to call up the past into their own present. One of the ways Victorian Americans may have achieved this was through objects that symbolized past people and events, and relics were the most potent type of symbolic object. Made from actual pieces of the past, primary relics acted as powerful representations of past people and events, and served as quasi-sacred objects that had the tremendous power to evoke an otherwise unattainable past.

Victorian Americans may have had an additional need for relics they could regard as quasi-sacred. The need to fill their sense-of-history void has already been

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<sup>45</sup>Warner, p. 121.

discussed. But why the need to sacralize the objects that symbolized that history? Perhaps because America's nineteenth-century, Protestant society also suffered from a lack of, and a longing for, things sacred. As Warner expressed it, Americans of the nineteenth century,

mostly Protestants and all skeptics in that they live in a modern science-based civilization, must settle for less--if not the souls of ancestors, then at least images that evoke for the living the spirit that animated the generations that embodied the power and glory of yesterday.<sup>46</sup>

Even more powerful than images, primary relics were quasi-sacred objects that came the closest to representing a transformation of everyday into sacred objects; as such, they were tangible symbols of the penetration of the quasi-sacred into the everyday realm.

Central to the idea of relics acting as quasi-sacred symbols is the fact that their real, tangible nature. Their tangibility is part of what endows them with their potency. The ancient, holy relics of the Catholic Church are valued as much for the simple fact of their tangibility as for their sacred link to a saintly human being. These religious relics,

seen not primarily as wonderworking talismans, but first of all as evidence of a world unseen, of the saints in Heaven,

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

of the continuity of Christian people,  
past, present, and future

clearly perform much the same function as later, more secular relics--that of linking the past with the present, the living with the dead.<sup>47</sup> These continuities are crucial to human existence. Hannah Arendt's classic work, The Human Condition, explores the universal need for tangible objects to symbolize these continuities. Among her assertions is the belief that

The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and heard and will remember, and, second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things.<sup>48</sup>

In order for there to be an understanding of the past and all the intangibilities that occurred within the past, there must be a reification process--the vital intangibles must somehow be captured in a three-dimensional object whose function is to act as a concrete symbol of that intangible facet of the past. Victorian Americans, like the members of so many other cultures, felt the need to reify, to give a perceived past reality a material tangibility.

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<sup>47</sup>James Bentley, Restless Bones: The Story of Relics (London: Constable & Co., Ltd., 1985), p. 64.

<sup>48</sup>Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 95.

The contention that remembrance, "for its own fulfillment," as Arendt puts it, "requires reification" is not radical or revolutionary. Arendt points out that in one sense, "Human life, in so far as it is world-building, is engaged in a constant process of reification...."<sup>49</sup> But it should be remembered that while some objects--such as houses or tables or bedframes--are made primarily for practical, utilitarian purposes (although they may in the future acquire more symbolic associations), there are other objects, such as relics, which were originally created as intentional reifications of something intangible.

Many accept the notion that "The need to touch reality is real and permanent."<sup>50</sup> This need can be satisfied by the creation and preservation of objects that serve to embody reality. Human beings make some objects with a certain reality in mind; through the creation of such objects, humans give their accepted reality three-dimensional form. Human activity is an essential step in the reification process. Just as junk and found objects are today transformed into pieces of art, the

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<sup>49</sup>Arendt, p. 96.

<sup>50</sup>Brook Hindle, "How Much is a Piece of the True Cross Worth?," Material Culture and the Study of American Life (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), p. 6.

nineteenth-century process of producing a relic object from a piece of dead wood involved a similar transformation: "... making it new by starting with something old; it is the object found and rescued, reclaimed, reworked, reintegrated, the thing with a history...."<sup>51</sup> For nineteenth-century Americans striving for an understanding of their own origins, a sense of involvement in the creation of their own reality may have been especially critical because, as many have asserted, America's own "cultural identity was not given by tradition but had to be created...."<sup>52</sup> The creation of objects is one way humans satisfy the need "to reach a three-dimensional embodiment of whatever history we accept."<sup>53</sup>

In most cases, the history that a given culture chooses to accept is not complete or factually accurate. In this respect, "modern" Western society has not abandoned the use of myth. Mircea Eliade states that "traditional societies" strive for a "total recollection of mythical events," while the modern West seeks

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<sup>51</sup>Miles Orvell, The Real Thing (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), p. 287.

