

Merchant's House Museum

Newsletter

Spring 2000

The Tredwells' Summer Home Escapes Demolition

In 1832, three years before he bought the house on Fourth Street and the year of a devastating cholera epidemic in New York City, Seabury Tredwell bought a 650-acre farm and colonial farmhouse on the ocean in Rumson, New Jersey. He would later add 150 more acres to his holdings there. For years, the family divided their time between their city and country homes.

In 1928, the farmhouse was sold by Gertrude Tredwell, and since then has been the property of many private owners. Recently, however, the house was sold to a couple who intended to demolish it.

Now thanks to concerted opposition by the Monmouth County Historical Society, local and state agencies, and interested individuals, demolition plans have been cancelled.

We at the Merchant's House have been involved from the beginning and will do whatever we can to help preserve this historically significant structure.

A chronicler of 19th-century New York City society determined that to be part of the City's socially elite, it was necessary for a family to own a home "above Bleecker"—and a country home as well. Taken together, these two homes are the only surviving example of the bygone lifestyle of the merchant elite who built the commercial foundation of the City.

Live from The Merchant's House!

On January 3, we held our collective breath as the scaffolding came down to reveal the newly restored 1832 windows and the reinstallation of the original dark green shutters on the south facade.

Channel Five's *Good Day New York* was on hand to document the unveiling with a live broadcast. Director Pi Gardiner conducted a tour of the House for TV viewers as volunteers dressed as Tredwell family members drifted through the rooms. And the conclusion? The restoration was a stunning success.

Fifty-Three Restorations did the painstaking work, adding UV protection, which allows us to display more of the collection throughout the House. The windows have been painted the original color as revealed by a microscopic paint (continued on back page)



"Heaven save the ladies, how they dress! We have seen more colours in these ten minutes, than we should have seen elsewhere, in as many days. What various parasols! what rainbow silks and satins! what pinking of thin stockings, and pinching of thin shoes, and fluttering of ribbons and silk tassels, and display of rich cloaks with gaudy hoods and linings!"

Charles Dickens, commenting in *American Notes*, 1842, on the parade of fashionably dressed women promenading up and down Broadway.

Illustration from *Godey's Lady's Book*, March 1841

Dressmaking Exhibit To Open March 2; Will Feature Three-part Lecture Series

"People wonder what the Tredwell women did all day," says Kenneth Loyal Smith, curator of the Merchant's House and of the forthcoming exhibit, "Dressmaking in a 19th-century New York City Townhouse."

"It may come as a surprise to discover how much time they spent sewing their dresses," he continues. "A dressmaker who came to the House would drape and cut the bodices, but the women of the House would stitch them together and construct the skirts as well. Not only that, but they also made some of the shirts worn by the men in the family."

The exhibit, which opens March 2 and runs through May 27, will feature women's and men's clothing from the Museum's costume collection as well as sewing tools like a collapsible skirt form and an original Willcox and Gibbs chain-link sewing machine from the curator's private collection.

Eliza Tredwell and her six daughters were beautifully dressed, judging from the gowns in the Museum's collection. According to Smith, "The Tredwell women knew fashion and spared no expense in assembling their wardrobes."

Leading authorities on costume history

will lecture at the Museum in connection with the exhibit. Each lecture will begin at 10:30 a.m., followed by a reception.

Valerie Steele, chief curator of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, will lead off the series on Wednesday, March 29. Her topic is "The Corset: Fashioning the Body." She will explore the social psychology of the corset and trace how it has fashioned the ideal body throughout history. Dr. Steele is a well-known authority and the author of numerous books on fashion.

On Tuesday, April 11, Betty Kirke will speak on "Updating Draping a la Vionnet." An authority on Vionnet, Ms. Kirke is a former senior conservator of the collection at the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology and the author of *Madeleine Vionnet*.

June Bove, former consultant to the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and currently professor of Museum Studies at the Fashion Institute of Technology, will speak on "The Role of the Dressmaker in the 19th-century Townhouse" on Thursday, May 4.

