George Washington’s Disappearing Ribbon

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A Case of American Revolutionary History and Memory

On July 3, 1775, George Washington needed something to make him stand out in a crowd. He had arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to take command of the American Revolutionary Army, but almost nobody in New England recognized their new chief. Clearly some system needed to be devised for identifying him, and the host of other new generals appointed by Congress. But this problem posed another dilemma. What decorations were appropriate in an army in revolt, and one espousing republican principles? What kinds of devices made sense for a rank as lofty as a general or the commander-in-chief?

1. George Washington at Princeton, Charles Willson Peale (1779). Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Maria McKean Allen and Phoebe Warren Downes through the bequest of their mother, Elizabeth Wharton McKean.

The decoration he chose, a blue silk moiré ribbon worn across his breast, made allusions to both one of the traditional colors of Whigs, the British political party with which American Revolutionaries identified, and the aristocratic decorations of Europe. At first, he wore the ribbon regularly, and then only on ceremonial occasions and in battles, until he phased the decoration out in 1779, replacing it with stars on his epaulettes. Examples of Washington's epaulettes have survived and appeared in several publications, but his silk ribbon has remained largely obscure among students of Washington objects and the American Revolution.

A recently re-examined silk moiré ribbon in the collections of Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology may well be the very ribbon depicted in the Washington portrait paintings by the Revolutionary artist Charles Willson Peale. It may even have been the one worn by Washington from 1775 to 1779 as referenced in various writings during the war. It may also be the ribbon displayed at Peale's museum in the nineteenth century.

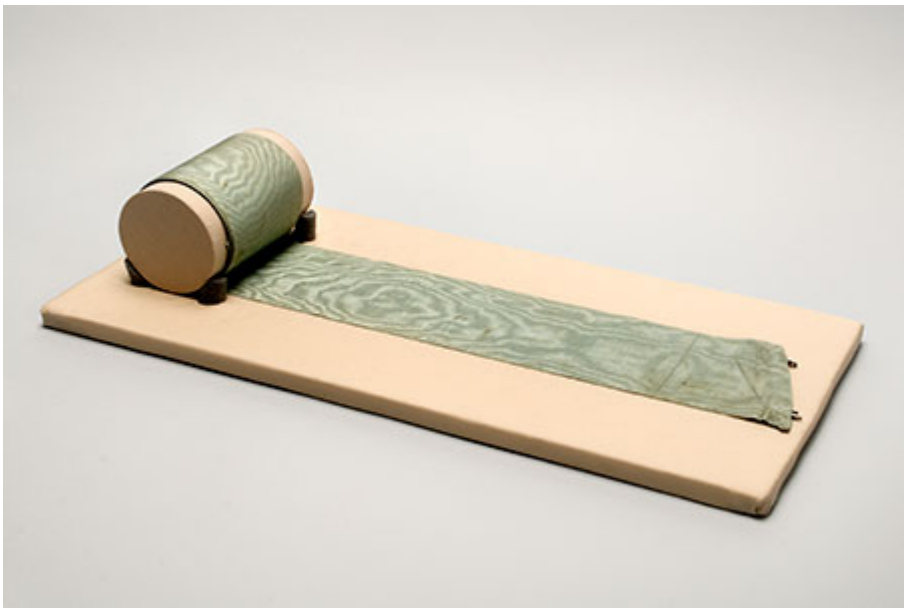
In 1899, the heirs of Moses Kimball, founder of the Boston Museum and co-owner, with P.T. Barnum, of the objects that had once been on display in Charles Willson Peale's museum, donated the ribbon to Harvard. At that time, according

to Peale scholar and descendant Charles Coleman Sellers, the ribbon had an original Peale museum label pinned to it, identifying it as a gift from Washington to the artist.

2. “George Washington’s Sash,” black and white image. Photograph by Hillel S. Burger ©President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM #2004.24.28120 (digital file #152010015).

Peale had portrayed Washington numerous times, during and after the Revolutionary War, both in miniatures on ivory and with both half-length and full-length portraits on canvas. Many of the portraits of Washington in uniform show him wearing a blue silk ribbon. Peale made his first portrait on canvas of Washington wearing his ribbon as a commission for John Hancock in June 1776 as part of the latter’s celebration of Washington’s liberation of Boston (now in the Brooklyn Museum of Art). In January 1779, the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania commissioned a full-length portrait of *George Washington at Princeton*, in gratitude for his role in the liberation of Philadelphia in 1778 (now in the collections of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) (fig. 1). Peale supported himself in the coming years partly through replicating the popular Princeton image, and at least four other copies are currently institutionally owned. If the ribbon at Harvard is the same as the one portrayed by Peale, it may reveal some new dimensions of Peale’s practices as an artist.

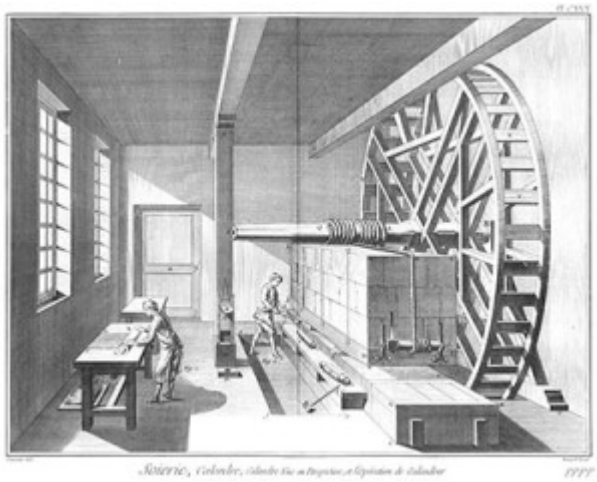
Subsequent to several close examinations of the ribbon at Harvard with the help of head conservator T. Rose Holdcraft, it appears that the extant ribbon is a surprisingly good match (based on physical and technical features) with the one depicted in Peale's paintings. This analysis was possible due to Peale's careful delineation of the fabric's characteristics. The surviving ribbon has oblique-hemmed ends, resulting in one edge being longer than the other, and measures approximately 80 inches long on one side and 77.5 inches long on the other. It is approximately 4 inches wide. These dimensions appear to fit the proportions on Washington's roughly 6-foot-2 frame, as depicted in Peale's various paintings. As with most eighteenth-century moiré ribbons, it is woven to be self-finished at the edges, rather than cut and hemmed. The bottom edges of the ribbon have been folded and sewn in a triangle shape to the back of the ribbon's length. The two pairs (or a set) of polished steel hardware clasps at the ends of the ribbon allow these two oblique edges to face each other in parallel and fall in a cupped shape, pointing up and outward from the hip, as depicted in several of Peale's full-figure paintings of Washington as general (fig. 2).



