

Trousers in the Attic

A Case for a Concealed Garment in a Nineteenth-Century Ontario Inn

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Abstract:

Thomas Montgomery immigrated to Canada from Ireland in 1812. By 1830, he was settled in the village of Islington, in the west end of modern-day Toronto. He quickly built an inn and established a large farming operation supplying local markets with crops, apples and wool. Montgomery lived at the inn until his death in 1871. His descendants continued to rent out the property until 1945, at which time it was sold and ultimately became a Presbyterian church. Through the efforts of local citizens during the 1950s and 60s, the building was saved from demolition and opened as an historic site museum in 1975.

During the restoration, a pair of men's trousers were discovered in the attic, rolled up and stuffed between two joists in the attic. When they were found, it was assumed that they were put there to plug a hole in order to stop birds from nesting. The trousers were set aside in the collection storage room until the late 1980s, when conservation treatment began. Once they were cleaned and stabilized, it became clear that the original 1830s trousers were made of wool twill and had been skillfully tailored when new. At some point during the nineteenth century, it appears that they were repurposed as a working garment, and became well-worn and patched many times. Signs of wear existed in predictable locations for a pair of working trousers, like the seat, knees and hems. In total, the fabric had been patched seventeen times with a variety of cotton and linen textiles. If not for these patches, it might have been nearly impossible to see the original shape of the garments due to the extensive insect damage sustained by the original wool fabric.

These trousers are a rare survivor indeed for an historical collection in Canada. Now, the question remains, why exactly were they placed in the attic in the first place? Was it, as suggested in the 1980s, a pragmatic decision to keep wildlife out the attic or was there another reason? Is this an example of a deliberately concealed garment used as a talisman to ward off evil? This practice is not well documented in Ontario and these trousers offer an opportunity to investigate this type of practice and perhaps suggest when and why this garment was ultimately stashed up in the attic of Montgomery's Inn.

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Introduction

Historic collections, operated by municipalities, frequently contain artifacts that hold close associations with people and place. The City of Toronto Historical Collection is no exception. In addition to the stewardship of artifacts, City of Toronto, Museum and Heritage Services also operate historic sites and house museums across the city. Artifacts with close historical associations to museum sites hold special significance as they impart a heightened level of authenticity to interpretation of local history. In one such case, the cultural and historical significance of a pair of trousers, found in the attic of a Toronto area tavern, embody this close (and perhaps mysterious) association between artifact and context.

Thomas Montgomery and Montgomery's Inn, Toronto

The tavern in question was established by Thomas Montgomery, who immigrated to Canada from Ireland in 1812. By 1830, he was settled in the village of Islington, in the west end of modern-day Toronto. He quickly built an inn and established a large farming operation supplying local markets with crops, apples and wool. Montgomery lived at the inn until his death in 1877. His descendants continued to rent the property until 1945, at which time it was sold and ultimately became a Presbyterian church. Over the coming decades, the building retained significance within the local community as a landmark of early European settlement.

During the 1960s, buildings and sites across Canada were recognised as having special historic significance. Governments and community groups banded together to save and restore these vestiges of Canada's past in the years leading up to (and in the decade after) Canada's Centennial celebrations in 1967. Architects, curators, historians and educators worked together to create the narrative of Canada's European settlement and expansion. Montgomery's Inn was restored during this period of heightened historical awareness and opened to the public as an historic house museum in 1975.

Trousers in the Attic

During restoration work on the second floor ceiling and attic areas, a generally inaccessible part of the building, a pair of men's trousers were found rolled up and stuffed between a pair of ceiling joists – the exact location was not documented. This well-worn garment had served as habitat for nesting rodents and birds and fodder for insects for many years. Once discovered, they were put in the collection storage room for safe keeping.



Fig 1:
Front of c1830s trousers found in the attic of Montgomery's Inn. Conservation netting visible at centre front closure.
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The trousers (fig. 1, 2) appear to date from the 1830s or 1840s – although the style may have been current even earlier. They are characteristic of this period with a gusset at the centre back waist, a narrow fall front and square flap pockets at the side waist. A small welt pocket (watch pocket) appears at the waistband, right hand side, it has been stitched up and the pocket lining removed. Similar trousers in the Royal Ontario Museum [ROM 966.192.1], share the same front closure, generous seat and wide straight legs. The possible date of fabrication of the Montgomery's Inn trousers is also consistent with the time of greatest activity at the property. The Thomas Montgomery papers contain numerous bills for cloth and tailoring from Toronto area shops during this period.



