Saving Old New England

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BECAUSE OF THE REGION’S EARLY SETTLEMENT by Europeans and because it was the first in the United States to experience the cultural upheaval of industrialization, New England is a good place to look for likely gay men as pioneering keepers of culture. It’s not hard to spot them, especially among those born in the last half of the nineteenth century, when centennial fever and the continuity-obliterating ravages of industry combined to heighten popular awareness of the nation’s history and to spark a romantic revival of Colonial design.

Distinct glimmers of likely gays in historic preservation appear even a century earlier. Consider the Reverend William Bentley of Salem, Massachusetts, who delighted in collecting and preserving objects related to the history of Essex County, noting in his voluminous diary the people and events connected with those things. When an elderly Salem bachelor died in 1796, Bentley regretted that he was unable to purchase all the furniture in the man’s seventeenth-century house, to preserve it intact as a set of historical documents. “I grieved to see the connection between the last and the present century so entirely lost,” Bentley wrote in his diary.¹

Within the next several decades more Americans began to feel a loss of cultural continuity. Despite the warm Currier and Ives tones in which nineteenth-century American life is often envisioned, it was a decidedly unpretty and disorienting era for many in the industrializing United States. Standardization and mechanization accelerated the pace of life. As cities grew ever larger, old buildings and neighborhoods were torn down with abandon. The rise of corporations redistributed wealth and reorganized society in oppressive ways, and massive immigration created unprecedented cross-cultural tension.

In reaction to these developments in his native Massachusetts, Henry David Thoreau retreated in his late twenties to a cabin that he built at a small lake near Concord, his hometown. Thoreau’s first impulse in getting a dwelling for himself was to buy an old farmstead on the Concord River. He was attracted to the Hollowell place’s seclusion, its bucolic riverside
location, and “the gray color and ruinous state of the house and barn.” When
the deal fell through, Thoreau ended up building a frugal one-room cabin
instead. He acquired most of the lumber from an old shed that he bought
and disassembled, and he used secondhand bricks fifty years old in building
his chimney.

Thoreau’s conservative sense of economy underlay this recycling, but it
was more than that. Old things had an inherent appeal for him, and he
wanted to perpetuate their lives and use. “How much more agreeable it is,”
he wrote, “to sit in the midst of old furniture like Minott’s clock, and secre-
tary and looking-glass, which have come down from other generations, than
amid that which was just brought from the cabinet-maker’s, smelling of var-
nish, like a coffin! To sit under the face of an old clock that has been ticking
one hundred and fifty years—there is something mortal, not to say immor-
tal, about it; a clock that began to tick when Massachusetts was a province.”

Thoreau’s periods of solitude fostered philosophical meditation. His early-morning bath in the pond was a religious exercise. He attempted to
live by a gospel of natural simplicity in the face of the artificial complexity
that was overtaking American life. In *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, pub-
ished in 1854, Thoreau voiced an early and eloquent denunciation of rtmpl
pant industrialization. The book had its small audience, including Edward
Carpenter, William Morris, and other like-minded comrades. But unlike many
early preservationists the ultimate golden age to which Thoreau would re-
turn was rooted not in human culture but in nature untouched by civilization: “In Wildness is the preservation of the World.”

Henry Thoreau’s contemporary and fellow villager Cummings Elsthan
Davis was a preservationist of a decidedly material stripe who amassed a rich
collection of the antiques of Concord, where he was born in 1816 and where
his family had lived for generations. “Whatever belongs to the remote past
has an unspeakable charm for me,” the village eccentric told a reporter in
1870. The first of Davis’s marriages lasted less than two years, and his second
wife kept her distance, preferring to reside in their house in Harvard, Mas-
achusetts, while her husband lived in Concord with his old-fashioned things.
Wearing knee breeches and long white stockings of eighteenth-century style,
Davis greeted visitors to his house and lovingly described the items in his
jumbled displays.

