



MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SIX LAYER SURPRISE

An examination of upholstery found on an 1856 sofa.

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Received by the Daughters of the American Revolution, this 1856 sofa was likely donated as an addition to the Sibley House furnishing collection. A survey in 1931 notes on Page 36, "179 Couch- antique, Pres. By Monument Chapter". Because the sofa's provenance is unknown, and it is not a part of the Sibley collection it was de-accessioned and upholstered for public use. Prior to re-upholstery an examination of the sofa was performed. Six layers of upholstery were found on this sofa during its examination. Each layer has been sampled, documented, photographed, and interpreted.

A new upholstery show cover appropriate to the sofa's time period of 1856 was chosen. A bright red mohair plush upholstery, a hardwearing fabric used within this time period, was chosen. This color is quite shocking to our 20th century eyes. Often we assume dusty subdued colors are appropriate because this is what we have seen on historic furniture in the past. However, dull colors are the result of use, staining, and fading. In contrast people of the 19th century lived with bright-upholstered furnishings, which can be seen in many paintings. Our misguided interpretation is an example of how there is always something new to learn from historic artifacts.

Below images and interpretation of the upholstery layers found on this sofa are documented. Weave structure, historical context and our estimation of time of application and use are noted.



→ 1st generation upholstery show cover (1856-1886 or 1896)



Haircloth fragment found on inside arm tacking edge.

Black satin weave structure with a cotton warp and horsehair weft, this upholstery fabric is woven 24” wide. It is not uncommon for haircloth upholstery to last 30-40 years.

Haircloth is an extremely strong and long wearing fabric with a sheen that emulates silk upholstery. Used by middle and upper middle class families, haircloth was a longwearing upholstery fabric that created a look of richness at a fraction of the cost of silk. Commonly found as a black satin weave, haircloth was also produced in pattern weaves of green, yellow, red, and blue.

The use of haircloths spans the 18th and 19th century demonstrating its popularity. Elizabeth Montgomery cites in her publication “*Textile in America 1650-1870*” that Thomas Chippendale billed a client in the 1760’s for “dining and library chairs covered in haircloth”. Because of its near indestructibility, much haircloth upholstery is still in place today under newer covers. This can lead one to believe that haircloth was the predominate upholstery of choice. However, it is important to remember that other fabrics, not as hardwearing, were also popular.



→ 2nd generation upholstery show cover. (1886-1906 or 1916)



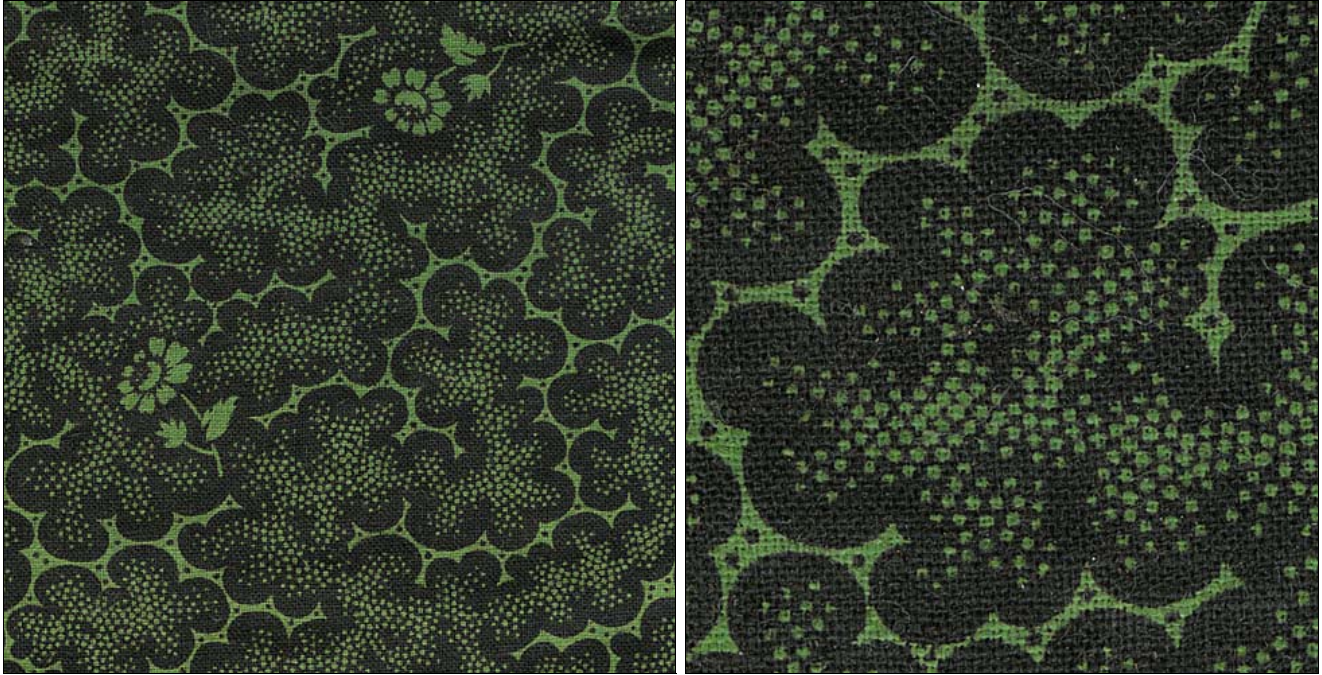
Printed floral canvas found on inside arm covers.

