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REPORT FOR THE PORTER-PHELPS-HUNTINGTON FOUNDATION

FORTY ACRES REINTERPRETATION INITIATIVE

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## INTRODUCTION

My interest in and approach to the Porter-Phelps-Huntington Foundation's project to reinterpret the house at Forty Acres is shaped by my broader concerns as a social and cultural historian, by my work on the social and economic history of 18th and 19th century New England, and by an interest in the opportunities and problems faced by all museums and historic sites as they attempt to present the past to a public audience. I have kept three considerations in mind as I have prepared this report: first, a wish to offer suggestions that will complement and reinforce those of other scholars in the program; second, an awareness of the particular character of the Porter-Phelps-Huntington house as a building associated with one family since the 18th century and accompanied by an unusually strong collection of documentary and material sources; and most of all, thirdly, a social historian's belief that the "story" of such a house and those who lived and worked there, carefully presented, can convey to visitors a rich sense of the broader context and processes of historical change of which they formed a part.

This third consideration leads me to argue that any reinterpretation of the house will require an abandonment of James Lincoln Huntington's apparent purposes for it when he undertook its preservation and restoration from the 1920s

onward. Despite the fact that its contents were from different periods, collected from several family sources, Dr. Huntington wrote that the house was "not a composite but a well furnished Colonial Mansion, such as one would expect to find the home of Squire Charles Phelps of . . . Hadley."<sup>1</sup> As Dan Horowitz will no doubt suggest, this was a conceit that says more about the Colonial Revival than about the evolving history of the house and family. Huntington also saw the house as a "family memorial," and his concerns were genealogical, even hagiographical, rather than historical in the wider sense. I sense that Huntington's conception of the house still influences its presentation to the public today, and that this makes it seem more parochial and less exciting than it could be. Reinterpreting the house will not require altering the Foundation's "mission statement," or even necessarily changing the contents of rooms (though that may be desirable in suitable cases). It will require rethinking the house's significance and purpose, making Dr. Huntington's conception of them merely one (late) stage in its history rather than the site's underlying rationale.

To Huntington the house represented a timeless "Colonial" past and memorialized a special family -- his own. Reinterpretation should exploit the house's potential

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<sup>1</sup> James Lincoln Huntington, Forty Acres: The Story of the Bist Huntington House (New York, 1949), p. 66.

to convey both a sense of historical change and the wider social circumstances within which the Porter, Phelps and Huntington families lived. The sense of change might best be captured in a "generational" approach that emphasizes the different phases of the house's history and which I shall outline in more detail shortly. Wider social circumstances might include evidence at three levels: the broader economic and social context into which activities at Forty Acres fitted at different periods; the social and class position of the Porter, Phelps and Huntington families at different times; and the role of the house itself as a nexus of social relationships -- of different sorts at different periods -- which involved not just the Porter-Phelps-Huntington family itself, but the many other people who worked at, managed or visited the estate. House and family therefore become not the sole foci of the interpretation but rather the starting-point and thread of continuity for an exploration of particular types of social change over time. This approach recognizes that Forty Acres clearly cannot be, and should not want to be, another Old Deerfield or Old Sturbridge Village, but that it has a distinctive type of historical "story" to illuminate.

The house's history can be divided into five distinct phases, as follows: the Porter<sup>2</sup> period, c1752-1770, and the

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<sup>2</sup> I have used family or individuals' names to identify periods or in this one instance, for the sake of brevity. I do not intend that they adopted for general use, nor to imply that only men's names could

building of the original house; the Phelps period, 1770-1816, including the evolution of the main buildings as they have essentially survived since; the Dan Huntington period, 1816-c1855/64; the Bishop Huntington period, c1855/65-early 20th century, when the house was mainly used as a summer residence; and the James L. Huntington period, c1920s-1940s, when the main features of the modern presentation of the house were evolved. I have assumed that Dan Horowitz will be discussing the last period and that the substantial late 18th century remodelling of the house during Charles and Elizabeth Phelps's marriage has made clear presentation of the first phase rather difficult. I have focused in what follows on the second, third and fourth phases. Between each of these periods the shift of control over the house from one generation to the next also marked a shift in its social and economic functions. A "generational approach" to the period c1770-c1900 may therefore provide a powerful interpretational tool, because it links the different phases in the family's history closely to the changing circumstances of the house itself.

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suitable labels for such periods.

