

CURATOR FACTS

Want to learn more about the big artifacts in this exhibition? Take this handout and look for the “Curator Fact” icons located at ten locations throughout the exhibition. Then find the matching number on the handout to learn more about the item and the big story of New Jersey history that it tells.

1. Kast

Curators use a variety of clues to date historical furniture. Saw marks are one important indicator of age. On the back of the kast, the marks are straight and parallel, which indicates that they were most likely made in the 18th century with a hand-operated pit saw. By the 1820s, the Industrial Revolution had produced a mechanized circular saw that produced boards showing distinctive, circular saw marks. Furniture having these circular marks were likely to have been made sometime after 1820. The hand-made nails on the back of the kast also indicate an 18th century construction date. Machine-made nails came into wide use in the 19th century.

2. Jaquard Coverlet

A cursory glance of this woven coverlet raises a number of questions. Why are some of the inscriptions backwards? Why is there a seam in the middle? Why is the fringe only on one side? When the coverlet came off of the loom, it was a long, rectangular textile measuring twice as long and half as wide as the desired final product. The weaver then cut the piece in half, creating two halves, and then stitched them together to create a finished product. Coverlets were intended to be reversible. The reverse side is an exact opposite of the front, with the colors reversed. The inscriptions appeared forwards and backwards so that they could be read on both sides. One side was commonly displayed in the winter months; the other side in the summer.

3. Rail Display Case

Robert Stevens' T-rail was highly regarded because it allowed for easy fastening of iron rails to railroad crossties using a simple hook-headed iron spike. In Stevens' day, railroad crossties - known as sleepers - were made out of quarried limestone blocks. When a supply issue prevented access to limestone, Stevens instead decided to use oak or chestnut logs immersed in a bed of crushed stone. The new sleeper technology resulted in a smoother, more comfortable ride for railroad passengers and the use of wood became the standard for years. Two original stone sleepers can be found on the museum grounds just outside of the entrance to the planetarium.

4. Battleship *New Jersey* Flag

This 48-star flag is not an official US Navy national ensign. Following strict military regulations, navy flags during the WWII era were issued in twelve sizes. This flag does not match any of these official dimensions. Furthermore, the hoist is marked with a blue stamp reading “Navy” - a marking not found on Navy-made flags. A civilian group or a relative of one of the ship's officers may have given the flag to the *USS New Jersey* as a good luck token from the home front. It was likely made by the American Flag Company of New York City, which used the brand name “navy bunting” to describe the wool material used in its flags. The word “Navy” on this flag refers to the navy bunting material used to make it.

5. Jeliff Sofa

When acquired by the museum, this sofa and chair set had long since lost its original upholstery - a common occurrence due to the use of plant and animal fibers as stuffing during Victorian times. The chair has been reupholstered in cross section to showcase the many stuffing layers. Just above the springs, the bottom layer consisted of a hay-like vegetable fiber contained inside layers of hessian, better known as

burlap. The next layer was commonly horse hair. Naturally straight, horsehair had to be boiled and twisted to achieve the curled shape needed for upholstery padding. In order to fill in any gaps in the lower layers and provide the maximum comfort possible, layers of carded wool and/or cotton wadding completed the upholstery.

6. The Great Seal

Take a close look at the painting on the shield and compare it to the image of the official Great Seal of the State of New Jersey. As you can see, the sovereign's helmet – located directly below the horse's head – is absent on the artist's rendition. This was a common practice in the 18th and 19th centuries as some patriotic officials found the sovereign's helmet offensive for its lingering royal connotations. In 1928, the state approved official guidelines for the seal, which sanctioned the presence of the sovereign's helmet and officially added the inspirational slogan "Liberty and Prosperity."

7. Blubber Pot

The round-bottomed shape of his blubber pot tells us that it must have been used to boil whale blubber on the New Jersey coastline. Whales living not far from the coast were caught and hauled to the shore for processing. In later years, whalers traveling to far off destinations had to process whales on board the ships in order to prevent the blubber from spoiling during weeks at sea. The term "try-works" described the pots and furnaces that boiled whale blubber aboard these long-distance whaling ships. So-called "try-pots" were flat-bottomed vessels with two flat sides. This unique shape allowed them to be stored snugly, side-by-side on the ship and prevented them from tipping over in inclement weather.

8. Tall Case Clock

It is a mystery why Peter Hill's clock does not have a signature on its face. Instead, the remnants of a paper label bearing Hill's name can be found on the inside of the clock where the weights and pendulum are encased. This is the only known instance of a New Jersey clockmaker placing his name on the inside of a clock case – a place normally reserved for the cabinetmaker label. Clockmakers only made the workings (or movement) of their clocks and hired woodworkers to make the cases. Hill's clock is also peculiar for the two star rosettes on the bonnet scrolls – one seven-pointed, one six-pointed. This decor also appears on a Peter Hill clock housed at the Smithsonian. Was Hill's intent to pay tribute to the patriotic fever of 1776?

9. Governors Chair

Curators use the term provenance to describe the history behind an artifact. Since 1913-1914, this chair has been known as the "Governors Chair" and the "Wilson Chair" because of various stories associated with it. In 1974, New Jersey Governor Brendan Byrne received a letter from an inmate at the New Jersey State Prison, then known as Trenton State Prison, stating that he was the owner of the long-lost "Wilson Chair." He had acquired the chair at an antique shop and placed it in storage prior to his incarceration. The chair was promptly donated to the State of New Jersey and sent to the New Jersey State Museum for preservation. This is the first time that it has been exhibited.

10. Rickshaw

James Birch was one of the more creative businessmen of his day. Learning that export duties on used goods were lower than those on new products, Birch ordered his staff to drive recently-built carriages through the muddy streets of Burlington in order to distress them. Then, he ordered the soiled carriages to be disassembled and packed into boxes for export as "used" goods. Birch also refused to put his business in any debt, preferring to pay cash up front for his materials and supplies. The carriage king's business savvy ended, however, when he refused to convert his operation to automobiles, believing them only to be a passing fad. Birch Carriages ceased operations in 1918.