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In 1990, the American Museum of Natural History began intensive preparations for an exhibit entitled "Chiefly Feasts: The Enduring Kwakiutl Potlatch". The exhibit was created to present the potlatch as not only an historic event but also as a vital and continuing tradition. The exhibit featured Kwakiutl masks, figures, and accoutrements used in the late 1800's and early 1900's presented alongside contemporary potlatch pieces to elaborate this enduring tradition. At the beginning of this century a significant part of the American Museum’s Northwest Coast collection was assembled with the help of a Native American. For this exhibit the museum solicited the active involvement of Indian scholars, chiefs, carvers and others, renewing a type of collaboration which, unfortunately, had been absent for most of the intervening period. This paper explores the impact this involvement had on the conservation treatments of artifacts in the exhibit.

The Kwakiutl\(^1\) live on the North and East sides of Vancouver Island, a densely wooded, rocky land where products of the sea and forest are bountiful. The Kwakiutl are renowned for their elaborately carved and painted wooden masks as well as for a ceremony called the potlatch, a celebration during which a noble family invites guests to witness a display of the host’s status.

The potlatch serves as the focal point of native society along the Northwest Coast. A potlatch may be celebrated on occasions such as childbirth, marriage, memorializing the dead, conferring of a ceremonial name, or inheriting a dance privilege. Potlatching specifically refers to the distribution of gifts to pay an audience for serving as witnesses. The acceptance of the payments signifies the guests’ validation of the host’s claims of status. Such occasions are social, but their fundamental purpose has always been to express relative ranking and group relationships. By proclaiming prerogatives, potlatches make the rights of high ranking individuals clear and play a key role in the organization of society. Among all the events at the potlatch, the most spectacular are the host’s extravagant distribution of gifts to his guests; his deliberate destruction of valuable property, thereby displaying his great wealth; an enormous abundance of sumptuous feasting; and elaborate ceremonial dramas portrayed by masked dancers.

The American Museum houses approximately 17,000 Northwest Coast artifacts which were acquired in three major stages between the years of 1880 and 1905. The third group of approximately 8,000 artifacts, including objects for the "Chiefly Feasts" exhibit, were collected by anthropologist Franz Boas and his assistant and native collaborator George Hunt.

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When Boas joined the American Museum in 1895, he decided that although the Museum’s collection was well represented in the northern Northwest Coast tribes, the artifacts from the southern tribes were not sufficient. Boas believed that the Kwakiutl would soon vanish because of increasing European contact and because of the Canadian government’s ban of the potlatch in 1884. He felt that anthropologists had a responsibility to preserve whatever could be recorded in books and held in museums. Boas persuaded Morris Jessup, President of the American Museum, to fund a major expedition to the Northwest Coast: the Jessup North Pacific Expedition of 1897-1903.

Boas travelled to the Northwest Coast on many occasions but left much of the collecting to George Hunt, who played an integral role in the growth of the American Museum’s collection of artifacts and documentation of Kwakiutl life. Hunt was raised among the Kwakiutl, though he was not of Kwakiutl birth. He was the son of a Hudson’s Bay Company official and a Tlingit noblewoman who came to Fort Rupert to work in a Hudson Bay Trading Post. Not of Kwakiutl birth, Hunt did not inherit any crests or clan titles, but he was invited into the Kwakiutl feasts. The privilege of attending the potlatch feasts and living among the Kwakiutl afforded him the opportunity to know "all there (sic) old ways" (Jonaitis 1991, p. 181), as Hunt conveyed to Boas. George Hunt’s "insider" status and his intimate knowledge of the language and region made him a valuable collector of specimens, of text, and of documentation.