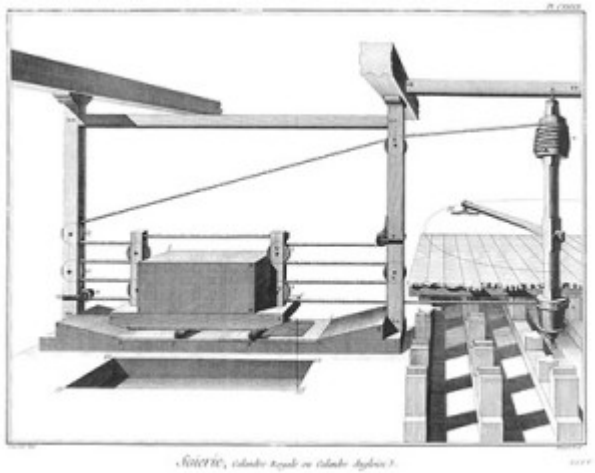
3. "Sash of watered blue silk taffeta, formerly worn by George Washington," color photograph of the sash on a roll. ©President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM #979-13-10/58761 (digital file #99080093).

The extant ribbon holds enormous potential for students of American military and political culture during the American Revolution, as well as of eighteenth-century American art history. Yet the ribbon has been largely ignored by both scholarly communities. The chief works on Washington's military equipment have detailed Washington's use of his ribbon but have not discussed the ribbon in the Harvard collection or any similar to it. It appears that only two print

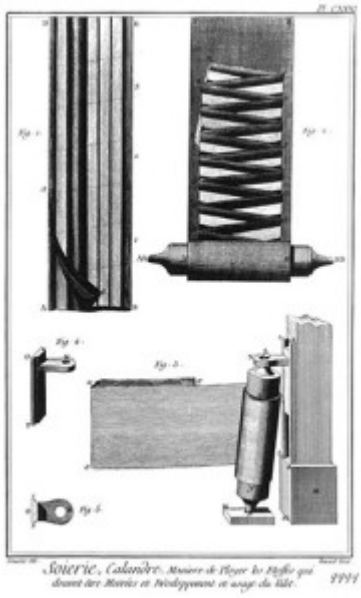
publications have included photographs of the Peabody ribbon. The first was a book dedicated not to Washington or to Peale as an artist, but to the history of Peale's museum. Charles Coleman Sellers' *Mr. Peale's Museum: Charles Willson Peale and the First Popular Museum of Natural Science and Art* provided a single black and white image. Sellers provided no analysis of the object itself to evaluate the possibility or likelihood that it could date to the Revolutionary War. Nor did he examine the wear on the ribbon, to determine whether it showed signs of being actually worn. The other publication is *Tangible Things* (2014) by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Ivan Gaskell, Sarah J. Schechner, and Sarah Anne Carter, with photographs by Samantha S. B. van Gerbig. This book examines the ribbon as part of a broader discussion about the history and practices of museum categorization at Harvard.



4. Plate CXXX: Silk—Manufacture, Calender, Perspective View of the Calender and Operation of Calendering. Translation and image courtesy of The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.



5. Plate CXXXI: Silk —Manufacture, Calender, Manufacture, Royal Calender or English Calender. Translation and image courtesy of The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.



6. Plate CXXXI: Silk—Manufacture, Calender, Way of Folding Fabrics to be Tabbied and Development and Use of the Cylinders. Translation and image courtesy of The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

I became aware of the ribbon in 2011, when Ulrich, Gaskell, Schechner and Carter included it in their Harvard exhibit on curatorship, also called *Tangible Things*, which became the basis for their book. The exhibit and book have aptly called attention to the dangers of categorization by museums. By mixing items from Harvard's many separate museums into composite rooms, the authors show the ways institutional and collecting categories can impede scholarly and public exploration of objects. The Peabody ribbon associated with Washington turns out to be an excellent case study of how object categories established by museums and academia can mask as much as they reveal. The history of Washington's ribbon as a museum object reveals something of Americans' troubled relationship with their Revolutionary past as a subject of historical or ethnographic study, and the complex implications of identifying a Washington object with either field. As an alleged "relic" of Washington, the ribbon had a significance that did not fit easily into these categories. Attending to the physical ribbon object at the Peabody Museum allows us to better understand this complexity in part by weighing the likelihood that the Washington association is accurate. An examination of the object's appearance, manufacturing process, and exact depiction in period portraits supports the Washington story as a true one. In turn, this close analysis allows a better insight into the technology and symbolism of the ribbon in Washington's own time, and the conditions and contexts of its subsequent exhibitions.

7. Detail, George Washington at Princeton, Charles Willson Peale (1779). Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Maria McKean Allen and Phoebe Warren Downes through the bequest of their mother, Elizabeth Wharton McKean.

