Report on Utilizing the Porter-Phelps-Huntington House and Its Furnishings as Resources for Research and Interpretation

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This report is written from the perspective of an early American cultural historian who spent most of the last decade working in historic house museums. The experience has impressed upon me the importance of basing historical studies on an analysis of a period, a region or a site's material culture -- the body of physical evidence -- as well as surviving documentary sources. Work in historic house musuems has also made clear the interpretive power of actual room installations in historic houses. More than anything written on a label or spoken by a guide, the visual impression of room interiors is the most powerful message that will inform or misinform visitors to a site. Getting right the look of a room is just as important as determining the dates of construction and subsequent alterations and the birth and death dates of inhabitants. Carefully analyzed, furnishings can tell us much about the lives of a house's residents, and correctly recreated, furnishings can tell the visitor more than the best-trained guide.

The richness of this site's physical evidence provided by both the house and the furnishings owned by successive generations of occupants parallels the richness of the Foundation's better known documentary sources. While not unique, the site's combination of the house's architectural integrity, the provenance of the furnishings (which are quite representative of the house's occupants) and the

abundant documentary sources is relatively rare and historically significant. Despite this fact, I feel the Foundation has been relatively slow to appreciate and utilize effectively the house and its contents as primary sources of historical insight in their own right and as illustrations for the story finally conveyed to the public. The historic structure report undertaken by Adams & Roy in 1988 was the first step in exploring the evidence that can be recovered from what is in reality an above ground archeological site.

The body of this report will suggest other lines of historical inquiry and approaches to interpretation by suggesting stories that the building and its contents can tell. It adopts an approach that seeks to enhance and clarify for the visitor the story of successive generations which was at the heart of Dr. Huntington's interpretive scheme and the one suggested most obviously by the site and its contents. It suggests areas for further research and recommends modifications to existing room installations.

The original 1752 structure embodied the genteel aspirations, provincial outlook and available resources of Moses Porter's family. The mansion house's central hall plan which necessitated the added expense of two chimney stacks and accommodated four rooms up and down was innovative for the time and place, for most families then made do with smaller, single-story houses with a central

chimney. The exterior cladding of wide weatherboards scored and coated with a red paint mixed with sand to imitate masonry construction represented an unusual and sophisticated technique used to suggest a solidity and substance that often out ran the financial resources of genteel home builders and the skills of colonial craftsmen. While the choice of imitation red sandstone may suggest a certain preference for a building material native to the Connecticut Valley, it more likely refers to what was then New England's grandest, high-style mansion house, Boston's Thomas Hancock House, built in 1737 of red sandstone from Middletown, Connecticut. Unlike the more fashionable gambrel-roofed Hancock House, the Porter house originally had a pitched roof and a jetty or overhang, features which more up-to-date mansion houses in the Connecticut Valley eschewed, but which continued to be found on substantial houses built by others in the neighborhood until the eve of the American Revolution. (The Boltwood and Warner houses in Amherst are examples of substantial yeoman houses with these features.) The corner fireplaces associated with the two chimney stacks also may be suggestive of another more exotic vernacular building tradition that stretched from the Delaware Valley to coastal Connecticut and possibly up the River. Inside the house the original paneling was rather modest, representative of what was found in other homes in the area and may have been unpainted. The staircase in the central hall originally lacked the fine turnings it now has.

The furnishings from the mid-eigtheenth century period suggest similar aspirations and associations. The yellow, pine board chest initialed SP is of a type that could have been found in many houses throughout the Valley and dates to the period from 1670 to 1720. At mid-century, older pieces such as this would have been found intermixed with newer pieces and newer forms such as the high chest and the dressing table now located in the northwest chamber. Both of these case pieces with their stylish curved legs, imported brass pulls, drawers and waste space -- some of which was eliminated when the legs of the high chest were cut down -- suggest a style of life that was to a degree influenced by cosmopolitan fashions, a proliferation of things -- small things that needed a proliferation of drawers to contain and categorize them -- and the spread of urban and urbane culture into the hinterland. Both of these case pieces were made by a Wethersfield, Connecticut cabinetmaker -- Return Belden -- who was trained by a cabinetmaker from the Boston area named William Manley. The odd choice of quarter-sawn sycamore as a primary wood and the profile of the legs -- like other craftsmen producing in some quantity, Belden used patterns and other jigs -- identify Belden's work while the double-beaded molding on the tops of the drawer sides reveal his indebtedness -- at a remove -- to Boston cabinetmaking. The three crook-back, bannister chairs made in 1775 by Samual Gaylord, Junior of

Hadley document the later localization of production in mode also indebted to Boston prototypes.

