

# Old Merchant's House

Newsletter

Spring/Summer 1990

## A Letter from Carol Roberto

Dear Friends:

July 1990 marks the beginning of major reconstruction work on the Old Merchant's House. At that time the OMH will close its door to the public for several months. Remarkably, this is only the second time it has closed since it opened as a museum in 1936. Twelve years have passed since the last restoration work, in the 1970's, and, as all OMH members know, the current work is desperately needed.

### *The Glorious Restoration*

The wonderful news is that, in spite of all its damage, the OMH is fundamentally sound and can be restored to mint condition. The restoration will be thorough and long lasting. A settlement from the developer of the adjoining site has provided the "seed money" to finally start work. We must raise the remaining, very necessary, funds. We are depending on your contributions.

### *The Damaged East Wall*

Let me begin with a description of some major structural damage. This damage was primarily sustained during and after the 1988 demolition of 31 East Fourth Street, the OMH's "twin" house. It left the OMH in grave structural jeopardy.

The east wall was damaged during the demolition. Now, two years later, the interior east walls on all four floors have suffered extensive water damage because this wall, stripped of its sheltering neighbor, stood vulnerably exposed to all weathers. The urban row house was never meant to be a free-standing structure. Its shared party wall was never meant to be an exposed exterior wall. Without the support of its neighbor, the OMH has shifted and cracked to an alarming degree.

### *A Vulnerable West Wall*

Water is as damaging as fire, but the effects are not apparent for a long time

and the actual sources can be obscure. We knew the exposure of the east wall would lead to water damage, but the west wall has also disappointingly continued its long history of water damage. When 27 East Fourth Street (built in 1826) was torn down in 1946, a trucking garage replaced it. The garage floor is situated just above street level, which makes it about level with the fireplace mantle in our family room. This has led to water seepage for the past forty years. Several years ago the interior west wall was waterproofed and replastered in the original manner - plaster applied directly to the bricks. Since then we have learned that the water-soluble nature of the plaster contributes to an on-going problem. This will be corrected during the reconstruction when the wall will be dried and replastered following a preservation technique that leaves a ventilating air space between plaster and brick.

### *The Southwest Crack*

Poor OMH, built in a quieter age, has suffered the blows of urbanization on both sides. It has been shaken for forty years by shocks as trucks struck the garage's door frame. The large vertical crack that appeared at the southwest corner during summer 1988 is related both to those shocks and lateral forces on the building incurred during the demolition of 31 East Fourth and subsequent loss of that structural support.

The crack-causing structural movement has also split open portions of the interior woodwork. You can see the splits in the shutter box panels on the parlor and second floor front windows.

### *And...The Roof Leaks*

A leaking slate roof has added to the already extensive water damage, particularly spoiling some of the plaster moldings. The number of broken tiles on the roof is not yet known.

### *Fixing the OMH*

During the first six weeks of work, scaffolding will be erected and exterior work will be done. There will be

waterproofing and reinforcement to the east side brick party wall. The bricks on the front will be pointed as needed. Windows and doors will be repaired and painted. The beautiful cornice, our crown jewel, will be caulked and painted.

While the scaffolding is up, the roof will be repaired and all the broken slate tiles replaced. They will be replaced with new tiles from the same quarry that produced the originals.

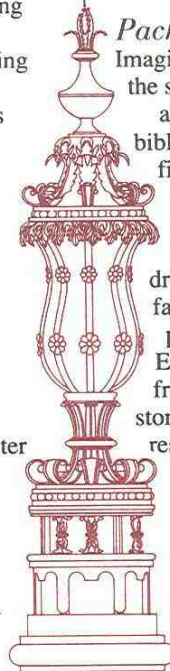
Structural stability will be restored by anchoring the walls to the floor joists on all sides of the house - north, south, east and west. Next the construction crew will move inside to the second and third floors where they will continue to strengthen the ties around the perimeter of the building. The pine floors will be opened for this work, which will mean moving the third floor office to the basement.

