## November 24th, 2010

## The Green Family Auction: No String Too Short to Save by Jeanne Schinto

R.W. Oliver's, Worcester, Massachusetts by Jeanne Schinto

Worcester, Massachusetts, was the setting for the four-day, nearly 2400-lot Green family auction held September 9-12. Orchestrated by auctioneer Richard W. Oliver of Kennebunk, Maine, the sale at the city's DCU Center (named for the Digital Federal Credit Union) featured the belongings of ten generations dating from the 17th through the 20th century. A 1696 deed to land in the vicinity of what is now Lynn,

Photos courtesy R.W. Oliver's

gigantic convention center in

A triple ballroom inside a

debutante ball gown in white tulle from the 1950's was one of the most evocative, especially since it was displayed with a photograph of its wearer. Andrew Haswell Green (1820-1903) was the most famous member of the family. An influential New York City official, preservationist, and reformer, he is largely unsung.

Massachusetts, was one of the

earliest items. A classic

Yet he played crucial roles in the creation of Central Park, the restoration of fiscal control to city hall after the "Boss" Tweed years, and the consolidation of New York into what we know today as the five boroughs. He also turned the Green family's farm in Worcester into a country gentleman's estate. It was called Green Hill and, like Central Park, reflected his interest in a then new fieldlandscape gardening. Andrew's physician-brother, Samuel Fisk Green (1822-1884), was accomplished in his own quiet way. As a seven-year-old, he wrote in his journal that he knitted himself a pair of mittens before breakfast because his hands were cold. As an adult, he

mission of bringing modern medicine to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). He also provided for the people spiritually by, for example, translating the Bible into Tamil. who saved things, took care of things," in Oliver's words. Julia Thompson Green of Kennebunk, that long-ago debutante, who died on July 5, 2009, at age 73, was the final family keeper of the "stuff." Besides the usual estate silver, china, glass, paintings, textiles, jewelry, furniture, dolls, toys, and games, there were letters, journals, diaries, ledgers, household expense books, wills, broadsides, posters, photographs, newspaper clippings, postcards, invitations, diplomas, maps, hair samples, railroad and ferry passes, stamp collections, coins and

in Kennebunk. It was all neatly packed away in boxes. When he started doing appraisals for the estate, he discovered they contained more than 10,000 pieces of correspondence alone. The auction was a comeback event for Oliver, who in October 1983 had one of the first decoy sales the collecting world has known. He held what is believed to have been the nation's first fishing tackle auction on July 3, 1986. By around 1990, however, Oliver, who also claims to have held the first golfing collectibles auction in the nation (1988), underwent financial

"All of this was crammed into eight hundred square feet," Oliver said at

the preview party on September 8, a benefit for the Worcester Historical

Museum. About four years ago, the auctioneer moved everything from

Julia Green's home in Brookline, Massachusetts, to her retirement place

paper money, clothing, textiles, and on and on and on.

enormous amount of trash that you'd be interested in.' Yale declined. Nobody had the courage to dive into it."

One way of handling the paper would have been to offer big boxed lots.

down really finely." Ralph recalled feeling understandably overwhelmed

early on, then galvanized when he came upon papers pertaining to the

Massachusetts.) Suddenly he realized he was looking at minutes of the

original incorporation of the Blackstone Canal. (That's the 45-mile

waterway, built between 1828 and 1848, that linked Worcester to

Providence, Rhode Island, through the Blackstone Valley of

earliest meetings of the canal's planners.

demolished in 1957.

premium).

Oliver did box some, but a great deal of the rest he decided to "break

The Green family roots go deep into that region of Massachusetts. In the area. This land, with later additions, is what became Green Hill. Thomas Green's son John inherited the land and in 1757 built the first Green family homestead on it. William Elijah Green, Andrew and Samuel's father, continued to increase the size of the property. So did Andrew after he inherited it in 1848.

