

Introduction

Katharine Prentis Murphy (1882-1967) pursued objects from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries with an intensity, intelligence, and enthusiasm that persisted for nearly seventy-five years. Her influential installations reflected her education, her family's professional participation in the decorative arts, and changes within the antiquing and museum community. Over the course of the 1950s, she used authentic furnishings to create a series of complex and multi-layered installations that highlighted the aesthetic qualities of American antiques. Murphy employed colonial imagery to evoke a golden age of luxury and refinement, and these efforts placed her at the forefront of the post-World War II Colonial Revival movement.

Murphy sought information from a variety of primary sources, including period diaries, paintings, inventories, and wills. Although she was a serious scholar of the decorative arts, her decision to place antiques within highly patterned and brightly colored settings was motivated as much by her personal preferences as by her studies. This was an unusual approach for historic house interpretations of the time, and put her at odds with the many curators who believed a muted color palette accurately reflected period tastes. Murphy created room settings that featured authentic objects from the 1750s, but her decorative schemes also expressed the popular trends of the 1950s. Her displays became more elaborate and colorful as the decade progressed,

paralleling the sharply rising levels of wealth and consumption that characterized the “Fabulous Fifties.”

The Colonial Revival has been an enduring phenomenon in the American decorative arts since the mid-nineteenth century. In an attempt to make sense of the present, individuals and organizations mine the American past for meaning, and apply lessons drawn from past events to present circumstances. One result of this search for meaning has been the creation of house museums that ensured the legacy of patriots and Founding Fathers. At the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, displays containing spinning wheels, the reputed *Mayflower* cradle, and old-fashioned cooking utensils underscored a sentimental interest in relics from the “Old Tyme New England Home.” Behind the scenes, costume-clad hostesses and lady managers used the venues to challenge the prevailing expectations for women, as they emerged from the privacy of the home and became active in public affairs.¹

The Colonial Revival gained momentum through the 1920s and 1930s, as the country struggled to integrate traditional beliefs with modern machines, and modern attitudes. Often considered the high point of the Colonial Revival, the preservation of historic houses and antiques in the interwar period reflected a sentimental longing for stability, as the country turned inward, rejected involvement in European affairs, and came to grips with immigration and the changing face of American citizens. Many individuals spent the wealth they had gained from new industries to collect early American furniture and accessories and promoted the objects as viable alternatives to European-made antiquities.

The Colonial Revival was a resilient and popular style, which persevered before and after World War II despite the demand for modern “machine age” designs and innovative products and materials. While several stages of the Colonial Revival have been examined in detail, the public’s renewed fascination with the movement after World War II has not received significant attention. While many elements persisted from the interwar period, including the veneration of patriots, an unrealistic idealization of the past, and the social superiority attached to antiques and those who collected them, the movement irrevocably altered after World War II. The Colonial Revival of the 1950s channeled the patriotic sentiment that surged during World War II but circumstances peculiar to the decade also left their mark on the movement. Renewed optimism and economic affluence, offset by ongoing political hostilities at home and abroad, played a part in the post-war interpretation of American colonial history.

Murphy’s historic house installations highlighted the artistry of colonial-era artifacts, and her settings emphasized the luxury and refinement she believed the earliest Americans possessed. Her work was first created for her own enjoyment and use, and the collector became a benefactor in her late sixties, with a generous gift of furniture and art going to her “hometown” museum, the New-York Historical Society. Her strong design sense defined every one of her installations, and the popularity with which they were received, demonstrated that Murphy touched a strong emotional chord with her arrangements of early American furniture. Murphy’s work expressed one woman’s aesthetic vision, as

it reinforced the nation's ongoing fascination with its own history and decorative arts.

Murphy could have collected objects from any period in American history, but her parent's involvement with the American Arts and Crafts movement contributed to her selection of furniture, as did her father's English heritage. Her preference was for exuberantly carved Jacobean, William and Mary, and early Queen Anne styled pieces, so she collected ornately carved chairs, tables, and daybeds, gate leg tables with ring and vase turned legs and stretchers, and chests embellished with deep, rich paint colors. A competitive and well-educated native New Yorker, she rose from humble circumstances and acquired a fortune that allowed her unprecedented financial freedom and social mobility.

Murphy worked hard to establish herself as an authority on her subject, and successfully achieved recognition for her antique expertise during a time when an "old boys club" mentality pervaded the museum field.² She was charming and generous to those she wanted to please, although she plowed over subordinates or colleagues who contradicted her or disagreed with her plans. Murphy loved a dense assemblage of different colors, patterns, and textures, a preference she shared with her good friend and collaborator, Electra Havemeyer Webb, and the man she held up as the model for collectors, Henry Francis du Pont. Murphy's room arrangements were a graceful blend of authenticity and luxury, which satisfied visitors who wanted to experience a bit of the glamour and opulence they saw in colorful advertisements and movie theaters.

“How-to” books, a staple of the American literary diet since George Washington’s day, helped consumers navigate the variety of home furnishing options in the 1950s. Many consumers were not ready to give up traditional furniture, or the conventional virtues and values associated with it, and authors offered advice on integrating colonial with modern styles within the home. Murphy’s elegant and functional interiors met the expectations of many 1950s consumers who wanted to surround themselves with traditional American values while enjoying modern comfort and up-to-date styling. Her use of ‘genuine’ antiques and her knowledge of the subject gave her credibility with museums and curators. Murphy’s installations expressed the expectations of her time, including 1950s ideal of the ‘perfect home’ as a gracious and welcoming space that idealized domestic homemaking.

Chapter One: The Foundations of a Collection

Murphy's family played a significant role in her decision to pursue antiques and decorating. Her father, Edmund D. Prentis, Sr., had emigrated from England in 1879, and worked in Manhattan as a textile designer and importer. In 1880, Prentis married the Boston-born Mary Francis (Fanny) Campbell, and the two worked together during the early years of their marriage, although Fanny later worked independently as an interior decorator. Murphy was born in 1882, and her only sibling, Edmund Astley Prentis, Jr., was born two years later. They recalled that their father was an artistic and well-read man, who was proud of his English heritage, and the English antiques that he had brought to America. Murphy had a close and warm relationship with her father, who shared her interest in antiques and interior design, and encouraged her to study history, because "to understand the furniture of the period, you must know the history and the people."³ According to Murphy, her father "loved Jacobean things," and she associated the medieval-inspired style of furniture with her father.⁴

Both parents emphasized the importance of knowledge and both contributed to their children's education. Her brother noted, "History has sort of run in our family. My [paternal] grandfather had a fine library in England, [and] was a fine historian."⁵ Prentis, Jr. felt that his mother had sacrificed a great deal to maintain a stable home for her children, and he apparently had a much less contentious relationship with her than did Murphy. He thought Fanny Prentis

"was obsessed with the idea that she must educate her children," and she went to great lengths to provide a decent upbringing for her children, which her husband seemed either unwilling or unable to do. She took in boarders and worked as a decorator, and was able to send her daughter to a Catholic boarding school in upstate New York, and her son to Columbia University.⁶

The degree and quality of Murphy's education had a major impact on her career. By her own accounts, she was interested in history from an early age, and acquired a great deal of knowledge about early colonial American households from personal research into period inventories, wills, diaries, letters, and church records. She developed her connoisseurship skills by handling a variety of objects while still quite young.⁷ At some point during her later boarding school years, Murphy trained as a nurse.⁸ As a confident and outgoing woman, she may have chosen nursing for its potential to provide her with an independent living. Around 1900, nursing gave women the chance to earn a steady income, although it carried the stigma of lower-class origins, intimate contact, and menial labor.⁹ Murphy's silence on the subject in her interviews is remarkable, since she otherwise volunteered a great deal of personal information about her early life. She was ambitious, and a social climber, so it appears likely that Murphy was anxious to hide her working-class roots, especially after she began socializing with collectors from the highest levels of society.¹⁰

Murphy's nascent nursing career ended after she married David Murphy, and left New York to join him in Concord, New Hampshire. Her husband had opened a dry goods store along Concord's Main Street in the late 1800s, and by

the time he married, the business was “one of the leading mercantile establishments of the state.”¹¹ Murphy's taste in furniture moved in a different direction after her 1905 marriage. She stated that she “couldn't find or buy European antiques, so I took the ones that were suitable to the house in which we lived in New England, and they were the simple New England pieces.”

Murphy did not describe the “European” antiques, the “simple New England pieces,” or the architecture of her Concord home. However, by “European,” she might have meant English antiques similar in style to the pieces she had grown up with at home. Years later Murphy donated a piece to the Shelburne Museum, which she described as “a lovely simple New England dresser.”¹² (fig. 1.1) If this is an example of what she meant by “simple,” then it seems the style of furniture she purchased after her marriage would have been rectilinear in form, with little surface ornament, carving, or expensive veneering, and with a stained or plain surface that showed the grain of the wood. Murphy thought very highly of the New England pieces she acquired as a young bride, and equated their simplicity with utility and fine workmanship. “When you are associated with these pieces and get to know them, you can't help but admire the integrity and strength and beauty that these artists put into their work. They put their whole life and soul into it.”¹³

Why did Murphy associate “simple” New England pieces with strength and integrity? Her choice of words suggested a connection to the principles embraced by proponents of the Arts and Crafts movement. Supporters of the movement, which originated in England, had attempted to improve the quality of

manufactured goods by returning to a medieval-style guild system that supported handcraftsmanship instead of machine production. Adherents of the Arts and Crafts movement stressed that usefulness should be evident in design, and that a majority of users could gain access to fine objects by taking advantage of native woods and less-expensive materials. American designers co-opted industrial production methods, a move resisted by their British counterparts, which resulted in large numbers of “artistically conceived goods” being made available to the middle class in the United States.¹⁴

Murphy had a family connection to the Arts and Crafts movement in her father. She noted in a 1957 interview, “my father was the representative of William Morris, the great English designer and manufacturer of fabrics.”¹⁵

Murphy later expanded on the connection between her father and William Morris:

Well, Dad, in the first place, was a representative of the William Morris [company] in this country, and he represented a very famous silk skein house...And he used to design these fabrics in this country and then bring them to Manchester, England, to be printed. And Dad was very artistic, but he didn't have much business ability. For instance, he was in the wholesale business, if he sold 2,000 yards of something for \$2 a yard that cost two dollars and a half a yard, the important thing was that he sold 2,000 yards!¹⁶

Textiles had absorbed William Morris's attention throughout his career, and his work in this field surpassed his production in other decorative arts media. Although Morris did not visit this country, by the late 1870s Americans could purchase the textiles he and his associates had designed, which were sold in large urban department stores.¹⁷ The importance of the American market led

representatives of Morris & Co. to stock six large booths at the Boston Foreign Fair of 1883. The company offered a catalog at the show that described the firm's practices, along with decorating advice for homeowners who purchased their fabrics.¹⁸ In the early 1880s, it is likely that Morris & Co. employed Murphy's father as a wallpaper and textile agent or broker responsible for coordinating orders between Morris's London and Manchester showrooms and his North American importers.¹⁹

Murphy's brother provided additional information about their father and his association with the American Arts & Crafts movement in two oral histories recorded by his alma mater, Columbia University. Prentis, Jr. supported his sister's collecting and decorating, and built his own excellent collection of Americana with her help.²⁰ He recalled that his parents valued the arts and education, but that his father failed to earn enough for the family to live on. His mother had taken on the responsibility of providing for her family.

My father was a notoriously poor businessman, but a very creative decorative artist. He was the secretary of the Associated Artists, of 115 E. 23rd St., who were in the decorating business. He created cretonnes and designed decorative goods. He was an Englishman, and he had those printed and woven in England and brought over here and sold to decorators. He always had remarkably good taste. My mother helped him in business.²¹

In the same interview, Murphy added, "my father was an importer and designer of fabrics," and she recalled having some of his fabric designs reproduced at the luxury textile manufacturer, F. Shumachers & Co., with the help of the textile historian, Carlton L. Safford. When the interviewer remarked

that, “Your brother told me the troubles your father had, and I think it is rather touching that in a way you’ve done this, because it would have been of such interest to him,” Murphy replied “Oh, he would have loved it.”²² The exchange illustrated the Prentis family dynamics, but also underscored Murphy’s commitment to education. She consistently sought the advice of specialists like Safford, and used what she had learned to upgrade her collection.

The connection to the Associated Artists firm is also significant, as is the fact that Prentis, Sr., designed cretonnes. Morris had begun to use cretonnes by 1879, suggesting that Prentis Sr. worked for him in the early 1880s.²³ Candace Thurber Wheeler had founded Associated Artists in 1883, with studio and office space at 115 E. 23rd Street in Manhattan. Wheeler had launched several organizations that merged her educational, social, and artistic interests, including the first Society of Decorative Arts.²⁴ She had co-founded the decorating firm of Tiffany & Wheeler with Louis Comfort Tiffany in 1879, bringing textile expertise to the partnership. The first major commission for the company was the decoration of the George Kemp mansion in 1879, which led to a series of prominent assignments, including the decoration of rooms in President Arthur’s White House.²⁵ In 1880, the firm reorganized as Louis C. Tiffany & Company, Associated Artists, and when Wheeler went her own way in 1883, she took the Associated Artists name for her textile design company.

The specific relationship that Wheeler and Morris had to Murphy and her family is hard to determine. However, Wheeler popularized the style of the Arts and Craft movement through her work as a textile designer, and encouraged

extensive training for women decorators, which allowed them to compete with the men who dominated the field. In the late 1870s, Wheeler became America's first female decorator, and her success opened the interior design profession to women.²⁶ She wrote popular advice manuals on the art of interior decoration, and with her "New Old-Fashioned Home" of 1900, advocated the use of American colonial antiques to stand in for principles such as truth and naturalness.²⁷

Murphy shared Wheeler's belief that beauty improved the beholder, although their interiors reflected their own preferences and collecting opportunities. Each woman believed home furnishings had the power to refine the taste of those who owned (or viewed) them. When asked whether collections "improved" people, Murphy replied, "How could it help but improve them? You can't be around fine surroundings, or really fine books and things, without being improved."²⁸ Wheeler also advocated the use of warm, rich, paint colors, and low ceilings, which became distinctive features in Murphy's decorating style. Wheeler's promotion of American colonial imagery and her association of that imagery with the simplicity and practicality of the Arts and Crafts style made a tremendous impression on Murphy, and influenced the design and style of Murphy's later period rooms.

