



A Hollingsworth Family Sofa and its Upholstery Revealed

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The work of Philadelphia furniture makers of the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century is distinguished by conservative design principles, fine proportions, strong construction precepts, ornamentation that required the skills of carvers trained in the latest European styles, and, for some forms, upholstery. As ubiquitous as large, richly figured mahogany and walnut furniture was in the homes of Philadelphia's colonial elite, pure, unadulterated examples surviving today are rare, even among the storied American furniture collection at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; one that enjoys the benefits of over 125 years of collecting.

In December 2006, the museum welcomed the gift of a large arch-crested sofa on molded Marlborough legs, circa 1768, that descended in the family of Philadelphia merchant Levi

Hollingsworth (1739–1824) and his wife, Hannah Paschall Hollingsworth (1744–1833) (Fig. 1). This plain sofa is significant in size and scope, revealing particularly coveted information about eighteenth-century upholstery practices that have been obliterated on most other examples, lost to later re-upholsteries.¹

The upholstery that dressed eighteenth-century seating furniture constituted the majority of its expense.² Simply put, the joined frame was an armature for pricey, imported watered wool (or moreen, a fabric with a thick weft embossed through heat to produce a wavy or watered surface), stamped wool, silk damask, or tapestry, which clearly announced the owner's social and financial status. Among the several hundred pieces of American upholstered seating furniture in the museum's collections, the Hollingsworth sofa is one of only a handful that

retains its original upholstery. The survival of what was the most salient decoration on this monumental arch-backed sofa offers new opportunities to study the evidence and apply it to other period sofas and chairs.

When the sofa was transferred to the museum it was shrouded in a mid-twentieth-century gray and red brocade upholstery; when stripped off, the remarkably intact condition of the frame and its original under-upholstery was revealed. The scrolled arms also retain their original yellow moreen, secured to the arms by their original rose head nails (Fig 2). Shadows on the wool reveal that there were two rows of decorative brass tacks

ABOVE: Fig. 1: Sofa, Philadelphia, circa 1768. Mahogany, oak, yellow pine; woven steel. H. 38, L. 95, D. 37 in. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; gift of Mr. and Mrs. James Wood.

up the ramp of the arms and one row on the outside edge of the scrolls that continued to the top edge of the crest rail, which also had a row of brass tacks (Fig. 3). The front and side rails also bear the evidence of decorative brass tacking: square shank holes can be traced in two single rows along the top and bottom edges of the rails ending at the back of the side rails, where the tacking ran vertically to box in the two horizontal rows (Fig. 4). Where later upholsteries and reductions in the height of crest rails obliterate this kind of information on so many examples of upholstered furniture, such clear tacking history provides evidence of the placement and design of decorative brass tacking on eighteenth-century Philadelphia sofas.

In the 1870s, a time when upholstery techniques were rapidly advancing, the owners replaced the original cross braces of the sofa's seat frame and the webbing and curled hair of the seat deck with a custom manufactured woven-wire box mattress. The woven steel wire resembles mesh (or mail) and is stretched lengthways across a wooden frame with long squared rails and rounded end rails secured with cast iron corner braces. One mattress rail is stamped: "Woven Wire Mattress / Hartford, Conn./ Sole Manufacturers." The other reads, "Patented June 16th 1868 / Nov 22 187[?] / November 22nd 1869" (Fig. 5).³ The woven wire box mattress was suspended on board slats that were screwed to the bottom of the seat rails. The use of this mattress within a sofa frame is ingenious. Though ironically unintended by the owners, the installation of the mesh mattress preserved the integrity of the original seat rails by eliminating the damage caused by repeated nailing for new webbing, sack cloth, and ties for coil springs.

Although the original webbing and sack cloth were removed when the woven wire mattress was inserted, the original edge roll and the tufted mattress (or loose cushion), both of curled horse hair, were salvaged and reused (Fig. 6). When recovered the first and only time (in the mid-twentieth century), the cake of original mattress stuffing was encased and re-tufted in a new blue and white ticking fabric and covered in a red and gray brocade.

