



Arnold Gold/Register

John Elliott, owner of Branford Rare Books, at the Blackstone Memorial Library in Branford earlier this year.



Pages from "The Orchard" (1839), with hand-colored illustrations of fruit.

# EPHEMERA, INDEED

John Elliott of Branford delights in books and letters from another era

By Lisa Reisman

**S**PEND AN HOUR OR SO examining the array of items collected by John Elliott of Branford Rare Books, and it's easy to understand their pull on him over the last four decades. In their unassuming way,

each revives a world long forgotten, restoring its color and depth.

Take a letter written by a young woman, dated Sept. 14, 1893, from one of the countless albums of old correspondence owned by Elliott. Addressed to her parents in Utica, N.Y., it describes her experience at the





A portrait of Miss Arabella Wilmot, drawn by miniaturist Abby Mason Brown in 1822.

1893 Chicago World's Fair — the heat as "something terrible," with "ambulances going all day" and people suffering sunstroke and dying; the influx of foreigners "all babbling in native tongues"; and the "truly wonderful" Ferris wheel that debuted there. "I tried to imagine its size," she writes in swooping cursive, "but it is about as twice as large as I supposed."

Not polished prose printed in black and white typeface for the ages; just the handwritten, eyewitness observation of one otherwise anonymous young woman having the time of her life. Just as the Ephemera Society of America puts it, a documentation of everyday life, "particularly that of average men and women in the past" — a way of seeing history from the ground level.

Which is why you might call Elliott a champion of the 99 percent. The 99 percent of people who lived centuries ago, that is. And why this is what Elliott lives for: the direct interaction, the immediate connection, with history.

That's because, though Branford Rare Books specializes in cartography, Americana and fine art, the most interesting objects are often the work of what historians term "the invisibles."

