National Historic Parks News

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Spring/Summer, 1971

Focus on Québec

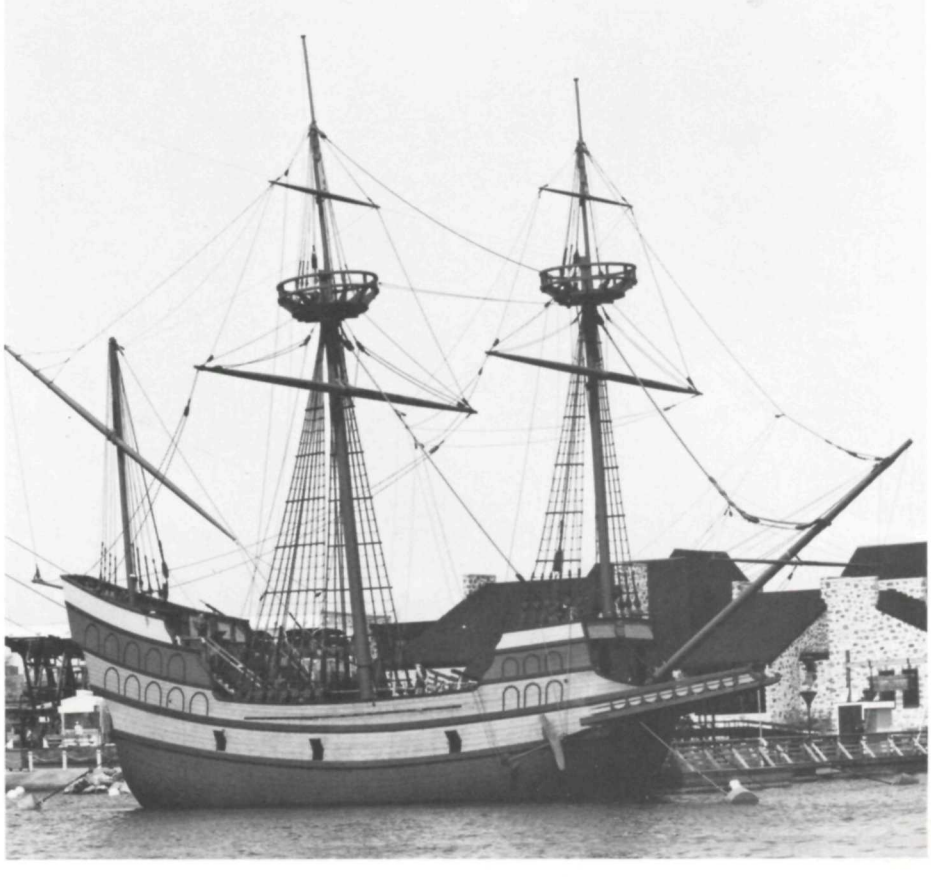
First as jumping-off point for exploration of the North American interior, later as commercial nucleus of the continent, Québec formed the warp on which much of early Canadian history was woven. During the coming year, some 15 historic places in Québec province closely connected with events that shaped our national history are slated for special attention. Over five million dollars have been earmarked for their development and maintenance by the National and Historic Parks Branch of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. The following are highlighted in the Québec plan.

One major undertaking is the new Cartier-Brébeuf National Historic Park. The 16-acre park, located outside Québec City where the St. Charles and Lairet Rivers meet, commemorates the place where Jacques Cartier and his crew spent the devastating winter of 1535-36. Cartier's discovery of the St. Lawrence River opened the way for French settlement and exploration of three-quarters of the continent. Ninety years later, missionary Jesuit priest Jean de Brébeuf together with Fathers Charles Lalemant and Enemond Masse landed at the same site where Cartier had wintered.

The focal point of the park will be "La Grande Hermine", a full-size replica of Cartier's flagship, largest of the three used on his expedition. (Completed in 1966, La Grande Hermine was on display at Expo '67). Nearly one half million dollars will be spent to refurbish the vessel and move it to its final destination, create an artificial basin in which to moor it, and build an interpretation and visitors' reception center for the park.