When the carpenters come to put the floors back together, they will also restore all of the damaged interior woodwork. The water-damaged ornamental plaster will be repaired by David Flaharty, working again on one of his favorite houses. This Philadelphia sculptor beautifully restored the OMH's ornamental plaster in 1979.

### *Packing Up the House*

Imagine 100 years of a family's history in the small details of everyday life - albums of daguerreotypes, family bibles, gravy boats, fish platters, fingerbowls, jugs and crocks, foot warmers, candlesticks, candelabra, linen doilies with crochet work around the edge, dresses, bonnets, shawls, petticoats, fans and hair ornaments, family portraits and oil paintings of European scenes, all in heavy gold frames, and etchings. All must be stored away before the interior restoration begins.

Additional protection will be needed for the marbleized vestibule walls and mahogany doors on the parlor floor. The pendant glass fixtures in the stair halls will have to be removed. The glass globes and smoke bells





of other fixtures will be packed.

Draperies and hangings will have to be removed for cleaning and storage, then reinstalled when the dust settles. Carpeting will be removed or protected on the stairs, the family room, parlors and bedroom floors. These items are overdue for cyclical maintenance and now is an opportune time to have the work done – if the necessary funds can be raised. After the painting of the three museum floors, the carpeting will be cleaned and restretched.

The Decorators Club, which has supported the OMH since 1962, will be called upon for its recommendations and assistance under the OMH Curatorial Committee Chairperson, Sara Tomerlin Lee, a member of the Club.

The Old Merchant's House has been through one major restoration. We know restoration's difficulties – working through the noise, dust and debris. We also know its delights – watching skilled craftsmen at work. A restoration in progress is a stimulating time of review and planning. It is also an expensive time and one when the OMH must call upon its friends for donations to the Restoration Fund. We look forward to hearing from you during the summer and seeing you at the reopening party.

Sincerely,

*Carol Roberto*

Carol Roberto

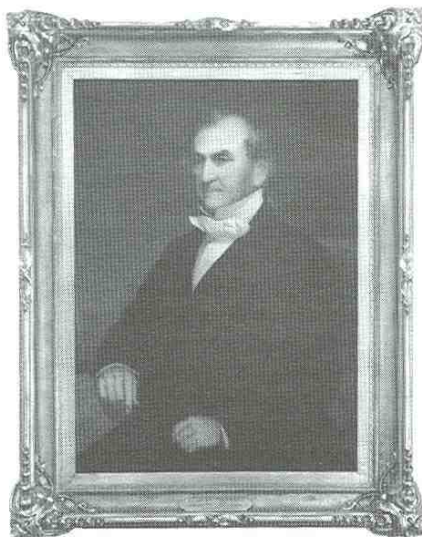
Carol and her late husband, Joseph, were recently honored for their leadership role in the preservation of the Old Merchant's House at the Metropolitan Historic Structures Association's annual benefit on May 23.

## The Tredwell Family

*By Anthony Bellow*

The history of the Tredwell family, inhabitants of the Old Merchant's House, spans more than a century, from the American Revolution to the New Deal! When Seabury Tredwell was born, he was, technically, a subject of King George III. George Washington became America's first president when Seabury was 9. Andrew Jackson was the seventh president when the Tredwells moved to the house. When Gertrude Tredwell died, Roosevelt had begun to guide America through the Great Depression and Hitler was rising to power.

Seabury Tredwell, head of the family, had a conservative heritage. He was born



*Seabury Tredwell*

in North Hempstead, Long Island, in 1780, the son of a physician who was rumored to have supported the Tories at the time of the Revolution. He was closely related on his mother's side to the first bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in North America and traced his ancestors back to John Alden and Priscilla Mullens of "Mayflower" and Longfellow fame.

His wife, Eliza, came from a different background. It has been said that she was the daughter of a sea captain who abandoned his family. It is generally accepted that her mother ran a boarding house on Pearl Street near Mr. Tredwell's shop. Possibly it was here that Eliza and Seabury met.

