

Historic Deerfield, Deerfield, Massachusetts

Yankee Ingenuity—Imagination and Invention

by Bob Frishman

Rufus Porter painted hundreds of home wall murals and probably thousands of quick portraits, and he patented at least 24 practical mechanical inventions. Born in 1792 in West Boxford, Massachusetts, he founded *Scientific American* magazine in 1845, taught dancing and music, wrote books promoting art instruction and criticizing organized religion, and labored for decades on his concept for a 300-passenger steam-powered zeppelin. It is no surprise that he was named frequently during the

(like Ralph Earl), all contributing to a decentralized market encouraged by turnpikes, post offices, rural academies, newspapers, political stability, and ample raw materials. This surge did not emanate from the academic and mercantile centers of Boston or New York City but rather from the countryside and was spread by large numbers of energetic peddlers sharing goods and ideas with their rural customers and colleagues.

Rufus Porter, often on the road, invented a simple camera obscura to speed his portraiture work. Eli Terry innovated and consolidated clockmaking to begin mass-production, harnessing water power and peddlers to make and market cheap timekeepers with reliable wooden movements. Terry hired women who found themselves underemployed once fabrics poured from mills and not as much from home spinning wheels and looms. By 1840, these ever-larger mills of all kinds then changed the face of Yankee ingenuity, reducing the ability of small entrepreneurs to thrive.

The next morning's lead-off speaker was the guru of "American Fancy," Sumpter Priddy. We have enjoyed his many writings, lectures, and exhibits about the bold and brightly colored furniture and decorative arts of this period. His lecture went further, claiming that these concepts of "imagination, spontaneity, light, and color" originated in mid-18th-century Edinburgh. The Scots, prodded by David Hume, rebelled culturally against English decorative restraint by rejecting strict rational strictures on taste and embracing emotional, imaginative styles. American colonists of Scotch and Scotch-Irish origins brought these mindsets with them and fed the "explosion of fancy" in the 1790s.

Priddy attributed David Brewster's invention of the kaleidoscope, in Scotland in the early 19th century, to exuberant new designs. Simple floral designs were replaced by complicated, dazzling geometric patterns on quilts, floor coverings, and walls. Stencils, grain-painting, and marbling adorned all kinds of domestic surfaces. After the severe economic depression in the late 1830s, however, "fancy" increasingly was viewed as frivolous, useless, and too emotional and was criticized by the likes of Henry David Thoreau and Edgar Allan Poe, who preferred simpler styles closer to nature.

The next speaker, who noted that hers was the second southern accent of the day, was Mary Cheek Mills, a glass specialist. She presented a history of glass making, noting its decimation of surrounding forests needed to keep furnaces at 2400 degrees Fahrenheit. Advances utilizing lead and new techniques created clarity and strength in glass used mostly for windows and bottles. Closeup videos of glass-blowing and molding were shown to illustrate the required skills and even revealed that inhaling sometimes is needed and is not fatal to the glassblower. American glass manufacturing had a slow start, despite benefiting from abundant wood. There were many bankruptcies and inferior products. Capital, business acumen, and good chemists all were vital ingredients. The South Boston Flint Glass Works struggled to compete with English purveyors but made important early 19th-century glassware, some with embedded dated coins. Sadly, most of that firm's ornate metal molds were melted down during the Civil War.

After lunch, Deborah M. Child delivered her talk on "Richard Brunton—Engraver to Early America—Legitimate and Otherwise." Child is an art historian and independent curator, and her 2015 book on Brunton was published by the New England Historic Genealogical Society. Because of her preferred genealogical approach to research, her commissioned study of an American early 19th-century portrait, purchased at Skinner in 2007, started her down a fascinating trail. The painting's depiction of a fancy chair led her to chairs similarly decorated in a New England prison, which eventually brought her to Brunton. This English soldier, fighting in America, deserted in 1779 and used his competent engraving skills for good and evil. He produced copperplates for printed family registers, portraits, and various views. He engraved silver medals and was imprisoned for counterfeiting banknotes.

