Stories in the Warner House

BY JEANMARIE ANDREWS

After moving from Boston, merchant and sea captain Archibald MacPhheadris hired a London builder to erect the finest house in New Hampshire's only port. A museum since 1932, the 300-year-old house stands as a testament to the visions of both owner and builder.

Recently refreshed under the leadership of Director Jeffrey Hopper and the curatorial committee, the rooms of the Portsmouth mansion built in 1718 for Scots-Irish sea captain Archibald MacPhheadris offer a window into early American architecture and decoration.

"For twenty years the layout was based on the 1814 inventory taken after the death of Jonathan Warner, and it was looking tired," said Hopper, a long-time conservator, now in his sixth year as the site's director.

(The house takes its name from Jonathan Warner, the second husband of Archibald and Sarah MacPhheadris' only surviving child, Mary.)

"My research is in the earlier Georgian period," Hopper continued, "so we decided to break the house down to show time changes for the whole range of family occupancy"—a period that stretches through five generations of female descendants who lived in and preserved the house until 1930.

"Our changes are always based on research findings," he stressed. "We are always trying to move the understanding of the house forward."

**UNIQUE ARCHITECTURE**

The home is one of the earliest urban brick houses in northern New England and a rarity in that the builders used locally fired bricks—some imprinted with their initials and some with the New Hampshire provincial seal—to construct 15-inch-thick walls in the Flemish bond pattern.

The fourteen-room mansion ranked as the finest home in the city (at a cost of approximately $1 million in today's dollars) and overlooked the owner's gardens and his warehouse (built in wood to match the house) on the Piscataqua River.

London-trained joiner John
The London-style townhouse built for Archibald Macpheadris in 1716 is the oldest brick building in Portsmouth and the oldest urban brick house in northern New England, with 14 rooms in 6,000 square feet of living space on the three main floors. The exterior of the house has remained virtually unchanged for three centuries.

One of the country's earliest National Historic Landmarks (in 1960), the house displays other notable architectural aspects. For instance, where a traditional Georgian plan has symmetrical rooms on either side of a center hall on each floor, in this house the room layouts mimic each other from the ground up, conforming to the placement of the chimneys—two on the outside of the west end and one on the east end that vented corner fireplaces on each of the three main floors.

Scholars estimate that heating an entire house of this scale would have taken 6,000 to 7,000 logs a year, so while Macpheadris was at sea, Sarah could close off the family rooms from the main staircase to retain heat and simplify maintenance.

Drew initially roofed the house with parallel gables typical of an urban English house, a configuration that worked well in the rainy climate of Old England but not so well in heavy New England snowfalls, the director noted. After the blizzard of 1717 dumped several feet of snow in the cleft of the M-shaped roof, Drew capped it with a gambrel roof incorporating the existing cupola, useful for a merchant watching the shipping traffic on the

At the second-floor landing of the main staircase, intended for guests, the mural encasing the arched window depicts Rhow Oh Koam, left, and Ho Nee Yeath Ta No Row, two of the four Mohawk representatives who accompanied New York Governor Pieter Schuyler to London in 1710 to meet Queen Anne and form an alliance with Britain against the French.
Early owners continued to use the kitchen until the Sherburne family moved into the house. They chose to sell the large kitchen as a complete building, which the buyer moved one block down Chapel Street. The family then built a smaller brick kitchen onto the house.

**DECORATIVE FIRSTS**

Early visitors to the home made their way to the second floor on what builders called an “easy staircase,” with double-width steps that slowed their ascent—giving them time to admire the earliest known wall murals in Anglo-America, painted in oils in about 1720.

Builders constructed the staircase with uncut, dressed timbers and nailed wooden wedges to support the rise and tread of each step, a technique that remained hidden beneath plaster until the early 1930s, when the Warner House Association saved the building from demolition and opened it as a museum.

“The staircase is the best piece of architectural furniture in the house, and it was not meant to be used on a daily basis,” Hopper said, explaining that servants, family members, business and government visitors would have used “privacy staircases” at the back of the house to go about their normal household duties without disturbing the family or guests.

The murals flanking the arched window at the second-floor landing depict two of the four surviving Mohawk sachems who accompanied New York Governor Pieter Schuyler to England in 1710 to plead with Queen Anne for help against French invasions from Canada. Sarah Macpheadris’ parents, who traded with local Indians, would have understood the threat of living on the frontier and the importance of the mission.

The murals along the staircase walls remained hidden under layers of wallpaper until 1853 and were conserved in the 1950s and again in the 1990s. Their historical significance—perhaps a chronicle of Macpheadris’ life in Britain and America—are still a matter of conjecture, but experts continue to research them.

Although the murals bear no signature, some scholars believe Nehemiah...
Pops of blue on chair cushions and fireplace tiles accent the smalt-covered walls in the parlor chamber. Six prints from the 12 Months of Flowers, by John Bowles, an 18th-Century London publisher, hang on the right wall.

Partridge might have painted them. The New York artist was born in Portsmouth, the son of a former lieutenant governor of New Hampshire.

The museum staff revised the interpretation of the room at the top of the stairs from a 19th-Century children’s bedchamber to a reception room where Macpheadris would have entertained important business and political contacts. The walls of the large second-floor room are covered in smalt—pieces of crushed cobalt glass strawed onto still-tacky paint.

Applying smalt was a gilder’s technique to reflect light, Hopper explained, noting that no other known room in this country displays the treatment on all four walls. “It’s a beautiful blue, closest to lapis, and they put another color under it to temper it. Ours is bubblegum pink, which creates tones like lavender,” he noted. “The walls literally shimmer in October’s raking light.”

While the walls sparkle, the floor floats. Each floorboard is connected to the next board by dowels and then secured by the skirting board. “The boards give so your legs won’t ache after a night of dancing,” Hopper said. In returning the room to its original use, the staff also discovered that it acts as a natural amplifier, carrying music throughout the home’s formal rooms.

Most recently, the museum restored the second-floor owner’s bedchamber to its 1760s grandeur after four years of research into the original decoration, which had been stripped out in the 1930s.

“In the 1760s, the city was ‘damask mad,’” said Hopper, and after research and consultation, the curatorial committee chose to re-create that type of decoration. Small patches of large floral-patterned paper from the 1720s remain in the side passage next to the bedchamber, but that pattern would have been seen as antiquated by 1760.

The museum chose a reproduction of damask wallpaper by Adelphi Paperhangings that was used at Strawberry Hill, the home of British historian Horace Walpole. Analysis shows that the paneled fireplace wall was originally painted Prussian blue.

The curatorial committee also found a 9-inch wooden strip running around the top of three walls, with scraps of fabric beneath three rows of 18th-Century nails, suggesting tapestries covered the walls before they were papered. Surviving receipts confirm that in the 1730s another local household ordered stained and painted cloths from London.

After the deaths of Archibald Macpheadris in 1729 and John Warner in 1814, subsequent owners made few changes to the house, instead preserving it as a shrine to their prominent seafaring ancestors.

“This was a well-thought-out and planned house,” Hopper concluded. “It was built for business, family, and entertaining.”

You can discover more about the home’s early prominence as well as how family life changed through the 19th and 20th Centuries during tours on architecture, British history, post-Revolutionary American history, and genealogy, which are held seasonally. The museum is open Wednesday through Monday from June 1 to October 20, and off-season tours can be scheduled. This season the Warner House is hosting From the Mundane to the Sublime: Stoneware 1600 – 1775, an exhibition encompassing more than 250 pieces ranging from plates and coffee and tea services to cider urns and sweetmeat bowls.