

Fact Sheet re: Plaster busts in GML Collection

Respectfully compiled by Chelsea Jordan-Makely and approved by the Library Board of Trustees on February 12, 2024

Statement from the Board of Trustees (Approved February 12, 2024)

For over two years, the Griswold Memorial Library Board of Trustees has been evaluating the dynamics surrounding the eight historical busts in our collection. We've studied their history and condition and share this report in order to encourage further discussion. We're committed to continuing this conversation in an open and transparent manner.

We recognize these busts' importance to our community and seek a careful, inclusive dialogue about their future. We invite everyone to share their thoughts through board meetings, online polls, written comments at the library and direct conversations with board members. We're also engaging with more groups to hear diverse opinions, and with the Council on Aging to schedule some facilitated conversations.

Please visit the library to see the busts and engage with the history represented by them. We will ensure the library remains a safe, welcoming place for all, supporting our staff amid these discussions and upholding Colrain's Code of Civil Conduct.

Let's continue this conversation, respecting our diverse histories and each other, to maintain our library as a center for knowledge and community.

Who/what?

The collection of busts that are presently located at the Griswold Memorial Library is comprised of depictions of Christopher Columbus, Homer, Julius Caesar, Ludwig Van Beethoven, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Dante Alighieri, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln.

The current Library Director, Chelsea Jordan-Makely, suggested in 2021 that the trustees consider deaccessioning these busts from the library's collection, and selling them through the municipal auction site, Auctions International, with the idea being for the proceeds to be invested back into the library building and grounds, for the sake of preserving and improving the site for current and future generation. This fact sheet answers several questions posed by the Library Board of Trustees in regards to these items and this process, and is intended to help the Trustees in making this decision.

MA General Law Chapter 78, Section 11 states: "Board of trustees; powers and duties
The board shall have the custody and management of the library and reading room and of all property owned by the town relating thereto."

When?

These busts date circa 1900, according to Aves Appraisal, Valuation & Estate Services, LLC.

[Articles in the *Greenfield Daily Recorder*, recently discovered by Don Purington, show that the busts were in fact present at the library's dedication, in 1908:](#)

“There is ample accommodations for the children. One of the rooms contains a representative selection of busts of great men, including Homer, Julius Caesar, Beethoven, Lincoln, Washington, Longfellow, Columbus, and Dante.”

A separate article notes, “In the right wing hang a fine collection of oil paintings, the gift of Mr. Griswold. These include portraits of the donor's father and mother,—the former by the late Mrs. Griswold and the latter by Augustus Vincent Tack—of Mr. Griswold, Mrs. Griswold, and Miss Cottrell, Mrs. Griswold's sister. The three latter portraits are also by Mr. Tack. Three other fine art works are “Venus and Adonis,” “Old Man's Head” and “Cow Piece” all from the brush of Mrs. Griswold. The right wing is devoted to statuary and is decorated by busts of Homer, Caesar, Milton, Washington, Lincoln, and Longfellow.”

[Milton was probably a typo, meant to reference Dante. Beethoven is not mentioned in this list, nor is Columbus.]

In Joseph Griswold's dedicatory address, he stated that he was trusting Colrain to keep the three pieces by Fanny Griswold together for all time, and he specifically mentioned his family portraits hanging on the walls, but he did not name or give any direction in their regards. Each of these articles is accessible here. We will work to get them transcribed and also added to the digital repository.

We know that they spent some years in the library's basement, and also that they were displayed on a float in the 1961 Centennial, as Betty Johnson and Elaine Stanley have shared.

The busts are also named in a 1953 typewritten inventory of the library's collection. In 1986, the library trustees endeavored to repair damage to the busts which had occurred as a result of the fact that they were stored in the basement; meeting minutes note “Some concern has been expressed regarding the condition of the plaster busts stored in the basement. It was agreed to allow Carol Moscato and Gloria Pike to take them to clean them up, with the understanding that they are the property of the library.”

A 2020 appraisal noted the damage apparent on several of the busts which may have resulted from these repairs, e.g. “The face is in excellent condition but the bust was painted at a time in the past leading to some flaking on the lower half.”

How much/where?

