

Tea table taps into historical interest

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It's a moment I'll never forget.

A rising fourth-grader, I stood with my parents at George Washington's second-floor bedroom at Mount Vernon, staring at the large, four-poster bed - the very bed where our first president slept, dreamed and, at age 67, quietly died.

In that instant, all the imagined walls barricading the word "history" came tumbling down. The years melted. History took on flesh and color. The past became present.

No wonder Leslie Kesler, curator of the Charlotte Museum of History, calls the recent purchase of an 18th-century mahogany tilt-top tea table an "unprecedented coup."

The table belonged to a prosperous farmer named Hezekiah Alexander, who, it's rumored, entertained George Washington on his visit to Charlotte in 1791.

Alexander had ventured down to Mecklenburg from Pennsylvania in the 1760s and bought 300 rolling acres on a branch of Sugar Creek.

In 1774, he finished the spacious rock house for his growing family near what is now Shamrock Drive.

The Hezekiah Alexander Homesite still stands - the oldest surviving house in Mecklenburg County - and it's open to the public.

What makes the purchase so exciting is that unlike Mount Vernon, where numerous original pieces still exist, the tea table is the first piece of furniture the museum has bought that is believed to be original to the house.

It's plausible (but not likely, says Kesler) that Washington might have dined with Hezekiah in 1791, as the gentleman farmer was one of the wealthiest in the state.

His land stretched from his rock house to the site of the old Eastland Mall on Albemarle Road. What fun to imagine the two men conversing over this table.

But Elizabeth Nisbet Miller, a member of the museum's executive board and an Alexander descendant through his youngest son Oswald, says that that's a new one on her. "If my mother knew that, she certainly would've talked about it," she says.

When Kesler learned that the table would be available at Brunk Auctions in Asheville, several private benefactors, including a few Alexander descendants, pledged money. A lesser amount came from the homesite's restoration fund.

Three other bidders vied for the table. But Kesler was the winner - for \$4,400.

My hope is that the tilt-top tea table will capture the imagination of schoolchildren touring the homesite. I like to picture them staring at the table, the word "history" abstract and distant.

Then the guide says: "Here is the table where Hezekiah Alexander ate his breakfast, long, long ago. before your great-great-grandparents were born. Perhaps this is where he read and where he blew out his candle."

Thanks to the presence of the original tea table, the word "history" will for many schoolchildren, become suddenly alive and now.

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