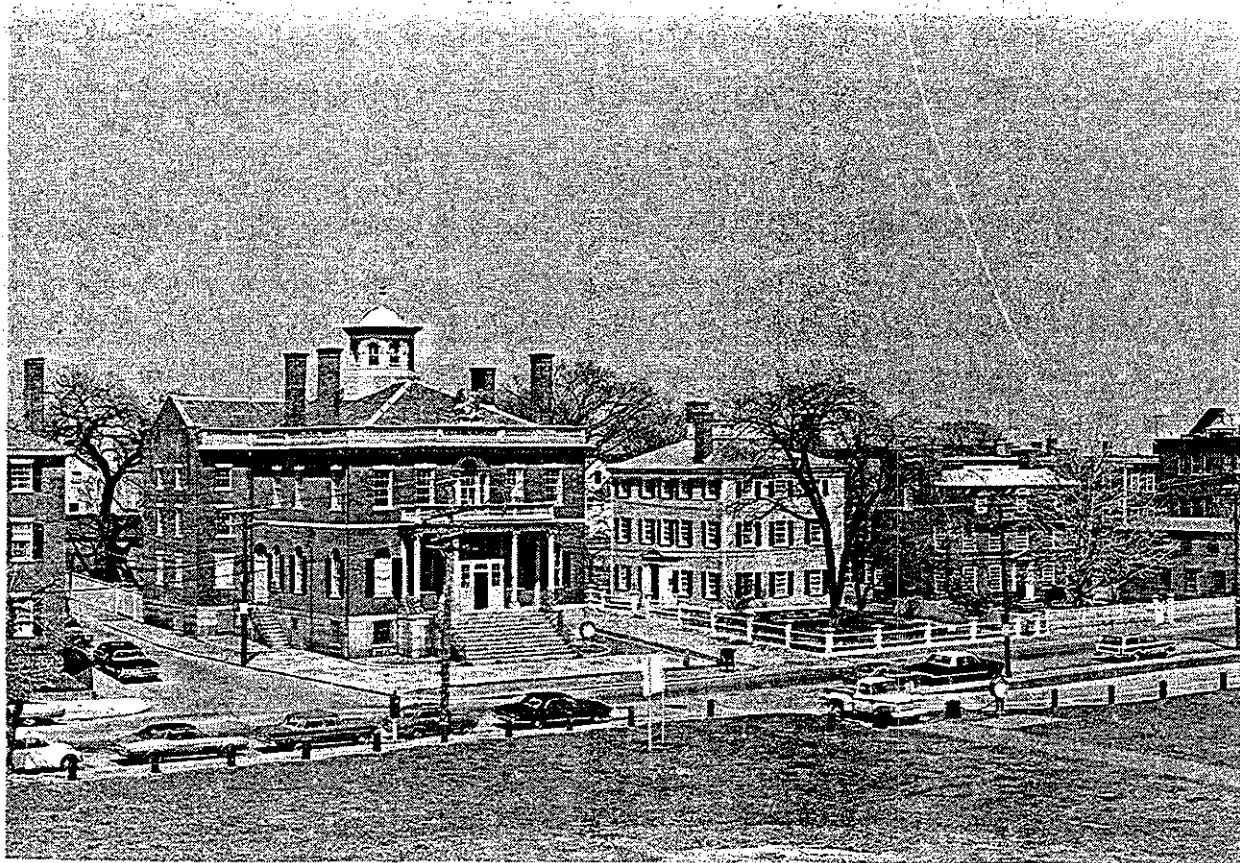


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ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY
OF THE
SALEM MARITIME
NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE



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Cover Photograph: Salem Maritime National Historic Site, Salem, Massachusetts, 1972.
Left to right: Custom House, Hawkes House, Derby House, and West India Goods Store, with
grass-covered wharves in foreground. (Courtesy National Park Service, Harpers Ferry Center,
Richard Frear, Photographer.)