Boas, like most anthropologists of his time, had a paradigmatic viewpoint. He was concerned with salvaging the oldest and most authentic elements of the culture and reconstructing what he believed had existed in the past. This approach lead to publications and museum displays which described Native peoples in a timeless and ahistoric era, completely separate from the changes and "progress" western cultures were undergoing. The anthropologists believed native cultures were bound to be corrupted from their pure, primitive state by white cultures. Aldona Jonaitis, guest curator of the exhibit "Chiefly Feasts", warned of the dangers of this approach:

> Today we realize that museum displays representing Native peoples must be particularly sensitive to the pitfalls of the ahistoric approach;...the process of preserving the "authentic" primitive serves actually to position modern culture above that of the represented society. This is not...an intentional act, but the logical consequence of the structure inherent in such representations. (Jonaitis 1991, p. 31)

Today, Native peoples often object to the imposition of alien notions of tradition and authenticity upon their cultures (Jonaitis 1991, p. 37). In response to this changing standard in anthropology, the western scholar is now seen as just one of many voices in determining what is said about Native American’s history and culture in museums. For "Chiefly Feasts", Jonaitis made the decision to work with the Kwakiutl not only as consultants but also as co-creators of the exhibit. Many Kwakiutl individuals were consulted and worked closely with Museum staff to produce the design of the exhibit, to choose the artifacts, to supply personal family and
documentary information and to write the scholarly material in the accompanying catalogue. Collectively, they hoped that the exhibit would enable a reassessment of the uninformed assumption that prior to white contact Indians were pure, and afterwards they were "less Indian".

The Native American consultants also took part in making conservation decisions. It was clear to all that many of the artifacts desired for inclusion in "Chiefly Feasts" were in dire need of conservation treatment. They were covered with an accumulation of sooty dust and debris gained in storage; many had unstable elements or moving parts; others had abraded or friable paint layers; and a few had major losses which greatly altered their appearance. However, it became immediately apparent that the Kwakiutl consultants had very different views than we did regarding the desired result of our conservation treatments. The conflict centered primarily on the issue of loss compensation. The Kwakiutl wanted far more restoration than we were initially comfortable with providing. Their desire for extensive restoration was governed by how they and their ancestors would have repaired such pieces in use. This conflict with the Kwakiutl regarding the goals or the extent of some of the treatments made us conscious of and lead us to question our principles as conservators in a way that had not been elicited by other projects.

The collaborative process and the ensuing discussions made it apparent that many of the decisions we make as conservators, such as the extent and type of compensation, are deeply embedded in our own cultural context. Prior to this project, treatments, albeit often inventive, tended to be made to satisfy curators’ or conservators’ personal aesthetic, or were derived from a set of accepted "traditional" western conservation solutions.

It may be obvious and simplistic to say that western conservators at the end of the twentieth century are the product of their own cultural conditioning; but it is far more difficult to try to define influences and to actually characterize how decisions about compensation arise. What does seem clear, however, is that present day conservation is very much a part of our artistic legacy and our own culture’s view of the meaning of the arts of other cultures.

In the contemporary western world there is not a unified state art; there is a multiplicity of acceptable styles, topics, points of view and technologies. This variety of acceptable means of expression leads to one of the basic rationales of conservation—every piece and every situation is different and there are supposedly no set recipes for treatment. Conservators are able to live with and actually thrive on the complexity of doing one treatment for one situation and a completely different treatment on the same piece for a different application. Moreover, treatments are to be reversible so that when perspectives change in the future the treatment can be easily undone. This mindset was very puzzling to the Kwakiutl consultants, whose own culture has much more prescriptive ways of creating and of dealing with damaged artifacts.
The romance, appreciation and acceptance of the fragment is another feature of our cultural inheritance that plays a role in our approach to conservation treatment. Late nineteenth- and twentieth-century art has seen the evolution of the idea of the fragment in all of the arts from architecture, painting, and the plastic arts to music and movement, resulting in the dismantling of the representational and the supremacy of the concept. During this period of redefinition, tribal arts were discovered by European painters and the first great archaeological excavations were also taking place. It is no great wonder that by the end of the twentieth century, any person who would choose to be a conservator of archaeological or ethnographic materials would be very comfortable with objects that were fragmentary. To us there are positive emotional undertones of age, use and antiquity if an object shows weathering and loss. Because of this prejudice spawned by modern art and archaeology, we have a much greater tolerance for and appreciation of aged artifacts than might the peoples that made them.

