



Artist in the Archives

By Jennifer Steen Booher

When I was asked to create a series of photographs that would visually unite the articles and provide a graphic theme for this issue of *Chebacco*, I initially imagined a series of still life photographs. When the authors submitted their topics, we discovered not only items traditionally found in museum collections—bird specimens, a basket, jewelry—but an abandoned garden, a ruined house, and a ninety-foot-tall tree. Still life photography went out the window. I proposed as a way to unite such disparate objects that we take the physical materiality of each object as our theme and use extreme close-ups with a narrow focal range to concentrate on the textures, colors, and traces of time that make each item unique.

The assignment took me from the Seal Cove Auto Museum to the backyard of Garland Farm, from the ruins of Oldfarm to the third sub-basement of Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology. The photographs are deliberately abstract—you may not be able to tell immediately what you are seeing. These are not documentary photos and make no pretense of objectivity. They reflect both my own skepticism about the objectivity of recorded history and my deep love of poking around in archives.

My skepticism comes from a sense that we as historians approach our work with a narrow range of focus, limited by the culture within which we operate.

It is a strong argument for preserving objects and documents; as the story of the Norwood's Cove artifact shows, those objects persist while the stories we tell around them change.

And as for the love of archives most of us share, well, we all know that frisson of serendipity or recognition when we stumble across something unexpected and special. I can't tell you how cool it was to see Henry Spelman's handwritten tags on his bird specimens. That sense of physical connection across centuries may be an illusion, but it's still a thrill.

Some of the photos capture elements that caught my eye—the rough geometry of the John Snow basket's split ash sides, the feathery soft needles of Garland Farm's Dawn Redwood, or the warm shimmer of the Peugeot's polished brass gauges. Others show tiny details I couldn't see with my own eyes and discovered only within the photos themselves—the cotton stuffing puffing out from the eye sockets of Spelman's bird specimens or the light coat of dust on the claw feet of George Dorr's desk. The photos of the ruins reveal the life that continues within them, contributing to their decay—fallen leaves on the crumbling walls, insects thriving in the weeds, moss covering the patio bricks—all collections are vulnerable to decay, and even the most cutting-edge preservation techniques can only slow the process.

I hope these photos remind you that these objects we have chosen to preserve are not only valuable for the stories they embody, but that they are also beautiful and worth visiting. I encourage you to go and look for yourself.