The overhang of second storeys, intricacies of drawer construction and the turnings of chairs are not the stuff of broad historical generalizations nor should they necessarily be topics regularly covered in tours of the house, but they do document the web of relationships among members of the gentry class, among artisans, among neighbors and with other individuals still more remote that shaped the world in which the Porters lived, and they are the stuff of which the family's story should be fashioned. For the River Gods, the network of rural gentry families of which the Porters were very much a part, cultural influences were as likely to travel up the river from Connecticut as they were to cross the colony moving overland from east to west. Though even when ideas and goods did move along the river, the influence of Boston and even more distant London still played an important role in shaping the look of rooms and the behaviour of aspiring gentlemen and ladies who occupied them. The Porters' status as members of a rural gentry class is central to understanding the house and its early furnishings, and as I have sugggested, an examination of their furnishings tells us much about members of this class.

The ability of the house and its earliest furnishings to tell this story of the first generation can be enhanced. Analysis of interior paints and in particular the restoration of what is presumed to be the central hall's

original coat of Prussian blue paint -- a real sign of extravagance -- could help establish the character and aspirations of early occupants. Removal of extraneous furnishings would also reveal the orginal vertical paneling which suggests a more modest ability (or desire) to realize the Porter's genteel aspirations. A more consistently furnished northeast parlor could also help establish at the outset of the tour the character of the family. This would appear to be the obvious place to highlight Porter possessions and to make much (if it can be documented) of the retention of a bed in the parlor, a practice which was becoming somewhat passe in genteel circles. The current furnishings, which include an inappropriately hung bed from the early 1800s, an out-of-place 1840s washstand and a nice but irrelevant portrait, are a hodgepoge of pieces from different periods, some of which have nothing to do with the Porters and are misleading and distracting.

The Long Room, which has more consistency in its furnishings, does a much better job of telling the story of the social position and cultural orientation of the house's late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century occupants, Charles and Elizabeth Porter Phelps, though even this powerful text would benefit from some judicious editing. The room with its evidence of architectural remodeling in the neoclassical Federal style and its similarly-styled primary furnishings -- the card tables, the pair of looking glasses, the set of fancy chairs, and the sofa -- makes a

powerful statement of purchasing power that screams nouveau riche. The recent addition of the Federal secretary is very appropriate and enhances the statement being made. The effect could be further enhanced by the inclusion of a tall case clock (there is an appropriate one currently in the hall), a reproduction of an appropriate floor covering (research is required here), the determination and restoration of the original paint color and the removal of extraneous portraits which merely distract and do little to further the stories of the Phelps and early Huntington families.

The origins of the Long Room's furnishings are difficult to pinpoint geographically because of the increasingly mobile charcter of skilled labor during the period, the increased use of parts produced in quantity -- the stringing and banding on the card tables could very well have been mass-produced by specialists, -- the more pervasive influence of cosmopolitan design sources and the even deeper penetration of urban culture into the countryside. (All of these are points that could be made in interpreting the room and the cultural orientation and aspirations of the Phelpses.) It is quite possible that much of this furniture could have been produced locally, but more research is needed to make a determination. If some of the furniture did come from Boston, it does not represent the city's best in terms of design and construction. The effect produced by the card tables, for example, was

stylish, but the construction techniques employed were cheap and the layout of the inlay rather clunky. Here is a rather representative instance where an early ninteenth-century cabinetmaker strove to achieve a certain effect at a reasonable cost and the purchaser, presumably Charles Phelps, Junior, wanted something flashy at an affordable price. (And here documentary evidence suggesting Phelps' limited financial resources provides some confirmation of what the material evidence is saying.)

This room's contents also make clearer than the earlier furnishings associated with the Porters and the Phelpses the role of women in the domestication of the household environment and the genteel culture of the day. Tea drinking and the rounds of visiting, status accomplishments involving musical instruments and the pictoral arts, and the work required to maintain and to supervise others who helped maintain such furnishings are all suggested by the contents of this room. Highlighting certain furnishings and possessions is one way of bringing out the position of women and their stories which, despite the richness of documentation, is not adequately integrated into existing tours.

