

SIDEDOOR (S09E10) - THE TOXIC BOOK OF FACES

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: Nora Lockshin sees a lot of books. But over a decade ago, she came across one she still remembers.

Nora Lockshin: *It was one of a few hundred books we were surveying. This one was particularly impressive as it was large.*

Lizzie: Nora is a senior conservator at the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives. It's her job to protect the Smithsonian's oldest books, which involves everything from research to mending.

Nora Lockshin: *Sometimes it involves looking in dark corners for bugs.*

Lizzie: *Ooh, that sounds less glamorous than I thought you were gonna say. [laughs]*

Nora Lockshin: *Sometimes we're microscopic janitors.*

Lizzie: The book in question had come to her from the Smithsonian's National Portrait gallery for some TLC. To me, it looks like something pulled from the set of *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Lizzie: *Like, if there were a book that were buried in some cave for hundreds of years and you pulled it out, it would look like this.*

Nora Lockshin: *That's such an interesting perception. I would say it has "marks of use."*

Lizzie: That's museum-speak for, "a little bit falling apart."

Nora Lockshin: *The book had obviously been cared for, but there were some things about it that made it structurally unsound.*

Lizzie: The spine was coming off, the front and back covers separating. Still, it was in pretty good shape for a more than 200-year-old book—well, notebook, actually. Because back when this book was new, the pages were blank. But not anymore.

Nora Lockshin: *When you open the book, you go from this sort of dirty cover—looks dirty but, you know, we have cleaned it—to this first page of these glorious silhouettes.*

Lizzie: Page after page after page of this book is covered in dozens of little silhouette portraits: two-inch tall, exquisitely detailed, black paper-cut profiles.

Nora Lockshin: *Oh, there are certainly hundreds in there.*

Lizzie: Close to 2,000, actually. Each one distinctive, down to the hair ribbons.

Nora Lockshin: *There are hairstyles, there are hats, there are details of collars and jewelry.*

Lizzie: *That's a very floofy scarf.*

Nora Lockshin: *Well, a lace jabot is never wrong. Oh, there's a feather. She's got a feather in her cap. I think milliners would get a big kick out of this album.*

Lizzie: But Nora noticed something besides fancy hats: some rusty-looking stains on the paper. Maybe some iron in the ink had oxidized? But there was something else strange, too, something her microscopic janitor self took note of.

Nora Lockshin: *There's zero bug damage in this book. There are no wormholes. There—I didn't find any little pests in the gutters. And it's that strange absence of evidence that should be potentially a warning sign in future. If something of this age and of this preciousness comes in and it looks too good to be true, it probably is.*

Lizzie: But for now, Nora was preoccupied with figuring out what these rusty-looking stains were.

Nora Lockshin: *I took it to our colleagues over at what is now called the Museum Conservation Institute, and they did some more intense analysis.*

Lizzie: And that's when her colleague at the Museum Conservation Institute called her.

Nora Lockshin: *And said, "Nora, how common is it to find arsenic in paper?"*

Lizzie: Arsenic is literally poison. Even a little would potentially be dangerous. But this book...

Robyn Asleson: *The whole thing is infused with arsenic, so it's not like one thing did it, it's just everything.*

Lizzie: Robyn Asleson is curator of prints and drawings at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery.

Lizzie: *Why is this book covered in arsenic?*

Robyn Asleson: *Well, we're not really sure. This book is full of mysteries. [laughs]*

Lizzie: What secrets are these toxins protecting? Who are the faces pasted in this book, and how did they get there? This time on Sidedoor, we open up a 200-year-old book of faces and flip back in time. Through the cutting edge art form papering the pages of this book, we get a rare glimpse at a newly-formed nation, and the people who lived here who we might not ever have otherwise seen. That's coming up after the break.

Lizzie: This is a little hard to imagine in the era of the cell phone camera, but back in the early 1800s, if you wanted a portrait of yourself...