Murphy's marriage had given her the means to purchase the antiques she loved, and she furnished her home with furniture, textiles, and accessories, all with a New England provenance. As Murphy learned more about the furniture she purchased, she replaced good pieces with better ones; "I only began to

furnish a house. Then as I found a better piece, I'd eliminate one, and as I found another better piece, I'd eliminate that."²⁹ Her father, who shared her appreciation for late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century objects, encouraged Murphy's interest in antiques. It is likely that her taste in furniture reflected her father's own preferences and the type of furniture that had surrounded her as a child. By her own accord, Murphy had been collecting objects since she turned ten, when she left for boarding school in upstate New York with a few antiques in tow.³⁰

Murphy recounted a time when she brought her father along to inspect a piece of furniture. Prentis, Sr., whose opinion she trusted, declared it to be Jacobean, English, and very fine. Murphy did not buy it then, and when she went back for another look, found that Israel Sack had purchased the piece, paying more than ten times the \$150 asked of Murphy. Sack promptly turned around and sold the cupboard for \$10,000 to the Boston Museum.³¹ While this was clearly a story about "the one that got away," it revealed that she had a capable mentor in her father. Murphy's creative and well-educated parents nurtured her interest in history, and exposed her to the Arts and Crafts style. Her father must have taught her how to distinguish between early American and English antiques, and how to recognize the features of the Jacobean, William and Mary, and early Queen Anne styles of furniture.

Murphy singled out several additional events that had spurred her collecting, including the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition of 1907, and the 1929 auction of Howard Reifsnnyder's collection, which realized staggering sums for American

decorative arts. She was one of a growing numbers of collectors and curators who had participated in a re-evaluation of American antiques during the interwar years. The consensus was that the objects were stylish, well made, and representative of uniquely American values, and that they could stand up to comparisons with their English and European counterparts. Briann Greenfield, author of *Out of the Attic: Inventing Antiques in Twentieth-Century New England*, described the reappraisal as “nothing short of a new way of understanding the values of antiques,” and a crucial step in recognizing the inherent merit of American-made objects.³² The organizers of the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition wanted the event to be “as educative as possible,” in order to “Create an Historical Awakening” that would enhance the significance of American-made goods.³³ The exhibit featured antiques lent by the noted collector, Eugene Bolles, whose collection became the core of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Americana holdings. Murphy believed the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition had awakened interest in “all things American,” and had spurred the serious study of regional furnishings.³⁴

Objects at the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition were grouped by period and style, which is a commonplace system of organization today, but was an innovation when it appeared in 1907. The arrangement was still remarkable in 1924, when the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened “The Homes of Our Ancestors” display in the American Wing. The event signaled that American objects had arrived, and as the accompanying catalog proclaimed, that the “Arts of Interior Architecture” had indeed evolved a “Style of their Own.”³⁵ Elizabeth Stillinger, author of *The*

Antiquers, saw a direct connection between the display at the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition and the installation at the American Wing, “By exhibiting objects with a unity of time and space, this approach conveyed a concentrated impression of the past and its spirit.”³⁶ Murphy’s period rooms were also “concentrated impressions,” that presented a dramatic and slightly exaggerated version of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century domestic life. She wanted her displays to capture the attention of visitors, and carry on the message that she had learned years earlier, that “our early Craftsmen” had fashioned a distinctively American style.

Du Pont was only two years older than Murphy, and like her, came away deeply affected by the period rooms presented by R.T.H. Halsey, the curator of the American Wing, in 1924. Six years later, du Pont’s collection of American-made furnishings, and the care he took to arrange them, positioned him as the major lender to the landmark Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition in New York. The display demonstrated “unequivocally” that the country’s decorative arts could hold their own against their English and European counterparts, and that du Pont had become a catalyst in the movement to win acclaim for American antiques.³⁷ Murphy was inspired by the decor at the 1929 exhibition and must have been particularly interested in the colonial-themed room that featured a seventeenth-century American press cupboard, chest, Spanish-foot gateleg table, and a pair of ornately carved English armchairs (fig. 1.2).

After Murphy had married and moved to Concord, New Hampshire, she could have driven several hours to visit a well-known historic house museum in

Concord, Massachusetts. The period rooms of the Concord Antiquarian Society contained a valuable collection of Americana given by the eccentric collector, Cummings E. Davis, in 1887.³⁸ The society had placed the eclectic furnishings throughout the rooms of a rambling 1730 home a few years later. Writing in 1902, in *The Book of a Hundred Houses*, Clarke Munroe praised the society's work. "A word must be said for the arrangement of the articles, as it is most unusual to find a museum that looks so much like a home."³⁹ Munroe thought the house conveyed a "natural and unstudied air," which was a description that anticipated the compliments that Murphy would receive fifty years later. Murphy's later period rooms showed her debt to the smaller, intimate presentations of domesticity that were displayed at the historic houses such as the one organized by the Concord Antiquarian Society.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the efforts of department stores to market furniture gave the period room a new prominence. Jan Whitaker, in her study, *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class*, noted that they targeted affluent clients with niche specialty shops that sold high-end imported and American antiques. Stores also offered the middle class the option of lower-quality reproduction period furniture, in Colonial, Chippendale, Sheraton, and Empire styles.⁴⁰ Whether antique, modern, or reproduction, stores placed the furniture within model rooms that encouraged customers to purchase multiple items or several coordinating pieces in a group. Like a well-designed stage set, these true-to-life tableaux allowed viewers to insert themselves into the scene.

Israel Sack, (1883-1959), also understood the advantages of creating carefully edited displays of furniture and accessories. Sack is widely recognized as the pioneering dealer of the early twentieth century, and the founder of the family business that sold the finest American antiques to the most discriminating collectors. He was a lifelong advocate for the furnishings of his adopted country, and he promoted them as works of art with a distinctly American flavor, made by master craftsmen for a discerning clientele. Sack recognized that his clients equated antiques with social status, and acquired them, in part, to gain access to the prestige they offered.⁴¹ Murphy took away another important lesson from him – the persuasive appeal of a well-designed interior. She had already purchased a few pieces of New England furniture when she walked into his store on Boston’s Charles Street around 1908.⁴² Sack’s displays are an overlooked aspect of his career, and they played a part in Murphy’s approach to interior design.

In 1924, Sack purchased the historic King Hooper House in Marblehead, Massachusetts, which he repurposed as an antiques store.⁴³ Sack encouraged visitors to the “King Hooper Shop” to enter into the scene, when he suggested, “Collectors may step from Chestnut Street into an atmosphere of the 17th century.”⁴⁴ A self-published sales catalog from 1928 showed that Sack followed a period room model, and presented his antiques in lifelike room settings that gave prospective buyers an idea of how the objects would look in their own home (fig. 1.3 and 1.4).⁴⁵ Wallace Nutting (1861-1941) illustrated a simple bedroom vignette by Sack that featured “Sheraton style” furniture, in his 1928 *Furniture*

Treasury (fig. 1.5).⁴⁶ Visitors who found the atmosphere of Sack's shop especially inviting could take advantage of the "contemporary decorating service" offered through the female associate who managed the King Hooper Shop.⁴⁷

Murphy took these lessons to heart, and incorporated what she had seen at the Hudson-Fulton and American Wing exhibitions, local historic societies, department stores, and antique stores, into her own home. Murphy's ability to arrange her furnishings into attractive and "lived-in" period rooms was critical to her later success, and it was a skill she learned from years of observation and experimentation. Over the course of her career, she placed every one of her installations within a period-appropriate architectural surround. Murphy's interior decoration integrated antiques into the room, and provided a harmonious and unified living space that looked very much like a "real" home.

Murphy's marriage had brought her wealth and status, and she traveled, built up her collection of American antiques, and honed her skills as an interior decorator. David Murphy had given her the capital to pursue her antiquing, and opportunities to socialize with his friends and colleagues who were active in politics, real estate, banking, and fraternal organizations.⁴⁸ However, in 1919, David Murphy died, and his thirty-seven-year-old widow had to reconsider any plans she had made for the future. Childless, she returned to New York City, and rented an apartment in the same West 67th Street building as her brother and his family.⁴⁹ It is unclear what Murphy's financial situation was at the time of her husband's death. She continued to travel, and spend money freely on antiques, which suggested that she inherited an income that left her quite well off.

Murphy traveled to Europe every year in the decade following her husband's death, a series of trips that left her determined not to become like "so many old women over there bored to death." She kept her New York City apartment, but wanted "an old house to put my old furniture in, which my old cook was taking care of in New Hampshire."⁵⁰ She had three criteria the house had to meet: it had to be old, it had to be in a good location, and it had to be cheap. In 1935, Murphy took possession of a 100-acre parcel of farmland in Westbrook, in the County of Middlesex, Connecticut, to which she added an adjoining three acres in 1938.⁵¹ The property had at least two structures, one of which was a circa 1812 farmhouse, and the other a freestanding "cottage."

Murphy called her home Candle Light Farm, and it became the focus of her collecting and decorating as the roaring 1920s gave way to the subdued 1930s. The purchase of the property marked the beginning of a quiet, but productive, span of time for Murphy. She began to clean and restore the main house, as well as the adjacent "cottage" guesthouse, but otherwise there is very little information about her specific activities during these years. In the 1930s and 1940s, she spent her time and money upgrading her furniture collection, traveling, and strengthening her ties to collectors and museum curators. Candle Light Farm provided Murphy with a new set of rooms to fill, and a new stage to demonstrate her decorating skills and furniture expertise.

It is likely that Murphy chose the location of her new home because of its proximity to neighbors such as Joseph Downs (1895-1954), who had served as the curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's American Wing since 1933, and

who Murphy counted as a close friend. Downs owned a 1723 salt box in Guilford, Connecticut, about twelve miles east of Murphy's home along Route 1, the old Boston Post Road. He restored his home around 1936, and contemporary photographs showed that he decorated the ground floor "keeping room" in an "Early Colonial" style.⁵² His collection included turned and joined trestle tables, high-backed settles, sunflower-carved chests, "Cromwell" upholstered back stool chairs, and cooking implements arranged around a brick hearth (fig. 1.6).⁵³ These photographs do not show the full range of Down's collection, but similarities between this décor and Murphy's decorating and collecting show that she was inspired by his work, and emulated it in her own home and in her later period rooms.

Downs may have introduced Murphy to Henry Francis du Pont (1880-1969), beginning a relationship between the two collectors that would continue for the next twenty years. She toured Winterthur for the first time in June of 1946, although du Pont had opened certain sections to small groups as early as 1942, as he prepared his home for its future as a public museum. Murphy would have wanted to see the furniture and accessories from "her" era. Du Pont had divided the furnishings of the Wentworth House room, which originated from a seventeenth-century home in Portland, New Hampshire, between the Thomas Hart room, from Ipswich, Massachusetts, about 1670, and the Oyster Bay Room, from Long Island, New York.⁵⁴ Containing low, wooden-beamed ceilings, wide-planked wooden floors, and white plastered walls, du Pont's rooms were similar to the dining room in Murphy's main farmhouse at Candle Light Farm. In the

Winterthur Hart Room, a court cupboard with ebonized applied ornament had a counterpart in the press cupboard that Murphy had placed in her cottage dining room. Du Pont and Murphy displayed brass candlesticks, pewter flagons and measures, and hung simple floor-length curtains alongside double-hung windows (fig. 1.7).

After absorbing a lifetime of influences over her fifty-plus years, Murphy began to exert an influence on others. Encouraged by parents tied to the arts and interior decoration, Murphy had spent years identifying and acquiring early New England antiques. She had established herself as a knowledgeable collector devoted to “Pilgrim” objects from the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries.⁵⁵ She could boast of close ties to museum experts, fellow collectors, and connoisseurs, such as Joseph Downs, Henry Francis du Pont, and Israel Sack. She had assembled a fine, if not the finest, collection of early American furnishings. However, she was too energetic and enthusiastic about her subject to consider retiring, and after World War II Murphy wrote a second act for herself as a decorator and curator.

Chapter Two: A Room of Her Own: Candle Light Farm and the New-York Historical Society

Many collectors have married their passion for a certain category of object or period with the need to instruct others, to document certain periods of history, and to issue moral guidelines. Financial gain (or the hope of it) and tax management for those in the upper brackets, were also attractions for most, if not all, antiquers.⁵⁶ While Murphy cited all of these reasons at one time or another to explain her own practices, her need to create a narrative -- to assemble her chosen objects into a series of coherent arrangements -- was at the root of her collecting. She did not stop once she possessed certain pieces, and was not content to enjoy her collection in private, but constantly organized, and re-organized her objects.

Murphy used period furniture and artwork to express her aesthetic vision of a cultured early American people, and in turn, her displays conferred upon the objects an additional set of meanings. By placing her objects within a series of strictly controlled environments, Murphy created relationships among the objects, the viewers, and the sponsors of her period rooms. The relationships revealed her motives, as well as those of her partners, and the reasons that informed her collecting and decorating decisions. Candle Light Farm was Murphy's decorating laboratory, and the public phase of her career began when *The Magazine Antiques* published an article about her vacation home. The article brought her a

great deal of attention, and led to her first major installation at the New-York Historical Society.

Always gregarious and outgoing, Murphy met Homer Eaton Keyes, the founder and editor of *Antiques*, (later re-named *The Magazine Antiques*), at a cocktail party shortly after she purchased Candle Light Farm. Keyes followed up with a promised visit, and according to Murphy, came away very impressed by “the best collection he’d seen,” and one that “captured a delightful livability.”⁵⁷ Alice Winchester, who followed Keyes as editor of the magazine in 1938, kept a close eye on Murphy’s work for over ten years. As the 1940s drew to a close Winchester convinced Murphy that the time had come to show the readers of *The Magazine Antiques* just what that “delightful livability” looked like. The article turned out to be the first of several that profiled Murphy’s collection and interior decorating, and signaled the busiest, and most productive, ten years of her career.

In June of 1950, the most popular feature in *The Magazine Antiques*, “Living with Antiques,” was devoted to “The Connecticut Home of Mrs. Katharine Prentis Murphy.”⁵⁸ Winchester’s introduction noted, “for upwards of ten years now we have discussed the possibility with her; for much longer than that it has been recognized, by those who had seen it, as one of the outstanding houses in America. But Mrs. Murphy is a perfectionist, and felt that it was not finished.”⁵⁹ Ever confident, even Murphy hesitated at the thought of the magazine’s discerning readers scrutinizing the interiors at Candle Light Farm. However, she had nothing to fear. Her work was so well received that the magazine printed

additional images of her home four months later, in the October issue. The second article announced that Murphy had donated the furnishings from the parlor, dining room, and bedroom at Candle Light Farm, to the New-York Historical Society, as part of a forthcoming public exhibition.

With the October article, Murphy's collection became the first one published in color by *The Magazine Antiques*. Under the heading "Three American Rooms," the feature was given pride of place in the center of the magazine, with one large glossy photograph per page.⁶⁰ The attention given to the interiors at Candle Light Farm demonstrated that Winchester, and her associates, had the highest regard for Murphy's collection. The editors praised Murphy for having created a display "with none of the static quality one sometimes feels in important collections."⁶¹ Many subsequent reviewers singled out the warm and charming interiors, and often expressed their surprise that the antiques were used daily by the owner. The *Middletown Press*, the "Home Paper of Southern Connecticut," represented a commonly expressed opinion, when it said of Candle Light Farm, "the cold clinical exhibition tactics of the museum are absent."⁶² Murphy gathered a remarkable collection of very fine early American furniture, but she brought her colonial furnishings to life with a distinctive mix of color, pattern, and texture.

