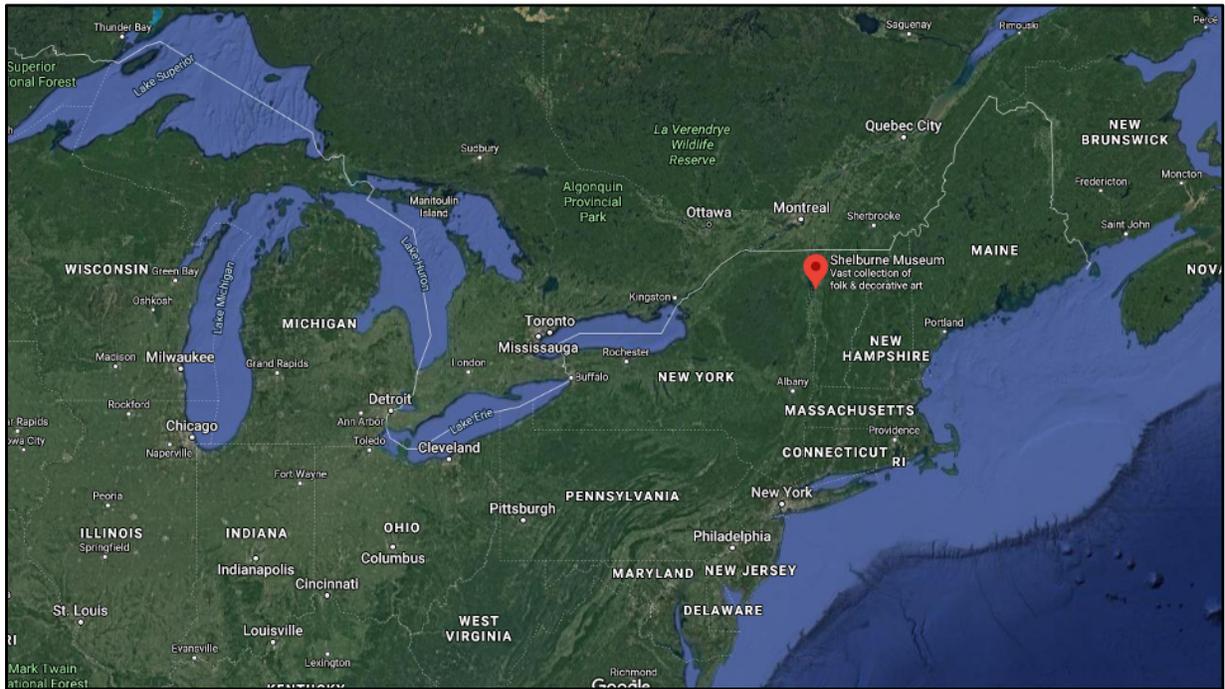


OUTDOOR COLLECTIONS & PLANNING FOR THEIR CARE

Nancie Ravenel
Objects Conservator | Shelburne Museum



My name is Nancie Ravenel, and I'm the objects conservator at Shelburne Museum, located in a place now known as Shelburne, Vermont, between Lake Champlain and the Green Mountains. This area as well as the town where I live is part of the ancestral and unceded lands of the Wabanaki Confederacy and the Abenaki people. I would like to acknowledge the Abenaki community, and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and future. Because of our location, the winters are cold and snowy, averaging about 72 inches of snow per year. Early spring is referred to as mud season, and our summers are warm and moderately humid. All of this has an impact on how we care for outdoor objects at the museum.

**How would you describe the
climate where you are?**

I'd like to know a bit about you – so I've got a poll – how would you describe your climate?



With regard to the museum itself, it was founded in 1947 by Electra Havemeyer Webb who, when pressed to characterize Shelburne Museum, described it as an educational project, varied and alive. The exhibition buildings are a combination of examples of vernacular New England architecture moved to the site, and purpose-build structures.

Not a historic
village but laid
out to evoke one.



Aerial view of Shelburne Museum, looking south.
Photography by Andy Dubak.



The intent was not to create an authentic historic village, but to replicate the feel. This romantic vision of the past, in turn, informs the placement and presentation of many of the objects displayed outdoors.

Who is involved?

