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Crafting Community: Learning through Doing in "Old" New England

By THOMAS ANDREW DENENBERG

FROM THE RURAL VILLAGES of the Connecticut River Valley to urban coastal settings such as Salem and Boston, hand craftsmanship in wood, metal, and cloth made a comeback at the turn of the century—decades after industrial production and the market revolution made such practices well and truly obsolete.¹ Promoted by acolytes of the Arts and Crafts Movement as a therapeutic antidote to the vicissitudes of modern life and labor, such handiwork was proscribed for a broad spectrum of society from wealthy neurasthenic invalids to recent immigrants. This revival of traditional craft practice not only soothed nerves and aided in the assimilation of new citizens, but it added to the region's venerable reputation and is an important, but often overlooked, chapter in the invention of Old New England.

Inventing Old New England

NEW ENGLAND, by the turn of the century, was more than just a pleasant, seemingly "old fashioned" region in which to get away from the increasingly gritty and complex nature of urban life. New England served as a national ideal promoted at every turn by an increasingly dominant visual and literary culture in the United States. As historian Stephen Nissenbaum has written, "students may study William Faulkner or William Gilmore Simms as Southern writers, or Willa Cather as a Midwesterner; but when it comes to Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Dickinson, they are studying *American literature*."² Add the schoolhouse poets, Longfellow and Whittier, to this list and a canon becomes readily evident. The tales spun by these authors (and disseminated by unprecedented new patterns of publishing) offered a compelling system of myth and symbol that turned New England's traditions into a newly invented history for the nation.

"Invented traditions," according to English historian Eric Hobsbawm are not invented per se but are "a set of practices of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values or norms of behavior by repetition and

1. This essay is based on a paper given at the 1997 American Studies Association Annual Meeting in a session entitled "Constructing Old New England in Image, Object, and Text." I would like to thank Bill Truettner, Elizabeth Hutchinson, Stephen Nissenbaum, and Nicholas Schonberger for their comments on an earlier draft of the essay.

2. Stephen Nissenbaum, "New England as Region and Nation," in Ayers, Limerick, Nissenbaum and Onuf, ed. *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 40.

which automatically imply continuity with the past.”³ They include “a) those establishing or symbolizing cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behavior.”⁴ This is not to say that such inventions represent false consciousness—there are no “real” traditions lurking behind or below the “invented,” but rather, that historical consciousness—call it tradition, myth, or history—is negotiated in the present. Such inventions, writes Wendy Kaplan, become “all the more powerful for their foundations in documentable culture.”⁵ By appropriating “archaeological excavations, folktales, ancient craft techniques, and indigenous building materials,” or historical material culture, these new notions of the past acquire tangible evidence. Physicality is enlisted in support of collective memory. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the recycling of historical styles, types, and motifs in the early twentieth century.

The Ideology of Craft

THE REVIVAL OF hand craftsmanship has long been the subject of scholarly attention in Southern climes. Indeed, the modern resuscitation of traditional skills in Appalachia has been a bread-and-butter topic for generations of folklorists.⁶ The story of craft in turn-of-the-century New England, however, has suffered from the looming historiographic presence of the Society of Arts and Crafts, Boston (SACB). Indeed, it is only recently that scholars have begun to treat the Arts and Crafts as a cultural movement rather than as an aesthetic style, and only very recently have New England manifestations such as the furniture of Olof Althin or the silver of George Christian Gebbelein been accorded serious investigation.⁷ To this day, the story of the well-organized and highly literate leadership of the SACB has largely eclipsed that of local efforts. Scholars turn to the carefully catalogued records of the society and the writings of its leaders but rarely question the cultural work of craft in individual communities. As a result, much has been written about SACB luminaries such as Harvard Professor Charles Eliot Norton and the wealthy philanthropist Arthur Astor Carey, but relatively little about figures like Caroline Emmerton and Margaret Whiting, women who led the return to craft in Salem and Deerfield, respectively.

3. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” *The Invention of Tradition*, edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 1.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Wendy Kaplan, “Traditions Transformed: Romantic Nationalism in Design, 1890-1920,” *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion, 1885-1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 24.

6. For an excellent discussion of the folk revival, see Jane Becker, *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of the American Folk* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1998).

