TECHNOLOGY AND TERMINOLOGY: This week’s glass object is a fragment of a looking glass. A bit of background on window and mirror glass—in the 18th and early 19th centuries glass production was largely devoted to the manufacturing of bottles and window glass—indeed many glass houses were devoted exclusively to the production of window glass. Window glass was relatively thin, 2-3 mm (roughly 1/8 inch) in thickness and made either by the crown or cylinder methods. Plate glass, largely for mirrors and looking glasses, was thicker, 5-6 mm (7/32 inch), and although produced in considerably less volume than window, it was a significant product—and when ground, polished, mirrored, cut and beveled, it was extremely expensive. A note on nomenclature, in historical terms a looking glass was a flat reflective glass used for gazing—to see what was directly before the viewer. A mirror was a convex-shaped reflective glass that gave a distorted, but larger image of the viewer’s world—to see what surrounded the viewer. Now, all reflective glass is a mirror, but it wasn’t always so.

THE OBJECT: So once again in the category of Yankee Frugality and Ingenuity, this week’s object is a make-do mirror from the Chris Havey collection. It is an irregular fragment of mirrored glass, perhaps from a circa 1800 mirror, which met with its demise. The fragment is set into a carved pine frame, with a wire for hanging. By itself, the mirror is a fragment in a piece of wood, but there’s more to it than that. It comes from the Octagon House in Limington, Maine; built in the 1850s by Capt. Josiah E. Chase (1819-1898), a whaling captain. Chase was apparently inspired by Orson Squire Fowler’s architectural treatise of 1848, The Octagon House, A Home for All. The book inspired octagon houses to be built throughout the United States during the 1850s. There are some 12 surviving octagon houses in Maine and many others scattered throughout the country. The Limington example is one of the best preserved and remained in the possession of the family until 1971. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987.

Part of an established New England family, Josiah was descended from Deacon Amos Chase who is reputed to have been the town’s first English settler. Josiah’s father ran a sawmill nearby on the confluence of the Ossipee and Saco Rivers. At age 18 Josiah moved to New Bedford and made his first voyage aboard the bark Forest. In 1841 Chase began a three-year whaling expedition, returning in 1845. After many such expeditions, he retired from the sea in 1876 following a voyage on the California, only to later return to captain his final voyage on the James Arnold.

A family note on the back of the Octagon House photograph reputes that this was the mirror Josiah used on board ship. The mirror is more reminiscent of a young sailor’s meager tack and the need for stable packable belongings than a successful captain’s belongings, and having accompanied Josiah on many of his voyages tells us it was more than a make-do mirror—it was a keepsake. That simple family note took an unremarkable household remnant and turned his keepsake into an ancestor’s memento.