

# PEN<sup>WORLD</sup>

*The Journal of Writing Culture*

past meets present:  
the future of

**Sheaffer Pens**

repurposing history:

**History Salvaged**

pens of substance(s):

**GW Pens**

mixing it up:

**Carolina Pen  
Company**

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With savvy partnerships and a focus on provenance, History Salvaged lets historical wood pens tell their stories.

# Witnessing History

BY NICKY PESSAROFF

Bob DeMartino has the only supply of original wood from Independence Hall in Philadelphia. From top—the sold-out Independence Hall rollerball with silver appointments, and the limited edition nouveau-style, twist-action ballpoint with antique brass and pewter appointments. Below—some of the wood's provenance.

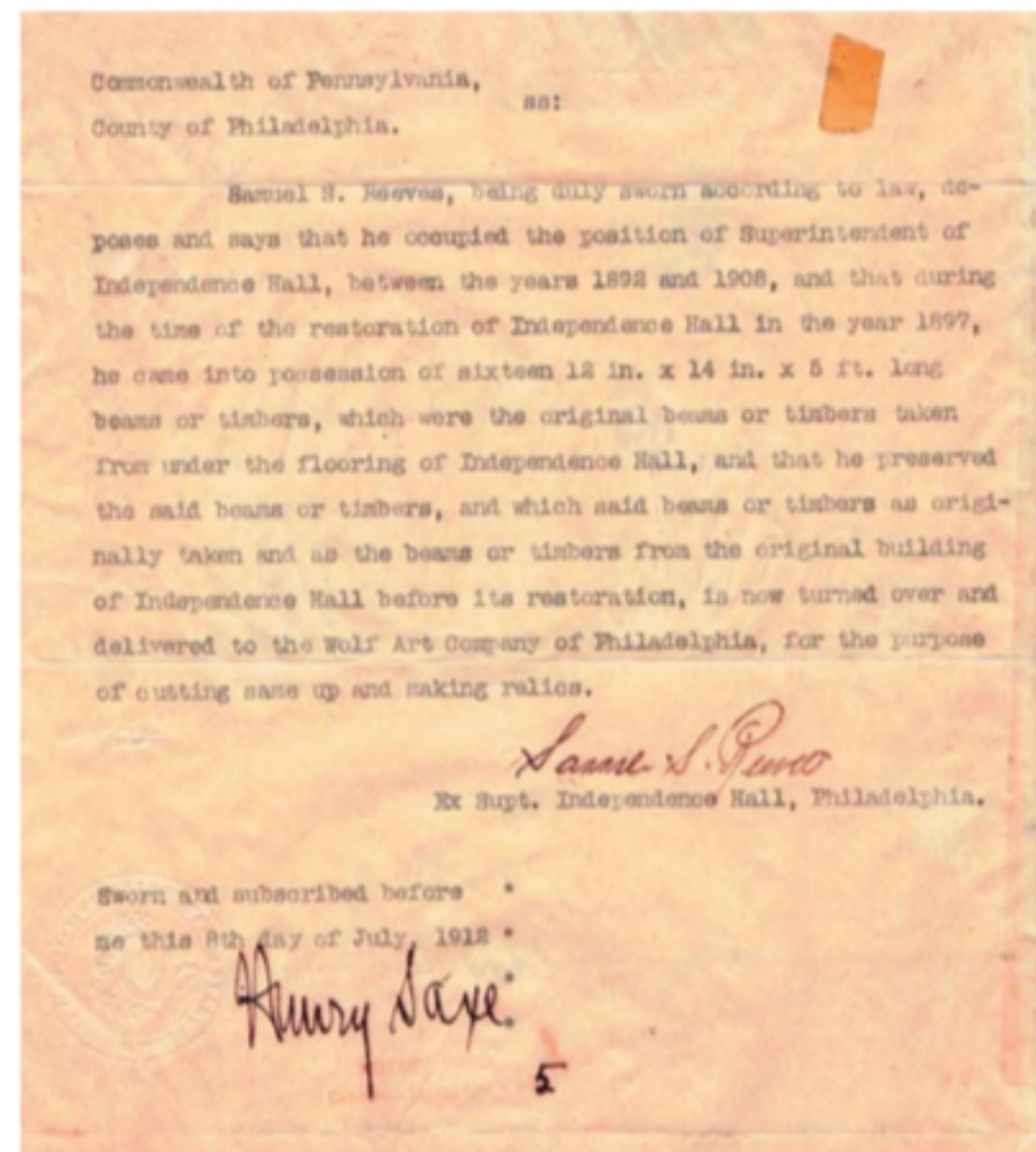


Like so many of us, my ancestors entered the oversized doors of Ellis Island's medical facility and awaited their fate. Something as simple as glaucoma might mean a return trip to tsarist Russia and the pogroms and oppression they fled.