Another major project will be restoration of Fort Lévis 1 on the Lauzon heights opposite Québec City. The fort is the one remaining of a series of three built in the 1860s to protect Québec against possible invasion from the south. A unique example of an important stage in Canadian military architecture, Fort Lévis was structured to

La Grande Hermine, the 160-ton 78-foot replica of Jacques Cartier's flagship, is destined for a permanent berth in Québec City's Cartier-Brébeuf National Historic Park.



accommodate the advent of rifling in military ordinance.

In Montreal, the two-storey stone house once inhabited by Sir Georges-Etienne Cartier, one of the leading Fathers of Confederation, will receive special attention. After negotiations for its acquisition have been completed, "as found" drawings recording the building's condition will be made, and restoration work on the 130-year-old house on Montreal's historic Notre Dame Street will begin. National Historic Sites Service curators are presently gathering suitable period furnishings to reflect the character of the 19th-century statesman's home.

In the Baie des Chaleurs at Restigouche, Québec, an underwater archaeological project has already been under way for two years. It is the site of the 17-day Battle of the Restigouche, the last North American naval encounter between British and French for possession of colonial Canada. In 1760, three French frigates were sunk as a result of that engagement, and archaeologists are bringing to light a trove of artifacts in unexpectedly good condition. Present plans call for erection of an interpretation center at Restigouche to tell the story of the ill-fated frigates Bienfaisant, Machault and Marquis de Malauze, and the men and goods they carried to the New World over 200 years ago.

Among other sites on which additional work will begin are Fort Chambly, Fort Lennox, Coteau-du-Lac, Laurier House, Carillon Barracks, and Fort Chateauguay–all within less than 30 miles of Montreal; Québec City walls, gates and Artillery Park –each part of Québec City's historic fortifications; Fort Témiscamingue in western Québec province; and the commemorative Jacques Cartier cross at Gaspé.

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Restoring the Motherwell Homestead

It is a rare occasion when a curator can consult the original inhabitants of a historic home. This was the case, however, when National Historic Sites Service curator Reg Dixon began to plan the furnishings for the Motherwell House, once the Saskatchewan homestead of William R. Motherwell, pioneer, politician, and farmer extraordinary.

Before attempting to track down the hundreds of items required to bring the homestead back to a semblance of its original appearance, Dixon and historian William Naftel compiled a list of surviving relatives Dixon then approached them for details of the home and farm, and using much of the information they provided drew up his restoration plans.

The ten-room cut-stone house is the focal point of an eight-acre homestead acquired by the National Historic Sites Service for long-range development into a restoration of the site as it was during Motherwell's lifetime.

In 1882, three years before east and west were bound by railway steel, Motherwell as a young man of 22 set out from Perth, Ontario for Saskatchewan. He rode till the end of the railway line and completed the journey by Red River cart. At the homestead site near Abernethy he emptied the contents of his cart, set up a tent and embarked on a career that was to transform Canadian prairie agriculture.

Dixon hopes that all significant aspects of the man's life can be expressed through the restoration. "I don't want to restrict the furnishings to just one year, for it is not intended as a display of period furnishings. We aim to show that here was a house he lived in virtually all his life. The idea is to show the passage of time, his life during that time, and his contributions to western agriculture. He was a builder and a family man. As a pioneer farmer he broke 28 acres at the time of the Riel Rebellion. When the problem of grain transportation got him into politics, he became founder of the first effective Canadian grain growers' association and from 1921-30 served as Minister of Agriculture in the Mackenzie King government. I'd also like to show all the various things he contributed to the betterment of agriculture for both farmer and consumer–he introduced import standards for agricultural produce, diversified farming, set standards for grading fruit, pork and eggs and many other improvements we all take for granted now."