As an appropriate follow-up, the day's final presentation was a discussion and demonstration of intaglio copperplate engraving. Andrew Stein Raftery, printmaking professor at Rhode Island School of Design, recounted the ancient



In August 2015, Historic Deerfield acquired a Samuel Gragg side chair, made circa 1810 in Boston. Working near the Seymours, Gragg pioneered the use of steam-bending molds to mass-produce an innovative white oak bentwood chair, likely the first furniture design to be patented in this country. Stamped underneath is "S. Gragg / Boston" and "Patent." Curator Christine Ritok also praised its original painted surface. Photo courtesy Historic Deerfield.

The conference focused on a pivotal period in American history.

2015 Historic Deerfield Decorative Arts Forum, November 13-15, in Deerfield, Massachusetts.

Ambitiously titled "Yankee Ingenuity & New England Decorative Arts, 1790-1840," the conference focused on a pivotal period in American history. During those 50 years, a breed of newly freed colonists blossomed from staid farmers to inventive artists, craftsmen, mechanics, and philosophers. Nearly 50 participants heard targeted presentations by eight prominent speakers and also could attend optional workshops and tours organized by Historic Deerfield staff.

Arriving early, I was able to see Rufus Porter's patented corn sheller, on view in the Flynt Center's visible storage "attic," and his little 1826 book on *Curious Arts, and Interesting Experiments* in the Henry N. Flynt Library. For readers who need reminding, Historic Deerfield began as the 30-year preservation and museum project of Henry and Helen Flynt. It probably is best described in Elizabeth Stillinger's 1992 book *Historic Deerfield: A Portrait of Early America*.

I also joined one of the four preliminary workshops. Ned Lazaro, associate curator of textiles and collections manager, led us through "Peddling Fashion: Accessories in Early New England, 1790-1840." Surrounded by mannequin body parts, sewing supplies, and vintage clothing, our group learned how bonnets, shawls, and shoes were made, marketed, and often recycled or "refreshed." Milliners and shoemakers were among the growing class of small-scale entrepreneurs driven by new techniques and by swelling consumer demand.

Philip Zea, president of Historic Deerfield, opened the official start of the forum and introduced the evening's keynote speaker. He complimented David Jaffee, teacher of American material culture at the Bard Graduate Center, for managing to arrive on time despite totaling a rental car en route.

We sensed no traumatic aftereffects during Jaffee's presentation, which recapped his recent writings on the transformation of America's rural North. He described a new world after the Revolutionary War, but one that even before 1776 began displaying economic diversity, diffusion of craft knowledge, and the decay of aristocratic authority. As more Americans gained wealth through making, buying, and selling inexpensive consumer goods, they aspired to a gentility that could be demonstrated by their material possessions.

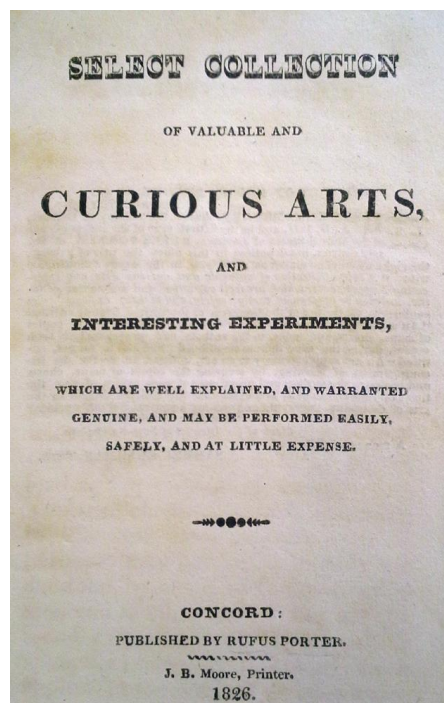
Jaffee explained that there were many "Ben Franklins," such as chair-makers, printers, globe manufacturers (like James Wilson), and portrait artists



Ned Lazaro, Historic Deerfield's collections manager, opened a 90-minute workshop in the Fitzpatrick Textile Conservation Room of the Flynt Center. An early 19th-century bleached beaver-fur woman's riding hat awaited our scrutiny. The hat's original inside label read "David Whipple, Market St., Providence." Frishman photo.