As the quirky Mr. Davis was on his way out of this life, the acquisitive
aesthete Henry Davis Sleeper was blossoming into it. Born in Boston in 1878,
his design-mindedness extraordinarily evident in childhood, Sleeper began
hauling home antiques at a young age. The house he shared with his mother
on Beacon Street was soon crowded with his collections. By the time he was
thirty, he commissioned the construction of a house that would accommo-
date everything. He began Beauport in 1907 as a twenty-six-room Queen Anne cottage overlooking the harbor at Gloucester, Massachusetts. Among the materials Sleeper used to finish the interior of these first rooms was paneling rescued from an eighteenth-century house in the nearby village of Essex.

“Mightn’t it be fun,” Sleeper mused, “to have a house in which each room could recapture some of the spirit of a specific mood or phase or ‘period’ of our American life from the time of Plymouth down through the Revolution and the early Republic?” He did just that, decorating every room, alcove, and hallway to express a historical or literary theme. For twenty years Sleeper continued to build and decorate more rooms, incorporating material salvaged from demolished old houses, until he had a labyrinth of more than forty rooms and no more land on which to build.

Sleeper was a romantic artist and consummate decorator rather than a scholarly collector. Working with an eclectic but highly selective accumulation of antiques—architectural fragments, furnishings, and masses of decorative objects—he composed each room as a carefully crafted work of art to be lived in. Just as Horace Walpole’s contemporaries in England had flocked to Twickenham to see Strawberry Hill, his eighteenth-century “Gothick” fantasy house, Sleeper’s sprawling but intimate creation at Gloucester enchanted many visitors.

Many of Sleeper’s visitors were gay men whose ability to connect with one another was fostered by the founding of the Walpole Society in 1910. A groundbreaking exhibition of American antiques at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1909 had brought together collectors from New England, New York, and Pennsylvania. Many of these men wanted to stay in touch with one another, which led to the founding of the exclusive, invitation-only, and gentlemen-only club for collectors and students of early American decorative arts. They named their group after Horace Walpole, the flaming antiquarian and Gothicizer of the eighteenth century. As Walpole’s appreciation of the old English arts and crafts had been pioneering, so was the Walpoleans’ embrace of early American work. In more ways than one, the club’s identification with Walpole was fitting and telling: its members recognized their ties to the gentleman who was, in the admiring estimation of A. L. Rowse, “a good deal of a sprightly and clever old lady.” This society of fastidious connoisseurs convened wherever there were interesting houses, collections, or collectors to be visited and pronounced upon.

In an eighteenth-century gilt mirror the Walpolean saw reflected the faces of its former possessors. Behind his early American chests, chairs, and tables he saw the skillful and inventive men who made them. Fascinated by pieces of old china, his imagination conjured histories and romances to go...
with them. “The old glazes and enamels are ofttimes more satisfying to one than meat and raiment,” one Walpolean said. Another’s house was described as an antiquarian’s sanctuary, orderly as only a bachelor’s house could be; large blue-and-white platters were safely centered, like babies, on the soft white covers of four-poster beds upstairs. In China Collecting in America, Alice Morse Earle captures the door-to-door antiques-acquiring practices of those with a Walpolean disposition. “I have been on the trail with a Yankee china dealer, and his unique method of management was delightful. He worked upon the most secretive, the most furtive plan. . . . He never, by any chance, told the truth about himself, and above all never gave his correct name and place of residence, nor drove away from the house in the way he really intended to go. . . . He was at one farmhouse a tender-hearted, indulgent husband, whose delicate invalid of a wife had expressed a wish for a set of old china and he was willing to spend days of search in order to satisfy her whim. It is needless to add that he was a bachelor.”

It appears that the Walpole Society included not only a significant roster of confirmed bachelors but also a number of married gay men. One of these gentlemen married an heiress and, with the help of her family’s money, filled three houses to overflowing with antiques. His name was at the top of the list when those who began the Walpole Society started identifying men with antiquarian propensities who might be interested in joining. Another Walpolean with three antiques-filled houses, plus additional storerooms, was never married and lived with his mother.

The Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts, one of the oldest and largest local historical groups in the country, appears to have been another important locus for preservation-minded gays in the early 1900s. The institute conducted and published historical research, edited old diaries for its historical collections series, and collected engravings and photographs showing Essex County life in the past. Institute members were urged to give their heirlooms to a museum rather than allowing future generations to scatter their grandmothers’ things. In its innovative efforts to make the past come alive, the Essex Institute created three period rooms illustrating everyday life among ordinary citizens in the late eighteenth century. The public was already familiar with the historical tableau concept, but the well-researched accuracy of these period rooms and their museum location were unprecedented in America. The rooms were a popular success. Also a first in the nation was the institute’s creation of an outdoor museum staffed by docents dressed in period costume.

William Sumner Appleton’s culture-keeping vision was not satisfied by museums and archives. Convinced of the need for a concerted program to protect New England’s historic houses in situ, he corralled seventeen of his
friends to found the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA) in 1910. (The founding group included one woman and seventeen men, with many ministers, former ministers, and seminarians among them.)\textsuperscript{9} Within a year, the SPNEA bought its first property, a seventeenth-century Massachusetts house. Over the next thirty-six years the group acquired fifty more properties in five states, most of them houses from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These early buildings were valued both for their ancestral associations and as documents in architectural history: they embodied medieval European building techniques and showed the emergence of American methods. The society’s houses were scattered throughout New England; some were lived in, some housed tearooms and gift shops, others were uninhabited and left unrestored for architectural study.

William Sumner Appleton was well known for the single-minded passion, persistence, perfectionism, and occasional autocracy with which he went about preserving these antiquities. The pages of the SPNEA newsletter, Old-Time New England, often carried Appleton’s seethings about the “crimes” being committed against the region’s old buildings. Though he had been disturbed by destruction and change in his earlier years, the acceleration of change in the first decades of the twentieth century (driven mainly by the advent of the automobile) provoked a kind of cultural vertigo and dysphoria. The job of the SPNEA, Appleton wrote, “is to restrain the ceaseless law of change with reference to certain antiquities of the past considered worthy of as prolonged a life as it is humanly possible to give them.”\textsuperscript{10}

Architect and medievalist Ralph Adams Cram participated in the change-restraining work of the SPNEA but looked back further in time for his own inspiration. “Between the years 1000 and 1500,” Cram wrote, “life was, in certain fundamental respects, more nearly right than at any time before or since.”\textsuperscript{11} In the face of the ugliness and desolation inflicted by industrialism since the early 1800s, Cram believed that a return to the human touch and the human scale of medieval patterns would restore vitality, harmony, and joy to life. To that end, he became his generation’s foremost preacher of the Gothic Revival. “Back to medievalism we must go, and begin again.”\textsuperscript{12}

Born in rural New Hampshire in 1863, Cram believed himself to be living in an age in which, unlike any other period in human history, beauty had been lost, or at least disfigured or mutilated. His own life was wrapped up in “the desperate nineteenth century revolt against ugliness, and for the recovery and restoration of beauty.”\textsuperscript{13} To that end, he found huge inspiration in the Englishman William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, whose works of architecture, art, and handicraft harkened back to the artisan guilds of the Middle Ages, to the old standard of beauty in thought, faith, art, and the conduct of life.
The Victorian standards of beauty with which he grew up were just fine for the wealthy and fastidious Charles Hammond Gibson Jr. By the time he died in 1954, Gibson had been designing the future of his family home for nearly two decades: It would be a museum of the Victorian era, “a demonstration of the manner in which a typical family lived at that time, and their principles of character, good citizenship, and taste in living.” The five-story townhouse on Beacon Street in Boston’s Back Bay was built in 1860 by Gibson’s grandmother. Gibson was born there in 1874.