**Administrative History of the
Salem Maritime National Historic Site**

Prepared for the

National Park Service
North Atlantic Regional Office

Contract No. CX1600-0-0037

by

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PREFACE

It is fitting that the National Park Service, as the nation's leading historical agency, study its own history, and to that end the NPS North Atlantic Regional Office in 1990 commissioned this administrative history of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site. Salem's administrative history is a particularly interesting one for several reasons. First, as one of the oldest historic properties within the the parks system, it encompasses most of the development and changes in historic site administration within the National Park Service's history. Second, Salem more than most parks in the system, has been dependent on the cooperative efforts of other entities, public and private, for its development and operation. Third, as one of the earliest urban sites in the system, it encountered the need to interact with neighbors before this was common in the Park Service.

Even as these characteristics have made the administrative history of Salem Maritime interesting, they have also made it complex to pursue. Changes in administrative organization in the Park Service over the years have scattered NPS records pertaining to Salem, and some have disappeared. Among those organizations which have cooperated over the years in the development of the site, record keeping has varied greatly, from the extensive archives of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities to the uninformative records of the Salem Maritime Historical Association. And for the site's relationship to its surrounding community, virtually the only record is in newspaper files. This has made it challenging to assemble a balanced view of many important aspects of the site's history.

Our approach in documenting Salem Maritime's history, therefore, has been to work outward from the official NPS records, supplementing them where necessary with the records of cooperating organizations, municipal and state records, newspaper accounts, and interviews with people within and without the Park Service whose memories and views we thought would add useful perspectives. Along the way, we have received invaluable help from many people, without whose assistance, the task would have been much harder and the results less rewarding.

Salem Maritime Superintendent Cynthia Pollack was perhaps our most enthusiastic supporter, placing at our disposal her own time and that of her staff, and offering useful suggestions of people to interview. It is especially

unfortunate that her untimely death in 1992 as this history was being completed deprived her of the chance to see the final result of both this history and the Salem Project in which she had played such a key role. Staff Historian John Frayler was particularly helpful in tracking down elusive documents, and was also able to provide first-hand knowledge of the events of the past decade. David Kayser also helped answer some troublesome questions about the whereabouts of records.

At the regional level, Regional Historian Paul Weinbaum has not only provided expert assistance in tracking down documents and guiding us through the far flung NPS records system; as Project Supervisor his excellent criticism and suggestions throughout the project have played an important part in shaping the final product. Gail Homer, Chief, Operations Evaluation, also provided help in articulating various aspects of the regional/site relationship in the planning process.

In Washington, Barry Mackintosh, Bureau Historian, was extremely helpful in providing background on NPS administrative history, without which it would have been impossible to place Salem Maritime in a national perspective. He and former Regional Historian Dwight Pitcaithley also provided valuable comments on the draft. Two other former regional office members, NPS Associate Director for Planning and Development Denis Galvin and NPS Deputy Director Herbert Cables, took time from busy schedules to share their thoughts on the history of Salem Maritime as it relates to the Park Service as a whole.

Others who were especially helpful in tracking down elusive or missing documents and photos were David Nathanson and photo archivist Tom DuRant at the Harpers Ferry Center Library, and, at the National Archives in Philadelphia, Shaun Aubitz.

Annie Harris of the Salem Partnership was helpful in documenting that informal volunteer organization's history, and its first president, Stan Lukowski was generous with his time in shedding light on that side of the partnership and the origins of the Salem Project. And the late Anne Farnam, former director of the Essex Institute and long time observer of Salem's historical institutions, also provided useful insights from the community perspective.

We thank all of these people who helped make it an enjoyable as well as a challenging project.

Pauline Chase Harrell, Carol Ely and Stanley Moss

PART ONE
VISION AND CREATION

CHAPTER 1

LOCAL/FEDERAL CO-OPERATION CREATES THE PARK

Prologue

Salem in the 1930s was a city with a distant memory of glory. Deteriorating wharves falling further into the harbor with each storm tide, derelict warehouses and a few small stores dimly recalled better days. Near the greatest of the old wharves, Derby Wharf, the still-splendid U.S. Custom House and the declining mansions of the old merchant elite hinted at the former greatness.

Two centuries earlier, Salem had been one of America's most important ports, trading with the West Indies and Europe. Founded before the rival port of Boston sixteen miles to the south, Salem had a sheltered but shallow natural harbor on the rocky North Shore of Massachusetts. In the 1760s, England's enforcement of mercantilist policies threatened Salem's prosperity, making its merchants and mariners into patriots in the American cause. Merchantmen were fitted out as privateers, and the wealth of the shipping elite helped to finance the Revolution.