<sup>52</sup>Sears, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup>Hindle, p. 6.

"recollection of all that took place in historical Time.<sup>54</sup>

However, it would be a mistake to assume "that mythical thought has been abolished."<sup>55</sup> It continues to survive, and is most strongly sustained by historians and other creators of historical "fact." As the power of mythical thought continues to inform the beliefs and behaviors of all cultures, it also informed the culture of nineteenth-century Americans. As already discussed, part of the process of successfully defining their mythical past was the creation of three-dimensional objects to embody this past. But if Victorian Americans were attempting, through the creation of relic objects, to reify a past that was not wholly factual but largely mythical, did they regard the relics they created as embodiments of an actual, true past? That is, were the relics themselves believable?

Some have maintained that a relic's authenticity is vital to its effectiveness. The truth behind a relic must be intact and unquestioned for that relic to serve its purpose as a believable transmitter of history. In short, "It does matter whether or not the crown jewels are fakes."<sup>56</sup> A relic's mythical value increases when it can

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<sup>54</sup>Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 138 (emphasis in original).

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Hindle, p. 6.

be traced truthfully back to that time and place in history of which it contends to be a part.

George Curtis' Souvenir of the Centennial, published in 1877, contains a chapter devoted to Connecticut's Charter Oak, and within this chapter, glued to the center of a page, is a postage stamp-sized, wafer-thin piece of wood veneer. Below this relic bit, in a footnote, is a guarantee of authenticity:

\* The following certificate is furnished, attesting that the pieces of Charter Oak wood inserted in the copies of this work are genuine:

Old Saybrook Conn., Nov. 1, 1877

I hereby certify that I have filled an order from George D. Curtis, publisher, Hartford, Conn., for pieces of "Charter Oak" wood, to be inserted in copies of a work entitles "Souvenir of the Centennial;" also that the said pieces were made from parts of the historic tree, presented to me by the late Hon. I.W. Stuart, of Hartford, Conn., its owner, and that they are unquestionably genuine.

(Signed,)  
John H. Most  
formerly of Hartford, Conn.<sup>57</sup>

Apparently, it was important to Curtis that those who bought his book also be provided with expert testimony attesting to the authenticity of the tiny relic each copy contained. Later in the same discussion of the famous

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<sup>57</sup>Curtis, p. 209.

tree, however, Curtis describes the flurry of Charter Oak relic-making immediately following the tree's collapse:

Mr. Stuart, owner of the tree, divided its ruins among his friends, and articles for relics were extensively made and sold in Hartford, sufficient in quantity, it is satirically claimed, to have equaled a dozen trees.<sup>58</sup>

Apparently, a healthy skepticism existed regarding the authenticity of some so-called relics.

However, Curtis quickly jumps to the defense of all Charter Oak relics:

It is presumed by many who have not given the subject much thought, that the wood of the Charter Oak must have been used up long ago, and the very great number of relics claimed to exist, arouse suspicions that many of them are not genuine. But it should be recollected that the tree was a very large one, and that few persons have other than small fragments of the wood, hundreds of which would not equal the bulk of a single limb.<sup>59</sup>

Undoubtedly, some spurious relics have been regarded as "real" by individuals who had been misled or were merely mistaken. In 1835, John Fanning Watson, that early collector of American relics, wrote excitedly about his discovery of the chair in which John Hancock supposedly sat during the signing of the Declaration of Independence: "Here is the Chair in which the President

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid, p. 212.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 214.

Hancock sat to declare the Independence. It is a high back mahogany one with a stuffed leather seat. I sat in it of course...."<sup>60</sup> Watson believed this to be the genuine article. Later scholarship would date the chair to no earlier than 1779, casting serious doubt on the chair's provenance. Yet "However unjustified, Watson's faith was firm."<sup>61</sup>

Faith in a relic's authenticity is crucial. Steadfast belief in a relic's direct link to the past is what imbues that relic with its mythical potency. If Watson had been presented with (and convinced by) evidence that the so-called Hancock Chair was not yet in existence in 1776, he would undoubtedly have viewed the chair differently. But would it have lost its significance entirely? Religious relic scholar James Bentley has commented that, among saintly relics, "A relic does not lose its interest when proved false."<sup>62</sup> This may apply to secular relics, as well. As Doris Fanelli has pointed out,

Information about the relic is often orally transmitted and the information can

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<sup>60</sup>John Fanning Watson, Journey to Harrisburg, January 1835, Watson Papers (Winterthur, Delaware: The Winterthur Library, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts and Printed Ephemera).