Wendy Bellion: *you had to generally commission one from an artist, and that was a lengthy and expensive process.*

Lizzie: Wendy Bellion is an art historian at the University of Delaware. She says prior to the invention of photography in the 1830s, to have a portrait of yourself kind of assumed that you were really rich.

Wendy Bellion: *It also assumed that you had the kind of leisure time to sit for days or sometimes for weeks on end in order to have that painting created.*

Lizzie: *That is such a good point. I hadn't even thought—I mean, I thought about the expense, but I didn't think about, like, the opportunity cost of sitting that long! [laughs]*

Lizzie: And most Americans didn't have that kind of time or money. Now imagine never getting to remember how you looked as a baby, or a child, or on your wedding day, never getting to gaze at a picture of your lover, or show a stranger a picture of your grandchild. Now imagine how delighted you would be if one day, a man rode into your town carrying a wooden machine, and he promised that this machine could make a scientifically accurate tracing of your face in a matter of minutes—for just a few cents. In 1804, that man would have been William Bache.

Lizzie: *Tell me a story. Who was William Bache? Why did he come to the United States? Okay, who was this guy?*

Robyn Asleson: *Well, a lot of this will be speculative.*

Lizzie: Robyn Asleson says William Bache arrived in Philadelphia from England in 1793.

Robyn Asleson: *We don't really know what he did before he came to the United States, but he did arrive.*

Lizzie: *[laughs] We know he came.*

Robyn Asleson: *We know he got here, and that he was pretty clever about maybe not having a great skill set that he could offer, but seeing that there was a new technology called the physiognotrace...*

Lizzie: *The what?*

Robyn Asleson: *Physiognotrace. So it's "physiogno—" face, "trace."*

Wendy Bellion: *It's basically a tracing machine.*

Lizzie: Wendy Bellion says the physiognotrace was first popularized in the United States at the Peale Museum in Philadelphia, where visitors could pay one cent to make a silhouette tracing of their own face.

Wendy Bellion: *So you would sit down at this machine, settle yourself into a chair. You would place your head against a small concave support.*

Lizzie: Then, with a piece of brass attached to a mechanical arm, you'd trace your own profile.

Wendy Bellion: *Really going from the base of your neck, across your chin, your lips, your nose, your forehead, and as far back as you might be able to reach.*

Lizzie: As you moved the piece of brass along your face, the mechanical arm would translate that exact movement to a pen which traced your profile in miniature onto a folded piece of paper. You'd carefully cut along that line ...

Wendy Bellion: *And when you unfold that piece of paper, you have effectively four identical silhouettes of your own head.*

Lizzie: Presto: instant portrait. The physiognotrace was a game changer. Portraits were no longer for just the hoity-toity and the rich and mighty. Now all it took was a few extra cents to have your profile made.

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Wendy Bellion: *It became something that you did when you went to the museum. And I like to imagine the excitement of going to the museum with a group of friends or family and taking turns almost like you would go to a photo.*

Lizzie: *I was gonna say, it sounds a lot like a photo booth, yeah.*

Wendy Bellion: *Right. I imagine it as a fairly social event.*

Lizzie: Now to be clear, silhouette portraiture itself wasn't new. The Roman author, Pliny the Elder, wrote about it in his book *Natural History*, back in the first century AD.

Wendy Bellion: *And in that book, he tells a fantastic story about a woman who was distraught over the impending departure of a man that she loved, a man who was a soldier who was leaving for battle.*

Lizzie: Knowing she might never see her lover again, the woman was desperate to hold on to his image somehow.

Wendy Bellion: *And as he was asleep in a chair, she memorialized his face, his profile, by outlining his shadow upon a wall. A very simple act of tracing.*

Lizzie: *There is something so heart-rending about that impulse, this sense of, like, the fleetingness, the fear of losing someone you love and just wanting to hold onto any bit of them before they go. Do we know what happened to the man she loved? Did he ever come back from battle?*

Wendy Bellion: *What a great question. I don't know. But it becomes a legend, and the legend becomes a favorite narrative of painters and poets in the 18th and 19th century.*

Lizzie: But while the concept of tracing a profile goes way back, it didn't get the name "silhouette" until the 1760s in France, when this guy came along ...

