

by Kory W. Rogers

Bandbox

At the Shelburne Museum

Papers

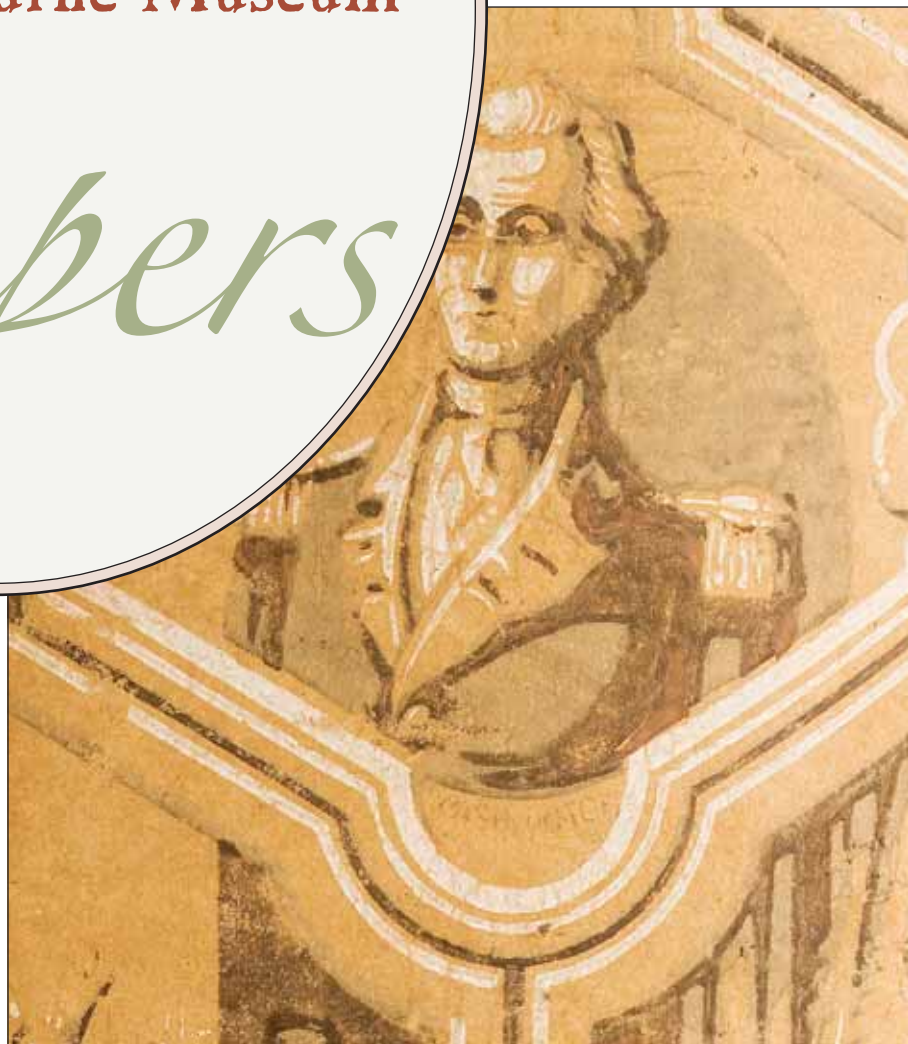
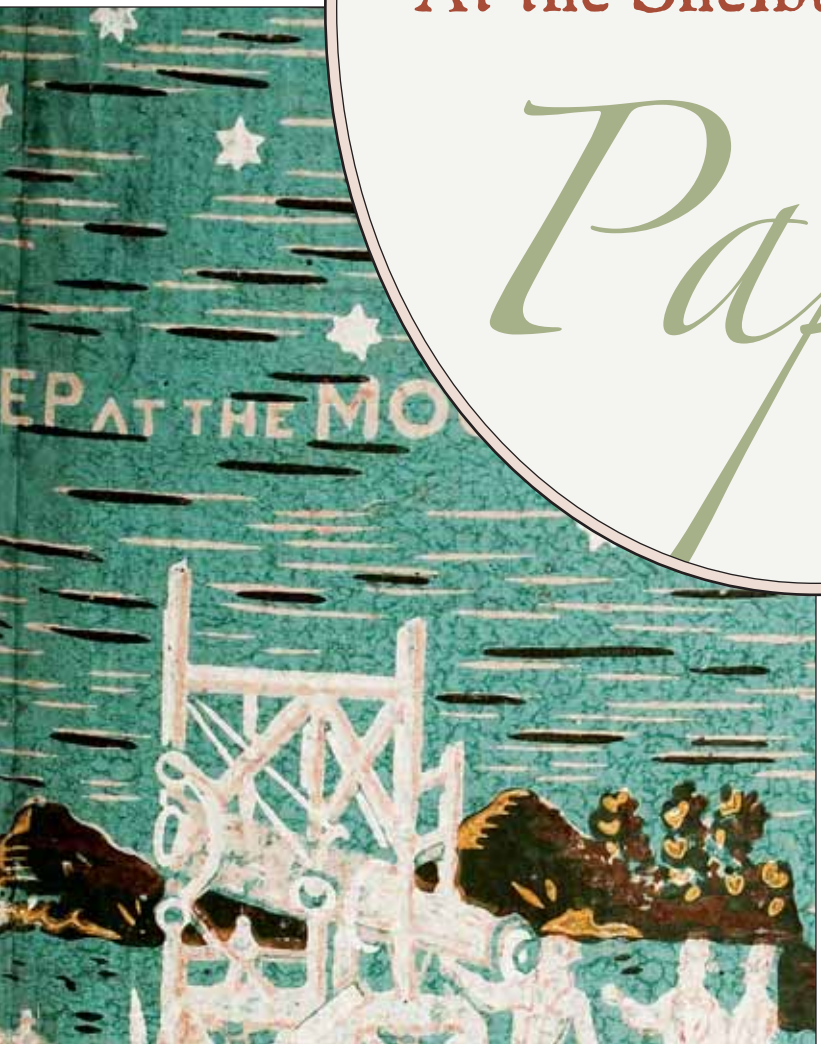