The appearances and disappearances of Washington's sash as part of his uniform during the war, and in the memory and scholarship on his generalship and portraiture, reveals various cultural meanings the sash acquired, first as a display of authority during the Revolution and later as a museum object in the two centuries since. Reading the ribbon alongside the work of eighteenth-century uniform historians James L. Kochan and Rene Chartrand suggest explanations for some of these appearances and disappearances. A close scrutiny of the surviving ribbon for its construction details supports its identity as very likely the one depicted in Peale's painting, while raising the question of what its relative obscurity says about its changing cultural significance since the eighteenth century. Tracing the history of the ribbon since the nineteenth century argues that its obscurity in the twentieth and twenty-first owes more to the way American museums have evolved and categorized their material over the past two centuries than to possible concerns about the ribbon's authenticity.

"A Ribband to distinguish myself"

When General Washington arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to take control of the Continental Army on July 3, 1775, few American soldiers took notice. Despite the mythology of a grand parade and review of the whole American army at Cambridge Common, Washington's inauguration as commander-in-chief appears to have been quite an understated affair. Nineteenth-century historians and

lithographers turned the scene into a great event, and locals in Cambridge anointed a tree on Cambridge Common as the “Washington Elm,” claiming its shade as the exact spot of Washington’s fateful first salute by the whole army. In reality, few soldiers noted Washington’s arrival in their diaries, and soldier diarists instead wrote some version of a common quotidian entry for boring days in camp: “nothing remarkable today.”

8. Detail of sash of watered blue silk taffeta, formerly worn by George Washington, close-up of the edge of the sash showing the clasps. ©President and Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, PM #979-13-10/58761 (digital file #75660001).

Though Washington would soon achieve stature and recognition befitting his rank, most of his troops in 1775 were New Englanders with habits that seemed quite foreign to him, including what he considered an insufficient respect for and deference to their officers. Washington saw these cultural problems exacerbated by the fact that few of the men recognized their general officers, and the makeshift uniforms of his immediate subordinates made it difficult for them to obtain the instant responsiveness to orders necessary for the maintenance of military discipline.

Washington attempted to solve this problem by introducing a system of identifying officers by silk ribbons. In early July, shortly after his arrival in Cambridge camp, Washington noted his purchase of “a Ribband to distinguish myself” for three shillings and four pence. In his General Orders for July 20, 1775 Washington announced that a system of color-coded ribbons would designate his general officers. As commander-in-chief, he would have “a light blue Ribband, wor[n] across his breast, between his Coat and Waistcoat.” The other general officers would wear different colors, “The Majors and Brigadier General,” being distinguished “by a Pink Ribband wore in the like manner,” the aides-de-camp “by a green ribband.” While Washington “recommended” in the same orders that “both Officers and men” should “make themselves acquainted with the persons of all the Officers in General Command,” he suggested that they rely on

the system of “ribbands” “in the mean time to prevent mistakes.”

9. George Washington at the Battle of Princeton, Charles Willson Peale (1781). Oil on canvas, 241.3 x 154.9cm (95 x 61 in.). Courtesy of Yale University Art Gallery. Given by the Associates in Fine Arts and Mrs. Henry B. Loomis in memory of Henry Bradford Loomis, B.A. 1875.

James Kochan, an authority on eighteenth-century uniforms and former director of collections at Mount Vernon Ladies Association, has argued that Washington’s choice of the blue color in his uniform alluded to the traditional colors of the Whig party in England, buff and blue. Washington’s use of a blue base color and buff lapel facings and cuffs for his coat, and buff small clothes, waistcoat and breeches, supports this argument. However, his choice of a moiré ribbon material for his generals’ decorations requires further explanation.

While Washington did not record the sources of his inspiration for this system, ribbons of moiré, or watered silk, were an established European method for distinguishing very high ranking aristocrats and some military officers. In France, the Bourbon monarch wore a blue watered-silk ribbon over the right shoulder, in much the same position as Washington’s. Contemporary portraits of Peter the Great of Russia and George III of England likewise show those monarchs wearing a blue silk ribbon.

In Europe, blue ribbons often denoted royalty, but, as Rene Chartrand of Parks Canada has noted, in France the Bourbons shared their distinction of blue silk moiré ribbons only with their highest-ranking military marshalls and lords. A contemporary painting by Pierre-Hubert Subleyras (1699-1749) depicts the granting of one of these awards by the Duke of Saint-Aignan to Prince Vaini on September 15, 1737, as a kind of classical apotheosis, the dukes and princes surrounded by cherubic and angelic figures approving the ceremony, as if a sacramental blessing. In England, blue and red watered-silk ribbons served as distinctions for Lords of the Order of the Bath and Order of the Garter.

Through the war, few Americans seem to have objected to the use of a garment so closely associated with monarchy and aristocracy by the commander-in-chief of the Continent's republican army. Nor did British officers apparently see any opportunity for lampooning Washington's pretense, or any inconsistency of the decoration for a republican soldier. Descriptions of Washington's uniform in the early years of the war from both sides make no editorial comment about the ribbon and sometimes do not mention it at all. Benjamin Thompson, a loyalist officer who spent time observing the American Army at the Siege of Boston, noted this new system of the marks of distinction among the Continental general officers during the siege:

> The Commander-in-Chief wears a wide blue ribbon between his coat and waistcoat, over the right shoulder and across the breast; Major Generals a pink ribbon in the same manner; Brigadier Generals a [blank] ribbon; and all Aids-du-camp a green one; all Field Officers wear red, pink, or scarlet cockades; Captains, yellow or buff cockades; and Subalterns, green ones.