Another feature of our cultural inheritance that, at the outset of this project, influenced our views of what would be appropriate conservation treatments had to do with the prevailing attitude, at least among museum personnel, that museums are a way to preserve the past for the future. The pieces, by virtue of being in a museum collection, are in a certain sense stopped in time and are holding the Kwakiutl’s history for them. This attitude in clearly expressed by Boas, who wrote in 1907:

> Museums are the storehouses...where scientific materials from distant countries, vanishing species, paleontological remains, and the objects used by vanishing tribes are kept and preserved for all future time, and may thus be made the basis for studies which, without them, would be impossible. (Cantwell and Rothschild 1981, p. 579)

The Kwakiutl, however, are not a vanished people; they have "continually redefine(d) themselves as they experience changes" (Jonaitis 1991, p. 67). They do not think of themselves as "less Indian" than their ancestors; therefore, they do not feel the same kind of pressure as we do to preserve who they were in the past. Their culture is vital and has continued to evolve.

To the Kwakiutl, the artifacts owned by the Museum are representative of their material culture at the turn of the century. They regard the pieces simply as "objects" rather than as sacred materials. The Museum does not have control of the power or status that the objects conferred to the owners and wearers in context. As museum conservators, we felt a sense of respect for the historical integrity of the artifacts, desiring to preserve the 1900’s-state of the pieces. The Kwakiutl, on the other hand, wanted us to bring these objects to a condition more resembling the contemporary pieces with which they were familiar.

From our initial contact with Tony Hunt, a Kwakiutl chief and artist, and running as a refrain through many of the meetings with native and non-native advisors, we found ourselves to be the...
embodiment of conservatism. Our desire to protect the objects from possible reinterpretation or over-compensation was often thrown into a negative light. We were used to defending the idea of doing less treatment to curators. We were quite unprepared to have to make this type of argument to the Kwakiutl, based on our previous contact with and knowledge of other Native American groups. The Kwakiutl initially suggested that we repaint masks, remake lost parts and refurbish degrading accoutrements. Tony Hunt was quoted as saying, "We know how they (the masks) should look. I'm a hereditary chief and great grandson of George Hunt and I feel a close attachment to the pieces" (Ostrowitz, p. 56). Hunt pointed out that carvings like these would have been the property of high ranking officials in the past and that they would never have been shown to an audience lacking important elements or in a state of disrepair. To ensure the aesthetic quality of the masks, the Kwakiutl would have and still do seasonally rework, repaint and refurbish their objects.

As time went on our attitude shifted from a stance of rigidity to one of compromise. We were challenged to balance the Kwakiutl's requirements for exhibiting their objects with our own sense of what was right for the history of the collection. Below, are a number of examples of treatments illustrating the results of our collaboration.

The first example is a crab puppet collected at Blunden Harbour by George Hunt in 1902 (fig. 1). This type of artifact was used by a tuxw'id dancer, usually female, in a drama performed to shock and awe the audience. The tuxw'id dancer often used gory special effects, such as concealed bladders full of blood that would be burst. This puppet would be held between the legs or near the feet of the dancer and would be invisible under a long cloak of cedar bark. The dancer would crouch down and feign labor pains, finally producing the crab who would scamper out from under the crouched figure's garment.

Figure 1. Crab puppet. AMNH 16/8936. After treatment.
When the crab was first examined, the legs of the crab were no longer attached to the body and three legs had been lost. This treatment involved restoration and repair of the legs and presented no particular problems for the conservation staff. Crab leg replication and hinge stabilization was carried out in a manner that is consistent with general western conservation practice. In order to complete the form, the crab legs were carved from pine (the original is in cedar), and painted with Rowney Cryla Flow acrylic paints. The date "1990" was written on the leg ends facing the body. New skin hinges were fabricated from commercially tanned calf skin, aged and darkened with potassium permanganate and toned with Acryloid B-72 and dry pigments. Steel tacks for hinge attachment were coated with Acryloid B-72 and Fluorescein and inserted into existing holes. Under UV light, the replacement legs, hinges, and nails are clearly distinguishable from the originals by their fluorescence.

The next piece was collected in 1900 and identified by George Hunt as a t'sat'salkwatal mask (fig. 2). Hunt did not provide any detailed information other than its name. According to Gloria Webster, former director of U'Mista Cultural Center in Alert Bay, British Columbia, t'salkwa' means hot and the designs on the band surrounding the face are the rays of the sun (Jonaitis 1991, p. 185). When the dancer performed with this mask, the firelight would be dramatically reflected from its copper eyes and mouth.