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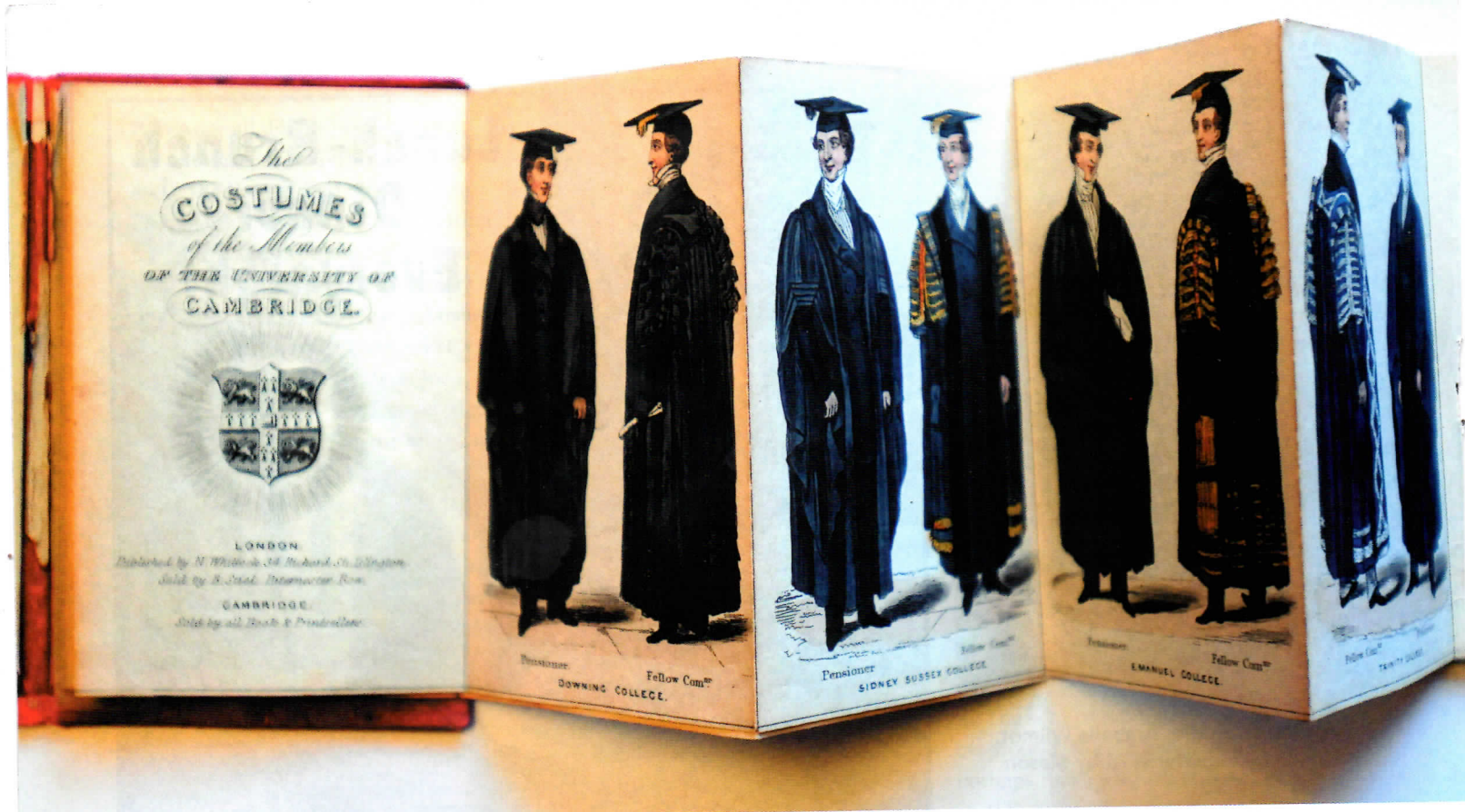
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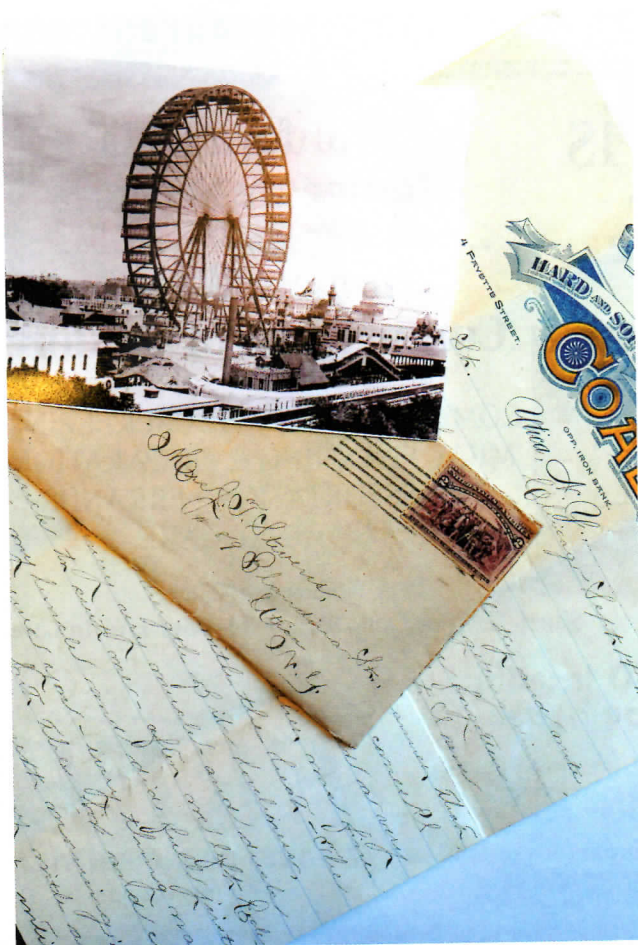
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An 1830s book, "The Costumes of the Members of the University of Cambridge," has a foldout illustration page.



An 1893 letter, detailing the Chicago World's Fair, with a modern printing of the Ferris wheel at the fair.