7. The bibliography on the Arts and Crafts Movement is large and growing. Grassroots studies, however, are still few and far between. For an excellent regional perspective, see Marilee Boyd Meyer, *Inspiring Reform: Boston's Arts and Crafts Movement* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1997)

Deerfield: History and Romance

FEW NEW ENGLAND communities exhibited an earlier interest in their material past than Deerfield, Massachusetts. Indeed, historian Charles Hosmer has credited Deerfield with one of the earliest historic preservation campaigns in the country in 1847 when locals banded together in a failed attempt to prevent the destruction of the Sheldon homestead, more famously known as the Old Indian House.⁸ A relic of Deerfield's importance in colonial days as a frontier outpost, the campaign to save the Old Indian House took place during the first wave of popular interest in a romantic past for New England. For Deerfield, and countless other small communities, this new filial piety coincided with dramatic economic changes in the countryside brought about by industrialization. Passed over by the railroad in 1846 in favor of nearby towns such as Greenfield, Deerfield could do little but wither off the vine and recall a golden age past symbolized by such hoary buildings as the old Indian House. Greenfield, on the other hand, sprouted a number of manufacturing villages including "Cheapside" which grew up after the Russell Cutlery Company was founded in 1836. By 1864, when a painting of this bustling industrial community was advertised in the *Greenfield Gazette and Courier*, the village was composed of mostly German, Irish, and Italian immigrants.⁹ Greenfield thrived and Deerfield, enjoying little of this economic activity, remained a predominantly agrarian Yankee community on a downward spiral.

"Deerfield the backwater," however, soon became "Deerfield the watering hole." Reborn as a pastoral retreat for wealthy urbanites in the decades after the Civil War and later for the middle-class tourists flocking to "the country," Deerfield quickly embraced the new industry. As early as the late 1880s residents organized a program known as "The Deerfield Summer School of History and Romance" to capitalize on the history of the town.¹⁰ Historian Dona Brown notes that "local promoters put their dilapidated buildings and grass-grown streets to work" in the community.¹¹ The selling point was the past, and the town burghers quickly moved to secure and add interest to this commodity.

The Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association led the charge. Founded in 1870 to house books and relics of local importance, the museum contained some of the very first period rooms in United States. Housed in the old Deerfield Academy building, the collections of Memorial Hall included seventeenth-century furniture, ancestral portraits, Native American baskets, and myriad other materials gathered by George Sheldon, its first president and "Cabinet-Keeper." It may be a matter of semantics; Sheldon changed his title

8. Charles B. Hosmer Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 33-34.

9. Suzanne Flynt, Susan McGowan, and Amelia Miller, *Gathered and Preserved* (Deerfield, Mass: The Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, 1991), 46.

10. I would like to thank Peter Spang, longtime curator and sage at Historic Deerfield, for pointing out the significance of the summer school. Personal communication, Peter Spang to Thomas Denenberg, November 1, 1999.

11. Dona Brown, *Inventing New England* (Washington: Smithsonian Press, 1996), 9.

to “Curator” in 1882, marking a turning point for the town as the institution made the transition from a private club with a cabinet of curiosities to a museum with a higher public profile.¹²

Arts and craft thinking came to town with the summering class, and by the 1890s Deerfield can be read as a synecdoche of the larger debates within the movement. Should craft seek to raise the lot of the worker, or merely improve his or her eye? Both strains of thought can be found in the small town at the turn of the century. The Deerfield Society of Arts and Crafts was organized in 1899, and its independent well-off members produced objects such as this remarkable joined chest, which was constructed around 1901 (Figure 1). If we unpack the chest a remarkable hierarchy of class and craft becomes apparent.

Three men of very different station constructed the Deerfield chest. Caleb Allen is credited with building the carcass, or main structure, of the piece. The wrought iron hinges were commissioned from Cornelius Kelley, an Irish immigrant blacksmith.¹³ Dr. Edwin Thorn executed the finely carved panels. Thorn, a member of the new professional class, neatly fits the model of therapeutic antimodernism proposed by the historian Jackson Lears in his choice of a highly aestheticised form of handicraft.¹⁴ Like so many of his peers who took up bookbinding, basket-weaving, or blockprinting, Thorn sought to avoid the vicissitudes of neurasthenia with plenty of fresh air and manual labor. Allen contributed his ancestry. The brother of well-known pictorial photographers Mary and Frances Allen, Caleb enjoyed the sort of rooted existence craved by many in this period of great cultural change. Allen, the local, and Kelley, the immigrant smith, played a supporting role in Thorn’s upper-class male fantasy of indigenous rural craftsmanship.