When the mask entered the lab it had many empty holes both on the face of the band and regularly spaced along its perimeter. Remnants of a stick-like material were found in a couple of the holes at the edge. Cross-sections of the material were examined under magnification and found to resemble split strips of whale baleen. We were not able to find any clues for the function of the pairs of holes on the face of the band. It is clear from a rendering of the mask published in 1909 in the Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History (Plate L, figure 6), that at the time of drawing the mask did not have anything protruding from the holes on the face of the band, but did have a springy hair-like material surrounding the edge.

Figure 2. T'sat'salkwatal mask. AMNH 16/8227. After treatment.
The Kwakiutl were eager to have the baleen replaced. It was not bothersome to us that the baleen was missing. In fact, we had originally suggested reproducing the rendering with an explanation to accompany the mask in the exhibit. Were we to replace the baleen with any material, and we did consider substitutes such as wire and vegetal fibers, we were reluctant to use the original holes with the original type of material because of possibly misleading future viewers. A compromise treatment was devised that consisted, first, of removing the peg ends of baleen from the holes, and documenting their locations in order to save them from loss. Second, a mount was fabricated from Pliacré epoxy putty⁶ that fit up against the reverse side of the band and was fastened to it by brass fittings. The mount had holes in it that lined up next to the existing holes, into which bundles of split baleen were set. The baleen was obtained from a Right Whale in the American Museum of Natural History’s Mammology Department. It was processed by soaking in ammonia to break down the disulphide bonds, thereby allowing the sheets to be peeled into thin strips. We were comfortable with this simple method of replacing lost material by affixing it to a non-intrusive and removable mount.

A related solution was devised for this wolf mask in order to replace its lost hair (fig. 3). The bottom of hair tufts remained in the pegged holes on the top of the head; the rest having been decimated by insects. Pliacré was molded over the pegged area, on top of a polyethylene film separator. The pegs were drilled out a bit after curing to insure that the Pliacré would not further damage the tiny amount of remaining hair. Hair bundles of synthetic hair were made by adhering strands together with a polyvinyl acetate resin and then adhering the bundles in the Pliacré holes with the same adhesive. We were pleased with the idea of the Pliacré toupee, especially with the degree of protection it gave the extant real hair, but were less than satisfied with the look of the particular synthetic hair chosen.

The next artifact is a mask which was collected by George Hunt in 1904 (fig. 4). Our Kwakiutl advisors recognized this type of mask as one that is still worn in an important tseka privilege. Tseka is what some anthropologists refer to as the winter ceremonials, an initiation performance during which dancers dramatize the interaction of an initiate with mythic beings whose contact in legendary time with his ancestors gave the family the dance privilege. Hunt acquired the rest of the costume with the mask, but it was far too damaged to be included in the exhibit.

The wasp mask was missing most of its stingers when it entered the lab for treatment; only two out of the original seventeen remained. The mask also had meager dessicated remains of fur.
pieces at the top of its head and the chin. Grazing patterns over the surface of the skin confirmed loss of hair by insect infestation. Our consultants requested restoration of both stingers and fur based on their familiarity with contemporary versions of this type of mask. However, until a picture surfaced from the archives, we were reluctant to make such drastic alterations. A photo (AMNH 13797), taken by George Hunt in 1904, showed the costume being worn before it entered the collection. It gives a reasonably clear disposition of the sticks, thus we felt more comfortable with replacing them.

Fifteen new sticks were fabricated by whittling down chop sticks which were later bent to attain gentle curves after soaking them in water. The sticks were painted with Acryloid B-72, dry pigments and Fluorescein. The replaced sticks glow a bright yellow-green under UV radiation. The two original sticks were retained with the mask, and other stub ends remaining in a few of the holes were removed and retained with our records. Each stick was numbered and the location noted. As the exhibit travels the sticks are removed to prevent damage and replaced at each venue.

Fur replacement for this mask was, again, not a necessary element of treatment to us; however, it was strongly desired by both curators and consultants. Hair samples were examined from the skin on the top of the head by Skip Palenik of McCrone Associates and identified as being possibly from a brown bear. The white hairs from above the brow and under the chin were not able to be identified. Because of ready availability to the curators, pieces of Chinese wild dog were obtained from a commercial furrier to replace the brown bear fur; Chinese wild goat replaced the white fur under the chin and on the brow. Fur replacement was done by laying the fur pieces over the existing skin, which had been humidified, reshaped and cleaned. They were then attached by tying with toned dental floss to protruding nail heads remaining from the original fur attachment to the mask. To us, the fur looked unsatisfactory. Its application was appealing from a conservation stand-point because it can be easily removed, and will be, once the piece stops travelling.

