

Framed

by Lynne Belluscio

Sometimes the box is worth more than the thing inside. And as we have discovered recently, sometimes the frame is worth more than the painting or at least it will cost more to restore the pair of frames than the portraits.

Last year we were fortunate enough to receive a grant from the Greater Hudson Heritage Network to clean and restore the portraits of Jerusha and Oliver Allen by Phineas Staunton. There is a limit to the grant money so I didn't apply for money to restore the frames last year, but this spring I wrote a proposal to have the frames restored.

First I had to wrap them in bubble wrap and take them to Westlake Conservators in Skaneateles. Luckily I didn't lose any of the pieces on the way. John Sutton examined them closely and ultimately sent us a condition report. There was good news and bad news. The bad

news was that the 1850s Rococo Revival frames were in pretty bad condition with a lot of damage to the finish and ornament. The good news was that the frames were structurally sound and were well worth the effort to have them restored.

John also told us that there was enough of the original frame components that he would be able to create replacements for the parts that were missing. Of course we had to come up with the money. This week we received the notice - - and the check from the Greater Hudson Heritage Network - - to proceed with the conservation work.

To be honest, the frames are a little over the top - literally. There is a lot of ornamentation and a huge crest on the top. They were probably made in New York City which makes sense since Phineas Staunton had a New York framer, Thomas Wilmurt make the huge

mahogany frame for the Henry Clay portrait that now hangs in the United States Capitol in Washington. (Thomas Wilmurt was known as one of the oldest and most respected framers in New York City. The famous artist John Singer Sargent as well as others chose Wilmurt frames for their art work. Many museums list the name of



Missing left side and ornaments glued into wrong positions at center.



Damaged finish.

Wilmurt in their catalogues along with the artist.)

On the back of one of the frames is a small canvas stamp from Williams, Stevens, Williams & Co 353 Broadway, New York. This company carried artist supplies and engravings. Research indicates that this stamp would place the frames between 1851 and 1859 which is compatible with the portraits.

The frames are Rococo Revival in design, which was popular in the United States beginning in the 1820s and lingering into the 1860s. The romantic Rococo Revival style was a reaction to the straight lines and simplicity of the Empire Period. Sensuous curves, scrolled lines and carvings dominated the furniture and artwork. Rococo Revival style was more ornate than the earlier Rococo style of the 18th Century that was common in France.

I have wondered who chose the frames for the Allen portraits. Was it Phineas Staunton the artist or was it the Allen family? Many artists during this period, chose the frames for their art work. This theory makes sense

for Phineas Staunton, because we have an identical frame - - in excellent condition - with another portrait, not associated with the Allen family. So it would appear that Staunton had several frames shipped to LeRoy from New York.

To conserve the frames, John will have to first stabilize all the cracked and loose pieces. All the old repairs and the dirt and grime will be removed. One of the crests was repaired and the parts were glued on wrong, so they will be removed, then reattached and the missing parts molded and attached in the correct place.

Other areas of the gesso will be replaced and the gilding will be applied and then matched to the original finish. Last, a small pad will be applied to the inside edges to protect the painted canvas from the abrasion of the wooden frame.

Sometime next spring the frames will be completed and Jerusha and Oliver Allen will once again hang in their glorious - if not a little ostentatious frames in the back parlor of the LeRoy House.