Wendy Bellion: *Etienne de Silhouette.*

Lizzie: *Oh!*

Wendy Bellion: *Or in English we would call him "Steven Silhouette."*

Lizzie: *[laughs] Okay.*

Lizzie: It sounds better in French. Anyway, Silhouette was the comptroller general for King Louis XV, meaning he was in charge of the money. And he was notoriously stingy, so French people turned his name into a kind of insult.

Wendy Bellion: *So anything that seemed austere in form or color or fiscal policy became known as "à la silhouette."*

Lizzie: *À la silhouette. "Like Silhouette would've wanted it." You know, bare bones, no frills.*

Wendy Bellion: *Absolutely. Absolutely. So that is where the term "silhouette" came from.*

Lizzie: Throughout the late 1700s, a lot of inventors started tinkering with ways to make profile portraits.

Wendy Bellion: *Too many to go into here. There are, in fact, many people on both sides of the Atlantic at this time developing machines and different methods for capturing somebody's profile.*

Lizzie: But it was the Peale Museum in Philadelphia that finally turned the physiognotrace into a household name in the United States. In 1805, the owner of the museum wrote ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: The physiognotrace has done wonders. Profiles are seen in nearly every house in the United States of America. Never did an invention of making the likeness of men meet so general approbation as this has done.]

Lizzie: People flocked to the museum from all over to try out this machine. They framed their silhouettes and hung them on their walls. They gave them to friends, exchanged them like school pictures, put them in photo albums. And entrepreneurs all over the Eastern Seaboard took note. This machine wasn't that hard to make, and it was bringing in a lot of money. And William Bache was one of those guys. In fact, Bache didn't just copy the Peale Museum's physiognotrace. He and two partners patented their own version, which they claimed was ...

Robyn Asleson: *Better. Different. [laughs]*

Lizzie: *Because?*

Robyn Asleson: *Because we—well, largely he said because it didn't touch the face, so it wouldn't spread germs, it wouldn't be so indelicate as to touch a lady's lips.*

Lizzie: Robyn Asleson says in the era of yellow fever this was a selling point. And if you're wondering how Bache managed to trace a face without touching it, we don't really know, because unfortunately ...

Robyn Asleson: *The patent office records burned and we have no way of knowing.*

Lizzie: However it worked, with this new machine, William Bache hit the road. Like most performers and artists of the day, he traveled from town to town, joining the ranks of rope dancers, puppeteers, mimes, musicians, animal acts, balloonists.

Robyn Asleson: *Actors, artists, people who had a trade that you couldn't stay in one place because you had a limited market. Once you met that demand, you had to move to the next place.*

Lizzie: Bache traveled down the East Coast. In each town, he'd set up shop in a boarding house or someone's store and post a newspaper ad like this one from *The Virginia Herald* in June, 1804.

[ARCHIVE CLIP: W. Bache takes the liberty of informing those who yet wish to have profile likenesses that he intends leaving this place on Wednesday next, 'till when he may be found as usual at his room at Mr. Ridley's on the hill, back of the Market-House. Four likenesses for 25 cents.]

Lizzie: And Bache seemed to do good business, but Wendy Bellion says it wasn't just that people wanted an affordable portrait.

Wendy Bellion: *What people really valued in these silhouette images was not just that you could have your portrait taken, but they believed it was the most accurate and direct and truthful form of portraiture of the day.*

Lizzie: Remember, this was the early 1800s. America had just gained independence from Britain. This democratic experiment wasn't even 30 years old yet.

Wendy Bellion: *There's a culture at this time period that we might think of as a culture of suspicion. Some historians have even referred to it as a "paranoid moment" in American politics.*

Lizzie: Wendy says people were really afraid of being tricked.