In 1835 Seabury Tredwell, long a partner in *Tredwell and Kissam*, prosperous marine-hardware merchants, decided to retire from commercial trade. He was now able to live on his investments and the interest gleaned from personal loans. First he had a major decision to



*Eliza Tredwell*

make: where to live? In 1821, a year after he married Eliza Earle Parker, he bought a house at 12 Dey Street. It was near City Hall, at that time the heart of the finest New York neighborhood. Fourteen years later, New York had exploded in size. Seabury decided to sell the old home and leave the growing congestion of downtown New York for a house in the Bond Street area (later known as Astor Place).

He chose the house at 361 East Fourth Street (the address at the time) and paid the builder/owner, Joseph Brewster, \$18,000 for the three-year-old house. It was to be a home in the newest and most desirable section of the city. Seabury was 55 and Eliza was in her late thirties. They would live here together for thirty years.

With them came their seven children, Elizabeth (born 1821), Horace (1823), Mary Adelaide (c.1825), Samuel (1825), Phebe (1829), Julia (1833), and newborn Sarah. Five years later, they were blessed with Gertrude, the only child born in the house.

The house was larger than their former home, decorated in the latest fashion, furnished with pieces ordered from the finest cabinetmakers and equipped with all the conveniences of the day.

It was an exciting time to be living on East Fourth Street. Just around the corner, Lafayette Place was lined with the homes of millionaires; the Delanos, Astors, van Warts, Landons and Brevoorts all lived there. The Bowery and lower Broadway were lined with theaters and restaurants. The finest shopping in the city was near by on Canal Street.

As the children grew up, beaux came calling and the parlors were the scene of wedding receptions for Elizabeth and Mary Adelaide. Samuel married and left home. Phebe, Julia and Gertrude remained at home unwed. Though Horace and Sarah never married, they also chose to leave home; Horace around the corner on Lafayette Place and plucky Sarah to the Hotel Cadillac in Times Square.

Over the course of time, various members of the family lived in the house. The 1855 City Census reported fourteen people dwelling here. They included Mrs. Tredwell's widowed sister, the Tredwell's eldest daughter, Elizabeth, with her husband and a new baby, and four servants from Ireland and England.

The parlors witnessed funerals as well as weddings. Papa died in 1865; Eliza in 1882. Horace returned home to die in 1885. Finally just Phebe, Julia and Gertrude were left in the house, living on their inheritance.

While the once splendid



### Helping around the house

Volunteers are needed. A myriad of positions are available! Volunteer training for all of our Interpreters, Desk Docents, and Office Volunteers will begin in the Fall. An exciting schedule of speakers on a variety of subjects and more information on the Tredwell family and our historic structure is promised. As we are planning to expand museum hours in the Fall, we need more dedicated volunteers! Please contact the museum if you are interested in becoming a volunteer!

### Library Needs

The Old Merchant's House is working to assemble a collection of books about 19th century New York City history, architecture, decorative arts, customs and manners. The collection will be used by staff and volunteers to improve their understanding and interpretation of the site—as well as by those doing future research at the house. Any donations of books on these subjects would be gratefully received and put to good use. The following titles are sought in particular:

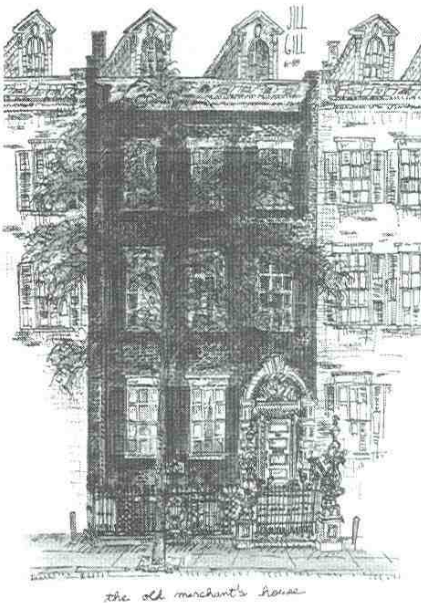
1. *The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York* by John A. Kouwenhoven (Doubleday, 1953)
2. *Bricks and Brownstones* by Charles Lockwood (Abbeville Press, 1972)
3. *Greek Revival Architecture in America* by Talbot Hamlin (Dover Books, 1944)
4. *Classic New York* by Ada Louise Huxtable (Anchor Books, 1964)
5. *19th Century Dwelling Houses of Greenwich Village*, Verna Small, editor (Greenwich Village Homeowner's Association, 1964)
6. *New York in the Nineteenth Century* by John Grafton (Dover Books, 1980)
7. *Old New York in Early Photographs* by Mary Black (Dover Books, 1973)
8. *Nineteenth Century New York in Rare*