THE GENERATION OF CHARLES PHELPS JR AND ELIZABETH PORTER  
PHELPS, 1770-1816

The keynote here is the evolution of the house and surroundings as part of a landed estate unusually large for settled parts of New England in the late 18th century. On one hand Charles Phelps acted to secure for himself the position and trappings of a gentleman farmer. His farm was large, employing considerable numbers of servants (including a few slaves before the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts) and hired laborers from the surrounding countryside, while Phelps himself devoted much time to legal, political and other public duties which took him away from home a good deal. Income from all these activities helped pay for the substantial expansion and modification of the house and its interior which took place over the last thirty years of the 18th century and which transformed it into the genteel "Colonial [sic] Mansion" of which James Lincoln Huntington would grow so fond.

This gentility depended upon and partly concealed a considerable amount of household production, documented in Elizabeth Porter Phelps's diary and many letters. Interpretation of the house in this period should stress the productive work -- manufacturing, food preparation, etc. -- that occurred in the kitchen, back-rooms, attics and outbuildings, as much as the elegance of the Long Room,

hallway and other front rooms that feature so prominently in tours of the house at the moment. Ways need also to be found for the interpretation clearly to distinguish between what was "typical" about the Phelps household and what, on account of its wealth and position, was unusual.

Their activities engaged the Phelpses in a complex web of social relationships: on the estate, with field and house servants about whom we have a fair amount of information; in the neighborhood, with other farmers, church members and visitors; and in the wider context of the New England élite, which patterned the family's movements, purchases and marriages. Analysis of material and documentary evidence will help establish, for instance, the mix of local, New England and imported goods which went into the furnishing of the house, and the role of these goods as markers of social position; there is evidence, for instance, that between 1788 and 1790 the house received the first imported carpet in Hadley.<sup>3</sup> Above all, the interpretation of this period could stress two issues largely ignored in James Lincoln Huntington's focus on Phelps the gentleman farmer: the strength of evidence about women's activities and concerns and the ability of the sources to throw light on the role of African- and Native-American men and women in the Valley's labor force at the end of the 18th century.

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<sup>3</sup> Judd Manuscript, "Hadley vol. III," p. 18 (Forbes Library Northampton).

However, the labor demands of farm and, to a lesser extent, household, made the attempt to maintain a large farm-based estate in the long run an impossible one. In its very untypicality, the Charles Phelps farm with its 600 acres illustrates the typical inability of northern U.S. élites to sustain themselves by working the land, because the abolition of slavery in the north, the reliance on family labor, the availability of land and non-farm employment, the ideology of "independence," and (in the late 18th and early 19th centuries) the absence of a successful staple cash crop all combined to prevent the formation of a permanent, fully dependent, impoverished agricultural labor force that could alone have made large farm estates such as Phelps's viable. Phelps himself invested in other activities, such as turnpikes and banks, and his son was a lawyer and merchant in Boston until after Charles Phelps's death. When Forty Acres, now divided from part of the estate and part of a smaller farm, was taken over by Phelps's daughter Elizabeth W. and her husband Dan Huntington in 1816, it ceased to be the seat of a great estate and took on more of the characteristics of a family farm.

THE GENERATION OF DAN HUNTINGTON AND ELIZABETH W. (PHELPS)  
HUNTINGTON, 1816-c1855/64

Typical New England farm families divided their land between their sons (and sometimes daughters) so that each could establish farms of their own. Depending on circumstances, the subdivision of farms helped produce many of the characteristics of early 19th century rural society: the diminishing size of holdings, improvement of good land, impoverishment of poor land, outmigration to the "frontiers" of northern New England and the "west," the establishment of specialist rural manufactures and the drift of offspring to towns and factories. In some measure the generation of Elizabeth Whiting Phelps and her husband Dan Huntington, who occupied the house from 1816 until the latter's death in 1864 reflected these typical rural conditions. The original estate was divided between Dan Huntington and his brother-in-law Charles Porter Phelps, who established his own house and farm across the road. Activities at Forty Acres were based on the presence of children, which temporarily increased the range of household production and reduced the demand for servants and other hired labor on the farm.

However the lives of Dan Huntington and his family were defined not by "typical" rural experience, but by the fact that they were members of a New England élite only partly attached to the land and its concerns. Huntington, a

~~A~~ clergyman, and Elizabeth Whiting Phelps, daughter of a prominent rural family, had connections and interests across southern New England, and when they came to raise their own children, particularly the sons, they focused not on establishing them on the land (though two did eventually become farmers), but on securing the college education or other training which could allow them to participate in the expanding New England upper middle class of lawyers, merchants, editors and churchmen. In Dan Huntington's generation, the house and farm were tools in a broader set of strategies to raise the income necessary to educate several children and set them up in careers. They were also the setting for the family's religious travails: Dan and Elizabeth's shift from orthodox Congregationalism to Unitarianism; her painful break with the Hadley church and their unsuccessful attempt to establish a Unitarian church in the neighborhood that could support Dan Huntington as its pastor.

