SPNEA'S Architectural Elements Collection

Shantia Anderheggen

ounded in 1910 by William Sumner Appleton, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA), located in Boston, MA, is the country's largest regional preservation organization, with 44 museum and study houses throughout five New England states. Through architecture and material culture, Appleton sought to preserve New

England's history. The objects in SPNEA's artifactual collections number over 120,000 and include furniture, costumes and textiles, ceramics, painting, and prints. There are nearly 3,000 items in the architectural study collection. In addition, supporting the properties and collections is the archives (figure 1), with over a million photographs, manuscripts, and architectural drawings.

The collection of architectural elements began immediately upon the founding of the organization. Preservation of an entire building on its original site was always Appleton's preference, as was preserving architectural material in situ. However, in the event that a building could not be saved, Appleton's last resort was to rescue parts of the building, thereby preserving the important details. If a building could not be saved, pieces of it could. In some cases, replacement of failed original fabric was unavoidable during a building's restoration, in which case Appleton would preserve the original material, as evidence of sorts, for the collection

The Benaiah Titcomb House (c.1695) offers a good early example of SPNEA's commitment to

both preserving architectural fabric and documenting the process of its removal. Originally located in Newburyport, MA, the property on which this house stood was taken by the town, necessitating the removal or demolition of the house. Well-known Rhode Island architect Norman Isham was solicited to execute measured drawings of the structure before the removal of the most important portions of the interior, much of which was then donated to SPNEA

and preserved in the society's collection. Fortunately, the house was ultimately saved and moved to Essex, MA.

Crucial information about the fate of many New England buildings can be traced through the columns of *Old-Time New England*, a quarterly journal published by SPNEA from 1910-1981. Included in its annals is the saga of the Benaiah Titcomb house. In addition, acquisitions to SPNEA's collections are often detailed throughout the publication, offering invaluable provenance to many of the objects. (SPNEA plans to restart publication of this journal in 1994.)

Appleton extensively photographed and corresponded about his travels around New England, adding further documentation to the collections. His early solicitation of photographic documentation of New England life eventually grew to include postcards, clippings, architectural plans and sketches, as well as other material which formed the

basis of the archives. Appleton's association with prominent antiquarians and architects, including Norman Isham, J. Frederick Kelly, Joseph Everett Chandler, and Frank Chouteau Brown only served to strengthen the credibility of SPNEA's pursuits.

At present, the architectural elements collection at SPNEA is predominately made up of domestic artifacts, most of which are associated with wellknown buildings, particular makers (architects or carvers, for example), specific forms of design drawn from known architectural sources, or typical (or atypical) features of New England architecture. Although examples from many of SPNEA's properties are found in the collection, hundreds of other buildings throughout New England are also represented.

SPNEA's collection dates from the mid-17th century to the present, although the bulk of the collection dates to before the mid-19th century. Although Appleton's emphasis was primarily on domestic material culture, a small number of architectural elements from religious, civic and commercial structures are represented in the artifact collection. A great

variety of building fabric is preserved in the SPNEA collection, with staircases and mantels especially well-represented. For example, the framing members, a sash window and later samples of wallpaper from a demolished late-17th-century brick dwelling in Boston, the Clough-Vernon House, is just one example of numerous elements from one structure. In addition, the collection of hardware con-

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Fig. 1. Hancock House broadside, 1860. Broadsides calling for the preservation of the house as well as advertising the auction of the building's important architectural features are preserved in the SPNEA archives. Other material contained in the archives relating to the Hancock House includes engravings and sketches, interior and exterior photographs, and John Hubbard Sturgis' measured drawings, the earliest known in the United States. This material provides both excellent documentation and context for the surviving architectural elements. Courtesy the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

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Fig. 2. The Hancock House, Beacon Street, Boston, MA, c. 1863. One of the preservation movement's earliest battles was waged in 1863 against the demolition of the Hancock House (built c. 1737). Although the house was ultimately torn down, many of its architectural features were salvaged and auctioned off. Among those architectural elements saved and later donated to SPNEA are numerous balusters, dado, and paneling. Photo by Edward Lamson Henry, courtesy the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

tains nearly every variety of shutter hook and lock imaginable.

During his tenure at SPNEA, Abbott Lowell Cummings concentrated much of his efforts on collecting evidence of First Period (1625-1725) building fabric and construction. The policy of requiring good provenance and documentation with accessions, established under Appleton, continued under Cummings' direction.

Thus, nearly every architectural element in SPNEA's collection is supported by some form of documentation. Whether there are *in situ* photographs (figure 2) or measured drawings, correspondence or notes made upon acquisition, or details published in *Old-Time New England*, the context for the object is explained through this documentation. Information on historic associations, such as maker, architect, former owners, or historic events, all combine to form an understanding of the architectural element beyond its physical or design aspects.

One obvious advantage of a collection of architectural elements which have been removed from their original locations is that it affords both technological, geographical, and temporal comparative possibilities. The technology used in wood carving, turning, and assembly can be examined through balusters and various ornamental features. Endless fragments of plaster and over 100 bricks might be examined for the nature of their constituent materials over

a broad geographical range.

Recent use of the architectural elements at SPNEA has included the examination by North Bennet Street School's preservation carpentry students of portions of the Jaffrey House (c. 1724, demolished in 1924). Once one of the grandest early Georgian houses in Portsmouth, NH, the Jaffrey House's woodwork, doors, sash windows, and other fabric are now preserved in SPNEA's architectural elements collection. The students were able to examine the craftsmanship of the original material and then replicate the Jaffrey House parlor for SPNEA's recent furniture show, Portsmouth Furniture: Masterworks from the New Hampshire Seacoast.

