

# Curator's Choice

## The Smith's St. Leonard Fan

By: Alex Glass, Public Archaeology Asst., MAC Lab

During the fall 2011 excavations at the Smith's St. Leonard site, located at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum, archaeologists worked to excavate a kitchen cellar that had been filled with trash and then covered with a brick surface. The cellar artifacts appear to date from the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Because of this, it is possible the cellar could have been filled in around 1748 when the property changed hands several times due to deaths in the Smith family (Fig. 1). Among the rubble and shell that filled a stratum layer roughly halfway down through the feature was the remains of an ivory hand fan.



Figure 1: Smith's St. Leonard fan after conservation treatment. Many of the sticks are broken, and the top portion of the fan is gone.



Figure 1a. Smith's St. Leonard fan uncovered at site.

The Smith's St. Leonard fan is missing the paper section at its end that made the fan able to move air. This section is called the "leaf" (Webber 1984). It can be assumed that the paper or fabric decomposed over time, but because it seems likely the fan was broken when discarded, it is also possible that the leaf was removed. Some of the sticks (the thin pieces of ivory attached to the rivet) on the fan are broken, and the ribs which attached the leaf to the sticks have either broken off or decomposed. A complete copper alloy rivet holds the sticks together so they can be spread apart or closed. While the ends of these rivets are sometimes decorated with a gem or paste stone, this one is plain (Bradfield 1997). The sticks are mostly undecorated, and do not have any gilding, paint or inlays on them as some 18th century fans had. The bases of the sticks are carved with an "S"-like pattern. This pattern creates areas between the sticks when open, adding to the overall decoration of the fan (Fig. 2).

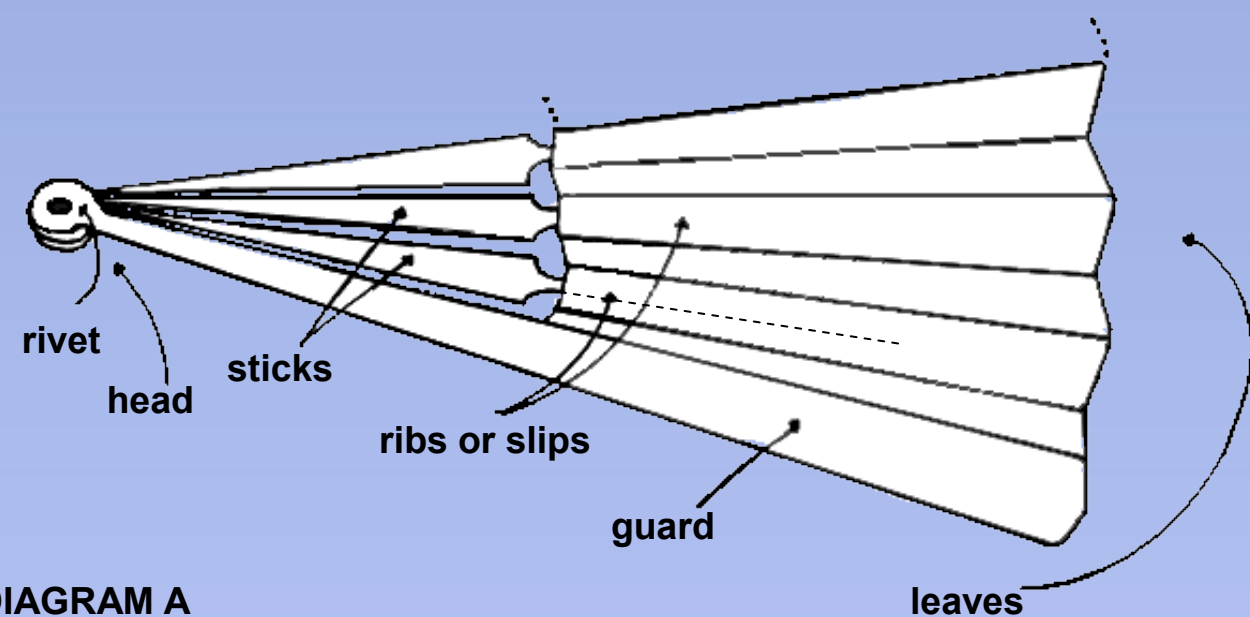


DIAGRAM A  
THE ANATOMY OF A FOLDING FAN

Figure 2: The different parts of a folding fan (Maxson 1986).

Hand fans have been in use for hundreds of years, but were introduced to Europe later in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries from Asian countries through trade (Steele 2002). Fans gained widespread popularity in Europe during the next several centuries and, by the 18th century, fan-makers were producing highly elaborate and detailed fans. These could be commissioned by wealthy ladies of the period and often were made of precious materials such as ivory, mother of pearl, exotic woods and fine fabrics or animal skins (Mayor 1980). Many fans featured hand painted paper or silk leaves with scenes that depicted military accomplishments, maps, dance steps, biblical scenes, and landscapes (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Very elaborate fan with gilding and painted skin. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts. Accession Number: 24.80.28

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In comparison to some of these fancier fan types, the Smith's St. Leonard fan seems plain. Possibly, most of the decoration had been on the leaf, which is now gone. The sticks also could have been painted at one point, but there is no longer any residue from paint or gilding. It is hard to get an impression of what the fan may have looked like while it was in use, but its presence, along with the other artifacts in the cellar, provides for a deeper understanding of the Smith Family (Fig 4 and 5).



Figure 4: This fan could be similar to the Smith's fan. The sticks are plain, but the paper section is hand painted. Notice the side where the stick ends, and the paper has detached from it. The ivory section is only about half the total length of the fan. Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection, accession number C.I.44.8.82



Figure 5: Woman holding a fan. Painting by Joseph Blackburn, active 1752-1778. Abigail Chesebrough (Mrs. Alexander Grant), 1754 American, English born. The Art Institute of Chicago.



10515 Mackall Road  
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685  
410-586-8501 [www.jefpat.org](http://www.jefpat.org)



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