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Painted Walls in the Connecticut River Valley

BY LINDA CARTER LEFKO

FOUR PRIVATE NEW ENGLAND HOMES OPEN THEIR DOORS TO STUDENTS OF EARLY WALL MURALS AND OTHER PAINTED WALL DECORATION.



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HISTORIANS AND HOMEOWNERS captivated by 19th-Century murals, decorated walls, and overmantel scenes have a rare opportunity to tour four private homes with original painted plaster *in situ*. On October 1, the Center for Painted Wall

Preservation hosts a talk and tour of four private homes, two in New Hampshire and two in Vermont.

Following a morning lecture by Center founder Linda Carter Lefko on “Painted Wall Treasures in the Upper Connecticut River Valley,” participants will tour the following sites in small groups.

EDWIN CHASE HOUSE

In contrast to the early murals at the Littleton Inn and the Murdock-Pierce House, those in the Edwin Chase House, an early Greek revival home nestled on the edge of the Tabor Valley in East Topsham, Vermont, date to the 1830s. They tell a story unlike most murals of this period.

The brightly colored murals on the walls of the Chase house extend from the downstairs foyer up the stairs to the upper hallway, covering the walls from the floor to the ceiling. The hallway walls had been wallpapered sometime in the 20th Century until owners in the 1970s uncovered them and had them professionally restored.

The murals include both water scenes and hillsides, with sharp-pointed mountains above the horizon line and interesting snowball-type trees dotting the landscapes on both floors. The trees, ships, and small village scene at the head of the stairway on the second floor are very well painted, clearly indicating a skilled hand. The black detailing is similar to that found on the Squire Cragin House in Greenfield, New Hampshire, and on a Jaffrey Tavern wall now in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

A large three-masted vessel with flags unfurled is sailing directly towards a sloop that is crossing her path. (Note that the flags on the larger vessel appear to have opposing wind sources!) The large ship's banners identify it as the “Potomac,” captained by “Downes.”

An 1832 news report told of

Commodore Downes's voyage to successfully circumnavigate the globe, which he completed in 1834 aboard the *Potomac*. Other reports said Downes had been asked by President

Andrew Jackson's Secretary of the Navy, Levi Woodbury, to approach a trading village in Sumatra and attack it, seeking retribution for an attack on the merchant ship *Friendship* the



The mural at the top of the Chase house stairway depicts a village scene.

In the upstairs hallway, the *Potomac* sails in the direct path of a small sloop. The ship's banners identify it and the captain by name.



OPPOSITE The downstairs front hall of the Edwin Chase House in East Topsham, Vermont, displays an unusually large (at 4 feet long) paddlewheel steamboat chugging out of a bay. The whole scene appears to be in the original paint.

previous February.

The unannounced attack was a surprise and has been called the first American military engagement in the Far East. Although Downes followed Jackson's expansionist orders, the attack drew criticism in America,

and Downes never had command of another vessel. The decoration on the Chase house walls likely post-date 1834 and might have reflected the political views of the homeowner.

The designs are primitive in style and rather flat in appearance, with

no indication the artist used stencils. The black detailing is extremely well done, as are the tiny tree trunks, indicating a well-trained hand. The colors on the ships are rich, and the style is reminiscent of murals found in Maine.



COURTESY OF THE MURDOCK-PIERCE HOUSE

Surviving wall painting at the Murdock-Pierce House in Norwich, Vermont, from about 1800 includes a landscape on the plaster overmantel beneath marbleized painting on the rest of the wall. The latter wall treatment is the only documented Vermont example of its type.

MURDOCK-PIERCE HOUSE

Original overmantels still *in situ* are almost unheard of, but a trip to the Murdock-Pierce House in Norwich, Vermont, will reveal two 1800 overmantels, each exhibiting scenic landscape painting on plaster and marbleizing as decorative features. The marbleizing example is the only documented Vermont example of its type and might be one of the earliest known American examples of using oil paint on plaster.

Painted overmantels found in England served as a precedent for interior decoration in New England and elsewhere from 1750 to 1800. In 1757, George Washington asked

his London agent to procure a “neat landskip” of a particular size to fit above a mantel at Mount Vernon. Overmantel subjects were usually peaceful landscapes, images that muralists likely derived from popular print sources or engravings, given the similarities in various designs that researchers have documented.

These overmantels were usually painted by anonymous traveling artists and are rarely signed. In her study of overmantels, Massachusetts collector and decorative arts scholar Nina Fletcher Little observed that “they were often weak in perspective but strong in color and design.” This makes them unique and consistent

with other examples of American folk art.

Decorated wood paneling above a fireplace was easy to remove—and in many circumstances, sell—making the original location of an overmantel difficult to ascertain. Often wood paneling, including the overmantel, is painted over.

Members of the CPWP had a rare opportunity to study the designs and techniques on an overmantel that had been overpainted and removed from its original location to see if we could identify the artist. With great excitement, we verified that we were looking at the remnants of work by Connecticut artist Winthrop

This overmantel fragment is attributed to Winthrop Chandler from Putnam, Connecticut, between 1768 and 1790. The oil-on-panel section is 31 by 42 inches.

Chandler (1747-90) the first known American artist to paint American landscapes that have survived.

