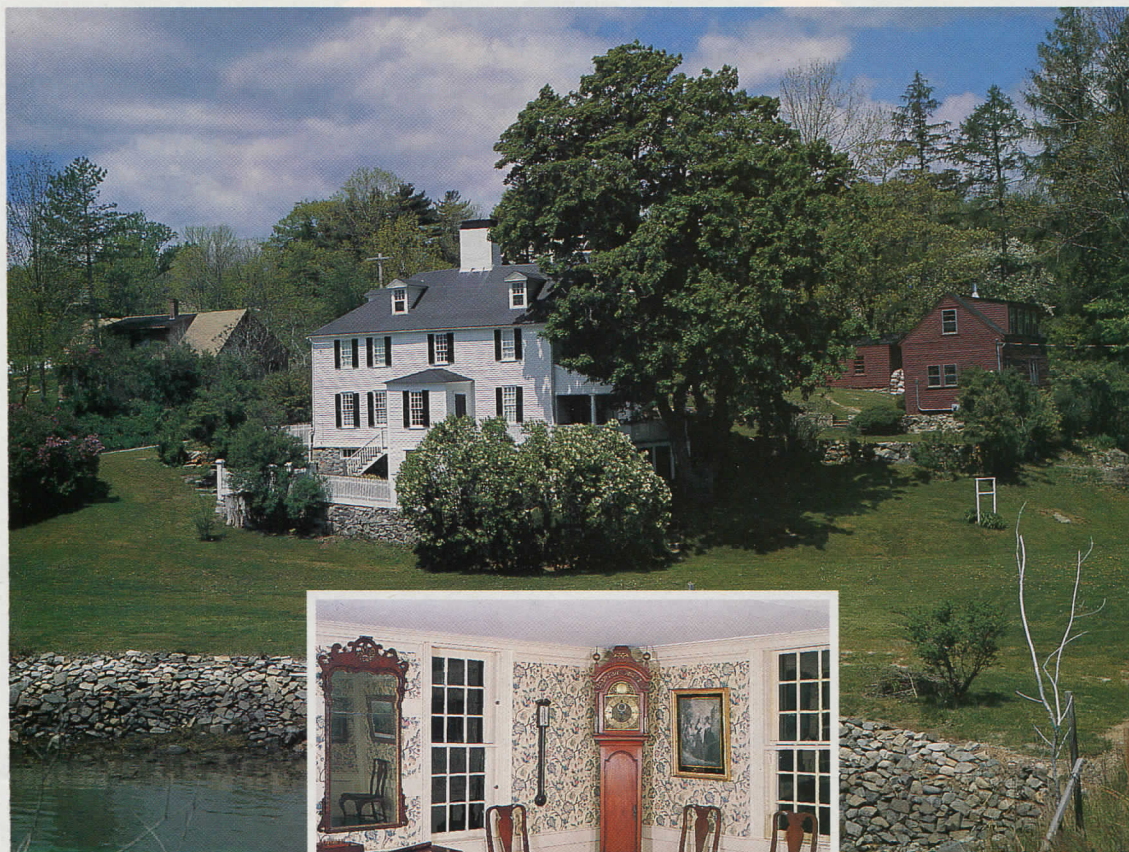


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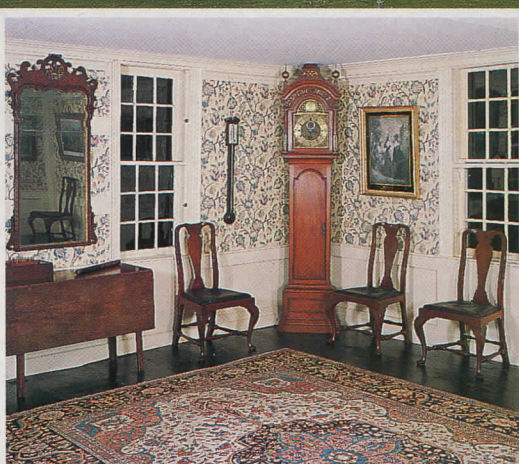
Borderline Mansions

Six grand Colonial homes still have stories to tell

by Anne Cassidy



On a recent tour of six historic houses clustered along the Maine-New Hampshire border, I learned that 19th-century ladies, when faced with an empty afternoon, would occasionally carve their initials, names, family history or favorite poems into window glass using a diamond ring. The delicate filigree, a cobweb of spidery etchings preserved in the panes, is some of the most elegant graffiti you will ever see. Apparently, glass was much softer 200 years ago than it is now, which made this tedious and time-



Built in 1718, the Sayward-Wheeler House (above) contained furniture that had not been moved in 200 years; the ceiling in the sitting room (inset) is only seven feet high.

consuming activity easier. But even if we moderns had the soft glass and the vacant hours to monogram our windows, I doubt we would.