Dan Huntington's farm was smaller than Charles Phelps's had been, but hiring labor was still a problem and income from farming alone insufficient for his purposes. As they grew up in the 1820s and 1830s several of his sons in turn became responsible for working the land, hiring or swapping work in the neighborhood when they needed extra help.<sup>4</sup> Like

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore G. Huntington, "Sketches by Theodore G. Huntington Family Life in Hadley," [1881] p. 63 (Porter-Phelps-Huntington Family Papers, Amherst College Archives, Box 21).

other Hadley farmers, the Huntingtons adopted new crops such as broom-corn and made occasional improvements to their land, but tailored their farming decisions to fit the labor they had available as much as to the desire to raise cash. From before 1825, however, Dan Huntington made partnerships -- at first with another man, later with his son Edward -- to own and run the store at North Hadley, for which he also secured a postmastership. Other schemes, including a proposal to run a school at Forty Acres, came to nothing. The store, though, gave the family new local social and economic ties. As merchants, they extended store credit to neighbors, sold liquor and other goods, and between 1832 and 1839 were involved on a moderate scale in putting out palm-leaf for braiding into hats by local families. It was from the store that they earned much of their cash income, which was applied mainly to the childrens' education. Once the youngest son, Frederic Dan Huntington, was through college in the early 1840s, his father curtailed and then relinquished his trading business.

Dan Huntington's is probably the generation whose interpretation to visitors presents the most intriguing problems. On one hand, documentation is quite rich, in letters, diaries and reminiscences which survive from a number of family members. On the other, compared with earlier or later ones, this period has left few distinctive

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marks on the house and its material collections. Trading and some other activities occurred, not on the farm, but in North Hadley village and elsewhere. Few major alterations were made to the best-preserved parts of the surviving house.

It is certain that this generation undertook critical changes to the pattern and significance of women's work in the household that would have entailed alterations to the rear rooms of the house, but evidence for this will have to be pieced together carefully from a variety of letters and other sources because the major surviving woman's diary from this period -- that of Elizabeth Whiting Huntington -- dwells on religious rather than household matters. Careful research, however, might reveal much about the uses of the house in this generation and also provide guidance about the placement of artifacts that could best illustrate the telling of its story to visitors. While the male side of this generation's story emerges most clearly from the documents, the potential exists to throw light on the shifts in women's lives that also occurred. A project that sought to delineate the contrasts between Elizabeth Phelps's household and that of her daughters and grand-daughters could form the basis of an interpretation that stressed the changes in women's work and their uses of space during the early 19th century.

THE GENERATION OF BISHOP HUNTINGTON, c1855/65 - EARLY 20th  
CENTURY

By the mid-19th century the house was much less the practical farm-house that it had been. Again, it reflected patterns rooted in the family's particular history but which illustrated broader social trends. The working farmers among Dan Huntington's sons had apparently moved to smaller houses of their own. Forty Acres came to serve functions it retained into the 20th century: as a summer residence for family members -- particularly Frederic Dan Huntington -- who made their careers away from the land in the Northeastern professional elite.

Its role in this generation probably took the house furthest from the gentleman farmer's residence that James Lincoln Huntington was so keen to recreate in the next. Yet the concerns of Dan Huntington late in his life, of his children as they continued to use or visit the house, and of grandchildren such as Arria S. Huntington, laid important ideological foundations for its restoration in the 20th century. If Dr. Huntington stressed genealogy, patriarchy and the aura of an imagined "colonial" past, these themes were prefigured in some of his predecessors' activities. Dan Huntington was engaged in compiling genealogies at least as early as 1848. His son Charles P. Huntington, a lawyer who had lived his life away from Hadley, stressed patriarchal

themes when he returned to address the town's bicentennial celebrations in 1859.<sup>5</sup> Bishop Frederic Dan Huntington arranged family reunions in the late 19th century whose posed photographs convey a strong generational consciousness, while by contrast Arria Huntington presented in Under a Colonial Roof-Tree (1891) the family's first published interpretation of its connections with a timeless, greater past. This contrast, which we might call the "genealogical paradox," combining strong historical consciousness about the narrow issue of ancestry with a much weaker sense of broader social changes, helped underpin the Colonial Revival of which James Lincoln Huntington was an exponent.

