

FOCUS

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Sophie Gallop Bryant
Crayon enlargement (c. 1890-1910)
from a family collection

Right: CCAHA Conservator Jessica Keister inpainting an area of loss on the portrait /
Below: The portrait before treatment (top) and after



The owner of this crayon enlargement portrait had always admired it while it hung, for as long as she can remember, in her aunt's home in Camden County, North Carolina. In the 1980s, she finally asked her aunt if she could have it. "I asked my aunt, 'who is it?', and she said it was her grandmother," the owner said. "We had never talked about it before." The revelation inspired her to delve into her family history and find out what could be done to preserve it.

After bringing the portrait home to New York, the owner found an antiques dealer who could replace the cracked convex glass of the frame. Over time, however, she realized that this modification would not prevent deterioration, as the portrait was fading and a large tear in its center was getting worse. A series of referrals from conservators unable to treat crayon enlargements finally led her to the Conservation Center for Art & Historic Artifacts (CCAHA).

CCAHA Conservator Jessica Keister carefully surface cleaned the front of the photograph and mended tears and weak areas. Using toned mulberry paper and modern wove paper, she filled large losses, most significant at the top right and bottom of the photograph. She filled smaller losses along tears with cellulose powder and wheat starch paste. Finally, Jessica applied a solution of warm photographic gelatin to the cellulose powder fills, tears, and areas of abrasion. Over this isolating layer, she inpainted areas of loss and abrasion using pigments and pastels.

After 20 years, the portrait has been repaired and stabilized. "This was my journey," the client said. She added that it is one she wishes to share. For students at the university where she teaches, preservation of the portrait is proof of the importance of remaining focused when completing a challenging task. For the client's family, especially her niece and nephews, the portrait helps provide a fuller picture of their history. "It's important to understand as much as you can about who you are and where you came from—about those who blazed a path and made sacrifices for you," the client explained. "I am trying to find out as much as I can. This will help me maintain my family's legacy." The portrait is only the beginning of her mission to collect and preserve family records, books, furniture, and other heirlooms.

Now enclosed in a sealed package and refastened into its original frame, the portrait of her great-grandmother will hang in the client's home. "I can look at her and continue to feel that connection," she said.