

Merchant's House Museum

Newsletter

Summer 1998

From the Director Restoration Redux!

It's hard to believe a year has passed since we announced the Astor Foundation's \$1 million challenge grant to secure the future of the House. Thanks to all of you who rose to the occasion (628 strong), we met the challenge—and with a flourish. Now, with much excitement we are turning our attention to projects that had temporarily been put on hold. Among these is restoration.

We have formed a task force of board members and outside professionals to establish priorities based on recommendations originally set forth in the 1993 Historic Structures Report. Work on our very forlorn-looking front door has already begun. But of more far-reaching significance, we are about to start final repairs on the west wall to halt years of water penetration. We are most grateful to the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts for its generous \$50,000 grant for this work.

So fundamental is this project to future restoration work and to the long-term preservation of the building that we asked architect Michael Devonshire to give us a short 101 course on the history of the problem and our restoration plans. Michael is Senior Architectural Conservator with Jan Hird Pokorny Architects, the firm that held our hand through the emergency stabilization of the building in the early 90's and that has overseen all restoration work since.

Margaret Halsey Gardiner
Executive Director

Final Repairs to Exterior West Wall To Be Completed Before Summer's End

by Michael Devonshire

This summer will see the completion of the third and final phase of the west party wall repairs at the Merchant's House Museum. While the work that will be taking place is not very glamorous and indeed will be nearly invisible to the casual passer-by, it is extremely important to the longevity of the House and will allow us to implement long-overdue plaster and paint finish repairs on the interior surfaces of the west wall. These interior repairs can not be completed until moisture is prevented from entering the building.

Some Background

The Merchant's House was once one of a series of contiguous buildings with shared party walls between the row houses. The party walls terminated in parapets topped with coping stones. Typically, because party walls were not intended to be exposed to the weather, they were constructed of "soft" bricks, which were less expensive than vitrified "hard" bricks, but more vulnerable to deterioration. In addition, softer mortar was generally used to bond the bricks. When the buildings on either side of the Merchant's House were removed, the party-wall brick masonry was exposed to the weather.

What's the Problem, Anyway?

The problem we have faced for several years is the infiltration of water into the west party wall, and to some extent into the east wall as well, resulting in damage to the plaster of the walls and cornices on the inside of the building. Water entered through the joints between the coping stones atop the parapets and through the deteriorating mortar joints in the brick masonry. Complicating the problem was the application in the 1970s of a moisture-impervious stucco that actually entrapped water within the wall, forcing it to migrate toward the dryer interior surfaces. Because the interior plaster was directly applied to the brick, this condition contributed to the demise of the plaster finishes, evident as "bloom" (the white fuzzy-looking stuff that you see on the interior surfaces of the party walls), which is actually re-crystallized salts. We tried to remove the stucco coating by several methods, but each method destroyed the brick as well.

So What's the Cure?

The first step in stopping water infiltration has been to remove the coping stones and install metal flashing beneath them to prevent seepage into the party wall from the top. New flexible sealant was applied to the joints between the stones. The second step is a bit more complicated. The outer wythes of brick will be removed

and turned around so that the moisture-impervious coating is on the inward side of the wall. The bricks will be repointed with a mortar containing some cement to make it more weatherproof, but which is "soft" enough to allow water that might enter the wall to evaporate through the joints toward the exterior. We were fortunate to discover that the exposed bricks were not "soft," but vitrified, and will withstand exposure to weather.

Then What?

After a reasonable period of time to allow the wall to dry, deteriorated interior plaster can be removed and new plaster and cornices applied. Final painting may then take place.

The work doesn't stop here, however. Because the mortar joints continually transpire moisture and expand and contract, they will eventually deteriorate, and may require considerable repointing within 30 years. The sealants between the coping stones must be monitored annually and will probably need some work within 8-10 years. Unfortunately, there are no miracle materials that can be applied and forgotten. Our best weapon in protecting and preserving the House is a healthy application of vigilance and maintenance.



Glossary of Terms

Coping—A water-resistant covering on top of a wall, usually of stone or terra cotta.

Flashing—Sheet metal or other flexible material formed to prevent water from entering a building at joints or intersections.

Joints—The space between masonry joints, in this case stones or bricks.

Mortar—Material used to fill masonry joints, usually a mix of lime and sand with some cement and water.

Parapet—The portion of a wall that projects above the adjacent roof.

Repointing—Removal of existing mortar in brick joints and application of new mortar.

Vitrified—Silicon (in bricks) fused by the firing process to the point of being impervious to water.

Wythe—A single layer or thickness of brick masonry. Most party walls are three wythes thick.



Wisteria Watch

Bring your lunch and enjoy the quiet haven of our 19th-century garden in bloom.

Open Sunday through Thursday,
1 to 4 p.m.