Only three of these six houses, which are all owned by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, have such window etchings. But each house bears its owners' imprints so surely, so indelibly, that visitors cannot fail to be impressed. We build grand houses in the 20th century too, but we seldom keep them in the same family for generations. We move in and

MANSIONS (Continued)

move out; build up and tear down. We don't give houses much of a chance to grow on us. These old homes, though, seem almost organic; their beams and moldings, walls and windows are thoroughly imbued with life. To step into one of these houses is to feel the breath of the past—and it's refreshing, not musty.

The houses I visited are in or near the Piscataqua River Valley, which straddles southern Maine and coastal New Hampshire. One of the most eccentric, and best preserved, is the Sayward-Wheeler House (1718) in York Harbor, Maine. When the SPNEA acquired the house in 1977, its curators found furniture that had not been moved in 200 years; it was literally stuck to the floor. Because the house was built in the early 18th century, the ceilings are only seven feet high in some places, which explains why the cornice in the sitting room is cut out to accommodate the top of a mirror frame, and a tall case clock appears to have grown into the ceiling.

Equally impressive to visitors is the

souvenir box from King George III's coronation, which reveals that patriarch Jonathan Sayward was a loyalist. In fact, the man was so worried about his unfashionable political persuasions that he always kept £200 in his pocket in case he was run out of town. Another telling detail, etched in the glass of a smallish window, is an elegantly looping letter *E*. It stands for Elizabeth Cheever Wheeler, a remote descendant of Sayward who learned to love the place as a young girl and bought it in 1900 for a summer house.

One reason the Sayward-Wheeler House is such a relic is that the family was just solvent enough to hang on to the place, but not wealthy enough to redecorate it. Another reason is that the people who lived there recognized what they had and worked to keep it intact. As early as the 1860s, Elizabeth and Mary Barrell, great-granddaughters of Jonathan Sayward, were giving tours of the house. The townspeople considered it a curiosity even then.

The other houses I explored had this same good fortune—to be lived in by people who respected them and, in the

best sense of the word, preserved them. In 1898, for instance, Emily and Elise Tyson, a wealthy Bostonian and her stepdaughter, fell in love with the Colonel Jonathan Hamilton House (circa 1785), a once-commanding but by then somewhat decayed Georgian mansion by the Salmon Falls River in South Berwick, Maine. They were urged to buy it by a local writer, Sarah Orne Jewett, who had played around the estate as a little girl and once described it as "a noble house . . . the chief show and glory of a rich provincial neighborhood." The Tysons agreed, and Hamilton House became their summer home.

The building now bears two distinct but harmonious impressions. Hamilton, a shipper who made his living off the water, was responsible for the exterior: an ordered, balanced, four-square mansion with Palladian windows and a sweeping view of the river that leads to the sea. The Tysons provided the light and airy Colonial Revival treatment inside. In their own unscientific way, the ladies strove for authenticity, papering the hallways with a reproduction of a

COME SOAK UP AT THE

A photograph of a woman and a young girl sitting on a wooden pier or deck. The woman is wearing a white dress and the girl is wearing a white dress and a hat. They are both looking out towards the ocean. The pier is made of light-colored wood and has a railing. The ocean is blue with white waves breaking in the distance. The sky is clear and blue. There is some tall grass in the foreground.

THE WESTIN RESORT
Hilton Head Island

late-18th-century pattern and adding fine Federal furniture. But they also lightened the place, with pale blues and greens, fishnet canopies over the beds, and punch-and-cut lampshades. The Tysons made the house a cool summer retreat, with a formal garden, a shade garden and a garden cottage.

Chances are Hamilton would have found the Tyson decor a bit too flowery. In his time the house was flanked by wharves and warehouses; it made a prosperous, businesslike impression. In fact, when Hamilton began building it, he was said to have wanted "a finer house than Tilly Haggins" (another prosperous merchant in town). Ironically, Haggins' place is now preserved as the Sarah Orne Jewett House (1774).

In 1819 Captain Theodore Jewett, Sarah's grandfather, rented the Haggins house in South Berwick. A former sea captain, Jewett must have felt comfortable in the house (he bought it outright in 1839), because some of the interior woodwork had been crafted by ships' carpenters.

According to writer Willa Cather, a

close friend of Sarah's, the Jewett home was "a beautiful old house full of strange and lovely things brought from all over the globe by seafaring ancestors." In the muted green-and-gold back bedroom where Sarah, a novelist, did much of her writing, you can still see her eyeglasses hanging from a bedpost, and a little cache of pens for midnight inspirations. And you can understand from the evergreen view out her window why this woman wrote a novel (which many consider her best) called *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Sarah also lived part of her life in the house next door, which is now the town library. In one of its rooms you can see a windowpane where she scratched in her name with a diamond.