Taken together, the June and October articles illustrated the range of objects, architectural features, and decorating techniques that Murphy employed throughout her career to create her recognizable style. Her goal was to create authentic "period rooms," and not merely atmospheric "period settings."⁶³ To

achieve that aim, Murphy insisted that the furniture to be displayed in rooms “as it was made to go,” and not “strung around the wall.”⁶⁴ She lived with her furniture and accessories, and loved to throw elaborate dinners that demonstrated that the objects were as useful in the present as they had been in the past. At parties, guests sat in caned and carved William and Mary chairs, and pulled up to a 250-year old trestle table, where they dined by the light of antique brass candlesticks. Murphy promoted this hands-on approach to objects, and believed that interacting with them was the best way to appreciate their artistry, as well as their “robustness and integrity.”⁶⁵ She not only admired the workmanship that went into the pieces, but described their attributes in terms of visceral human characteristics. She invested her antiques with emotional and symbolic qualities, and felt strongly about them. “I eat them – I love them.”⁶⁶ Murphy created dynamic settings that transformed “cold antiquarian specimens” into accessible objects that conveyed the excitement and meaning she was sure they possessed.

In June’s “Living with Antiques” article, Murphy’s interiors featured broad expanses of uncluttered surfaces, simple, rectilinear chests interspersed with light and vertical chairs, and symmetrical arrangements of pewter and china. The wooden doors and paneled walls of the sitting room, living room, and dining room appeared to be unpainted, as was most of the furniture. Carved ornament punctuated the crests of the banister back chairs, while turned elements animated the spool-turned stretchers of a table, and set off the ebonized details of a low chest. Looking glasses were a feature in almost every room, with some

set within stumpwork frames and some in the style of the “courting mirror,” with a portrait set into the crest. Delft plates depicted English royalty, and added their outlines to the curves and angles of the mirror frames. In the fifteen black-and-white photographs that accompanied the article, the rooms appear quiet and composed (fig. 2.1 and fig. 2.2).

In the October 1950 issue, the color photographs of Murphy’s dining room, living room, and bedroom challenged the calm of the previous images. The four images represented her earliest efforts to create visual excitement by juxtaposing the textures and patterns of the furnishings. The color palette of deep red and green warmed up the rooms and imparted a sense of coziness, as well as sumptuousness, to the display. The varying shades of the wooden furniture became noticeable. The floral patterns on the oriental carpets interrupted the expanse of the dark wood floors, and indicated Murphy’s early exposure to the Arts and Crafts movement, which employed abstract and nonrepresentational flower motifs (fig. 2.3). The white-painted walls and ceilings of the rooms lacked the chair rails, dadoes, beams, and paneling that she employed more frequently as the decade progressed.

When Murphy’s New-York Historical Society rooms opened to the public in April of 1951, a *New York Times* critic called the “treasure trove” of “choice” New England antiques “the best and most opulent.”⁶⁷ *The Magazine Antiques* had introduced Murphy to an audience of like-minded readers and serious collectors. The *New York Times* article brought her to the attention of a wider audience. Now in her sixties, Murphy’s public debut marked her transition from private

collector to well-known benefactor. Her installation at the New-York Historical Society consisted of a gift of three fully furnished rooms drawn from her collection of early American fine and decorative art. Most of the objects came from Candle Light Farm, although her brother supplied a few very fine pieces. As she laid out the scope of her donation, Murphy clearly based her period rooms on many of the museums founded in the 1920s and 1930s, when historic house and object preservation efforts reached a crescendo around the country.

Murphy had toured Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia's 18th-century capital city, a restored, and largely sanitized, setting created and financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. She visited Dearborn, Michigan, and toured Greenfield Village, Henry Ford's "living history" museum, along with the decorative arts galleries at the auto industrialist's namesake Henry Ford Museum.⁶⁸ She could have driven through Massachusetts' Old Sturbridge Village in the late 1940s, which was an historical re-creation founded by the brothers, Albert B. Wells and J. Cheney Wells. At the time, visitors could motor down the Main Street of the "model New England village," that featured "primitive" antiques in relocated buildings staffed by costumed interpreters.⁶⁹ Murphy was personally acquainted with Helen and Henry Flynt, who began to restore the Main Street of Deerfield, Massachusetts, in 1948. Antiques-furnished rooms were fixtures at local historical societies close to her vacation home in Concord, Massachusetts, and New Haven, Connecticut.⁷⁰

The personality of the founder often colored the colonial history offered at these larger museums. Different patrons emphasized different aspects of early

American life, from the crafts and period tasks on display at Ford's Greenfield Village, to Rockefeller's Revolutionary-era capitol, to the Well's family's interest in the "common" arts and trades of native New Englanders. Murphy's work built upon these earlier efforts, but also expressed her individuality and preferences. She shared their admiration for – and frequently idolization of – colonial-era crafts, artisans, and owners, but she emphasized the refinement of the men and women, and the beautiful objects that surrounded them. The period rooms displayed at the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which Murphy visited frequently, continued to exert a strong influence upon her work. Murphy was very close to Downs, the curator of the American Wing galleries from 1932 until 1949, when he became the director at du Pont's Winterthur estate. Downs was a scholar and a pioneer in the use of primary source documents, and Murphy relied heavily on his knowledge, and his design expertise, which was on view at the American Wing, and at his vacation home in Guilford, Connecticut.

Downs played a key role in Murphy's decision to donate to the New-York Historical Society. Murphy had spent "all her life" collecting toys and dolls, and she offered them to Downs in the late 1940s, to form an exhibition to commemorate her recently deceased mother. However, Downs countered with a request for bedroom furnishings from Candle Light Farm. He had his eye on a rare and valuable banister back armchair, with an elaborately carved crest and broad Spanish feet, which he attributed to the chairmaker Thomas Gaines of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.⁷¹ Downs left for Winterthur in 1949, before he

could finalize the planned installation with the Metropolitan Museum, but Murphy had now taken up the idea of a larger bequest. Shortly afterwards she met the President of the New-York Historical Society, Dr. Fenwick Beekman, and the Director, Robert Vail, who offered to display her furnishings in their grand Park Avenue West building.⁷²

Murphy quickly agreed, but stipulated that the furnishings in her home were to be conveyed “intact” and displayed as they were in her own home. Her determination to control the design of the exhibition indicated her strong-willed nature, but was also an attempt to leave her mark on the museum world. In 1950, Murphy suffered complications from surgery that left her close to death.⁷³ She apparently did not see the displays at the New-York Historical Society as the first of what would be a half-dozen period room installations over the course of the decade, but thought the rooms would stand as the alpha and omega of her “life effort.” However, Murphy pulled through and the society’s board members allocated the funds for the construction of a set of historically appropriate interiors that would display the objects to their best advantage.⁷⁴

The New-York Historical Society Museum and Library had been founded in 1804 with a mission to preserve the city’s history and culture. The institution moved several times before relocating to its present Beaux-Art building facing the west side of Central Park.⁷⁵ Renovations underway in 1937 added a pair of two-story wings to either side of the building, and much-needed archival and display space. Vail was very eager to bring in Murphy’s collection, “especially the 17th century room,” and intended it as a permanent exhibit to augment period

furnishings already on display in the Second Floor galleries.⁷⁶ Murphy's collection was a windfall for the New-York Historical Society, which correctly anticipated that the prestigious collection of Americana would raise the museum's stature, and increase tourism, including classroom visits by local school-aged children. However, in their eagerness to acquire Murphy's furnishings, the museum's board and staff agreed to a requirement that would later come back to haunt them. Prentis, Jr., stipulated that the society could choose to discontinue the "permanent" exhibition. However, "those articles so discontinued," would be sold, and the proceeds given to his alma mater, the Trustees of Columbia University.⁷⁷ In the early 1980s, the society reclaimed the space on the second floor for other purposes, and removed Murphy's period rooms. Curators deaccessioned a number of objects, and sold them at auction, and sent the proceeds to Columbia University.

By the end of 1951, the parties had reached agreement on the outlines of the "Prentis Collection" gift. Murphy had offered to "make available to the public" the contents of the living and dining rooms from the cottage at Candle Light Farms, and one bedroom from the main house. She and her brother supplied the furniture for "seven American rooms of the 17th and 18th Centuries," and contributed securities to help defray the cost of building out the exhibition spaces. The remaining four rooms were to be installed "in the near future," and adjacent to the current display, although details about the remaining rooms were hazy.⁷⁸ Murphy's offer of seven rooms worth of material signaled her generosity, but also revealed an impulsive streak, and her inability to resist acquiring more than she

could possibly use in her own home. The color photographs of Murphy's interiors at Candle Light Farm, featured earlier in *The Magazine Antiques*, served as templates for the furniture placement within the installation.⁷⁹

The first order of business at the New-York Historical Society involved the construction of a substructure within the second floor gallery, which created the walls and ceilings for three rooms and an exterior hallway gallery. Visitors viewed the rooms from "one side wall of each room" that had been opened, although they could not walk through the rooms.⁸⁰ Murphy and the museum staff agreed that the installation would be as "authentic" as possible, and they expended a good deal of money and energy to insure that the displays were factual re-creations of a nonspecific, early colonial American home. To insure the authenticity of their project, Prentis, Jr., and Murphy purchased the 1766 Curtiss-Robinson house in Southington, Connecticut, for \$2500, and transferred the façade and the paneling from three rooms to the site.⁸¹ A 1962 photograph showed Prentis, Jr. standing amid the displays in the gallery, with the room openings visible on the left, and part of the house façade in the rear (fig. 2.4). The museum staff photographed and measured the house, prepared elevation drawings, and numbered every piece to insure it was re-installed in its proper location. Mrs. Austin Palmer, a close friend of Murphy's, provided additional interior woodwork from "an old house" in New Hampshire. The entire front wall of the Curtiss-Robinson house had been moved to the museum, and visitors could see the doorway with flanking pilasters, a pair of twelve-over-twelve paned casement windows, and the original wooden siding (fig. 2.5).

A sketch of the low-ceilinged dining room showed a gateleg table with vase-and-ring turned legs in the center of the room, flanked by a chest of drawers, a small chest-on-frame and desk, a press cupboard, and several banister back chairs (fig. 2.6). At least two of the antiques had been purchased from Sack, including the gateleg table in the sketch, and a circa 1710 burl maple high chest of drawers that descended from the Revere-Little family of Boston.⁸² While Prentis Jr. donated far fewer items than did his sister, his gifts included the majority of the artwork. He apparently collected objects in the later Chippendale style, for he contributed a slant front desk attributed to the Newport, Rhode Island, cabinetmaker Job Townsend (fig. 2.7).

A great number of very fine pieces were gathered together in these rooms, because Murphy wanted to demonstrate that the colonists lived in comfort, and enjoyed luxurious and well-crafted goods. In later years, curators would note that the quantity and quality of the objects was more of a reflection of Murphy's tastes than a realistic narrative of an upper-class early colonial home.⁸³ However, it is important to note that while her arrangements rendered the rooms more fanciful than factual, the objects she used were authentic. Murphy's presentations can be considered too much of a good thing, since the abundance and excellence of the antiques weakened what was genuine in her historic house installations.

A thirty-page catalog, with a foreword written by Vail, accompanied the official opening of the period rooms, in April 1951. Downs wrote an extensive description of the furniture, and John Marshall Phillips, curator of the Garvin Collection at Yale University, commented on the portraits, gold, and silver. In the

catalog, Downs expressed his admiration for Murphy's furnishings of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries, which he thought memorable due to their "rich legacy of great craftsmanship." He noted the opulent nature of the setting, which might belong to a "contemporary governor, magistrate, or merchant." Downs knit together the history of the period, the practices of the early colonists, and the provenance of the objects, from the furniture to the crewel-worked bed hangings to the Delft pottery. Phillips wrote about the rarity of a silver caudle cup and the "Rhenish stoneware jug with silver mounts," and pointed out the New York City origins of an extremely rare early gold spoon and fork displayed in a case in the hallway.

Murphy's insistence on authentic room settings, to house her authentic furnishings, marked an important stage in the evolution of period rooms. The "New England" or "Olde Tyme" kitchen exhibits of the late nineteenth-century had featured a hodge-podge of relics, and were intended to represent an "idiom of the time" that idealized the Revolutionary-era ancestors as courageous, loyal, and God-fearing individuals, who conveyed the type of 'traditional' American values that were worth emulating a century later.⁸⁴ The period rooms at the Metropolitan Museum's American Wing re-directed the focus onto the "aesthetic accomplishments" of American-made goods, although their emphasis was largely devoted to interpreting the finest examples of colonial American craftsmanship.⁸⁵ Murphy's installation at the New-York Historical Society continued the aesthetic approach begun by Halsey at the American Wing in the 1920s, with arrangements that highlighted the taste and refinement of the original owners

and the producers. However, as Peter Thornton has noted, “Each period of history has its own way of seeing things – its own ‘period eye,’” and Murphy’s New-York Historical Society rooms reflected her ability to give a public space a private and homelike atmosphere.⁸⁶ This dynamism captivated her audiences, and allowed the aesthetic approach of the 1920s to become much more accessible and understandable to viewers.

The New-York Historical Society benefitted from the variety and the caliber of the objects given to them by Murphy and Prentis, Jr., which were a substantial addition to their holdings of Americana. An inventory taken in 1953 revealed the extent of Murphy’s generosity; 133 pieces of furniture, including a Townsend desk and tea table, over 200 glass, metal, and wooden objects, 27 antique textiles, and 243 pieces of pottery, including Chinese Export and Worcester porcelain, Delft earthenware, and Whieldon stoneware.⁸⁷ Murphy also gave the collection of dolls and toys that had set in motion her work for the society, which added another 400 objects. In December of 1951, the society put together an exhibition featuring the children’s playthings, entitled, “Early American Toys: Prentis Collection.”⁸⁸ Murphy often walked the ten blocks from her apartment on West 67th Street to the historical society’s headquarters to view “her” period rooms. A New Yorker through and through, her gift demonstrated that the hometown girl had made good.

Murphy recovered her health, and by the end of 1951, she had taken on another project. In 1941, the Buttolph-Williams House was acquired by the Antiquarian & Landmarks Society, (now Connecticut Landmarks), which

renovated the house and opened it to the public ten years later. The 1714 Wethersfield, Connecticut, house is a two-story structure with a “medieval exterior” of weathered gray clapboard siding, and “romantic interiors” with “Pilgrim-style” New England furniture (fig. 2.8 and 2.9).⁸⁹ The house contains a first floor parlor and kitchen, which flank a central staircase that leads to the two upper bedrooms (fig. 2.10 and 2.11). Murphy donated the furniture for the Best Bed Chamber, and decorated the room in a style that is almost identical to her work at the New-York Historical Society. The 1950 color photographs of her bedroom, from *The Magazine Antiques*, depicted a four-poster bed hung with light floral-embroidered crewelwork hangings and a yellow quilted silk coverlet. Murphy decorated the Best Bed Chamber in the Buttolph-Williams House with a similar four-poster bed, hung with “flame stitch wool embroidered” panels and a coral quilted silk coverlet (fig. 2.12). Her favorite pieces appeared in both installations; William and Mary caned side chairs and daybeds, oriental carpets, Jacobean era chests with applied spindles and moldings, tables with turned stretchers, framed embroidery, and brass candlesticks with saucer-shaped drip pans.⁹⁰ Stylistically, the Buttolph-Williams House continued Murphy’s work at Candle Light Farm and at the New-York Historical Society (fig. 2.13, 2.14 and 2.15).