- Landscape
- Building Preservation
- Collections



Chip Stulen checks the plumbing and determines the cause of the iron staining to the granite base under *Turtle Baby* (c.1910-16) by Edith Parsons



Staffing-wise, I'd describe us as medium-sized, with about 65 full-time, year-round staff. Three teams at the museum are tasked with direct care of outdoor objects, depending on our skills, the location of the objects, and the objects themselves.

What role do you play?

So here's another poll – what role do you play?

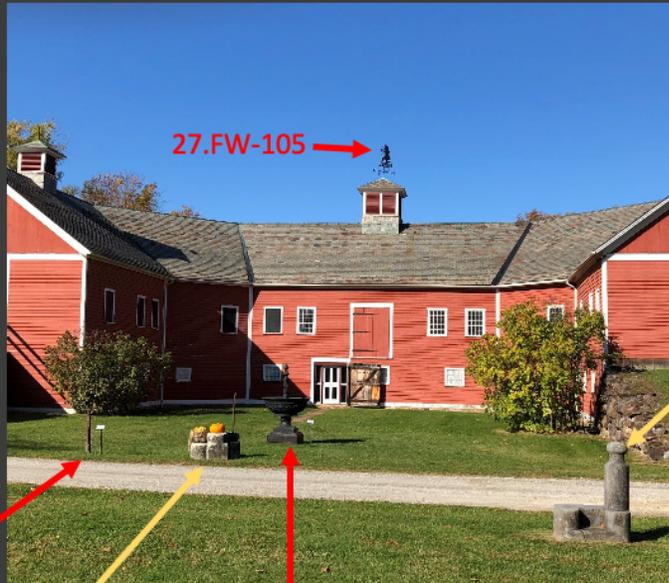
Thanks to

- Jess Gallas, Landscape & Gardens Manager
- Brian DeLaBruere & Tanner Dana, Groundskeepers
- Chip Stulen, Director of Preservation & Landscape
- Ron Wanamaker, Lead Carpenter; Michael Bernier & Steve Sperry, Carpenters
- Justin Mayo, Lead Painter; Brian Verville, Painter
- Mirsad Karabegovic, Museum Services
- Kate Owen, Associate Registrar for Exhibitions & Loans
- Suzanne Zaner, Preparator; Alex Kikutis, Lead Art Handler, Jim Brumsted & Nick Bonsall, Art Handlers
- Allison Gillette, Assistant Registrar, Archivist & Librarian
- Barbara Rathburn, Director of Collections
- Kory Rogers, Senior Curator



Here I've listed some of the individuals at Shelburne Museum who have been involved with our collections outdoors. I especially want to thank Jess Gallas for sharing her viewpoints and the Grounds' crew's processes with me. While the museum's landscape is perennially popular with our visitors, it took on an even larger role this year, given the pandemic. In a typical year, all of these people play a role in how we care for objects displayed outdoors along side seasonal staff and volunteers that expand the Landscape and Grounds staff. Turn-over is a given, and so ongoing training is necessary. However, this year the museum did not hire extra grounds crew and gardeners for the season, and many of the people on this list, including the carpenters, painters, art handlers, and me, and some who are not, were helping out with caring for gardens and grounds in addition to our usual job descriptions this year. This has helped encourage some new conversations about how we care for objects displayed outdoors. So this is to say that our program continues to evolve, and some of what I'll be sharing is how we're working to improve.

About 20
collection
outdoor
objects
Many others
considered
"Found in
Collection"



27.FM-55

27.FW-105

1953-332



So what kinds of things am I talking about. Some objects are accessioned and cataloged, while others were placed on the grounds at some point during the museum's history, but we've not yet found the paperwork on how they got there. I don't think we're the only museum with "found in collections" items.

Permanent
collection &
gardens



Edith Barretto Stevens Parsons, *Turtle Baby*, 1910-16. Bronze. Gift of Dunbar Bostwick, 1986-32.

