

no. 5

Old Merchant's House

Newsletter

Fall / Winter 1991



*The Board of Directors of
the Old Merchant's House
invites you to celebrate the reopening of the museum
at a 19th century holiday party
on Tuesday, December 10, or Wednesday, December 11,
from six until eight o'clock
Twenty-nine East Fourth Street
New York*

R.S.V.P. (212) 777-1089
Old Merchant's House

Music and Refreshments

*Members Free
Non-members \$20.00*

The Structural Restoration was Nearly Finished... When We Learned We May Need to Rebuild the West Wall

After more than a year of work, the structural stabilization of the Old Merchant's House was virtually complete when the results of studies and testing led our architects, engineers, and conservators to conclude that the west wall may need to be totally rebuilt.

The structural restoration work has been a tremendous undertaking for the museum— and to date has cost an alarming amount of money, almost \$600,000. But much has been accomplished. With no support on either side, the building was standing like a house of cards, with walls falling out and away from the structure. To stop this, the front and rear walls were tied into the floor joists with steel angles and expansion bolts on each floor. At final count, 43 “ties” were used to secure the walls, over double the original estimate.

As our luck would have it, testing of the east and west walls showed that an extremely tenacious exterior stucco coating on the brick is preventing the currently water-saturated walls from drying out. (The source of the water penetration was found to be the roof parapets. Work to rectify that problem has been completed.) Moreover, the testing revealed that the mortar that bonds the inner and outer wythes of brick is no longer sound, having had its original bonding agent, lime, leached out after years of water penetration.

Our story only gets worse. Removal of the stucco coating is only possible by abrasive means, which irreparably damages the brick. We are now investigating both short and long-term solutions to the problem. Rebuilding the west wall could cost a staggering \$200,000.

In addition to this unforeseen work, we must restore the front facade, including the marble stoop and doorway, the rear facade and, lastly, the interior. We are striving to secure funding so that we can continue the restoration. As we all know, historic preservation is hugely expensive. You can help by contributing to the Old Merchant's House Restoration Fund. We thank you for being as generous as you can.

Textiles Safe from Damage and Dust

Last spring, the Old Merchant's House began the final phase of restoration work to stabilize the museum building — installing structural ties on all floors of the museum

and repairing the east and west walls. The work required that the entire collection of textiles, furniture, and decorative arts objects be properly packed and stored — made safe not only from potential damage, but also from the huge amount of dirt and dust that would be stirred up during the course of the construction work.

Professional art handlers were called in to pack the furniture and decorative arts objects. Protecting the fragile textiles collection presented a larger and more creative challenge, however, as much of the vast collection was to be found packed away in attic trunks and closet drawers. The task loomed large.

An article in *The New York Times* concerning the plight of the museum's collection attracted the attention of Yvette Sencer, Acting Dean of Graduate Studies at the Fashion Institute of Technology. (The master's program in Museum Studies at F.I.T. leads to a degree in either Decorative Arts or Costumes and Textiles. Developing skills in conservation and preservation techniques is key to the goals of the program.) The Old Merchant's House and F.I.T. worked together to devise a plan to bring students to the museum to help. Margaret Fikioris, formerly a textiles conservator at the Henry Francis duPont Winterthur Museum and currently an instructor in textiles conservation at F.I.T., directed the work of ten graduate students from the Costumes and Textiles program. Nine students spent class time each week at the Old Merchant's House cataloguing, photographing, and packing the textiles. The tenth student worked as an intern coordinating the needs of the museum and the efforts of volunteers, and monitoring the project's progress.

In order to conserve the textiles, acid-free boxes, acid-free packing paper, and unbuffered paper (suitable for packing silks) were purchased. A small but powerful hand-held vacuum was also purchased, and remains a well-utilized part of the curatorial supply closet. A gift of 16 yards of Gore-tex fabric — which resists dust particles while allowing air to pass through — was secured by Ms. Fikioris. Some costs of the project were underwritten by the Junior League of the City of New York.

Many days were as exciting as days in Grandma's attic. “Oohs and aahs” were heard from students and museum volunteers alike as unique pieces surfaced. Each piece was given a collection number, description, condition report, and photographed. Then, each was carefully packed for storage. Some fascinating discoveries include a large collection of early nineteenth century fans; a collection

of mid-nineteenth century *Godey's Ladies Books*, with many items from the collection identical to patterns found in the books; an assortment of the earliest type of brassieres, and many other nineteenth century undergarments; dozens of examples of lace, both hand and machine made; dark green cotton window hangings with an early nineteenth century silhouette; and mid-nineteenth century French-blue fringes.

