Good Fellows: The Walpole Society

by Jeanne Schinto
Photos courtesy the Walpole Society

...an assembly of good fellows, meeting under certain conditions.” —The definition of club by Dr. Johnson (1755)

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Walpole Society—have you heard of it? Even longtime New Englanders may not know of this über-exclusive club for Americanica collectors, curators, scholars, house preservationists, and antiquarian archivists. From the society’s beginnings in 1910, it has not sought publicity. In fact, it has done the opposite. Nonetheless, a rich archive of its records (correspondence, memoranda, memorabilia, and photographs) has been on permanent deposit at the Winterthur Museum and Library in Wilmington, Delaware, and open to researchers since 1994. Since then, the Walpole Society has continually added to...
Eving began collecting American antiques as a teenager in the horse-and-buggy days. (The dedication says, “To Henrietta B. Eving / A student of furniture / for fifty years / whose knowledge is surpassed only / by her cheerfulness / in sharing it.”) His first purchase was a flint-locked pistol and musket made in 1833 by Simeon North of Middletown, Connecticut.

Out antiquing in the country he often found a locally made chest in a farmhouse cellar where it was being used as a potato bin and munching the small slugs that rode home inside it because there was no other place for them. In the early 1900s Eving was fond of junk,” Erving wrote unapologetically in his essay-memoir, Recollections of an Early Collector.13

Thomas Benedict Clarke, a collector of porcelain and fine art who advised J. P. Morgan about his pursuing Vieux Luxembourg group too. So was Francis Hill Bigelow, an early collector-dealer who in 1906 organized the first American silver exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. When Yale University Art Gallery curator E. F. W. Blashfield wrote the biographical dictionary Colonial Massachusetts Silversmiths and Jewelers in 1998, she made use of unpublished research by Bigelow and others. Bigelow was the first curator of the Garvan collections and a Walpolean from 1941 until his death in 1953 at age 48. If the interviewer got the fun, it was Henry Wood Erving, an early collector-testament on what the material was “a gold mine.”10

Here in alphabetical order is the entire list of original members:

- Samuel Putnam Avery III of New York City and Hartford, Connecticut
- Edwin Atlee Barber of Philadelphia
- Frederick Hitchcock Campbell of New York City
- Charles Hitchcock of New York City
- Thomas Benedict Clarke of New York City
- John Cotton Dana of Newark, New Jersey
- Henry Wood Erving of Hartford, Connecticut
- Harry Elmer Barnes of New Haven, Connecticut
- Henry Watson Kent of New York City
- Thomas W. Gibbons of New York City and Greenwich, Connecticut
- George Shepard Palmer of Norwich and New London, Connecticut
- George Munson of New York City
- Arthur Jeffrey Parsons of Washington, D.C.
- Albert Hastings Pitkin of Hartford, Connecticut
- Charles Adams Platt of New York City
- Frederick Scribner of New York City
- Henry White of New York City
- Hollis French of Boston
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Wood Erving wrote to a fellow Walpolean on July 2, 1940: “Of course, I don’t know [him] but he is the son of a well-to-do family who I understand is nosey and disrespectful people. I don’t want anything to do with the name...” For the record, the son was the collector’s uncle.26

Both the Walpole Society and Club of Old Volumes, remain so is surprising, at least to those who don’t know the full story. And while the Walpoleans frequently do invoice wives and the widows of deceased members to join them and have discussed going off sex, we voted for years, whether to do so remains, like the private vs. professional debate, a divisive and unresolved issue.

“Clubbable” is a word that has been used to describe the kind of members the society is seeking. In 1932 Norman Isham proposed that the society’s then president, Davis Miller, a naval officer, historian, and fellow Rhode Islander, by saying in part: “I believe that everything else, even including your first object must be to ‘make’ the Club,” the club has little trouble getting into the clubs of his desire. In person he’s not really the right word, since the club has always been a club of shy and intensely companionable people. In person he must not be a reason for membership. But unless a candidate qualifies as a general and likable person, this to my mind should rule him out. If we elected members, no matter what their capabilities are, who are not attractive table companions, then this would take away from the chief function of a club—to create a sense of membership among its members.