Bostonian Joshua Green, who was still a schoolboy during the siege, got some of the details mixed up in his own narrative of the siege, but captured the basics of the new system of the "Distinction of ye different ranks of ye Officers in ye Continental Army undr. Genl. Washington":

> For ye. General a black cockade & a broad scarlet ribbon from ye. left shoulder to ye. right hip but being under ye. coat is seen only across his breast. Major General a blk cockade wth. a purple ribbon as above. Aid de camps, a blue. Colo:, Lt: Colo:, & Major a scarlet cockade. Captains a yellow cockade. First & Secd: Lieuts: a green.

It is unclear whether Washington wore his ribbon on all occasions or only for special ceremonies. It is also uncertain whether he regularly wore it in combat, though it would certainly have been useful in helping identify the commander on the field. American Army surgeon James Thacher did not mention the ribbon in either his 1775 or 1778 descriptions of Washington's uniform. Instead, he described "His uniform dress" as "a blue coat, with two brilliant

epaulettes, buff-colored under-clothes, and a three-cornered hat, with a black cockade."

American troops appear to have felt comfortable with demonstrations of hierarchy and even suggestions of aristocracy in the Continental Army. This supports Caroline Cox's claim that honor and gentility were not inconsistent with the principles of the Continental soldier, but rather central to them.

The French alliance seems to have introduced new concerns about the decoration. In the years after the Revolutionary War, rumors circulated that Washington had received the rank of marshall in the French army as part of his rank in command of the allied French and American armies. In the opinion of nineteenth-century historian Charles Henry Hart, the resemblance of Washington's ribbon to the blue moiré silk decorations of French officers likely encouraged the confusion. Possibly the confusion grew with a ceremony held by the French Army in the Hudson Valley on March 6, 1781, described by French officer Louis-Alexandre Berthier as a parade "where he was rendered the honors of a Marshall of France," though this appears to have been a term for distinctions granted by a marshall, rather than the actual achievement of a marshall's rank.

Whatever the source of these rumors, the timing of Washington's phasing out of his ribbon from his uniform suggests that the presence of French officers and aristocrats in the allied army increased scrutiny on the allusions and implied pretenses of Washington's attire. As James Kochan has noted, the Marquis de Barbé-Marbois, a French officer serving in America, expressed unease about the ribbon that suggests he considered it too aristocratic or monarchical. Barbé-Marbois wrote with relief in 1779 that Washington's uniform "is exactly like that of his soldiers." But he noted that "Formerly, on solemn occasions, that is to say on days of battle, he wore a large blue ribbon, but he has given up that unrepublican distinction."

It remains unclear how much Barbé-Marbois' comment reflected a more widespread objection to Washington's use of the ribbon. Kochan's argument suggests that the French pushed Americans toward more consistency between their republican principles and dress, perhaps an indication of the way the alliance with the Bourbon monarchy ironically made Americans more aware of their republican symbolism. Charles Henry Hart's work suggests that it was actually Americans' discomfort with the French, rather than their placating French tastes, that put pressure on Washington to reconstitute his uniform.

The survival of the blue ribbon in the Peabody Museum allows a close scrutiny of these social and political implications of Washington's garment. A comparison of the images of the ribbon in Peale's paintings with the surviving object presents a compelling case that the Harvard ribbon is the exact object depicted by Peale in his portraits of Washington, and likely the one worn by Washington during the war.

The Harvard Ribbon of Moiré Silk

The ribbon at Harvard has foxing from exposure to air or water and a few brownish stains that may be small burn marks, but it still retains the impressive luster and strong warp and weft of moiré silk. It was meant to impress, and it still does (fig. 3).

Creating moiré, or watered silk, in the eighteenth century required an elaborate process of pulleys and weights. The shimmer and ripple of the fabric did not occur naturally in silk. Rather, as Florence Montgomery has explained in her book *Textiles in America*, they were a kind of scar created by rubbing the ribbed silk fabric against itself when placed under between sixty and 100 tons of pressure. Silk manufacturers would dampen the silk, fold it into even segments, and then roll huge blocks of stone over it. Under the enormous pressure, the ribbed fabric crushed unevenly as the facing sides pushed against their ribbed surfaces, lightening some areas more than others. The force of this deliberate crushing resulted in a pattern that resembled the broken surface of water when rippling in wind or hit with a stone, with each pressing creating a unique pattern.

Contemporary depictions of the process for pressing a watered pattern into silk appear in Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* (1751-1780). The *Encyclopédie* showed that the French and English generally used slightly different methods for producing the force necessary to squeeze the fabric. The French method included a large mill-wheel-like device attached to a giant collection of blocks (fig. 4). The English method used a lateral wheel probably turned by animals (fig. 5). Both devices moved blocks across rollers. The silk was folded and wrapped between the rollers and another piece of cloth, and then placed under the blocks for pressing.

The ribbon attributed to Washington at Harvard is very likely not French, and more likely English-made. Though he noted his purchase of his ribbon shortly after he arrived in Cambridge, in 1775, at that time no American manufacturer is known to have had the capacity to create moiré silks. In the eighteenth century, there were various royal and national systems of measurement used in Europe and America. The Washington ribbon at Harvard fits English units better than other contemporary standards with a width of almost exactly four inches at most points of measure. It varies in width at a few points from 3 and 15/16 to 4 and 1/16 inches, likely due to the effects of pressing during the creation of its watering pattern as well as stretching and wear during its use. French manufacturers used Paris royal inches, which were approximately 1.068 times the

size of an English inch, meaning a four-inch ribbon in Paris royal measures would measure 4.272 English inches. Because the ribbon's measurements fit English units so closely, it is likely English-made.

A third engraving from Diderot's *Encyclopédie* shows the method for winding a silk ribbon around one of the rollers for pressing (fig. 6). The Washington ribbon at Harvard shows evidence of this process. The depiction in Diderot shows the ribbon folded in a slight zigzag pattern and then wrapped around the roller. Other processes lay the ribbon accordion-like in a pile and then rolled or pressed it. Both processes left a series of permanent fold lines at regular intervals across the ribbon.

