



Real and Rare: What We Learn from the Stephen Girard Collection

– By Elizabeth Laurent –

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A joy of my job is sharing the Stephen Girard Collection with current Girard College students. Sometimes, the students, seeing I'm so much older than they, figure I must have been alive in the 1800's and ask, "Mrs. Laurent, did you know Stephen Girard?"

This is a funny but reasonable question. They rightly wonder how I know anything about Stephen Girard.



Founder's Hall on the Girard College

At our museum in Founder's Hall on the Girard College campus, we preserve thousands of objects from Girard's Philadelphia townhouse: his furniture, silver, sculpture, paintings, prints and porcelain. The collection also includes everyday items, like his clothing, darned socks and toupee; and household textiles like tablecloths, kitchen towels and over thirty bed sheets!



Portrait of Stephen Girard
By Bass Otis, 1832

The Archives holds Stephen Girard's Papers, a collection available on microfilm to researchers at the Philadelphia's American Philosophical Society. The Girard Papers include over 800 boxes of "loose" papers of incoming correspondence; receipts; lists; construction, garden and ship records; and architectural drawings. We have three thousand of Girard's bound volumes, including year-by-year receipt books, copies of his outgoing correspondence, ship log books, maps, bank records and his personal library.



Girard's bound volumes

The glory of the Stephen Girard Collection is how its authentic and varied objects give us a sense of the man. The artifacts reflect their owner, being a personal collection of items both plain and fancy.

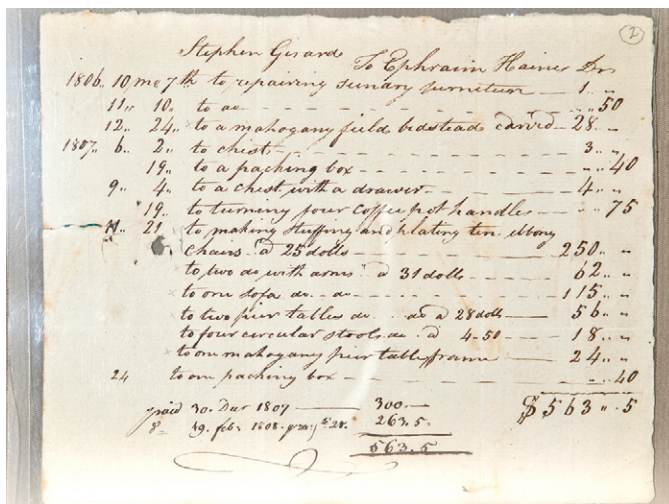
It is rare for a man's artifacts and archives to remain together long after his death. While generations of history curators have been trained to make well-informed guesses about what a famous person might have owned, with the Girard Collection such guesswork is unnecessary. The objects we have were Girard's. He had no children, so his things were not divided among his descendants. Girard's items were not sold after his death because of his Will's instruction that his school should set aside a few rooms for his papers and things.

So let's explore a few examples of what we can learn from Girard's object and papers.



Ebony Suite

The most famous items in the collection are Girard's suite of ebony furniture: two armchairs, 10 side chairs, a settee, and pair of marble-top tables. Along with his ebony suite, is Girard's surviving 1807 bill for \$563.00 from Philadelphia furniture maker Ephraim Haines. Haines



1807 bill for \$563.00 from Philadelphia furniture maker Ephraim Haines

lived at 100 North Water Street, a few blocks from Girard's home at 23 North Water Street. We can wonder how they came to know each other, or how Girard hired Haines to build the furniture, but we know the men shared a Philadelphia neighborhood. Their business transaction was between neighbors – the antithesis of today's online shopping.



Girard's home at
23 North Water Street

Moving outward from the suite's fabrication, what can we learn from Girard's elegant suite, famous as the only

furniture made of solid ebony in his Philadelphia? Species of Ebony trees grew in southern India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and western Africa. For centuries, ebony had been prized for its almost black color, its density (it sinks in water) and how its fine texture gives a polished, smooth finish. Girard's rich contemporaries may have coveted furniture made from this exotic wood.