Murphy did not relate how she became involved with the Buttolph-Williams House, but it is likely that Luke Vincent Lockwood and his wife, Mary Louise Lockwood, enlisted her help with the installation. The couple collected antiques, including American furniture and decorative art, and Luke Vincent Lockwood was

actively involved in the museum field. He was the author of *Colonial Furniture In America*, which was originally released in 1901, and he served as president of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, (later The Brooklyn Museum), from 1916 to 1932, and as a trustee of the Antiquarian and Landmark Society. Murphy would have met him through her collecting, and would certainly have studied the period rooms at The Brooklyn Museum.

Lockwood took great pains to make The Brooklyn Museum period rooms as accurate as possible, and arranged them so that the visitor had the impression “that he is in a house and not in a room isolated from its original location.”⁹¹ Murphy shared Lockwood’s commitment to authenticity, and his desire to create rooms that allowed visitors to experience the reality and “hominess” of domestic life in the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries. Lockwood passed away early in January of 1951, and it seems that Murphy took over the reins and saw the project through to completion, since her “fingerprints” are all over the decoration of the remaining rooms. The Buttolph-Williams House joined the New-York Historical Society as a premier destination for travelers interested in historic house tours. In *A Guide to Early American Homes – North*, Dorothy and Richard Pratt praised the Wethersfield house as one of the “finest examples of 17th-century architecture in Connecticut (which means in the country). Dark, stark, but filled with vitality, its medieval character is revealed in... furnishing(s) of period perfection. One of the most important preservations in the state.”⁹² Helen Comstock, an editorial assistant at *The*

Magazine Antiques, included the Buttolph-Williams House in *100 Most Beautiful Rooms in America*, and illustrated Murphy's decor in the Best Bed Chamber.⁹³

Over the course of her decorating and collecting career, which would span the decade of the 1950s, Murphy produced, or consulted for, at least six historic house installations, including a colonial era church and tavern. While three of Murphy's original installations currently remain intact and open to the public, the Buttolph-Williams House occupies a unique position as the only example of her work that has continued in an unchanged condition. The rooms of the Wethersfield historic house are showing their age, and the textiles, in particular, are faded and in poor condition. However, the Buttolph-Williams House allows visitors to experience Murphy's aesthetic vision firsthand. It remains a remarkable survivor of her work and her ideas.

Chapter Three: The Colonial Revival and the Prentis House at the Shelburne Museum

The installations at the New-York Historical Society and the Buttolph-Williams House positioned Murphy as an authority on New England antiques. Sanka Knox, a reporter at the *New York Times*, called her a talented decorator able to assemble “the best and most opulent” objects of the period “with taste and authentic flavor.”⁹⁴ She became more widely known, as antique enthusiasts learned of her work through *The Magazine Antiques*, and from positive reviews of the period rooms that followed in national and regional newspapers. Murphy recovered her health over the winter, and by the spring of 1951 had resumed collecting and arranging with her characteristic energy and enthusiasm. She made the rounds of favorite antique stores, attended auctions and museum exhibitions, and received “pickers” who brought objects to her at Candlelight Farm. For Murphy, antiquing and socializing were inseparable activities, and she was happiest when engaging in both at the same time.

The historian Briann Greenfield has argued that antiques underwent a transformation in the first half of the twentieth century as they changed from family heirlooms and “memory markers” to aesthetic antiques that embodied the “American artistic spirit.”⁹⁵ Murphy contributed to this transformation, and carried it into the second half of the century, with period rooms that emphasized the beauty of colonial-era crafts, and the sophistication of the early colonists.

Murphy's use of antiques promoted Colonial Revival furnishings, by demonstrating that American antiques provided warm and inviting interiors.

Her arrangements within the Shelburne Museum's Prentis House romanticized colonial life, and portrayed the period as a time of creativity, good taste, and happy domesticity. The Prentis House was the largest installation of Murphy's career and the only occasion she had to furnish an entire residence other than her own. Period rooms have always presented a paradox for museums; even though the objects remain credible expressions of the cultures that created them, it is impossible to recapture the past, even with the use of authentic objects.⁹⁶ Museum curators seek to interpret past events as objectively as possible, and resist imposing their own beliefs and attitudes upon the narrative. Murphy's décor at the Prentis House illustrated some of the difficulties inherent in historic interpretation, since her rooms combined authentic period furnishings arranged to suit her subjective view of the period.

Apart from her brother, the individual who worked most closely with Murphy was Electra Havemeyer Webb, the principal behind the Shelburne Museum, and herself a pioneering collector of American folk art and New England antiques. In 1947, Webb founded the Shelburne Museum as an outdoor museum complex near her Lake Champlain vacation home in Shelburne, Vermont. She intended the site to serve as an educational venue, which would preserve the region's architecture and traditional handcrafts. The museum and its many historic structures provided a permanent home for her "collection of collections," and today visitors can see carriages, quilts, dolls, decoys, folk art,

ceramics, and textiles. The two collectors first met when the Shelburne Museum was still in the planning stages. Murphy learned that Webb was purchasing hatboxes for one of her proposed galleries. Self-assured and determined, Murphy called Webb, introduced herself, and offered to donate several examples from her own collection.⁹⁷ Her initiative paid off because Murphy eventually contributed a variety of objects to Webb's fledgling museum.

The two grew closer as the village complex approached its 1952 public opening. Webb relied on her friend for advice and support, as the Shelburne Museum grew "like topsy" with the addition of diverse structures, including a covered wooden bridge, church, general store, lighthouse, and a working blacksmith shop. In the three years that followed the opening, Webb added twelve structures and thousands of objects to the site, including the Lake Champlain steamship *Ticonderoga*, which was moved overland two miles, and permanently moored into the museum's landscape.⁹⁸ Webb preserved the buildings as historic artifacts in their own right, and used them as period-appropriate galleries to display her varied collections.

To reflect the activities of "everyday people," Webb brought abandoned buildings to the site, including private homes, a church, craft shops, and a school. She was not interested in restoring an existing city with Colonial-era roots, but wanted to "depict the manner of living" of New England families with a mix of authentic commercial and residential structures. The Prentis House added to Webb's "varied and alive" museum ensemble. Webb was impressed with Murphy's knowledge of New England furnishings from the late seventeenth- and

early eighteenth-centuries, and thought the Prentis House would provide an authoritative view of family life from that period. She purchased a house from Hadley, Massachusetts, originally believed to date from the early 1700s, and Murphy donated the majority of the furnishings and decorated the interiors. Webb's desire to achieve a sense of "liveliness" echoed Murphy's own philosophy that an appropriate setting was required to animate the past. Murphy and Webb thought that objects in period settings evoked the lives of the original owners much more powerfully than objects displayed individually as works of fine art.

Webb and Murphy shared more than their aesthetic vision and passion for collecting early American antiques. Webb was close in age to Murphy, having been born only six years later. Both had begun collecting antiques at a very early age, and both maintained a lifelong interest in dolls and toys. Webb's collecting methods paralleled Murphy's, although on a much greater scale, as she gathered objects from every decorative arts discipline to create a comprehensive folk art collection. Neither woman documented her purchases. Although the Shelburne Museum would take in over 60,000 objects during Webb's lifetime, neither woman left records or diaries outlining their acquisitions.⁹⁹ Finally, both women relished the process of acquiring objects, and the time and effort spent pursuing their intended quarry.

Murphy and Webb exhibited a rebellious streak that found expression through their collections. Murphy's mother constantly criticized her choice of "Pilgrim" furniture, and Webb's first major purchase of a tobacconist's figure – a

“cigar store Indian” – shocked her parents. It can be theorized that Fanny Prentis associated her daughter’s interest in antiques with her ne’er-do-well husband and his influence. She did not think that Murphy’s collection of objects were “pretty things,” and must have had a low opinion of the interior decoration at Candle Light Farm, for Murphy once told her mother, “the furniture knows you hate it.”¹⁰⁰

Webb and Murphy were part of an elite group, along with Louise du Pont Crowninshield and Ima Hogg, that Stillinger dubbed “a Triumvirate of Collecting Ladies” plus “One Lone Texan.”¹⁰¹ Murphy was not as well off as the others, but the four women were “possessive, competitive, and eager for a certain sort of immortality,” and each left idiosyncratic collections of American fine and decorative art.¹⁰² Their lives overlapped socially and artistically and Murphy would later install a period room for Hogg at her Houston house museum, Bayou Bend. It is likely that all four women found antiquing to be a socially sanctioned outlet that satisfied their competitive natures. Murphy’s candid anecdotes showed that “antiquing” was a cutthroat activity overlaid with a veneer of sophistication and refinement. She recounted several occasions when she vied with Israel Sack for a particular piece of furniture, although he usually got the better of her.¹⁰³ An experienced competitor, Webb was an accomplished markswoman and big game hunter who enjoyed fox hunting and sport fishing.¹⁰⁴ Winchester contributed to the success of this elite group. Although not a wealthy collector herself, she used her position at *The Magazine Antiques* to empower the women, and placed their collecting within an academic framework that helped to level the playing field between them and their male counterparts.¹⁰⁵

The Prentis House provided Murphy with a canvas of eight rooms on two floors, including a large walk-in pantry or buttery.¹⁰⁶ Webb purchased the 1773 house in 1954, and the following year transported it from Hadley, Massachusetts, to the Shelburne Museum, and placed it adjacent to two other relocated historic homes, the Dutton House, and the Stencil House. The Prentis House retained its original beehive-shaped, brick chimney at the center of the home, and its 18th-century paneling, doors, wide-planked floors, and hardware (fig. 3.1). It took Webb and Murphy three years to re-assemble the house, paint the interiors, and arrange the furnishings (fig. 3.2). Murphy had restocked Candle Light Farm, and as she had done with the New-York Historical Society, moved most of the objects from her vacation home to the new installation.¹⁰⁷

The Prentis House was the second freestanding home that Murphy furnished, after her Connecticut vacation property. Murphy prepared three bedrooms in the Prentis House, including a child's room that featured a small, low-post bed, cradle, and a scaled-down ladder-back chair (fig. 3.3 and 3.4). The refined taste of the imaginary owner of the Prentis House was evident in the dining room, where a cupboard and small chest-on-frame with ebonized ornament displayed pewter, brass candlesticks, and imported ceramics, including punch bowls, and a pair of rare Delft, covered posset pots. Carved and turned William and Mary chairs placed around an open gate-legged table indicated the early eighteenth-century trend towards light and vertical forms. White plastered walls contrasted with the oxblood-red dado, wall, and ceiling beams, and floor-

length, flame stitch patterned curtains and seat covers added warmth and interest to the room (fig. 3.5, 3.6 and 3.7).

Murphy's familiarity with William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement was evident in the abstracted forms of floral ornament that appeared on the crewel embroidered bed hangings in the West Chamber bedroom, and the pattern on the solid-colored quilts in both the West and East Chambers (fig. 3.8 and 3.9). Her use of Oriental carpets indicated her preference for the stylized forms of nature associated with the Arts and Crafts movement. She laid the boldly patterned carpets on the floors at Candle Light Farm, and used them in all of her period rooms, including the dining room, parlor, and two main bedrooms at the Prentis House. For Murphy, oriental carpets were part of a comprehensive effort to promote the colonists as aesthetically aware individuals, "I think that in those days they loved beauty, and tried to get as many [beautiful] things as they could then as they do today."¹⁰⁸

Sarah Sherrill, the author of "Oriental Carpets in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century America," noted that the designs of the rare Middle Eastern hand-knotted pile carpets were imitated by Flemish, English and Irish weavers as early as the mid-sixteenth century.¹⁰⁹ By the second half of the eighteenth century, English weavers in cities such as Axminster and Wilton had created large, seamless carpets that imitated Turkish imports. Sherrill concluded that paintings and inventories demonstrated that carpets with Oriental designs were present in the American colonies, but "no carpets survive today that are known to have been in this country before the nineteenth century."¹¹⁰ The colonist who

owned a fine carpet was likely to place the luxurious object on a table or sideboard instead of the floor.¹¹¹ While it is possible that Murphy, the well-read researcher, looked to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European and American paintings to justify her use of Oriental rugs, it is probable that she simply liked the effect the rugs provided.

In the 1950s, Murphy was not the only collector and decorator who displayed oriental rugs on the floors of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century period rooms. Downs placed an Oriental carpet in front of the fireplace in his “Early Colonial” keeping room in Guilford, Connecticut (fig. 1.6). The Flynts placed similar rugs in the late seventeenth-century rooms at Deerfield’s Parson Ashley’s Study, and the Allen House.¹¹² Murphy looked up to du Pont, and emulated his work at Winterthur, where he displayed a number of fine Oriental carpets from his collection. A 1935 stereopticon photograph showed that du Pont had placed a “Turkish” rug in the late seventeenth-century Wentworth Room (fig. 1.7). Du Pont later dismantled the room to accommodate ongoing building renovations, and integrated the furnishings into the Hart and Oyster Bay rooms, which depicted colonial rooms from Massachusetts and New York. In a 1955 *The Magazine Antiques* article, John A.H. Sweeney, a curatorial assistant at Winterthur, wrote of the Hart and Oyster Bay furnishings that the colonists had sought “the comforts of home with imported luxuries” such as Oriental carpets, Delft pottery, brass candlesticks, and “Italian brocatelle at the windows and on the low-post bed.”¹¹³ Murphy shared Sweeney’s conviction that the early

colonists had access to the floral patterned rugs, although they usually placed these premier items on tabletops to add warmth and color to their homes.

However, Murphy's room arrangements were occasionally problematic, in spite of her research and period-appropriate furnishings, because they were such subjective interpretations of early colonial life. At times, she selected the facts that supported her opinions, and to a great degree, her period rooms expressed her taste and point of view. In *Furniture of Our Forefathers*, Esther Singleton was eager to clear up any misunderstandings about the use of carpets in the seventeenth century; "It will be noticed in the above inventory that several carpets are mentioned. The reader must remember that these are not floor-coverings, which were not in general use till nearly a century later, but merely table-cloths and cupboard-cloths."¹⁴ As seen, Murphy placed Oriental carpets on the floor of nearly every room in the Prentis House, letting her desire to add color and pattern trump her academic inclinations.

