



# Old Merchant's House

Newsletter

Spring/Summer 1991

## Exhibition Marks Closing of Museum for Restoration

A dramatic exhibit, "Packing up for the Painters," drew large crowds at the Old Merchant's House March 1, 2 and 3. The exhibition, which marked the closing of the museum for eight months of restoration, recreated a domestic scene of the 1860's in which a family packs up its belongings for the painters' arrival. Trunks owned by members of the Tredwell family, the original occupants who lived in the house for a century, were scattered about the period rooms displaying treasured family clothing and possessions from the collection.

Many of the objects on display had never been on view before, including ball gowns, street clothes, shoes, undergarments, bed linens, table linens, needlework, family books and documents, china, and kitchen utensils. The objects, placed in vignettes, graphically displayed every-day life of nineteenth-century New York.

We wish to thank the many Old Merchant's House volunteers who gave so much of their time — and with such good humor — to help with the exhibition.

## Board Welcomes Two New Members

Two outstanding individuals have recently joined the Board of Directors of the Old Merchant's House. Kate Burns Ottavino and Timothy C. Forbes each bring expertise and experience of great value to the Board and the museum. The Board is delighted to welcome two such qualified, dedicated, and knowledgeable new members.

Kate Ottavino is Director of Preservation at the architectural firm of Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut & Whitelaw. She is an historic preservationist and architect specializing in architectural restoration, architectural materials, and fine arts conservation.

Ms. Ottavino holds an M.A. in Architecture and an M.S. in Historic Preservation from Columbia University. Ms. Ottavino's current projects include the restoration work on the U.S. Customs House, the Dakota apartment building in New York City and the Temple Rodef Shalom in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has worked on the restoration of Bethesda Terrace in Central Park, and the New York Public Library. Ms. Ottavino's assistance over the past year in developing a master restoration plan for the Old Merchant's House has been invaluable.

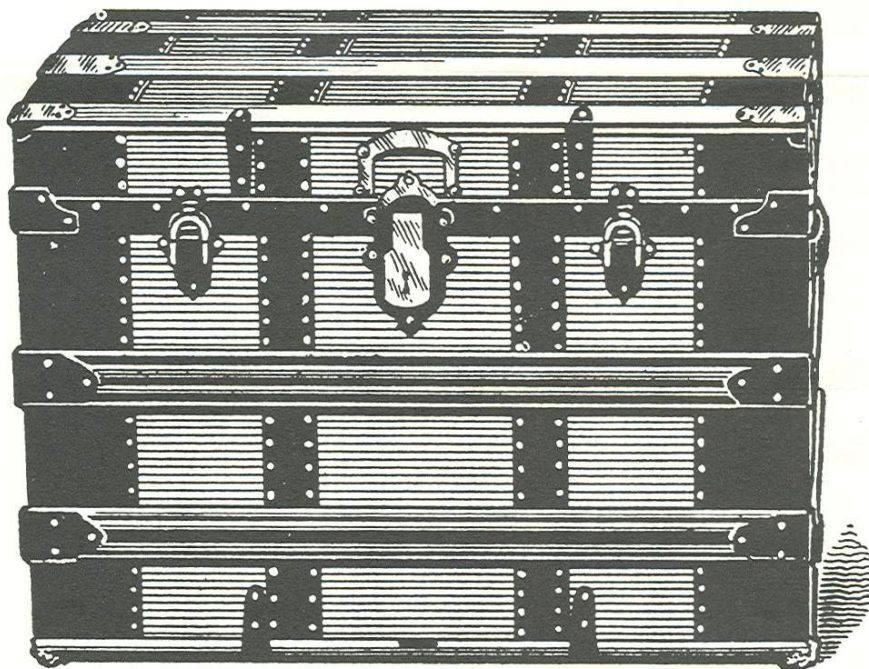
Tim Forbes is President of American Heritage, publishers of *American Heritage* magazine, *American Heritage of Invention & Technology*, and books on American history and related topics. Mr. Forbes is also a Vice President and Director of Forbes, Inc., publishers of *Forbes* magazine. He serves as a Trustee of Brown University, his alma mater, and St. Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center of New York; as a Director of the New York Landmarks Conservancy; and as Chairman of the Historic House Trust of New York

City. Mr. Forbes' knowledge of and interest in nineteenth-century New York is well known. Recently, Mr. Forbes took on his own mammoth restoration project, that of his own home, a Village row house of the same period as the Old Merchant's House.

## Archaeology at the Old Merchant's House

When Seabury Tredwell and his family moved uptown to the Old Merchant's House on Fourth Street in 1835, the Washington Square area was being developed as one of the city's first wealthy suburbs. Although this new way of life developed only a century and a half ago, we know surprisingly little about daily life in these early residential neighborhoods.