The chest itself is modeled on several bearing the seventeenth-century Hadley tulip and vine motif on display in Memorial Hall with the addition of dramatic wrought-iron strap hinges (Figure 2). The local importance of the form cannot be overemphasized. Such chests had been actively collected since the 1880s when Hartford antiquarian Henry Wood Irving coined the name, referring to the small town in Massachusetts where he bought an example.¹⁵ By 1892 there were five such case pieces on view in Memorial Hall. Remarkably, photographs in the form of cabinet cards had been available of the Pocumtuck Hadley Chests since 1887—testimony to the growing popularity of antiquarian activity in the region as well as Deerfield’s precocious marketing instincts when it came to the town’s history.¹⁶

12. Flynt et al., 8.

13. For more on “Con” Kelley, see Ellen Snyder-Grenier, “Cornelius Kelley of Deerfield, Massachusetts: The Impact of Change on a Rural Blacksmith, Bert Denker, ed., in *The Substance of Style: Perspectives on the American Arts and Crafts Movement*, ed. Bert Denker. (Hanover: UP of New England, 1996), 263-80.

14. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

15. Philip Zea and Suzanne Flynt, *Hadley Chests* (Deerfield, Mass.: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, 1992), 6.

16. *Ibid.*



Figure 1.

Edwin Thorn, Caleb Allen, and Cornelius Kelley, *Chest with One Drawer*, c. 1901. Oak and Pine, 36 x 47 x 20 inches. Courtesy of Historic Deerfield, Inc., Deerfield, Massachusetts. Gift of Dr. Preston Bassett.



Figure 2.

Hadley Chests in Memorial Hall, c. 1910. Courtesy of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Massachusetts.

The Society of Blue and White: Textiles for the Modern Priscilla

BESIDES HADLEY CHESTS, the collections of Memorial Hall held design prototypes for women in the form of an unusual collection of historic textiles. Such handmade textiles were predictably fetishized as production moved out of the home and into the mills of Waltham and Lowell in the 1830s and 1840s. The ideal of female textile production runs throughout Longfellow's *Courtship of Miles Standish* and Whittier's *Snowbound*, and icons of spinning women were all but ubiquitous by the turn of the century. Christopher Monkhouse has spelled out the thinly veiled message of the spinning-wheel chair, an object that placed an icon of traditional female labor directly in the middle-class parlor.¹⁷ In Deerfield, local residents upped the ante by founding an organization that embroidered local myth from the whole cloth.

The Deerfield Society of Blue and White, founded by Ellen Miller and Margaret Whiting in 1896, participated in this idealization by banding together local women to produce the reproductions and interpretations of the historic textiles in Memorial Hall seen here. Trained at a New York academy, Whiting and Miller organized the revival of traditional techniques like embroidery and cross-stitch, much in the same way as Washington matrons traveled to West Virginia and Kentucky during the Depression to remind locals how to weave and make baskets. Employing up to thirty women at a time in a pattern of outwork, the image promulgated by the Society of Blue and White in popular journals heavily emphasizes "continuity with the past" to paraphrase Eric Hobsbawm (Figure 3). That the objects produced by the society created symbols for the larger community is readily apparent in a *New York Evening Post* article of 1897: "the Deerfield Society of Blue and White Needlework is in perfect harmony with its environment. It is colonial and puritan, it is artistic, it is loyal to its traditions, patriotic and there is not another like it."¹⁸ The success of the Society of Blue and White may have been rare, but the *Post* was wrong in suggesting its singularity; there were numerous craft industries cropping up in New England. Some of the most important work was being accomplished in the city.

Salem: A Novelized Restoration

STANDING "HALF-WAY DOWN a by-street in an old New England town," Salem's House of the Seven Gables is the archetype of invented tradition in New England. Long the subject of antiquarian interest, the significance of the old Turner House was recognized as early as the 1840s when Susan Ingersoll and her writer cousin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, climbed about the attic counting mortises in the rafters to determine the original number of peaks in the roof.¹⁹ Economically depressed after the demise of the China trade, Salem lunged at modernity, embracing railroads and steam factories in the wake of the reced-

17. Christopher Monkhouse, "The Spinning Wheel as Artifact, Symbol, and Source of Design," *Nineteenth Century* 8, no. 3-4 (1982): 154-72.

18. Flynt et al., 50.

19. Frank Cousins, *The Colonial Architecture of Salem* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1919), 13.



Figure 3.

Frances and Mary Allen, *Sewing Group*, c. 1900. Platinum print. Courtesy of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, Memorial Hall Museum, Deerfield, Massachusetts.

ing maritime industry. Industrialization had its consequences, however, and by the turn of the century whole neighborhoods in Salem were foreign-born, much to the consternation of visiting dignitaries such as Henry James. The expatriate was disturbed by what he found in old Salem. "So, inevitably, at Salem," he wrote, "when, wandering perhaps astray, I asked my way to the House of the Seven Gables, the young man I had overtaken was true to his nature; he stared at me as a remorseless Italian—as remorseless, at least as six months of Salem could leave him."²⁰

20. Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Horizon Press, 1967, reprint of 1907 original), 265.