Murphy's use of bright paint colors and striking color contrasts is significant, since she used color, as well as a mixture of patterns and textures, to communicate her ideas about the dynamic spirit she believed the early colonialists possessed. *The Magazine Antiques* reviewed the Prentis House rooms in May of 1957, shortly before the rooms opened to the public. Color illustrations showed the parlor ceiling beams, and wainscoting, had been painted a glossy, apple green color, which matched the green, silk velvet, floor-length curtains (fig. 3.10). Murphy had placed an easy chair in the same room, upholstered in a flame stitch fabric composed of stripes of black, blue, green, and

yellow, next to a black and red painted high chest. Contrasting veneers enlivened the drawers of a nearby dressing table, and the “courting mirror” above the table sparkled with blue and red accents.¹¹⁵

Forty-five years later, the checked floor had become such a recognizable signature of Murphy’s decorating style that the Shelburne Museum’s President and Chief Executive Officer, Hope Alswang, and the Chief Curator, Henry Joyce, enlivened the Prentis House parlor floor with the design during a renovation of the building.¹¹⁶ However, it was a feature that Murphy would not “invent” for several more years, until her subsequent installation at the New Hampshire Historical Society. In *The Magazine Antiques* article from May of 1957, the dark wooden grain of the floor was still visible, and an Oriental carpet covered the central portion of the room. The addition of the black and white painted floor was an instance where curatorial interpretation trumped authenticity. Joyce and Alswang preferred Murphy’s characteristically bold and elaborate use of color and presented that aspect of her work instead of her more subdued original installation.

Murphy painted the woodwork in the Prentis House dining room a bright red, and had curtains and chair cushions made from a flame stitch fabric with a lighter ground than the similar version used in the parlor. In this room, she mixed together blue and white Delft, shiny pewter tableware, and another Oriental carpet, and achieved harmony by limiting the scale of the patterns (fig. 3.11). The West Chamber bedroom featured bright blue painted woodwork, crewel worked bed hangings, a coral pink quilt, and an upholstered easy chair, while the

East Chamber featured royal blue textiles and red painted woodwork. Murphy stated the “early settlers loved color, and they used a good deal of color, though their rooms were done in one color.”¹¹⁷

When it came to choosing period-appropriate paint colors, Murphy cited the investigations of the author, editor, and translator, Esther Singleton, who was active in the first three decades of the 20th century. Singleton was the editor of *The Antiquarian* magazine from 1923 until her death seven years later, and the author of at least thirty-five works on European and American art history, architecture, furniture, and music.¹¹⁸ Murphy could have consulted Singleton’s *The Furniture of Our Forefathers* (1900), *French and English Furniture* (1903), and *Furniture: Distinctive Styles and Periods* (1911).¹¹⁹ Singleton was a diligent scholar who studied early inventories, letters, and advertisements, and her research methods resembled those of her predecessor, Irving Lyon, the author of *The Colonial Furniture of New England*. Murphy noted that Singleton’s inventories listed rooms that were red, green, or blue, but “I’ve never read of a white room, and I’ve never read of a pink room...never read of those.”¹²⁰

Although it is difficult to judge the original intensity and hue of the colors Murphy used from the surviving photographs, contemporary accounts indicated that the colors were originally vivid and intense. Helen Comstock included four of Murphy’s period rooms in her book, *100 Most Beautiful Rooms in America*; the cottage dining room from Candle Light Farm, the South Chamber from the Buttolph-Williams House, and the parlor and West Chamber from the Prentis House.¹²¹ Comstock wrote of the Prentis House parlor “(t)hat rich color was

known in the houses of Puritan New England may not be generally realized,” and that the West Chamber beams “were painted the bright colors that made the homes of our ancestors so inviting.”¹²² Murphy had studied period inventories, diaries, wills, and paintings, and her desire to create room settings based on this information was laudable, as was her insistence on “genuine” antiques.

To help homeowners achieve a “period” look, the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company offered twelve “authentic shades and tints” of “historic wall paint” that had been vetted by “characteristically thorough research.”¹²³ In the early 1950s, investigators at Williamsburg had sampled the original paint – but had not taken into account the degree to which the paint changed over two hundred years (fig. 3.12). Researchers did not realize that destructive agents, including light and pollution, had caused the intensely pigmented original colors to fade and darken. As a result, the paints sold by the museum were considerably more muted than the original versions.¹²⁴

Murphy used blue and green shades in the Prentis House that were similar to the reproduction colors offered by the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company. She chose brighter and bolder tints for her rooms, not because she realized that Williamsburg’s colors were faded, but because she preferred vibrant colors. It appears that she correctly intuited that the colonists recognized a color hierarchy, and used the more expensive shades, such as blue, yellow ocher, and green, in the public areas of the house. “Painter-stainers” had been at work in colonial dwellings since at least the third quarter of the seventeenth century. They whitewashed private spaces and workrooms with plain “Led” paint, while using

red as both a primer, and an overall interior color.¹²⁵ Murphy's colorful interiors were not entirely accurate displays of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century New England rooms, but they were realistic interpretations of paint usage in the colonial period. Most importantly, Murphy's Prentis House décor and the Williamsburg paints recorded the tastes and preferences of the 1950s Colonial Revival movement in America, and have become important historical documents in their own right.

The decoration of the Prentis House was a significant achievement for Murphy, since she furnished a home from top to bottom, instead of being limited to a few rooms within an existing museum. Murphy had used color to animate the antiques and interiors at the Prentis House, creating rooms that were imaginative versions of early colonial life. In much the same way, her representation of gender and femininity in the Prentis House was a creative intermingling of fact and fiction. The representation of domesticity has always been central to Colonial Revival interiors and the hearth emerged early on as the "heart of the home" at venues such as the 1864 Sanitary Fair, and the 1876 "New England Kitchen" at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition.¹²⁶

At the turn of the century, fireplaces became showier and more elaborate, which played up their symbolism, even as central heating and hot water systems made their function in the home obsolete.¹²⁷ Wallace Nutting's images of women contentedly working beside the fireplace maintained the traditional meanings of the hearth – and of female domesticity – during the unbuttoned interwar period.¹²⁸ After World War II, the fireplace persisted as a standard feature in

every 800 square foot Levitt ranch house, and reassured 1950s buyers that traditional comforts could coexist with modern conveniences.¹²⁹ Colonial Revival hearths that displayed cooking tools, spinning wheels, drying herbs, and cradles were attempts to counter the reality of women working outside the home, as if an abundance of domestic appliances could ward off social change.¹³⁰

Murphy presented a tidy assortment of accessories in the kitchen of the Prentis House (fig. 3.13). The cooking utensils, along with the pewter dishes and flagons arranged on the hutch opposite the hearth, made the “colonial” virtues of simplicity, and pre-industrial craft production, available to Prentis House visitors in 1958.¹³¹ If the historic structure had contained a modern stove, refrigerator, and indoor plumbing, visitors would see the high-end suburban Colonial home that Patricia West, the author of *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America’s Historic House Museums* noted was “so often posited as the linchpin of social stability.”¹³²

Of particular interest in the presentation of domesticity was the “borning room,” a small ground floor bedroom next to the kitchen. Murphy had drawn up an inventory of “Antiques in my home at Westbrook, Conn. which I wish to give to the Shelburne Museum and Suggestions for their use in furnishing the Prentis House” in 1954. Her listing included only the living and dining rooms, and the two large upstairs bedrooms, although Webb added a question mark and “Borning R” next to descriptions of two pieces of living room furniture.¹³³ It seems likely that Webb came up with the interpretation of the “borning room” as a lying-in bedroom for the convenience of a new mother. The room contained

only a low-post bed with an unadorned headboard, two plain banister back side chairs with rush seats, a small cabinet for a chamber pot, and a Pennsylvania German painted chest of drawers (fig. 3.14 and 3.15). The dressing table, with stiff cabriole legs resting on thin pad feet, and an arched molding missing a pair of pendant drops, seemed to be the work of a rural New England joiner or cabinetmaker. Jane Nylander addressed the subject of the borning room in everyday New England life in *Our Own Snug Fireside*. She acknowledged that while the need might have existed for such a room, no formal documentation supported its existence in colonial era New England homes.¹³⁴

The simply styled country furniture, including the rush bottomed chairs and painted chest, give the borning room a different character from the other rooms at the Prentis House, which contain elaborately carved furniture, expensive patterned textiles, and fanciful mirrors and art work. The Pennsylvania German chest is the only one of its kind to appear in any of Murphy's period rooms, which suggests that it came from Webb's collection. The home has a decidedly feminine appearance due to the profusion of decorative textiles, which have been traditionally associated with women and women's work. An example of this is the full set of crewel embroidered bed hangings in the West Chamber, which came from Murphy's "pink" bedroom at Candle Light Farm.

Murphy divided objects into two worlds; carved, joined, and painted furniture demonstrated masculine workmanship, while crewel worked bed hangings, quilts, needlework samplers, and the stump work frames of the mirrors were the handiwork of women.¹³⁵ Murphy correctly interpreted the extensively

embroidered hangings as indicative of the high social class of the woman who had the time and training to produce the items.¹³⁶ Her interpretation reflected the gendered reality of the manufacturing processes behind the majority of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furniture and textile production, although it might also have reflected her early association with the Arts and Crafts movement.

Murphy believed that all women did “magnificent needle work,” because it was “the only way for people to enjoy themselves” and socialize. She stated that women took up needlework as an entertaining and creative outlet, before the advent of automobiles, telephones, and radio.¹³⁷ Murphy’s interpretation of textiles in the Prentis House built on the pre-war sentiment that linked the home and home tasks to happiness, not drudgery, as machine production made needlework a choice and not a necessity. She also linked the colonial-era “housewife” to her 1950s counterpart, who returned to the sphere of home and hearth, “to find personal, rather than moral, satisfaction through that identity.”¹³⁸

As designed by Murphy, the furnishings of the Prentis House portrayed a capable mother who tackled childbearing from offices in the birthing room, made dinner at the nearby hearth, served it herself in the beautifully appointed dining room, and retired to the parlor for a late-night game of backgammon or cards by the warm glow of candlelight. A powerful presence within her domestic sphere, the woman evoked by the décor at the Prentis House was bold and passionate, self-assured, and competent. She was certainly Murphy’s early 18th-century alter ego.

Winchester highlighted the country's foremost history museums with the 1959 publication of *The Antiques Treasury of Furniture and Other Decorative Arts*. The book was a scholarly reference guide, with illustrations and research from museum curators, outside experts, and the staff at *The Magazine Antiques*. The dust jacket promised a "tour of 7 great "living" American museums" and singled out "Winterthur, Williamsburg, Sturbridge, Ford Museum, Cooperstown, Deerfield, [and] Shelburne" for their ability to represent the decorative arts "in all their periods."¹³⁹ Views of the Prentis House accompanied photographs of the Shelburne Museum's Dutton and Stencil houses. Webb wrote an introduction to the chapter on the Shelburne Museum, and singled out the Prentis House for praise. Not only was the "gem" of a house the museum's oldest, but being furnished by Murphy made it stand "not only for life in New England but also for friendship and loyalty, for two people working together to achieve something worth while."¹⁴⁰

Chapter Four: The New Hampshire Historical Society: Antiques in the Age of Modernism

In June of 1958, the New Hampshire Historical Society opened a suite of four period rooms and galleried passages, which was a showcase for the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century furnishings donated by Murphy and her brother. Housed in the East Wing of the society's imposing 1911 Beaux Arts building, the "Prentis Collection" was dedicated to the memory of Murphy's late husband. The exhibit of colonial New England decorative art was the second-largest project of her career, smaller in size and complexity only to the Shelburne Museum's Prentis House. Murphy had come full circle since 1919. She had left Concord as the widow of the wealthy and politically active storeowner, David Murphy, and returned decades later as a renowned expert on early New England furniture and art. Her bequest to the New Hampshire Historical Society highlighted her transformation from a young working-class nurse and wife, to a connoisseur and decorator who moved in the highest circles of society.

The year after her installation at the New Hampshire Historical Society, Murphy donated a single room to Ima Hogg's Bayou Bend historic house museum, (now part of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston). A comparison between her earlier work and her later work shows that as the decade progressed, Murphy added more color, pattern, and texture to her rooms. Her final installations at Concord and Houston were livelier and more elaborate than her rooms at Candle Light Farm and the New-York Historical Society. Murphy

may have grown more confident in her own abilities as the years went by, and become more willing to take greater creative risks. She did not radically modify the style of her period rooms over the course of the decade, and her installations consistently represented an idealized colonial era of wealth, refinement, and fine craftsmanship. However, the increasingly showy quality of her decorating paralleled a broader change underway in interior design during the 1950s, as war-time austerity gave way to the “Fabulous Fifties,” and American consumption and self-indulgence nudged aside traditional Puritanical reserve.¹⁴¹

Murphy related the story of her association with the New Hampshire Historical Society on several occasions.¹⁴² She had been researching a portrait said to be of New Hampshire’s Lady Wentworth, née Martha Hilton, who had been a servant in Royal Governor Benning Wentworth’s household. Although Hilton’s 1760 marriage to Benning was scandalous, it later became the subject of a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. On one level, Murphy’s interest in the painting was academic. She was a knowledgeable art collector, who had purchased several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century portraits for her collection over the years. The Wentworth family figured prominently in New Hampshire state affairs and a portrait of Lady Wentworth would have been an appropriate addition to her New England furniture and textiles. However, it is likely that the sentimental nature of the story, as romanticized by Longfellow, held a particular appeal for Murphy, who had married a man twenty years her senior. She received a quick response from Philip Guyol, the society’s director, and their

correspondence eventually led the director to request a gift of regional furniture from her personal collection.

During her discussions with Guyol in 1957, she offered to furnish several period rooms if the society agreed to fund the construction of the interior space. Guyol and the Board of Trustees weighed the benefits of the expenditure, and anticipated that Murphy's gift would allow the society to acquire rare and desirable objects, but also would enhance the educational mission of the historical society, promote tourism, and secure the bragging rights to a very valuable collection. Aware that museum professionals and visitors had praised the Prentis Rooms at the Shelburne Museum, Guyol acted quickly to secure Murphy and her brother as benefactors.

Murphy and Prentis, Jr., never formally ratified the terms of their gifts to the New Hampshire Historical Society, but correspondence revealed that both parties agreed the installations would remain continuously on display for twenty-five years.¹⁴³ While Murphy believed that her objects and period rooms had a transformative power that conveyed American history and culture, she wanted to leave behind a memorial to her own artistic vision. Her desire to establish a legacy was an ambition shared by many collectors, modest and grand, although very few ultimately had the resources and determination to insure that their work remained permanently on display.¹⁴⁴ Murphy wanted to emulate the great private collectors with whom she worked and socialized, especially du Pont, Webb, and Hogg. However, unlike her friends, she did not have the financial resources to

fund her own historic house museum, and instead she relied on partnerships with existing organizations.