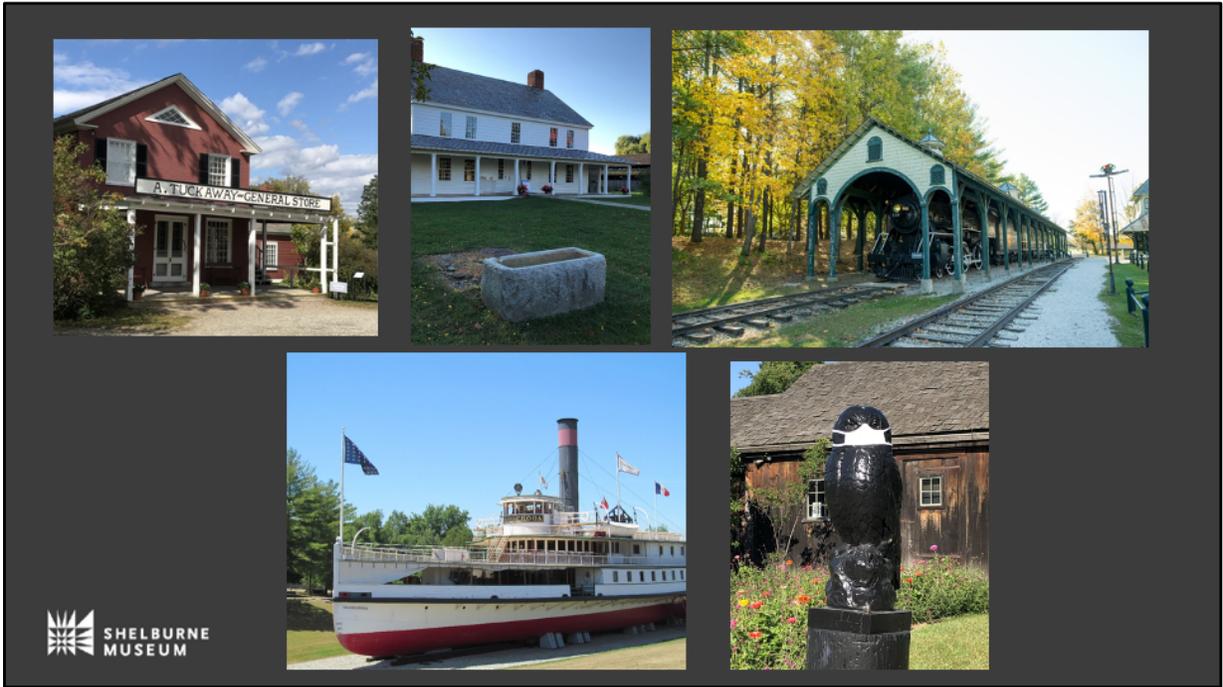


Unidentified maker, *Eagle on rock*, 19th c. Bronze. Gift of Mrs. Lyman Delano, 1961-21.



Unidentified maker, *Snow roller*. Granite, iron. Gift of Mr. John C. Arnold, 1955-83.

In addition to historical items like the granite snow roller we also have outdoor sculpture, including Turtle Baby seen here that is also a fountain. Care for the sculptures have historically been tasked to the Collections team...



While care of the historical objects and architectural features like painted signs are under the perview of Preservation and Landscape.

Yearly
outdoor
sculpture loan
exhibition
since 2016



George Sherwood, *Memory of Water* (stainless steel, 2014, ©George Sherwood) in 2016



To further activate the landscape, the museum has hosted a yearly outdoor sculpture exhibition, running May to early November since 2016. We have been borrowing contemporary works directly from artists or their galleries. The first exhibition was works by George Sherwood, a New England artist who creates kinetic sculptures. How we care for those sculptures while they are on our grounds is worked out as part of the loan agreement crafted by the registrar for exhibitions and loans, with input from the artists.



Aaron T. Stephan, *30 Columns* (painted polycomposite, 2010, courtesy of the artist and Samson Projects, Boston) in 2017, during installation.



Dan Snow, *Fantasy Topography* (stone and wood, 2019, courtesy of the artist) in 2019.



Here's a couple more examples of the kinds of works we've hosted. Typically, we receive initial care instructions from the artist, and they are further refined through conversation with staff, including the grounds and gardens manager, me, the preparator and occasionally the deputy director, especially if there's an interactive component. Occasionally, we find that we need to have an ongoing conversation with the artist regarding care during the run of the installation.

Risk Assessment



The New York Times
Opinion

Every Place Has Its Own Climate Risk. What Is It Where You Live?

