

2006 New England Newspaper of the Year

## A trunk, a photo, and a family's life revealed

Heirlooms abandoned on a New York City street lead a photographer to a prominent Rhode Island family.

**BY PAUL DAVIS**  
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Stacy Morrison's life changed with the discovery of a mysterious trunk on a street in Manhattan early in 2002.

A professional photographer, Morrison had lost both her prized apartment and her boyfriend. She felt anxious and

vulnerable as she walked to Crosby Street to meet two women looking for a roommate. One of them had just found a battered leather trunk atop a pile of garbage bags on the street.

Curious, Morrison peeked inside.

Someone — New Yorkers were so quick to jettison the past — had tossed away dozens of family heirlooms: 19th-century paper dolls dressed in shoes with pink bows; a brown daguerrotype of two girls, hands clasped, their faces pensive;

wallpaper swatches; a bracelet made of human hair; and a calling card for a Susan A. DeWolf.

"I started crying," says Morrison. "When I looked at these things — the photographs, the book, the dolls — I was so devastated that the objects had been thrown out that I had to elevate them to art."

Among the photos in the trunk was one of a young woman, dressed in black, with braided hair.

Morrison arranged to rent the apartment with the two women;

as soon as she moved in, she started photographing items from the trunk with a large camera and special film.

The combs, pins and playing cards made her contemplate the aftermath of her own death.

What, if anything, would she leave behind? Would her things be thrown away?

When Morrison moved six months later, she took the trunk with her. At night, she started dreaming about the mysterious woman dressed in black, with braided hair.

"We would have conversa-

tions, which are long forgotten to me now," Morrison would later write. "She was calling out to me, imploring me to look, to think, to feel for her. When I would awaken in the morning, in a blurry state of half-consciousness, I would be confused

SEE TRUNK, A10

Stacy Morrison displays a photograph of Sylvia DeWolf Ostrander that she found in a trunk outside her apartment.

THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / BILL MURPHY



A10 Monday, October 30, 2006

FROM PAGE A1

### Trunk

Continued from Page A1

as to who I really was. She was so alive to me in this world."

At first, Morrison was happy not knowing anything about the woman associated with the contents of the trunk. Left free to speculate, she wondered: What did she look like? Was she wealthy? Was she happy?

The trunk had offered a clue to Susan's status in society. A cream-colored invitation to a fancy ball said, "In Honor of H.R.H The Prince of Wales, Boston, Oct. 18, 1860."

Morrison thought of Cinderella.

**ONE RAINY** October night in 2004, while Morrison was looking at some of her photographs, she decided it was time to unlock the mystery surrounding Susan A. DeWolf.

For two years she had drawn comfort from imagining her 19th-century world, a world free of terrorists and broken relationships.

When she Googled the DeWolf name, she discovered an online walking tour of Bristol, R.I., once a world of waterfront slave traders, brazen privateers, creaking counting houses and many-roomed mansions.

James DeWolf, she discovered, was a slave captain who had thrown an African woman overboard and who had later served as a Rhode Island senator.

There were other DeWolfs, too, many of them in the slave trade. Surely one was connected to Susan, she thought.

Morrison called historical societies in Providence and Bristol. She tried an online genealogical site and, once she learned that the some of the DeWolfs had lived in New York, she haunted the New York Public Library and the city archives, where she found Susan's will and other records.

Through the records, interviews and later letters, she determined that the trunk of keepsakes had been collected by Sylvia Russell Bullock, one of Susan DeWolf's three daughters. The contents had been gathered as a tribute to Susan, her mother, and Sylvia's beloved sister, Annie.

"Very slowly, bit by bit, I pieced together the history," says Morrison.

Born in Bristol in 1820, Susan

was the daughter of Sylvia Griswold and John DeWolf, a poet and Brown University chemistry professor. John's father had been a partner in one of America's largest slave-trading operations, run by several DeWolf brothers.

In 1840, Susan married Jonathan Russell Bullock, a lawyer and later lieutenant governor and state Supreme Court justice. She and Jonathan had three daughters: Sylvia Russell — the trunk's owner — Annie Amelia and Elizabeth Mitchelson.