The extraordinary state of survival of the Hollingsworth sofa elucidates significant information about the sequence of the upholstery on such a seating form in the eighteenth century. The sofa was both constructed and upholstered in four separate parts: first the seat frame on legs; then the two scroll arm units, which were tenoned into the seat frame; and finally the removable sofa back frame, which screws into the legs and arms. After upholstering the seat deck over the rails, arms, and the back independently, the upholstered back was slid into slots created by the backs of the arms and the upper extensions (also called scarfs or tusks) of the two outside rear legs (see figure 4). The three rear mahogany leg extensions are varnished and have the same finish history as the legs. The seat deck fabric is carried over the rails and around the outside corners in such a way that the tusks remain exposed above the seat rail. The fabric covered the seat rail between the center tusk and leg in a similar manner; unlike the outer legs, the center leg and tusk were mortised into the rail separately. The upholstered back frame was secured to the seat frame and arm units by large screws inserted



Fig 2: Detail of original wool moreen showcover (showing the watered pattern) on the inside of the (proper right) arm. Photography by Joe Mikuliak. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Fig 3: Shadow of decorative nailing along the outside of the arm scroll and around the edge back. Photography by Steven Crossot. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

through the tusks of the rear legs and the crest rail into the backs of the arm scrolls. The completely removable back greatly simplified the upholstering of the sofa; it also aided in moving the sofa through narrow doorways when being moved. The three exposed tusks at the back of the sofa were functional elements to the sofa's upholstery and overall visual intent.

The front of the sofa back retains its original under-upholstery and linen cover. Because the upholstered portion of the sofa back, or out-back, does not retain its original yellow moreen, the support for the



Fig 4: Evidence of “boxed” nailing. Image also shows tusk on rear leg. Photography by Steven Crossot. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

under-upholstery is visible from behind and shows that a variety of webbing and sackcloth materials were used. Such irregularity is clearly characteristic of a busy upholsterer’s shop where secondary materials did not have to be uniform as long as their physical properties satisfied the job. Previous insect infestations have consumed some of the curled hair stuffing and has resulted in the slightly deflated loft in the under upholstery of the sofa back and arms.

The shaped crest rail of the sofa back is extremely broad, measuring thirteen and a half inches at its highest point. It does not contain any drilled holes, which would have been required if the back had originally been tufted. Just above a chalked upholsterer’s mark at the middle of the crest rail is written (upside down), “Mr. Hollingsworth,” in a clear eighteenth-century script (Fig. 7).

The mahogany undercarriage of the sofa is void of decorative fret, brackets, or foot bases—it is bold, but unornamented in comparison to other examples. The three molded front legs are joined to the plain backward swept rear legs with medial and perimeter stretchers. The height of the legs has never been shortened, measuring twelve inches high from the bottom of the front rail to the ground; the leg height from the bottom of the stretchers to the ground is three and five-sixteenth inches. The legs have never had bases or castors.

Levi Hollingsworth

Levi Hollingsworth was a native of Elkton, Cecil County, Maryland, and the second son of Zebulon Hollingsworth, who operated the family flour mills in Elkton.⁴ As the second son, Levi was not encumbered by the family business, a duty left to his older brother,

Zebulon Hollingsworth Jr. In 1758, Hollingsworth moved to Philadelphia to pursue his fortune as a merchant. His first partnership was with George Adams, a Maryland waterman known as a shallopman, who transported goods between the Chesapeake Bay and the Delaware River. Adams and Hollingsworth began advertising in 1759. Levi’s next partnership was with Zebulon Rudolph, with whom he first advertised in 1767.

A devout Quaker, Hollingsworth married Philadelphia-native and fellow Quaker Hannah Paschall, daughter of Stephen Paschall, on March 9, 1768. They had eight children, five of whom lived to adulthood. By 1772, Hollingsworth operated a mercantile firm in Philadelphia independently, concentrating primarily in flour brokering.⁵ A staunch patriot, throughout the American Revolution the Hollingsworth firm supplied the Continental Army with provisions and other stores. In 1793, he welcomed his son, Paschall, into the business; until his Levi’s death in 1824, the firm remained Levi Hollingsworth & Son.⁶

