



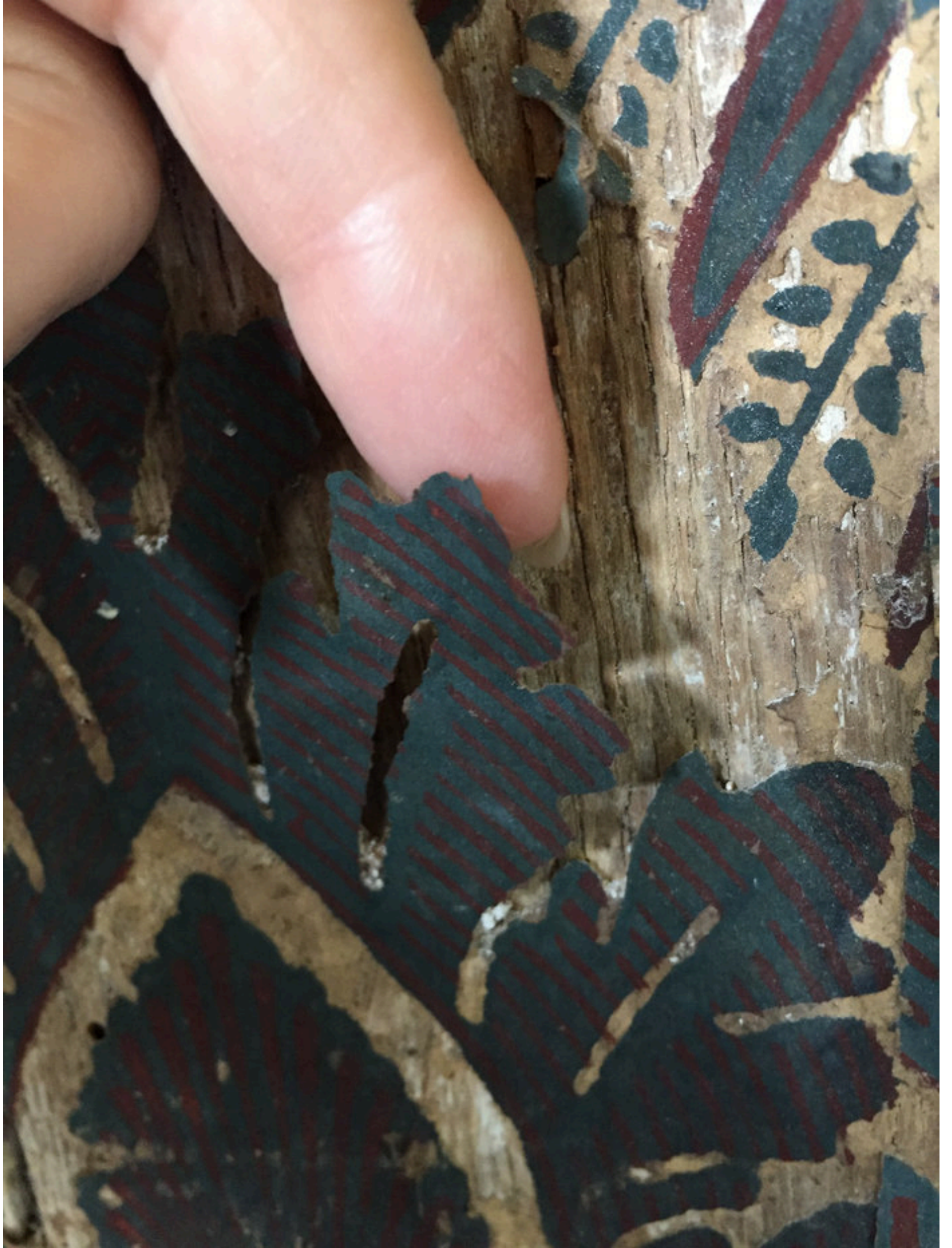
Mystery Solved!