The Museum is open to visitors Thursday through Monday, 1 to 5 p.m. Guided tours on Saturdays and Sundays.

The Merchant's House Museum is New York City's only family home preserved intact—inside and out—from the 19th century. A National Historic and New York City landmark, the house was built in 1832 and was home to a prosperous merchant family for 100 years. Visit Thursday through Monday, 1 to 5 p.m. And visit us on the web: www.merchantshouse.com

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Thursday, March 2 through
Monday, May 27

"Dressmaking in a 19th-Century New York City Townhouse"

An exhibit and lecture series focusing on the construction of clothing for a wealthy New York City family of the 19th century.

The Lecture Series

\$25 each, \$60 for the series. A reception follows the lectures. Call (212) 777-1089 for reservations or e-mail nyc1832@merchantshouse.com

Wednesday, March 29, 10:30 a.m.

"The Corset: Fashioning the Body" Valerie Steele, chief curator of the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Tuesday, April 11, 10:30 a.m.

"Updating Draping a la Vionnet"

Betty Kirke, author of *Madeleine Vionnet* and former senior conservator at the collection at the Museum of the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Thursday, May 4, 10:30 a.m.

"The Role of the Dressmaker in the 19th-century Townhouse"

June Bove, former textile conservator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and currently professor of Museum Studies at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

Tuesday, April 13, 6 to 9 p.m.

Thomas Jefferson Birthday Celebration

Lecture at 6 p.m., followed by T.J.'s Birthday Party at 7 p.m. with his favorite foods, including peas, baked Virginia ham, and coconut cake. And "the necessity of life" (wine). \$60, members \$30. Call (212) 777-1089 or e-mail nyc1832@merchantshouse.com for reservations.



THE HISTORIC HOUSE TRUST OF NEW YORK CITY

Coming Attractions

Beginning in May. . .

Great New York Writers In Great New York Places 2000

Our third year-long series of readings celebrating the history of New York City in significant architectural and historical sites. Sponsored by the Merchant's House Museum, the Historic House Trust of New York City, City of New York/Parks and Recreation, and The Library of America. For tickets, call (212) 360-1378.

May 31 to June 15

Edith Wharton Tour of Italian Gardens and Villas

With a copy of Edith Wharton's *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* in hand, 24 lucky people will retrace the steps of Wharton to Italian villas and their gardens this June. Sights such as Isola Bella on Lake Maggiore, Villa Cicogna at Bisuchio, Villa Barbarigo near Padua and Villa Gamberaia near Florence will be included.

Thomas Hayes and Judith Chatfield, leading Edith Wharton and Italian garden experts, will direct the tour, which is co-sponsored by Classical America and the Merchant's House Museum.

For copy of the itinerary and complete travel information, contact Thomas Hayes, P.O. Box 752, Monterey, MA 01245, or call him at (413) 528-9992.

New Hours for Visiting

The Museum is now open from 1 to 5 p.m., Thursday through Monday. Guided tours are available Saturday and Sunday.

To see what else is happening, log on to our web site:

www.merchantshouse.com

The Museum's public education programs are sponsored in part through the generous support of the Public Service Award program of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

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

Mary Knapp, editor

Merchant's House Museum

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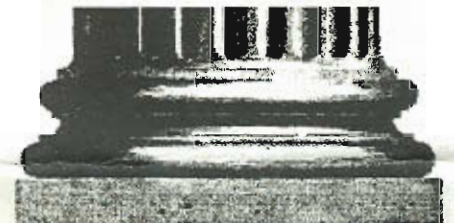
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Live from the Merchant's House (continued from front page)

analysis—the color of cream. Now we are moving on to do the windows on the north facade. If you would like to contribute to this project, make your check out to the Merchant's House Museum, mark it "windows," and mail to 29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003. Your contribution is tax deductible. (Thank you.)

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