By Stuart A. Thompson and Yarnia Seibel | Oct. 14, 2020

For most of us, climate change can feel like an amorphous threat — with the greatest dangers lingering ominously in the future and the solutions frustratingly out of reach.

So perhaps focusing on today's real harms could help us figure out how to start dealing with climate change. Here's one way to do that: by looking at the most significant climate threat unfolding in your own backyard.

Search for your county

What to call climate change where you live:
Intensity shown in scale from low (green) to very high (dark red)

Note: "Water stress" reflects the change in drought-like conditions as well as water demand. The methodology does not consider stream water quality, so its location where that may play a larger role, the base selected the amount of water that is used. This index reflects the impact from water use. The "extreme rain" index applies to counties where at least part of the region contains the highest rainfall in the Twenty-Century data. Other areas are mapped using the highest average across the remaining climate risks. — Source: From "Every Day"

In addition to collaborating with the artists regarding maintenance, the curator leading the installation, the preparator, and the Director of Preservation and Landscape work with the artists to determine where the works are placed on the grounds. Naturally, this is done with an eye towards potential weather-related risks. We are seeing increased storm severity, including more high wind events, and this recent interactive opinion piece in the New York Times indicates that we can expect more hurricanes and extreme rainfall in coming years.

Examples of works in *Peter Kirkiles: At Scale* (2020)



Images by Andy Dubak

Here's some examples of this year's installation. You'll note that the sculptures that have painted wood elements are lifted slightly above the ground.

Condition
Monitoring
(Still looking for
the best way to
collaborate &
share among
departments...)

Image: CO2011_OS61
Object: Grindstone
Location (as of July 2011): Stone Wall by Dyer's Garden



Condition: Object has been moved since previous survey. It cannot be determined if the condition of the object has changed since the previous survey. Object suffers from discoloration, material loss, wear and moss growth.



For the objects in our own collection, the way we monitor condition has been changing over the years. It began in the Collections Department with notebooks of annotated images, like the one I'm showing here. In Collections, updates to condition and maintenance information is recorded in the collections management database, but the database isn't easily accessible to the other departments, and so how we communicate this information internally is one area where we could improve. Since the Buildings Preservation team uses the software Microsoft OneNote to record and share their condition and maintenance information, I foresee that something similar could be done for outdoor objects, so that condition and maintenance instruction notes could be made in the field and more easily shared among staff.

What tools & skills are needed to help?



While we operate in a somewhat segregated manner, we also work collaboratively when specialized tools and skills are needed. For instance, because members of the Building Preservation team are trained to operate this lift to maintain roofs, they also monitor and document the condition of weathervanes and other decorative elements on those roofs. And depending on the work needed, as I alluded to earlier, they may also be the ones providing the care.

Maintenance

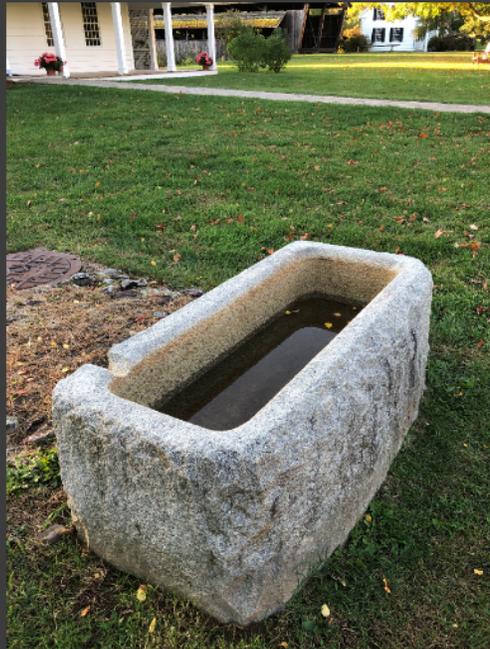


Unidentified maker, Hand Hitching Post, ca. 1896-1900
Iron. Gift of Mrs. Elie Nadelman, 27.FM-55.
Before and During Maintenance, August 2020



Most of the maintenance does not require a conservator – for instance, the lichens growing on this cast iron hitching post were brushed off using water and nylon bristle brushes. The post has been in this location for several decades. The weathered patina on the metal is appreciated, and has not appreciably changed over the years.

