

## New England Collectors and Collections

by Jeanne Schinto

Most of us know at least a few of the names. They are the men and women who wrote the first antiques reference books. They donated the first important collections to museums. They organized the first exhibits. They validated antiquing for the rest of us. The beauty of this weekend-long conference on "New England Collectors and Collections," the latest offering of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, was its depth and breadth. Participants gathered June 18-20 at Eaglebrook School in Deerfield, Massachusetts, to consider individual collectors as well as institutional collections from the 18th century to the present.

"Collections have been in the background of all the other topics for the last twenty-eight years," said Peter Benes (pronounced Ben-esh) of Concord, Massachusetts, Dublin Seminar's cofounder and director. Those topics have always been quirky and ingeniously interdisciplinary. Last year's was "Slavery/Anti-Slavery in New England." It included, of course, the African slave trade and abolitionism, but also Native American slavery, life after emancipation, and the memory of slavery. The year before that, it was "Worlds of Children: 1620-1920" and covered children's games, children in 19th-century illustrations and picture books, children in newspaper trades and public festivals, child performers and prodigies, children in wartime, and children in orphan asylums.

Retired Boston University professor Richard M. Candee of York, Maine, a longtime trustee of the Dublin Seminar, was asked how the topic is customarily chosen. Candee said that Benes selects it, making sure that it cuts across enough disciplines that "everyone hasn't just gone to another conference on it." Then everybody on the board helps him fine-tune it. "We decide what the questions are, not the answers," Candee said. The topic is announced in the fall, when a call for papers goes out.

A core of regulars attends every year (this was the 29th annual conference). Most other people attend once and only once, drawn by a special interest. Candee said the best attended years, when they drew 150 people, were the two that focused on textiles. Who would have guessed there were so many weavers and spinners out there?

This year, 85 curators, historians, educators, independent consultants, and writers were signed up; about 50 were present from beginning to end. Candee was surprised that more collectors weren't in evidence, but it's a rare one who enjoys listening to his or her behavior being scrutinized. Catherine L. Whalen, a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies at Yale, presented three case studies of early 20th-century collectors that she called "artifactual autobiographies."

When the list of topics to be delivered by Ph.D. candidates such as Whalen was first circulated, we, frankly, worried a little about what we were in for. "Conceptualizing Collections as Material Narratives" was Whalen's daunting title. Her abstract contained phrases such as "mutually constitutive juxtaposition." This is, after all, a world where academics of all sorts, not just those in museum studies and decorative arts programs, have begun to mine the rich materials that collecting and collectors offer researchers.

The trend began about 20 years ago, when Susan Stewart, who teaches the history of poetry and aesthetics at Princeton University, published her highly original work, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984). More recently, *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America* (Rutgers University Press, 2003) was published by Leah Dilworth, who teaches English at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus. For her anthology, editor Dilworth chose essays on such likely subjects as Monticello, children's cabinets of curiosity, and Civil War era photo albums, but she also chose one called "The Serial Killer as Collector" by Sara Knox, described in a biographical note as a lecturer in cultural studies at the University of Western Sydney.

Thankfully, the Dublin Seminar board chose their academics well, and the students, while obviously schooled in prevailing academic models, presented some of the freshest and most interesting talks of the weekend: on the ulterior purposes of female china collectors in late 19th-century New England, on the problematic practice of treating Native American relics as historical collectibles, and on the Walpole Society.

One difference between the students and the older presenters—people who have worked at some aspect of historic preservation most of their lives—was the attitude of each group toward collecting. The students held it at arm's length; they were at times arch about it. They did not take it for granted that collecting was worthwhile. The oldsters simply did.

The keynote address of Jane C. Nylander made clear that she herself had experienced the ridicule that collectors often endure. "I attach myself without shame or embarrassment to the antiquarian world," she declared. Nylander, who is president emerita of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now known as Historic New England), went on: "Every town has its long list of people who squirrel stuff away. They valued things that most people scorned and destroyed."

One of Nylander's examples was Cummings E. Davis (1816-1896) of Concord, Massachusetts, who collected "everything." He was committed to an asylum at the end of his life. "Many towns have characters like this," she said. He was one of those collectors who are seen as "childish old men." But few of them amass collections of such lasting value as Davis's, now owned by the Concord Antiquarian Society's museum.

Nylander spoke too of Benjamin Perley Poore (1820-1887), whose collections at Indian Hill, his home in West Newbury, Massachusetts, were inspired by Sir Walter Scott's artifact-packed castle, Abbotsford. One of her slides showed Poore's arrowhead collection, which he put into a locked cabinet and then threw away the key. It's an act that exemplifies for Nylander "the control that all collectors like to have."

Nylander and others argued against the widely disseminated fact that Americans first began collecting Americana as a result of centennial fever. They stressed that collecting was already well established here by 1876. It was noted that someone had possessed the foresight to save the lantern from North Church's famed steeple in Boston just seven years after the Revolution. For Nylander, the salvager was just one of those who have typically carried out the "rescue operations conducted by all good antiquarians."

Which is not to say that our earliest collectors valued design or form. "If not for their associative value, [many of these things] would have been discarded," Nylander said.

How general cultural values have expressed themselves in collections was a theme that ran through all 21 presenters' papers. Thomas S. Michie, curator of decorative arts at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, traced a value shift in collections based on nostalgia to those based on an appreciation of aesthetics. He compared the motivations of china-hunter Anne Allen Ives (1810-1884) of Providence, Rhode Island, to those of aesthete Charles L. Pendleton (1846-1904), whose collection of 18th- and 19th-century furniture and related decorative arts was bequeathed to the Rhode Island School of Design upon his death. The Ives collection of ceramics, approximately 500 pieces, is also at the museum, given in 1909 by Hope Brown Ives Russell, Ives's daughter.

