

Curator's Choice

"I always carried my little Book with me":

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Aide-mémoire Hardware from Saunders Point

If you lived in the 18th century and needed a quick and easy way to keep track of your to-do list, jot down ideas, or plan out your weekly schedule, what might you use? We outsource many of these tasks to post-it notes or our electronic devices in the 21st century, but in the era before computers, people relied on different writing media to organize their everyday lives and remember important things. Paper and ink may come to mind first, but for those who could afford them, sheets of ivory presented a simple solution, in addition to being both reusable and erasable. The Curator's Choice is yet another example of "This is why we Re-examine Collections (again, and again, and again)." The artifact has been on display at the Patuxent River Naval Air Station (NAS PAX) since 2002, and it is still on display at the golf course there. It was originally identified as a pendant, but it is so tiny it would hardly weigh down a chain (Figure 1).

The Saunders Point site was an accidental discovery. When private owners in Anne Arundel County, Maryland began the construction of a pool on their property in the late 1960s, a bulldozer unearthed a cellar. A group of archaeologists from the Archaeological Society of Maryland were called in to assist, and together they recovered a collection of 18th century artifacts. Research determined that the site had been the home of the Saunders family, who may have had family ties to John Saunders, a co-owner of the famous *Dove* which brought Maryland's first European settlers in 1633 (Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory 2014).

A unique artifact in the Saunders Point collection is a copper alloy hardware piece that belonged on an aide-mémoire (see Figure 1), which translates to "reminder" from French (Cambridge Dictionary). The piece is smaller than 5cm in both length and width, semi-triangular, and decorated with small circles. It would have been placed on the outer cover of the aide-mémoire (see Figure 2) opposite the central pin hardware. The aide-mémoire itself would have consisted of several flat sheets of ivory within a case/cover.



Figure 1: Aide-mémoire hardware from the Saunders Point site.



Figure 2: A map showing the location of the Saunders Point site.

Ivory sheets had been used as writing media long before the 18th century. One 14th century example from the Walters Art Museum consists of a box with ivory pieces inside that were each coated with wax. The writer would press into the wax using a stylus and reuse it once the wax had been smoothed over (The Walters Art Museum). By the 18th century, aide-mémoire books (also referred to as memorandum books) evolved to become smaller and more compact (see Figures 3 and 4). The ivory leaves could pivot on a central pin and unfold in a fan-like fashion. Both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin owned and regularly wrote in aide-mémoire books (Stallybrass 2006:556-557).

Both men and women utilized aide-mémoire books to record various notes. Jefferson famously jotted down meteorological and climatological data in his aide-mémoire before transferring it to logs within his note-



Figure 3: An aide-mémoire from the Winterthur collections, dating to 1730-1740 (Winterthur 2009).

We may never know for certain who in the Saunders family owned an aide-mémoire, or which parts of their lives they recorded on its ivory sheets. However, the presence of an aide-mémoire was a peek into the family's comfortable, affluent lifestyle (Cleveland Museum of Art).

books (Monticello). An aide-mémoire could also function as a miniature planner or to-do list, as some books came with the days of the week stamped into the ivory. Ladies may even have used them as dance cards. Re-use and maintenance were simple: the book's owner simply needed to wipe the ivory leaves clean using a damp cloth or sponge (Stallybrass 2006:556-557).



Figure 4: Aide-mémoire books from the collections at Monticello (Monticello).

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