Plain weave cotton canvas. This fabric is printed with an undulating acanthus leaf framing a flowing chrysanthemum flower. Width of yardage unknown at this time. A heavy cotton canvas of this weight could withstand 20 to 30 years of use.

Predominately printed in reds and yellows, this fabric is similar to the early designs of C.F.A. Voysey (1857- 1941) of the Arts and Crafts movement. Exotic floral prints were popular in the 1880's. This design is printed on a thick cotton canvas in reds, browns and yellows. Two other possible designers are Harry Napper (1860-1940) or Lindsey Butterfeild (1869-1948).

Its use as 2nd generation upholstery show cover and similarity to other designs of the time leads one to speculate that it was designed and applied sometime between 1880-1890s.

→ 3rd generation show cover. (1906-1916 or 1926)



Printed green vermiculate calico found on inside back and arm covers.

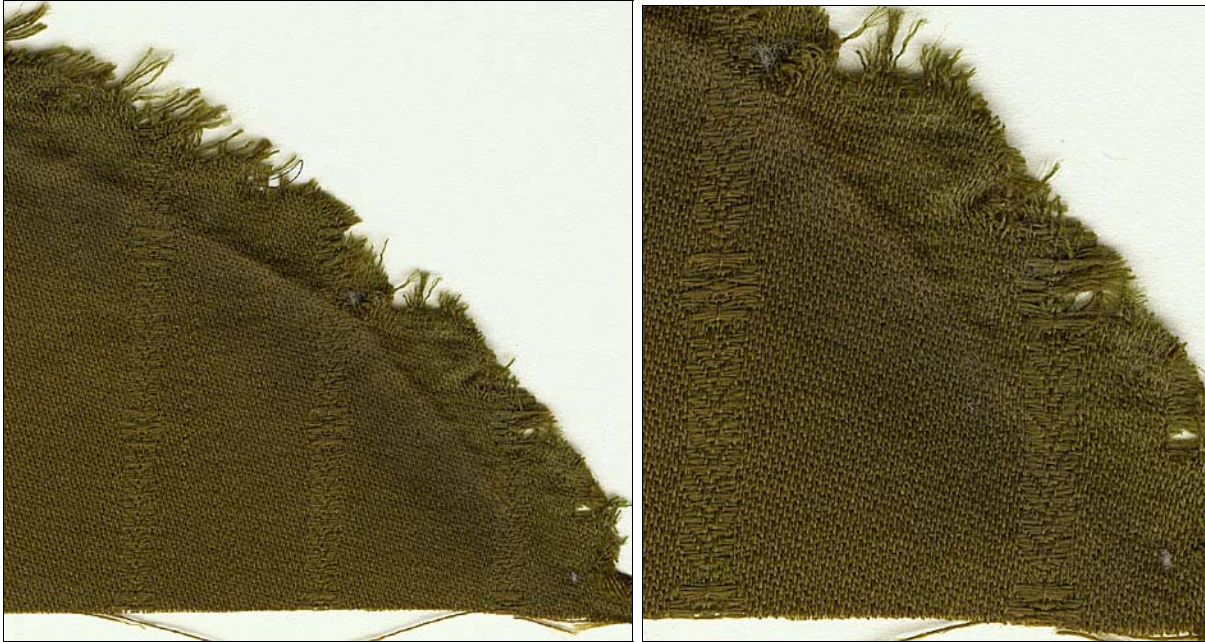
This green plain weave cotton fabric is printed with a black vermiculate pin dot design and small flower. Width of fabric unknown at this time. Due to the thin and inherently fragile nature of this fabric it is speculated that it would withstand 8-10 years of use.

This fabric is a non-directional dress-weight print allowing for its economic use. Green printed chintzes of this design style can be found as early as the 1830's to present day, leaving us with little help in dating.