About 100 years later, New Jersey native Bob DeMartino toured Ellis Island and saw those doors. What he did with them helped change the definition of a historical pen.

DeMartino got his start in licensing and branding with major contracts in the field of professional sports. He also was one of the early promoters of the modern-day autograph pavilion, in which dozens of athletes and celebrities gather for large autograph events. This was all fun and good—and profitable—but DeMartino was a history major in college with a restless intellect.

Which brings us to Ellis Island and the year 2007, when DeMartino enjoyed a private tour of the island's entire facilities, some of which were undergoing a major restoration. At the time, they were working on the old hospital building. DeMartino continues, "There were nine or ten guys lifting an oak door off its hinges, and they just carried it off to a dumpster. And I thought, 'What the hell are they doing?! You've got to do something with that stuff!' Long story short, we spent eight weeks talking about what to do with that door."







From left—Featuring wood recovered from the Seaside Heights boardwalk after Tropical Storm Sandy and gold and silver appointments, this fountain pen was presented to Prince Henry of Wales (far right) when he toured the New Jersey boardwalk town. Below—The Seaside Heights fountain pen presented to President Barack Obama. John Greco made both writing instruments.

DeMartino knew little about fine writing instruments, but he immediately saw the potential of the old oak wood. He hatched a plan to create high end fountain pens from the wood, with proceeds going to support Ellis Island restoration projects. This provided the foundation for the pen and accessories company History Salvaged, which specializes in creating artisan pens from historical wood.

DeMartino began by soliciting samples from 40 artisan penmakers in 35 states. His main concerns were quality and making an authentic heirloom: a pen that honored the history of the wood properly by a maker who appreciated what that wood witnessed and represented as much as DeMartino did. None of the makers met his standards.

Then he discovered artisan penmaker John Greco—they grew up just a couple towns apart (although they did not know one another), and DeMartino loved the quality of Greco's work. [For more on Greco, see p. 50.] He also made connections with a wood stabilizer and caster, Tim Kipps, and a silversmith, Mike Redburn.

DeMartino's pens were a departure from the definition of "historic pen." This was a fountain pen with a body completely constructed of wood from the door of Ellis Island. The wood wasn't fancy, but it was beautifully turned and finished, engraved with its provenance. This was repurposing history as well as honoring it. Wood that would otherwise be scrapped lived on in a new, utile form. "Historic pens" became "historical pens"—*made of history*.

Soon DeMartino was traveling to museums and historical sites around the country, scouring auctions and private collections, purchasing historically-pertinent wood otherwise meant



for landfills. He owns the only documented original construction wood ever removed from Independence Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and he has wood from over 200 historic and cultural sites. He trademarked the term "Witness Wood®" to describe his collection, a reference to the fact that this wood witnessed history.

History Salvaged has almost single-handedly changed the historical pen market, filling a niche no one knew needed filling both in terms of its own collection as well as its distribution. DeMartino explains, "The big pen companies can't do a big enough run, and the hobbyists aren't going to spend time or resources to secure these Witness Woods®." DeMartino's company is the proverbial Mama Bear: big enough to afford the prices of Witness Wood® but small enough to make each pen by hand.







The H. S. Cullen Signature Series fountain pens (from left)—Barrel wood from the USS Missouri with blue acrylic and polished stainless steel appointments, and barrel wood from the USS California and polished stainless steel appointments; both caps feature engraving of the respective ship's profile. Each pen raised \$1,000 for the Orange County School of Performing Arts.



Soarway Independence fountain pen uses wood from Independence Hall with vintage red celluloid, black ebonite, and hammered stainless steel accents. This pen raised \$2,000 for the Soarway Foundation, which supports the people of Nepal.