The club has struggled with the conundrum since its beginnings, i.e., should the high caliber of a member’s character be more important to the institutional collection over the culture of shy and intensely companionable people. In person he must not be a reason for membership. But unless a candidate qualifies as a general and likable person, this to my mind should rule him out. If we elected members, no matter what their capabilities are, who are not attractive table companions, then this would take away from the chief function of a club—to create a sense of membership among its members.

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Endnotes to Part I

1. E-mail to the author from E. Richard McKinstry, library director at Winterthur, September 11, 2015. For many years before that, the records were stored, unprocessed, at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, according to an email from September 14, 2015, to the author from Wadsworth curator Eugene R. Gaddis. Before that, especially during the Walpole Society’s earliest years, records were scattered and record keeping haphazard.

2. The Note Book was biannual from 1991 to 2010; it became an annual again in 2011.

3. That friend, John C. Riely (1945-2011), worked for Wilmuth Sheldon "Levy" Lewis in the early 1970s as an associate research editor for the Horace Walpole project at Yale University and edited several volumes of Walpole’s correspondence. Published by Yale University Press. Riely also wrote the catalog for The Age of Horace Walpole in Caricature: An exhibition of Satirical Prints and Drawings from the Collection of Donald B. Rourke, exhibited at Yale’s Sterling Memorial Library, October–December 1973. The Walpole Society saw the exhibit on a visit to New Haven in that year.

4. Two exceptions are a brief (six-page) chapter in Elizabeth Stillingler’s The Antiquers (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969) and Illustrations of Things Old and New (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012) by Jeffrey Trask. Trask’s book is a study of the development of the American Progressive Era in which he discusses two Walpoleans in particular, Henry Watson Kent and R.T.H. Halsey, both of whom were associated with the Progressive Movement. The Walpoleans themselves have published their own histories of their years, marking their various major anniversaries in slim, chatty, limited-edition volumes. Most recently, in 2012, The Walpole Society: Five Decades (The Walpole Society, 2012) was published to celebrate the society’s fiftieth anniversary. The two-volume set has been distributed to about 20 major American libraries in addition to the five repositories of the Note Book. E-mail to the author from William S. Reese, June 30, 2015.

5. Jeanne Schinto, “The Walpole Society Goes to Dinner,” Gastronomica: The Journal of Food & Culture, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Fall 2008), pp. 34-45. The article’s main focus is Edna Greenwood (1888-1972), who is considered one of our first important collectors of American art as well as our country’s first significant collector of culinaria, i.e., kitchen stuff. When the Walpoleans went to see the collection at her Time Stone Farm in Marlborough, Massachusetts, she cooked them an 18th-century-style dinner.

6. This timeline of the U.S. Supreme Court (www.supremecourt.gov/about/members.aspx) shows the progression of judges through the decades. I wish there were a comparable one for the Walpole Society. If the club had decided to have a website, I hope they included something like this.

7. Lawrence C. Wroth, The Walpole Society: Five Decades (The Walpole Society, 1960), p. 5. A Google search will bring up the website of the Walpole Society of England (see www.walpolestociety.org.uk). That organization should not be confused with the unrelated, website-less American one that is the subject of this series. Founded in 1911, the British one, which is likewise named for Horace Walpole, promotes the study of the history of British art, and is open to anyone.

8. The lantern is owned by the Concord Museum of Concord, Massachusetts. According to its website (www.concordmuseum.org), “the collector Cummings Davis (1848-1906) acquired this lantern around 1878 with the history that it was ‘bought in 1872 by Captain Daniel Brown, of Concord, from the sexton of Christ Church in Boston, and affirmed by the said sexton at the time to have been given to Horace Walpole, the owner of that church by order of Paul Revere on the evening of April 18, 1775.’”

9. The chair sold at Sotheby’s on January 31, 1887, for $2.75 million, then a world-record price not only for a people’s chair but for any furniture sold at public auction anywhere in the world.

10. The Walpole Society Note Book 2013, “Constitution,” p. 115. E-mail to the author from William S. Reese, June 30, 2015. As of this writing, Reese said, there are 30 “active” members as well as four “inactive” ones.

32-A Maine Antique Digest, November 2015