Fig. 1: Bandboxes, 1800–1850. Pasteboard and paper with polychrome distemper decoration.



ver the course of two centuries, bandboxes evolved from repositories for delicate lace collar bands into the commodious chic carryalls of the nineteenth century. Akin to modern gift-wrapping, nineteenth-century bandbox papers — block-printed in chalky distemper and glossy varnish paints — transformed the otherwise plain surfaces of utilitarian pasteboard and bentwood

storage containers into must-have accessories for stylish young women and men. Historical bandbox papers at the Shelburne Museum commemorate the political and military celebrities, public landmarks, innovative transportation, and sensational events of the first half of the nineteenth century (Fig. 1).

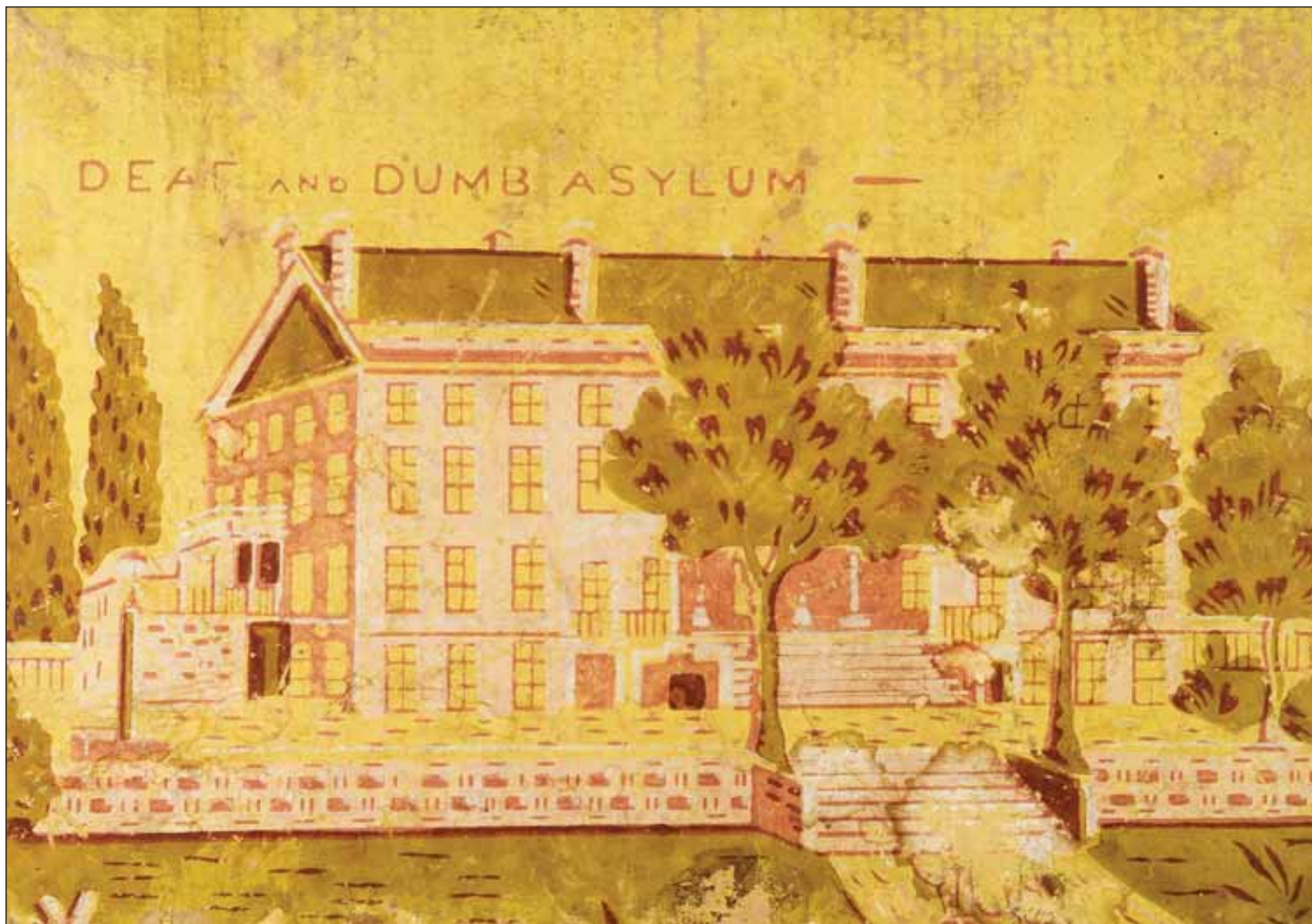
Although concentrated primarily in Northeastern urban centers, bandbox paper

manufacturers designed patterns that appealed to both local and national markets. Produced circa 1815, the bandbox covered in the George Washington paper would have had universal appeal (Fig. 2). Even before his death in 1799, Washington's likeness was being applied to household goods by foreign and domestic manufactures hoping to capitalize on America's admiration for the founding father.

On the other hand, the bandbox paper fragment depicting New York's Deaf and Dumb Asylum (Fig. 3) must have had very limited appeal outside the city. Commonly attributed to one of the four bandbox paper manufactures listed in New York's 1840 business directory, it was probably marketed specifically to Manhattanites as a sign of the city's social progressiveness.¹ At the time of its founding in 1829, New York's asylum was one of the earliest institutions teaching the recently developed American version of sign language. The first such institution had been established twelve years earlier in Hartford, Connecticut, by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet.



Fig. 2: "George Washington" bandbox, circa 1815. Pasteboard and paper with polychrome distemper decoration. Museum purchase, panel no. 28-93.



ABOVE:

Fig. 3: "Deaf and Dumb Asylum" bandbox paper, after 1831. Pasteboard and paper polychrome distemper decoration. Museum purchase, panel no. 28-42.

BELOW:

Fig. 4: "A Peep at the Moon" bandbox, after 1835. Pasteboard and paper with polychrome distemper decoration. Museum purchase, 28-158.



