TECHNOLOGY: This week’s object is the early 19th century chandelier hanging in the Warner House front parlor. The museum’s chandelier with its ropes of glass nuggets and dangling glass facets was designed to reflect and intensify the light of its flickering 12 candles. Although mesmerizing, candle powered chandeliers provided better lighting for public spaces, hallways and assembly rooms, than for private rooms like parlors or dining rooms. Chandeliers projected light upwards and outwards, but not downwards. There was a cone of relative darkness directly under a chandelier. A dining table under a chandelier required candles to illuminate the table. A chandelier over a dining table illuminated the room—not the table. In domestic settings wall sconces and candlesticks provided a better solution for ambient and task illumination. Lighting a chandelier could be expensive due to the quality and number of candles needed. Melting wax was always a concern. The more expensive sputter-free beeswax candles were preferred over tallow candles, which as they melted splattered and dripped on anyone below them. The Warner House twelve-light chandelier used the equivalent of two rooms worth of candles. Chandeliers, particularly large tiered examples, were used for special occasions, not every day. The monumental versions in stately homes might only be used once or twice in a generation. Chandeliers like the Warner House example were a bit of domestic bling that announced your status without burning a thing. The sparkle of the brass and glass played overhead during the daylight as easily as during the evening while burning candles. These bits and pieces of simple sparkling glass shapes in a middle-class house brought the same delight as their more august cousins.

THE OBJECT: Installed sometime in the 1820s it has been hanging in the house ever since. Its installation may have coincided with several weddings that took place in the house. It is either of British or American manufacture and stylistically falls into the late Federal and Regency period of design. The pieces are linked with thin steel wires and many of the pieces can be removed for cleaning. It is the first piece catalogued in the Warner House collection and was given to the house by Charles Sherburne Penhallow.

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