The house itself will contain many of the original Motherwell furnishings, a large part of which have been donated to the National Historic Sites Service by his family. Other buildings on the property will house agricultural exhibits–displays to show the seasonal cycle of life on the farm, some of the original farm machinery, and technical explanations of how the machinery worked. Gathering the furnishings is, says Dixon, "a sort of sleuthing job".

"We've gathered original pieces which were in the home from as far afield as Prince Edward Island and California. At the present time we have some farm machinery, the bulk of the original furnishings, and a pretty good description of items such as curtains and draperies. We've also been able to track down the buggy that Motherwell and his second wife Catherine–his

first wife Adeline died in 1905 – drove from the church at Abernethy to Indian Head on their honeymoon. Some pieces are in storage in Regina, others that have been promised us, like the family Bible and grandfather clock, are in homes in Abernethy and Calgary." Now in storage in Ottawa are Motherwell's sturdy leather armchair, a stuffed weasel, and a mantle clock presented to him by the Saskatchewan Liberal Association.

Surviving family members and acquaintances proved to be valuable sources of information about the homestead, as did early photographs and catalogues. Dixon points to the importance of period catalogues.

"When we can't locate the actual pieces, the old Sears and Eaton's catalogues are very convenient for finding out the kind of furniture that was popular at the time. Whenever it's possible we try to obtain the originals. When they are not available we obtain a piece as close as possible in design or have authentic reproductions copied from the catalogue descriptions."

Yet the live sources are vital. The memories of Mrs. Alma D. Mackenzie, Motherwell's daughter, produced a 16-page description of the homestead. She told of life on the farm, the precise colours of curtains and carpets, the games the family played, her mother's Raymond sewing machine, and the huge vats of soft soap in the cellar. And from her reminiscences, Dixon was able to sketch plans for each room, detailing the position and appearance of almost every object and piece of furniture. The restoration promises to be a remarkable tribute to a remarkable Canadian.

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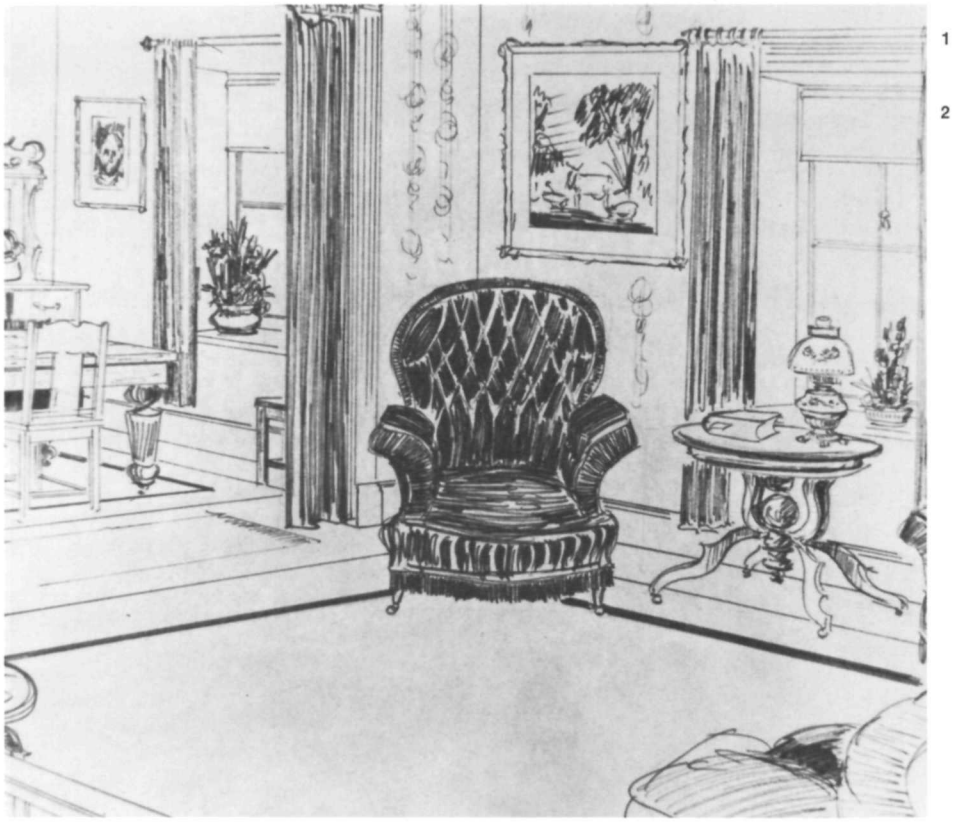

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1 When fully restored, the parlour of the Motherwell House will closely resemble curator Reg Dixon's sketch.