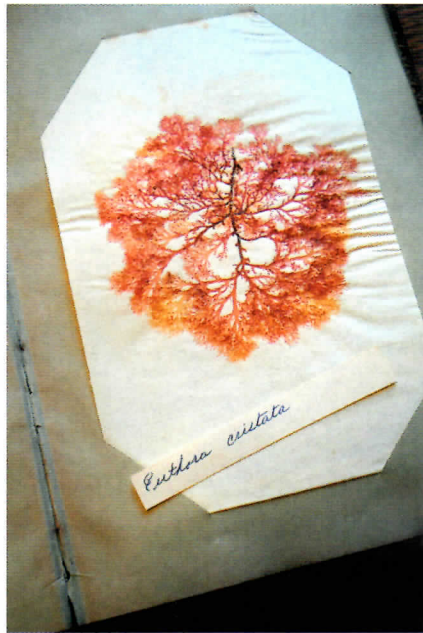
The objects known as ephemera, in other words. Literally defined as a short-lived thing, from the Greek word for mayfly, it is, said Elliott, "raw, unedited history — the purest kind."

Odds are, you'll find the bespectacled, rumpled 65-year-old at the Branford Book & Card Shoppe on Main Street on any given Thursday, where he stops in to pick up a printed edition of the Newtown-based Antiques and the Arts. There's an online version of the so-called bible for the antiques industry, which includes all listings for all auctions in New England and throughout the country, but Elliott prefers the paper one.

The reason is simple. As the unapologetic throwback flatly stated, "I hate computers." And that's a problem, it would seem. As oxymoronic as it may sound, most of the antiques trade is trafficked on the superhighways of the Internet. Elliott doesn't regularly correspond by email; he has an email address, but has constant problems with the password information. A Google search will yield the name of his business, and Branford Rare Books is listed as a buyer on eBay, but there's no sleek website with links to his extensive holdings.

Elliott has been collecting ever since 1972, when he stopped in an antiques shop during his lunch break while working in marketing for the Newark branch of ARCO. "The owner had a portfolio of prints from the 18th century," Elliott recalled at the Lucy Hammer Room of Branford's Blackstone Memorial Library in the course of a monologue that was enigmatic and idiosyncratic as his collections. Another customer had put a deposit on it and never returned. "I paid one or two hundred dollars and ended up selling it for a





An 1850 seaweed album, containing 40 plates of impressed seaweed.

profit," he said. And that's when he got hooked.

At first it was maps and atlases. By the time he transferred to Connecticut in 1973, he had collections worth \$25,000. With the proceeds from selling several items, he started a business in a building on Montowese Street overlooking the Branford Green in 1978. In the years since, he's been president of Branford's Chamber of Commerce; member of the BCTV Board of Directors; and helped broker sales of paintings to Sotheby's for Blackstone's 1996-97 renovation.

At least on its face, there's nothing particularly glamorous about what Elliott collects. An anonymous portrait miniature. A faded issue from a 1839 edition of *The Casket*, a monthly magazine published in Philadelphia in the first half of the 19th century. A figurative painting with a peculiarly familiar depiction of color and sunlight.

But dig deeper and the fun begins. That anonymous portrait? According to Elliott, it's the work of Abby Mason Brown, listed in "Who's Who of American Art" as a top practitioner of that discipline in the early 1800s. He estimates its worth at \$500. For it he paid a fraction of the sum.