In the "attic" visible storage of Historic Deerfield's Flynt Center is an example of Rufus Porter's corn sheller, patented in 1838. To operate, the farmer used one hand to turn the large wheel, while the other hand fed ears of corn into the aperture below. We have no reports on how well this worked. Frishman photo.



David Bosse, librarian at Historic Deerfield, showed me an original edition of Rufus Porter's 1826 popular how-to book. Among its many pages of brief practical instructions are "28. To make writing appear and disappear at pleasure"; "55. To produce the exact likeness of any object instantly on paper"; "88. To freeze water in warm weather"; and "89. To change the colours of animals." Frishman photo.

origins of engraving and then described its needed tools, inks, and techniques. Little has changed in the procedures of creating and printing these reversed images, except that laboriously hammered copperplates have been replaced by rolled ones with grain that noticeably affects the scribing process, and hand-powered presses now are geared to reduce the operator's effort. With the use of a closeup video camera, we were able to observe his hands and the burin as he engraved. Raftery is an accomplished studio engraver and has had important exhibits and museum acquisitions. He is assisting a scholar studying how many prints Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) could produce from one engraved plate. Raftery's copy of the plate already has made more than 300 impressions; up to 1000 are expected before he sees noticeable signs of wear from pressure, abrasion, and cleaning.

Phil Zea returned to the podium on Sunday morning to present "Rich and Tasty" Vermont Furniture: Revolution to Reinvention." Zea reminded us that Vermont was an independent republic from 1777 to 1791, more years than Texas, and sometimes is called the "Old Republic." During the post-Revolutionary War years, many of its proud citizens were wealthy not only because of rich farmland, marble and granite quarries, merino sheep, and cast-iron stoves but also because their "business number one" was smuggling consumer goods from Canada during the Jefferson embargo. Really two territories separated by the Green Mountains, Vermont tolerated outsiders and adopted urban decorative and architectural styles. Zea showed several strong examples of Vermont-made furniture and clocks, similar to Boston and New York pieces but with distinctive differences and flourishes.

Historic Deerfield welcomed a new curator of furniture in 2015. Christine Ritok arrived from the Museum of the City of New York in February. At the November forum she presented a brief illustrated talk on some of the exemplary furniture in Historic Deerfield's collection. She noted the use of rare woods, perhaps for local competitive advantage, and skillful carving in place of cast metal adornments. The collection includes fine examples of furniture made elsewhere in New England and includes Seymour and Nathan Lombard sideboards and a recently acquired Gragg bentwood side chair, possibly with John Ritto Penniman painted decoration.

The final lecturer was Peter Benes, director of the Dublin Seminar of New England Folklife, founded in 1976. He focused on "The Yankee Peddler," noting that already by 1820 these traveling salesmen were American icons. Using old illustrations and photographs, Benes explained that many of these itinerants were not native-born Yankees but hardy immigrants facing severe hardships and risks including frequent robberies and

murders. Their antecedents were the traveling performers, mountebanks, and charlatans of old England who could walk a "slack wire" one day and extract teeth the next. Tired of menial work in one place, this loquacious "coterie of transient occupations" instead went on the road to sell, and in the process they spread new ideas, products, and skills that changed our culture. According to his research, even in 1775 there were more than 200 peddlers in New England visiting new brides and established households, carrying leather backpacks, pushing wheelbarrows or two-wheel carts, or leading horses and covered wagons, "stores on wheels," loaded with goods.

Peter Benes did not mention one notable peddler, Bronson Alcott, the charismatic and idealist father of Louisa May Alcott. At age 17, still using his given name Amos, he left Connecticut to peddle books and merchandise in the South. His March 1823 letter to his cousin William recorded that "Peddling is a hard place to serve God, but a capital one to serve Mammon." His peddling career soon was unsuccessful, however, and he began the wandering philosophizing life for which he is better known. *New Connecticut* is the narrative poem, published in 1881, where he describes those peddling days.