Figure 4. Wasp mask. AMNH 16/9587. After treatment.
If restoration was the aim we would have thought it important to use the same type of fur or at least furs whose qualities resembled the originals. However, again the Kwakiutl were satisfied.

The next piece is a madam dancer mask which was collected in Hopetown by George Hunt in 1901 (fig. 5). The madam is said to be a mythological bird who lives high in the mountains and appears on a mask as a heavily furred animal with big eyes, a long snout, a square jaw with an adjustable mouth, and long quartz crystals that are said to squeak as madam moves. The recipient of one of these quartz crystals is said to be endowed with the ability to fly.

The mask was missing the fur from the skin strip that lay over its forehead and jaws. An artist's representation of the mask published in 1909 in the *Memoirs of the American Museum of Natural History* (Plate L, figure 5), revealed that the fur was gone by the time of collection; however, the consultants and curator strongly believed that the mask should be presented looking its best, as it would have been for a potlatch.

Remaining individual hairs, banded yellow-white and black and 2 1/2" in length, were also identified by Palenik as a type of bear fur. The protruding rays behind the mask had been painted white, but the paint did not begin until 2 inches up from the forehead, further aiding in the fur's identification and indicating that at the time of painting, at least, a long haired fur had been in place. A replacement pelt whose visual characteristics matched the description of the original hairs was procured by the curators from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department. This fur, however, was from a wolf rather than a bear. Paper templates to aid in cutting the new fur were made off the existing skin. Fur toupee sections were cut with small incisions made through them for existing projecting nails, which were used to hold the replacement fur in place. We were more satisfied with this fur replacement than with that of the wolf or wasp masks because there was some attempt to match the visual characteristics, if not correct animal, of the original fur. After several experiences with this type of compensation, we finally understood that what was important to the Kwakiutl was that the masks have hair or fur.

Figure 5. Madam dancer mask. AMNH16/8531. After treatment.
That it be of the original type or have the same qualities as the original was simply not important to them.

The treatment of the mask called Born-to-be-Head-of-the-World was the most troubling for us of all of the pieces in the exhibit. The mask, collected by Hunt in 1901, was used on the cover of the catalog and is a centerpiece of the exhibit (fig. 6).

Figure 6. Born-to-be-Head-of-the-World mask. AMNH 16/8410. After treatment.

This transformation mask represents the hero Siwidi, a major subject of Kwakiutl legend and comprising a significant body of dancing paraphernalia and other carvings. Hunt collected three versions of the Siwidi legend. In summary, the story is about an ancestor who undergoes a metamorphosis of nature and appearance. Siwidi is shamed by his father for his lack of initiative in matters of spiritual endeavor. He is almost drowned and then dragged by an octopus to the fantastic house of K’umugwe’, the chief of the undersea kingdom. Accompanied by the undersea king’s attendants, killer whales, Siwidi is launched into a series of adventures as he visits other tribes. Afterwards K’umugwe’ bestows the name Born-to-be-Head-of-the-World upon Siwidi, gives him his house and many supernatural powers. Present day Chief Tom Willie of Hopetown claims the exclusive right to contemporary performances of the dance of the undersea kingdom, a considerable indication of high status.

