



William Howard, American, born Africa about 1805, active until c. 1870

Writing Desk

19th century, Mississippi, United States

lime wood and found wood, measures 60.25 x 30 x 23.5 inches

2012.11

This writing desk was designed and created by William Howard and is a newly acquired object for MIA's collection of African American and American Folk Art. William Howard lived and worked at Kirkwood Plantation in Madison County, Mississippi, first as a slave, then as a free man after the American Civil War. William McWillie and his wife Catherine built Kirkwood after arriving from South Carolina in about 1845. By 1857, McWillie had become governor of Mississippi and Kirkwood was a large cotton plantation with nearly 200 slaves. African Americans produced much of the material objects needed on the self-sustaining plantation, which included a smoke house, winery, bakery, and blacksmith shop. A skilled and no doubt valued carpenter and builder, William Howard remained on the plantation after the Civil War.

A skilled and no doubt valued carpenter and builder, Howard constructed the desk, resembling a perfectly proportioned Greek temple, from yellow pine, cotton crates, and "Bull Durham" tobacco boxes (visible from the interior, back, and bottom). Most striking is the pictographic assemblage of more than 70 hand-carved and applied weapons, tools, eating utensils, vessels, and trade symbols.

According to an 1870 census, William Howard was born in Africa, but was enslaved and owned by the family of William McWillie at Kirkwood Plantation in Madison County, Mississippi. Howard remained at Kirkwood as a freed man after the Civil War, working as a field hand. The desk was handed down through a local African American family, along with the story of William Howard as its maker. In addition to its fascinating history, this object presents a curious contrast between its high-style, neoclassical form and the use of rough, "make-do" materials such as cotton and tobacco shipping crates in its construction. More than 70 hand-carved objects, including weapons, tools, eating utensils, vessels, and trade symbols embellish the desk's surface; however, what these objects are meant to convey remains a mystery. They may represent the important contributions of African American labor in manufacturing and the skilled crafts during a time of profound economic hardship and social change in the South. The desk certainly showcases the ingenuity and technical skill Howard must have possessed to create this masterpiece of American folk art.

<http://www.artsobserver.com/2012/01/24/a-tale-of-two-african-american-made-plantation-desks/>

Willie Howard, Fall-Front Desk
Wadsworth Athenaeum
<http://www.thewadsworth.org/fallfrontdesk/>
c. 1870

American, Kirkwood Plantation, Madison County, Mississippi
William Howard (c. 1805–after 1870)
Southern yellow pine, salvaged crate wood, and varnish



Early this year, the museum acquired a unique desk, adorned with carved symbols that reflect plantation life in the Deep South. Images such as shovels, picks, and water buckets allude to the grueling work of field slaves, while wash boards, scissors, and tableware illustrate the tireless toils of domestic slaves. The creator, William Howard, was an emancipated slave from the Kirkwood Plantation, owned by William and Catherine McWillie. One of two known works attributed to Howard, this desk broadens the representation of arts made by Southern craftsmen and adds to our collection of works from the Civil War period.

This 19th century plantation desk/stationary is from Kirkwood Plantation in Mississippi. The desk was made by William "Willie" Howard when he was a slave living on the plantation, and has over 50 applied carvings depicting Masonic imagery, tools and utensils useful in plantation life. Howard remained on the Kirkwood plantation as a freedman after the Civil War and during Reconstruction. This desk/secretary is considered a retrospective work of art commemorating life on Kirkwood. This piece makes me muse about what furniture on the plantation he may have been copying, and what we might have found stored inside in say, 1860.

Robin Jaffee Frank, Chief Curator and Kriebel Curator of American Painting and Sculpture (Wadsworth Atheneum), said "Willie Howard would have been familiar with forms like this [a 17th century classically inspired cupboard]," Frank said, referring to the 17th-century cupboard. "He was so observant, so brilliant, borrowing bits and pieces of it to create a piece of folk art."

Kirkwood Plantation

<http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/index.php?s=extra&id=126>

After the death of Governor and Mrs. McWillie, their descendants felt that the old home's work was finished, and that it would better become a sweet memory and pass away with the master and mistress, whose gracious presence had so hallowed it. Therefore, it was taken down.

It was also reported that the mansion burned about 1937

<http://mdah.state.ms.us/manuscripts/z2142.html>

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MCWILLIE FAMILY PAPERS, ACCRETION

1814-1866; 1973

Biography/History:

William McWillie, Jr., was born in Camden, Kershaw County, South Carolina, on May 7, 1842. The McWillie family moved to northeastern Madison County, Mississippi, and established Kirkwood Plantation about 1845. At the age of nineteen, McWillie married sixteen-year-old Sallie Tucker (b. June 17, 1844), daughter of former Mississippi governor Tilghman Tucker, on May 31, 1861. Three days later, McWillie departed with Company G, Captain Adam McWillie's Camden Rifles, to join the Eighteenth Regiment, Mississippi Infantry, in Corinth, Alcorn County.

Scope and Content:

This accretion to the McWillie family papers consists of original correspondence and photocopied typescripts of correspondence, slave rolls, and other family papers. The correspondence primarily consists of complete and partial letters written from William McWillie, Jr., to his wife, Sallie, between 1861 and 1864. The letters describe life as a member of the Camden Rifles, Eighteenth Regiment, Mississippi Infantry, during the Civil War. Topics include troop movements around Fredericksburg and Manassas, Virginia. News of friends and acquaintances, as well as personal observations on the war and military strategies are included. The remainder of the correspondence consists of letters from Catherine Morris Anderson McWillie from Kirkwood Plantation, Madison County, Mississippi, to her son, William, while he was serving in the Confederate army. The letters were written between 1861 and 1863, and they offer news of family and friends and details about domestic activities such as making cheese, jelly, and clothing for the McWillie family and also for Confederate soldiers.

An 1866 letter from Silas M. Tucker, brother of Sallie Tucker McWillie, discusses the settlement of the estate of their father, Tilghman Tucker, who died in 1859. Of particular interest are two original 1858 slave rolls for the McWillie family plantations, Madison Place, Madison County, Mississippi, and Senaasha (or Seneasha) Place, Attala County, Mississippi. Each roll lists the first name and age of each slave, the number of pounds of bacon allotted to each slave, and whether or not a slave is a "hand." Notes concerning slave births and deaths are also recorded from 1858 to 1860.