Maintenance:
Transitioning
from institutional
memory to
recording &
evaluating
processes



For the troughs, the grounds crew empties them of water on a regular basis, and washes the surfaces with water occasionally to remove any algae if it has formed. In talking to the landscape and gardens manager, the processes they use have been handed down in an oral tradition, and she's in the process of writing them down so that we can get that information into the record and make changes, if necessary.

Rolling stock
needs to roll
for
preservation
purposes



ECI gently pushing the *Grand Isle* back under the shed after work was completed on the tracks, 2018.



Then there is maintenance that needs to happen so that other areas can be maintained. The journal boxes – the assemblies that allow the wheels to turn - and the brakes on the locomotive and private train car need to function so that the cars can be pushed and pulled and stopped along the tracks so that the tracks can be kept level. The tracks have needed to be leveled about every 15 years, and we bring in firm that maintains the railroad tracks in our area to move the cars and do the work on the tracks. Its amazing how gentle they are employing their equipment.

Winter protection

- Protective covers where freeze-thaw is a concern



Turtle Baby under cover



We have seasonal closing processes that include draining and covering the fountain.

- Cover to prevent freeze-thaw and condensation damage
- Removal of painted signage to indoor storage



Ticonderoga in winter, photo by Katharine Noiva



Covers are also applied to portions of the Ticonderoga like the fore-deck, the whistle, the light, and the walking beam, and the sign is removed to indoor storage for protection. Following heavy snows, the decks are shovelled.

Peter Kirkiles: At Scale moved indoors while the museum is closed to visitors



Since the loaned outdoor sculpture show will stay with us another year, those works were moved indoors in keeping with our agreement with the artist.

Stakes to mark locations of artifacts that are close to the road to prevent plow accidents



Objects that are close to the paths are marked with tall stakes to ensure that the plows avoid them.

Why a Conservation Management Tool?

- Clarification of objectives & various roles
- Articulate skills required
- Risk assessment
- Budgeting time & money
- Facilitate succession & re-assessment



Birdbath by Edith Barretto Stevens Parsons in April and October



As I mentioned earlier, because we have been looking at our landscape and the collections displayed outdoors with new eyes, and I seem to see increasing requests for moving sculpture and other objects outdoors. A few years ago I worked with colleagues to draft a broad conservation management tool for outdoor and working objects to achieve the following goals – to clarify roles around conservation and maintenance of those collections, to articulate skills required, and to develop a methodology for assessing risk, applying a budget and to facilitate assessment and to ensure that future staff members will know what we've done in the past. To walk this through, I'd like to share two recent projects with you. While this kind of process could be adopted if you don't have a conservator on staff, I do recommend that a conservator is included in discussions as you develop plans to care for your outdoor collections.

So what's this conservation tool?

- 3 planning phases
- 3 implementation phases



Unidentified maker, Danby Water Fountain, Before 1911. Iron. Gift of Danby-Mount Tabor Fire District No. 1, 1953-332.

The first is the object I'm showing you here as it looked this year as we work through this process incrementally. The cast iron Danby Fountain came from the town of Danby, VT, and was given to the museum in 1953. Its made of multiple pieces of cast iron, and has been used for decades at the museum as a planter.

Planning phases

1. Curatorial request



Danby Fountain in front of Circus Building at Shelburne Museum, c. 1966. Image from Shelburne Museum Archives.



A few years ago, after some work was done to raise the fountain onto a new stone support, the museum director asked in a somewhat teasing manner, asked if it could be returned to use as a fountain. As you see here, the fountain once was displayed in front of the museum's Circus Building, and prior to it moving to its present location, it had been at the south end of campus near the visitor entry, approximately a third of a mile away .

Planning phases

2. Conservation assessment

3. Institutional impact
assessment



Danby Fountain emptied of its garden
for conservation assessment

Because I had never known the fountain without a garden inside, I asked grounds to empty it of dirt so that I could better assess the condition. As you can see, here, we learned that the fountain does not drain, and there was no lining between the dirt and the iron. We determined that a great deal of work to the object as well as adding new water service infrastructure would need to occur to have it function as a fountain.

Implementation phases

1. Undertake treatment



Danby Fountain base before treatment



& after application of a commercial rust converter



I put together an incremental treatment proposal, addressing what I could do that first year, which was to clean surfaces of dirt and apply a commercially available, but well studied rust converter.