Murphy's period rooms occupied the second floor of the East Wing of Concord's Tuck Library, in a building that was across the street from the state capitol, and a short walk from the shopping district where David Murphy's Main Street store had operated.¹⁴⁵ Financial considerations shaped her donations to the New Hampshire Historical Society, as had been the case with the New-York Historical Society. In a letter to Guyol, she wrote of her plan "to give every year about \$20,000.00 in value," which would take advantage of the maximum allowable yearly income tax deduction at that time. Although Prentis, Jr., contributed a few pieces of furniture, Murphy was the main benefactor of the Concord museum. The objects in the Prentis Collection were on permanent loan to the New Hampshire Historical Society, which meant the lenders could not remove them at will. Selected pieces converted annually from loans to gifts, to accommodate the cap of \$20,000 per year, and after Murphy's death, all objects became the property of the society.¹⁴⁶

The New Hampshire Historical Society constructed four rooms and two passages to house the objects. The museum paid slightly over \$22,000 to create spaces with architectural details a staff member believed to be "as accurate as we could make them." Curators displayed additional objects in the "long hall" and "entrance hall," which connected the dining room, bedroom, parlor, and kitchen.¹⁴⁷ The idea of providing extra display space in the adjoining hallway was likely necessitated by the volume of goods Murphy donated. A 1957 inventory of

the collection ran to eleven single-spaced typed pages, and listed nearly 450 pieces.

Since that time, the construction of galleries adjacent to period rooms has emerged in the museum field as a practical, if expensive, solution to balancing the broad context provided by period room displays with a focus on individual objects. Recent renovations at premier urban art institutions, such as New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, have located decorative arts galleries within the spaces surrounded by chronologically arranged period rooms. To overcome the physical limitations at existing historic houses, additional structures have added gallery space in adjacent buildings, as has been done at Mount Vernon, Monticello, and Winterthur. Murphy's galleries and period rooms at the New Hampshire Historic Society were a precursor of the type of hybrid exhibition spaces that leading historic houses have since followed.

In preparation for the installation, members of the New Hampshire museum staff visited Candle Light Farm, the Prentis House at the Shelburne Museum, and Murphy's period rooms at the New-York Historical Society. In essence a series of stage sets, the New Hampshire Historical Society adapted existing spaces on the second floor of the East Wing, then veneered the rooms with a combination of period and newly fashioned, but appropriately aged woodwork. The New Hampshire museum chose to interpret its rooms to about the year 1730, and the reasons for the choice shed light on Murphy's relationship to both the New York and Concord museums. Murphy had grown impatient with the New-York Historical Society, which had either postponed or cancelled the

additional four period rooms they had vaguely agreed to in 1950 and 1951. In anticipation of the new rooms, Murphy had stockpiled furniture at the New-York Historical Society, and had been using their storage rooms for several years as an extension of her own attic. The historical society staff was alarmed by Murphy's frequent visits and her habit of adding and removing objects from the storage rooms, and occasionally, from the period room displays, without informing the collections manager or filling out the necessary paperwork.¹⁴⁸ By 1957, Murphy realized the New-York Historical Society would not add any further rooms, so she "rescued" the remaining unused paneling from the 1730 Curtiss-Robinson House, and the furniture in storage in New York, and sent it on to Concord.

The rooms at the New Hampshire Historical Society featured the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century furniture, textiles, artwork, paint, and upholstery that were now characteristic of Murphy's collecting and style of decorating. Color and black and white photographs from the New Hampshire Historical Society archives show paneled rooms, oriental carpets laid onto dark wood floors, off-white plastered walls, jewel-colored floor-length curtains, small-paned casement windows, and square timbered ceilings (fig. 4.1 and 4.2). Visitors viewed the rooms through openings placed within one of the walls of each room. They would have seen Murphy's favorite William and Mary banister back chairs with carved crests and turned stretchers, (five of which were attributed to John Gaines), gate-legged tables, a daybed, and low "sunflower" chests. Later Queen Anne pieces included a dressing table with slim cabriole

legs, and a red, blue, and green flame stitch upholstered easy chair attributed to the New Hampshire cabinetmaker, John Gaines (fig. 4.3 and 4.4).

Murphy's belief that she had acquired six rare Gaines chairs was misguided, and revealed that the allure of a piece and the thrill of the hunt occasionally trumped her common sense. The New Hampshire Historical Society inventory attributed "Arm Chair, 5 Bannister back, carved crest," to Gaines, who worked in Portsmouth and Ipswich. Two of the five Gaines banister back arm chairs were placed in the bedroom. Their Spanish feet, double-baluster turned front stretchers, and rush seats indicated the William and Mary style, while the vase-shaped back splat suggested a transition to the later Queen Anne style (fig. 4.5 and 4.6). The remaining Gaines chairs went into the parlor and dining room. Prentis, Jr. had donated the sixth Gaines easy chair, which Guyol considered the preeminent piece in the collection, and which he placed on the front cover of the accompanying catalog.¹⁴⁹ A few years later, the Assistant Curator of the Decorative Arts at the Beverly Historic Society in Massachusetts called into question the Gaines attribution for all but the two transitional Queen Anne styled chairs.¹⁵⁰ The antique dealer(s) who sold Murphy the "Gaines" pieces deserved some of the blame for the misattributions, but she should have been more skeptical about the apparent good fortune that allowed her to "find" six rare and desirable chairs.¹⁵¹

The saga surrounding the Gaines chairs revealed a problem of attribution in Murphy's gift to the New Hampshire collection, although she would not be the first – or last -- to find fraudulent pieces in her collection. The overall quality of

the collection was exceedingly high, and while some of the items on display were pedestrian – tin cookie cutters, wax fruit, and wooden funnels – there were many rarities. Exceptional pieces of furniture included a Wethersfield, Connecticut, sunflower chest, caned-back “Boston” chairs given to Murphy by Downs, a chest purchased from the Bolles Collection, and a late seventeenth-century stool recorded as number 872 in Wallace Nutting’s *Furniture Treasury*.

The tables and mantles were set with fine period silver, Delft, and pewter; artwork decorated the paneled and painted walls; and a rare set of crewel worked bed hangings decked the antique “pencil post” bed. The New Hampshire rooms were notable for the greater variety and quantity of objects in each space than had been seen in Murphy’s previous displays. Compared to the kitchen at the Shelburne Museum’s Prentis House, the kitchen in Concord contained two tables, instead of one, and tabletop displays suggested the inhabitants were in the midst of cooking and dining. Lead-glazed pottery with bright yellow, trailed slip decoration added another level of color and motion to the display of pewter measures and iron cooking implements (fig. 4.7 and 4.8). The heightened level of activity corresponded to the greater density and elaboration of material. No object was beneath Murphy’s consideration, and her New Hampshire period rooms put her imaginative and comprehensive worldview on display together with her antiques.

At the dinner to celebrate the opening of the Prentis Collection, Kenneth Chorley, the president of Colonial Williamsburg, welcomed the guests with an address, entitled “No Compromise with Quality.” A leader in the field of historic

preservation, he spoke about Murphy's professional and personal attributes, and noted her skills as a collector, benefactor, and competitive bridge partner.¹⁵²

Nyleen Morrison of the *Monitor and N.H. Patriot* suggested Murphy's gift would promote tourism with an article on June 22, 1958, that noted "the atmosphere of elegant olden days (is) much nearer at hand." On July 3, 1958, the Concord *Sentinel* carried a photograph of Murphy and William Saltonstall, the society's president, and reiterated that the four rooms were so "far from appearing dusty and museum-like" it seemed the occupants had just walked out. Another complimentary review appeared in the *New Hampshire Sunday News* for June 22, 1958, under the banner headline, "Recreate 1730 Home of Rich NH Merchant." The article stated that "qualified persons" had determined the four colonial rooms were "as lovely and authentic as any period rooms in the United States."

The newspaper accounts were expressions of regional pride in their area's history, but the reviews confirmed that the most significant aspect of Murphy's installations remained her combination of authenticity and humanness. In a twenty-one-page catalog that accompanied the exhibition, Guyol stated that, "There was no pretense that the rooms themselves were actually transplanted from the past; rather, they were constructed as settings appropriate to the furnishings, with painstaking attention given to authenticity of architectural detail."¹⁵³ In her discussion of the Reuben Bliss Bedchamber at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Hillary Murtha noted that once a period room was removed from its original site, curators need to step in, and construct a new history for the

space that is “part fact, part fable, [and] part informed interpretation.”¹⁵⁴ The most dramatic feature in the New Hampshire rooms -- the diamond-patterned painted floor in the parlor – illustrated the methods Murphy used to create a ‘new history’ for the room.

Murphy had gone to a “very great deal of expense and trouble” to get wide period floorboards for the parlor, and when she went to Concord to check on the installation, she found that the carpenters had planed the boards, leaving them as smooth and new-looking as freshly milled lumber. The carpenters promised to “antique them,” but Murphy was not satisfied; “So that night I thought and thought and thought, and I went to my book on early portraits, and the two earliest known portraits painted in America are children painted on a black and white floor.”¹⁵⁵ She chose a 1670 portrait of a young woman, had the image enlarged, and the museum’s installers painted the black and white pattern onto the parlor floor (fig. 4.9). Murphy was thrilled with the solution. “I think it’s more fantastic, and I think it’s very effective, and it’s right.”¹⁵⁶ In this situation, Murphy’s interpretation of the painted floor was a thoughtfully constructed story, based in fact, that exaggerated or idealized an historical truth. “Painter-stainers” had arrived in the colonies as early as 1634, and documents suggest that they applied a range of colors to the interiors.¹⁵⁷

Murphy immediately used the black and white checked floor again, in the single room she completed for Ima Hogg at Bayou Bend in 1959, the year after the New Hampshire Historical Society’s installation (fig. 4.10).¹⁵⁸ The historic house museum in Houston was originally Hogg’s private home, and the

repository for her collection of American decorative arts, which she donated to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 1957. The home opened to the public in 1966 as a series of period rooms that provided an overview of the country's material culture from 1620 to 1870.¹⁵⁹ Hogg and Murphy belonged to the same small clique of wealthy collectors and antiques experts, and shared friendships with Webb, du Pont, Crowninshield, the Flynts, and Ralph Carpenter, one of Newport's leading preservationists, among others. Virginia Bernhard, the author of *Ima Hogg, the Governor's Daughter*, recounted that their close friendship got off on the wrong foot when Hogg arrived late for her first visit to Candle Light Farm, and received a frosty welcome from Murphy. However, the two subsequently became very close, and Hogg asked Murphy to create the first period room at her home, which was a seventeenth-century setting for her colonial furnishings.¹⁶⁰

Hogg planned to furnish the "Murphy Room" with objects donated from her own collection, but Murphy contributed so many items that the Texan insisted on paying her friend for her gifts.¹⁶¹ Murphy arrived at Bayou Bend to find Hogg bedridden with a severe cold, so she launched into the decoration of "her" room largely on her own.¹⁶² The rooms featured her trademark William and Mary banister back chairs, a drop leaf gate-legged table, Delft, portraits, and pewter. Murphy repeated the dramatic black and white checked floor she had created for the parlor in Concord, but painted the single wall of wood paneling a dark red, instead of the bright blue-green she had used in New Hampshire.

The 1950s are a decade justifiably associated with modern furniture design, but Murphy's period rooms for Bayou Bend and the New Hampshire Historical Society demonstrated the continuing appeal that American antiques held for consumers. The American Walnut Manufacturers Association, a trade group that tracked the lumber used by furniture companies, compiled a thirty-five year study of significant trends in the furniture industry (fig. 4.11). The 1970 study listed five styles of furniture; modern, English, Early American and Colonial, French and a category dubbed "Italian and Spanish." The trade association's chart covered the period from 1934 to 1969, and showed that the demand for modern furniture rose from 1940 until it peaked in 1958. During the same period, the demand for Colonial furniture remained stable, and showed little variation, until the start of a marked rise in popularity in 1958. Within five years, modern furniture quickly lost ground, while the preference for colonial furniture increased, until the two styles were about equally popular in 1963.¹⁶³ The survey established that consumers had their fill of modern furniture the year that Murphy's New Hampshire period rooms opened to the public. In 1958, after holding steady for over two decades, traditional furniture spiked, and within five years, sales of traditional furniture had doubled.

Color was one reason for the shift in furniture styles. In the mid 1950s, manufacturers and retailers jettisoned the somber and muted colors they had used for decades on traditional furniture, and turned to bright pastel blues, pinks, and yellows. Synthetic pigments allowed colors to take on a new intensity and depth. Designers created vibrant color contrasts, and favored an increased use

of metallic fabrics, colored leathers, and shiny plastics.¹⁶⁴ Murphy was well versed in the use of bright, bold colors, which she had placed in all her period rooms. Her use of intensely saturated colors in antiques-filled period rooms was new and unusual for its time, and represented a shift away from the muted palette advocated by other historic house organizations, such as Colonial Williamsburg. Although she favored deep brick red colors for kitchen walls, the paneling in the New Hampshire parlor was painted a bright turquoise, and a coral quilt and curtains set off the robin's egg blue bed hangings in the bedroom (fig. 4.12 and 4.6).

By the close of World War II, John Graham, the Brooklyn Museum curator, had remade the Reuben Bliss period room into a "more luxurious space" that reflected the post-Depression yearning for "prosperity and plenitude."¹⁶⁵ Murphy did the same, with lively period rooms that channeled the nationalist spirit that had surged during and after World War II, and with antique filled interiors that resonated with the 1950s culture of consumption. Her baroque elaboration of colonial era luxury and refinement tapped into a contemporary desire to secure a comfortable, refined, and individualistic home. Murphy presented her aesthetic vision of the colonial past through her use of bright colors, patterns, and textures, which incorporated modern tastes and trends.

Conclusion

Over the course of a brief but highly productive career, Murphy endowed three major period room installations, and contributed to at least three additional historic house exhibitions. More than fifty years after her rooms first opened to the public, part of her collection of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century American decorative art can be seen at the Buttolph-Williams House in Connecticut, the Murphy Room at Bayou Bend, Texas, and the Prentis House at the Shelburne Museum, in Vermont. These three installations survived despite circumstances that led to the de-accessioning of Murphy's displays at the New-York and New Hampshire historical societies, Newport's Hunter House, and Columbia University's Low Library. Murphy deserves recognition as a collector, benefactor, and decorator whose period rooms presented the colonial era as a golden age of craftsmanship, luxury, and refinement. She created settings that blended authentic furnishings with bold colors, patterns, and textures, creating dramatic period rooms that expressed her own point of view as well as a historical narrative.

Murphy's passionate engagement with antiques and design was a family affair. While both parents were textile designers and interior decorators, her English-born father had close ties to the American Arts and Crafts movement, having worked with the companies created by William Morris and Candace Wheeler. Her father encouraged Murphy's interest in American and European history, and the fine and decorative arts, and introduced her to the Jacobean and

William and Mary antiques that she would collect for the remainder of her life. Although her marriage to David Murphy had made her a wealthy woman, her husband's death when she was just thirty-seven forced her to re-evaluate her life, and she focused on antique collecting with her usual enthusiasm and fervor. She enjoyed the lifelong support and encouragement of her brother, Edmund Prentis, Jr., a financially successful engineer who was not only devoted to his sister, but was wise enough to realize that her tremendous energy needed the creative outlet that antique collecting and decorating provided.