By 1807, Girard had been trading in ebony wood from Mauritius for several years. His international shipping empire enabled Girard to acquire enough ebony to have a full suite made for his Parlor. But even Girard could not get quite enough ebony ... and the side rails of both tables are "ebonized" or black-finished pieces of an unrelated wood because Haines ran out of ebony!

Girard's suite of ebony furniture was so famous around town, that when Bass Otis painted the 1832 posthumous portrait, he showed Girard seated in one of the ebony armchairs.



So, this cluster of furniture, documents, shipping records and painting combines to show us what we can learn of Girard from his surviving collection.



Market Street Watercolor

Girard's 1807 watercolor of Market Street painted by James John Barallet, links the Philadelphia of his time to today's city. As a conservative investor, Girard considered

real estate an admirable asset. In the early 19th century, Girard saw how the city would inevitably spread westward, and bought an entire block of Center City Philadelphia in the path of city development, the block on the south side of Market Street between 11th and 12th Streets. On that block was the big brick townhouse owned by John Dunlap who had printed the Declaration of Independence – a home sometimes mistaken for Girard’s similar brick townhouse over on Water Street.



The watercolor is a lively view of that era’s city, depicting figures and vehicles on the rutted, unpaved street, a street lined with Lombardy poplar trees, and the city’s brick food markets in the far distance.



Snellenberg's Department Store

Generations of Philadelphians remember the same block as the home of Snellenberg’s Department Store, and since the early 20th century, it has been the location of the Girard Estate

Offices. So, in this 1807 view of the Market Street of Girard’s time, this painting tells stories stretching from the Declaration of Independence to today’s governance of Stephen Girard’s school at the Girard Estate offices.



Girard Estate Offices

Marble Sculptures of Bonaparte and the Philosophers

Other groups of artifacts and documents demonstrate the nuances of what mattered to Girard. Particularly revealing are three surviving marble sculpture busts, of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte and Enlightenment Philosophers Rousseau and Voltaire. It is no surprise that the anti-Royalist Girard would have admired Napoleon. But along with the sculpture of Bonaparte, is the surviving 1817 letter written in French from Napoleon’s older brother Joseph Bonaparte, giving the sculpture to



Napoleon Bonaparte



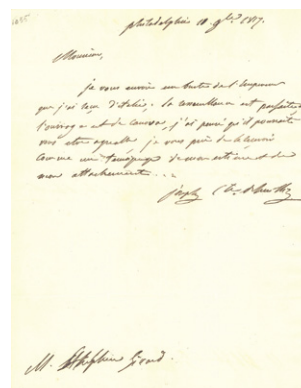
Philosopher Rousseau



Philosopher Voltaire

Girard and describing it as a “good likeness.” (Joseph signed the letter the “Comte de Surveillier,” his alias in America while pretending no one knew him to be a Bonaparte!) Joseph Bonaparte represents a unique friendship of Girard’s latter years combining both business and social with mutual interests in gardening and construction.

While the Bonaparte sculpture was a gift, Girard purchased the busts of Rousseau and Voltaire, and displayed



Letter from
Joseph Bonaparte

them together in one room. (At the time of Girard's death, the three sculptures were in "Back Parlor, Up Stairs") In furnishing one's home with sculptures of recognizable individuals, it is reasonable to assume that an owner would select individuals of personal significance. Recall Thomas Jefferson's memorable Dining Room at Monticello with its sculpture busts of Washington, Franklin, Lafayette and John Paul Jones. So, it is correct to read meaning into Girard's selection of Rousseau and Voltaire.

BACK PARLOUR, UP STAIRS.			
1 Carpeting, 10 mahogany chairs,			50/00
2 Pillars, 1 table, marble top,			15/00
1 True piano, 2 circular cases,			30/00
1 Marble bust Voltaire, 1 do. Rousseau, 1 do. Napoleon,			25/00
2 Marble ornaments,			1/00
1 Marble ornament, (like grapes)			1/00
2 Trays, 2 brasses randlewick, 2 silver do. 1 pair scissors, and 2 trays, 1 pair so-			20/00
1 brasses randlewick,			2/00
1 Looking-glass, and picture over the mantel,			10/00
1 Looking-glass, 2 engravings,			10/00
1 picture, mirror, trays, and bellows,			2/00
2 Bird cages,			2/00

Page from Girard's room-by-room 1832 Estate inventory, listing the three sculptures

Stephen Girard was a man of the Enlightenment. The school he envisioned in his Will was an Enlightenment institution dedicated to the concept that man could advance toward perfection through his own energies. A popular definition of the Enlightenment would be "a European philosophical movement of the 17th and 18th centuries, characterized by belief in the power of reason and by innovations in political, religious, and educational doctrine."