2 Motherwell, seated in the first row, second from left, as provincial Minister of Agriculture. He later became the federal minister under Mackenzie King.

The "Stuff" of History

"Little bottles filled with mercury are carried by old-timers in the Yukon. These are handy substitutes for thermometers, for when the mercury is solid, the wise traveller in that country seeks shelter."

Taken from a contemporary account of the Yukon Gold Rush, this is the sort of information that the newly established "material history" research section of the National Historic Sites Service is attempting to compile. The researchers approach history through the everyday stuff of Canada's past—the goods pictured in old newspaper advertisements and retail catalogues, observations from centuries-old travellers' journals, and the objects found in museum collections.

Elizabeth Wylie, supervisor of the project, explains: "We're interested in Canada's social history during the European period, and the everyday things historians considered too ordinary to be worth recording."

When curators restore and furnish a building interior, creation of the appropriate atmosphere depends on precise and accurate historical detail. "There is a basic peril in simply attempting to restore a house in 'period' furnishing. The furnishings often varied according to the individual's social standing and did not necessarily depend on whether his background was French or English, or whether his home was urban or rural. For example, as the French Canadian gained social status, he abandoned the carved pine armoires and other goods from the French settlers' rural 'peasant' past, and adopted current British, French, or American styles. Another example is evident at Fort Anne National Historic Park in Nova Scotia. In the 1730s when Fort Anne was an isolated and supposedly poverty-stricken garrison, the commanding officer's parlour was hung with portraits by John Smibert, Boston's most famous and fashionable artist," Miss Wylie points out.

In recreating the home surroundings of a 19th-century Quebecker, curators might refer to sources ranging from Cornelius Kreighoff's paintings to contemporary newspaper advertisements. Eaton's catalogue is a virtual encyclopedia of information, but it did not exist before 1884. The late 1880s brought mass production and a standardization of Canadian goods—up to that time the reflection of regional differences was more pronounced but systematically unrecorded.

One area of interest to the research section is how the use of some rooms and other interior features of Canadian homes have changed with changing social customs and economic circumstances.

Researcher Marcel Moussette is now conducting a historical study of domestic heating in Canada. One of the most important features of the stove was its adaptability to our climate, Moussette points out. Otherwise there would have been no reason for the stove to replace the fireplace. The stove was mobile and radiated heat from its metal plates rather than just providing a limited amount of direct heat as a fireplace would. (Most of the heat in early fireplaces went up the chimney.)

It is likely that the stove also had some effect on certain features of Québec architecture. In the 1600s the first French settlers came to Canada from western France where fireplaces were used for indoor heating, although stoves were being used in other parts of Europe at the time. The early settlers lived in two-room dwellings consisting of kitchen and sleeping quarters with a chimney located at either end or in the center of the house. When stoves came into popular use, however, they could live in several rooms—pipes would carry the heat throughout the house. And since they were obliged to heat their houses for a good part of the year, roofs were constructed of tin or slate tile to avoid fire. Until 1760 historical accounts make no mention of cooking stoves—apparently cooking was still done at the hearth.

Another area of research, traditional trades and crafts, will include information on early Canadian flour mills, lime kilns, weaving techniques, and the crafts of the blacksmith and cooper. Last summer Miss Wylie and staff photographer Georges Lupien filmed an old stone flour mill still in operation at Ancaster, Ontario. The film record, she explained, could serve as a valuable guide for restoring a similar structure in the historic sites system.

