

Program in New England Studies, June 2012

by Bob Frishman



The 1784 Governor John Langdon House in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. George Washington was entertained at the house in 1789 but slept elsewhere. In keeping with HNE's policies of expanding the appeal and uses of historic properties, the house is available for weddings and functions, and it offers temporary exhibits in its double parlor.



The 1846 Roseland Cottage in Woodstock, Connecticut, plunged us into study of the Victorian era. Its first owner, Henry Bowen, was a founder of the Republican Party and hosted visits by several U.S. presidents as well as extravagant July 4th celebrations. Out back is the single-seat privy erected for the stay of President Grant.



HNE's 1740 Codman House in Lincoln, Massachusetts, faced demolition in the mid-19th century but was saved after public outcry over the 1863 razing of John Hancock's 1737 Boston mansion.



PINES participants arrived at Historic New England's Coffin House, Newbury, Massachusetts. Our guide described it as one of the earlier and better 17th-century dwellings that remain standing, even with its 18th-century front addition.

Is this, finally, the end of Colonial Revival? Is the longest-running, most pervasive style of American architecture and furniture design coming to the close of its nearly two-century run?

On the final morning of Historic New England's (HNE) annual six-day Program in New England Studies (PINES), this provocative question was raised by Gerald W.R. Ward, a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), in the garden cottage of HNE's circa 1785 Hamilton House in South Berwick, Maine. He remarked that the idea had just occurred to him at breakfast, but it made an ironic postscript to a week spent studying historic homes and furniture collections within 100 miles of the Boston Tea Party.

As primarily a restorer and dealer of antique clocks, I enlisted in this program for a greater understanding of the surrounding styles and cultures of the timekeepers I service. Among the other 23 participants were old-house owners, interior designers, auctioneers of antiques, historians, museum professionals, and a graduate student who received one of three program scholarships.

Our itinerary began on June 18 at HNE's Otis House headquarters in Boston and concluded at their Beauport mansion in Gloucester on June 23, advancing chronologically from the mid-17th century to the beginning of the 20th. Each day featured lectures by renowned experts as well as bus travel to period homes and the MFA.

On that Monday, June 18, we were welcomed by Kenneth Turino, HNE's manager of community engagement and exhibitions, who administers the intensive program. He and Joanne Flaherty, exhibitions coordinator (and "cruise director"), were our efficient handlers throughout the week. Ken reported that Historic New England, founded in 1910 by William Sumner Appleton (1874-1947), is a primary specialist of New England material culture. HNE owns 36 properties in five New England states, more than 110,000 relevant objects, and more than one million ephemera items in its archives and library. Carl Nold, HNE president and CEO, also spoke, saying that these objects are not the most beautiful or costly, but each is a piece of New England's heritage.

Our first speaker, Cary Carson, is retired from the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. His focus on "How Colonial New England Became Britain's Pottery Barn" (his talk's title) challenged the supply-side notion that a flood of inexpensive consumer goods fueled economic expansion. He suggested instead that public demand, driven by a "passion to purchase," encouraged manufacturers to invest in new technologies to meet the new need. This demand arose not just from increased prosperity, but because in a more mobile society, markers other than traditional class and landownership were needed to indicate a person's social position. Portraits, buckles, mirrors, chests of drawers, along with good manners, all identified one's place in communities that were founded only years, not centuries, before.

Robert Blair St. George, history professor at the

University of Pennsylvania, was next. He described the transfer of architectural forms from England to Colonial New England, showing details of how early settlers brought various building styles from their British counties of origin. Nearly all of these structures were demolished by the 1850's. A small number remain, mostly the better two-story homes, which were finer than the majority of cruder, smaller single-story dwellings.

Our coach brought us to an outdoor lunch at the Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm in Newbury, Massachusetts, (where recently I had viewed baseball played in period uniforms according to 1861

rules). Two nearby HNE properties were our ultimate destination. At the 1678 Coffin House and the circa 1670 Swett-Ilsley House, we found Abbott Lowell Cummings, the former HNE director and originator of an earlier version of PINES some 30 years ago.

Cummings, joined by Cary Carson, guided us through the homes, noting their construction, additions, East Anglian precedents, large multi-purpose rooms, and earliest known Boston wallpaper, circa 1780. Cummings suggested that the upstairs chamber in the second house is the best "teaching room" he knows, especially for showing what he termed the "building logic" of the time.