With victory and peace came economic stagnation for New England ports, shut out of the lucrative trade with the British imperial colonies. Salem's merchants had the imagination and willingness to take great risks, sailing into the unknown to trade with distant and untried ports. The risks paid off on a grand scale. The luxury trade with the Far East made Salem, in the years from 1786 to 1812, one of America's greatest and richest ports. Tea, pepper, spices, silks, china, and other exotic commodities filled the wharveside warehouses of the Derbys, Forresters, Crowninshields, and other merchant families. Through trade, manufacture and labor, people of all ranks in the city had a financial stake in the outcomes of the long voyages of the China Trade; and the duties collected on cargoes at the Salem Custom House were a crucial source of revenue for the new federal government.

The great years of prosperity ended with the Embargo of 1807, which closed English and French ports to American vessels, and the ensuing War of 1812, from which Salem never recovered. Hopes were high when a fine new brick Custom House was built at the head of Derby Wharf in 1819, but without the

advantage of the inland transportation system enjoyed by the competing port of Boston, and with a harbor too shallow for the larger seagoing vessels of the 19th century, Salem never regained its position, though its wharves were used for shipping until the end of the century. When writer Nathaniel Hawthorne worked as the Surveyor of the Port in the 1840s, he described a dusty and idle Custom House. Salem was becoming a manufacturing town, and the rundown waterfront neighborhoods would provide cheap housing for immigrants from Ireland, Canada, and Eastern Europe who worked in the mills and manufacturing plants.

As New England's economy declined in the early twentieth century, the tide of Salem's fortunes ebbed still further. The waterfront near the Custom House was a clutter of derelict and underused wooden sheds set on tide-washed heaps of stone that had once been solid masonry wharves. On land, once magnificent mansions served as stores and boarding houses. All were threatened by weather and neglect.

Through the joint resolve and resources of a uniquely broad partnership, this historic but run-down waterfront was transformed into the first national historic site designated under the Historic Sites Act of 1935. Local individuals, the City of Salem, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, preservation experts, and private organizations all worked with the National Park Service (NPS), implementing its new historical mandate, and with numerous other agencies of the federal government. Each of these entities brought specific abilities and different agendas to the task, and each left its stamp on the final creation.

This process took place during a heady time of change and growth in the federal government. The Roosevelt administration's aggressive New Deal was challenging long-held notions of the proper relationship of government to the people and of the federal government to the states. The Park Service was refining its standards, its procedures, and even its management structures for preserving historic properties. It had at its disposal a budget that grew even faster than the ability to spend it, and manpower, including both highly skilled and untrained workers, standing ready to perform nearly any task that could be invented. The New Deal work programs gave the Park Service unparalleled power in preservation at a time when newly hired NPS professionals were struggling to set standards for proper scholarly control.

The combination of unfamiliar partners, working with untested administrative mechanisms, and the sense of urgency to utilize special Depression-related funds while they were available necessitated an *ad hoc* planning process that proceeded concurrently with implementation. The result was a national historic site created expeditiously but retaining

ambiguities which would require future resolution. The Salem site faced issues of interpretive direction and site definition that would challenge planners throughout the process of site acquisition and early development.

The National Park Service Moves Into History

The National Park Service had a new interest in the 1930s in acquiring and developing historical parks in addition to its natural-area sites. In the late 1920s NPS Director Horace M. Albright had stated his intention to "go rather heavily into the Historical Park field," and acquired for the Park Service numerous historic battlefields formerly managed by other federal departments. In the early '30s, this new direction was intensified by Interior Secretary Harold Ickes' interest in developing recreational sites in the East to match the great wilderness National Parks of the West. Since the East had little wilderness to preserve, sites of historical interest seemed likely candidates. President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself had a personal appreciation of conservation and an interest in American history. Arno B. Cammerer, who succeeded Albright as NPS Director in 1933, carried on his efforts in conservation and historic preservation.¹

Historic sites also gained public popularity in the 1920s and '30s with the celebration of the 200th anniversary of George Washington's birth, and of the 150th anniversaries of American independence, the Revolution and the creation of the new republic. Across America, local and state historical organizations focusing on local sites formed a growing constituency for historical parks, museums, and governmental involvement in historic preservation. In Williamsburg, Virginia, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., had created a professionally researched and managed outdoor historical museum that provided a model for the Park Service to emulate.²