The Washington ribbon at Harvard has six of these permanent fold lines and these are roughly perpendicular to the edges, indicating the ribbon was probably pressed using the accordion and not the zigzag folding. Five of these permanent folds are roughly evenly spaced at lengths of between 15 and 5/32 inches and 15 and 9/32 inches (38.5 centimeters and 38.8 centimeters). One of these lines is partly folded under one of the obliquely hemmed edges. The farthest line on the opposite edge of the ribbon is only a few inches from the edge of the ribbon, where the ribbon was cut and then hemmed back. The exact measured distance of this line from the ends are: 3.5 inches from the long side of the oblique hem line and 2 and 3/8 inches from the shorter side. This final fold line provides a helpful clue to further substantiating it as the ribbon likely depicted in some of Peale's Washington portraits.

In Peale's 1779 painting of *George Washington at Princeton*, commissioned by the Pennsylvania Supreme Executive Council, the front of the ribbon is visible from just below Washington's right breast to the bottom where its two edges attached at his hip (fig. 7). Peale's work shows four folds across the width of the ribbon. The top and bottom of these are straighter and deeper than the center two. These upper and lower folds are probably Peale's effort at showing the permanent fold marks on the ribbon.

Identifying these folds as matching those on the surviving ribbon in the Peabody Museum speaks to Peale's exactitude and skill in depicting the fabrics of Washington's uniform. Understanding Peale's precision allows us to further consider a greater degree of likelihood that Harvard's ribbon is in fact the one in the Peale painting. The lowest fold line on Washington's ribbon in the painting lies a few inches from the bottom front edge of the ribbon. It appears to be perhaps an inch or two more distant than what may be the same fold line in the original surviving ribbon at Harvard. However, the distance of that final line in the painting and on the original ribbon is too similar to be easily thought a coincidence. Assuming the fold line that is 3.5 inches from one of the oblique edges on the Peabody ribbon is on the side that Washington

wore on his front, the lines on the front-facing side of the Peabody ribbon and those portrayed by Peale are remarkably close. It would be surprising if a nineteenth-century reproduction or replaced ribbon not only showed signs of this eighteenth-century technology, but showed such close similarities in the spacing pattern.

The method of attaching the edges of the original ribbon lends further support to the claim that it is a late eighteenth-century object and is consistent with the construction details shown in the Peale image. As mentioned before, Peale shows the ribbon as a continuous loop where the base is at Washington's hip and the top over his shoulder, between his coat and waistcoat. It is not crossed at the bottom, like the sashes of later fraternal organizations.

The extant ribbon shows how the effect of a continuous loop was achieved by linking the two edges. Each of the bottom edges were cut and hemmed, and then one corner was folded toward the opposite edge, like the front of a paper airplane, and then hemmed down with silk cord. This created two oppositely oblique edges that faced each other in parallel when draped over the body. To keep these together, a set of polished steel clasps faced each other at the edges. On one side of the original ribbon there are beveled twisting steel clasps that resemble a modern hiker's carabineer (fig. 8). Erik Goldstein, curator of Mechanical Arts and Numismatics at Colonial Williamsburg, has confirmed that these clasps are consistent with those found on contemporary sword hangers, though they are of a higher grade. Opposite these two clasps on the other end are loops, cut with a beveled pattern that resembles what eighteenth-century jewelry specialists call a diamond pattern, which often appears on steel shoe buckles and other small items. The cord used to hold these metal parts in place is also silk, and consistent with eighteenth-century construction.

The watered pattern of Washington's moiré silk surely presented a challenge for any artist, but the survival of Washington's ribbon demonstrates Peale's extraordinary talents as a precise illustrator of light and fabric. Patterns in silks of this type appear to move or slightly change shape in light. They would also have been unique on each ribbon, like a snowflake or fingerprint. A 1758 dictionary noted the effect of this silk on contemporary science. Watered silk, the entry on related tabby fabrics in Barrow's dictionary, "furnishes the modern philosophers with a strong proof, that the colours are nothing but appearances."

The pattern of watering shown in Peale's portrait of Washington has enough

detail to allow a comparison with the patterning in the surviving ribbon at Harvard. Though the pattern is not exact, certain similarities appear that suggest both are the same ribbon. For instance, a series of five rising arches of watered lines above the second fold line appear at Washington's mid-chest. A similar pattern appears on the part of the Peabody example that would likely have lain in approximately this location when worn (the clasps and the cornered hemlines make it possible to distinguish the front from the back of the ribbon). This would not be the case with every similar ribbon. The back of the Harvard example, for instance, shows a completely different pattern than that on the front or that shown in the Peale painting. These similarities cannot be conclusive without additional efforts to display the ribbon in differing lights and positions, but they do suggest the possibility that Peale was looking at this ribbon and made a deliberate effort to show the shapes in its watering pattern.

Why does it matter if this is indeed Washington's ribbon, and in fact the one depicted by Peale? While we may doubt the desire to authenticate as a naïve grasping for certainty in the midst of historical ambiguities, establishing the identity of a historical object does more than feed emotions. It provides a new source for scholarship, a new set of questions. If Washington in fact wore this ribbon, it is one of a very small group of textiles known to have survived from his Revolutionary War uniform. Two of his epaulettes survive in the Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Another set of his epaulettes are in the Smithsonian Collection. Mount Vernon also owns two red silk waist sashes of a military uniform that belonged to Washington, though it remains unclear whether he or anyone else used either of them during the Revolutionary War. Though the Smithsonian Collections include a Washington uniform, it appears to date to sometime after the war. As an object that Washington wore during the 1775-1779 period, the ribbon may enhance our understanding of how Washington constructed his authority in the early years of the Revolutionary War. Its survival offers a chance to explore changes in the memory of Washington and the Revolutionary War.