The key to retrieving the information compiled by the researchers is a detailed subject catalogue. Explains historian-cataloguer Nancy Bower: "If someone on staff wants to know something about gunflints, for example, the subject cards will list books, magazine articles, slides, sound tapes, and films that may be available on gunflints, as well as experts on the subject. Unlike the traditional library, we're not limiting sources to the written word. The idea is to direct our staff to all available sources of information of a particular subject, no matter what form the information is in."

1 Catalogue illustration of a late 19th-century cooking stove.

2 The millstones of Cope's grist mill in Ancaster, Ontario were imported from a quarry near Paris as were all high quality North American millstones of the 19th century. The mill, dating from 1863, was filmed in operation as a source for restoration engineers and social historians.

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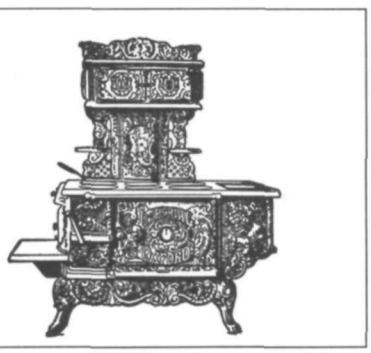

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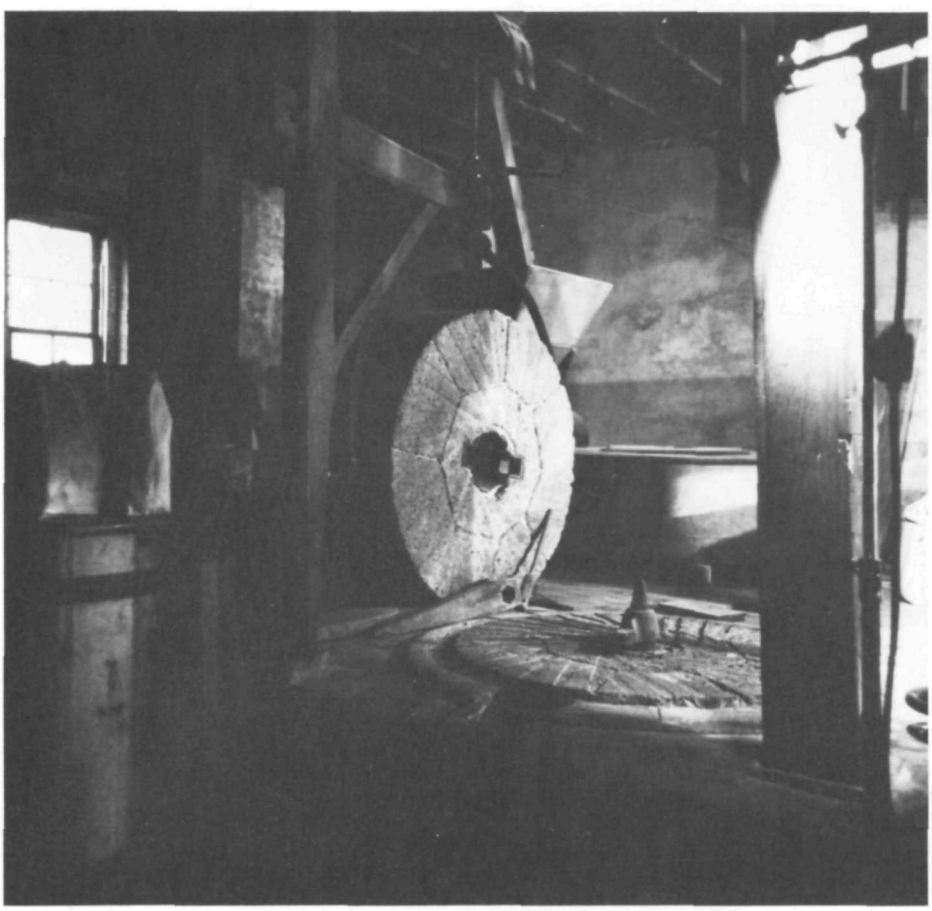

Conservator at Work

Picking away a layer of buff-coloured wallpaper in the 116-year-old Pope House in Charlottetown, Richard Beauchamp hit upon a patch of vivid red flecked with gold and adorned with Paris green scrolls. "Not my taste," he comments, "but it was heavy and rich and would make a very interesting room."