Wendy Bellion: *Tricked by con artists, charlatans, even politicians who could appear to represent your best interests, but in truth might have their own best interests at stake.*

Lizzie: Unlike a painted portrait, which could be finessed by an artist to make someone look better or different ...

Wendy Bellion: *People believed that the profile portrait didn't lie.*

Lizzie: *Hmm.*

Wendy Bellion: *So it's very interesting to consider the possibility that one of the reasons that this device might have been popular is because it produced visual representations that were similar to the ways in which political representation was being described at the time.*

Lizzie: *So at the same time that people are looking for direct representation in their elected officials, they're also finding this kind of direct representation visually in the form of silhouette portraiture.*

Wendy Bellion: *Yes.*

Lizzie: *Or it may have just been because people really love photo booths.*

Wendy Bellion: *That is entirely possible, too.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: Whatever the reason, business was booming for William Bache. We know because every time he made a portrait, he'd keep a copy for himself and paste it in his ledger book.

Robyn Asleson: *And match it to an index at the back with the name of the person it represented. So this—his book is numbered, and the numbers refer to the index at the back with the names.*

Lizzie: This is the ledger book now in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery, but back then it was Bache's personal record, and probably also his marketing move. When Bache rode into a new town knowing nobody, he could open up his book and say "See? Here's what I can do for you."

Lizzie: Working his way down the East Coast, Bache filled his ledger book with characters, hundreds of faces of the people who came to have their portraits made: doctors, lawyers, merchants, politicians, priests. But also soldiers, farmers, children, household servants and enslaved people. People who, before the physiognotrace, might never have left a trace behind.

Lizzie: When we come back, we'll take a closer look inside Bache's book. Who were the people who sat down at Bache's physiognotrace? We'll explore some of their stories after the break.

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Lizzie: William Bache's ledger book is full of faces of real people who lived 200 years ago. The National Portrait Gallery's Robyn Asleson says it's a work of art, but also a historical document.

Robyn Asleson: *We're an unusual museum in that we have both curators and historians, but sometimes you need both. And this is one of those times, because we needed to find out not just about William Bache's career but, like, who these people are.*

Lizzie: But remember, in addition to being full of faces, William Bache's ledger book is also full of arsenic—and nobody's exactly sure why.

Lizzie: Today, it's considered dangerous to drink water with arsenic that exceeds 10 parts per billion, but back in the 19th century, arsenic was a common household product. People drank it in medicinal tonics, put it on their skin as a beauty regimen, and even sprinkled it on their clothes and bedding to keep bugs away. And the Smithsonian's Robyn Asleson says somebody probably did the same for Bache's book.

Lizzie: So museum staff donned protective gear and carefully scanned the pages of the book. Once fully digitized, it could be examined more closely. And Robyn set out trying to figure out exactly who the people inside were.

Lizzie: *So your job was to sort through about 1,800 faces of people who lived 200 years ago and identify them based on their silhouette and possibly a misspelled name?*

Robyn Asleson: *Mm-hmm. Yes. [laughs] So I called in the troops. I had a wonderful intern, Carolyn Hauk, help me.*

Carolyn Hauk: *I was looking at notary records, military records.*

Lizzie: This is Carolyn Hauk.

Carolyn Hauk: *Newspapers were also really helpful.*

Lizzie: Carolyn would take the names in the back of the ledger—often misspelled and barely legible—and look for matches in archdiocese records, legal documents, any kind of public record. Through this research, Robyn and Carolyn learned that in the fall of 1804, Bache arrived in what

may have been the most eclectic and exciting city in America: New Orleans.

Robyn Asleson: *There were still so many people there from Germany, from France, from Spain, England, Caribbean. Just this huge swell of people coming and going.*

Lizzie: Just a year after Thomas Jefferson doubled the size of the country with the Louisiana Purchase, William Bache rode into the Big Easy with his physiognotrace in tow. He rented a room on Royal Street, and for a month he churned out portraits, averaging over 25 a day. High society folks and everyday people lined up to get their silhouettes done, bringing their stories with them.