Dyeing the color green was problematic. Early in the 19th century before the development of chemical dyes, it was difficult to take natural dyestuffs like bark, minerals, or flowers and create the color green. Commonly the color blue was over-dyed or printed with yellow creating green. The mythical dye, poison green, is aptly named for its use of arsenic as a mordant to fix mineral dyestuffs. However, William Crookes writes in his 1874 tome *Dyeing and Calico printing* (p545) "Arsenic acid occurs in a great number of printing receipts. Its function being often very doubtful. In some cases it plays the part of an alternant rather than of a true mordant.... The poisonous nature of the arsenical compounds undoubtedly tends to restrict their tinctorial applications." Crookes, goes on to cite 13 of the many known green aniline or chemical dyes discovered in the latter half of the 19th century. Some of their interesting names are Usbe Green, Cherpin green, Night Green, and Pomona Green (p202).

The use of a dress weight fabric is quite unusual. It can be speculated that the Colonial Dames upholstered this sofa for the Sibley site in the early 1920's with this dress weight fabric. The green vermiculate calico may have been perceived as an appropriate historic replacement show cover of the time.

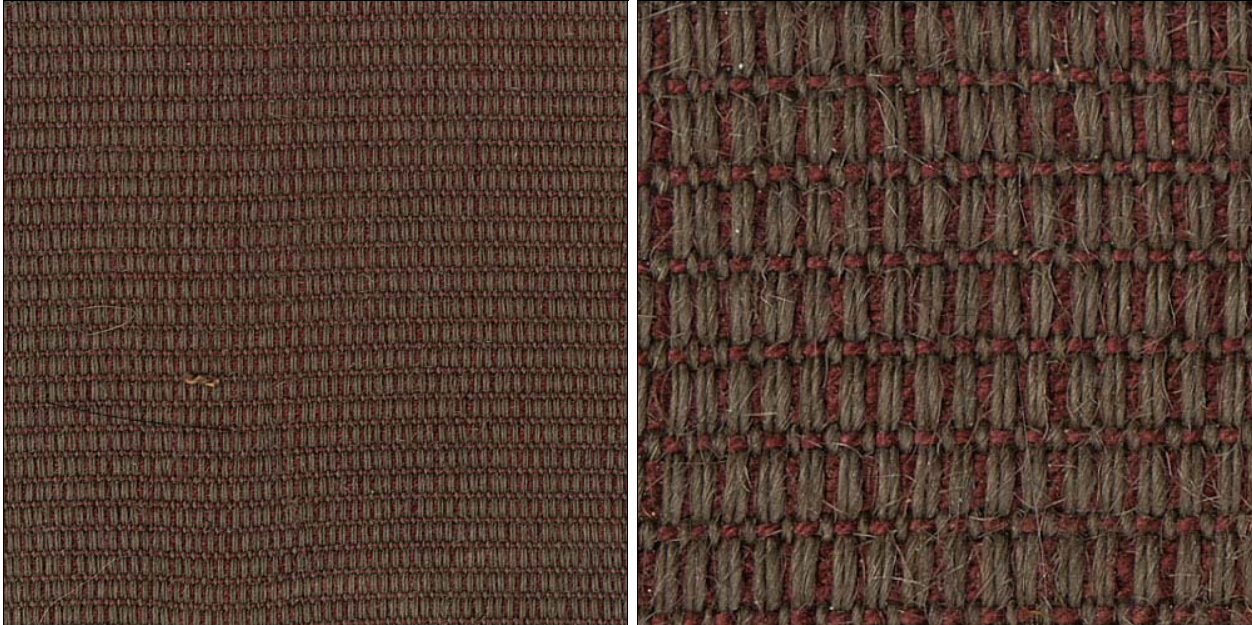
→ 4th generation (1926-1936 or 1946)



Green satin weave wool fabric with vertical stripe of small alternating flower and leaves found on the inside back. Width of fabric 53". A sturdy wool of this type can withstand 20 to 30 years of use.

This green woven stripe pattern in green may have been chosen to match the previous green calico, suggesting that the sofa was recovered to be part of a previous color scheme. The wool's woven stripe pattern suggests an earlier historical time period of the late 18th early 19th century. Woolen upholstery was common throughout the 18th, 19th, and early 20th century. However, today's upholstery market often opts for more economical use of cotton, rayon, and other man made fibers that are often fabricated to look like wool.