In 1931, a professional historian position was created in the NPS Washington office. To fill it came Verne E. Chatelain, a teacher and historian from the Midwest. Dynamic and ambitious, Chatelain had a clear vision of the Park Service's mandate to preserve and interpret the nation's history, and he got down to work implementing that vision. In addition to supervising the work of two historians hired the same summer to work on the sesquicentennial of the Battle of Yorktown and the creation of the Colonial National Monument in the Yorktown and Jamestown area, he had the task of sorting through the

¹ Charles B. Hosmer, *Preservation Comes of Age* (Charlottesville: 1981), I: 512.

² Edwin W. Small, "Historical Conservation and the Salem Maritime National Historic Site," an address before the Lynn, Mass., Historical Society, 9 March 1939, SAMA boxes, NPS North Atlantic Regional Office, Boston.

numerous proposals for new historic sites that came through Congress. Most of these involved preservation or reconstruction of structures associated with Presidents and other great men of American history. Many were buildings of purely local interest or in such bad state of repair as to make them unattractive propositions for the Park Service. Chatelain saw the need to systematize and professionalize the process of researching and accepting sites into the federal system to avoid partisan politics.

As a response to these needs, Chatelain participated in the drafting of legislation that became the Historic Sites Act of 1935. This act defined the Park Service's role in acquiring and managing historic sites and created a professional advisory board to review potential sites. It also authorized the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) to survey all properties of significance that were worth saving, whether or not the Park Service would eventually become involved in their administration. This Act initially set the stringent standards of historical significance and professionalism in historical research for which the Park Service has become known.³

When Civil War and Revolutionary War battlefields were transferred to NPS jurisdiction from the War Department at Albright's behest in 1933, the Park Service found itself in need of additional positions in its management structure for historical research and interpretation. The need for professional supervisory personnel was heightened by the Roosevelt administration's decision in 1933 to have the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) work with the Department of the Interior, and Albright's successful bid to direct some of this work force to restoration projects, notably in the battlefield parks. Positions for historians and historical architects were allocated in the CCC funding and Albright and Chatelain immediately hired as many as possible. In July 1935 the Branch of Historic Sites and Buildings was split off from the Branch of Research and Education, with Chatelain at its head.⁴

Among those hired through the CCC was Edwin W. Small, who was to be by far the most important individual in the history of Salem Maritime National Historic Site. Small, age 27 in 1935, was a historian with both B.A. and M.A. degrees from Yale who joined the Park Service (through the Emergency Conservation Work program of the CCC) directly out of graduate school. Throughout his career, he saw himself as a historian more than an administrator, preferring the academic title of "Historian" to the more elevated "Superintendent." He has been called "a most efficient and

³ Hosmer, I: 513-14; I: 562-76.

⁴ Barry Mackintosh, *Interpretation in the National Park Service: A Historical Perspective* (National Park Service: 1986), 23; after 1938 Ronald F. Lee was head of this department.

diplomatic emissary for the Park Service in a region where the federal government was not trusted." In the crucial year of 1935, he was on the scene as the Regional Historian for New England in the CCC.⁵

This "efficient and diplomatic emissary" summed up, in an address to the Lynn Historical Society in 1939, his understanding of the federal role in historic site preservation:

The program of historical conservation outlined for the National Park Service in accordance with the Historic Sites Act of 1935 is in no sense to be regarded as an attempt to replace the work that is being done by state and local organizations. The purpose is rather to supplement and to expand the work of agencies already active in the field. To appraise and select a coherent system of historic sites and buildings which will portray all major themes of American history is truly a great undertaking. State and local participation as well as national action are essential to achieve that end.⁶

