

Excerpt from Bugle Newsletter, Fall 225 by David Shivers

Today is August 7th and this is the day we are officially midway through summer. It is a beautifully cool morning in Salem. This weather is a nice break from the very warm weather we had during the first half of the summer. There's still a lot of summer to go, let's make the most of it.

Joy Cable, one of my partners in crime, asked me a question I have never been asked about the museum and its collection, "What single artifact best represents Salem?"

Wow! You would think this should be an easy question.

I mentally went through the museum, room by room, artifact by artifact. One item kept coming to mind. I kept thinking there must be something which better represents Salem more than this item. John Strawn's wallet? The Hise Diary? The town hall clock? The Mullins Boat? I need to go through the museum and look around in person.

I gave an impromptu tour the next morning. This gave me a chance to look at everything. While I was giving the tour, my eyes scoured each room, all the artifacts. Again, my mind went to this one object.

Later, as I was thinking about this object, I realized why this object stuck out in my mind.

By now I am sure you are asking, "Which artifact have you chosen?"

It is the hair wreath in the parlor.

Now you are asking, "Why the hair wreath?"

The wreath is much like Salem when it was first founded. A group of people chose this area as a place to come together to settle and build our town. Much like the four sisters, Esther Strawn Burton, Margaret Strawn Smith, Eva Strawn Bardo, and Josephine Strawn Cobbs who came together to begin the wreath project.

Resourcefulness

Our early settlers used the limited, yet endless resources available to them, in a slow and steady process, to lay the foundations of the city we now call Salem.

The sisters began saving their hair. This too was a slow and steady process. They collected their hair from their combs and brushes. It would have taken a long time to gather enough hair to make a single leaf or a flower petal.

Determination

Never giving up, the early town's people stayed on course to build our town. Shovel by shovel of moving dirt, Board by board building homes and businesses. It would have been easy to quit and return to where they were from originally.

Again, the sisters stayed on course. Crocheting leaf after leaf forming the vines building the foundation. Petal by petal making each beautiful flower. They could have easily abandoned the project, but they didn't.

Perseverance

The settlers, tired, yet still working hard to keep their dreams alive by building a beautiful town, seeing a town grow and come to life.

The sisters, continuing to work hard on their piece of art, adding each completed flower, each leaf, and watching the wreath come to life.

Realization

The town is ready. Most everything is in place. They can now proudly see what all of their hard work had built. This is Salem!

The last piece of the wreath is woven in place. Years of gathering and saving their hair. Countless hours of crocheting are over. They can now stand back and proudly look at their finished piece of art.

Longevity

Salem was founded in 1806. Through the good and the bad we are still here. Changing and adapting as time provides new challenges. A testament to our town's founders and to the early settlers.

The wreath was completed sometime around 1850. It looks as if it was made just yesterday. A testament to the Strawn sisters devotion and determination.

The wreath itself is easily compared to the circle of life Salem has witnessed. From the first footsteps made into an uncharted area to the hectic pace of traffic in town today. From the life of the first person calling Salem home to recent deaths of our citizens. No obstacles can't be overcome, nothing can diminish our strength. No struggle will make us give up. From the first fragile hair saved to the last hair woven to the first hair, this bond created a wreath of strength and beauty.

Which artifact would you have chosen? I would love to know! Our next visit will be in the fall. Cooler temperatures, falling leaves, and maybe a spit and sputter of snow! Enjoy the rest of summer! Don't complain about the heat and humidity too much (but of course you can complain a little). Till next time, be safe and happy.

Now for a little hair history... written by our new friend Al.

Human hair had notable cultural, artistic, and even economic significance in the 1800s, especially during the Victorian era. Here are the key ways it was used and why it mattered:

1. Mourning Jewelry and Sentimental Keepsakes

- Victorian mourning customs: After the death of a loved one, hair was often woven into jewelry like rings, brooches, and necklaces as a memorial token. It symbolized an eternal, tangible connection since hair doesn't decompose easily.
- Sentimental value: Even outside of mourning, lovers and family members exchanged hair as keepsakes. It was deeply personal because it was a part of someone's physical being.

2. Art and Decoration

- Hairwork art: Intricate designs—flowers, braids, even entire wreaths—were crafted from human hair and displayed in homes. These were both memorial pieces and status symbols.
- Miniature portraits: Locks of hair were sometimes hidden behind tiny portraits in locketts or integrated into the painting itself.

3. Fashion and Hairpieces

- Wigs and hair extensions: Human hair was a prized material for wigs, hairpieces, and elaborate hairstyles, especially during times when voluminous hair was fashionable.
- Trade and commerce: There was a thriving market for human hair, with hair merchants traveling to rural areas to buy hair from poor women (often called “hair harvesters”).

4. Symbolism and Romanticism

- Love tokens: Hair exchanged between sweethearts was considered more intimate than a letter because it represented physical closeness.
- Immortality and memory: Hair’s durability made it a metaphor for lasting love, remembrance, and even spiritual continuity.

5. Scientific and Practical Uses

- Wig-making for medical reasons: Hair was used to make wigs for people suffering from hair loss.
- Curiosity and study: Collectors and naturalists sometimes saved hair in specimen collections as part of the Victorian fascination with cataloging the natural world.