

from our collections

Conserving *A View of West Point and Its Environs, 1782*



Todd Pattison is the Conservator at American Ancestors/NEHGS.

We recently completed conservation treatment on *A View of West Point and Its Environs*, an irreplaceable piece of history from the founding years of our country.¹ Our rare 1782 sketch by Charles Pierre L'Enfant is one of three copies that are known to exist. The other versions, both by L'Enfant, are in collections of the Library of Congress and the Museum of the American Revolution in Philadelphia. All three versions show the low, rolling hills of the Hudson Valley, as well as rows of tents, camp followers, various animals, and other accurate and lively details.

Our copy is inscribed by General Henry Knox (1750–1806), who commissioned the panoramic views. Knox commanded Continental Army troops in the area now known as West Point and was captivated by the striking Hudson River location. The artist, Charles L'Enfant, was the French-born American engineer, architect, and urban designer who designed the basic plan for Washington, D.C. L'Enfant studied art at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris until 1776, when he enlisted as a volunteer in the American Continental Army.

Rear Admiral Henry Knox Thatcher (1806–1880) donated the drawing to New England Historic Genealogical Society around 1870. Born in Thomaston, Maine, Thatcher had a long military career, which included distinguished service in the Civil War. Thatcher's mother, Lucy Flucker (Knox) Thatcher, was the daughter of Henry Knox, and the admiral may have inherited this sketch of West Point (his alma mater) from her. In the 1870s, Thatcher also gave NEHGS a valuable cache of his grandfather's papers, which made our organization an important scholarly center for the study of the Knox family.





Top: NEDCC Senior Paper Conservator Katie Boodle spraying the object with a 30:70 ethanol/filtered water mixture on a suction table. *Bottom:* The 1782 sketch after conservation treatment.

Katie Boodle, Senior Paper Conservator at NEDCC, was the lead conservator working on the drawing with the conservation treatment overseen by American Ancestors/NEHGS Conservator Todd Pattison and Curator of Fine Art Curt DiCamillo.

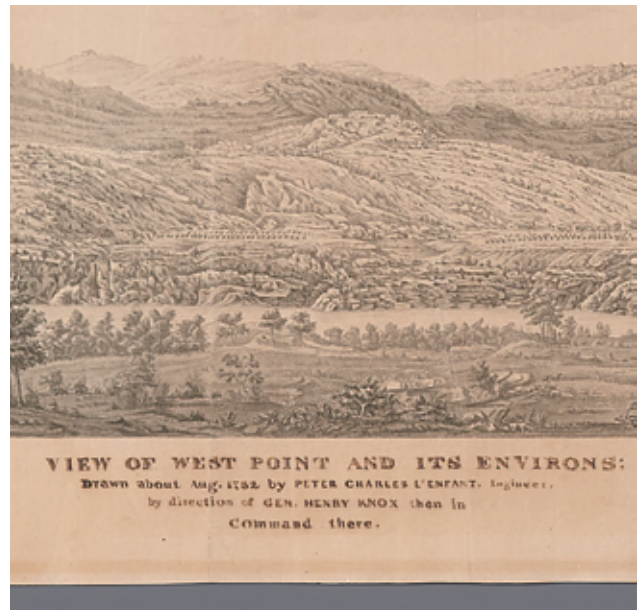
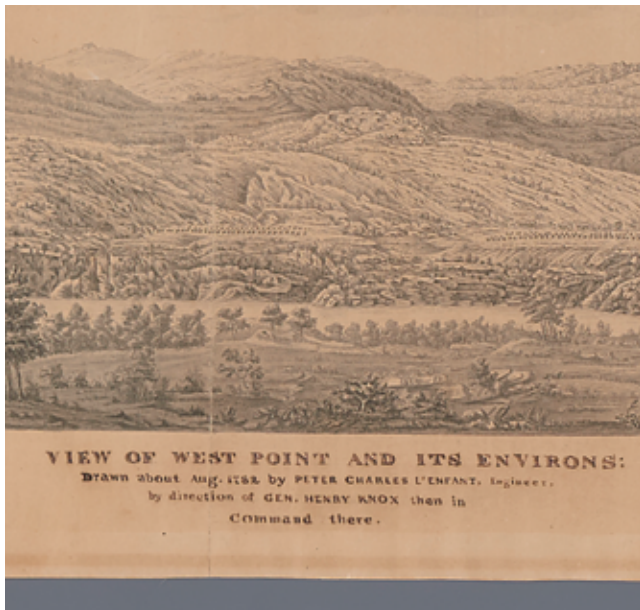
The goal of treatment was to stabilize the object and improve the visual cohesion of the gray-scale watercolors while still retaining the piece's historical integrity. Concern was expressed