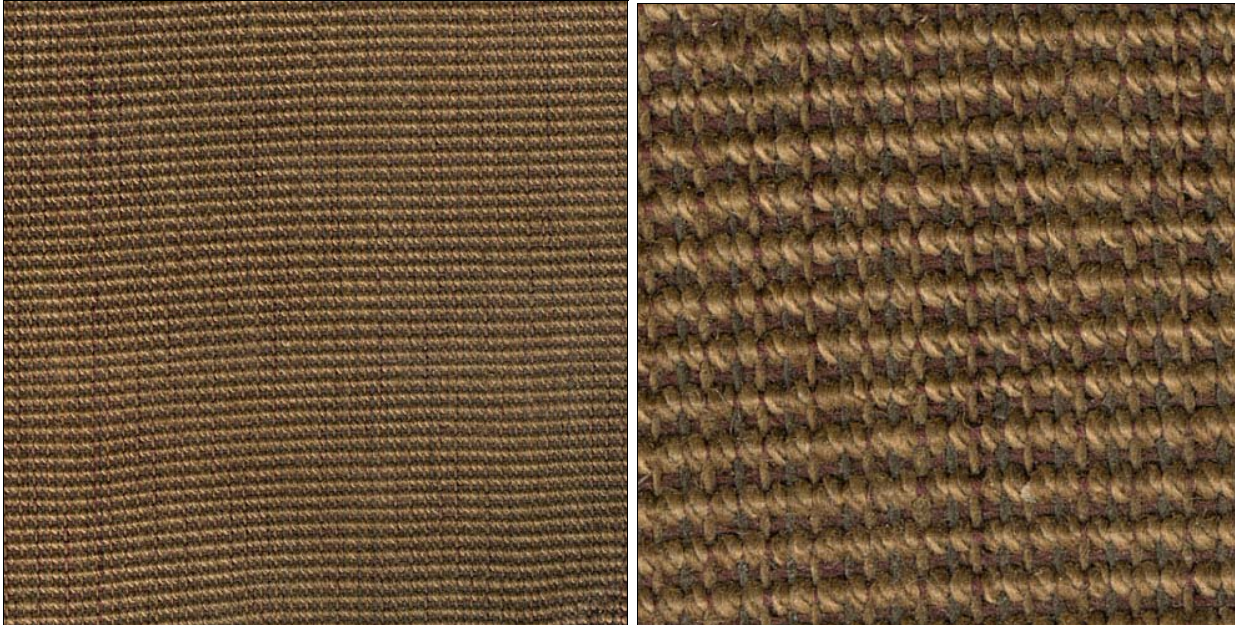
→ 5th generation (1946 or 1956 or 1966)



Grey/blue and red plain weave cotton rep upholstery covering the entire sofa. Width of fabric unknown at this time. A sturdy cotton rep, this fabric could be in use for 20-30 years.

Ridged or rep fabric is a common upholstery choice. There are European and American examples of rep upholstery dating back to the 18th, 19th and 20th, century. However the alternating fat and thin rep ridge appears to have been popular 1870-1900. Mrs. Anna Ramsey, the wife of Minnesota's first governor chose to upholster her formal reception room suite in white wool rep fabric with alternating fat and thin ridges. John and Marion Stockton write in their 1873 publication *The Home: where it should be and what to put in it*. "Furniture upholstered with hair cloth comes at the same prices as rep. But this somber, slippery stuff, is happily, nearly out of fashion. Woolen reps are most used for chair and sofa coverings..." (p 48).

→ 6th generation (1966- present)



Beige cotton plain weave rep upholstery covering the entire sofa.
Width of fabric unknown at this time. A sturdy cotton rep, this fabric could be in use for 20-30 years.

Similar to the former gray rep fabric this upholstery varies little except in color and size of yarn used. The upholstery is woven with thinner closer-set cotton yarn creating a smoother surface.

→ 6th generation trim (1966- present)



Salmon silk pattern weave around glued and tacked to arms.

This trim is a common style found on sofas that from the 1870's onward.

→ Current Interpretation



Red mohair and polyester plush.

Layers of upholstery document the long and varied life of this sofa. Styles, trends, and time periods are documented within the 6 upholstery layers found. This new upholstery of red mohair plush returns the sofa to 1856 allowing patrons to experience what it was physically like to sit on just such a piece.

Furnishings were regularly covered in bright-saturated colors. We base our decision of color and type of fabrics used on collections, periodicals and surviving furnishings. Modern interpretation leads one to think that muted beiges, greens and gold's were more common. However it is important to remember that all textiles deteriorate with time and rarely does their original color survive. A similar color is upholstered on a rocker in a water color by Edmund Darch Lewis in 1857 noted in Elisabeth Garrett's publication "*At Home: The American Family 1750-1870*".