



### **The Fan**

A hand-held folding fan in the Fenton History Center's collection is part of the collection of fans that belonged to Jeanette Fenton Gilbert, the Governor's daughter. It dates from circa 1850 – 1870. It has carved ivory sticks, and guards, with gold painted trimming and a silk leaf made from peach silk chiffon and wine colored plain weave silk. It is decorated with hand painted roses, leaves, buds and small white flowers with attached brass paillettes, small pieces of metal or foil used to add shimmer and shine to any fashion design.

We seldom use hand-held fans today, but they were very important prior to the widespread availability of electricity. The first use of a fan was when the first hot person picked up a palm leaf and used it to move the air to cool them. There is evidence from carvings and paintings that fans were in general use by the eleventh century B.C.

Hand-held fans were prominent accessories of the upper classes by the sixteenth century, A.D. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century they were a fashionable, as well as, a useful accessory. Elizabeth I of England had many fans. She had fans to match her clothing and always the appropriate fan for every occasion. As the middle of the nineteenth century approached (the period of this fan), fans were very elaborate, made from textiles, embroideries, laces or feathers. Many used a variety of techniques, including painting. Fan painting was a lady-like hobby for the Victorian woman. We do not know if the Governor's daughter painted this fan, but it's possible.

In the past, hand fans were used not only as cooling instruments, but also as convenient communication devices, mainly for furtive love messages. A language of the fan, which is today completely forgotten, was widely used. If a woman was fanning herself with her left hand, it meant, "Don't flirt with that woman" or if a woman was running her fingers through the fan's ribs it meant, "I want to talk to you" and a woman slowly fanning herself was saying, "Don't waste your time, I don't care about you."

The production of fans diminished as the roles of women changed, particularly after World War I. Still, during the 1920's, feather fans were popular, as well as fans with advertising for many businesses on flat fans. There are a number of advertising fans in the Fenton collection dating from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.