As it turned out, Sylvia was the woman who haunted Morrison's dreams.

With help from Bristol historian Ray Battcher, Morrison found the Bristol homes where Susan and Sylvia lived, on Church, Hope and State streets — old roads laid out in 1680.

But the history of the DeWolf family did not square with Morrison's fairy-tale daydreams. "It was hard to attach this harsh history" to a trunk "filled with perfume, floral paper and paper dolls," she says.

The DeWolf women had troubled marriages, were hampered by 19th-century social customs and lived through a bloody Civil War.

Susan's husband, Judge Bullock, was not a popular man, says Morrison. Even Sylvia, his daughter, disliked him greatly. She once told a neighbor, "I won't set foot under the same roof with that man."

In letters between the father and daughter, Bullock accuses Sylvia of being ungracious, unappreciative and selfish. In return, Sylvia calls her father judgmental, controlling and uninterested in her side. "From my heart I cannot imagine any human being taking such delight in doing all they can to torment their own flesh and blood," Sylvia wrote in 1880.

"I believe that Sylvia was a very smart, strong and willful woman," says Morrison. "From the correspondence I have between her mother and sister Annie, it seems like Sylvia was very headstrong, perhaps even overly sensitive. Everyone went to great lengths to keep her at bay or not to upset her."

Sylvia — not Susan — went to the 1860 ball in honor of the Prince of Wales. Then 19, she danced with William Davis Dimock, a cousin. It was, says Morrison, a grand event attended by the "most notable and wealthier of families ... Sylvia



COURTESY OF STACY RENEE MORRISON

One of the many heirlooms found in the mystery trunk.

kept her dance card."

But Sylvia's happiness would not last.

During the Civil War, she wrote to William and to his brother, Joseph Judson Dimock, both soldiers with Company K, a Union regiment from New York.

Sylvia probably loved Joseph, or "Jud," says Morrison. But Jud was 14 years older — and married to Isadora DeWolf. During the war, he died of typhoid fever.

That same year, Sylvia married the younger Dimock, her Boston dance partner. Four years later, Sylvia's mother, Susan, died of consumption and was buried beneath a stone with carved roses in Juniper Hill Cemetery in Bristol.

Sylvia and William apparently separated at one point. "The marriage of William and Sylvia seemed to be a rocky one" and William died young, in 1873 at the age of 36, Morrison says. The couple had one son, William DeWolf Dimock.

In 1883, Sylvia suffered another blow: her favorite sister, Annie, died.

The next year, Sylvia married Cornelius Van Buren Ostrander, the wealthy New York president of the Merchant's Fire Insurance Co. He was 76 and she was 41. He died three weeks later.

On November 17, 1925, Sylvia died of a cerebral hemorrhage and was buried in Juniper Hill Cemetery — but not near her family. "She is by herself and her stone does not face the same way as all of the other stones in the cemetery," says Morrison.

Morrison, who last June received a \$2,000 grant from the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, is now at work on a book about the DeWolf women. She has met with several DeWolf descendants in New England, including Sylvia's great-great granddaughter.

The great-great-granddaughter gave Morrison some of Sylvia's dresses, a parasol and letters. The family, Morrison says, has been very supportive of her project. "The DeWolfs have an amazing historical presence in this country and a rich oral history which has been passed down from generation to generation."

There's still more to learn, Morrison says. She's been unable to find portraits of the women, even though the paintings are mentioned in a will. She is hoping they are somewhere in Rhode Island.

But she's no longer searching alone. Her new husband, also a photographer, has joined her on trips to Bristol and elsewhere.

This weekend, Morrison is visiting several DeWolf homes and she will try to capture the "ghosts" of the DeWolf women through long-term photographic exposures. She'll be wearing one of Sylvia's cotton dresses beneath a silk mourning coat. Tomorrow — Halloween — she'll talk about her project to art students at Roger Williams University.

She offers a final anecdote.

Late last summer, she was walking home to her New York apartment when someone shouted "Sylvia!" Immediately, Morrison turned around. "Of course, they were shouting at a real Sylvia," she says. "It really creeped me out."

pdavis@projo.com / (401) 277-7093