*Photographic Views* by Frederick S. Lightfoot (Dover Books, 1981)

### Preserving images of lost New York

#### Member adds OMH to her artistic archive

Jill Gill is an artist whose specialty is watercolor and ink paintings of townhouses and interiors. Her clients love the way she captures their home or their favorite room in intricate lines and a wash of color.



*Jill Gill's rendition of the Old Merchant's House.*

But Jill's passion is capturing fascinating blocks of New York City before they fall under the demolition ball of development. Her lightning pen has caught forever the beaux-arts mansions that stood on the sight of Museum Tower, on the Upper West Side; the art deco

Bonwit Teller building replaced by Trump Tower; the old theater and movie houses that are fast disappearing from the streets of New York. Her paintings recall these blocks in all their original grandeur.

Now we are fortunate to have had Jill come forward and put her pen to work on Old Merchant's House. The result is a beautiful postcard depicting the house in its heyday, complete with its long-disappeared shutters (another much-needed restoration project). And on either side, Jill's postcard suggests the neighboring houses — number 31, the second speculative house built by Joseph Brewster, and number 27, built in 1826. How wonderful to see the tire shop and the rubble replaced by a grand sparkling block of homes in a well-to-do, late Federal neighborhood.

#### Postcards by mail

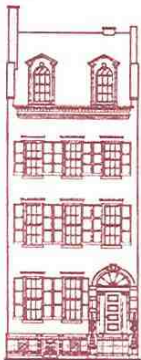
Jill's postcards are perfect for short notes, invitations and thank you's. They are so different from the usual and offer you a special way to show your support for the museum as you share its beauty with friends and correspondents.

On sale at the museum for \$1 each, the cards are available to newsletter readers at a special price — just \$8.50 for 10 cards. Simply check the appropriate box on the coupon, page 3, enclose your check for only \$8.50, and we'll send your cards by mail.

The Old Merchant's House is a non-profit organization committed to the restoration and preservation of the historic Seabury Tredwell House. Built near Manhattan's Astor Place in 1832, the museum was the Tredwell home for one hundred years. It became a museum in 1936.

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

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Old Merchant's House  
29 East Fourth Street  
New York, NY 10003



neighborhood was transformed over the next fifty years into a quarter of factories and tenements, Seabury's daughters valiantly held on. The theaters and shopping districts moved uptown, first to 14th Street then to 23rd. Eventually, all the fine residences on Broadway were demolished. Shining carriages no longer drove up to the front door.

In 1906 the parlors held another funeral...Sarah's. Phebe followed her the next year after a fatal fall, possibly down the stairs. In 1909 Gertrude's last surviving sibling, Julia, passed away, leaving her essentially alone for the next twenty-four years trying to keep the house "as Papa wanted." Considered an eccentric recluse, she led a life that declined from elegance and comfort to bare subsistence. She died at the age of 93 in a world she no longer recognized or understood.