Ken Turino was our speaker following that evening's reception back at the Otis House. He focused on the serious challenges facing house museums. Shrinking visitation and funding requires new thinking beyond the "velvet rope" traditional approach. We heard of strategies to involve more community involvement and activities and about ongoing efforts to ensure that these properties endure. Different from purpose-built treasure-house institutions, house museums must balance issues of their sites and surroundings. Many still have "too much stuff" from undefined collecting and devote too much attention to chasing short-term grants. Turino described HNE's "stewardship" program, which now has 81 historic properties safeguarded under private ownership but overseen by HNE.

Tuesday began in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, at HNE's 1784 Governor John Langdon House. James Garvin, retired New Hampshire state architectural historian, explained how the area's timber, especially eastern mountain pine, provided both export wealth and sawn lumber for grand new homes. Despite a relatively small population, the availability of trained carvers, joiners, builders, and illustrated style and pattern books made such places possible. Scarce labor led to the first use of water-powered sawmills, bringing down the price of boards needed for this construction. Wood was planed, decorated, carved, and sometimes coated to simulate stone elements. We heard first mention of the Federal style, originating from Britain's Robert Adam in the late 18th century.

Jane Nylander, HNE's president emerita, talked next about the popularization of the New England home. She summarized from one of her many publications, *Our Own Snug Fireside* (1993), about how the idea of the New England house, inhabited

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A hatch in the Coffin House exterior has been raised to show features of wall construction. This is an example of HNE's efforts, beyond restoration and caretaking, to enhance understanding of the historic homes under its care.



Gerry Ward, shown gesturing at the lower right, said that this sometimes is called the "IKEA" or "Home Depot" display of period furniture in the Amelia Peabody Gallery of the MFA, Boston.

by sturdy self-reliant folks capable of resisting the rigors of local winters, became so influential. These homes, often good customers for manufactured textiles and ceramics from England, were romantically portrayed in Currier & Ives scenes and other prints, and are pervasive idealizations of how we lived.

After a tour and lunch at the Langdon House, we walked to the circa 1716 Warner House (not an HNE property) and were met by Richard Candee, a Boston University emeritus professor. This large brick structure is the earliest high-style English home left in New England, although there were dozens, principally in Boston, built by prosperous merchants. Not only do the original builder's invoices remain, there are also two early inventories of house contents along with 20,000 shards from the grounds, providing rare details of its history. Slowly, the house furnishings from those early lists are returning from family descendants. Unique features include a lightning rod, probably installed by Benjamin Franklin, bedroom walls treated with smalt (ground cobalt glass providing a deep blue color treatment), and a 1733 Queen Anne inlaid chest with proven family provenance.

Nearby Maine was our next stop. The 1760 Lady Pepperell House is an HNE deaccessioned property, privately owned and maintained since 1985. The owners gladly submit to HNE oversight and occasional visiting groups. Joseph Cornish, HNE's senior stewardship manager, pointed out its high-style Georgian features. A reception at the old Portsmouth home of Jane and Richard Nylander topped off this day.

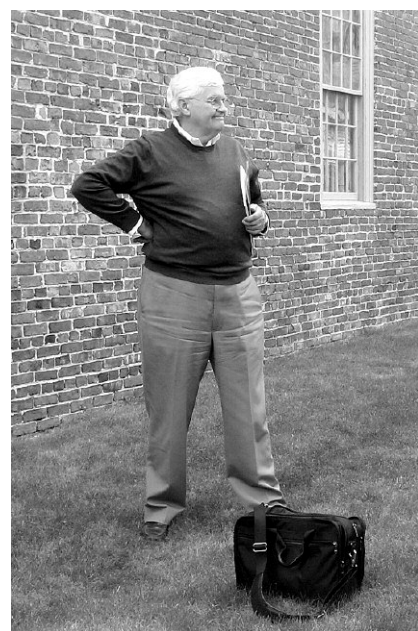
Wednesday, again at Otis House, we heard from Brock Jobe, professor of decorative arts at Winterthur. Referencing the style and pattern books available to craftsmen and consumers of 18th-century American furniture, he led us through details of carving, turning, joining, cabinet-making, inlay, veneer, and the various woods utilized. Brass hardware, imported from Britain and often equal in cost to the rest of the piece, was initially sand-cast and was then stamped later in the century. Cheaper iron was used for table hinges. Upholstery options were broad, from costly silks to less expensive cotton or linen prints to leather as the least expensive. London, described by Jobe as the "Capital of America" in the 18th century, provided most of the designs, but there were Continental influences as well, all brought by immigrant craftsmen, travelers, and publications.