The Pope House, once inhabited by William Henry Pope, one of the Fathers of Confederation from Prince Edward Island, was acquired by the National Historic Sites Service in 1967. Beauchamp, as chief conservator for the Service, was trying to determine the original paint colours of the rooms slated for restoration, a process requiring patience and objectivity. He began by taking plaster samples from the walls and wood samples from the baseboards and ceiling moldings, sometimes finding more than a dozen coats of paint and wallpaper accumulated over the years. In a room-by-room survey, lists of the paint sequences were compiled and examined to find a common colour denominator.

Beauchamp explains, "One can usually find that the whole room was first undercoated with one paint, all woodwork painted another colour, the chair rail a contrast. Someone might find the colour combinations too bright or distasteful, but like them or not, at a particular date those actually were the colours in that room."

Before a piece of furniture is restored, the conservator attempts to determine the original paint colour in the same careful manner. The chair or cupboard is examined, and scraped down layer by layer in several spots. The cracks and corners where it wouldn't have been stripped or cleaned are

Richard Beauchamp restores an oil painting by "inpainting" with watercolour. The watercoloured areas match the tonal values of the original but are easily distinguishable to a restoration expert and so can be removed without harming the original paint layers.

given special attention. In this manner, you can be almost certain exactly what the original colour was.

The actual paint used to restore furnishings for national historic sites is usually the equivalent in colour if not in formula of the historical compound, for in researching paint shades, Beauchamp has hit upon some unusual compounds.

One example is a blue once popular for painting corner cupboards in rural 18th-century Québec. Beauchamp relates one version of how the blue was made. "A Québecois farmer told me that during the winter the early settlers used to urinate in a bucket kept behind the stove. The deposit of thick crystals left at the bottom of the bucket was later used in making the blue paint."

Another colour which cannot be duplicated in restoration work is Paris green. A brilliant green popular in the 1820s and 30s, Paris green is a poisonous compound of arsenic and copper.

Before the paint was taken off the North American market by legislation passed in the United States in the late 1880s, painters' manuals printed warnings against use of the colour. They pointed to cases where husbands and wives had "expired" from living in houses painted with it and creeping children had died from gnawing Paris green woodwork.

Besides the overseeing of paint and furniture restoration, Beauchamp's bailiwick includes conservation and reconstruction of textiles, glassware, prints and paintings. The work requires a thorough knowledge of the materials, patience, and often, ingenuity. To remove stains from a water-colour painting, for example, Beauchamp uses a bleaching solution called chloramine-T mixed with alcohol and water. Ordinary bleaches would break down the cellulose of the paper, he explains. When cleaning ink drawings and maps, it is important to know the chemical composition of the ink. Iron or oil-based inks are insoluable but a vegetable ink could easily be bleached out of existence. In fact print-washing is such a delicate process that Beauchamp found the conventional sink inadequate.

"When working on the back of a print it's awfully important to see its face, and in an ordinary stainless steel sink you can't do that. So I made a glass-bottomed sink with a mirror underneath it." Since publishing the details of his invention in the bulletin of the International Institute for Conservation, Beauchamp has had inquiries from conservators in Italy, Norway, Australia and Africa.

As a conservator, Beauchamp is concerned with the ethics of restoration; what he describes as the museographer's respect for the object itself. "If you intend to restore something ethically, the object isn't to make it look new, but to preserve as much of the original as possible–to stop it from deteriorating any further and make it as presentable as possible."

Textiles, because of their perishability, pose special problems. Some women's dresses are so old that the silk has rotted and must be backed with terylene net. Beauchamp also oversees the mending of lace, and the washing and folding of costumes, some of them over a century old. Washing is often a delicate operation.