Fig 2:
Back of c1830s trousers found in the attic of Montgomery's Inn. Pink/beige compensation fabric and conservation netting visible on legs and at waistband.
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In terms of materials, the trousers were originally made from camel-coloured wool broadcloth. The fibres range in quality from fine to coarse. A weaving flaw is visible in a section of the leg- the flaw may have been obscured during the fulling process, but later revealed after years of wear. It is unclear if the wool is of local or foreign manufacture. Weavers and fulling mills were active in Southern Ontario during this period – however large quantities of imported goods were also available. The stitching of the original garment was done with a two-ply linen thread – one ply much finer than the other. Long seams were done with a short backstitch and raw edges finished with a diagonal whip stitch. Incidentally, the front fall patch was whip-stitched with silk thread – this does not appear to be part of the original garment. The bound buttonholes are finely worked (fig. 3).



Fig 3:
Front left buttonhole closure, repair stitching and cotton patch (lower right).
Detail 987.49.2 City of Toronto, Museums & Heritage Services

The level of preservation of the trousers is quite high and largely due to the extensive use of cotton and linen patches (fig. 3, 4). In some areas, if not for these added layers, the moth damage to the wool fabrics was so severe that little would have remained of the original shape of the garment. The patches were applied in areas that required reinforcing due to wear – the seat, leg fronts and hem cuffs. It may be possible to suggest the type of work being done – likely associated with typical farm labour. During the conservation treatment, seventeen different patches in ten different cottons and one all-linen fabric were identified. These repair fabrics appear in plain, sateen and twill weaves. The stitching varies considerably in the patched and re-worked areas. In some cases the work is more considered than in others. In one instance there appears to have been an attempt to darn a worn area.



Fig 4:
Patch repair and waistband and side seams.
Detail 987.49.2 City of Toronto, Museums & Heritage Services

In 1987 the trousers underwent an extensive conservation treatment to remove accretions and some staining, stabilize fragments and interline with compensation fabric areas of severe fabric loss (wool areas). The treatment was never completed; however the garment was sufficiently stabilized that a pattern could be created for reproduction. Trousers made from this pattern have been used in period-room displays since the late 1980s.

A Deliberately Concealed Garment?

The question remains, how or why did this extremely rare survivor from the second quarter of the nineteenth century survive? After getting to know these trousers over the years and considering their context, I have become increasingly interested in the motivation behind their preservation. The cataloguing report suggests that they might have been stuffed up in the attic in order to discourage nesting birds. However, it is more likely that would have become part of the nest in this context, rather than discouraging nesting. This has led me to question whether these trousers were deliberately hidden in the attic for some other purpose – accidental? practical? sentimental? spiritual?

During the 2015 ICOM Costume Committee Meeting in Toronto, I had the opportunity to tour committee members through the City of Toronto's historical collection. I featured these trousers during my tour and brought up the curious location where they were found. ICOM Costume Committee member June Swann, who was on the tour, suggested I might consider if they had been deliberately concealed. In other words, an example of a *deliberately concealed garment*.

According to the UK's Deliberately Concealed Garments Project,

"The tradition of concealing clothes can be related to the practice of concealing other objects such as dried cats, witch bottles and charms in buildings. These types of object have been discovered hidden in similar places. The concealing of these items including garments can be related to folklore and superstitious traditions relating to the ritual protection of a household and its inhabitants."

[concealedgarments.org]

The project website lists a host of other characteristics based on items found in a wide range of documented contexts. In terms of the trousers found stuffed between the ceiling joists of a nineteenth-century Ontario Inn, they are similar to documented concealed garments in the following ways:

- Found in an attic – typical location
- Very worn, mended and altered
- Appeared to have been unlaundered at the time of discovery (other debris and accretions aside, according to conservation report)
- Likely deposited in the attic prior to circa 1900
- Unknown if these trousers were part of a cache – no documentation of their discovery has survived – parts of the cache could have wandered off with nesting birds and rodents
- Purpose for deposit unknown or unclear

Given the criteria listed above, it appears that a case could be made for adding the Montgomery's Inn trousers to a list of deliberately concealed garments from Canada. Given that examples of deliberately concealed garments have been identified in the UK, the United States and Australia, it appears logical, considering Canada's colonial past, that Canada be added to the scope of enquiry. I have found a few documented examples of deliberately concealed garments, but a

more in-depth study is warranted. The regional cultural differences that characterize Canada from East to West and North to South could provide an interesting comparison with evidence from other countries. Further research within the Canadian context could also help shed light on practices in other places in the hopes of identifying synergies and differences between people, place and artifact.

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