

Inspecting a microscope

February 1, 2016

This year got off to a great start for our collections when we took a call about a microscope that might be a Manhattan Project-era artifact but was on its way to Lab salvage.

The person who prepares items for salvage raised a flag that she had something that might be of importance and even sent pictures for the Museum's staff to consider.

While the contact couldn't be sure about what the microscope had been used for, it apparently came from the Lab's Health Physics organization. (For those who don't know the jargon, health physics deals with the recognition, evaluation and control of hazards associated with ionizing radiation.) After it was determined there was no radiation associated with the item itself, it was brought to the Museum and a condition report created. It's always satisfying to come across an object that has been beautifully cared for, such as this microscope.

It turned out to be a Spencer Lens Company polarizing microscope, complete with a graduated, rotatable stage. Its manufacture date was 1948, just outside of Manhattan Project history.

It came with its original wooden case, lockable, with the key attached on a length of ribbon. It's unusual that the key hadn't been lost in the ensuing 60 or more years! A monocular eyepiece is attached, but it also has a binocular piece, for use with both eyes, that is nestled in a velvet-lined accessory drawer. Also present are over half a dozen other lenses, a polarizing light filter, and a Wray copying lens. We're still puzzling over this last item since we don't think it belongs with the microscope—it's a camera lens. (Such is the world of artifacts...)

While investigating what such a piece of equipment might have gone for when first purchased, we discovered it originally sold for \$1,036. That's over \$10,000 in 2016 dollars! It's humbling to imagine the scientific research that might have been performed with such a high-end instrument.