September's CPWP 'Plaster Bits' generated a lot of hypotheses on what this "new" and obviously interesting wall decoration at the Dartmouth, MA Heritage Preservation Trust's Akin House could possibly be. It was decidedly early, since it was applied directly on the vertical boards then covered with many layers of local newspaper and wall paper, each denoting a different time and expression of home decoration.



One idea proffered was that of a printing process directly on the wall. If screen printed, cracks between the boards would have offered no resistance to the colors being excessively pushed through the silk. The idea that a jig would have been necessary to line up the repetitive images was also suggested. We learned that although the silk screen process is older, it did not become common in wallpaper production until about 1940.

Another thought was the decoration could possibly have been *schere**nsnitte*, a technique of German origin where paper is cut quite delicately into a variety of patterns. The lace-like quality of the image seems to suggest that this may have been a possibility, but the size of the project defies imagination as to scope of work since this is one hundred and fifty years before lasers!



The idea that it was a stencil was examined because of the repetitive nature of the decoration, but understanding how stencils were cut left the examiner realizing this was impossible— much more likely that it was a silk screen process.

Then.... We heard from a fellow conservator who had documented a very similar observation in Topsham, ME. He had researched it and offered this conclusion: In the 1830 Topsham house on the walls of a plastered attic stairwell what remains is a delicate block printed paper floral pattern printed in what now appears to be dark gray and blue on a white ground.







As you can see in the photos, insects have eaten away entire portions of the off-white paper ground, which appear as a brighter white. Some of the close-up shots show areas that are only partially eaten away. This leads us to believe that the same thing has occurred in the Akin house.



“The block printed foliate pattern, probably from the 1840’s, is typical of popular wallpaper designs of the 1845-1860 period,” says Richard Nylander, retired senior curator of Historic New England and wallpaper specialist. It is interesting that what appears to be the background color of the design is actually what was printed- just the reverse of the usual procedure of printing the design in colors on solid ground color.



After consulting an Entomologist we learned that the insect, most likely a silverfish, wants the starch in the paste but can sense the arsenic in the color before it's too late. They nibble around the toxic color and, in this case, leaving the deep verdigris pattern on the walls. This block printed paper dates from 1825 to 1840 and again the colors are typical of the period. A similar pattern can be found on Historic New England's collections data base - www.historicnewengland.org (<https://shoutout.wix.com/so/0LyigNzh/click?w=LS0tDQpkNmM2YWMyMy1mNmZhLTQ1ZGI0MjExNi0wZjE0MTkwYzI0MjcNCmh0dHA6Ly93d3cuaGlzdG9yaWNuZXdlbmdsYW5kLm9yZy8NCi0tLQ>) accession number 1923.241.

So, with the help of several professionals, the mystery is solved! We are grateful to our readers and appreciate your forwarding on the 'Plaster Bits' monthly articles to your associates. If you would like to receive them directly, just go to www.pwpcenter.org (<https://shoutout.wix.com/so/0LyigNzh/click?w=LS0tDQo4YWEzZjIhMi1kMjM3LTRiYTAtNmYyZC1hMmU0YjI1YzNhMWQNCmh0dHA6Ly93d3cucHdwY2VudGVyLm9yZw0KLS0t>) and sign up for the once a month newsletter.

The Center for Painted Wall Preservation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and dedicated to the preservation of paint decorated plaster walls. Please consider making a tax-deductible donation using the easy 'donate' link on our website www.pwpcenter.org (<https://shoutout.wix.com/so/0LyigNzh/click?w=LS0tDQo4YWEzZjIhMi1kMjM3LTRiYTAtNmYyZC1hMmU0YjI1YzNhMWQNCmh0dHA6Ly93d3cucHdwY2VudGVyLm9yZy8NCi0tLQ>) or by mailing to the address below to help us continue our documentation and preservation work. Thank you and let us hear from you regarding painted plaster you have in your area.

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