Like Julia, Andrew never married, and upon his death, Green Hill went

to his nieces and nephews, who in turn sold it to the city of Worcester,

is today Worcester's largest municipal park, with over 480 acres, two

ponds, a zoo, a picnic grove, a playground, a Little League field, a golf

course, and handball courts, but not the Greens' mansion, which was

In the 1950's and 1960's, there were other losses, including portions of

contributing \$50,000 toward the purchase price of \$104,000. Green Hill

the property that were transferred to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. One of them was a takeover for Interstate 290, which linked Worcester east to west but also, unfortunately, isolated Green Hill's parkland from its recreational area. Still, Green Hill is one of the city's jewels, and regional historians came out to preview and to buy what Green Hill memorabilia they could. William Wallace, executive director of the Worcester Historical Museum, said he was well aware that "community history [was] being sold," and his goal was to save some of it. Indeed he did, buying, for instance, a

auction. ("It's all going bye-bye," he announced at the start.) We saw dealers at the sale, and they did buy some. So did collectors. But the sale was more notable for the number of institutions that participated. These included the New York Public Library, the New-York Historical Society, the Museum of the City of New York, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Smithsonian Institution."It was a good opportunity for [institutions] to buy and to buy correctly," Oliver said. "There were some excellent, excellent deals." A private-museum owner bought one of the most publicized pieces in

affectionately, Th. Jefferson." The room bidder also bought an 1817 autograph letter of Andrew Jackson written to Monroe when he was Secretary of State for \$6490, and he paid \$9440 for another by Jackson addressed to President Monroe in 1825. The room bidder's competition for the presidential material came mainly from phone bidders, with an 1801 autograph letter by Monroe addressed to our fourth president, James Madison, going to one of them for \$11,800. The same phone bidder bought an 1810 autograph letter by Madison to Monroe for \$7080.

The presidential letters, nearly a dozen, were from a collection once

Cadwalader (1836-1914) was, among other things, a founder of the

Association of the Bar of New York and Assistant Secretary of State

during Ulysses S. Grant's administration. "You seemed interested the

other day in some of the autographs," he wrote Andrew. "...I send you

Jefferson, Madison, and Jackson]—& a few others." All told, the

with my kind regards and good wishes a few.... in your political line [i.e.,

presidential material, including the Washington will, realized \$98,321.

devoted entirely to "Green Family Vintage Clothing & Accessories." The

preview area for it took up half of one ballroom. Items included 18th-

and 19th-century dresses, gowns, cloaks, shawls, purses, hats, slippers,

The sale's four days were divided into six sessions, one of which was

owned by John L. Cadwalader and given to Andrew H. Green as a gift.

century clothing from Julia Thompson Green's closets-e.g., a 1950's prom dress in turquoise taffeta and a 1960's Davidow designer wool coat in navy, red, white, and orange plaid, each of which brought \$59 on the same \$100/150 estimate. All the items for this section had been beautifully arranged by Tonya A. Cameron of Saugus, Massachusetts, who put many of the most important pieces on mannequins. (An auctioneer in her own right, Cameron also supplied Oliver with the "computer clerking" he needed to run this mammoth enterprise.) Lynne Z. Bassett of Palmer, Massachusetts, a costume and textile historian and a museum consultant, was the agent who bought a number

of clothing items for the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in

Hartford, Connecticut. Her purchases included the top lot of the

session, a circa 1860 taffeta silk gown in metallic celery and bronze with

miniature red and pink floral brocade that sold above estimate at \$2242.

For a matching pair of 1825-35 down-filled pads for inserting in gigot

sleeves, each embroidered with the Green name, she paid \$1770, nearly

three times the high estimate. "I bought items from the 1830's through

exhibitions we have planned."