Implementation phases

2. Execute lifecycle
3. Assess and adjust



2019



2020



As part of that proposal, I asked the grounds crew to add spacers between the bottom of the basin and a lining, to reduce the amount of weight that was being added to the basin as well as set off the space surrounding the fountain with stone so that they wouldn't need to trim so closely to the fountain. The lining will be used to lift the planting dirt out of the basin, and they will be covering the basin so that water and snow do not collect while the museum is closed to the public for the winter. I hope to get the fountain painted in the coming year by either fitting it into my schedule or the building preservation team's schedule before it is time to re-plant. In assessing the size of the rock surround with the Landscape and Gardens manager, we both felt that it should be a bit larger, and so it will be extended next spring.

Conservation
Management Tool
applied to a new
acquisition

1. Curatorial request:
Can we display this iron
garden gate in the
Bostwick Garden?



Marie Zimmermann (1879-1972), Flower Garden Gate, ca. 1925. Wrought iron, 52 1/2 x 42 x 2 in. Collection of Shelburne Museum, gift of the John C. Zimmermann Family. 2018-6.
2018 exhibition *In the Garden* at Shelburne Museum



So that's an example of the conservation tool as applied to an object that's already in the collection. Here's an example of one that is new to our collection. Marie Zimmermann designed metalwork inspired by historical precedents, including ancient Egyptian, classical, and Chinese forms, and she's known for experimenting with color and patina. Examples of her work in jewelry and precious metals can be found in large museums like the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. This garden gate initially came to the museum on loan for an exhibition from the artist's descendants, and at the close of the exhibition, they gave it to the museum. The curator was interested in putting it on display outdoors, and so we put the conservation tool into play.

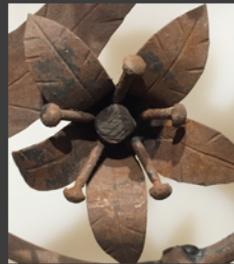
Conservation
Management Tool
applied to a new
acquisition

2. Conservation
assessment:

- Traces of artist's patina?
- Missing elements.

2a. Questions for curator:

- How many examples in public collections?
- Desired level of restoration/surface?



As part of the initial loan examination, we had already noted traces of what might be the patina applied by the artist, and happily there was already some published information on how Zimmermann finished her ironwork. We do have a working blacksmith shop at the museum, and so we would be able to re-create the missing elements. But I had a number of questions for the curator before I could propose a treatment and maintenance plan for the gate if it moved outside.

Conservation
Management Tool
applied to a new
acquisition

2a. Question for Curator:
What is our responsibility
for the materiality of the
object vs. the function
given that this may be the
only example of outdoor
ironwork by Zimmerman
in a public collection?



This question about how many other examples of Marie Zimmermann's ironwork could be found in public collections, and how much was really at the crux of the matter.

Conservation
Management Tool
applied to a new
acquisition

3. Institutional impact:

- Blacksmith to fabricate missing structural piece
- Conservation schedule
- Planning for protection from elements
- Security



Assessing the impact of deciding to place it outdoors, I noted that I'd need to collaborate with the blacksmiths and that would have an effect on their normal production. I would need to slot the treatment work into my schedule. Preservation and Landscape would need to prepare a site for the gate, ideally with some protection from the elements and visitors, and we would need to secure the work.

Conservation
Management Tool
applied to a new
acquisition

Curatorial decision:
The gate stays inside for
now.



As a result of the planning process and a desire to put the gate on view as quickly as possible, the curator decided that the gate should go on display indoors, but the initial planning to move it outdoors has been documented, and added to the object's record, so that future staff will be able to build on that discussion, if necessary.

Recommendations

- Collaborate
- Assess risks
 - Present & Future
- Monitor
- Work with a Conservator to help develop your strategies
- Maintain
- Assess and Adjust
- Document the process



Arial view of Shelburne Museum looking northwest.
Photography by Andy Dubak.



In conclusion, when thinking about caring for your outdoor objects, think broadly about who is already caring for them and collaborate with them. Assess associated risks. And when you monitor and maintain outdoor objects, document and assess the processes on a regular basis, so that they can be adjusted and improved when needed. And now I'll hand it over to Kelly and Christina.