<sup>61</sup>Sommer, p. 4.

<sup>62</sup>Bentley, p. 219.

be factually incorrect. What is important is how the group/use of the relic perceives its power, not whether its provenance is correct.<sup>63</sup>

Once an object has been labeled a relic, it is especially difficult to strip it of its potency. Even relics of questionable integrity were collected and prized by Victorian Americans; even relics of uncertain or unreliable origin possess a measure of mystical attraction stemming not only from their age, but from the historical/mythical possibilities that surround them.

Since large numbers of nineteenth-century Americans were eager to collect relics of all shapes and sizes, do relics qualify as souvenirs? A souvenir has been defined as "an actual object that concretizes or makes tangible what was otherwise only an intangible state."<sup>64</sup> This is consistent with the reifying function served by relics. Souvenirs, like relics, also contain an element of the extraordinary or sacred. In a socio-psychological context when one becomes a tourist, "one changes from the home mode to the tourist mode and moves from the ordinary or mundane state to the extraordinary or

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<sup>63</sup>Doris Fanelli, unpublished letter, July 23, 1986.

<sup>64</sup>Beverly Gordon, "The Souvenir: Messengers of the Extraordinary," Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 20, No. 3, Winter, 1986, p. 135.

sacred state."<sup>65</sup> Therefore, a souvenir is a concrete object that, when brought from the extraordinary back to the ordinary world of experience, acquires a quasi-sacred status. If one were to view relics as a type of souvenir, they would be included in one of Beverly Gordon's proposed categories: that of a "piece-of-the-rock" souvenir. Within Gordon's typology of souvenirs, the so-called piece-of-the-rock souvenirs are "the truest metonymic type; they are parts of the whole."<sup>66</sup> Examples would include colored sand from the Painted Desert, salt from Utah's Great Salt Lake, and ash from the eruption of Mt. St. Helens.

A relic object, however, is more than a souvenir. While a souvenir is a memento of someplace one has been, a relic serves as a memento of someplace one was not--at least not at the vital moment of historical significance. A relic, in addition to being part of a larger whole, is part of a more ancient past. A chair, cane handle, gavel, picture frame, or any other object crafted from the wood of an ancient and significant tree symbolized to the Victorians more than just a place, more than an experience. Relics symbolized a surviving bit of the past. The tremendous age of the material, the

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid, p. 136.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

significance of the tree from which it came, and that tree's association with notable people and events of the American past all were important elements embodied within, and symbolized by, a primary relic object.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the phenomenon of relic furniture in Victorian America. It should be remembered, however, that the creation and preservation of relic objects is not a uniquely American phenomenon. Other societies have produced relics which, by virtue of their association with past places, people, and events, embody that culture's sense of their own past. Relic objects help to fulfill the universal need for a tangible link between the past and the present, the living and the dead. The relics significant to any group of people remind the members of that group of what came before--of their ancestors and their origins.

Relics of all types have been and continue to be prized by cultures all over the world. Religious relics of the Catholic church have long been believed by the faithful to possess certain very real powers. Pilgrims still journey to the sites of reliquaries to be near and perhaps to touch the saintly remains, believing in the relic's power to heal and transform. In ages past, such relics were thought to be even more potent. As one writer

has stated, "If a medieval man were asked what relics do, his list of their activities would be a long one."<sup>67</sup> In addition to healing the sick, protecting individuals and entire cities from enemies, and performing various other miracles, "Relics, he could answer, visibly join earth and Heaven, the natural and the supernatural, this life and eternity...."<sup>68</sup> Victorian Americans did not expect quite so much from their relics. Nevertheless, the relics produced, exhibited, consumed, and collected by nineteenth-century Americans performed the vital function of joining their world with a past world, their lives with past lives, and their sense of reality with the origins from which it sprang.

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<sup>67</sup>Bentley, p. 86

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

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