Robyn Asleson: *These are some women in the D'orso family.*

Lizzie: Robyn points to three silhouettes in the book.

Robyn Asleson: *In the middle is Desiderata D'orso.*

Lizzie: A young woman dressed simply with a curly lock of hair at her forehead.

Robyn Asleson: *And then at the far end we see the same profile, but now wearing a hat and an elaborate blouse of some kind with ruffles. And her name is recorded in the index is "Desiderata Doyle." She had eloped with a young army officer, and it was quite a scandal. It got the governor of New Orleans in trouble because it was thought that he had assisted. The Secretary of State of the United States got involved.*

Lizzie: *Wait, how?*

Robyn Asleson: *Because the governor had to write him a letter saying, "I swear I had nothing to do with this."*

Lizzie: *Oh my God! [laughs]*

Lizzie: Governor Claiborne—Mr. "I had nothing to do with this"—is here in the book, too.

Lizzie: *Middle-aged guy.*

Robyn Asleson: *Mm-hmm.*

Lizzie: *Proud chin sticking out there.*

Robyn Asleson: *Definitely get a sense of pride from the tilt of that chin.*

Lizzie: *Kind of thin hair.*

Robyn Asleson: *Mm-hmm.*

Lizzie: *One page later ...*

Lizzie: *Hold on. Here's Claiborne again.*

Robyn Asleson: *Yeah.*

Lizzie: *And this time he's back with a hat!*

Robyn Asleson: *[laughs] That's right. It's so funny. It's so human nature. The ones who came without a hat the first time, they come back and they want a hat the second time. Or they're wearing a hat. They're like, "Too much hat. Not enough me." They come back next time, no hat. So, you know, it's just second guessing.*

Lizzie: *I think one thing that I really love about what you learn from identifying these people is, like, some of the just mundane dramas that played out.*

Lizzie: *Like, Carolyn shows me a silhouette with curly hair, pouting lips and a slightly pointy-looking head. Artist Francois Guyol de Guiran. We know from court records that he was granted a divorce from his wife because she started living with another man. Looking at his profile, it's hard not to think ...*

Lizzie: *That was something that man thought about a lot, probably.*

Carolyn Hauk: *Absolutely. You know, what I love about this research too, is just how those stories really come to life. Because we see these dramas play out in television and in some unfortunate cases in our own lives. But, you know, I think that's what really vivifies history. That's what really breaks this weird barrier that we feel when we talk about the past, that temporal barrier.*

Lizzie: *Silhouettes, they're just like us!*

Carolyn Hauk: *[laughs] Kind of. Exactly, yeah.*

Lizzie: *Admittedly, some of these dramas could really only have played out in 19th-century New Orleans, like silhouette number 509, Captain Peter Paillet.*

Carolyn Hauk: *So he is a native of New Orleans, and he engaged in a lot of commerce between the New Orleanian ports and Tabasco.*

Lizzie: Paillet sailed between the US and Mexico a lot.

Carolyn Hauk: *And he was captured by a piratical boat, with a crew of European Spaniards. And they were kind of pressing him to become their chief and he refused them.*

Lizzie: *Wait a minute. A "piratical boat" meaning like a boat of pirates came up to him and they were like, "We want you to be our leader." And he was like, "No, thank you?"*

Carolyn Hauk: *[laughs] Yes.*

Lizzie: *Wow! But you know, looking at him in profile, I'm not surprised that he said no. Like, he's got a strong set jaw.*

Carolyn Hauk: *Yeah. And he's kind of tilting his head up a little.*

Lizzie: Now the whole "pirate job interview" happened years after Peter Paillet sat down to Bache's physiognotrace, which gets at this slightly eerie sense when looking at the book—that you're seeing a person *and* their future. A future they were entirely unaware of at the moment the portrait was made. Like silhouette number 410.