Some of Girard's seventy volume set of Voltaire from his personal library

Girard chose the sculptures of Rousseau and Voltaire to display his knowledge and interest in Enlightenment philosophy. Working outward from the sculptures, our collections include Girard's 70+ volume set of Voltaire (in French, of course) as part of his personal library. Some Log Books and many archival boxes are filled with documents of his four ships Girard named Helvetius, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Voltaire.



Storage Boxes for Girard's papers for ships Rousseau and Helvetius (Garry Norton)

He literally sent those ships around the world, spreading the names of the great Enlightenment philosophers. So by starting with one sculpture, our interrelated books, and ship documents show us the role of Enlightenment philosophy in Girard's life.

Haitian Immigrant Cabinetmakers

One final example of how our museum artifacts explain issues in Girard life.

The same year as Philadelphia's 1793 yellow fever epidemic, the Caribbean island of Haiti was embroiled in what would become the world's only successful black-led slave revolt that led to the creation of a nation. Many whites fled revolutionary Haiti. Some came to Philadelphia including two Haitian émigré cabinetmakers, Jean-Baptiste Laurent and Charles Dombaille.



Armoire by Laurent and Dombaille

All of his long life, Girard remembered what it had been like to be an immigrant



Display cabinet by Laurent and Dombaille

to Philadelphia. He consistently befriended and dealt with other refugees to his adopted city. Somehow Laurent and Dombaille came to Girard's attention, and Girard helped them start in business by commissioning them to make at least three pieces of furniture: a surviving armoire, a glass-doored display cabinet, and a marble-top buffet.

Documents between Girard and the cabinetmakers in 1796 and 1797 confirm the transactions.

Without those documents, today's furniture scholars



Buffet by Laurent and Dombaille

would glance at these three pieces and assume they had been made in Louisiana or the Caribbean. But the documents (and an analysis of the secondary woods proving use of wood

typical in American manufacture) provide rare proof of pieces with authentic French construction techniques and appearance, being documented as made in Philadelphia. The papers and the pieces themselves take us back around to Girard's lifelong interest in Caribbean trade and in new French immigrants to Philadelphia.

These are just a few examples of how the Stephen Girard Collection teaches us what mattered to Girard. The Collection illustrates Girard's personal community and his place within his adopted city of Philadelphia. More important, as authentic survivals from Girard's household, the collection allows us glimpses of how Girard surrounded himself with objects that had layers of meaning and significance. We understand Girard better by learning



Museum room view (Garry Norton)

about what he chose for his home.

The most helpful publications about the details of the Stephen Girard Collection are:

- The Stephen Girard Collection, A Selective Catalog by Robert D. Schwarz (1980, Girard College)
- "Stephen Girard: A Patron of the Philadelphia Furniture Trade" by Wendy C. Wick (1977, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Delaware), and
- Chapter 15, "The Curator's Picks" from *Girard College – a Living History* by Richard Sand and Elizabeth Laurent (2009, Oakley Publishing)



About the author: Elizabeth Laurent is the President of the Chester County Historical Society, in West Chester, PA, a post she assumed in 2016. Prior to that, and since 2000, she was the Director of Historical Resources at Girard College, where she was responsible for the preservation and interpretation of the school's Stephen Girard Collection of archives and artifacts, and the school's original classroom building, Founder's Hall. With Richard Sand, she co-authored *Girard College – a Living History* (2009). Elizabeth was previously the Curator at Cliveden of the National Trust, in Germantown, and Stratford Hall Plantation, a Lee family home in Westmoreland County, Virginia. She has consulted widely among local organizations including Stenton, the Grundy Foundation, the Friends of Lemon Hill, and the PA Sons of the Revolution. A native of Alexandria, Virginia, Elizabeth is a graduate of Williams College and the University of Delaware's Winterthur Program in Early American Culture.