Robert P. Emlen, university curator at Brown University, discussed the rise of nativism and how it took the form of a pointed display of material culture organized by the newly formed Daughters of the American Revolution in 1892. The exhibit consisted of some 1100 "relics" commemorating the cherished Yankee past.

It was ostensibly meant to mark the 116th anniversary of the battles of Lexington and Concord, but the agenda was much broader. These were objects "inherited, not bought," Emlen said. Tellingly, they were arranged by lender, not category— "the object's DNA, you might say." The crush of immigrants arriving in America posed a threat to the old families' domination, and they reacted by insisting that both objects and lenders to this exhibition be "of a proper sort." "The moral lesson implied by the description and display of these hallowed totems," Emlen said, "was that society was best served by stability gained over time."

With so much fascinating material being offered, it was a relief not to have to choose between concurrent speakers. Each went in turn. The program was tightly scheduled, with 25-minute limits strictly enforced. Most people's lectures were illustrated. Peter Benes wasn't equipped to offer PowerPoint, but he did have a seemingly endless supply of slide projectors. When one failed, he produced a backup, then another, and another. Like a true New Englander (although born of Czech parents in Geneva, Switzerland), Benes was well organized and well prepared.

Elizabeth Stillinger was cited more often than any other author at this conference, so her absence would have been conspicuous. Stillinger's talk, about the Lyon family, consisted of a revised and updated chapter of her 1980 classic, *The Antiquers*. Patriarch Irving W. Lyon (1840-1896) was "arguably our most important early collector," Stillinger said. His son, Charles Woolsey Lyon (1872-1932), by contrast, was considered "the black sheep" because he made a business of antiques. The senior Lyon, she said, wrote the "first carefully researched book" on American furniture, *The Colonial Furniture of New England* (1891), and also "established a methodology for all succeeding students of American decorative arts." These methods were the examination and analysis of many examples and the study of household inventories, account books, diaries, and early newspapers. But Irving was "outraged" when Charles became a dealer. Irving thought a little genteel trading among friends was acceptable but outright selling was "a desecration."

Charles, nonetheless, made antiques history himself, becoming one of the country's leading marketers. He counted among his customers collectors such as Francis P. Garvan, who donated the Mabel Brady Garvan collection to Yale University in 1930 on the occasion of his 20th wedding anniversary. Stillinger said Garvan had whole warehouses on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where things were brought, then vetted by experts. Dealers didn't get paid until the objects had gone through this mill because Garvan "was often just as low in funds as any compulsive collector."

Lyon, a physician, started collecting antiques while living in Hartford, where he established his private medical practice. When William Hosley, executive director of Connecticut's Antiquarian and Landmarks Society, reviewed the many important early collectors who were based in Hartford, Lyon was one of them. Others mentioned in his talk were William C. Prime, whose book *Pottery and Porcelain of All Times and All Nations* (1878) is credited with launching the china-hunting craze of the late 19th century; Emily Seymour Goodwin Holcombe, "a one-woman preservation society"; and several founding members of the Walpole Society, "the country's most famous and august collecting society," whose first meeting was held in Hartford in 1910.

The part of Hosley's talk that elicited the most discussion was about the Hartford-based Jewish cabinetmakers—Morris Schwartz, Jacob "Jake" Margolis, his brother Nathan, and Nathan's son Harold, among them—who catered to the Walpoleans and other early collectors. Audience members wanted to know: what was their relationship with men and women who often held dear the value of nativism? Between the collectors and the cabinetmakers there was mutual respect, Hosley said, because of their shared patriotism. But Stillinger offered that the relationship was more pragmatic. They "learned from each other, even though the cabinetmakers didn't get invited to the cocktail parties," she said.

Hosley concluded his talk with an analogy: "The days of big-game hunting have passed," he said. "For us the objects are like animals in the zoo instead of in the wilds of Africa." Those "zoos" are, of course, institutional collections—our museums, libraries, archives, and other unique repositories, such as the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Thomas Knoles, director of reference services and curator of manuscripts at the American Antiquarian Society, spoke about one of the most idiosyncratic collectors of all time, the Reverend William Bentley (1759-1819) of Salem, Massachusetts, and his role in the society's founding. Known today chiefly for his voluminous and richly detailed 1784-1819 diaries—he is our Samuel Pepys, one could say—Bentley was one of the greatest collectors of books, manuscripts, and prints in the early republic, who donated some but not all of that collection to the society. Knoles provided insights to Bentley and to Isaiah Thomas, the farsighted man who founded the society in 1812.

Ministers such as Bentley were well placed to become collectors (and many did) because they had access to every home in a community. Donald Friary, who spoke about the origins of Historic Deerfield, where he was executive director for 27 years, agreed that ministers had a special situation: "They could meet those who had access to the past through oral tradition."

A selection of the papers presented at this conference will be published as *The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife Annual Proceedings 2004* by Boston University, whose American and New England studies program sponsors the conference each year. To order this publication or any from past Dublin Seminars, write Boston University Scholarly Publications, 985 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215; phone (617) 353-4106; or see the Dublin Seminar Web site ([www.bu.edu/dublinseminar](http://www.bu.edu/dublinseminar)).

For information about next year's conference, write Peter Benes at the address above; send him an e-mail [dubsem@bu.edu](mailto:dubsem@bu.edu); or phone (978) 369-7382.