

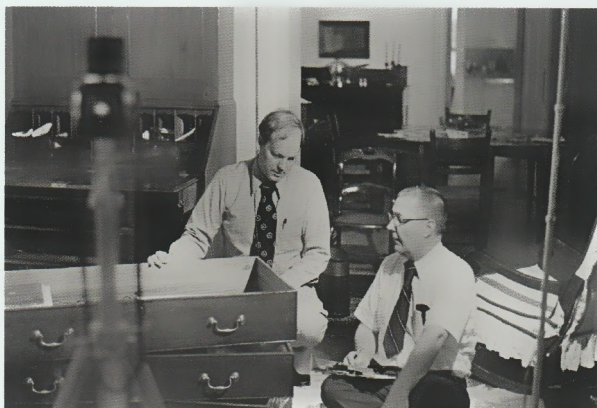
Letter from America

Dear Friends in the Regional Furniture Society,
Greetings from the United States of America!

This year the MESDA Field Research program is celebrating its 50th anniversary! Frank Horton, the founder of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, realized that a great deal could be learned by finding and recording objects in their natural habitats. The program began in June 1972 with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, two major United States Government grant programs. Horton hired young women to embed themselves in southern communities as 'field representatives.' (He hired one young man as well but found that young women were better able to talk their ways into people's houses!) These field representatives sought out local objects, photographed them, and sent that information back to North Carolina. The field representatives then arranged for follow-up



An example of a contact sheet from the MESDA Field Research Program



Frank Horton and Brad Rauschenberg documenting a piece of furniture on a follow-up visit.

visits by staff including Brad Rauschenberg, Carolyn Weekley, John Bivins, and Luke Beckerdite for formal photography and documentation.

The MESDA Field Research Program is still ongoing—our team will be documenting objects in Georgia this winter—though the process has changed. (For example, we no longer send young women to embed themselves in southern communities and talk



This Lady's Closet (MESDA acc. 3522) was the work of cabinetmaker Robert Deans, who fled Edinburgh for Charleston, South Carolina, under scandalous circumstances. His story was told by Stephen Jackson and Robert Leath in their 2015 article for *The MESDA Journal*.

their ways into stranger's houses!) Over the past fifty years we have visited more than 11,000 homes and documented over 20,000 objects. In addition to objects from Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alabama, many non-southern objects have also been caught in our nets. The database is online and free to access at MESDA.org.

New discoveries in the Field Research Program were one of the factors that led to the establishment of the MESDA Summer Institute, a graduate-level course now taught in collaboration with the University of Virginia. Each summer we accept about eight fellows to join us for a month of study and research at the museum and in the field. This summer's Institute will focus on the Southern Lowcountry, a region that includes Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia, and was home to many British immigrant cabinetmakers. Last summer our fellows included a PhD candidate from the Courtauld and we hope to continue to attract international applications. Participants are eligible for full fellowships that cover the cost of the

course, including tuition, housing, and a week-long study trip to South Carolina and Georgia. More information can be found at MESDA.org/SI

Finally, for those planning to visit the United States, 2023 promises several exciting programs, most notably the Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary. More information can be found at ColonialWilliamsburg.org. And for those who plan well into the future, David Dewing and I are working on an American South study tour, likely in the fall of 2024, that will coincide with MESDA's biennial furniture seminar. We'll look forward to sharing more details in future letters.

With best wishes from the United States,

Daniel Kurt Ackermann, Ph.D.

American Secretary

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