

NEWBURYPORT
PRESERVATION TRUST

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Linking the past with the present and future



Quarterly Newsletter of the Newburyport Preservation Trust

Summer 2020

'If This House Could Talk' event is in the spotlight as a socially-distanced Yankee Homecoming activity

Stroll the neighborhoods for some fun house history from July 26 to August 2

Since 2016, "If This House Could Talk," a fun do-it-yourself local public history project, has been a rousing success during the city's Yankee Homecoming celebration. Last year more than 100 residents posted signs in front of their houses that presented vignettes that ranged from the historical to the whimsical.

In past years the event was a treat for neighborhood strollers seeking a break from the hoopla of Yankee Homecoming week. This year, however, with the usual large-crowd activities not possible during the continuing public health crisis, "If This House Could Talk" steps into the spotlight as a featured event July 26 through Aug. 2.

Neighborhood strollers are encouraged to download a map of participating houses before their pandemic perambulations at www.walknewburyport.com, or pick up a map at the Newburyport Public Library (Harris St.).

New on the map this year are locations of houses with plaques from NPT's growing Historic House Plaque Program. The 50th plaque was recently mounted on a mid-19th-century Victorian at 18 Allen Street.

Since its inception, "If This House Could Talk" has been coordinated by Newburyport Preservation Trust member and city resident Jack Santos, who introduced the program to Newburyport after observing its success in Cambridge, Mass. The program is co-sponsored by the Newburyport Preservation Trust and the Newburyport Public Library, and has attracted enthusiastic volunteers. NPT researcher Barb Bailey presented three sessions of "House History 101" in June and July via Zoom for prospective participants.

NPT thanks all coordinators, volunteers, participants, and strollers for keeping this fun event alive in this difficult year. ■



In 2019 more than 100 residents posted signs for "If This House Could Talk" during Yankee Homecoming week.

In a crisis, historians & preservationists urged to make history useful in the present

By R. W. Bacon, Editor, NPT Quarterly News; Member, NPT Board of Directors

Since the beginning of June I have hustled to keep up with the statements from all the professional associations in the museum and history field that renew the call for anti-racism initiatives. All are united in urging their members to seize the moment to build greater public understanding of the roots of racial divisions and white privilege.

Preservation organizations like the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Historic New England, and Preservation Massachusetts have sounded the same alarm, urging members and preservation advocates to recognize the links between preservation and history to illuminate the racial divides that roil our nation.

But what does all this have to do with the nexus of history and preservation here in Newburyport? After all, aren't New Englanders the "good guys" in our nation's slavery story? And as I pursue my research

focused on early-20th-century happenings in London, Sydney, Chicago, and St. Louis, what can I contribute to the subject?

Well, for one thing, I can suggest that we local history and preservation enthusiasts face up to our own history, usually swept under the rug, that New England's 18th-century economy, especially in its port cities like Newburyport, was built squarely on the backs of enslaved Africans at sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean.

In school we all learned about the trans-Atlantic "triangle trade," the 18th-century slavery-based economic engine. But that phrase was so neat-and-tidy that we could compartmentalize it, then forget about it.

In Newburyport, the economic growth from participation in the trans-Atlantic West Indies "triangle trade" was a "tide that lifted all boats." Everyone's life was improved, from the merchants and sea captains to the farmers and fishermen, to the dock workers and deck hands, to the

New book tops the field in historic house restoration

Book Review: *Restoring Your Historic House: The Comprehensive Guide for Homeowners*, by Scott T. Hanson, with photos by David J. Clough, was published in late 2019 by Tilbury House of Thomaston, Maine. “Comprehensive” is the operative word for this weighty 712-page volume, as its content spans homes from the early 17th century to the mid-20th century, and covers the technology and trades from the base of the foundation to the peak of the roof.

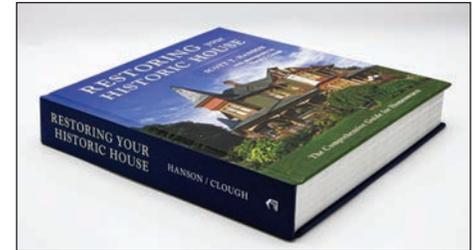
In the introduction, the author notes that unlike other books on home renovations, this book prioritizes the identification and preservation of character-defining features. Its purpose: “To describe and illustrate a best-practices approach for updating historic homes for modern life in ways that do not turn old houses into new ones.”

Throughout 20 well-organized chapters in six categories (Project Planning, Under the Surface, Systems, The Exterior Envelope, Interior Finishes, Tools and Resources), the author shares the insights of 40 years as a designer, carpenter, historic preservation consultant, architectural historian, and municipal historic district regulator. His 15-year hands-on renovation of his own historic house contributed to those insights.