The wear and stain patterns on the original ribbon at Harvard clearly confirm that the ribbon was indeed worn. The center of the ribbon bears two darkened and slightly browned areas, probably from either side of his shoulder. Washington's orders for generals to wear their ribbons under their uniform coats would result in staining in the comparable location on the ribbon. The hardware hooks and eyes at the base of the ribbon have slightly abraded the areas of silk directly nearby. The damage is not as great as might be expected for a garment worn every day. The limited damage around these metal pieces may substantiate the French officers' description of Washington reserving the ribbon for battles and ceremonies. The bevels on these pieces were designed to minimize the damage to the cloth from rubbing, and the polished steel would have prevented rusting. Washington's surviving ribbon reflects a high quality of fabric and hardware to fit his rank. Peale's effort to depict its sheen and

drape speaks to the importance of this accoutrement in establishing his authority.

Given Peale's clear effort to carefully document the moiré ribbon, its disappearance from some of his later copies of the Princeton painting may reflect his changing understanding of the fabric's symbolism after 1779. In Peale's 1784 painting of *George Washington at the Battle of Princeton*, which now hangs at Princeton University, Peale left the ribbon out. While that 1784 example may have simply reflected the fact that Washington stopped using the ribbon in 1779, the example at Yale University Art Gallerysuggests a more deliberate wiping out of the ribbon from the memory of Washington's leadership. In this version a faint line of blue beneath Washington's waistcoat may indicate the presence of a ribbon that has been painted out. If this is the case, the ribbon in the Yale painting has quite literally disappeared (fig. 9).

What accounts for Washington's disappearing ribbon? As a piece of Washington's uniform that he likely wore for battles and ceremonies between 1775 and 1779, the ribbon should have had enormous appeal to those in subsequent generations who sought to venerate Washington through witness relics of his patriotic actions. So why has the ribbon received relatively little attention? Some history of American museums may provide a clue.

The Peale Museum Provenance

When Peale scholar and descendant Charles Coleman Sellers sought to explain the obscurity of Washington's ribbon, he noted that Peale himself had "never thought of placing it in a natural history museum." This seems at least an exaggeration, since Peale did include images of Washington and other founders in his museum. However, the ribbon has had a relatively quiet existence given its significance. Sellers seems partly right in attributing the limited attention it received to its placement in collections focused on natural history and later ethnography and anthropology.

When Harvard University received the ribbon in 1899, according to Sellers, the staff at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology did not immediately accession it. They sent it on loan to the Old South Society of Boston, a group focused on preserving the history of Boston with a particular focus on the Revolution. When the Old South Society returned the ribbon in 1978, according to Sellers, it received "a cool welcome" at Harvard. Around the time that the ribbon returned to Harvard, the original Peale museum label was lost.

Though Sellers did not live to see it, Harvard loaned the ribbon in 1981 to the Museum of Our National Heritage and in 1992 to a traveling exhibit of Peale's museum artifacts sponsored by the American Association of Museums. However no image or mention appeared in the catalog. It appeared again in Harvard's 2011 *Tangible Things* exhibit.

For Sellers, the separation of artifacts into categories of “history” and “archaeology and ethnology” accounted for the ribbon having no glory in its adopted institution. While Sellers may have exaggerated the extent to which Peale and Harvard made this distinction, these categorizations do have a history that at least partly directed the ribbon’s stewardship, and partly explain its various appearances and disappearances in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The history of the ribbon in the generations following the Revolution raises a number of questions about how Peale and other members of his generation and those that followed in the mid-nineteenth century understood the boundaries between the proper methods for chronicling the history of the American Revolution, and those for studying the history and lives of people they considered outside their community, including in many cases Native Americans and African Americans.

According to Sellers and Harvard’s own records, the original Peale museum label that accompanied the ribbon read “Washington’s Sash. Presented by Himself” (most nineteenth-century sources describe the object as a “sash,” though Washington never described it as anything but a ribbon). Sellers believed this meant that the ribbon/sash was given by Washington to Peale as a prop for paintings, rather than as a museum object.

By the 1830s, after Peale’s death in 1827, his children inherited the museum and apparently answered the rising demand for Revolutionary relics, largely following Lafayette’s return to America in 1824, with new displays of these objects, including the ribbon. Sellers found that the first mention of the ribbon/sash in the museum is from an 1832 account of Philadelphia written by Edward Thomas Coke, a British Army officer who had traveled through the United States while on furlough. Coke provided a description of the case that held the sash and the surrounding objects that captures the continued segregation of objects associated with European colonization and revolution in the New World from the story of Native peoples, African Americans, Pacific Islanders, or any of the other groups whose objects the museum displayed:

Among the objects of curiosity are Washington’s sash, presented by himself, an obelisk of wood from the elm tree under which Penn made his treaty with the Indians in 1680, and a manuscript poem of Major Andre’s, written but two months previous to his execution. It is a satire upon the failure of General Wayne, in an expedition which he commanded for the purpose of collecting cattle for the American army; it is entitled the “Cow Chase” and the first stanza is copied almost literally from the old English Ballad of “Chevy Chase.”

Of course, even in this description, the artificial boundary between different types of history, or different “types” of people, required careful management. As Coke’s description unconsciously acknowledged, the objects of Penn’s treaty were also objects of Indian history. Yet they could be categorized alongside Washington’s sash by emphasizing that Penn was the actor in the story, and the

Indians only its object: “the elm tree under which Penn made his treaty with the Indians.”