The manufacturers of two other bandbox papers turned to the front pages of 1835 newspapers for inspiration. Ripped from the headlines of the *New York Sun*, the bandbox paper in figure 4 commemorates the great moon hoax of 1835.² Concocted to stimulate newspaper sales, the articles were purported to be excerpts from a scientific paper written by the eminent British astronomer Sir Jonathan Herschel chronicling his observations of the moon's surface — a lush jungle inhabited by fantastical creatures and a race of batmen.³

Billed as a "Grand Aerial Voyage," the second news story to make the leap from newsprint to bandbox paper was the balloon flight of Richard Clayton, an English-born clockmaker and amateur aeronaut (Fig. 5). A ticketed public event, Clayton ascended from Cincinnati, Ohio, on April 8, 1835, and landed nine and a half hours later in Monroe County, Virginia, 350 miles away — breaking the world's record for the farthest distance travelled in a balloon.⁴

The second quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the completion of the Erie Canal (1825) and the introduction of the steam locomotive (1829). These new means of transportation enabled greater numbers of Americans to travel farther distances at faster speeds and for less cost. This increased mobility contributed to the popularity of bandboxes, which could be carried as sturdy, lightweight luggage. Two bandbox papers in Shelburne's collection commemorate these innovative forms of transportation. One (Fig. 6) depicts a horse-drawn packet boat crossing the Aqueduct Bridge outside Little Falls, New York, where the Erie Canal intersects the Mohawk River. The thirty-foot tall, stone bridge supported by sixteen arches was built to permit the unimpeded flow of people and goods over the Mohawk.

After a rocky start in America during the 1820s and 1830s, the popularity of steam locomotives began to increase toward the middle of the nineteenth century. The locomotive depicted on the bandbox paper pictured in figure 1 (lower right), dating to after 1829, captures the novelty of this promising new technology.

Bandbox paper manufacturers, millinery shops, and other businesses used bandbox papers as traveling billboards. The bandbox paper illustrated in figure 7 depicts the swanky Holt Hotel in New York and was possibly sold as a souvenir to commemorate a guest's stay. Built in 1833, in what is today the Financial District in Lower Manhattan, the luxuriously appointed hotel offered its visitors the ultimate modern amenities including hot and cold running water and a state-of-the-art steam-powered dumbwaiter system.⁵

Bandbox papers may have also served political agendas. The Zachary Taylor bandbox (Fig. 1, lower left), may have been printed as an advertisement for the general's 1849 Presidential campaign. A hero of the Mexican War (1846–1848), Taylor's military credentials were an important factor in the election, which was dominated by territorial issues and potential conflicts with foreign nations. "Old Rough and Ready" Taylor is depicted atop his trusty steed, Whitey, in commemoration of his decisive vic-



Fig. 5: "Clayton's Ascent" bandbox, after 1835. Pasteboard and paper with polychrome distemper decoration. Museum purchase, 28-2.