Local progressive activists were also concerned but focused on the problems at hand. Caroline Emmerton made a study of the underlying structures of immigrant life in Salem and concluded that:

When the immigrants arrive today they find the great cities already [built]... For the most part they come from countries where, however poor they may have been, they usually had a home of their own and a family life. But in this new land all... is changed. The home influence counts for little. Their children through the advantage of a public school education soon usurp the place of their fathers and mothers in the eyes of the younger children; and they are easily enticed away from their parents' authority by every form of commercialized amusement which gives them a false idea of American life and ideals.²¹

What Salem needed, concluded Emmerton, was immediate social relief and a set of common values for the long haul. "Early in this century," she wrote, "an interest in Settlement work had penetrated to Salem with the result that a committee of ladies was formed to try out its possibilities here."²² As for the question of common values, what better shelter for a social settlement than a local historical landmark? "All through the winter I was mulling over the problem of how the House of Seven Gables could be made into an efficient Settlement building without impairing its attractions as a show house."²³ Emmerton and her architect, Joseph Everett Chandler, restored the structure to make the House of the Seven Gables congruent with Hawthorne's romance and in doing so provided an invented historical environment for craft revival in Salem (Figure 4).²⁴

From the very beginning of Emmerton's settlement, the therapeutic role of handicraft was stressed. "The work began the first of the year 1908. It consisted of classes for little girls mostly with a little leather work and painting mixed in."²⁵ Emmerton's endeavor eventually included woodworking classes for boys and needlework for girls. Adopting the most up-to-date of pedagogies, the House of the Seven Gables followed the Swedish Sloyd system of manual training to educate the whole child. Developed at around the same time as the theories that lead to kindergarten, the Sloyd method laid out a series of increasingly difficult manual tasks to be performed at a special workbench designed for children. Just as in Deerfield, manual training was highly gender specific. Boys worked in wood and leather while girls learned sewing and embroidery (Figure 5).

Children and adults alike attended historical dances and later staged public historical pageants while taking English classes and participating in craft revival. Ultimately designed to facilitate the social and economic integration of James's "remorseless" Italian boy (and we suppose his equally difficult sis-

21. *The House of the Seven Gables Settlement Association Annual Report* (1913-14), 5.

22. Caroline Emmerton, *The Chronicles of Three Old Houses* (Salem, Mass., 1935), 30.

23. Caroline Emmerton, manuscript, "House of the Seven Gables as Social Settlement." Archives of the House of the Seven Gables Settlement Association.

24. Emmerton was a member of the board of trustees of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, and Chandler served as one of the organizations "consulting architects." For more on the role of the settlement on the restoration see William Truettner and Thomas Denenberg, "The Discreet Charm of the Colonial," *Picturing Old New England*, 79-110.

25. Caroline Emmerton manuscript, "House of the Seven Gables as Social Settlement," Archives of the House of the Seven Gables Settlement Association.



Figure 4.

The House of the Seven Gables, c. 1912. Postcard view. Collection of the author.

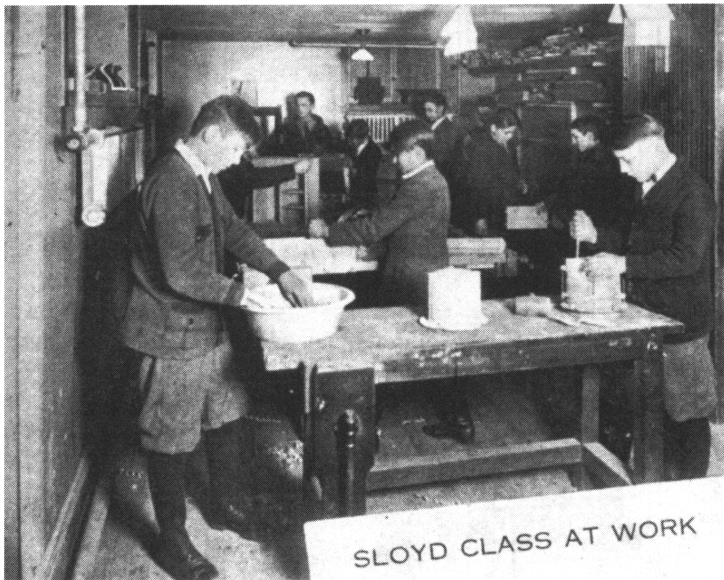


Figure 5.