This transformation mask has been on permanent display in the Northwest Coast Hall probably since its opening in 1909. It was in excellent condition in all respects except for the dangling red and yellow cedarbark hair, which was very actively breaking and shedding. Cedarbark has an inherent vice as an art material. Calcium oxalate crystals and resin inclusions contribute to a fiber tissue structure that tends to separate and fracture causing continual breaking of the
vegetal strands every time they are moved. After dozens of hours of treatment to the bark, by
delicate looping together of broken strands with embroidery floss, we still felt so strongly about
its poor condition that we tried to have the piece removed from the travelling show. Because
it was on the cover of the catalogue our efforts were completely rejected. The Kwakiutl had
encouraged refurbishing of all cedarbark fixings on pieces in the exhibit. We avoided this by
not travelling the most unstable of these pieces. We were required to replace the dangling
cedarbark on this one mask. After careful documentation and with great reluctance, the original
dangling cedarbark hair was removed from the mask. It was preserved in storage for study, as
it would have been impossible to reattach it to the mask in the original manner. Replacement
cedarbark for the red and yellow hair was obtained from one of the Kwakiutl consultants. This
bark, all red cedarbark, was supplied in two different colors: as dyed bright-red strands, which
is the current Kwakiutl preparation for red cedarbark, and as natural, unaged red cedarbark,
which closely resembles the aged yellow cedarbark on the mask. In addition, it was supplied
in wide, flat strips and was shorter than required to duplicate the original method of application.
For the red strands of the hair, we needed to achieve a close match to the aged red cedarbark,
as a thick, twisted strand of it remained affixed to the perimeter of the face. The red dyed bark
was, therefore, bleached with hydrogen peroxide and then redyed with a PROcion dye. The
flat strips were then pulled apart and distressed. Because of its short length, the replacement
cedarbark had to be applied in two sections: the loops at the top and the dangling fibers. This
was not a very satisfying treatment in terms of duplicating the original, but it was a successful
simulation that allowed the piece to travel safely.

As an aside, in addition to the actual treatments, the manner of presentation of the artifacts
represented another area of challenge and collaboration during the project. The advisors wanted
the masks positioned in display as they would have been worn on the head and at the correct
dance angles. Mounting systems had to be devised to reflect proper orientation as well as to
accommodate the correct movements that the dancer would have made in imitation of the natural
movements of the creatures being danced. Needless to say, these were occasionally not what
we would have called the most sound positions from the conservation viewpoint. The decisions
we made regarding display in our work with the Kwakiutl proved to be another interesting arena
of compromise.

The field of anthropology, and museums in general, are in a process of re-evaluation and
evolution concerning the representation of minority groups. It is by no means clear how
conservators are to respond to this changing landscape. As is probably clear from the foregoing
discussion, "Chiefly Feasts" represented a considerable departure from our usual manner of
working. The majority of cultures whose works we treat are no longer extant or are so far
removed from our context that they are not interested in what we do.

In this case, the Kwakiutl are very much alive and quite concerned with their appropriate
representation. While we welcomed the potential opportunity to learn more about the pieces and
the people who made them, we felt challenged throughout the project by our mutually different cultural biases and their effect on our work. As conservators we felt a responsibility to protect the collection from permanent changes informed by current Kwakiutl practices. While we were able to relinquish many of our preconceptions, some proved intractable. Our orientation as museum conservators stresses preservation of both the physical and artistic integrity of the objects and tends to view the time of collection as paramount. Just as our approach to compensation has changed through the years, we felt that the present Kwakiutl practise of refurbishing and repainting might also change. Given our mutual culturally based standards, however, we managed to work together in an environment of compromise to devise treatments involving compensation that reflected both Kwakiutl and western conservation’s current attitudes.

Bibliography


Endnotes

1. The name Kwakiutl (pronounced Kwagiulth) comes from the translation of the sounds these Northwest Coast peoples used when pronouncing their name. The name Kwakiutl is commonly used today, although they would prefer to be called the _Kwakwaka’wakw_, a name that means the speakers of _Kwak’wala_.

20
2. Consultants included Emma Hunt, Agnes Cranmer, Irene Hunt Haynes, Tony Hunt, Elsie Williams, Adam Dick, Tom Willie, Ethel Alfred, Gloria Cranmer Webster, Helen Knox, Alice Smith, William Hunt, and Margaret Cook. Non-native collaborators included Peter McNair, Bill Holm and Richard Inglis, all specialists in Northwest Coast art and culture.


4. Acryloid B-72 acrylic co-polymer is manufactured by Röhm and Haas Company, Independence Mall West, Philadelphia, PA 19105, and is available from Conservation Materials Ltd., 1395 Greg Street, #110, Sparks, NV 89431, (702) 331-0582.

5. Fluorescein, a fluorescent labelling reagent, is available from Sigma Chemicals, P.O. Box 14508, St. Louis, MO 63718, (800) 325-3101.


7. PROcion fiber reactive dyes are manufactured by and available from PRO Chemical and Dye Inc., P.O. Box 14, Somerset, MA 027216, (508) 676-3838.