

Restoring broken antiques isn't easy

By Lynn Hopper
Correspondent

'Oops!" That single word can strike fear into the hearts of antique lovers and homeowners everywhere, especially if it is preceded by the sound of "crash, tinkle, tinkle."

It's bad enough if the broken shards were once an expensive vase. It's worse if the piece was a family heirloom.

Imagine, then, the shock and horror of the anonymous volunteer about 15 years ago at the President Benjamin Harrison Home, when a precious plate, hand-painted by first lady Caroline Harrison, shattered on the front parlor hearth.

A group of volunteers had been creating a holiday display above the fireplace mantel when the one-of-a-kind dish fell. It didn't just break. It smashed into so many pieces that some parts were just ceramic dust, explained curator Jennifer Capps.

She found the remains tucked away in a box when she came to the Harrison Home 11 years ago.

Today, the tiny, irreplaceable plate is whole again, and once more on display, only this time,

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Restoring

■ 16 craftsmen helped put plate back together.

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behind glass in the china cabinet in the dining room.

"They were certainly wise to pick up all the pieces, at least," noted Phyllis Geeslin, executive director of the home.

Wise, indeed, because Wiebold Studio Inc. restoration services of Terrace Park, Ohio, was able to put them back together — well, almost — to appear that the accident might never had happened. But, it wasn't cheap,

and it wasn't easy.

"The first thing we had to do in restoration was to take a series of digital photos of the pieces, to try to identify the pattern of the plate. There was very little there," explained Bob Brown, business manager at Wiebold.

Nearly all of the 16 full-time craftsmen who work for Wiebold took part in the operation, he said, including William Wiebold himself, who is a historian.

The little plate has a fairly elaborate lattice-work edge, and a cherub was painted in the center by Mrs. Harrison.

The piece is particularly special to the Harrison Home history, according to Capps, be-

cause Mrs. Harrison didn't usually paint faces. Her specialties were floral motifs, though there is one set of bird plates.

Caroline Harrison was an enthusiastic china painter, but her pieces are especially prized by the staff of the home because they don't have very many of them.

"She probably gave most of it away as wedding gifts and such," Capps said. "She even persuaded a local painting instructor, Paul Putzki, to come to Washington when they moved to the White House, to work with her and give painting classes there.

"Most of the pieces we have are dated 1891, and she died in the White House in 1892."

Wiebold specialists pieced together the mark on the back to get the center of the plate in order, and then ceramic sculptors duplicated the only side of the lattice-work that was complete, Brown said.

The "dust," though carefully saved, was not used. That side was completely rebuilt.

"It was difficult because of the detail," he said.

The process took 11 months to complete, and cost \$1,442, which was paid by the home's volunteer organization.

Keeping the Harrison Home up with a minimum of breakage is a challenge, said Ruth Nisen-shal, director of development and public relations.

"Everything here is so accessible, it's a wonder more things don't get broken," she said

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Together again: The Harrison plate is as good as new after restoration work.



Submitted photo