Following a tour of Bulfinch-designed Otis House, we left for three workshops at HNE's Collections and Conservation Center in Haverhill, Massachusetts, a storehouse of 50,000 objects. Brock Jobe conducted an examination of high chests, tables, and chairs. First he asked us to use our own eyes to assess each piece. Nancy Carlisle, senior curator of collections, led us through the mysteries of ceramics, and Laura Johnson, associate curator, explained textiles used for furnishings (not clothing) from bed linens to curtain and upholstery fabrics.

That evening's event was a presentation in the headquarters'



Nancy Carlisle, an HNE curator, is shown standing in one of the first-floor dining areas of Beauport in Gloucester, Massachusetts. *Lonely Planet* has ranked Henry David Sleeper's creation among the world's ten greatest mansions.



Richard Candee, author of the 1996 book *Building Portsmouth: The Neighborhoods & Architecture of New Hampshire's Oldest City*, guided us through the Warner House. Thousands of ceramic shards, mostly fragments of high-end Chinese porcelain, were found buried on the grounds and demonstrate the family's early wealth.

basement archives, where we heard Lorna Condon, senior curator of library and archives. She assists more than 3500 researchers each year and oversees a collection envisioned by her hero, William Sumner Appleton, to preserve and organize all aspects of domestic New England history. The cataloged collections include documentary photography, architectural drawings, and eventually any material "documenting the built environment." Her most prized objects may be a group of 1895 large glass negatives that captured the construction of Boston's subway system, the nation's first.

On Thursday, we first had a lecture from J. Ritchie Garrison, director of the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture at University of Delaware. Focused on the landscape and architecture of New England's Federal period, he explained how growth in relatively small and easily traveled states led to larger sophisticated housing and commercial buildings. This style had a long history since "people build what they see," and they imitate current building standards conservatively. Builders became

more efficient, many house components were mass-produced, and homes could become more affordable or grander as a result.

Robert Mussey, an independent conservator and author based in Milton, Massachusetts, led us through an examination of Federal furniture. Boston took more than a decade to recover from the destruction suffered during the Revolutionary War, but then could begin to afford to implement the Federal style, which was Neoclassical or late-Georgian in old world terms. Thomas Sheraton's 1793 design book, owned by several period Boston craftsmen, emphasized the governing principles of art, geometry, and perspective derived from classical forms. Key was a reduction of three-dimensional sculpted and carved representations into two-dimensional inlays, veneers, and decorations on flat surfaces that repeated similar motifs. As stronger woods, joints, and techniques were employed, furniture components became thinner and lighter, clearly evidenced in Seymour furniture, on which Mussey is a foremost expert.

Lunch at the Peabody Essex



Dean Lahikainen, a curator at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, began his talk on the steps of the PEM's 1804 Gardner-Pingree House a few steps away from the main museum building. McIntire carving adorns the portico entry. Windows above and beside the door send daylight into the front foyer.



The gardens of Beauport were restored in 2009, and the shadow on its sundial tells the time of my visit. Several antique mechanical timekeepers also were inside. None of Sleeper's personal records remain, however, to document the house and its contents; his brother destroyed all papers directly after Sleeper's death in 1934.



Brock Jobe grouped chairs, tables, and high chests at HNE's Haverhill, Massachusetts, storage and study center. Because he knew that Michael Grogan, an antiques auctioneer based in Dedham, Massachusetts, was in our group, he asked us all to pretend to be auctioneers called to an imposing old Boston home to assess antique possessions, with the HNE pieces as our test cases. Test results, even using the latest tablet computer seen in this photo, revealed that we all needed further training.



Abbott Cummings stated that the Swett-Isley House boasts the largest fireplace opening in New England, shown here containing two of our group. It features three ovens built into its brick back wall. Such ovens later were placed into hearth front walls instead, greatly reducing the fire risk to housewives peering into them.

Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, preceded a tour of their adjacent 1804 Gardner-Pingree House, led by Dean Lahikainen, curator of American decorative art. His published specialization on the builder and carver Samuel McIntire was ideal. One of the first to prepare careful drawings and with a mastery of Neoclassical proportions, McIntire designed this grand brick townhouse and executed much of its ornate carving at a time when Salem had the highest per-capita income in the country. Nearly intact interiors contain period furniture including some originals returned from the family. Happily for me, a Simon Willard long-case clock stands in the home's keeping room, and our group was allowed to enter rooms that normally are viewed only from their doorways.