This spring, we will begin an archaeological study of the backyard of the Old Merchant's House to find out more about the Tredwells' way of life. The excavations will be conducted by a field class from the Anthropology Department



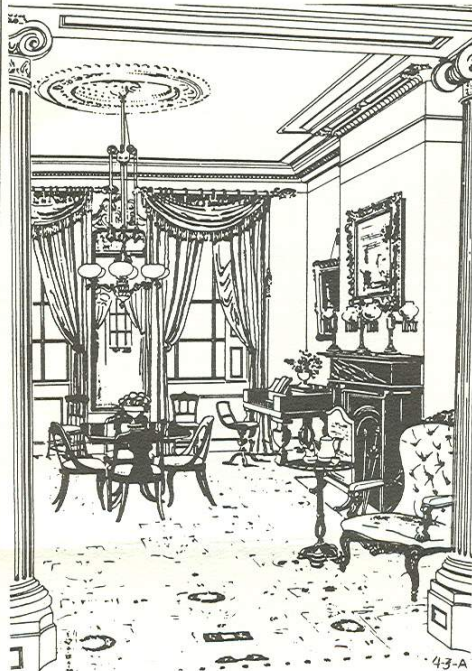


at City College. The study will form part of the historic structures report on the house that is being prepared by Jan Hird Pokorny, Architects. The excavations will be the first to examine a Greenwich Village backyard in its entirety.

We will focus the excavations on two different parts of the backyard in order to answer two different kinds of questions about life at the Tredwells' in the nineteenth century. Some excavations will be spread throughout the area in order to discover what the backyard was like in the nineteenth century; others will take place near the garden's back wall to locate the pit from the old outhouse, or privy.

Before the middle of the nineteenth century, New Yorkers had no indoor plumbing. Instead, they had outhouses in their backyards, which were usually placed near the back garden wall — as far from the house as possible. After the completion of the Croton Aqueduct System in 1842, the city began to lay water and sewer lines under the streets. Unfortunately, however, we have no records to tell us when individual houses like the Tredwells' hooked up to these new utilities and installed indoor plumbing. A privy pit can contain a treasure trove of materials that can be excavated and analyzed to tell us when the privy was abandoned and about daily life in the nearby house.

Privies can contain two different kinds of deposits. The very top layers were dumped into the privy after it was abandoned, to fill up the hole to the level of the surface of the surrounding yard. Garbage from the nearby house was often used to help fill up the privy. The materials included in the garbage can often be dated to give us an idea of when the privy was filled, and, by inference, when indoor plumbing was installed in the house. The garbage can also tell us about daily life in the house — it often includes the china and glassware that the family members used to prepare and serve their meals, and the animal bones, seeds, and pollen from their food. Under fill layers, privies also sometimes contain a layer of "nightsoil" left over from the privy's use. The seeds, pollen, and animal bones in the "nightsoil" can tell us more about the diet of the people who lived inside the house. Other excavations will take place throughout the site to explore how the Tredwells used their yard. We know amazingly little about what the backyards in the early suburbs were like. We do know that yards in nineteenth-century cities were often used as utility areas, where people occasionally dumped their refuse, hung laundry, and visited the



outhouse before plumbing was installed indoors. One historian has described urban backyards at this time as "typically rancid, disreputable, and overrun by rodents" — clearly areas to be avoided except when necessary. However, we also know from early newspaper advertisements that some houses at the edge of the city had gardens. We are not sure whether the yards in the early suburbs like the Washington Square area had ornamental or kitchen gardens, or whether they were used simply for utilitarian purposes.

We will excavate under the modern flagstone pavement to try to find out when these stones were laid. We will also look for older paths and pavements that might be buried in the ground. If we find such paths, we will follow them to discover whether they simply lead to the outhouse, or whether they define artfully arranged flower beds or a more utilitarian kitchen garden. We will also look for trash that may have been thrown into pits or strewn about the yard. Finally, we will take samples of the seeds and pollen from the plants that grew in the yard to see if they came primarily from the weeds that we would expect in a utility area or from the ornamental plants or vegetables that we would associate with a garden.

In addition to answering these questions, we also hope that we will find a large array of shards from ceramics and glassware — the vessels that the Tredwells used every day and, when broken, threw away in trash pits or the privy. If we do,

these vessels will be reconstructed and used in exhibits to interpret the way of life in the Old Merchant's House in the nineteenth century.

By Diana diZerega Wall

Diana diZerega Wall is Curator of Archaeology at the South Street Seaport Museum.

## Museum Calendar

### March 3

Museum closed for restoration. Scheduled reopening Fall 1991.

### May 11

"Archaeology at the Old Merchant's House," Saturday, 12 to 4 p.m. Tours every half-hour led by archaeologists of the excavation in progress. Admission \$6.00, members free. Refreshments.