In the 1920s, Murphy visited the antiques on display at the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition, the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition. She was deeply impressed by the content of the exhibitions as well as by the narrative possibilities inherent in the lifelike arrangements of the object. Her commitment to Americana was strengthened by what she saw, and by the efforts of individuals and museums to redefine the country's decorative arts as aesthetic objects that embodied the country's national character. Murphy believed that period rooms were the best means of expressing the colonist's appreciation of beauty, and to this end, her arrangements emphasized the humanity of the inhabitants. For Murphy, "livability" was key, and beginning with her first public installation at the New-York Historical Society, she worked with the museum staff to create dynamic rooms that brought the past to life.

Murphy prided herself on her knowledge of primary sources, and cited period inventories, wills, diaries, and paintings to support her decorating and

collecting choices. She spent the interwar years honing her connoisseurship skills, continually upgrading the antiques in her Manhattan apartment and at Candle Light Farm, her design “laboratory” in Connecticut. Murphy was always happiest when she mixed antiques with socializing, and to that end, sought out elite collectors and museum curators as much for the information they provided as for the higher social status they conferred. She developed personal and professional relationships with many of the country’s most recognizable experts, including du Pont, Downs, and Lockwood, and collaborated on rooms with Webb, Hogg, and Carpenter. Relationships were at the heart of Murphy’s collecting and decorating; both the personal connections she established with her colleagues, and the period room narratives she created with arrangements of furniture and accessories.

Her style of decoration became more elaborate and extravagant as the 1950s progressed, paralleling major shifts in society that included the rise of a consumer-driven society, the flood of consumer goods, and new forms of advertising that promoted self-indulgence and planned obsolescence. In a decade best known for modern furniture and “Good Design,” Murphy championed traditional styles of furniture, which remained popular with consumers. Reviewers praised her period rooms for their warmth, luxury, and livability, and her displays showed that antiques could fit nicely into contemporary domestic settings. After World War II, due in large part to the efforts of individuals such as Murphy, the Colonial Revival phenomenon enjoyed yet another resurgence. While her more prosperous colleagues were able to create

entire museums of their own, Murphy left her mark in a series of period rooms that expressed her own optimistic view of a cultured and refined early American society.

Murphy's upbringing and her father's English heritage, the Arts and Crafts movement, and the positive reevaluation of American antiques in the early twentieth century were factors that influenced her decorating style. She presented her aesthetic vision of the colonial past through her use of bright colors, patterns, and textures. Murphy promoted American-made objects as fine works of art, and championed the early colonists as discriminating homeowners who loved beautiful things.

Epilogue

Murphy and her brother remained generous donors, who put into practice their conviction that it was better to exhibit objects in museums, than keep them locked away in private hands and private homes. Their actions were well founded, and today researchers have access to the English antiques that surrounded Murphy as a child, and the American-made objects that were the focus of her collecting and decorating career. In one of her lesser-known projects, which occurred over the second half of the 1950s, Murphy had been a member of a committee that restored St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Smithfield, Virginia (fig.5.1). The "Old Brick Church" is the "only surviving original example of English Gothic ecclesiastical architecture and...the oldest church of English foundation remaining in this country."¹⁶⁶ Murphy did not participate in the "decoration" of the church, but she donated many of her father's English antiques to them, including a fifteenth-century silver chalice, and a silver baptismal basin.¹⁶⁷

Throughout her career, Murphy united her passion for collecting and decorating with her love of socializing (fig. 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4). She entertained frequently at Candle Light Farm, and hosted boisterous cocktail-fueled dinner parties, where her fellow antiquarians swapped tales, and monitored each other's acquisitions. By her own accounts, Murphy had a number of very close friends, but she formed one of her closest relationships with Ralph Carpenter, the preservationist, connoisseur, and author, known as "Mr. Newport," for his efforts

to restore the historic buildings of his adopted hometown. Almost thirty years younger than Murphy, Carpenter teamed up with her in the early 1950s to restore the Hunter House, his first historic house preservation effort in Newport.

Carpenter had been a founding member of the Preservation Society of Newport County, whose principals had banded together in 1945 to “save the old houses of Newport [as] a matter of patriotic concern to the whole country.”¹⁶⁸

The following year the Society acquired their first property, the 1750 Hunter House, and the year after, they purchased the White Horse Tavern. Downs had consulted on the Hunter House restoration, and it is possible that he suggested Murphy as a donor for the renovation of the 1673 tavern. She began to furnish an exhibition in a room that would have belonged to one of the earliest owners, Robert Nichols. Plans to make the tavern a self-sustaining restaurant or tearoom ran into a number of obstacles, leaving the project in limbo for many years. By 1957, the White Horse Tavern still had not opened to the public, but the Preservation Society of Newport County had become a viable preservation organization with over 500 members. That year, the society inaugurated an Antiquarian Award, which it presented to individuals who had distinguished themselves in the field of historic preservation. Murphy was one of the first ten recipients, along with her friends Crowninshield, Webb, du Pont, and the Flynts.¹⁶⁹

The issues facing the White Horse Tavern remained unresolved by the end of the decade, so in 1959 Murphy removed her furnishings from the site, and with her brother, presented them to Columbia University. The siblings renovated

a room in the 1897 Low Library, and installed a gallery and reading room known as the “King’s College Room.” The spaces were furnished with Murphy’s preferred late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century pieces, and were intended to suggest the period around 1754, when the school was founded as King’s College. Prentis, Jr. and Murphy paid over \$32,000 to build the installation, and gave an additional \$20,000 in gifts, which included antique American and English furniture, portraiture, and rare books related to the university’s history. Murphy added paneling from an eighteenth-century home, lowered the ceilings, and for the third time, painted a diamond-patterned black and white design upon the floor.¹⁷⁰

Murphy had gained an influential position within the world of high-end historic house decorating by the close of the decade. She received a number of commendations in addition to the Preservation Society of Newport County’s Antiquarian Award. In 1962, the National Trust for Historic Preservation recognized her series of accomplishments with the third annual “Louise du Pont Crowninshield Award.”¹⁷¹ She was one of four Americans honored by the National Society of Interior Designers (NSID) in 1965, for “having influenced public taste and inspir[ed] good design.” Her fellow honorees included Marjorie Merriweather Post, and her good friend Miss Ima Hogg.¹⁷²

Murphy’s association with the NSID led to what was certainly her most prestigious historic house commission – the renovation of rooms at the White House. According to Betty Monkman, author of *The White House, Its Historic Furnishings and First Families*, an NSID committee of experts “selected and

assembled donations from private individuals and the country's foremost dealers in Americana," which they presented to President and Mrs. Eisenhower in 1960.¹⁷³ The early eighteenth-century American antiques furnished the Diplomatic Reception Room, which was then located in the ground floor Oval Room of the White House.¹⁷⁴ Monkman noted that this gift was the "first successful attempt to furnish a room in the White House with American antiques of the highest quality, and it set a precedent for Jacqueline Kennedy's efforts in the early 1960s to bring a historic character to the house."¹⁷⁵ As a member of the "committee of experts," Murphy worked alongside colleagues such as Albert Sack and the textile designer Franco Scalamandr , to remake the Diplomatic Reception Rooms into an elegant showcase of American decorative arts.

In 1967, Carpenter invited 100 "antiquarians, bibliophiles, museum curators, sponsors, and directors of historic restorations" to a birthday party for Murphy at New York's tony St. Regis-Sheraton Hotel. Carpenter had been organizing birthday parties for Murphy for fifteen years in a row, and this one was the most lavish, as befitted her eighty-fifth birthday. The clothing designer Murphy used exclusively, Hubert de Givenchy, flew in from Paris, and joined state governors and the presidents of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the New-York Historical Society. However, it was a somber affair, given that her brother had passed away unexpectedly the evening before.¹⁷⁶ Edmund Prentis had remained his sister's most loyal and loving friend, confidante, and supporter, and it is no surprise that within two months of his death, Murphy herself passed away on May 12, 1967.¹⁷⁷

Murphy had arranged for the appraiser and auctioneer, O. Rundle Gilbert, of Garrison-on-Hudson, New York, to hold a public auction of her estate after her death. Held over three days in September, on the premises of Candle Light Farm, the 1293 lots included objects from her Connecticut vacation home, as well as her Manhattan apartment. The auction was a highly publicized event – “An Auction to Remember” -- and attended by over 3000 friends, museum colleagues, and dealers.¹⁷⁸ Murphy’s wry sense of humor and personal philosophy were displayed alongside her collection of objects in the accompanying catalog, where she had written, “My Dear Friends – All my life I have enjoyed going to auctions. Now I want you to have a chance to buy my things. My only regret is that I will not be there. But I hope you will all get a ‘good buy.’”¹⁷⁹ Many of her friends and associates honored her last wishes (fig. 5.5).

The New York Times noted that prices were high, as buyers and would-be buyers converged upon the scene to purchase some token, inexpensive or not, that would remind them of Murphy.¹⁸⁰ Notable lots included a pair of Waterford crystal candelabra, and a Whieldon pottery plate, each of which brought \$2000, a “Queen Anne Two-Part Mirror” with a Japanned frame that was sold to Colonial Williamsburg for \$3800, and a “Queen Anne Walnut Inlaid Lowboy” from Connecticut, that was purchased for \$8000 by a member of the Prentis family. At the end of the sale, Murphy’s estate had realized \$211,040.¹⁸¹

Thirteen years later, the staff and trustees of the New-York Historic Society reevaluated the museum’s core mission of preserving and displaying the

material culture of the city of New York, and concluded that Murphy's New England period rooms did not meet their collection's standards. Space was at a premium, and curators needed to accommodate new exhibitions, and organize crowded storage areas. In the fall of 1981, aware that they would lose part of their collection to Columbia University, the society's board made the decision to dismantle Murphy's three period rooms, and the adjoining galleries.¹⁸² Dr. James Heslin, Director of the New-York Historical Society's board, informed the school of their decision to remove the displays in a letter that stated, "I am accordingly writing to you to let you know that your furniture is encumbering our premises!"¹⁸³ The historical society retained ownership over the objects that Murphy and Prentis had given outright, which included her annual gifts of toys, dolls, ceramics, pewter, and brass.¹⁸⁴

Columbia University moved quickly, and by February of 1982, had sold the Prentis Collection at auction for the sum of \$436,000. The proceeds established the Prentis Fund endowment at the university, and brought to an end the unusual relationship Murphy and Prentis had created between the two New York City institutions.¹⁸⁵ In 1990, the New-York Historical Society removed and sold the Connecticut House façade, and in 1994, the museum deaccessioned several hundred items in a sale of "Americana and Decorative Arts."¹⁸⁶ This last sale included a half dozen additional pieces given by Murphy, although the museum kept the valuable 1760-1765 desk by Townsend. The society also kept pieces from Murphy's extensive collection of toys and dolls, and some fine early colonial-era items, including a very rare Britannia silver caudle cup from London,

and pewter made by the Americans Oliver and Israel Trask, and Thomas Danforth.¹⁸⁷

In Concord, the New Hampshire Historical Society kept Murphy's period rooms on display for twenty-five years. By the start of the 1980s, the museum faced many of the same issues as their New York counterpart. Items not made or used within the state did not advance the organization's mission, and limited future educational displays. Removal became preferable to continued storage in already over-crowded quarters.¹⁸⁸ After completing a rigorous deaccessioning procedure, the trustees retained almost sixty of Murphy's objects. The retained pieces included the disputed Gaines chairs, and pieces with a confirmed New Hampshire provenance. The society sold the remaining items in an October 1983 auction of "The Katharine Prentis Murphy Collection." Robert W. Skinner, a Bolton, Massachusetts, auctioneer and appraiser, sold 342 lots of furniture, pottery, pewter, brass, and glass, and raised almost \$390,000 for the historical society. The Essex Institute purchased "a chest" for \$35,000, under a provision in the New Hampshire Historical Society charter that allowed museums the right of first refusal before an auction. The total realized was close to the amount generated by the 1982 New-York Historical Society auction. The proceeds generated by the sale were set aside to fund future purchases at the New Hampshire Historical Society, with the guarantee that Murphy and Prentis would receive credit for the acquisitions.¹⁸⁹

Introduction Notes:

¹ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, DC: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999), 160. West noted that "The process of establishing a house museum brought women out of the private sphere, but it also could be a vehicle for negotiating the changing relationship between women's traditional power base, the home, to the public realm in general and the state in particular."

Chapter 1 Endnotes:

² Alice Winchester mentioned the "old-boy network" mentality that was present in the museum field when she began her career in the early 1930s at *The Magazine Antiques*, first as an office aide and then as associate editor under the founding editor, Homer Eaton Keyes. Alice Winchester, in a series of three sound recording interviews conducted by Robert F. Brown from Sept. 17, 1993 to June 29, 1995, interview session September 17, 1993. Oral history interview with Alice Winchester, September 17, 1993 – June 29, 1995, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

³ "The Reminiscences of Katharine Prentis Murphy," January 29, 1957, in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 38 (hereafter cited as "Reminiscences KPM").

⁴ "Reminiscences KPM," 23.

⁵ "The Reminiscences of Edmund Astley Prentis and Katharine Prentis Murphy," 1962, in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University, 2-3 (hereafter cited as "Reminiscences of EAP and KPM").

⁶ "Reminiscences of EAP and KPM," 9.

⁷ "Reminiscences KPM," 46.

⁸ Murphy was educated at St. Agnes, a private Episcopal girl's school in Albany, New York. Considered a school that provided an excellent education at a moderate cost, St. Agnes prepared girls from leading New York Episcopal families for further study at prestigious colleges and for careers as educators, doctors, and religious leaders. Porter E. Sargent, *American Private Schools: An Annual Survey*, vol. 5 (Boston, MA: Geo. H. Ellis Co., 1919), 220.

⁹ Patricia D'Antonio, *American Nursing: A History of Knowledge, Authority, and the Meaning of Work* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 82; Susan Reverby, *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma of American Nursing* (Cambridge, England: The Cambridge University Press, 1987), 128-129.

¹⁰ Jane Nylander, interview with the author, October 17, 2010, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Jane Nylander worked with Murphy in the late 1950s when Nylander became the Director and Curator of the New Hampshire Historical Society. She thought that the idea of status was very important to Murphy, and that with her marriage to the wealthy merchant, David Murphy, "she would show Concord how far she had risen from her career as a nurse."

¹¹ Ezra S. Stearns, ed., *Genealogical and Family History of the State of New Hampshire: a Record of the Achievements of Her People in the Making of a Commonwealth and the Founding of a Nation*, vol. 2 of 4 (New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1908), 881. David Edward Murphy opened his own dry goods store in 1886, eventually expanding it to several buildings

along Concord's Main Street. He had financial interests in banks and real estate, and served on the Concord Board of Trade, the Democratic state committee. It is not known how David Murphy met Katharine Prentis, and what the connection might be between the New York and Concord homes.

¹² "Katharine Prentis Murphy Speaking About Prentis House," transcript from the Audio Tapes Collection (Summer 1956), 8. Courtesy of the Shelburne Museum Archives, Shelburne, VT.