That evening, Gerry Ward pointed out prize objects in the MFA's Americana collection. Stops at heavy Colonial carved chests, gleaming Revere silver, colorful Copley portraits, extravagant 18th-century furniture, and restored period rooms were teasers demanding longer return visits.

Friday we were delivered to the 1740 Codman House in Lincoln, Massachusetts. We were met by Richard Nylander, HNE curator emeritus. During his 41 years with Historic New England (formerly known as Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, SPNEA), he spent much time on the history, restoration, and interpretation of this country manor. It is a "complicated" house that endured several owners and changes. Ogden Codman Jr. was its best-known resident. Codman worked closely with Edith Wharton and was a prominent interior designer, but earlier and later owners made major changes. One of Nylander's specialties is wallpaper, and in this house, as well as other houses he discussed, his scholarship on this subject was ably applied to the needed restorations. More than 100 linear feet of original paper documentation came with the donation of the house in 1968, boosting its research and historical value.

The coach then made a longer drive to Woodstock, Connecticut, location of the 1846 Roseland Cottage and an appropriate setting for our turn to Victoria

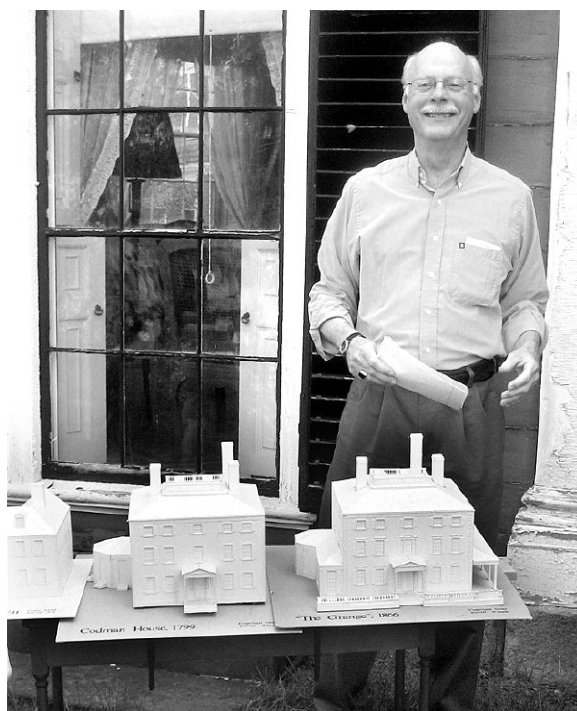
style. Richard Guy Wilson, chair of the department of architectural history at the University of Virginia, was our leadoff speaker there. He offered descriptions and context of New England single-family homes, which he claims are a nearly unique American element compared to the most common family dwellings of other nations. The Victorian period was long and evolving, and the personal taste of its namesake can possibly be revealed by the monarch's home, Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, and the Albert Memorial in London's Kensington Gardens. These were the times of John Ruskin, the Gilded Age of Mark Twain, and the Massachusetts architect H.H. Richardson, covering decades, which Wilson overlaid with his "Visual Curve" showing rising and falling design complexity.

Nancy Carlisle titled her talk here "Victorian Furniture: Design Run Amok or Inspired Creativity?" Her 25 years with HNE have provided ample time to examine the craftsmanship and materials of that era. While many collectors condemn the decorative excesses and mass-production techniques, she pointed out that those excesses often reflected very high levels of skillful handwork, since power machinery could not yet produce deep carving and fancy shapes. The period can be subdivided into several "revivals" from Gothic to

Egyptian and then to the Aesthetic and Arts and Craft styles that followed. Debates about whether Victorian objects are "refined" or "vulgar" can reflect subjective cultural values that also have changed over time.

That evening we were treated to a reception and tour at the 1902 Ayer Mansion, not usually open to visitors, on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston. Jointly owned by a nonprofit organization providing housing for college women and by a branch of the Catholic Church, it was built as the home of an elderly patent-medicine and textile magnate and his younger theatrical wife. Unusual for Boston, it was designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany. It retains astounding décor with strong Byzantine and Moorish influences.