All window and bed hangings had to be removed and packed in preparation for the restoration. The silk damask reproduction curtains from the parlor floor were carefully vacuumed to remove loose dirt, wrapped in the unbuffered paper, and settled into acid-free boxes. The original 1865 curtains — or what is left of them — were discovered in the attic and packed, for reference. The curtains and bed hangings from the bedroom floor were also vacuumed, packed, and stored on the mattresses of the four-poster bedsteads in their respective rooms. Because of the unique construction of the window valences and bed swags in these two rooms, special boxes were made to hold these items. Each bedstead was cocooned in wrapping made partly of heavy clear plastic and partly of the Gore-tex fabric. The aim was to protect the bed and textiles from dirt while allowing air to flow through the Gore-tex panels to prevent heat or moisture build-up through the summer months.

When all the textiles were packed, the acid-free boxes were placed in a secure enclosure that has been constructed in the central area of the servants hall on the fourth floor. The room is made of melamine-coated particle board. Using this material was critical, as over the course of the summer plywood would have emitted so much acidic gas that the acid-free quality of the boxes protecting the collection would have been compromised. An interior shelf of melamine-coated board was installed about five feet off the floor and a “skirt” of Gore-tex was fastened on the inside walls of the storage room. Another strip of Gore-tex was laid across the roof of the room at floor level. This construction created a “chimney effect,” allowing the coolest air to enter at the floor level while the rising heated air exits at the top. The shelf holds approximately 1000 cubic feet of packed boxes. A thermometer in the storage area monitors the temperature, which remains cool. With two padlocks on the door and the monitored temperature, the textiles collection has been as secure and protected as possible throughout the restoration.

Museum News

Historic Structures Report Work Leads to New Discoveries

The restoration work on the second floor has led to exciting new findings about the original fabric of the house and life in the nineteenth century. Beneath the floor boards in the bedroom floor hallway, researchers from Jan Hird Pokorny Architects, the firm conducting the Historic Structures Report, have found evidence of an early nineteenth-century bathroom. The bathroom, located under the stairs just to the left of the old elevator shaft, was not original to the house, however. From the type of nails used, we believe the bathroom was installed in the 1840's. Lead waste pipes and lead pipes for hot and cold running water indicate this bathroom was very modern for the time.

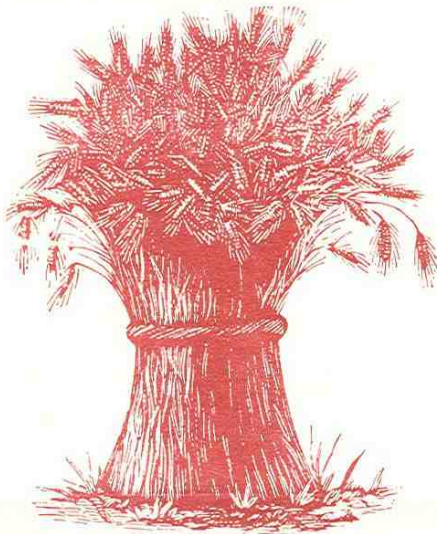
In addition to this discovery, the purpose of the hidden trap door in the hall between the bedrooms on the second floor is being reevaluated. It has always been believed that this trap door provided access to the mahogany sliding double doors on the parlor floor to clean the mechanisms. However, a recent investigation by that daring young architect Michael Devonshire (who climbed down the ladder into the dark and narrow passageway) proves the passageway only gives access to one side of the sliding doors. From all evidence gathered, the passageway seems to have been created by Joseph Brewster when the house was built in 1832.

The original trap door is hidden beneath the chest of drawers in the closet. In order to open the trap door and enter the passageway, one must remove the closet drawers. The passage continues below into the closet of the kitchen and possibly to the cellar beneath it. Renovation of the kitchen closet into a modern kitchen in 1936 disturbed the passageway, and it now

ends at the ceiling level in the kitchen. Unfortunately, we have no answers yet to the mystery of what Joseph Brewster used such a passageway for. Michael did find some shards of an early nineteenth century wine bottle with wax drippings....

Volunteers Helping around the House

We would like to thank the many committed Old Merchant's House volunteers who have continued to work so hard for the museum throughout the restoration. John Abb painstakingly painted the gates of wrought and cast iron. Tracy Stora provides invaluable help as our dedicated newsletter art director, overseeing all graphics and layout. Mimi Sherman tirelessly works on textile conservation and the proper storage of our textiles collection. John Beck has donated great amounts of computer training time for the Old Merchant's House staff. Eddie Baltz devotedly helps out in the office as well as with various curatorial projects. Joie Anderson has been doggedly organizing and making an index of the



Godey's Ladies Books. Anne Churchill Coffey does our splendid calligraphy. Anthony Bello has been working to promote the museum and gave an engaging, standing-room-only slide lecture on the restoration this June at Federal Hall. In addition, many volunteers gave tours to the public this summer of the archaeology and restoration. Sylvia Mok is currently at work on a short video about the Old Merchant's House and, in her free time, maintains our garden. The Old Merchant's House Board of Directors and staff would like to thank all the volunteers for their help.

