

A Traveling Man's Dressing Case

by Carrie Crane

On October 31, 1842 John Bartholomew Gough, who would become a world renowned Temperance orator, first took the pledge of abstinence from alcohol. Gough had struggled with alcoholism in his early adult life which led to many hardships including poverty, and his shameless drunken behavior at the death of his first wife and infant child. He hit bottom on many occasions. On one such occasion he was met by a caring soul who encouraged him to attend a temperance meeting and take the "pledge". Wanting his dignity back, Gough rose to the challenge, signed the pledge of sobriety and not without setbacks started a new life dedicated to inspiring sobriety in others.^{1,2}

The Temperance movement had been gaining steam in England and the United States since the early 1800. Gough took to the growing movement with all his energy. He was a natural and passionate speaker and audiences were captivated by his story. As time went by, he was asked to speak, first locally in Central Massachusetts, then he was invited to speak in Boston. Eventually the word spread about his energetic and engaging speaking style and the invitations came from further away, throughout New England and the Midwest, Canada, England and Europe. Gough traveled extensively from 1843 through February 15, 1886 when he was stricken, while on stage, by apoplexy (cerebral hemorrhage) and soon died.

Travel in the mid-19th century was not as easy as it is now but it was considerably more accessible than early in the century, particularly if you were affluent. Train lines were extending their web in all directions from the major cities across the nation. This was a significant improvement over stage coach travel of earlier years which was slow, uncomfortable and often dangerous. At the same time, significant advancements in the design of passenger steamships allowed for travel across the Atlantic and although the trip was still long and weather could make the trip uncomfortable for some, the accommodations were luxurious compared with the past. These improvements to travel made it possible for Gough to accept speaking invitations from far and wide.



Wooden Dressing Case
Exterior view with JBG monogram

¹ Martyn, William Carlos. John B. Gough: The Apostle of Cold Water. pg 81

² Gough, John Bartholomew. *The autobiography of John B. Gough. With a continuation.* United Kingdom, n.p, 1858. p. 52

With this increase in travel came an increase in demand for luggage of all kinds. For affluent men and women in particular, their luggage might include what was known as a Dressing Case, or Vanity Case, a mid-size box, of wood or leather, that contained all the tools and jars of ointments needed for the personal care of the upper-class body, face and hair. On display at the Boylston Historical Museum is the handsome Dressing Case that belonged to John B Gough which may have accompanied him on some of his many travels.



Travel Case
Interior view with accessories

The manufacturer of this Dressing Case is not known but many cases from this period were manufactured in England and France and Gough may have acquired his during one of his trips to England or Europe. The dark wooden box (11 5/8" w, 5 3/8" h, 9" d) is decorated with brass inlay trim and has a brass monogram inlay in the center of the top. It is engraved with "JBG Jan. 1st 1867". The interior is lined with a rich green silk moire. There are spaces for four glass jars with silver engraved tops that may have contained aftershave, cologne and creams. Only two of the original four remain. Additionally, there is what would have been considered the essential assortment of ivory and silver grooming tools, including: nail file, scissors, button hook, nail and cuticle cleaner, cut throat razors as well as two wooden hair brushes. As seen in his most common photograph, Gough was a handsome and well-groomed man with a full head of hair and beard. It is easy to imagine that he would have made good use of these grooming tools.



John B. Gough

Over the course of John B Gough's impressive life as a Temperance orator, he traveled 450,000 miles and gave 8,606 addresses to approximately 9 million audience members.³ Quite astonishing for the time. With that amount of travel, it is remarkable his dressing case survived to this day. at all.

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Photography of Travel Case, Carrie Crane

³ Martyn, William Carlos. John B. Gough: The Apostle of Cold Water. pg 315