\$250/300).

the 1860's for the museum," Bassett said. "They'll fit in nicely with some

The price for both was \$1298, almost six and a half times the estimate. Still, Bassett called the prices "reasonable" for the quality. She added that, just as with furniture, the provenance of historical clothing counts, as does original condition-i.e., no alterations. Or if there are alterations, it's nice to have a written record documenting them with, say, dressmakers' receipts. Judging from these items, Bassett said the Greens "appeared to be a family of some wealth and taste. Certainly they were in the nineteenth century." The celery-colored dress "that I bought is particularly charming. I love the floral woven edging that was used on it."

Manhattan borough historian Michael Miscione attended the "Andrew

collection and also acted as agent for the Museum of the City of New

York. Offered, besides Andrew's shaving kit, ivory tusk encased inkwell,

pocket watch fob, studded cufflinks, tuxedo, top hat, and so on, were all

sorts of ephemera documenting his life and career. A group of 31 letters

1850 sold to a phone bidder for \$590 (est. \$150/200). The same bidder

took a large lot of Green family letters written to Andrew for \$1416 (est.

written by Andrew to various family members in the period 1835 to

H. Green Memorabilia" session of the sale. He bought for his own

Books have already been written about both Andrew and Samuel, but with all this new material coming to light, it would not be surprising to see others in the future. New facts about Central Park's formation may be revealed by these materials. It's a story worth retelling, potentially giving hope to those who struggle to transform blighted urban areas today. As the 1913 biography of Andrew states, before that land in the middle of Manhattan became Central Park, it was "worse than a

reported as the result of mistaken identity, but some speculate that it was actually Boss Tweed's friends delivering payback. Even people who aren't world-class savers like the Greens usually hang on to the family photos. There were plenty at this sale. They enticed dealer Greg French of Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, who came away with the top photo lot. It's not for resale, at least for now, he said. The half-plate daguerreotype of a side view of a house on Green Hill, photographer unknown, shows a child on the roof (standing on his head), another holding a wheelbarrow, and a woman standing next to a one-horse carriage. The estimate was \$3000/4500. French paid \$12,390, citing its

"The kid on the roof did it for me," French said. "Around him, there's natural tension with the slopes of the roofs, the lines of the clapboards and general decay of the house set against the trees, and the solarized sky. There's plenty of activity. And if you look closely, there's another woman in the lower window holding a basket. It's sharp and has great tonality. Plus, I could see that changing the glass will make it pristine." Unprompted, French commented that he "thought the whole auction was very well run. I thought they did everything with class. It was sort of a three-ring circus between the three rooms, and yet I was amazed at how

about the time it took to sell so many single-item paper lots, deed after deed after deed, for example.) Oliver himself said he was most pleased that "after such a long absence we still put together, I felt, a first-class campaign" that attracted a great deal of media interest. "It was up in lights on Times Square in New York City. I did an interview with the BBC in London. ABC-TV interviewed me. I don't think there was

Asked about his future plans, Oliver said, "If anyone wanted me to go into the auction business full time again, I would have to say, 'no, thank you.' I would never do another sale as grueling as this one. I really probably won't have another sale unless it's of the same caliber as this one.'

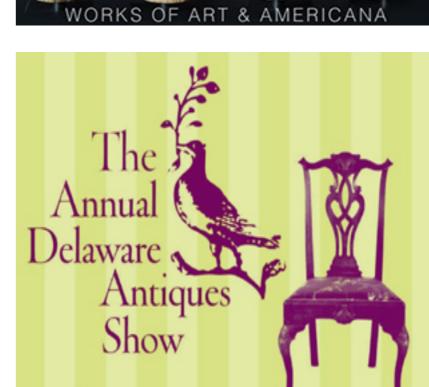
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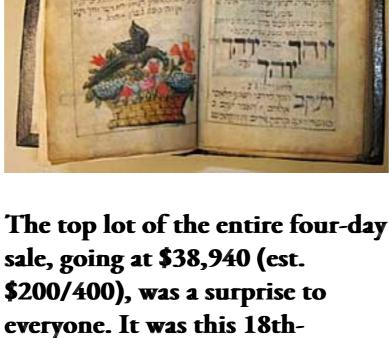
and Decorative Arts

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century illuminated manuscript

on vellum in Hebrew. "I bet we

had ten calls on it from Israel,"

Richard Oliver said. "Then we had a raft of calls from all over the country." No one at the auction house knew quite what it was, and the bidders weren't saying. "It was all on the hushhush," said Oliver, who identified the buyer on the phone as a collector in New York.