The Old Merchant's House is delighted to welcome back this fall the committee members of the Junior League of the City of New York. Among other activities, League members are continuing to work on our new education program for elementary school children. League members are also helping give tours to the public on Sunday afternoons. If you are interested in becoming an Old Merchant's House volunteer, please contact the museum office (777-1089).

We mourn the loss of Frederick V.L. Brokaw, who died this summer. Fritz helped the museum greatly as a board member, volunteer, and patron saint of restoration. Part of our museum life for decades, Fritz will be greatly missed.

Museum Calendar

September 26

Lecture and reception, "A History of Colonnade Row," by Dr. Regina M. Kellerman, Architectural Historian. Sponsored by the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, at the Great Hall of The Cooper Union, 7 East Seventh Street, 6 to 8 p.m. \$6.00 for members of GVSHP, \$10.00 for non-members.

Step into the past and be a part of our future

*GOOD NEIGHBOR \$25

Free admission for one during visiting hours.
Invitation to 19th century Holiday Party.
Bi-annual newsletter.

*PROTECTOR \$50

As above, for two.

*CULTURAL HERO \$100

*PRINCELY SUPPORTER \$250

*GUARDIAN ANGEL \$500

*TRUE FRIEND \$1,500

*POSTCARDS @\$1.00 each 10/\$8.50

*RESTORATION FUND \$ _____



Membership contributions are tax deductible. If you are eligible for a matching gift program, please take advantage of it to increase your gift. Gifts of securities are welcome. Please ask your broker or banker to call the museum office (777-1089).

Make check payable to:
Old Merchant's House

and mail with this form to:
Old Merchant's House
29 East Fourth Street
New York, NY 10003

Name _____
Address _____ Telephone _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

September 30

Lecture and reception, "Henry James' and Edith Wharton's Washington Square," by Scott Marshall, Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. La Maison Francaise, New York University, 16 Washington Mews, 6 to 7:30 p.m. Hosted by New York University Office of Community Relations and La Maison Francaise. Free.

October 28

Lecture and reception, "Silk and lace: Textiles of Nineteenth Century New York," by Mimi Sherman, Instructor of American Textiles and Needlework at the Museum of American Folk Art. La Maison Francaise, New York University, 16 Washington Mews, 6 to 7:30 p.m. \$6.00 for members, \$10.00 for non-members.

December 10 and 11

19th century Holiday Party, music and refreshments, 6 to 8 p.m. Members free, non-members \$20.00.

December 15

Museum reopens to the public for tours, Sundays, 1 to 4 p.m. Members free, non-members \$3.00.

December 22

Dramatic reading for children and adults of Clement Clarke Moore's nineteenth-century classic, *The Night Before Christmas*, 3 p.m. Tours and refreshments, 1 to 4 p.m. Members and children \$3.00, non-members \$6.00.

January 1

New Year's Day Reception, 1 to 4 p.m., tours and refreshments. Members \$3.00, non-members \$6.00.

Late Winter 1992

Exhibition, "Suburb to Seaport: Greenwich Village 1790-1850," at the South Street Seaport Museum, displaying objects from the Old Merchant's House collection.

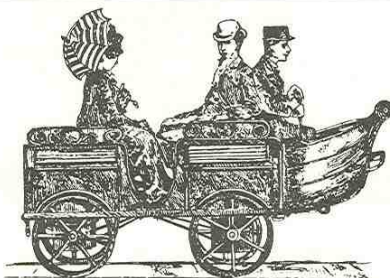
The Old Merchant's House on the Road

For adults...

We have created a unique and lively slide lecture on the Old Merchant's House and life in nineteenth-century New York. Speakers are available to deliver the lecture. If your organization or school would like to learn more about the museum and its history, architecture, restoration, and artifacts, please telephone the museum office (777-1089).

For elementary school children...

In collaboration with the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, the Old Merchant's House is offering a school program that teaches the history of Greenwich Village, emphasizing the importance of historic preservation. The program comprises an introductory slide presentation at the school — complete with nineteenth century artifacts; a walking tour of the Washington Square neighborhood; and a trip to the Old Merchant's House, where docents dressed in period clothing portray members of the Tredwell family during the tour. Please telephone the museum office for information (777-1089).



The Old Merchant's House is New York City's only family home preserved intact from the nineteenth century and Greenwich Village's only historic house museum. A row house built in 1832, it is among the finest surviving examples of American architecture of the period. Home to prosperous merchant Seabury Tredwell and family from 1835 to 1933, the house, which has been a museum open to the public since 1936, reflects in its original textiles, furniture, and decorative arts the lifestyle of a typical New York City upper-middle-class family of the last century.

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Old Merchant's House is the bi-annual newsletter for members of the museum. Inquiries may be sent to the Old Merchant's House, 29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003. Telephone 212-777-1089.

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