



— hidden — HISTORY

RESTORING HISTORY

By Leigh Rupinski, Archivist

For decades, portraits of one of Wilson's founders, the Rev. James Wightman, and the College's first donor and namesake, Sarah Wilson, graced buildings on campus. By 2015, they both were in need of some tender loving care.

Wightman's portrait, missing its frame, had been relegated to storage in Wilson's archives after the canvas suffered two large punctures. Meanwhile, Sarah Wilson's position in the college cafeteria, which had become the stuff of campus mythology, left the canvas exposed to years of residual grease. Both the portrait and frame were sticky to the touch.

As an archivist, it is my responsibility to preserve our collections and determine if items are in need of restorative care so they can be enjoyed for years to come. To that end, the two Wilson historic paintings were sent out for conservation work at Hartmann Fine Art Conservation Services in Carlisle, Pa. The company's president, John Hartmann, came to Wilson in February and personally evaluated both paintings before recommending treatment.

Art conservators are trained to improve the condition of physically deteriorating artifacts by correcting flaws while retaining original materials. If successful, the final product will look as close as possible to when it was first created.

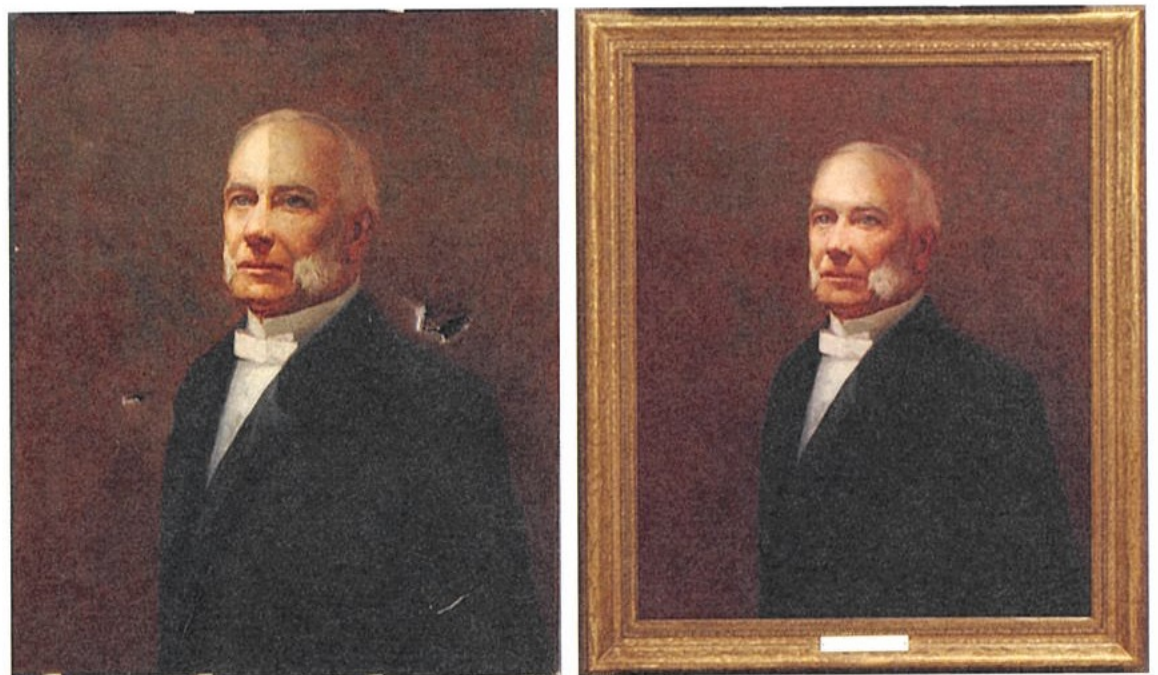
Both portraits, oil paintings on medium-weight woven canvases, required the same basic treatments for initial restoration. Hartmann's team removed discolored varnish and dirt with appropriate solvents and gels. Then, minor paint loss and abrasions were corrected with gesso primer and conservation-grade paints.

In addition to those treatments, each painting faced unique issues. Hartmann's team seamlessly realigned the punctures in Wightman's portrait and restored the lost paint so the punctures are now virtually invisible. The archives staff located the portrait's frame and brought it to Hartmann's facility for restoration. Once the frame was cleaned, it was reunited with the portrait.

After years in the cafeteria, Sarah Wilson's portrait took an extremely long time to clean. In fact, when restoration work began, the portrait and frame were so thickly coated with grime that they

were actually fuzzy! Although the portrait retained its original frame, the frame's finish was severely cracked and marred by chips in several places. The frame had to be cleaned, reformed and refinished with gold leaf. After weeks of intensive work, both portraits were again ready for display this summer.

The restoration also brought to light some interesting history about the artist who painted Sarah Wilson's portrait. The artist's signature reads "M.R. Dixon, 1912." Hartmann's research identified the artist as Maria Dixon, who always signed her work with initials to avoid gender discrimination.



Above, from left: Partially restored portrait of the Rev. James Wightman; fully restored portrait with frame. Left, portrait of Sarah Wilson demonstrates the impact of cleaning and restoration. The left side of the painting has been cleaned; the darker, right side has not.

Dixon studied at the Art Students League under Charles Yardley Turner and many of her works were exhibited in New York and Chicago during her lifetime.

We are excited to share the restored portraits with the Wilson community. The portraits will be on display in the newly renovated John Stewart Memorial Library following the Oct. 23 rededication.

For more information on the restoration project, please contact the C. Elizabeth Boyd '33 Archives.