Sloyd Class—at the Settlement Association, c. 1920. Courtesy of the House of the Seven Gables Settlement Association, Salem, Massachusetts.

ter) by teaching a common language, creating a collective past, and providing a trade, the House of the Seven Gables established, in the words of Hobsbawm, group cohesion and a common value system for the old Yankee city during the Progressive era.

New England Moves North

THE ONSET OF the Great Depression in 1929 precipitated a shift in New England's cultural coordinates. Popular notions of the region had long been fluid, the "real" New England migrating from towns such as Deerfield at the turn of the century to cities like Salem by the early 1920s. The trajectory continued, as William Truettner has explained that those "who in the 1930s turned to the rural north ... were leery of cities and urban social problems."²⁶ They sought "down-to-earth neighbors, supportive communities, and roots." This cultural migration north took many forms. Robert Frost came of age as the latest in a string of good gray poets soothing national concerns with simple verse of birch trees and other species "north of Boston." On the political stage Americans became fascinated with the ideal of the New England town meeting. On Broadway, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, set in the mythical Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1938. These interests fueled demand for talismans of rugged individualism, and northern New England responded with a traditional product, the hooked rug.

The rug guilds of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont represent perhaps the apogee of the invented craft tradition. Popularized by Wallace Nutting, a minister-turned-photographer and antiquarian entrepreneur, hooked rugs were received as "colonial" designs by a public seeking to furnish countless small capes, saltboxes, and gambrel-roofed small houses (Figure 6). Not only did Nutting create a market for the form with his photographs, but his wife Mariet designed rugs and filled orders throughout the 1920s and 1930s.²⁷ Mariet's activities, however, were but a drop in the bucket. By the 1930s rug guilds were to be found throughout northern New England. The Pinkham Associates were perhaps the largest such organization, providing work for some six hundred "associates" who worked in their own homes. Headquartered in Portland, Maine, with showrooms on Madison Avenue in New York City, the Pinkham Associates claimed that their product was nothing less than "the embodiment of loving thought and sentiment, for into each rug the maker has put something of her own sterling character."²⁸

The modern need for a textile imbued with "sterling character" and the economic reality of hard economic times made rug hooking a major home

26. William Truettner, "Small Town America," in *Picturing Old New England*, ed. William Truettner and Roger B. Stein. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1999), 116.

27. For more on the minister, see Thomas Denenberg, *Wallace Nutting and the Invention of Old America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003).

28. My discussion of the Pinkham Associates is based upon William B. Rhoads, "Colonial Revival in American Craft: Nationalism and the Opposition to Multicultural and Regional Traditions," Janet Kardon, ed. *Revivals!: Diverse Traditions, 1920-1945* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 50-51.



Figure 6.
Wallace Nutting. Hand-tinted platinum print. Courtesy of Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut.

industry (Figure 7, next page). Throughout the upper tier of New England, countless rug businesses traded upon the image of place to promote their product to the nation. In Silver Lake, New Hampshire, Mrs. Helen Albee founded Abnakee rugs; in Center Lovell, Maine, locals formed Sabatos rugs; on the shore, the Maine Seacoast Missionary Society embraced the craft as a way of funding its work among the “10,000 people living on the lonely headlands and islands off the coast from Kittery to Calais.”²⁹ So important was the rug hooking economy, that in 1949 Allen Eaton dedicated an entire chapter to its study in his monumental survey of the *Handicrafts of New England*.

Hooked rugs from the coast of Maine, embroideries from an hoary Salem house, and a chest made by three men in Deerfield share little in media, geography, or aesthetics. They are all products of a single ideology, however; a set of beliefs that held sway from the turn of the century until World War II. Handicraft, or learning through doing, was the organizing principle in the revival of traditional skills and practices that helped to cast New England in a

29. Allen H. Eaton, *Handicrafts of New England* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 120.



Figure 7.

A Hooked Rug of Original Design. Photograph of Mrs. Mabel S. Bragdon of Kezar Falls, Maine, illustrated in Allen Eaton, *Handicrafts of New England* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949), 71.

historical light in this period of rapid cultural change. Learning though doing promoted cohesion and common values for the region in a period of phantasmagoric change. From invented colonial villages to “gothick” (spelled in good antiquarian fashion with a ‘k’) coastal cities, this craft revival facilitated the creation of community in an increasingly heterogeneous society. By looking closely at the centers of craft production and the objects themselves, the structures of class and gender that enabled the invention of Old New England are brought forward in high relief.