Like the Barrell sisters in the Sayward-Wheeler House, Sarah and her sister, Mary Rice Jewett, revered their house. Unlike the Barrell sisters, however, the Jewetts had the money to redecorate it. And redecorate it they did—in large, vibrant floral wallpaper for the entry hall and a William Morris lily-patterned carpet for the gracious stairway. The house is filled with photographs of Sa-

rah's literary friends and mentors—Julia Ward Howe, Henry James, Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Of all the houses I visited, the past was most palpable in the Gilman Garrison House in Exeter, New Hampshire. The oldest part of the house, built about 1650, was once a stronghold to protect Exeter's early citizens from Indian attacks. If you open a little door beside the parlor fireplace you can see the massive rough-hewn logs and careful dovetailing that strengthened the structure. In another part of the house the original stone foundation is visible. While most early New England garrison houses were torn down years ago, this one was clapboarded over, enlarged and given a proper Georgian facade. Beneath its surface, you'll find the fortress details that give the house its charm: the pulley used to haul up the heavy outer door, the way the second floor overhangs the first, and the room with a four-foot-thick floor of split logs.

Daniel Webster boarded in the Gilman Garrison house when he was a student at nearby Phillips Exeter Academy, and

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MANSIONS (Continued)

over the years eight generations of owners put their signatures on the place. One of the most energetic was Brigadier General Peter Gilman (1703-1788), who added, among other things, a new wing with higher ceilings, a formal bedchamber and a meeting room for the governor's council. Gilman, a council member, was deeply involved in local political, religious and civic affairs. One of his granddaughters left her own mark—a lengthy, ornate windowpane inscription about three family weddings—when she visited in 1788.

In 1985 Robbins Paxon Gilman, Peter's descendant, wrote *The Old Logg House by the Bridge*, a quirky, loving account of the home's history and owners. He described how the house had always been a focal point for the community: first as a garrison, then possibly a tavern and later a hat shop. Like the Sayward-Wheeler House, it was thought of as a local curiosity as early as 1793.

It's a giant step from the twisting passages of the Gilman Garrison House to the bowling alley-size halls of the Governor John Langdon House (1784) and the Rundlet-May House (1807), both in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and both built by prosperous merchants eager to display their wealth in intricate moldings, arched doorways and French flocked wallpapers. In a town accustomed to grand old houses, these two still stand out.

"Portsmouth, it is said, contains about 5,000 inhabitants. There are some good houses (among which Colonel Langdon's may be esteemed the first)," wrote George Washington in his diary on November 3, 1789. Although Washington didn't sleep in the Langdon House, he did dine there. But the house has an even greater claim to fame: the splendid wooden mantel in the southeast parlor, which *Antiques* magazine described as having "some of the finest carved rococo ornament in any American interior," and featured on its March 1986 cover. It is indeed a marvel—wood come alive with a subtle, rounded, spectacular beauty.

John Langdon began his life as the son of a humble farmer. He grew up to become a ship's captain, shipbuilder, U.S. senator and two-term New Hampshire governor. He was also the unofficial host of Portsmouth, entertaining Washington and other notables in the large double

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MANSIONS (Continued)

parlor, whose ceilings are 13 inches higher than the rest of the first floor.

James Rundlet, another self-made man, moved to Portsmouth from Exeter in 1807, eager to make a splash in society. Before he built his stunning Federal-style mansion, the Rundlet-May House, he elevated the site a full eight feet above the street. Some locals found this a bit de trop. As Rundlet's obituary observed, the house became "an object of envy to many who predicted with wise nods that so much pride must have a fall and concluded that he had built his house too high."

A compulsive organizer, tinkerer and lover of pets and children (he had 13 of the latter, 10 of whom lived to adulthood), Rundlet left his thumbprint throughout the house and grounds. The Rundlet-May House is known for its well-preserved outbuildings, including a stable and privy, and its pet cemetery. Rundlet installed an early version of central heating for the main hall and an innovative bell call for the servants that was operated by foot from under the dining room table. There's a clock in every room and a Rumford Roaster (a moist-heat oven with temperature control—an innovation in its time) in the kitchen. So thoroughly did Rundlet make this house his own that later generations introduced few changes. The last descendant to live in the house was Ralph May, Rundlet's great-grandson, and according to some reports his interest in the house continued from beyond the grave. But those in the know say old Ralph's ghost has been quiet since his wife died in 1975.