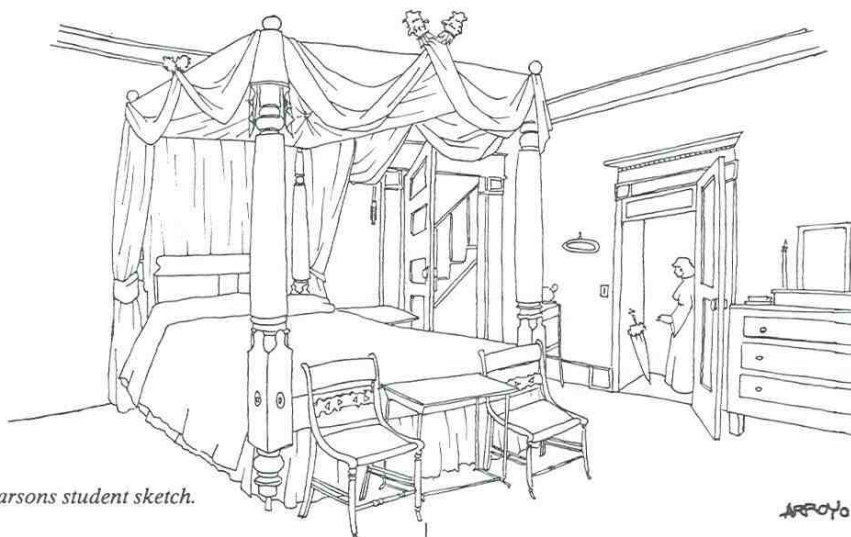
Although the Tredwells left us few written records, most of their personal possessions remain to give a very complete example of what life in 19th-century New York was really like. Not only is this house a monument to a family and a way of life, it is the most intact surviving pre-Civil War row house in Manhattan...and it is wonderful.

Anthony Bellov has been an OMH volunteer for several years. He is currently working on a tour book, of which this is an adapted excerpt.

## Museum News

### Board Strengthened

The Board of Directors is pleased to announce the addition of two new members. Joan Bull and Karen Treadwell joined the smaller, restructured Board at the February meeting. Joan has been a dedicated member of the OMH for years,



A Parsons student sketch.

and brings excellent museum and business experience to the board. Karen, who will serve as treasurer, is a financial director at the Rockefeller Group, bringing financial expertise to the Board. Karen is a distant relative of our Tredwells.

### IMS MAP Grant Awarded to OMH

A Museum Assessment Program grant has been awarded to the OMH by the Institute of Museum Services. This grant enables an expert to perform an overall, on-site review of the museum and advise on long-range planning of programs and operations. This will help the OMH to structure operations more efficiently, improve service to the community, and increase the base of local support. The Board and staff are looking forward to participating.

### Fall reopening celebration planned

A Fall 1990 reopening celebration is in the works to unveil the newly restored

Old Merchant's House to our members. We know you will all be pleased when you see the structurally secured museum in the fall.

### Collections care

Volunteers from the Junior League of the City of New York will initiate a project at the museum to label and store the OMH textile collection. This will be done with acid-free museum materials to ensure that Gertrude's gowns survive for generations to come.

### Museum special events

We are trying out several different ways of utilizing the OMH building to generate income for the museum. Do not forget us when planning your special event! This year, a company's board of directors held its formal meeting in the parlour; a picnic lunch was served in the garden; and a romantic, Brigadoon theme, private, candlelight dinner was held at the OMH in February. Several photo shoots are in the works, including one for *World of Interiors* and another for *Sterling Wallpaper*.

## Please help create a future for this unique landmark

Become a member today or, if you're already a member, sign up a friend.

#### ☐ GOOD NEIGHBOR \$25

Free admission during visiting hours. Invitation to the Victorian Holiday Party and Spring Garden Party

#### ☐ PROTECTOR \$50

As above for two and family

#### ☐ CULTURAL HERO \$100

As above plus invitation to special events

#### ☐ PRINCELY SUPPORTER \$250

As above plus gift of a new illustrated book on New York

#### ☐ GUARDIAN ANGEL \$500

As above plus more

#### ☐ TRUE FRIEND/CORPORATE

CHAMPION \$1,500

Host a special event at the House

#### ☐ PROUD OWNER \$2,000,000

Restricted deed

#### ☐ RESTORATION FUND \$\_\_\_\_\_

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POSTCARDS —@ \$1.00 each —10/\$8.50 box

Membership contributions are tax deductible. Please remember to inquire at your place of business about matching corporate gifts.

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