As for the monthly magazine, it may contain a story or poem com-

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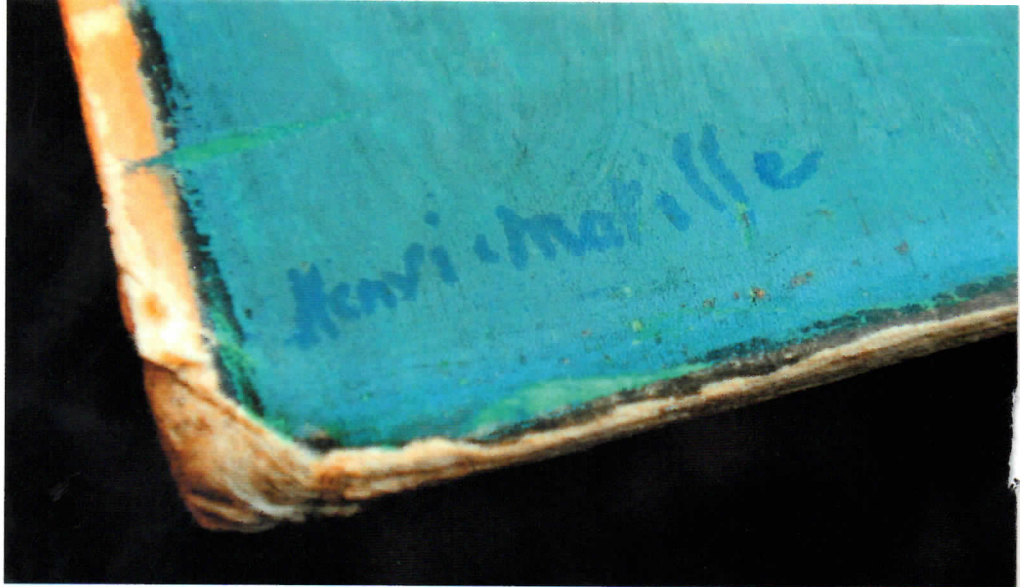
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posed by none other than Edgar Allan Poe. After all, Elliott pointed out, the author of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and “The Raven” had moved to Philadelphia in 1838 and was writing for a number of different magazines. In fact, the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore notes that Poe published articles and poems in *The Casket* around that time. The reason for Elliott’s interest: No one has yet identified the work. And Poe, the antiquarian dealer noted, was notorious for using pseudonyms early in his career.

The painting? It could well be an early Matisse. Elliott bought it, along with 400 other pieces, from an artist with a Russian art collection for \$250 at an auction in Farmington. When Elliott gets around to having it valued — he has dozens of other items that are awaiting appraisal, and the process is lengthy — the return could be a cool \$2 million. For now, it’s just another painting among the hundreds Elliott owns.