Hannah and Levi Hollingsworth lived at 16 Dock Street in Philadelphia, within close walking distance of Hollingsworth & Son. The patriarch and matriarch of what became one of Philadelphia’s great families are known to have owned a pair of high chests of drawers, a pair of dressing tables, a pie crust table, a set of carved and cut banister-back chairs, and a sideboard table that are contemporary to the sofa; the sideboard marked and dated 1806 by journeyman cabinetmaker Robert McGuffin and labeled by Henry Connelly postdates the other furniture by nearly 30 years.⁷

At Levi’s death, he bequeathed to his “Beloved Wife Hannah Hollingsworth all my household furniture and Plate...”⁸, which included “One Old Sofa,” a chintz [removable slip-] cover for the sofa, and a set of yellow “maurene” curtains. The will of Hannah Hollingsworth, written in 1829, four years before her death, assigns furniture and furnishings to each of her grandchildren. The sofa, already qualified as old when Levi died in 1824, descended from Hannah Hollingsworth to Henry Morris, the son of her daughter Mary Hollingsworth Morris (1776–1820). Henry Morris (1808–1881) and his wife Caroline Old left the sofa to their daughter Emily Hollingsworth Morris Wood (1841–1916), the wife of James Wood. The Wood’s son Levi Hollingsworth Wood (1873–1956) and his wife, Martha Speakman, inherited the sofa, still with its original yellow moreen upholstery. Levi and Martha Wood had the sofa’s cover replaced with the modern gray and red brocade noted earlier and left it to their son James who generously donated it to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The incredible state of survival of the Hollingsworth family sofa stands as a testament to the family’s own attitude toward preservation. Now gratefully part of a public art collection, it will serve to inform all who visit about the art of cabinetmaking and upholstery in eighteenth century Philadelphia. @

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carefully removing the modern upholstery from the sofa.

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1. Further research and comparative study may reveal the identities of the cabinetmaker and the upholsterer of this sofa; their identities are presently not known.
2. For comparative costing of sofa frames with other seating furniture, see *Prices of Cabinet and Chair Work* (Philadelphia: James Humphreys, Junior, 1772), 10–11.
3. The Woven-Wire Mattress Company of Hartford was a manufacturer of significant repute. Three patents were issued to it for this woven-wire mattress through the Scientific American Patent Agency. The numerous patent dates likely indicate updates to the patent, maintenance on the existing patent, or dates of added claims used to describe the patent as required by laws of that time.
4. The Hollingsworth family papers are collection number 289 at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and cover the time period of 1715 to 1882. An abstract is available on line at www.hsp.org.
5. An advertisement in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* of April 2, 1767, notes that Levi Hollingsworth and his partner Rudolph are engaged in the transportation of goods and passengers from Philadelphia to Baltimore. They operate with George Adams and James Partridge of Christiana, Delaware, Tobias Rudolph and Zebulon Hollingsworth at the Head of the Elk, and Isaac Griest in Baltimore. Clearly, Levi Hollingsworth used the experience and connection he gained during his early years as a shallopman on the Christina and Elk Rivers during the French and Indian War.
6. In 1824, Levi's firm was renamed Paschall Hollingsworth and Company for his son, Paschall, who was the proprietor. In 1837, at Paschall's death, it was renamed Morris, Tasker and Morris.
7. One of the high chests, the sideboard table, and the Connelly/McGuffin sideboard are owned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. One of the chairs is an intended gift to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. For information on other furniture, see William McPherson Hornor, Jr., *Hornor's Blue Book of Philadelphia Furniture: William Penn to George Washington* (1935) and Lita Solis-Cohen, "Christie's January Triumph—American Furniture & Decorative Art," *Maine Antique Digest* March 1998, and the Christie's, Important American Furniture and Decorative Arts, January, 1998.
8. Will of Levi Hollingsworth, 1824, will book number 8, folio 186. Downs Manuscript Collection, Winterthur Library.

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Fig 5: Patented stencil. Photography by Steven Crossot. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Fig 6: Original curled hair edge roll and mattress stuffing. Photography by Steven Crossot. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Fig 7: Shop mark and script: "Mr. Hollingsworth." Photography by Steven Crossot. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.