The Bishop's generation was crucial both to the house's physical survival and to the ideology of its 20th century re-presentation. My surmise is that the withdrawal of the house from productive activity both prevented its substantial alteration (or even demolition) and created the cultural milieu in which the "genealogical paradox" could take root there. The decline of its close links with the land and rural production needs careful exploration and documentation to test this hypothesis. Research may also reveal much more than we now know about the family's local connections and social relationships in the late 19th

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<sup>5</sup> See Celebration of the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Settlement of Hadley, Massachusetts, at Hadley, June 8, 1859 (Northampton, 1859), es pp. 12-13.

century. This in turn may help locate the house's place in Hadley's wider social and economic circumstances in this period.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I have suggested that the presentation of Forty Acres up to now has been rooted in the tradition established by James Lincoln Huntington, that this tradition in turn drew on an ideology nourished by the house's unusual origins and 19th century circumstances, and that reinterpreting the site will entail abandoning that tradition even as we seek to understand it as a particular phase in the house's history. If the Foundation were to reject the assumption that the house represents a timeless "colonial" past and instead use each generation of the Porter, Phelps and Huntington families to convey the sense of broader historical changes of which they were part, it would unlock the house's considerable potential to be a popular and informative historical site.

I have already hinted at interpretive and research strategies on particular issues. In conclusion, I would offer some more general suggestions. Reinterpretation will involve time and effort in research and presentation, but need not require a huge budget. Three areas need attention: more systematic research in the Porter-Phelps-Huntington

Papers and other collections; the incorporation of new findings and interpretations in the tours and other exhibits provided for visitors; and the arrangement of artifacts in the house. Kevin Sweeney and other material culture specialists are much better qualified than I am to make recommendations on the third area, which may in any case be a project for the future. My remarks will relate to the first two areas, on which work could begin with little delay.

In addition to specific research possibilities mentioned earlier, I would suggest the need for some general documentary research on the house and its site, to help underpin the kind of generational approach I have recommended:

-- Use tax lists to trace the accumulation and disbursement of the family's property in Hadley, and to gather evidence of the economic activities of Moses Porter (if possible), Charles Phelps, Charles Porter Phelps, Dan Huntington and later members of the family;

-- Correlate this data with information from deeds and from probate records regarding the land and other property owned and passed on by different family members;

-- Drawing on all the resultant evidence, try to map the outline and subsequent distribution of Charles Phelps Jr's property, and trace its relationship to activities such as farming, logging, sawmills, etc. This might form the

basis for an historical map of the site that could be used in displays or interpretive materials;

-- Using diaries, letters and other documents try to map the movements, hence "geography" and connections, of different family members, male and female, so as to understand the social and cultural milieu of the house and family in different periods.

How might this be achieved?

-- Presumably the Foundation will wish to use its connections with locally-based scholars to make these and other research projects the subjects of graduate and undergraduate papers or theses which could be added to the papers collected at Amherst College and form the basis for revised tours and other interpretive material;

-- It might also explore the possibility that students could produce for course credit handouts, displays or other material designed for use or distribution at the house;

-- Above all, though, effort is needed to initiate a program of training for the guides at the house so that the fruits of new research and the insights suggested by the scholars in the present program can be incorporated in house tours;

-- Ideally, this would necessitate the writing of a new, concise history of the house to replace James Lincoln Huntington's Forty Acres, and to be given to tour guides instead of it;

-- It is also likely that different and varying tours need to be devised to convey the variety of "stories" and experiences the house can be used to relate. If the "generational" approach I have sketched were to be adopted, for instance, it would be preferable to designate one or more rooms to be used to illustrate each stage of the story and to rearrange artifacts accordingly;

-- Consideration could be given to the setting aside of space on the site for a small exhibit to introduce visitors to the material they will be shown, the families' history and the wider social issues that will be addressed. If possible a permanent display might be accompanied by space for temporary exhibitions to focus attention on specific topics or themes;

-- In the longer run, and in conjunction with any rearrangement of artifacts within the rooms of the house shown to the public, consideration might be given to the restoration and opening-up of one or more of the working rooms at the rear of the first floor. As my remarks about the importance of household production in the late 18th and early 19th centuries suggest, the present impression of a house largely for sleeping and elegant consumption needs to be balanced better with its historic role as a center of production and labor. If research confirms my suggestion that different generations undertook different types of

household production, there will also be a need to illustrate patterns of change in this area.

This last suggestion will, I realize, entail considerable cost and reorganization. But the other suggestions need not pose such great difficulty. Above all, it should be possible to convey, with careful coordination of research and interpretation, a clear sense of the house's different historic roles and the broader social changes of which it and its families formed a part.