Young Gibson saw many wealthy Bostonians abandon their Back Bay homes in favor of suburban enclaves. The old townhouses typically ended up being subdivided into rooming houses and apartments. Gibson would permit no such fate for 137 Beacon. After his mother died in 1934, he began to freeze the house in time, preserving everything as it had always been in his memory. (To protect old brocade upholstery from wear, he barred guests at his tea and cocktail parties from sitting on it.) Believing that his beloved Back Bay had been “the essence of a refined and cultured society,” Gibson opened his house to the public in the early 1950s. For the price of admission visitors got a time-capsule glimpse of High Victorian interior fashion: the profusion of decorative objects, richly patterned carpets and curtains, embossed and gilt wallpaper, overstuffed and tasseled furniture. Because Victorian style was almost universally scorned in the 1950s, Gibson acknowledged that his preservation achievement would not be truly appreciated until long after his death.

Now, fifty years after Charles Gibson’s death, gay men are fully engaged as keepers and appreciators of his Victorian time capsule. “My boyfriend David and I like to visit historic houses together,” says Allen Young, “and it seems to me that a lot of these places were preserved by so-called bachelors. One place that has an old bachelor as part of its story is the Gibson House in Boston. The man who took David and me on our tour was very obviously a gay man who loved the house. From the little bit we heard about the last Gibson, it seems likely that he was a gay man who lived a somewhat eccentric life.”

Allen Young was born in 1941 and has lived in rural Royalston, Massachusetts, since 1973, when he and a mostly gay group of friends began living at a place they named Butterworth Farm. “For all of us preservation was part of living in this area of New England, appreciating the old buildings and trying to protect them. For Bob Gravley, who died of AIDS, it was a mission. He led a successful fight to get our beautiful mansard-roofed town hall reshingled in slate rather than the cheaper asphalt that some considered adequate. Bob was the first chairman of Royalston’s historic district commis-
sion. He resigned in furious protest when the board allowed a resident to install vinyl siding. The involvement of gay men in preservation has a lot to do, I think, with our greater aesthetic sense. Even as a child growing up in a nondescript farmhouse, I had an eye for the more interesting and attractive buildings in the area. Some of the old homes, churches, and hotels that had a certain look were the ones that I liked best. They just caught my eye.

“I came from a very nonartistic background. In the 1970s, as I found myself surrounded by gay men for the first time in my life, it opened my eyes to new things and I liked what I saw. My boyfriend David was also quite repressed artistically in his childhood. Coming out and getting involved socially with gay men opened up a whole new world for him and gave him permission to get involved with his aesthetic side. There’s that line from The Boys in the Band, ‘It takes a fairy to make something pretty.’ I have mixed feelings about that kind of cliché, but I do believe that many gay men have a greater appreciation for beauty and painstaking craftsmanship. While many straight men seem to really enjoy working with big machines to knock things down and build skyscrapers and new roads, I think it’s a more ‘feminine’ value to stop and smell the lilacs and appreciate the beauty of old things.”

Extraordinary sensitivity to things of distinctive beauty is manifested by the three New Englanders whose stories follow. In meditating on the beauty of a battered old silver-plate pitcher, poet Mark Doty expresses the connection- and continuity-minded bent of his passionate aestheticism. Doty’s account of his and his partner’s relationship with a needy Victorian house in Vermont gives a rich portrait of their romanticism-suffused domophilia and aestheticism. All these quintessential traits are evident as well in Doty’s description of the allure of New England household auctions. For entrepreneur innkeeper Don Leavitt the aesthetic appeal of resurrecting grand old New Hampshire buildings is wedded to the hope of making a living from finding new uses for them. Mark Sammons, historical museum curator, was drawn to the profession twenty-five years ago by his “fantasy-of-the-past” romantic and aesthetic leanings. Those aspects are now subordinate to Sammons’s desire to understand and communicate social history that reflects the realities of the past and addresses the needs of the present.