

Mystery of the Clitherall 'Mount Vernon' Armchair

GEORGE B. B. CLITHERALL of Mobile, Alabama, donated this Queen Anne-style mahogany armchair to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1890. At the time of the donation, Clitherall passed along the chair's provenance as he understood it: it was one of a set of library chairs that had belonged to President George Washington and was used at Mount

Vernon. Clitherall received the chair as a gift upon the death of family friend General Benjamin Smith, who had told a young Clitherall that he had been a friend of Washington and had received it upon Washington's death in 1799. Having no reason to doubt this account, Clitherall's beneficiaries at MNHS accepted the chair with the reverence they felt it deserved as a relic belonging to the nation's first president, and they publicized the donation widely.¹

Clitherall's connection to Minnesota dated back to the four years (1857–61) he had worked in Minnesota's newly organized Otter Tail County as a US land agent, appointed by President James Buchanan. He associated with prominent Minnesota Democrats such as Charles Flandreau and Henry Rice. Clitherall was a known proslavery Southern Democrat and was suspected of involvement in a land syndicate designed to populate the new state with Southern sympathizers. (For more on Clitherall, see pages

269–70.) Clitherall was replaced as land agent in June 1861, shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War. In 1870, he purchased 61.5 acres in Otter Tail County from noted black-Indian fur trader George Bonga.²

Decades after the chair's donation, the mission of MNHS shifted to focus on local history. In the 1940s curators reached out to Mount Vernon staff in an effort to return the chair to the presidential home. It came as quite a surprise when Mount Vernon curators responded that they sincerely doubted the chair had ever belonged to Washington. Further research into General Smith failed to substantiate the story George Clitherall had believed.

Despite its now unknown origins, Clitherall's chair remains in the MNHS collection. The lack of authenticity speaks volumes. The George Washington origin myth is an expression of American deification of a national hero. The act of giving the chair demonstrates one man's effort toward reconciliation during the postbellum era. Retaining this chair allows MNHS to continue to tell its complex story and to explore nuances of museology through a single, beautiful object.

—Sondra Reiersen, associate curator
of 3-D objects

The mahogany chair has Queen Anne-style turned details. It features a serpentine top rail, outcurving arms, cabriole front legs with carved knees and claw and ball feet, and square canted back legs. The seat has been reupholstered in maroon velour; the original upholstery was red Morocco leather. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)



Notes

1. "Relic of Historic Worth," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 11, 1890; "St. Paul News," *Minneapolis Tribune*, March 11, 1890, 3. Clitherall's entry in *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society 14*, Minnesota Biographies 1655–1912, p. 129, notes

the donation and its connection to Mount Vernon, as does the entry for Clitherall Township in Warren Upham's *Minnesota Place Names: A Geographical Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001), 421.

2. Richard R. Hahn, *George Bush Burgwin Clitherall: Love of Country Paramount to Devotion to Party* (Forest Lake, MN: self published, 1994), 58.



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