Not to mention broadsides from

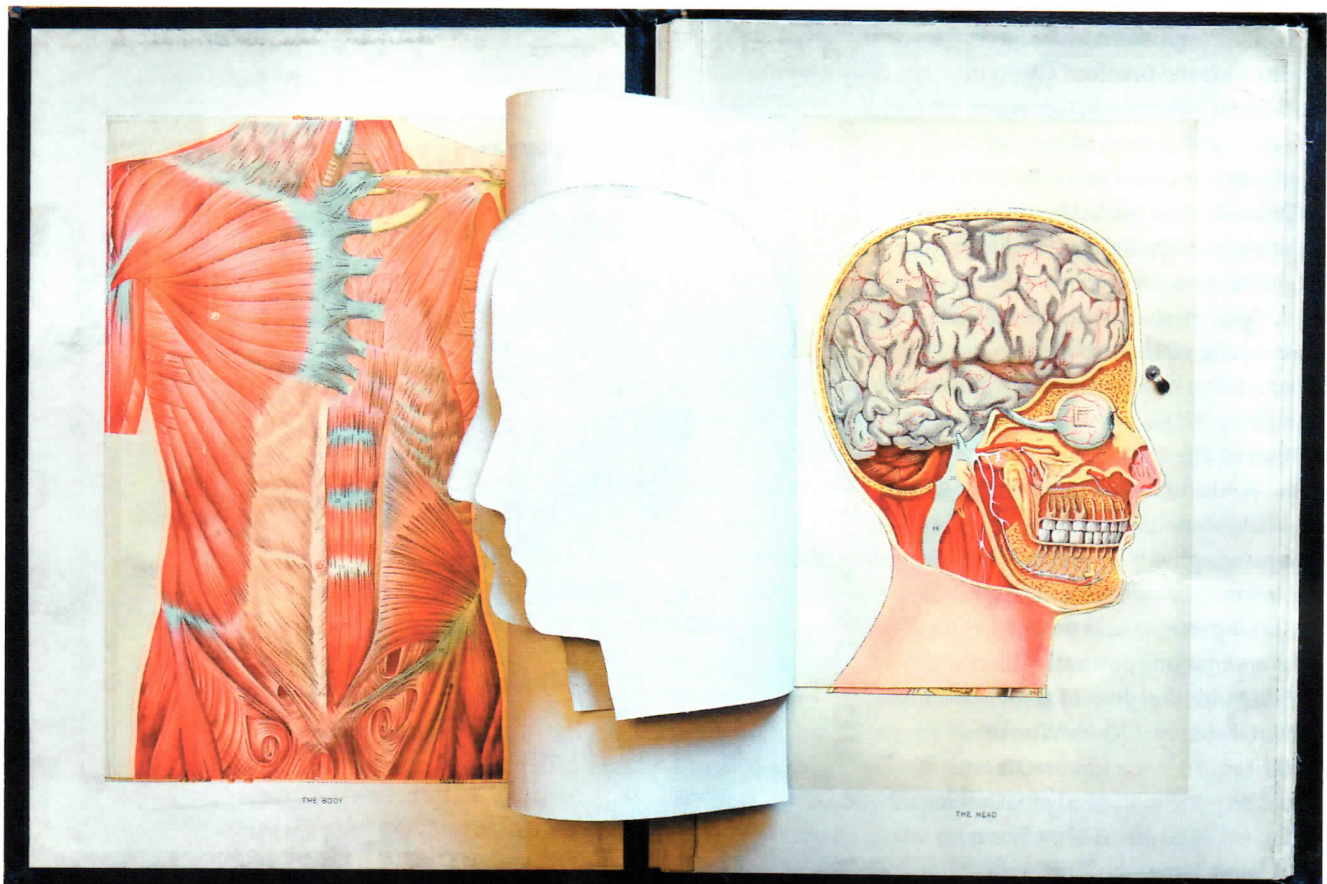


The signature of a possible Henri Matisse painting.

1789 urging citizens to rise up in the French Revolution; a tepid 1790 proclamation from King Louis XVI not long before he was removed from power; and an 1801 map of Italy bebringed with a wine stain around the time of Napoleon’s invasion. A series of letters from the Civil War tells the story of a Pennsylvania soldier shot in the clavicle. Recovering in a Washington,

D.C., hospital, he recounts to his family the way his doctors would turn him upside down.