I ended my tour about 45 minutes up the coast from Portsmouth in a house that, while it isn't in the Piscataqua region, bears its owners' indelible imprints, like the six other places I saw. The Captain Lord Mansion (1815) in Kennebunkport, Maine, is a historic house that is also a bed-and-breakfast. The huge Federal-style building has four stairways, including a graceful, three-story, suspended elliptical one. Another, a tightly coiled stairway that winds its way up to the cupola, used to have a street entrance so townsfolk could climb up to look for arriving ships without bothering the owners.

This mansion, too, has captured the community's imagination. At the turn of



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the century tourists and locals would drive by to see all its windows illuminated with kerosene lanterns. Like the Rundlet-May House, the Captain Lord Mansion is said to have a ghost—Phoebe Walker Lord, wife of the original owner, who's been spotted flitting about the cupola and sitting in one of the guest rooms. But ghosts seem redundant here, as in all the other houses I saw—so imbued are these places with the simple, tangible, comfortable spirits of well-used and much-loved homes.

How and Where

Getting There: It's best to drive. All the houses are in towns that are quick hops off Interstate 95, and all are less than two hours north of Boston by car.

Where to Stay: There are 16 rooms in the Captain Lord Mansion (Box 800, Kennebunkport, Maine 04046; telephone 207-967-3141), each named after a ship owned by the Lord family. Eleven have working fireplaces; all are filled with antiques and have private baths. In the gathering room, you can work a puzzle or browse through photo albums showing the mansion's restoration. Hosts Bev Davis and Rick Litchfield or a staff member will make dinner reservations for you and recommend sights in town. In the high season (May through December), double rooms cost \$100–\$175, including full breakfast. Rates are lower from January through April and midweek in May, June, November and December. Reserve well ahead.

In Portsmouth, try the **Sise Inn** (40 Court St., Portsmouth, N.H. 03801; 800-232-4667 or 603-433-1200), a renovated 1881 Queen Anne Victorian with 25 beautifully appointed rooms and 7 suites. Rates, including continental breakfast, range from \$115 for a double to \$175 for the Chairman Suite, which sleeps four and has a whirlpool bathtub.

Where to Eat: Portsmouth has had a gastronomic revolution in the last few years. One of the best restaurants is **Strawbery Court Restaurant Français** (20 Atkinson St.; 431-7722; \$70 prix fixe for two), close to the Strawberry Banke outdoor museum of restored 17th and 18th-century houses. On the menu are fresh seafood, duckling, grilled lamb loin chops and medallions of veal.

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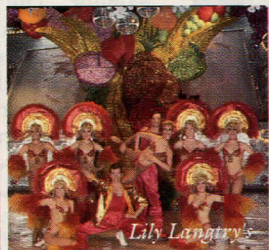
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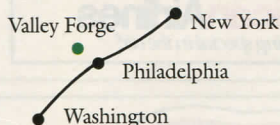
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MANSIONS (Continued)

entrees (from mussels to meat loaf) and delicious fresh-baked pies (try the maple walnut or fudge nut), eat at the **Stockpot** (53 Bow St.; 431-1851; \$10-\$15). It's perfect for an inexpensive lunch. For fortifying snacks, try **Café Brioche** (14 Market Square; 430-9225), an outdoor café right off the market square, that serves pastries, coffee and tea.

The **White Barn Inn** in Kennebunkport (Beach St.; 207-967-2321; \$80) is a romantically renovated barn that serves dinner only. Live piano music accompanies the meals (mainly seafood and beef); the wine list is extensive and reasonable. Don't miss the hot fudge puff, a dessert so rich it's almost decadent.

To See and Do: If you have time left over and want to see more than just historic homes, Portsmouth is a great town for walking. Don't miss Ceres Street on the waterfront, and Market and Bow Streets with their fanciful shops. And if you haven't gotten your fill of history, the Portsmouth Trail leads you past six of the town's finest mansions, including the Langdon and Rundlet-May houses.

Kennebunkport is also great for strolling. In the lower village there are plenty of shops (especially the Book Port building, originally a rum warehouse), as well as the 1824 Congregational church, which has a Christopher Wren-style cupola and belfry. Walk or drive north along Ocean Avenue to see St. Ann's Episcopal Church, sitting almost in the surf.

The town of York Harbor has a mile-long cliff walk, which you can pick up right in front of the Sayward-Wheeler House. Exeter and South Berwick are also charming river towns.

For More Information: To find out more about the six houses, write to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (Harrison Gray Otis House, 141 Cambridge St., Boston, Mass. 02114; 617-227-3956) and ask for the "House Guide," a brochure describing all 24 of the society's house museums. Admission is \$3 per house for the places mentioned in this article. Most are open from June 1 through October 15. Call to find out what days each house is open to the public.

For more information on Portsmouth, contact the **Portsmouth Chamber of Commerce**, 500 Market St., Portsmouth, N.H. 03801; 603-436-1118. ◀◀