"You have to judge when something is not strong enough to be washed. One method of washing fragile fabrics is to place them between fiberglass screening and dab the dirt out with a soft brush. Otherwise the material might get so heavy with water that it would tear itself by its own weight."

Beauchamp (he pronounces his name "Beecham"), specialized in restoring oil paintings before he came to the National Historic Sites Service. He received training in artifact restoration at the Instituto Central de Restauracion in Madrid, and points out that nowhere on this continent are academic courses available for those interested in conservation of historic materials. The prospective conservator must receive his basic training in fine arts and then learn on the job.

Beauchamp has prepared a mimeographed "very basic manual" of museum handling for his staff. The manual covers a variety of materials including leather, textiles, ceramics and glassware, pewter and silverware, prints, drawings and oil paintings. These rules are cardinal, says Beauchamp, for in the conservatorial field a broken rule can mean a broken artifact.

1 Expert craftsman Fricis Jaunzens matches paint colours on the reconstructed portion of an early 19th-century chair. The piece is a country-style copy of Chinese Chippendale, one of some 250 chairs in the reserve collection of the National Historic Sites Service.

2 A decorative mid-19th century tablecloth is mended with intricate care.

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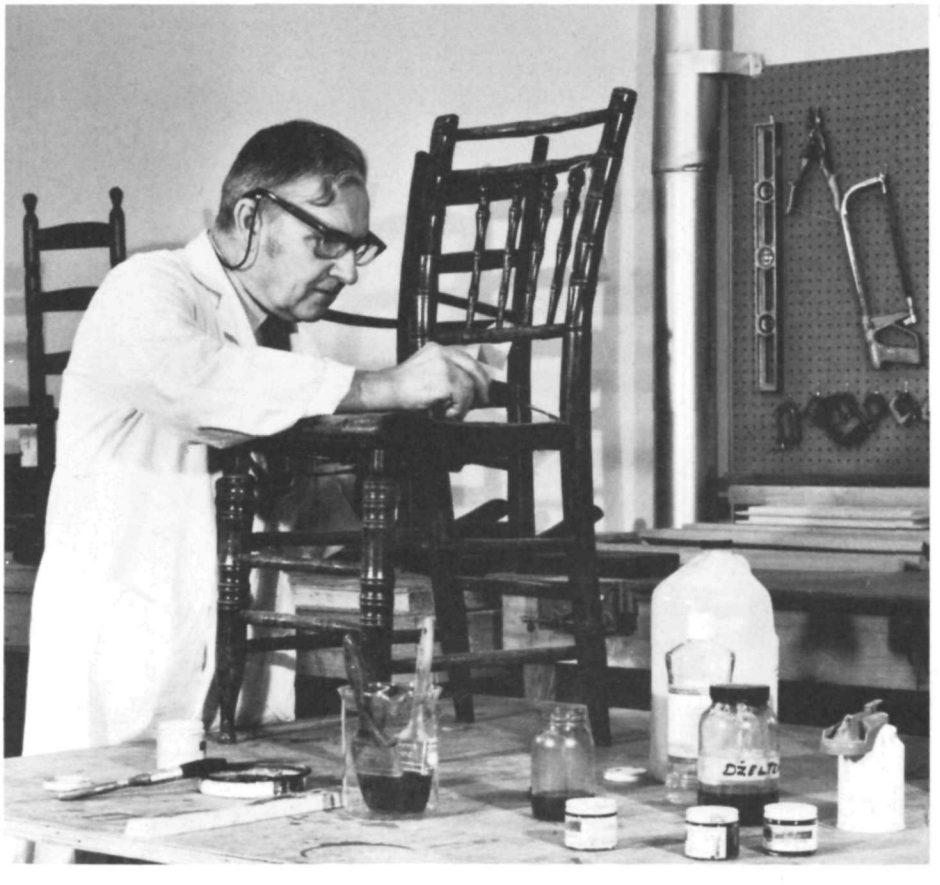

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