At the outset the author makes sure the reader understands the distinction between rehabilitation, restoration, and preservation. “Preservation is a frame of mind,” he writes, “an attempt to understand how a historic building came to be what it is, and to identify the elements that make it historic.”

While there are many good how-to books on basic skills, this book addresses adapting those skills to the needs of a historic house. Throughout are case studies of projects on houses built between 1769 and 1924.

Not only is the content thorough, but the book is well-produced, packed with hundreds of instructive color photos on its 9.25x10.25 matte-coated pages. This book will reward any historic house homeowner, tradesperson, advocate, or enthusiast with the theoretical and practical insights of a pro. The list price is \$49.95. Although it is available for less from some online sellers, the book is a great value even at full price. (Let’s preserve our local booksellers!) ■



Restoring Your Historic House, by Scott T. Hanson (2019); ISBN#: 978-0-88448-695-4; LOC#: 2019948645.



Last call for ‘1690 House’ staircase & wainscoting

In 2016, at the city’s request, NPT salvaged the ornate c. 1770 Georgian staircase from the former Towle “1690 House” on Merrimac Street.

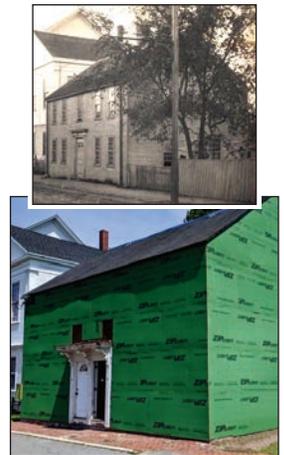
This is the “last call” to find a home for the staircase in Newburyport.

The staircase parts include the left side wall of paneling, the decorative scroll work, balusters, and railing.

If interested, contact NPT co-president Tom Kolterjahn at 978-462-8081, or tkolterjahn@gmail.com. Proceeds support NPT education and advocacy. ■

W. L. Garrison birthplace: NPT hopeful for a ‘sensitive restoration’

At first glance, those passing by the late-18th-century birthplace of abolitionist newspaper editor William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879) may have grumbled “total gut job” at the two-unit condo conversion project at 3-5 School Street near Old South Church. But fortunately the builders, after seeking NPT guidance, have tentatively agreed to restore the Georgian facade to its period form and re-mount the historic site plaques. (The original interior features were long-gone even a century ago.) ■



History: Useful in the present ...

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ship-builders and clam-shuckers. This is not to demonize or even criticize the merchants and sea captains living in the context of their times. Unfortunately, throughout human history, the elevation of one culture at the brutal expense of another is nothing new. In the late-18th century, New England port cities saw gains in education, literacy, infrastructure, architecture, and craftsmanship – largely bankrolled by the “rum trade” profits gleaned from the stolen labor of enslaved Africans worked to death in the Caribbean.

Of course, don’t take it only from me. Highly recommended are *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery* (2005), by Anne Farrow, Joel Long, and Jenifer Frank; *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (2016), by Wendy Warren; and *Patriots and Partisans: The*

Merchants of Newburyport 1764-1815 (1962), by maritime historian Benjamin W. Labaree.

In my years of museum presentations, most people appreciate learning about the 18th-century slavery-based economy, even those who once believed New Englanders were always “the good guys.” Some are perplexed by the challenge to long-held beliefs. After all, we prefer heroic stories and happy endings. But as ever, providing well-reasoned context facilitates understanding.

Here in Newburyport we can be proud of the Museum of Old Newbury and the Newburyport Public Library, which have hosted historian and educator Susan Harvey multiple times since 2014. Twice in the last year, capacity crowds have gathered for Ms. Harvey’s evidence-packed presentations about Newburyport’s slavery-based 18th-century maritime economy.

Today in Newburyport, while the 11 rum distilleries are gone, and the shipyards that

built 47 slave ships for British customers are gone, there is still surviving material evidence of “triangle trade” profits. Maybe as we stroll through our beloved city and admire the original craftsmanship, hard-won preservation, and responsible stewardship of our defining Georgian and Federal era houses, their presence can also prompt us to contemplate the whole story of our regional economic history.

Facing up to our history of white privilege is a necessary step before action towards real change. Our local history can be more than a feel-good diversion. Let’s make it useful in the present. My hope is that our museums, schools, and local history outposts will prioritize the story of our region’s early slavery-based prosperity. Enhanced public awareness, long overdue, will at least nudge our understanding in the right direction. If we don’t face up to “the whole story” of our history, what are we really preserving? ■