The dining room provides a logical progression chronologically in terms of furnishings and in terms of the house's occupancy from the story of the Phelps family to the story of the first Huntingtons. The dining room, which would have been a relatively new type of room in rural New

England, bespeaks the ambiance of a middle class family increasingly influenced by urban fashions and pratices. The room's furnishings, especially the ceramics and shelf clock (which is appropriately located though not original to the house) tells a story of the growing availability of factory-produced goods that brought former luxuries into the homes of the middle class. And the professionally trained Huntingtons appear to have been preeminently rural professionals who became less rural as they became more professional. The furnishings could be refined further to reinforce these interpretive themes (after necessary research), and consideration could be given to a reproduction floor covering and possibly wall paper.

After using the first three rooms and their furnishings to establish the basic chronology and character of the first three generations, the tour could logically move into the back rooms on the first floor to address the themes raised by other occupants of the house. Most of the interpretation in the back region of the house will relay more heavily on words than things, but still things do have a role to play. A stark contrast between the general character of front regions -- parlors and dining rooms -- and back regions -- kitchens, work areas, possibly even servant living quarters -- should be obvious in the architectural finishes, floor and wall treatments, and the quality and character of furnishings. Furnishings could also play a supporting role

in discussing patterns of work involved in cooking, household production, and supervision of help.

After the back regions, the Bishop's Room could help reestablish the story of succeeding generations that used the house after its career as a working household had largely ended. This room should be preserved pretty much as it is. It speaks volumes about the later orientation of the family and the subsequent role of the house as family shrine. It conveys much more than the most eloquent guide ever could.

The upstairs rooms could be used to highlight themes in a nonchronological manner. If a strong sense of chronology is established on the first floor by moving generationally from room to room, a more purely thematic approach that mixes personalities and possessions from different periods could be adopted on the second floor. Phelps' office highlights another type of work that went on in the house in the late 1700s and early 1800s. And as it is currently furnished, the southeast bed chamber provides an effective setting for consideration of the house's later career. Resarch in documentary and physical sources would suggest possible themes for other rooms.

The grounding of the stories of the house's successive generations of occupants in successively furnished "period" rooms each emphasizing a paticular story makes overall tour narrative more concrete and comprehensible. It is a proven,

and admittedly not very novel approach, that appears to be in keeping with Dr. Huntington's original intention. Still, making effective use of things to tell the story of successive generations moves the story beyond a single family to suggest its connections with others of their day and of today. Currently, the simultaneous employment of a multigenerational approach in each of the rooms (to varying degrees) produces confusion and requires a heavier reliance on words to sort out the things, instead of strategically using the things to reinforce the stories told by words. And I fear that the histories and the eloquent statements embedded in these supposedly mute things are lost, and with them a distinctive set of voices is silenced.

To allow these voices to speak more clearly, additional research on the collections is needed. The information on the current catalogue cards is usually inadequate. Some is incomplete; some of it is dated, some just plain wrong. Outside expertise needs to be employed to up-date this information on furniture, ceramics, and other artifacts. It is possible that students could do some of the work, but some needed information could be established relatively quickly by knowledgeable individuals. Once established and recorded on the cards, the information could be used to direct the rearrangment of furnishings, to shape the narratives of tours and to instruct members of the guiding staff.

In shaping tour narratives, the interpretive potential of the furnishings needs to be understood in light of the studies of material culture undertaken during the past twenty years. This will help the staff make the most of the stories these things have to tell and will broaden the interpretive themes to address issues that transcend the boundaries of Forty Acres. Some obvious places to start are: James Deetz, _In Small Things Forgotten_ (1977); Carol Shammas, "The Domestic Environment in Early Modern England and America" (1980); Robert B. St. George, _Material Life in America 1600-1860_ (1988); Jack Larkin, _The Reshaping of Everyday Life, 1790-1840_ (1988); and Ronald Hoffman, Cary Carson and Peter Albert, eds., _Of Consuming Interests: The Style of Life in Eighteenth-Century America_ (forthcoming 1993). Here again student projects could play a role in suggesting and possibly developing possible interpretive furnishing plans.

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