

Connecticut Historical Society: The Collection

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ORGANIZATIONAL OVERVIEW

The Connecticut Historical Society (CHS) is a private, not-for-profit museum, library, research and educational center. Founded in 1825, the CHS is one of the oldest state-level historical societies in the nation. The mission is to *connect you and the story of Connecticut*. To accomplish that purpose, CHS collects and preserves material (books, documents, images, and artifacts) related to Connecticut's social, cultural, and family history and makes those materials available for public education and use **onsite** at its building on Elizabeth Street in Hartford, **off-site** at other locations, and **online**. CHS's on- and off-site public services reached 43,870 people in 2012, almost half of whom were K-college students, teachers, and chaperones.

THE CHS COLLECTION

With over **3.5 million items**, the CHS collection is nationally-renowned, especially in the areas of clothing and textiles, furniture, unique hand-written manuscripts and diaries, prints, photographs, tavern signs, early children's books, and tools. As stewards of this collection, CHS aims to: 1) preserve and enhance the collection to maintain its relevance and overall quality, 2) employ judicious accessioning and deaccessioning as needed, and 3) organize and catalog the collection to increase its value and accessibility to our audiences. The latter is to be accomplished through a variety of channels including online catalogs, finding aids, and on-site databases, as well as school tours, educational programs for children and adults, exhibitions, off-site programs, and community and university partnerships.

Selected highlights from the collection:

Connecticut "Firsts"

- first issue (1764) of the *Connecticut Courant* (now the *Hartford Courant*), the longest continually published newspaper in the United States
- earliest known view of a Connecticut town, painted by Sybil Huntington May of Haddam, about 1756
- *American Cookery* by Amelia Simmons, Hartford, 1796 – the first cookbook written by an American and published in the United States

- *A New and Correct Map of the United States of North America*, 1784 – engraved, printed, and published by Abel Buell of New Haven less than a year after the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Revolutionary War

17th-century history

- English sword carried in the Pequot War of 1637
- drum used to call town meetings in Farmington in 1650
- one of the two earliest known chairs made in America (the other at The Metropolitan Museum of Art)
- chair owned by Governor John Winthrop Jr. from about 1660
- Native American deeds, indentures, and petitions, including deeds granting lands to English colonists bearing the mark of Uncas, leader of the Mohegan tribe

Revolutionary Era

- rare Tory officer's coat and waistcoat
- Connecticut State Hero, Nathan Hale's diary
- rare set of 4 hand-colored engravings by Amos Doolittle (1754-1832) showing the Battles of Lexington and Concord, 1775
- common round hat with bullet holes from the shot that killed Phineas Meigs, the last Connecticut casualty of the Revolutionary War
- elaborately-engraved powder horns

18th-century Connecticut furniture

- fine examples of regional styles including spectacularly flamboyant high chests and chests-on-chests from southeastern Connecticut (Norwich/Colchester) and highly desirable tea and dressing tables from the Connecticut River Valley

Childhood items

- cradles, buggies, wagons, cribs, miniature furniture, and mechanical banks
- Connecticut-made toys and games from the 18th - 20th centuries, including: a 1930s Mickey Mouse pull toy, uncut box boards for "Rainbow Chime" and "Dial Handphone" toys from the Gong Bell Toy Co. in East Hampton, and 20th-century favorites like Legos, Pez dispensers, Wiffle balls, and Cabbage Patch dolls
- extensive collection of 18th and 19th-century children's books

Celebrity-related items

- Mark Twain's 1886 bicycle

- Samuel Colt's family baby crib
- fabric samples for a suit worn by George Washington to promote America's "infant manufactures"
- flag that Abraham Lincoln pushed aside in his box at Ford's Theater at the moment he was shot
- Katharine Hepburn's 1930s tennis outfit and 1970s golf clubs

Advertising

- the nation's largest and finest collection (65 examples) of 18th- and 19th-century tavern and inn signs, remarkable survivors of early roadside art
- stunning art nouveau-style color lithograph poster advertising Columbia Chainless bicycles
- extensive collection of 19th-century broadsides and trade cards advertising Connecticut businesses and manufacturers

Women's history

- 1669 complaint against a Wethersfield woman on suspicion of witchcraft
- *The First, Second, and Last Scene of Mortality*, embroidery by Prudence Punderson of Preston, 1776-1783—an unique 18th-century artistic representation of human mortality within a contemporary interior
- travel journals, correspondence, guest books, photographs, awards, and other personal papers of Beatrice Fox Auerbach, including correspondence with Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as business records of G. Fox & Co., the well-known department store
- WWII era "Women Work for Victory: Farm, Office, Factory" WPA poster
- 19th-century woman's bicycle and bicycling outfit

African American history

- rare needlework sampler by an African American girl from Old Saybrook
- wooden flour scoop made about 1800 by Cuff Smith, whose father Venture Smith wrote an autobiography relating his capture in Africa and eventual path to freedom
- paintings by African-American artists Nelson Primus and Charles Ethan Porter
- daguerreotypes by Hartford-based early photographer Augustus Washington
- one of the earliest known (1835-1845) anti-slavery banners documenting Connecticut's abolitionist movement
- Civil War letters from Joseph O. Cross of the Connecticut 29th Regiment to his wife
- 1803 broadside advertising a \$10 reward for return of an 18-year-old runaway slave named Caesar

Industrial History

- 1870s “corpse preserver”, used to chill bodies of the deceased during mourning periods
- Blickensderfer typewriters and other early typewriters outfitted with experimental or alternative (non-QWERTY) keyboards
- Extensive collection of early 20th-century chrome housewares
- unique prototype model for shelf clock to be mass-produced of interchangeable parts, made by Eli Terry, Plymouth, probably about 1814

Chinese Educational Mission

- extensive collection of letters, papers, and photographs from the Chinese Educational Mission, headquartered in Hartford, 1872-1881

CHS COLLECTION BY THE NUMBERS

3.5 million manuscripts, including diaries, letters, ledger books, family and business papers

242,000 photographs, prints, and drawings

125,000 books, serials, and pamphlets

38,000 artifacts and paintings, including household objects, furniture, clothing, and toys

10,000 architectural drawings

3,700 broadsides/posters

1,300 maps