Carolyn Hauk: *Micaela de Almonester, the Baroness de Pontalba. She is an incredible figure.*

Lizzie: Here, she's only about nine years old, a little girl with bangs and a bun. She was the only surviving child of her French Creole mother and Spanish father, born into a wealthy family when New Orleans was still a territory of Spain. But six years after William Bache cut her silhouette, when she was 15, Micaela would be married to her 20-year-old French cousin and move with him to a chateau in France surrounded by a moat. But her father-in-law, he was bent on getting her inheritance any way he could.

Carolyn Hauk: *He resolves to shoot her four times at point blank range.*

Lizzie: *[gasps] What?*

Carolyn Hauk: *And she survives.*

Lizzie: *What!*

Carolyn Hauk: *She survives, he commits suicide.*

Lizzie: *What! Geez!*

Lizzie: Baroness de Pontalba returns to New Orleans, becomes the wealthiest woman in the city, and personally designs and commissions the construction of the red brick buildings that still line the French Quarter today.

Carolyn Hauk: *The National Register of Historic Places kind of cites her as starting this ornamental tradition of cast iron galleries in New Orleans.*

Lizzie: *Wow!*

Lizzie: But for all the famous people in William Bache's ledger book, there are just as many whose names are nowhere to be found in the public record. The physiognotrace gives us a look at circles of society whose images might be lost to history without this technology.

Lizzie: *Do you mind just briefly touching on number 769?*

Carolyn Hauk: *Sanitte is this silhouette that is pasted later in the book.*

Lizzie: This is a portrait of a young woman with a mop cap tied in front with a ribbon.

Carolyn Hauk: *And there's no surname listed for this woman. Her name is one that was commonly given to enslaved women at the time.*

Lizzie: At this time—really anytime prior to the invention of photography—depictions of enslaved people were incredibly rare. But Carolyn says Bache's ledger book can show us how lives intersected in ways that complicate our ideas about history. Like, she points to a Jeffersonian-looking character with a large nose and strong brow, ponytail tied with a ribbon, Francisco Riano.

Carolyn Hauk: *He's a Spanish captain of militia under the Spanish government, but there's a record of him selling an enslaved woman named Marie to Louise Bon Lalan, who is a free woman of color operating a slave-dealing business in New Orleans.*

Lizzie: *Wait, so he sold an enslaved woman to a free woman of color?*

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Carolyn Hauk: *Yes. And there's actually auction records of different enslaved people that she sells. And these are carried out by someone by the name of Pedro Petisquo, who also has a silhouette in the ledger book as well.*

Carolyn Hauk: *It is really—it's really a complex history, but it does speak to the embeddedness of American chattel slavery, and how it was positioned as this economic venture, no matter how inhumane or violent it really was.*

Lizzie: William Bache probably stayed in New Orleans for a month. After that, he disappeared for nearly a year and a half. And Robyn Asleson had no idea what happened to him until she came across a letter to the editor in the newspaper of Havana, Cuba. Translated from Spanish, it reads ...

[ARCHIVE CLIP: A half-sane man from the neighboring country, with a machine of a thousand squiggles, presents himself to destroy those heroes of the paintbrush, offering portraits without touching paint.]

Robyn Asleson: *We came across an article in the paper complaining that this man, William Bache, had come from America and had started this terrible craze for portraits. And was going door to door carrying his physiognotrace on his back.*

[ARCHIVE CLIP: He'd shoulder his contraption and go fishing from house to house, on terms that have driven the entire city mad. There was not a family that didn't have their portraits done right down to the cat.]

Lizzie: But Robyn says this letter helped connect some puzzle pieces. There were a lot of sugar plantations in Cuba, and Louisiana was where sugar was refined.