The similarities to the Chandler overmantel from the Ebenezer Waters House in West Sutton, Massachusetts (illustrated in the 1994 Sotheby's catalogue for an auction of the Little Collection) were undeniable. The Putnam overmantel had been covered by paint for many years and were to be used for a new home project until the underpainting was discovered. We will never know how many other overmantels were lost to modernization.



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LITTLETON INN

The inn James Williams built in 1790 in Littleton, New Hampshire, served as a mecca for hunters, trappers, and explorers from the north and south. Incredible early wall murals remain untouched in the upper room of this small building in the foothills of the White Mountains.

The decoration is attributed to the Bear and Beeves Artist of a well-known fireboard found in Lisbon, New Hampshire, now owned by the New York State

Historical Association at Cooperstown. "Beeves" references the sides of beef the artist portrayed hanging from trees. He was also called the Bear and Pear Artist.

The artist painted the inn murals above a horizontal wood dado in the upper room, along with a wooden picture rail below the stenciled frieze at the top of the wall. Otherwise, none of the woodwork has ever been painted. The stenciled frieze is interesting because it fills the space but is not fully developed, as were later

stencils from the 1820s.

Although there is no evidence of any sky color, tiny stenciled eagles, birds, and deer decorate the wall surface near the mountains. The rolling mountains are understandable parts of the decoration given the inn's location on the edge of the northern exposure of the White Mountains. The tree formations closely resemble those from the walls of the Hackett House, which once stood just down the road in Thornton.

An inn or tavern at the center



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A full wall of New Hampshire's Littleton Inn has a stenciled border with animals, including a camel ridden by a Hessian soldier, at left. The decoration is attributed to the Bear and Beeves Artist, who also painted a fireboard found in Lisbon, New Hampshire.



Decoration on a wall from the Hackett House, built in Thornton, New Hampshire, is attributed to the Bear and Pear Artist (also known as the Bear and Beeves Artist) between 1800 and 1825. Note the line of Hessian soldiers along the bottom.

of a rural town attracted all kinds of period oddities. Traveling exotic animals were occasionally brought to town and put on display at the tavern, which usually charged a fee to view the creatures. By the middle of the 18th Century, Boston sites had exhibited lions, camels, and polar bears at various times.

Taverns also attracted itinerant workers with skills and items to sell, such as the painter who boarded in the upper room of the Littleton Inn. A camel that dwarfs the other animals and houses in the mural becomes a visual focal point. A closer examination of the helmeted soldier atop the animal reveals a similar stencil (reversed) that was used for a line of soldiers in the mural at the Hackett House.



Close-ups of murals at the Littleton Inn, left, and Hackett House, above, show a similar stencil was used for the Hessian soldiers, suggesting the same hand did the work.



The current owners of the Moses Kent House in Lyme, New Hampshire, realized the house had original murals when they began restoring it to its early-1800s appearance.

MOSES KENT HOUSE

The Moses Kent House in Lyme, New Hampshire, is an early-19th-Century Federal gem that has undergone extensive restoration to undo all the things various owners over the last century have done to “improve” it. This includes replacing 408 panes of glass glazed into 12-over-12 sashes that the current owners had made for all the windows.

The house had no heat, electricity, or bathrooms until 1951, which likely helped save the house and facilitate the restoration. The walls have been insulated, plaster repaired, and original woodwork stripped, all in the effort to take the residence back to its original state.

Abel Kent brought his family



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Murals in the Kent house show the work of two artists, perhaps Rufus Porter and his nephew, Jonathan Poor. This view shows the downstairs parlor.

from Newburyport, Massachusetts, to Lyme in 1792 and bought land in the northwest corner of town. In 1811, his son Moses, a cabinetmaker, built a house that year on a portion of the River Road property, married Mary Stark in 1815, and with her raised seven children there. One reason the Porter-school murals were left almost untouched is that the home remained in the Kent family for nearly a century.

The murals have been cleaned and restored to their majestic beauty in the front parlor, lower and upper hall, stairway, and an upper bed-chamber. Evidence suggests two sets of hands painted the decoration, perhaps Rufus Porter and his nephew Jonathan D. Poor working together.

The upstairs hallway murals do not adhere to the Porter “recipe” for designing murals; instead they are flat with little or no foreground greenery. The limited color palette is similar to the walls of the Josiah Stone House in Hancock and the Artemas Hemenway Tavern in Pepperell, Massachusetts.

The mural in an upstairs bedchamber of the Kent house lacks trees in the foreground, suggesting the work of Poor.

The trees are similar to those on the signed Poor walls in the Oliver Prescott House in Groton, Massachusetts, and the orchards are typical of Poor, not Porter. The Federal house with ell that appears throughout the murals is found on many signed Poor murals but not seen on attributed Porter walls. The faux chair rail is seen in most Porter murals and several Poor walls as well.

Join the experts and see what else you might learn about early painted walls. ★

The Connecticut River Valley Talk and Tour begins at 9:30 am Friday, October 1, at the Lyme Center Academy Building, Lyme, New Hampshire. After the talk, participants will receive box lunches and maps. Current pandemic protocol will be followed: masks and proof of vaccination might be required. The cost is \$50 person. Register online at pwpcenter.org/events



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