The collection has also been used by graduate students engaged in research, such as an inspection of the workmanship of carved objects by Boston's Skillins family or the design of colonial wrought iron hinges. Further, those engaged in restoration have also found SPNEA's architec-

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tural elements collection invaluable. Information on such diverse topics as early exterior stucco, or rough-cast, and late-18th-century window sash profiles from rural Vermont have been sought.

Intent on displaying the artifactual evidence collected from New England buildings, Appleton installed some of the larger architectural elements, such as porticos and staircases, in a small barn on an SPNEA property. Less formal a display than the subsequent ones, this barn represents the first display of SPNEA's architectural elements, a well-articulated desire of William Sumner Appleton from the beginning.

In 1960, in celebration of SPNEA's 50th anniversary, the first formal exhibit of architectural artifacts was installed by Abbott Lowell Cummings at the Otis House (c. 1796), the free-standing federal house that serves as SPNEA's head-quarters in Boston. The exhibit was on view for 15 years and formed the basis for a second installation, mounted in 1981. Until 1986, this second exhibit strongly influenced visitors to the Otis House. Whether stumbling upon the museum while waiting for a tour or attending a meeting in the museum, this installation of structural, functional, and ornamental building material proved to be enjoyable and instructive.

A prime user of the second architectural exhibit was SPNEA's Education Department. The department's program "Classic Times" used the architectural exhibit to begin teaching elementary school children the vocabulary of neoclassical design through finding, observing and illustrating certain attributes. Placed in the context of the c. 1796 Otis House, the exhibit enabled children to see and understand the continuity of neoclassical design in art, furniture, and architecture. Other regular users of the architectural exhibit included Boston University's Preservation Studies Program, through which graduate students were introduced to the range of artifacts and issues available for further study. For most of this century, SPNEA's architectural elements were

ly two-thirds of the collection remains to be entered in ANCS. Resource management records, such as field notes, photographs, and sketches, need to be cataloged according to archival standards being incorporated into ANCS.⁶ Adapting ANCS to allow cross-referencing of artifacts and resource management records would permit ready access to all the rich architectural resources the park has to offer.

Continued research and development of the collection, as outlined above, is hampered by financial constraints. But these projects can provide valuable training for students of historic preservation, museum studies, and related fields. There are opportunities for cooperation between professional organizations or academic programs and the park. Preparing, preserving, and promoting the artifacts as an object archive, and encouraging outside research and programming, may be park's best course of action on a limited budget.

The Independence National Historical Park Architectural Study Collection is available, by appointment, to professionals and students in architectural and historical fields. Call 215-597-7085 for further information.

- Charles E. Peterson, "The Wide World of Windows: Notes Issued for a Visit to the Independence Architectural Study Collection" (Philadelphia, November 17, 1989, photocopy), 13 pp. Mr. Peterson often uses this phrase to sum up the importance of architectural study collections.
- Lee H. Nelson and Penelope Hartshorne Batcheler, "A Proclamation" (INDE, August 24, 1970, Typescript).
- ³ Lee H. Nelson, "Nail Chronology as an Aid to Dating Old Buildings," History News 24, (November 1968): Technical Leaflet 48
- Natica Schmeder, "Evolution of the Mechanical Systems of 315 South American Street, Philadelphia," term paper, University of Pennsylvania, May 1991; Elise Vider, "Early American Locks," term paper, University of Pennsylvania, December 1989.
- ⁵ Carl Nittinger, "A Primary Resource for the Restoration, Reconstruction and/or Replication of 18th & Early 19th Century Architectural Elements: The Architectural Study Collection of Independence National Historical Park," Master's thesis, Graduate Program in Historic Preservation, University of Pennsylvania, 1991.
- ⁶ National Park Service, Museum Handbook, Part II (April 29, 1993, Draft), Appendix D:1-6.

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Webster, Richard. Philadelphia Preserved: Catalog of the Historic American Buildings Survey. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981. Synopses of Philadelphia HABS reports; indicates when, and what, artifacts from a property are in the park study collection. Seventeen entries are listed in the index. Copies of all entries are on file at the park.

John Marks, a museum intern hired by the Friends of Independence National Historical Park (INHP) to inventory the architectural study collection at the park, is a 1992 graduate of the Cooperstown Graduate Program in History Museum Studies with an emphasis on the management and interpretation of collections.

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stored in a large barn (which has since been dismantled). Currently, the collection is divided among two other barns and a warehouse. SPNEA's central storage warehouse offers a secure, fireproof, and climate-controlled environment for all the society's collections, including many of the architectural elements. Here, as well as in the two barns, objects are arranged primarily by type and size.

Presently, architectural elements are acquired almost exclusively through donations, many of the objects coming from buildings undergoing demolition or restoration. SPNEA's current collecting and cataloging policies regarding all collections are applicable to the architectural elements collection as well. That is, the artifact must contribute to our further understanding of the material culture of New England.

All of the architectural elements in the collection have been catalogued, detailing location, description (material, size, shape, condition, etc) and historic associations (structure from which the element came, maker, donor, etc). The cataloging information on each object is then entered into the Collection Department's computer database. Accessibility to the collection through the database is impressive. All objects, architectural elements included, can be tracked using almost any attribute or factor, including location, material, donor, type and building. In the near future, images including those from the archival collection, will also be integrated into the database. Through this integration on the computer of the architectural elements collection with other SPNEA collections and archival information, an even larger contextual picture for all the collections, including the architectural elements, can be drawn.

¹ Floyd, Margaret Henderson. "Measured Drawings of the Hancock House by John Hubbard Sturgis: A Legacy to the Colonial Revival." in *Architecture in Colonial Massachusetts*. Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1979, page 88.

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