Robyn Asleson: *And that solved the mystery, because we realized because there were these connections between the Caribbean and New Orleans, he probably made a lot of connections there, and someone in New Orleans said "You should go to Cuba."*

Lizzie: In 1806, Bache returned to Philadelphia from Havana, Cuba. He spent five more years rambling from town to town in New England until at the age of 40, he got married and settled down in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania.

Robyn Asleson: *But I think his decision to stop running around the country making art had something to do with getting married. Like the woman who put the hat on after she eloped, he decided, "I'm changing my image, I'm changing my lifestyle." And he became a very different kind of person and*

stayed in one place for the rest of his life.

Lizzie: William Bache himself isn't so notable in the course of history. He was one of many entrepreneurial guys seeking his fortune in a new country. One of many silhouette makers of that era. What makes his ledger book so remarkable is that it survived.

Lizzie: *Paging through this book feels a little like wandering through a cemetery.*

Robyn Asleson: *Hmm.*

Lizzie: *Where you see all these people in a way. Like, you see a record of all these lives.*

Robyn Asleson: *Mm-hmm. Yeah.*

Lizzie: *And to just feel surrounded by these sort of presences that you have a vague sense that they existed. It's like a book of ghosts.*

Robyn Asleson: *Maybe it's just that. I think it's quite spooky, but it's also mysterious in a good way. You know, it's very intriguing.*

Lizzie: We still don't know the identities of over half the portraits in Bache's book, but those we do know give us a different kind of window into a moment in our nation's history.

Carolyn Hauk: *What I really do appreciate about this ledger book though, is how it's a reminder that history does not occur in a vacuum. I think these silhouettes, you know, the importance of them is that they do grant this representation to those whose histories have often not been privileged in an archive. And they're part of these larger social webs and networks of history that overlap.*

Robyn Asleson: *A lot more work could be done on trying to trace those networks and understand who's related to whom and who knew who. It's a historical document that has a lot of information.*

Lizzie: *A lot of information it sounds like that remains, in some ways, untapped.*

Robyn Asleson: *Yeah, definitely. People don't always think about art as a document that can tell us about history, but in this case it definitely is.*

Lizzie: In this book of portraits, we can see our own history differently through specific lives and stories that complicate and connect us with our collective past.

Lizzie: Who knows? 200 years from now, someone could be combing through our Facebook pages trying to piece together what our lives were like at this moment we're living right now—and wondering why were we wearing such goofy hats?

Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Lizzie: You can see William Bache's ledger book for yourself, fully digitized and purusable online, safely out of the reach of arsenic, at the national portrait gallery's website: npg.si.edu. Many of the portraits are now labeled with names that you can Google yourself and immerse yourself in these incredible stories.

Robyn Asleson: *I think anybody who wants to write a novel need go no further. Look at the history of this place.*

Lizzie: *[laughs] In this book.*

Robyn Asleson: *Yeah. There's just—there's so many stories that you just can't believe are true, but yeah they were.*

Lizzie: We'll include a direct link in our newsletter. You can subscribe at SI.edu/sidedoor.

Lizzie: It's summer, and we here at Sidedoor are taking a little summer break to work on new stories for you come this fall. In the meantime, we'll be releasing some goodies in our feed so don't go anywhere! And as always, if you have a pitch for us or a Smithsonian-related question you'd like investigated, email us. Seriously, reach out. We want your ideas. And we look at all of them, I promise. We're at Sidedoor (@) si.edu. You can also tweet at us or find us on Instagram @SIDEDOORPOD.

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Lizzie: Tami O'Neill writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from PRX.

Lizzie: Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship (@) prx.org.

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening, and happy summer!

Lizzie: *Boy this is another pretty extraordinary hat. That one defies gravity.*

Robyn Asleson: *That's Martha, isn't it? No.*

Lizzie: *Oh my God, it's Martha Washington!*

Robyn Asleson: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: *[laughs] Oops!*

Robyn Asleson: *She can wear whatever she wants. Yeah.*

Lizzie: *Whoops! Sorry, Martha!*