The Merchant's House Museum is New York City's only family home preserved intact, inside and out, from the 19th century and Greenwich Village's only historic house museum. A row house built in 1832, it is among the finest surviving examples of late-Federal and Greek Revival architecture of the period. Home to hardware merchant Seabury Tredwell and family for 100 years, the landmark house, complete with original furniture, clothing, and memorabilia, offers an intimate glimpse into the lifestyle of a prosperous New York City merchant family of the 19th century.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Sunday, May 10, 3 to 5 p.m.

Mother's Day Tea

Celebrate "the day" surrounded by blossoms and birdsong in our garden. Traditional tea with scones, tea sandwiches, and desserts. \$20, \$35 for two. Reservations (212) 777-1089.

Monday, May 11, through Thursday, May 14, 8 p.m.

Jane Eyre, One-Woman Show

Lisa Hayes returns to the Merchant's House in her popular adaptation of the classic 19th-century romance. \$15, \$12 members. Reservations (212) 777-1089.

Sunday, May 31, 1 to 4 p.m.

Walking Tour, A 19th-Century Merchant at Home and at Work

Meet at the Merchant's House for a tour of the landmarked family home. Then walk with your guide or take the M-15 bus to the South Street Seaport, where the tour will reconvene at 3 p.m. \$15, \$12 members of the Merchant's House or South Street Seaport.

Reservations (212) 748-8590.

Wednesday, June 10, 6 to 9 p.m.

"And The Beats Go On"

Fifth Annual Garden Benefit

Be there or be square! Call (212) 777-1089 for your invitation.

"Tea for Two"

Traditional tea in the garden

Sunday, June 14

Sunday, July 12

Seatings at 2 and 3 p.m.

Scones, finger sandwiches, and desserts. \$24 couple, \$15 individual. Reservations (212) 777-1089.

Sunday, June 21, 2 p.m.

A Walk in NoHo

Promenaders gather at the Merchant's House to join Henry Hope Reed for a tour of almost two centuries of the architecture and history of our now-trendy nabe.

Gathering in the garden follows. A collaboration of Classical America and the Merchant's House. \$15, \$12 members. Reservations (212) 777-1089.

Sunday, June 28, 1 to 4 p.m.

Walking Tour, A 19th-Century Merchant at Home and at Work

Repeat of May 31 tour.

Great New York Writers In Great New York Places

A year-long series of readings celebrating the literary history of New York City in significant architectural and historical sites.

Sponsored by the Merchant's House Museum, The Historic House Trust, the City of New York/Parks & Recreation, and the Library of America as part of NYC 100, a commemoration of the centennial of greater New York.

Reservations (212) 360-1378

Sunday, May 17, 2 to 4 p.m.

James Baldwin

At the Village Vanguard

178 Seventh Avenue South.

Reception follows. \$20.

Tuesday, June 9, 12 noon.

William Cullen Bryant

In Bryant Park

Free public event.

Tuesday, July 7, 6 to 8 p.m.

Herman Melville

Aboard the ship *Wavertree*

At the South Street Seaport.

Reception follows. \$20.

South Street Seaport and The Merchant's House To Offer Joint Programs

Spring walking tours will be the first in a number of events planned as joint ventures of the South Street Seaport and the Merchant's House Museum.

The Seaport and the Merchant's House are natural partners; you might say we go together like a horse and carriage.

In 1832, when the Tredwell home was built, it was located "uptown" in the most fashionable New York City neighborhood. Downtown, Seabury Tredwell's hardware business on Pearl Street was within sight of the full-rigged ships docked at the South Street Seaport. The United States was at peace; the industrial revolution was under way; and the world's goods (including hardware that Tredwell sold to stores in the hinterland) were arriving by packet and pouring into the warehouses at the seaport. The merchants prospered.

We are pleased to join the Seaport in bringing a 19th-century merchant's world of commerce and elegant living alive. See calendar for details—and watch for announcements of future programs.

Merchant's House Museum is the newsletter of the Museum.

Mary Knapp, editor

Merchant's House Museum

29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003

Telephone (212) 777-1089 Fax (212) 777-1104



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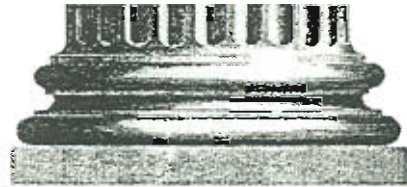
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"And The Beats Go On"

The War Against the Squares has long been a Downtown tradition—since the 1850s, when the very first Bohemians (rebellious against the rising tide of middle-class Victorian prudery) gathered at Pfaff's beer cellar on Broadway, just a few blocks from the Merchant's House (where the squares lived).

Downtown has been hipper than hip ever since. So in the spirit of fun—and all for a good cause—on the night of June 10, the garden will be a real Beat scene. Wear your blackest black, and bring your bongos—baby. See calendar for details.

The vault of Pfaff's where the drinkers and laughers meet to eat and drink and carouse, While on the walk immediately overhead pass the myriad feet of Broadway.

Walt Whitman,

"The Two Vaults," 1861

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