Many of the ideas we heard during the forum about this 50-year period of "Yankee Ingenuity" are contained within Jean Lipman's 1968 book *Rufus Porter: Yankee Pioneer*. Editor at the time of *Art in America* magazine, Lipman detailed Porter's entire life story, offered many illustrations of his prolific output over his 92 years, and firmly connected him to those transformative decades in our nation's history. In the book's opening pages, she wrote:

"Porter's life reads almost like a composite tale of the times, a personal embodiment of the era of itinerant adventure, of freewheeling invention, of scientific, journalistic and artistic enterprise. We see a New England farmer's son and shoemaker's apprentice exploring the world on all levels.... In no other time or place than nineteenth-century America could such a life have been led."

For more information about this and other Historic Deerfield educational programs, visit (www.historicdeerfield.org).



The lecture by Philip Zea, president of Historic Deerfield, covered the same topic as the 2015 Shelburne Museum exhibit and accompanying publication, *Rich and Tasty: Vermont Furniture to 1850*, which he co-edited. Frishman photo.



Antique furniture scholar and dealer Sumpter Priddy III has made new discoveries since the 2004 publication of his prize-winning book *American Fancy*. He revealed the Scottish origins of "Fancy" furniture and has found significant examples of the style in the American South. Frishman photo.



The brick Neoclassical main school building of Deerfield Academy overlooks the town's Old Main Street. The school was founded in 1797 and prepared many New England boys for productive lives in the new republic. Frishman photo.



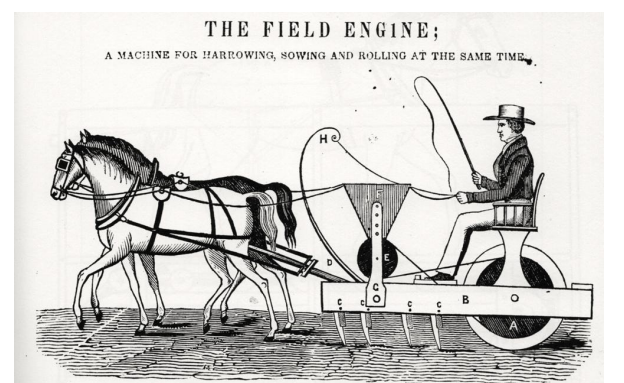
The Deerfield Community Center was the architecturally appropriate venue for our weekend programs. Frishman photo.

THE PEDLER'S PROGRESS.

YOUTH casts its glance into the future far,
Stirred from within by its deep-felt unrest,
Led forward by some bright bewildering star,
And holds a fair ideal in its breast.

Forth from his nest before the approaching cold,
Fired by strange impulse and a dim foresight,
Thirst for adventure, novelty, and gold,
Our bird of passage takes his southward flight.

These are the opening lines of Bronson Alcott's poem about his youthful peddling days. His daughter Louisa May clearly was the better writer. The page appears in *New Connecticut, An Autobiographical Poem*, published by Roberts Brothers, Boston, in 1887.



The August 6, 1846, issue of *Scientific American*, founded by Rufus Porter, illustrated his "Field Engine" that performed three farming tasks simultaneously. It would be hard to imagine a finer example of Yankee mechanical ingenuity.



Mary Cheek Mills researches and teaches the subject of early American glass. Her favorite glassmaker is Thomas Cains. He arrived in Boston in 1812 from Bristol, England and was the first in New England to produce flint glass, using lead in the mixture to produce clear, shiny glassware. Examples from a Cains descendant are in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Frishman photo.



In this large 1870s tintype, a rural family was doing some shopping from a peddler's wagon. While the location is unknown, this photo confirms that peddlers still were roaming America's back roads later in the 19th century. Photo courtesy Greg French.

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An independent art historian and curator, Deborah M. Child unearthed the life story of a British army deserter, engraver, artist, and counterfeiter. Although he was foreign-born, his itinerant creative lifestyle mirrored that of many young American men during this half-century of Yankee ingenuity. Frishman photo.



After demonstrating the use of a sharp steel burin to engrave a small copperplate, Andrew Stein Raftery pulled a print. We were certain that the engraving and printing process is far more difficult than he made it appear. Frishman photo.