Local and Regional Preservation Interest

The Park Service's interest in new sites in 1935 coincided nicely with local ambitions in Salem. Two years earlier, in 1933, the Salem Planning Board had considered the idea of using federal emergency relief funds to restore derelict Derby Wharf (Fig. 1). One of the few remaining Revolutionary-era wharves in the nation, it was then owned by the Eastern Massachusetts Street Railway Company. Would it not make an attractive historic site? Local businessman and civic leader Harlan P. Kelsey, a member of the Planning Board, took up the campaign. Kelsey, a landscape architect and nurseryman who lived in East Boxford, had a strong interest in city planning, community improvement and conservation. He raised \$7,500 of his own money and that of a few wealthy subscribers from Salem's old families, and purchased the option to buy Derby Wharf. Kelsey was also a personal friend of Park Service Director Arno Cammerer. A board member of numerous state, regional, and national associations, he had an ability to get things done at the state and

⁵ Hosmer, I: 658; Small to Director, NPS, 27 July 1950, SMNHS box, NPS Harper's Ferry Center Library.

⁶ Edwin W. Small, "Historical Conservation and the Salem Maritime National Historic Site," an address before the Lynn, Mass., Historical Society, 9 March 1939, SAMA boxes, NPS North Atlantic Regional Office, Boston.

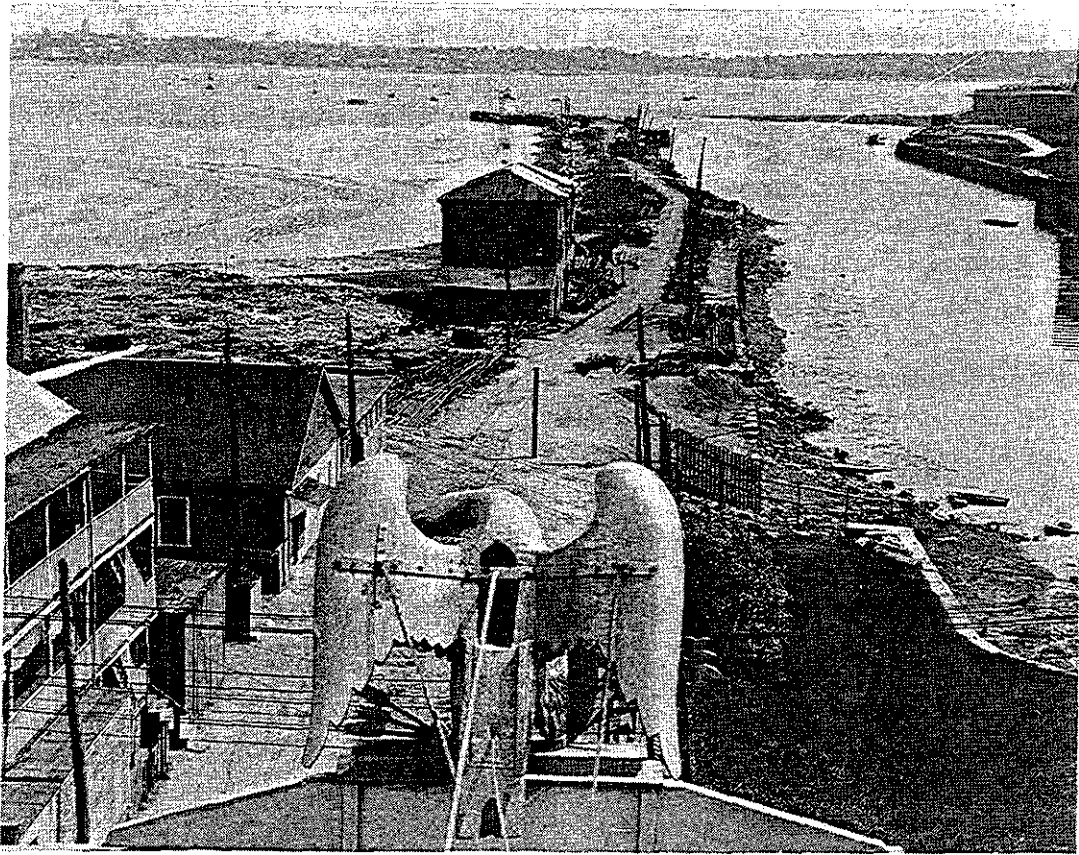


Figure 1. Derby Wharf from the Custom House, ca. 1930. The once-bustling center of Salem's foreign trade retained only crumbling remnants of its former appearance. (Courtesy Essex Institute Salem, Mass.)