Though Sellers explained the absence of Washington’s sash/ribbon from the Peale museum as an expression of Peale’s narrow categorizations, in some ways Peale and the other members of his generation had a less defined distinction between natural and historical objects, or between the methods of histories and ethnographies, than their descendants. As Peale museum historian David R. Brigham has pointed out, Peale did include objects demonstrating Native American and African American contributions to the American Revolution. He made sure, though, to frame these objects as expressions of natural hierarchy, with white gentlemen like himself at the top. The museum displayed, for example, a bow and arrow of Jambo, an African prince and then slave to Colonel Jacob Motte of South Carolina, and described their use in a confrontation between the American and British armies during the Revolutionary War. “In this context,” Brigham writes, “the African artifacts exemplified collective success.” They emphasized that in Peale’s museum, “harmony of purpose was valued above difference.” Likewise, Peale’s early museum efforts combined his cabinets of “natural” curiosities with galleries dedicated to his portraits of those he considered important and inspiring revolutionaries.

Though Peale’s museum certainly confronted visitors with a powerful message supporting racial, class, and other forms of hierarchy, in some ways his generation did not yet have the idea of a clear distinction between objects of their own Revolutionary history and those of “others” that more often became the province of ethnography in the nineteenth century. Peale’s own collecting, for example, may have included purchases from perhaps the earliest American “cabinet of curiosities” to include historical objects from the American Revolution, the collection of Swiss emigrant and Philadelphia artist Pierre Eugène du Simitière. Du Simitière had avidly sought items from the colonial and Revolutionary history of the thirteen states during the American War for Independence. His 1782 advertisement announcing the public display of his collection promoted it as “the first American museum.” In his list of objects and categories, he included his display of European weapons and utensils alongside similar items from Africa and the “Indians of the West Indies, and the North American Indians.” He distinguished this area as focused on “artificial curiosities,” and separated it from natural ones, like shells and botany. Within his “artificial” category, du Simitière separated objects by continent and culture, suggesting an effort to balance comprehensiveness of coverage with the segregation of people he saw as different and other.

Philip Freneau, the Philadelphia poet, provided a similar reflection on the permeable boundary between history of “settled” European-American communities and the ethnography of peoples more commonly described in travelogues. In 1784, he warned buyers of a French officer’s war journal he had translated and edited that they would find a type of writing more familiarly applied to Western tales of Indian life applied by the Frenchman to areas of European-American settlement he had witnessed during the war. But Freneau urged his readers to

celebrate the “philosophical” writer.

Given the ambiguities in the Revolutionary Americans’ understanding of the proper ways to categorize their own objects in museums or private collections, some other possible explanations for Peale’s excluding the ribbon become more plausible. It is possible that Peale treasured the sash too much as a personal memento of his former commander to display it in his museum. Perhaps more likely, the continuing confusion between the sash and decorations of monarchs and French military officers may account for Peale giving the item little publicity during Washington’s life. In the years after the Revolutionary War, Washington publicly corrected the rumors in the press; writing to poet Aeneas Lamont in 1785 that “I am not a marshall of France, nor do I hold any office under that government or any other whatever.” The rise of the French Revolution during his presidential administration likely made these mistaken associations with the ribbon even more dangerous. Washington carefully managed his image to avoid any appearance of equating the presidency with monarchy, or of seeming to favor or be beholden to any foreign power. The ribbon might have endangered either carefully held position.

While Peale may have had a variety of reasons for keeping the ribbon off display, subsequent owners revealed a great deal of their own thoughts about race and history in their choices for how to display it. After Peale’s museum finally dissolved in 1849, the objects were sold through a “sheriff’s sale” auction, with the lion’s share going to a partnership of Moses Kimball, the founder of the Boston Museum, and Phineas T. Barnum, the famous showman. The catalog for the sale categorized the objects by room: “Birds…Insects…Marine Life…” and region for most objects of human origin: “Africa…American Indian…China…Northwest Coast, Pacific, and East Indies….South America” and finally “Miscellaneous and Unidentified.” A separate category of “Historical Relics” locates Washington’s ribbon alongside other items of European construction:

2 flags taken from the British
Ancient carved chair, A.D. 1123
Ancient chair once owned by Washington.
Washington’s letter to the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania
1 case, “Washington’s Sash & various curiosities.”
“Model of Lafayette Arch and Helmets, 9 Pieces.”
Wooden model of a fortification
Anchor, Balls, and 11 Pieces of Iron.

That an “ancient” European chair dated to 1123 A.D. had more in common with Washington’s Revolutionary War ribbon than Native American objects likely used in the same conflict says a great deal about the ways Americans ordered their cultural worlds in the mid-nineteenth century. Long passages of linear time meant less than racial identity in categorizing human objects. The history of Washington’s ribbon thus displays a kind of racially defined non-linear time as an important part of American historical thinking in this period.

After roughly fifty years on display in the Boston Museum, the heirs of Moses Kimball donated Washington's ribbon/sash to Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, where it remains today, rolled on an archival tube, tied and housed in an archival box, in climate controlled storage. The ironic legacy of the Peale museum's message of racial hierarchy has been the obscuring of an object Peale himself likely treasured, and one that figured prominently in his depiction of a man whose life exemplified, for him and other Revolutionaries, the highest capacities for human "virtue" and "civilization." The ideals of race and society that Revolutionaries like Peale wished to propagate with his museum masked one of the great objects of his own Revolutionary moment and one of the great "relics" of Washington, the man who was, as Revolutionary General Henry Lee put it in 1799, "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his country."

Its 2011 reappearance in Harvard's *Tangible Things* exhibit on collecting and the categories of curatorship has brought it back to light. Perhaps it will prompt some new investigations into the ethnography of American collecting in the Revolutionary generation.

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Further Reading:

The original ribbon is in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology under the accession number 979-13-10/58761. Images and catalog information can be found on the Harvard Peabody Museum Website.

