

# Conservator surveying V.I. government antiques

By PATRICK JOY

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ST. CROIX — Stacked against the side of a stuffy warehouse room at the Department of Planning and Natural Resources — wrapped in paper and plastic under the watchful eyes of a half dozen stuffed animals — a treasure trove of antiques sat waiting Monday for conservator Craig Deller.

The mainland expert is beginning a survey of some of the Virgin Islands government antique holdings this week in hopes he might help to preserve the rare and valuable cultural works. He will travel to St. Thomas today to examine more antiques.

Deller, who operates an Illinois-based conservation group, got his first look at some of the long-lost treasures Monday and said he was impressed with the collection. The first piece freed of its plastic wrap was a mahogany bed frame, which Deller and his Virgin Islands representative, Jane Brown, said could fetch \$25,000-\$30,000 at auction.

Conservation differs from restoration, in which pieces are sometimes sanded, altered or refinished. Conservation focuses on halting deterioration of the piece and stabilizing it structurally but does not alter the piece. Any conservation additions to the piece to help improve its stability or aesthetics can be removed easily to reveal the original piece.

"Someone might look at a piece like this and ask me to French polish



Daily News Photo by CRISTIAN SIMESCU

Craig Deller, an antique furniture conservator from Geneva, Ill., talks to Fort Frederik Museum administrative specialist Yulette George about the posts of a mahogany four-post bed inside a storage room at the Department of Planning and Natural Resources on St. Croix on Monday afternoon. Deller is in the Virgin Islands to study several pieces of government-owned antique furniture that he plans to restore.

it," Deller said as he revealed a late 19th century chair that showed signs of weathering and frequent use. "I wouldn't do that. It's not consistent with the history of the piece."

Deller has extensive experience in the field. He has studied at the Smithsonian Institute and served on the

board of directors of the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. He said Caribbean mahogany furniture is some of the best and most sought after on the antiques market.

"It's rare and more unique in style," he said. "The mahogany here

is the true mahogany. It's very dense and is like butter to carve."

Yulette George, administrative specialist at the Fort Frederik museum, said the St. Croix collection Deller examined Monday contained about 10 pieces. She did not reveal the specific pieces for security reasons.

Monday was Deller's second visit to St. Croix in recent months. He conducted a conservation workshop at the Whim Museum in January and said his long-term goal is to establish a nonprofit conservation lab on St. Croix to serve the entire Caribbean. Conservation requires complex chemical and light diagnostics and treatment procedures for which a lab is crucial. Deller said he mixes his own cleaning solutions, including one that mimics human saliva, and the subtle adjustment of pH levels and other chemical combinations must be tailored to each piece of furniture.

"We might use one set of enzymes that eat away at oils or we might change the pH. We make very precise adjustments," he said.

Deller said he will examine each piece closely in the V.I. government collection and then craft a plan for their preservation. His examinations include tests to determine the types of varnish used on the surface and stylistic observations to determine the approximate date of the piece. When all the pieces and their conditions have been catalogued, Deller will submit his plan to the government, which will decide which pieces, if any, it wants to conserve.

Deller plans to return to the territory in May to continue his work.

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