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## Troutman Sanders Lawyer's Beetle Mania Earns Place in History of Science

Posted by Alison Frankel



Robert Heggstad is a painstaking man. As of counsel in the Washington, D.C., office of [Troutman Sanders](#), he has spent the last 19 years as the lead lawyer in a tax case called U.S. v. Stonehill, filing Freedom of Information Act requests to uncover the history of the United States' involvement in document destruction in the Philippines some 50 years ago.

That, however, is nothing compared to Heggstad's hobby since 2007: figuring out the provenance of a spectacular Victorian-era collection of butterflies, moths, beetles, shells, and botanical specimens. Heggstad acquired the collection--a portion of which is pictured above--by accident in 1979, when he bought what he thought was just a lovely old cabinet for \$600 at an antiques store in Arlington, Virginia.

Heggstad's hard work produced good results for his Stonehill clients, whose 45-year-old tax case was reopened by the Ninth Circuit in 2002. But for his collection of 150-year-old specimens, Heggstad has earned a place in the history of science. Through handwriting analysis and careful documentation, he has demonstrated that the 1,700-item collection was assembled by a British scientist named [Alfred Russel Wallace](#)--the co-discoverer of Darwin's theory of natural selection.

As The Washington Post first reported in [a front-page story on Sunday](#), Heggstad didn't know anything about Wallace when he bought the cabinet as a young lawyer. The antiques dealer, Heggstad told The Am Law Daily, told him the wondrous collection within the cabinet had belonged to an important naturalist, but Heggstad regarded it more as a show-and-tell curiosity.

"I did some independent research," Heggstad says. "Then I kind of lost interest." The dealer he bought the cabinet from told him that it had been purchased in the 1960s by a Philadelphia antiques dealer at a sale of unclaimed baggage. The Philadelphia dealer believed it had once belonged to Wallace. Heggstad learned that Wallace, who traveled widely in search of exotic specimens to sell to Victorian collectors, had devised a theory of natural selection independent from Darwin. He wrote to the [British Museum](#) and to the [Smithsonian](#) about his collection, but when neither museum could confirm his collection's provenance, "I went back to my real job," he says. "For 20 years I did nothing with it."

Then a friend to whom he'd shown the cabinet--which sits in his dining room--said the collection belonged in a museum. "She said, 'It would really be a shame if anything happens to it,'" Heggstad says. "I decided she was right--I really needed to authenticate this."

Heggstad went about the authentication process in lawyerly fashion. Handwritten labels accompanied many of the specimens, so Heggstad began by analyzing the writing. He sent photographs of the labels to the British Museum, which owned the only known Wallace collection. He also assembled letter-by-letter binders of examples of the handwriting on the labels in his collection, and compared them to known examples of Wallace's script. "I'm looking on the Internet at letters from the 1870s, and I saw curls [in Wallace's letters] match up," he says.

At the suggestion of a curator from the Smithsonian Museum, Heggstad brought in a handwriting expert named Beverly East. East spent several weeks comparing the writing in the British Museum's collection with the script in Heggstad's. She concluded there was no doubt that the handwriting matched.

Heggstad became engrossed in Wallace's writings. And after finding a description of an exotic tea cup-shaped pod that he recognized from his collection, he began documenting references in Wallace's work to specimens in the cabinet in his dining room. He eventually prepared a 62-page report, supplemented with two thick binders of exhibits, to support the theory that his collection once belonged to Wallace.

Heggstad has not been able to document how the collection ended up in the United States (although Wallace did conduct a lecture tour in the U.S. in the 1880s). He's also not sure of the relationship between his collection and the smaller, less diverse Wallace collection in the British Museum. (That collection was donated by Wallace's family.) His theory is that Wallace, who sold specimens for a living, had more than one private collection.

Heggstad's collection is now for sale, with both the Smithsonian and the American Museum of Natural History considering purchase. The lawyer declines to specify his price, but he says the collection is "very, very valuable." But more important, Heggstad says, is its value to science. "This collection ties in to Wallace's theory of evolution," he says. "I want it to stay in the U.S., to be available for research--and for history."

*Photos by Robert Heggstad; grid by Martin Refsal*

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