### June 27

Lecture on the Old Merchant's House restoration, in conjunction with the series of Federal Hall Lunchtime Lectures, "Preserving New York: Case Studies in Restoration." 12:30 lecture, at Federal Hall; 1:45 tour of the restoration in progress. Call for information. Free to the public.

### June 28, 29, 30

"Hard Hat Tours of the Restoration," Friday, Saturday and Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m., every half-hour. Tours highlighting the restoration in progress with discussion of architectural preservation techniques and the storage and preservation of the museum's decorative arts and textile collection. Admission \$6.00, members free. Refreshments.

### Fall 1991

Lecture: "Edith Wharton's and Henry James' Washington Square," by Scott Marshall, Executive Director, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. Date and location to be announced.

Lecture: "Digging up the Backyard: Archaeology at the Old Merchant's House," by Diana diZerega Wall, Curator of Archaeology at the South Street Seaport. Date and location to be announced.

### "Pillar and Scroll" Road Show

Since the museum will be closed for almost a year for restoration, we have created a fascinating and unique 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 for details.

## Museum News

### *Restoration Plans Complete*

The Architectural Committee of the Board of Directors, under the wing of the remarkable Kate Burns Ottavino, has developed a five-phase restoration plan for the Old Merchant's House. Phase I, the emergency work to secure the building structure, is almost complete. Phase II, consisting of the installation of structural ties, exterior painting, masonry repairs, and the historic structures report, began in March and will take up to eight months. Phase III and IV are the front and rear facade restorations. Phase V is the interior restoration, including plastering, painting, electrical work, installation of security and climate control systems — and more. We are very fortunate to have secured funding — but only for the first three phases of restoration. As you know, historic restoration is extremely costly. Please help.

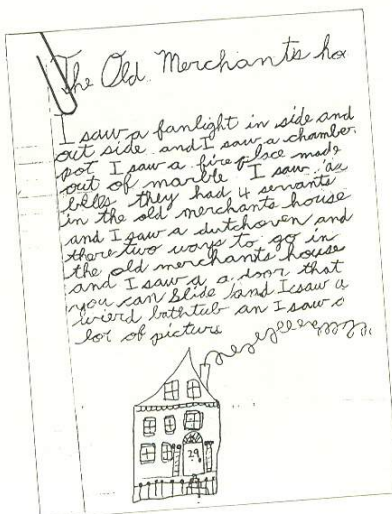
### *Corporate and Foundation Support Broadens*

The Old Merchant's House wishes to express gratitude to the museum's major corporate and foundation donors. Corporate contributors include Brunswick & Fils, Inc., the Chase Manhattan Bank, Citibank, McGraw Hill, J.P. Morgan, National West, the Rockefeller Group, Stuyvesant Park Association, Schieffelin & Somerset Co., Time Inc., and United

Technologies. Generous gifts were received from the following foundations: the Vincent Astor Foundation, the Forbes Foundation, the Frederick H. Gilmore Foundation, the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, the Greenwall Foundation, the J.M. Kaplan Fund, the James A. MacDonald Foundation, the New York Times Company Foundation, the Henry B. Plant Memorial Fund, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the Wein Foundation.

### *Museum Membership Flourishes*

In 1980, with great insight, Board member Betty Whitman proposed a membership drive for the Old Merchant's House. With her dedication and hard work, a small handful of members grew and grew. Today, membership is 600 strong, providing a significant portion of the annual operating budget. This spring, many of you will receive your annual



renewal notice. Please give as generously as you can — your membership contributions are vital. Encourage a friend to join. The museum needs your continued support!

### *Cataloguing the Collection Continues*

Under the supervision of Margaret Fikioris, an instructor at the Fashion Institute of Technology (F.I.T.) who had worked as a textiles conservator for many years at the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in Delaware, and Marilynn Johnson, Chairman of the graduate program in Museum Studies at F.I.T. and an expert in nineteenth-century American decorative arts, F.I.T. graduate students and Old Merchant's House volunteers, including the Junior League of the City of New York, are cataloguing the museum collection — textiles and decorative arts. As they are photographed and recorded, the textiles are being individually stored in acid-free boxes for their protection. We would like to extend our appreciation to F.I.T. and the Junior League of the City of New York, which are helping to underwrite the cost of all materials, including photography.

### *"Is it a Really Big Candy Dish?"*

In collaboration with the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, the Old Merchant's House Education Committee has developed a program for elementary school children that emphasizes the importance of historic preservation. The program comprises an introductory slide presentation at the school — complete with nineteenth-century artifacts ("It's not a big candy dish — or a soup bowl — it's a chamber pot."); a walking tour of the Washington Square

## 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

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