The drawing was made on handmade laid paper with iron-gall manuscript inks, graphite pencil, and watercolor. *A View of West Point and its Environs* was selected for conservation because of concerns that the object would deteriorate further without intervention. The drawing presented several challenges due to how it was made, its large, panoramic format, and the impact of a previous partial restoration effort. Given the complicated conservation issues posed by the mixed media used to create the drawing, the sketch was sent to the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) in Andover, Massachusetts, for treatment. NEDCC, founded as a non-profit regional conservation center, is a nationally recognized leader in the field of paper conservation.

about the overall stability of the iron gall ink that was used for the annotations along the lower margin. The methods for stabilizing the ink do not work well with watercolors in general, but fortunately the ink only showed slight deterioration, which could be addressed by aqueous (water) treatment.

The other point of concern arose because the drawing was composed of two sheets of paper seamed together at the center. The sheets could not be separated during treatment, as this might have resulted in a distorted image if the two pages dried irregularly. To address this issue and protect the ink and watercolors, the piece was washed in a tightly controlled manner on an absorbent capillary material with a mixture of ethanol and filtered water.





Above: Details of the drawing before (left) and after (right) showing the reduction in staining.

While this washing method removed a significant amount of discoloration and degraded products from the paper, the previous treatment and prior framing had created some irregular staining that could not be addressed solely by washing. The only way to reduce these areas and create better visual cohesion overall was to isolate parts of the watercolor and expose them to light in a controlled manner during several timed rounds of light bleaching. Overall, the aqueous treatment created a better depth of field by restoring the highlights and returned the drawing to a state more closely resembling its original condition. Additionally, the aqueous treatments improved the flexibility of the paper, making it less brittle and easier to handle.

Another part of the treatment removed pressure sensitive tapes from the verso where they had been used to repair tears and hinge the pieces to a previous backing board. In time, these tapes would have caused local staining or affected the paper matrix in a more significant manner. The tapes were removed and the breaks were repaired with an appropriate weight Japanese tissue paper and wheat starch paste. A comparable Western paper fills areas of loss in the margins. Both types of mends are easily reversible and will not cause long term damage to the object in the same way the tapes would have.

“This was a fun item to work on in each stage of treatment, but especially during the washing stages as I could spend time assessing how the aqueous treatment and the light bleaching brought back the depth of field to the illustration each day,” according to Katie Boodle. “Seeing the change in person is always a satisfying part of the conservation work. L’Enfant’s illustration had a number

of details that only truly became visible after the second or third day of aqueous treatment once the highlighted areas and palest gray marks of vegetation started to rise out of the pale brown of the paper tone.”

After the conservation treatment the drawing was attached to a 100% cotton rag backing board with a false margin of lightweight Japanese tissue paper applied to all four edges with wheat starch paste. This false margin allowed for the entirety of the edges of the drawing to be securely attached to the backing board. A minimal mat was used to better support the edges and create a barrier between the drawing and the glass of the frame. The frame itself, which likely dates to the nineteenth century, was altered to better protect the drawing in the future. A barrier against the acidic wood was added and an archival dust cover and hanging hardware were attached to the back. With the completion of this project, the future of this remarkable drawing is now secured.

The conservation treatment for *A View of West Point and Its Environs* was made possible by a generous grant from the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution and the financial assistance of an anonymous donor. ♦

NOTE

- ¹ *A View of West Point and Its Environs* was featured in an earlier column in this magazine. See Curt DiCamillo, “A Rare View of West Point,” *AMERICAN ANCESTORS* (2019) 1:60–61.