Saturday, the program's last day, we started at the circa 1785 Hamilton House in South Berwick, Maine. Gerry Ward's talk reviewed the history of the Colonial Revival period, which he can trace possibly back to the 1840's and certainly to the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. He suggested that it could more realistically be named "early American revival" since it covers the entire hand-craft era from 1620 to 1830 and could be based upon a national need to worship ancestors, relive a romantic "Golden Age," bolster patriotism and national identity, acculturate new immigrants, and



Richard Nylander described the gradual enlargement of Codman House from six to 22 rooms. HNE's approach to the house changed from leaving it as found in 1968 to a new philosophy, begun in 1978, to "conserve and restore" it to earlier years that better interpret this country home's significance.



Distinctive markers make HNE's house museums easy to spot. Opening days and hours can be quite limited, so should be checked in advance.



Beaumont's terrace overlooking Gloucester Harbor offered a perfect setting for our program's final reception and farewells. Articles in 1916 *Country Life* and 1929 *House Beautiful* magazines brought national attention to the mansion.

honor our origins. Often the depictions and interpretations were not accurate, especially based on today's research, but from Wallace Nutting prints to chairs made from pieces of old spinning wheels, the idealized forms have ruled for more than a century. Collectors have sought rare Colonial pieces, and skilled fakers have often satisfied that need, as have legitimate makers of good-quality reproductions.

Kevin D. Murphy, professor at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York, presented our final formal lecture. Stating that our buildings and furnishings represent history in three dimensions, he believes that the Colonial Revival period actually began with the 1824 United States tour by Lafayette at a time when memory became history for the years of the Revolutionary War. Murphy also highlighted the Centennial Exhibition's very popular *New England Kitchen* exhibit, which helped bring our region's Colonial history into the forefront. He pointed to many examples of architecture that reprised the old styles in the decades up to and beyond the book *Houses for Good Living* by Royal Barry Wills, first published in 1940.

Richard Nylander returned to lead our tour of Hamilton House. He described its Colonial Revival renovations after its 1899 purchase by friends of Sarah Orne Jewett, who lived nearby and located her novel *The Tory Lover* on that site. Perhaps most stunning are large interior wall murals painted by George Porter Fernald. With illustrated articles appearing about the house in 1929 in *House Beautiful* magazine, the home again reinforced 20th-century interpretations of our domestic past.

Hamilton House is connected to the historic home we toured last—Beaumont, the Sleeper-McCann House in Gloucester. Henry Davis Sleeper, Beaumont's creator, visited Hamilton House with the artist Cecelia Beaux, and its garden cottage reportedly was an inspiration for the start of his Beaumont project in 1908. Descriptions are difficult and inadequate for this harbor-front neo-Norman collectors' paradise. A successful and eccentric Boston interior designer, Sleeper loaded Beaumont's many rooms with objects artistically unified by their colors and themes. Richard Nylander, again our guide, said that he never waits long for the "Oh my God" exclamations as visitors enter each room. Our farewell champagne on Beaumont's terrace perhaps revived the spirit of Sleeper's own heavy partying on those same stones. (Viewers of the PBS *Antiques Roadshow* 2012 Boston installment will see host Mark L. Walberg's recorded Beaumont visit when it airs early in 2013.)

When Abbott Lowell Cummings welcomed us in Newbury, Massachusetts, he joked that his tour would be "like throwing a little dog a big bone." For most of us in the program, this applied to all six days as we attempted to gnaw on everything we saw and heard, and it also applies to this report. According to Ken Turino, there is no other such program of study offered in the country, and we were able to visit places not normally open to the public, with top experts not normally on call.

At least among our group, interest in New England domestic history, including the long Colonial Revival period, is far from dead. Gerry Ward's musings about its demise cannot easily be dismissed, however, given declining public visits and support for house museums and historical societies, as well as the struggles of antiques shows, dealers, and auctions. Fewer young people are growing up in Colonial Revival homes surrounded by Colonial Revival reproduction furniture; fewer of them study the history of this period in any depth; and fewer find from it any entertainment or educational value.

Tellingly, Historic New England is launching a new three-day study program—"Modernist Immersion Weekend." For more information about all HNE programs including the June 2013 PINES program, contact Ken Turino at (617) 994-5958 or (www.HistoricNewEngland.org).



Virtuoso carving and lathe work are visible throughout the Langdon House. One motif is the three styles of turned balustrades repeated up the main staircase.



The 1716 Warner House in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, is not an HNE property, but as the "earliest extant brick urban mansion in New England" it was an important stop for us.



Abbott Lowell Cummings, author of many publications including the 1979 book *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625-1725*, points out architectural elements in the large upstairs chamber of the circa 1670 Swett-Ilisley House in Newbury, Massachusetts. This was HNE's first architectural property, acquired in 1911.

