

Collectors' notes

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ANTIQUES' own forum where readers may exchange information and advice, report discoveries and add fresh facts to the record, or set us straight when we have erred.

History repeats itself

IN THIS COLUMN in our February issue (p. 338), one of our perceptive readers brought to our attention a relic of Napoleonic France that had been buried in the vast collections of the British Museum. This month, another reader brings to light an equally decorative piece of American history, which has lain unrecognized for many years in a small museum in New Jersey. Leon Castner, an appraiser, came upon the extraordinary silver inkstand shown below in the course of an insurance appraisal. He writes:

"This unusual presentation piece was ordered by the United States Senate for Vice-President Garret Augustus Hobart (1844–1899), according to the inscription on the base, at the bottom of the center front steps. It is a scale model of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C., on an elaborate base, the whole weighing nearly twenty pounds. It consumed 338/6 troy ounces of silver at a cost of \$236.81, and the building is entirely enameled. The small domes flanking the central one conceal glass inserts for the ink.

"The hallmarks on the bottom indicate that the inkstand was made by the Gorham Company in Providence, Rhode Island, for Harris and Schafer, a Washington jewelry firm in business between 1880 and 1938 that was noted for the fine quality of the silver, jewelry, art works, and glass it sold. The Gorham records are quite precise about the manufacturing of the inkstand. It was modeled by the sculptor Frederick Kohlhaugen, the first professor to use live models at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, who worked with an assistant for five weeks to prepare the clay model. A craftsman identified only as 'PP' spent 695 hours making the mold for the Capitol and one identified as 'F' spent 246 making the mold for the base. Casting the building required 64 hours, and casting the base, an additional 60 hours. The cast was evidently a clean one since only 40 hours of further chasing were required. Turning the domes and finial took 50 hours. The crest of New Jersey painted on the elaborate central cartouche was done by an Austrian artist named Richter, who was paid \$7.50 for 7½

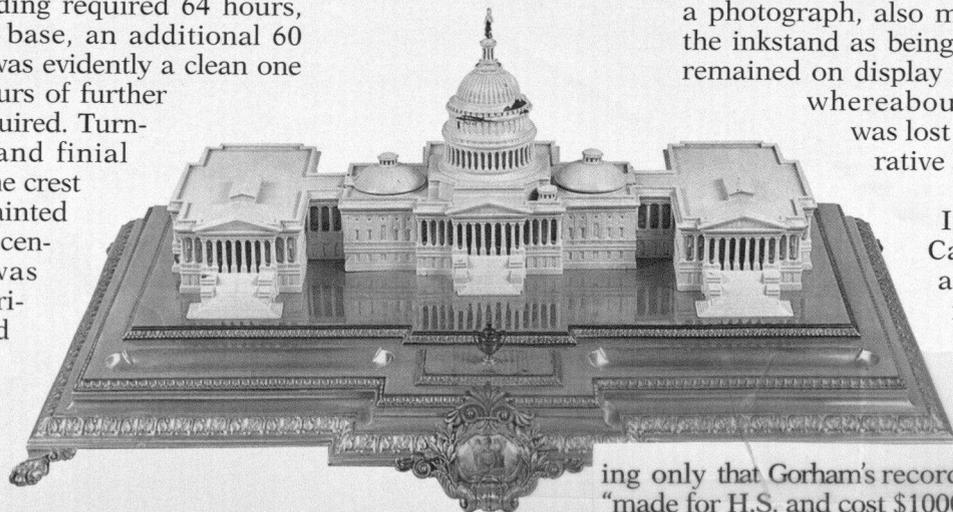
hours of work, the highest sum paid to any of the craftsmen who worked on the inkstand. Enameling the building cost only twenty-three cents.

"The total cost of making the inkwell was nearly \$1,800, but Edward Holbrook, the president and owner of Gorham, ordered the net cost to be set at only \$1,000. It is not known exactly why or when the inkstand was presented to Hobart, but it is known that he was an extremely popular official who vehemently lobbied to maintain the gold standard against those favoring the adoption of a silver standard. Gorham, the largest silver manufacturer in the country at the time, would have been extremely grateful to a politician who had saved its manufacturing foundation by continuing to make silver available in quantity, and this alone could account for the fact that Holbrook set the cost at about 60 percent of the actual cost.

"Hobart was elected vice-president on the ticket with William McKinley in 1896, having been chosen for his deep Republican roots and his ability to carry New Jersey. As an astute businessman and New Jersey congressman, he had few shortcomings—or enemies. Often referred to as the 'assistant president,' he raised the office to one of importance and dignity. He did not survive his term however, dying at his home in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1899. The nation mourned his passing for days, remembering him as 'holding the latch key to the White House.'

"Hobart's widow donated the inkstand to the newly created Lambert Castle Museum of the Passaic County Historical Society in Paterson in 1934. It was included in the museum's inaugural exhibition, which was devoted to Hobart memorabilia. An account of the exhibition in the *Paterson Morning Call* of October 24, 1934, stated, 'In the center of the room stands a beautiful model of the Capitol at Washington made of ivory.' An account in the *Morning Call* three days later, which included a photograph, also mistakenly identified the inkstand as being of ivory! Although it remained on display for many years, the whereabouts of the inkstand was lost to scholars of decorative arts and history."

Inkstand made by the Gorham Company, Providence, Rhode Island, 1898. Marked on the bottom with Gorham's marks and "HARRIS & SCHAFER." Silver and enameled silver; height 9½, length 24, width 16 inches. Passaic County Historical Society, Paterson, New Jersey; photograph by Helga Photo Studio.



In 1982 Charles H. Carpenter published a photograph of the inkstand from Gorham's archives in his *Gorham Silver, 1831–1981* (p. 174), not-

ing only that Gorham's records indicated that it was "made for H.S. and cost \$1000." Happily it can now be recognized for both its beauty and its historic value.