Other key primary sources can be found in the Washington Papers at the Library of Congress American Memory pages. Washington's July 14, 1775, order creating the system of ribbons can be found here. The manuscript account book entry for

Washington's purchase of his ribbon can be found here.

Three key works on Washington's military equipment and other personal possessions capture changing attitudes toward the subject over the twentieth century. See the Mount Vernon Ladies Association, *General George Washington's Swords and Campaign Equipment: an illustrated catalog of swords and memorabilia in the Mount Vernon Collection* (Mount Vernon, Va., 1944); Carol Borchert Cadou, *The George Washington Collection: Fine and Decorative Arts at Mount Vernon* (Manchester, Vt., 2003). (These two focus on Washington items at Mount Vernon, though they explore items elsewhere as well.) Also see James L. Kochan, "'As plain as blue and buff could make it': George Washington's Uniforms as Commander-in-Chief and President, 1775-1799," catalogue for the 44th Washington Antiques Show. Kochan and Cadou connect the study of Washington's equipment, uniform and other objects to questions about the meaning of republicanism. The quote from Marbois criticizing Washington's ribbon as "unrepublican" is included in Kochan's article and Cadou's book.

For more on the reaction of New England troops to the arrival of Washington in camp in 1775, see Justin Florence, "Minutemen for Months: The Making of an American Revolutionary Army before Washington, April 20-July 2, 1775." *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 113: 1 (2003): 59-101. The quote about little going on in camp during Washington's arrival appears in Florence's article and is originally from Samuel Hewes, *A Journal for 1775, in the Military Journal of Two Private Soldiers* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y., 1855). Quotes from American Army surgeon James Thacher describing Washington's uniform may be found in James Thacher, *Military journal of the American revolution, from the commencement to the disbanding of the American army, comprising a detailed account of the principle events and battles of the revolution, with their exact dates, and a Biographical Sketch of the most Prominent Generals* (Hartford, Conn., 1862). The Joshua Green and Benjamin Thompson quotes can be found in J. L. Bell's March 12, 2012, article on his blog, *Boston 1775,* "Distinction of ye. different ranks of ye. Officers." Also see his other related articles, "A Ribband to Distinguish Myself" (March 11, 2010) and "Took their Cockades from Their Hats" (March 13, 2010). For an excellent cultural analysis of hierarchy and honor in the Continental Army, see Caroline Cox, *A Proper Sense of Honor: Service and Sacrifice in George Washington's Army* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004).

For more on the French perceptions of Washington's ribbon and rank among French officers, see Charles Henry Hart, "Peale's Original Whole-Length Portrait of Washington, a Plea for Exactness in Historical Writings," *The Annual Report of the American Historical Association* I (1896): 189-200. For a French officer's description of the ceremony in which Washington received "marshall's honors," see Louis-Alexandre Berthier, journal entry for March 6, 1781, in Howard C. Rice, Jr., and Anne S.K. Brown, transl., eds.,*The American Campaigns of Rochambeau's Army 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783* (Princeton, N.J., 1972). Conversations by e-mail with Rene Chartrand in June 2014 clarified for me the role of the ribbons in the French service.

For more on textile technology, see Florence M. Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650-1870*, (New York, 2007). Also see John Barrow, *Dictionarium Polygraphicum*, 2 vols. (London, 1758). Montgomery's description of the process is still helpful, though new research has showed her description of the process of creating moiré as involving a molecular change in the fabric is incorrect.

Paris royal inch measurements for the eighteenth century are taken from William Croker, Thomas Williams and Samuel Clark, *The Complete Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (London, 1765), accessed online at Google books. I am grateful to Steve Rayner for pointing me to this source.

The primary material quoted in the discussion of ethnological collecting among Revolutionary Americans are: Abbe Robin, *New Travels through North-America: In a Series of Letters,* Philip Freneau, trans. (Boston, 1784); du Simitière, "American Museum" (broadside), 1782, accessed online at America's Historical Imprints. For more on the history of Peale's museum, see Paul Brigham, *Public Culture in the Early Republic* (Washington, 1995).

The quote "first in war…" is from Henry Lee, *A Funeral Oration in Honor of the Memory of George Washington, Late General of the Armies of the United States* (New Haven, 1800), accessed online at America's Historical Imprints.

For more on the history of the Peale collection in the hands of the Kimball family, see Castle McLaughlin, *Arts of Diplomacy: Lewis & Clark's Indian Collection* (Seattle, 2003). Also, for more on the history of Washington's ribbon in the Peale and Kimball museums and at Harvard, see Charles Coleman Sellers, *Mr. Peale's Museum: Charles Willson Peale and the First Popular Museum of Natural Science and Art* (New York, 1980). An excellent overview of the history of the Peale museum can be found in the exhibit catalog, William T. Alderson et al, *Mermaids, Mummies, and Mastadons: The Emergence of the American Museum* (Washington, D.C., 1992). This was the exhibit that displayed the ribbon, though there is no image of the ribbon in the catalog itself.

For more on du Simitière as a collector, see Mairin Odle, "Buried in Plain Sight: Indian 'Curiosities' in du Simitière's American Museum," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* Volume 135, No. 4 (October 2012): 499-502.

For more on the various combinations of uniform accouterments Peale used in his full-length portraits of Washington, see Graham Hood, "Easy, Erect, and Noble," *CW Journal,* Summer 2002.

For more on the ribbon in the context of Harvard's current collections, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Ivan Gaskell, Sara Schechner, Sarah Anne Carter, and Samantha van Gerbig, *Tangible Things: Making History through Objects* (Oxford, 2015).

Full-length portraits of Washington by Peale are in the collections of the United States Senate; the Yale University Art Gallery; Colonial Williamsburg;

the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and Princeton University Art Museum. The original Peale painting of Washington at Princeton belongs to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Another version sold at Christie's Auction house in 2006.

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