A half-plate daguerreotype of a scene outside an early house on became a physician who made a the Green Hill property sold to Greg French for \$12,390 (est. \$3000/4500). Mankind may owe debts to these two Greens, but the auction owes everything to several other Green family members—"a series of people

troubles that were beginning to show. He declared bankruptcy in 1992.

Since then, Oliver has had one auction, in 1997 in Maryland, featuring

Massachusetts, taking his turn at the podium. At this auction, it was a

staff members for the transporting, previewing, telephone bid-taking,

lasted ten months and was very expensive.

decoys. More regularly, he is seen at John McInnis auctions in Amesbury,

turnabout as McInnis was Oliver's relief auctioneer. McInnis also lent his

and the many other duties required to pull off this herculean task, which

"The hall alone cost twenty-four thousand dollars by the time all was said and done," Oliver told us. "Twelve thousand square feet, but we occupied just about every square inch of it." The cataloging of the ephemera fell mostly to historian Bill Ralph of Essex, Massachusetts. "We had no idea what was here, nor did the family," Ralph said. "At one point, Julia's father was desperately trying to get rid of the stuff, I discovered. He wrote a letter to Yale in 1947. 'I have an

1754 Thomas Green purchased from Thomas Adams about 180 acres in

broadside advertising the auction of personal items from "Green Hill Farm" that took place on April 2, 1906, after the city had taken ownership of the property. Its price was \$177 (includes buyer's

Prices were not huge, for the most part, nor were the estimates. The

was something over \$800,000, according to Oliver.

whole auction was estimated unofficially to bring \$1 million. The gross

"This was a volume sale," the auctioneer said of his unreserved, absolute

the sale, a rare copy of The Last Will and Testament of Gen. George Washington, published in Worcester by Isaiah Thomas (1749-1831) in

1800, the year after Washington's death. According to the catalog, its first

owner was William E. Green (1777-1863); it was then passed down in the

including ones owned by the American Antiquarian Society, the Library

comment, but we heard that one of his interests is presidential material,

and he did buy several autograph letters to or from other commanders in

chief. One, which cost him the same amount as the Washington will, was

family. Only about a dozen other copies of this edition are known,

The new owner of this copy, who paid \$18,880 for it, declined to

from Thomas Jefferson to "Colonel James Monroe," written at

of Congress, and Harvard's Widener Library.

Monticello on September 23, 1790. Jefferson, soon to be the third president of the United States, was inviting Monroe, future fifth president, and his wife to dine with him and others. He also wanted to discuss business. "I shall wish for some opportunity of a particular conference with you before you leave us," he wrote, signing, "Your's

muffs, petticoats, and other undergarments, as well as heaps of 20th-

Bassett also bought an earlier item for a private collector, a circa 1800 embroidered cotton baby dress, with a circa 1830 example of the same.

wilderness." Principally rock and swamp, its approximately 700 acres was home to 5000 squatters, a "huge" population of cows, horses, swine, goats, dogs, cats, geese, chickens, and their "filth." It was also the city dump.

Andrew's life ended tragically. A newspaper clipping from the front page

of the New York Herald Tribune, sold at the auction for \$153.40 (est.

\$400/450), tells the story. The headline reads: "Andrew H. Green, His

Murderer and Scene of Tragedy. The account of the shooting of A.H.G

on the early afternoon of November 13, 1903." The fatal shooting was

aesthetic values over any historical ones.

organized it was." Others said much the same thing. (To be fair, we also heard grumbling

For more information, phone (207) 985-3600 or see the Web site (www.rwolivers.com/green).

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anybody who didn't know about this sale."

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