things done at the state and local levels which would prove invaluable to the Park Service in its efforts to create the site.⁷

Kelsey was abetted in his efforts by Mayor George J. Bates. A state representative before he was thirty, Bates went on to become mayor of Salem from 1923 to 1937, then served as Congressman for the 6th District until his death in 1949. During his fourteen years as mayor, he managed to reduce the city's debt by nearly \$900,000 while carrying out an extensive program of public improvements, including new schools and library, new streets, and the restoration of the old Salem Town Hall. He was also one of the first mayors to obtain government approval for local WPA projects.⁸

Besides local pride, the City of Salem had in mind, of course, tourist dollars to revitalize a flagging local economy, as well as the short-term influx of federally-funded jobs while the major reconstruction work was done on the wharves and houses. While tourism in the postwar sense had not yet emerged, New England seacoast towns had long experienced an influx of "summer people" who arrived by train or trolley to enjoy the more picturesque parts of the coastline. The advent of the private automobile had augmented their numbers, and Salem hoped to attract a greater share of them. In addition, Derby Wharf as the centerpiece of a revitalized harbor could provide open space and recreation for the residents of the crowded waterfront community, as well as boating for locals and visitors. A newspaper article commented that "Anything that recalls this old life and beautifies our harbor will create a feature of great popular as well as world-wide interest."⁹

When Kelsey addressed a hearing on the Commonwealth's appropriation for land acquisition in 1936, the *Salem Evening News* reported, "He spoke of the tourist trade that comes to New England and of the splendid advertising that the city, state and New England would get out of this monument to maritime history. He stressed the necessity of the conditions being carried out jointly by the city and state." When Small spoke at the hearing, he highlighted the same theme:

⁷ "Master Plan for the Preservation and Use of Salem Maritime National Historic Site" (1962), Salem Maritime National Historic Site Master Plan, 373/MPNAR Mission 66, vols. 1 and 3 (microfiche, NPS Denver Technical Service Center); Hosmer, I: 649-50; *Who's Who in America*, 5, s.v. Kelsey, Harlan.

⁸ *National Cyclopedia of American Biography*, 34, s.v. Bates, George J.

⁹ *Salem Evening News*, 11 December 1935.

We're interested in having Derby Wharf in our custody. When developed, Derby Wharf should draw people to this section of the country as never before. If New England is to keep pace with other parts of the country as a vacation land, it must make the most of its assets. Massachusetts has a wonderful history but it needs to be interpreted to the public. It will be an advantage to have Derby Wharf under the National Park Service as it will have a national prestige and as part of the national historic site development program it will have significance in other parts of the country which it otherwise would not have.¹⁰

In addition to his contacts with local and state government, Kelsey could also call on a network of preservationists with valuable skills. Conservative and scholarly in approach, many preservationists were from New England's old families. They were not typically New Deal Democrats. But when urged by Kelsey and community leaders in Salem, New England's leading preservationists would break through their traditional distrust of government to work with federal and state agencies to create the site.

By the 1930s, New England preservationists had developed models and techniques for the documentation, preservation, and responsible restoration of historic properties, as well as an understanding of the maritime heritage of the region that would be useful in dealing with Salem's historic wharf area. Beginning in 1876 with the preservation of Boston's Old South Meeting House and five years later its Old State House, private preservation groups had successfully preserved and managed important historic sites in Massachusetts. The Trustees of Public Reservations, of which Harlan Kelsey was a Trustee, was founded by Charles W. Eliot in 1891 and had preserved areas of scenic beauty. The Ipswich, Massachusetts, Historical Society as early as 1898 had preserved the Whipple House for its architectural interest alone, the first such instance in the country.¹¹

Salem itself boasted two models, both bearing the stamp of George Francis Dow. One was at the Essex Institute, the nation's oldest county historical society and repository of outstanding archives and artifact collections. As secretary of the institute from 1898 to 1919, Dow had introduced the concept of carefully recreated period rooms, then a new idea in the United States. After this, he went on to install a group of period houses and shops on Essex Institute property, creating an "outdoor museum" on the Scandinavian

¹⁰ *Salem Evening News*, 28 May 1936.

¹¹ Jane Holtz Kay and Pauline Chase-Harrell, *Preserving New England* (New York: 1986), 41-45.