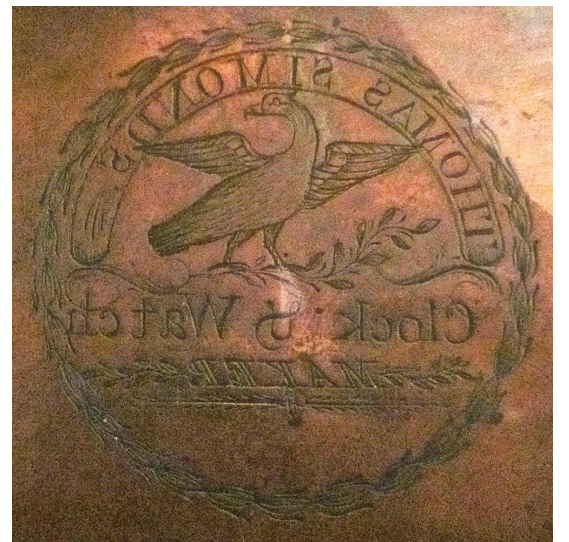
The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife observes its 40th anniversary in 2016. Cofounder Peter Benes rested after delivering his multicultural perspective on Yankee peddlers. A call for papers has been issued for the Dublin Seminar topic, *New England at Sea: Maritime Memory and Material Culture*. Frishman photo.



Peter Benes included in his presentation this early sixth-plate daguerreotype of an energetic Yankee peddler. Note the ingenious straps and supports for his heavy twin cases of wares. The majority of peddlers walked and carried their goods without the help of vehicles or draft animals. Photo courtesy Peter Benes.



Historic Deerfield has an extensive and impressive collection of American furniture, clocks, and decorative accessories, many displayed in informative exhibits as shown here. A visit is worthwhile anytime. Frishman photo.



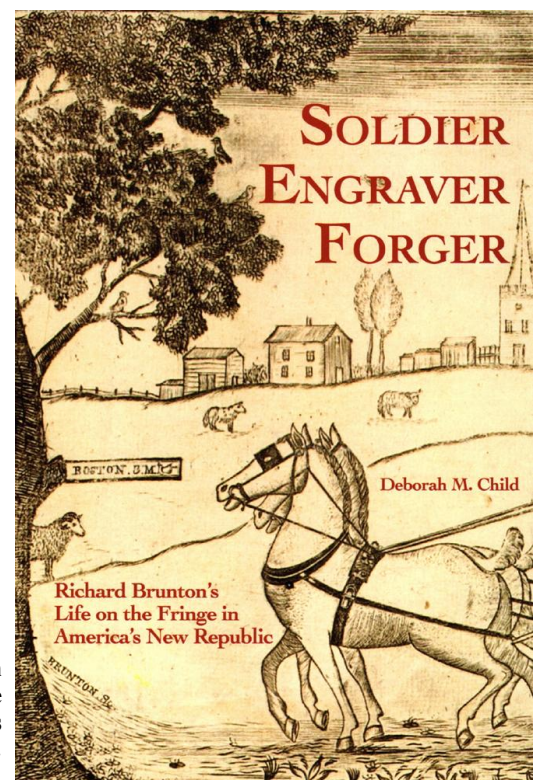
A private collector in the forum audience provided this example of an antique engraved copperplate for Andrew Stein Raftery's demonstration lecture. As someone avidly interested in watch papers, I felt both thrilled and sad to handle this horological artifact that I reluctantly handed back to its owner. Photo courtesy a private collector.



From a friend's collection, this sixth-plate circa 1852 daguerreotype froze a peddler with a loaded wagon in conversation with a local customer. This photo was included in the exhibit *A Perfect Likeness* at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York. Photo courtesy Greg French.



Phil Zea's lecture on Vermont furniture included this bombé-front chest of drawers with splayed French feet. Attributed to cabinetmaker George Stedman (1795-1881), the cherry, maple, and pine bureau is among only a handful known in this French-inspired design. A similar signed example is at the Winterthur Museum. Photo courtesy Historic Deerfield.



The cover of Deborah Child's 2015 book on Richard Brunton reproduces one of his rare engravings with his initials. More common is the small bird he liked to include in his scenes.

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