Per the 2020 report that we received from Aves Appraisal, Valuation & Estate Services, LLC, the relative worth (replacement cost) of each of these busts is estimated as follows:

- Christopher Columbus, \$1,500
- Homer, \$1,500
- Julius Caesar, \$1,500
- Ludwig Van Beethoven, \$1,000
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, \$1,500
- Dante Alighieri, \$750
- Abraham Lincoln, \$2,000
- George Washington, \$2,000

As per Dave Kazalt at Auctions International, if the busts were put to auction, the Library Board of Trustees would have the option to accept or reject any bids, and also can counter through their online system. Mr. Kazalt recommended listing each bust separately.

Why?

1. The library is not sufficiently able to maintain these items. As noted already by Aves Appraisal, Valuation & Estate Services, LLC, the busts show signs of damage that has occurred during their time in our collection, namely when someone meaning well attempted to provide upkeep. Evan Knight with the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC) noted in a conversation with Chelsea that public libraries are rarely able to meet the appropriate conditions to care for valuable historic artifacts such as these. Even if our security, humidity, temperature, and skills as conservators were up to snuff, the busts are at risk of being damaged by the public, or other factors, such as when a bird flew into the library over this summer and knocked into Longfellow, knocking loose some plaster.

The busts above the large print and in the children's area are of particular concern.

2. The plaster busts take up valuable shelf space that could be used instead for displays. This is particularly true of the busts of Lincoln and Washington, which are located on the shelves we use for new kids' chapter books and new kids' graphic novels. The East windows could be used for a projector screen for meetings, and for displays, if it were not for the three busts there now. When Joseph Griswold endowed the library, there were 2,300 items in the collection. Today, it is about 11,000, and space is a constant consideration, given that the library also hosts programs, is a connecting point for technology and printing, and serves as a gathering space, besides being just a repository for books and our Library of Things.

3. The busts are outside of the library's [collection scope](#) and purview, in general; the GML's mission states: "GML is a community hub where open access to current tools, resources and services support the enjoyment of reading and the informational, educational, and communication needs of the public."

As the total collective/replacement cost of these busts is more than \$10,000, their sale may go a long way towards improving and preserving our library building and grounds, and growing our capital campaign towards a new gathering space and improved accessibility. Please see above as to the procedures that would be followed if the library was to go this route.

Related, if the library was to keep these busts, then they would need to be repaired and preferably secured, and the library itself would need to follow through with due haste on its plans to control the humidity and mildew in the building. The costs of repairing and securing the busts, and mitigating mold in the building, are not known as of this time.

4. Visitors to the library have had varying responses to seeing these inherently political figures on display in our library, with some people taking offense at some of the figures, and others vociferously speaking up in favor of the busts. Like many cultural symbols, the busts mean one thing for one group of people, and have a different meaning for others.

The GML's current strategic plan states, "All visitors and staff feel welcome and safe to use our space, ask for help, and give their feedback." The plaster busts may undermine this and other efforts to create an inclusive and welcoming environment.

No matter your viewpoints; history can be contested ground. As the [American Association for State and Local History](#) explains:

History practitioners and organizations may disagree about the meanings and implications of historical events and the appropriate way to commemorate them, but a good-faith consideration of the range of ideas and expertise in their community is an essential part of reconciling divergent views about the future of a given monument or memorial.

Unfortunately, library staff are not in a position to regularly facilitate these delicate conversations in the context of day-to-day library work. Other experts in our community, such as the Historical Society, whose mandate is specifically focused on local history, would be in a better position to engage with visitors, than library workers.

Rhonda Anderson, the Western Massachusetts Commissioner on Indian Affairs, founder and Co-Director of the Ohketeau Cultural Center and the Native Youth Empowerment Foundation, and a member of the Advisory Council for the New England Foundation for the Arts has also referred us to the [“Living Presence of Our History” series](#), which includes conversations about Columbus (one of the figures in the library’s collection who is known to cause controversy). These materials may help to initiate further conversations about these subjects and their representation in our community.

A recent post (posts) on social media proved the point of how charged conversations about these busts can become. For staff, responding to these questions has become stressful, because people can be so intense in their opinions.