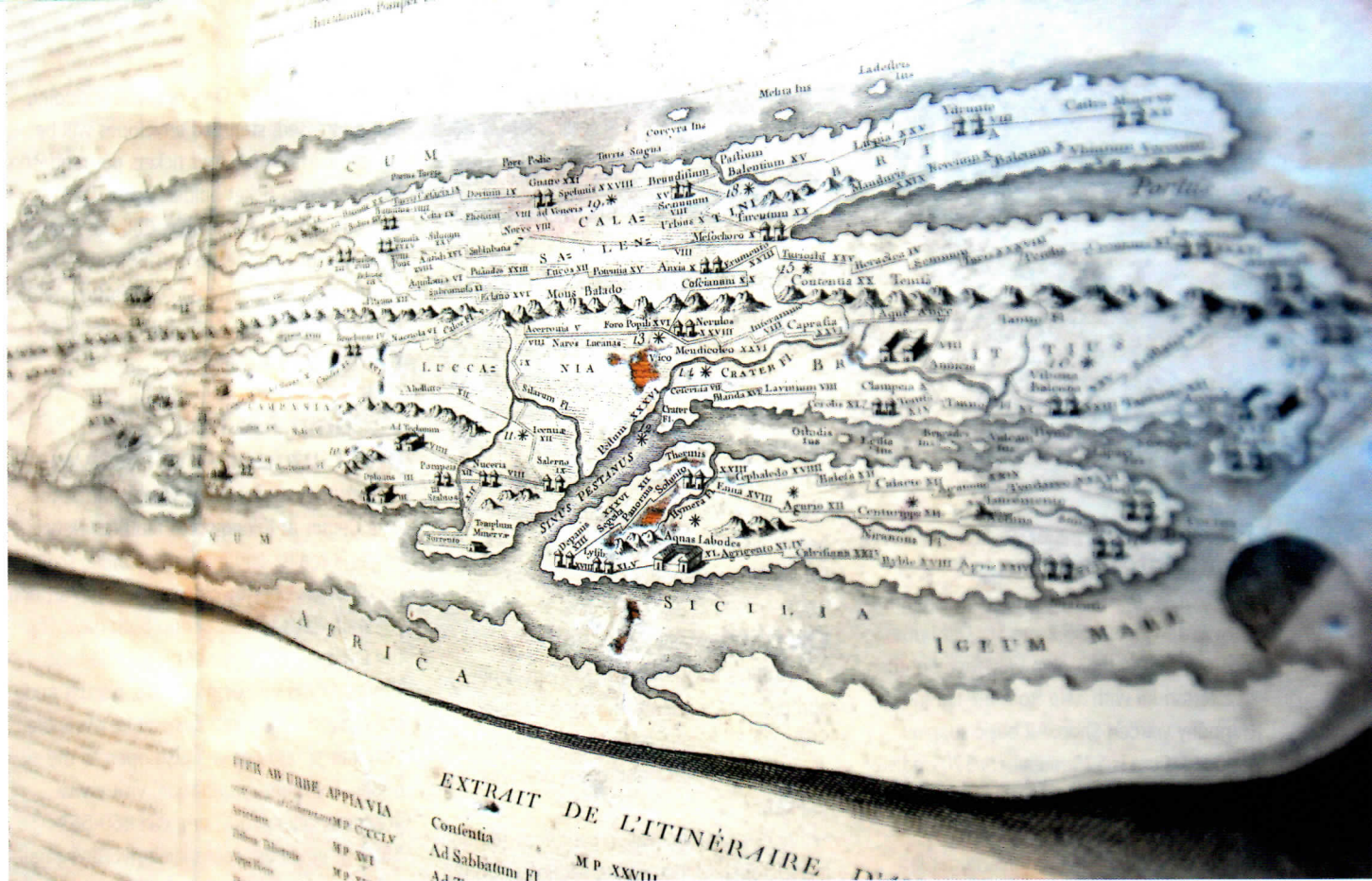
The soldier ultimately died from his wound, but his letters live on. And perhaps that’s why the sheer enormity and diversity of his holdings don’t seem to daunt Elliott. Indeed, while Elliott regularly does appraisals for the Connecticut and Montana historical



An 1890 student anatomical aid.

Arnold Gold/Register





An antique map of Italy.

Arnold Gold



societies, as well as for the University of Michigan, and for corporate entities like Union Carbide, he's far more eager to relate the smaller pleasures of his work — in particular, recent word from a New York auction house that a second edition of Charles Darwin's "Origin of Species" had been valued at a substantial sum.

The book had come from a Shoreline resident who had learned of Elliott from another of his clients. In keeping with its defiantly Luddite attitude, Branford Rare Books advertises solely by word of mouth. The wait had been six months.

"It had the imprint of his descendants," said Elliott of the book with undisguised delight. "And it was wonderful seeing his reaction to the news. For him, it was a link to his past. A way of honoring it."

From the sale, Elliott got a small percentage. And that's fine by him. "I buy things because I like them," he said matter of factly. For him, the enduring appeal of collecting is in the great finds, the near misses and, not least, the human element.

Which might be the reason for Elliott's disdain of computers and email, including our literally virtual ephemera of text messages and Twitter. "What will our 99 percent leave behind?" he asked.

— Branford Rare Books, New London Antiques Center, 123 Bank St, New London, 203-483-7477, 860-444-7598.

At left, several pieces of Civil War-era ephemera.