

A Famous Maryland Painting Restored

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ONE hundred years ago a State legislative committee offered a prominent artist \$3,000 to do a painting for the State House. It was to show one of the great historical events that had taken place there: General Washington resigning his military commission in 1783.

The artist, Edwin White, said he wouldn't do the job for less than \$6,000, and he got it. The work was done, put in a 1,600-pound frame and hung. During the century that followed, it was subjected to several moves and general neglect. Layers of varnish darkened and crusted, and the canvas was marred by scales, blisters and checks — or cracks — some an eighth of an inch wide.

Money to restore this painting, which many consider the most important in the State House, was made available last year. The work was done by Bendann Art Galleries, which had previously restored the "Burning of the Peggy Stewart" and a number of other State House pictures. But because of its 9-by-16-foot size and poor condition, "Washington Resigning His Commission" was the toughest of the lot.

Fifteen men were needed to get the painting down. It was removed from its frame, loaded into a moving van and brought to Baltimore. The 300-pound canvas would not go through the gallery doors and a window facing on the back alley had to be removed to get it inside the building.

THE first step was to reline the canvas on the back so that it would stand the strain of cleaning. The actual work was done by Jacob H. Bockelman, who in his 47 years as an artist has done similar work on hundreds of paintings.

He says this was one of his greatest challenges. Besides the darkening and flaking, excessive cracking had marred the composition of the scene. Special distortion-eliminating techniques were applied, and now, Mr. Bockelman says, there is

less than 1/4-inch distortion in the entire 16-foot length.

After the new backing was applied, removal of the dirt and grime was begun. Twenty different chemicals were used to remove dirt without harming the paint. Holes and cracks were filled in with filler and worn down to a smooth surface.

Portions of the scene that were almost obliterated came to new life under the artist's hand. Faces of people in the gallery became visible and the flags could be identified easily. New paint was applied only where the old had been completely destroyed. Special techniques brought out original details put onto the canvas, even though they were no longer visible as paint.

The final step was application of two coats of preservative, a varnish that unlike the old will not turn amber with age. The entire job took seven weeks and cost nearly as much as the painting did originally.

SEVERAL points about the picture itself remain unexplained. Local authorities do not know why Martha Washington is shown, for she was not present. This is gathered from Washington's statement after the ceremony that he wanted to hurry home to spend Christmas with her. She also appears in Trumbull's representation of the same scene, which is in the Capitol rotunda in Washington and which White undoubtedly referred to. But Trumbull placed her up in the balcony; White on the main floor.

The original plan for the ceremony was for those present to remain seated and covered until the end, when they would remove their hats as a symbol of their respect for Washington as a man rather than a military leader. But in the painting, only Madison and Monroe are wearing hats. Mr. Bockelman believes this was done for the sake of artistic composition.

The canvas is back in its frame now, hanging once again in the State House.



This closeup of a small area of the painting shows how it had blistered during a century on the wall.



Edwin White's painting of Washington resigning his commission as it looked in the State House, Annapolis, before its recent restoration.



Jacob H. Bockelman at work on the picture. The left portion shows the cracking and scaling that had occurred.



The painting cleaned and restored. Faces and the chandelier have become visible, the flags identifiable and other details clear again.