H. S. Cullen Signature Series fountain pens are cartridge/converter fillers offered with a number of nib sizes and styles, including custom grinds.

As the market for pens made from historical materials has grown, specifically among the artisan penmaking community, DeMartino has expanded his partnerships. With John and Jeremy Piper, of Piper Pens, DeMartino supplied wood from Independence Hall and the Sam Houston estate for a series of fountain pens. His work with Greco has been presented to global political leaders.

His newest partnership is with Artisan Penmakers' Guild president and Hooligan Pens' owner/operator, Tim Cullen. Like DeMartino, Cullen is a passionate student of history and had made his own series of pens using DeMartino's historical woods. As History Salvaged grew, DeMartino saw the potential for a partnership: the H. S. Cullen Signature series.

DeMartino provides the historical items and design suggestions but otherwise allows Cullen to work independently. Cullen, for his part, implicitly trusts that the items DeMartino supplies are authentic. He says, "Bob is the honey badger of historical pens. He has a knack for hunting down this stuff. He provides the canvas. He finds stuff no one else can. He provides me the chance to put my heart into my work."

For his part, DeMartino implicitly trusts his artisan penmakers and sees big things for them: "I have total respect for Cullen. I truly believe in the next couple years he'll start getting recognition outside the pen industry in a big way. Greco, too."

Both Cullen and Greco credit DeMartino with understanding that the story behind an item is as important as the materials used. Cullen notes a piece of wood from a home during Civil War-era Gettysburg, Pennsylvania that is

stained with blood from a leg amputation surgery.

DeMartino highlights an interaction with California's Monterey Maritime Museum, which found a piece of wood from the USS Maine, the ship whose sinking on February 15, 1898, began the Spanish-American War.

DeMartino explains, "It was a piece of wood from the railing that a surviving sailor literally held onto for dear life as the ship sank. I have a handwritten letter from that sailor explaining exactly what happened and what the wood was."





This Greco-designed rollerball and these wooden tokens are composed of boardwalk wood destroyed by Tropical Storm Sandy. Proceeds went toward rebuilding New Jersey's shore towns. Below—An especially rare piece of wood from the USS Maine.

The future of History Salvaged will go beyond wood. Cullen is a polymath when it comes to materials—his Hooligan Pens line includes writing instruments made from musk ox, Damascus steel, vintage resins, and more. Ever restless, these days Cullen is perfecting his engraving skills. He is currently working on a piece of barrel wood from Ford's Theatre that will feature fine engraving of President Lincoln's profile on a copper cap. He and DeMartino also have plans for pens created from what one might call Witness Stone and Witness Metal.

DeMartino's sales directly benefit charitable organizations—his pens and accessories made from Jersey Shore boardwalk wood ruined by Tropical Storm Sandy benefited the seaside towns. Above all, History Salvaged helps preserve both historical items and provenance that would otherwise be lost to time.

Cullen notes, "There's urgency to this project; we need to keep history alive. History Salvaged is also an activist and charitable organization. We don't know our own history anymore, and we must. There's so much that just gets discarded."

DeMartino feels as passionate: "If John Greco, Tim Cullen, Tim Kipps, Jon and Jeremy Piper, and I can continue to create heirlooms that will stand the test of time, that may inspire a child to see the value not only in our history but also in the traditions of craftsmanship and artistry that have built this country and the world. Together, in 2018 and beyond, we can find a way to inspire others to keep history alive."



When you begin thinking about it, it kind of blows your mind. Back in the 1900s, my ancestors walked through the large oak doors of the Ellis Island medical building. Perhaps my great-grandmother's fingers grazed the door as she waited in line, so unsure of her fate. A century later, somewhere out there, someone reading this has a pen made from that wood. When that pen is used, history lives on.

Visit [historysalvagedonline.com](http://historysalvagedonline.com) or [historysalvaged.com](http://historysalvaged.com).

See Tim Cullen's personal line of work at [facebook.com/hooliganpens](https://facebook.com/hooliganpens).

Visit [eaglepens.com](http://eaglepens.com) to see the Piper Pens collection.

For more on John Greco, just turn the page!