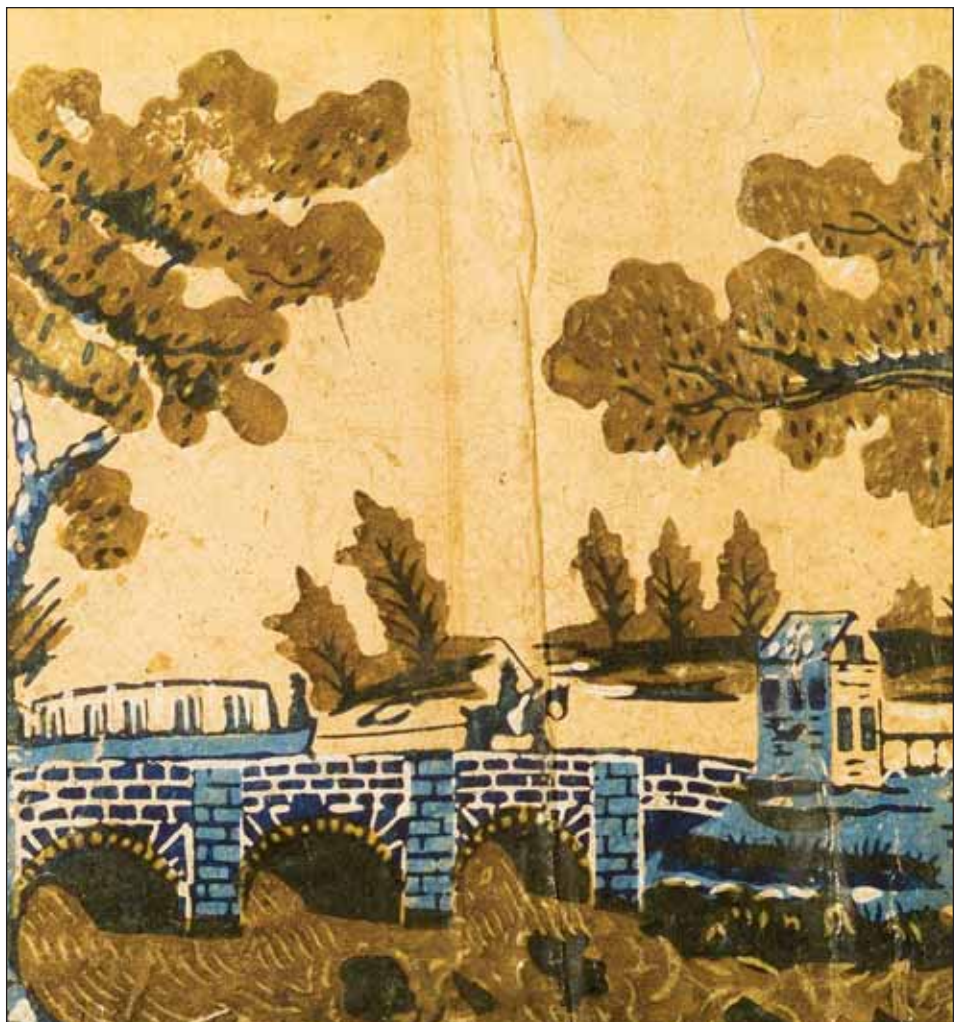


Fig 6: "Aqueduct Bridge, Little Falls, New York," bandbox paper, after 1825. Pasteboard and paper with polychrome distemper decoration. Museum purchase, panel no. 28-38.

tory at the Battle of Palo Alto on April 8, 1846.

Although bandboxes became outmoded after 1850, their legacy as stylish multipurpose storage containers continues in the form of designer handbags and logo-branded shopping bags that serve as both fashion statements and advertisements. The bandboxes featured in this article will be on exhibit in the newly reconfigured hatbox and bandbox galleries in the Shelburne Museum's renovated Hat and Fragrance Textiles Gallery opening to the public June 10, 2006. For more information call 802.985.3346 or visit www.shelburnemuseum.org. The museum is open May through October.

Kory W. Rogers is curator of exhibits at the Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.

Photography by **Andy Duback**, courtesy of Shelburne Museum.

1 Catherine Lynn, *Wallpaper in America: From the Seventeenth Century to World War I* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1980), 294.

2 Lilian Baker Carlisle, *Hat Boxes and Bandboxes at Shelburne Museum* (Shelburne: The Shelburne Museum, 1960), 195. I am indebted to Ms. Carlisle for information concerning the sources for the images in several of the bandbox papers described here, specifically, figs. 4 (see p. 195), 6 (see pp. 132–133), and 9 (see p. 192).

3 Richard A. Locke, "Great Astronomical Discoveries Lately Made By Sir John Herschel, L.L.D., F.R.S., &c. At The Cape of Good Hope. [From Supplement to the Edinburgh Journal of Science]," *New York Sun*, 28 August 1835.

4 Advertisement, *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, March 26, 1835, as cited in Maurer Maurer, "Richard Clayton—Aeronaut," *Bulletin: Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio*, Vol. XIII, No. 2 (April 1955), 142. Maurer, 146.

5 Description published in the *Traveller's Guide* in 1833 as cited in Carlisle, 174.

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Fig. 7: "Holt's New York Hotel" bandbox, after 1833. Pasteboard and paper with polychrome distemper decoration. Museum purchase, Panel no. 28-95.