¹³ "Reminiscences KPM," 2.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Cummings and Wendy Kaplan, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (London: Thames & Hudson, Ltd., 1993), 143-178; Leslie Greene Bowman, *American Arts & Crafts: Virtue in Design*, 5th ed., (Boston, MA: Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with Bulfinch Press/Little, Brown and Company, 1999). Bowman makes the point that the paradox of the American Arts and Crafts movement rested in the adaptation of "artistically conceived" crafts which conformed to industrial production, rather than an elevation of crafts, from an industrial setting into the fine arts.

¹⁵ "Reminiscences KPM," 201-202.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Linda Parry, ed., *William Morris* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1996), 224.

¹⁸ "The Morris Exhibit at the Foreign Fair," a pamphlet written by Morris & Co. manager George Wardle, ca. 1883-1884, for use during the company's exhibition in Boston. Available online at <http://www.morrisociety.org/writings.html>.

¹⁹ Linda Parry, ed., *William Morris* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1996). See Parry for detailed information about the William Morris Co., and their corporate re-organizations, as they moved their offices and factories several times in the 1870s and 1880s. Parry noted that after 1873, J.F. Bumstead & Co. distributed Morris wallpapers, and later still, A.H. Davenport & Co. represented the company. Edmund Prentis, Sr.'s name did not appear in the company records included by Parry in *William Morris*.

²⁰ Elizabeth Stillingr, *The Antiquers: The Lives and Careers, the Deals, the Finds, the Collections of the Men and Women Who Were Responsible for the Changing Taste in American Antiques, 1850-1930* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 240.

²¹ "Reminiscences of EAP and KPM," 2. Murphy did not mention what she planned to do with the fabrics.

²² "Reminiscences of EAP and KPM," 110-11. Safford had expertise with historic renovations and textiles, and published *America's Quilts and Coverlets* with Robert Bishop in 1972.

²³ Phillip Sykas, "Morris Prints: Cretonnes," 1-3, a 2007 paper available as a .pdf from the Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK, at <http://www.artdes.mmu.ac.uk/profile/psykas>. Sykas noted that Morris had been unhappy with the shiny surfaces provided by the rolling process that produced the widely available chintz fabrics, and in the late 1870s, Morris experimented with a heavy cotton material known as Bolton cloth, and sent samples to be dyed by the Manchester manufacturer, Thomas Wardle. In 1879, Morris replaced the twilled Bolton cloth with English-made cotton cretonnes, which provided a heavier fabric that was washable, durable, and had a soft, flannelette finish. In Florence M. Montgomery's dictionary, *Textiles in America*, the author defines cretonnes as an inexpensive material used in the eighteenth century for curtains and shirting. By 1919, the fabric was popular because it could be printed on both sides, allowing it to be reversible, and because the soft surface

gave the finished product an irregular, broken finish that was thought to resemble antique textiles. Florence M. Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650-1870* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007, originally published 1984), 209.

²⁴ L.R. Hamersly, ed., "Wheeler, Candace Thurber: Founder of systems and first society of Decorative Arts; founder of the Associated Artists. Address 115 E. 23rd St., NYC," *Who's Who in New York City and State, containing Authentic Biographies of New Yorkers who are Leaders and Representatives in Various Departments of Worthy Human Achievement*. (New York: R. Hamersly Company, 1905).

²⁵ Ulysses Grant Dietz and Sam Watters, *Dream House: The White House as an American Home* (New York: The Acanthus Press, L.L.C., 2009), 126-130; Betty Monkman, *The White House: Its Historic Furnishings & First Families* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2000), 164-169.

²⁶ Pat Kirkham, *Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference* (New York: The Bard Graduate Center for the Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, 2000), 86-89. The catalog was published in conjunction with the exhibition "Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference," held at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture, from November 15, 2000 to February 25, 2001.

²⁷ See Amelia Peck and Carol Irish, *Candace Wheeler: The Art and Enterprise of American Design, 1875-1900* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001); Candace Wheeler, "Interior Decoration as a Profession for Women," *The Outlook*, April 6, 1895, 559-560, and April 20, 1895, 649.

²⁸ "Reminiscences KPM," 30.

²⁹ "Reminiscences KPM," 1.

³⁰ "Reminiscences KPM," 38.

³¹ "Reminiscences KPM," 22-24.

³² Briann J. Greenfield, *Out of the Attic: Inventing Antiques in Twentieth-Century New England* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 2-3.

³³ Edward Hagaman Hall, "The Hudson-Fulton Celebration 1909: The Fourth Annual Report of the Hudson-Fulton Celebration Commission to the Legislature of the State of New York," vol. 1 (Albany, NY: J. B. Lyon Company, 1910), Introduction. Retrieved from the Hudson River Maritime Museum website at <http://www.ulster.net/~hrmm/quad/1909hudsonfulton/contents.html>.

³⁴ "Reminiscences KPM," 32.

³⁵ R.T.H. Halsey and Elizabeth Tower, *The Homes of Our Ancestors* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1925). The cover of the catalog read, "The Homes of Our Ancestors as shown in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York from the Beginnings of New England through the Early Days of the Republic: Exhibiting the development of the Arts of Interior Architecture and House Decoration, the Arts of Cabinetmaking, Silversmithing, etc., especial emphasis being laid upon the Point that our early Craftsmen evolved from the Fashions of the Old World a Style of their Own; with an Account of the Social conditions surrounding the life of the original Owners of the various Rooms."

³⁶ Stillinger, *The Antiquers*, 189, 194-196.

³⁷ Stillingner, *The Antiquers*, 196; Jay E. Cantor, *Winterthur* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1997), 104; Wendy A. Cooper, "A Historic Event: The 1929 "Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition,"" *American Art Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Winter 1980), 31.

³⁸ Russell H. Kettell, "Cummings E. Davis and the Concord Antiquarian Society," *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 18, no. 2 (August 1950), 108-109.

³⁹ Clark N. Munroe, "The Home of the Concord Antiquarian Society," in *The Book of a Hundred Houses: a Collection of Pictures, Plans, and Suggestions for Householders*, the Estate of Alson Clark, ed., (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone & Company, 1902), 328-329.

⁴⁰ Jan Whitaker, *Service and Style: How the American Department Store Fashioned the Middle Class* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), 307.

⁴¹ Greenfield, *Out of the Attic*, 71-75.

⁴² Sack, Albert. *Israel Sack: A Record of Service, 1903-1953* (Boston and New York: Self-published by Albert Sack, 1953). Courtesy of The Winterthur Library: Winterthur Archives. One of Israel Sack's three sons, and a distinguished author and dealer in his own right, Albert Sack compiled *A Record of Service* in 1953 as a tribute to his father's fifty years in business. The booklet consists of testimonial letters written by museum directors and private collectors paired with black and white photographs of the pieces they acquired from the Israel Sack company. Facsimiles of letters are on the left hand page, and under images of objects on the right, Albert Sack wrote brief paragraphs about the pieces, the owners, and the turn of events that brought them together. Murphy is included in this list of elite institutions and private collectors of American furniture. In a letter dated March 17, 1950, Murphy addressed "My dear Mr. Sack" and wrote: "Little did I realize when my dear mother and I wandered into your shop on Charles Street (over forty years ago) that you would play such a large part in bringing keen interest and joy into my life." This letter puts Murphy and her mother in Sack's store before 1910 – just a few years after Israel Sack opened his first retail outlet in Boston – and in a city less than 70 miles from Concord.

⁴³ Israel Sack, *The Israel Sack Collection of American Antiques* (Boston, Marblehead, New York, New London: Israel Sack, 1928). Courtesy of The Winterthur Library: Winterthur Archives. See photographs labeled "Near the Entrance" and "The Pine Room." In the former, the caption for the photo reads, "Showing old New England paneling and an interesting grouping of furniture and decorative objects." The caption for "The Pine Room" states "Collectors may step from Chestnut Street into an atmosphere of the 17th century. They will find in this room a comprehensive collection of useful and decorative objects of the period."

⁴⁴ I. Sack, *The Israel Sack Collection of American Antiques*, see "The Pine Room" of "The King Hooper Shop."

⁴⁵ I. Sack, *The Israel Sack Collection of American Antiques*.

⁴⁶ Wallace Nutting, *Furniture Treasury*, vols. 1 and 2 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1928), image number 1513-15, volume 1.

⁴⁷ Beginning with the Civil War Sanitary Fairs, and continuing through the 1876 Centennial and 1893 Columbian Expositions in Philadelphia and Chicago, visitors could see colonial-themed period rooms filled with an assortment of miscellaneous objects. By the second decade of the twentieth century, period rooms had moved out of their temporary locations and were finding permanent homes in historic house museums. Melinda Frye traces the earliest period rooms installation back to 1896. See Melinda Young Frye, "The Beginnings of the Period Room in

American Museums: Charles P. Wilcomb's Colonial Kitchens, 1896, 1906, 1910," *The Colonial Revival in America*, Alan Axelrod, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 233.

⁴⁸ David Murphy had financial interests in a bank, a position on the Concord Board of Trade, was a Knight of Columbus, a Catholic, and a Democrat who served on the Democratic state committee. By 1919, his store had expanded from "Nos. 76 to 82 No. Main Street" in Concord. Stearns, "Murphy, David," *Genealogical and Family History of New Hampshire*.

⁴⁹ The siblings discuss this move several times in "The Reminiscences of Katharine Prentis Murphy," and in "The Reminiscences of Edmund Astley Prentis and Katharine Prentis Murphy," both in the Oral History Collection of Columbia University. When Murphy returned to New York City, around 1920, her mother and father were alive, and still living at the family home on W. 23rd Street.

⁵⁰ "Reminiscences KPM," 2.

⁵¹ The Westbrook Land Records, Vol. 21, Page 156, June 1, 1935, and Vol. 27, Page 165, June 8, 1938, for the State of Connecticut, Middlesex County, Westbrook. Town Clerk's Office, Westbrook, CT, 866 Boston Post Road, Westbrook, CT 06498. According to the 1935 deed, the property conveyed for the sum of "One dollar and other valuable considerations." It is possible that the one-dollar stated value was a dodge to avoid paying hefty Connecticut real estate taxes, or that Murphy offered furniture in trade. Murphy once compared the cost of a piece of furniture to the price of the property, suggesting that she purchased her home for about \$5500. "Reminiscences KPM," 46.

⁵² Two interior views of Downs' home are given in *How to Furnish Old American Houses*; the first black and white photograph is captioned an "Early Colonial entry featuring a Connecticut chest and 17th Century leather-covered chairs, probably of European origin." The second photograph shows the same space, but was taken from a point farther back in the room, allowing more of the fireplace wall to be seen. This was captioned "An old kitchen graciously adapted to modern living with a pine settle, Jacobean gateleg table, 17th Century hanging cupboard, and mushroom ladder-back chair. The Oriental runner is in no wise out of keeping." Henry Lionel Williams and Otalie K. Williams, *How to Furnish Old American Houses* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1949), 7, 66. Downs' "Early Eighteenth Century" rooms were featured in "Living With Antiques," *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 57, no. 1 (January 1950), 45.

⁵³ Helen Comstock, "Connecticut Salt Box," *100 Most Beautiful Rooms in America* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1958, reprinted 1965), 27-28.

⁵⁴ Cantor, *Winterthur*, 30, 31, 173.

⁵⁵ Wallace Nutting popularized the catchall term "Pilgrim," and he used it to describe the early colonial American furniture that predated the classically inspired, Oriental-influenced Queen Anne and Chippendale styles. Wallace Nutting, *Furniture of the Pilgrim Century, 1620-1720: Including Colonial Utensils and Hardware* (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, Publishers, 1921).

Chapter 2 Endnotes:

⁵⁶ Leah Dilworth, ed., *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 6-7; Marjorie Akin, "Passionate Possession: The Formation of Private Collections," *Learning From Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies*, W. David Kingery, ed. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 108.

⁵⁷ "Reminiscences KPM," 46.

⁵⁸ Winchester wrote, "From the many comments we receive, we know that our *Living with Antiques* series is the best-read feature in the Magazine. Everyone loves to see how other people live, and every collector loves to see how other collectors live with their antiques." Alice Winchester, "Living With Antiques," *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 57, no. 6 (June 1950), 431.

⁵⁹ *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 57, no. 6 (June 1950), 432.

⁶⁰ The introduction of color photography celebrated a marked change in the fortunes of *The Magazine Antiques*. The magazine had contracted significantly by the end of World War II; the January 1946 issue was barely thick enough to allow for the name and date on the spine, although by 1950 the monthly issues were ten to fifteen percent longer than in previous years. The introduction of color photography built upon years of technical improvements, and reflected the growing awareness of the medium's impact by advertisers, as well as book and magazine publishers. *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 53, no. 4 (October 1950), 281-284.

⁶¹ *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 57, no. 6, (June 1950), 432.

⁶² "One of Stops on Essex Tour of Homes," *The Middletown Press* (May 8, 1950).

⁶³ In her study of The Brooklyn Museum's period rooms, which opened to the public in 1929, Diane Pilgrim noted that the period room attempted a degree of accuracy, using appropriate woodwork, while the period setting attempted to create (merely) a certain ambience. The Brooklyn Museum had installed an early 18th-century house from Maryland in their building by 1917, and added eighteen more period rooms for the public opening in 1929. Diane Pilgrim, "Inherited From the Past: The American Period Room," *American Art Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1 (May 1978), 13.

⁶⁴ "Reminiscences KPM," 27.

⁶⁵ "Reminiscences KPM," 10.

⁶⁶ "Reminiscences KPM," 2.

⁶⁷ Sanka Knox, "For the Collector: Opulent New England Antiques in Exhibit," *The New York Times* (May 19, 1951), 26.

⁶⁸ *The Magazine Antiques* dedicated the February 1958 "Special Issue" to the Henry Ford Museum. Ford displayed his decorative arts in a series of galleries within the museum, as well as in twenty-two buildings that comprised the "Street of Shops." The indoor "Shops" were new, but patterned on historic buildings. They were stocked with antique furnishings and store fixtures in order to portray the "crafts and trades of the America of yesterday." *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 73, no. 2 (February 1958).

⁶⁹ "Part 1: How the Village Came to be," from the "Early History of Old Sturbridge Village," Old Sturbridge Village, Inc. website at <http://www.osv.org/museum/history.html>. See also the "Special Issue" of *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 68, no. 3 (September 1955), which surveyed the installations at Old Sturbridge Village.

⁷⁰ A "17th Century" room with objects from the collection of Cummings E. Davis had been on view at the Concord Antiquarian Society, Concord, Massachusetts, since the early twentieth-century. Kettell, "Cummings E. Davis and the Concord Antiquarian Society," *The Magazine Antiques*, 45.

⁷¹ "Reminiscences KPM," 3-4.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Prentis, Jr. loved his sister deeply, and they remained very close from their childhood to the end of their lives. In a letter to du Pont, Prentis, Jr. wrote "It is with a heavy heart that I have to tell you that my precious sister, Katharine Murphy, has had a very serious set-back and is again in the hospital. She is resting comfortably but I am afraid the outcome is somewhat uncertain...A man never had a more perfect sister and we have always loved each other with all our hearts." Letter from Edmund Astley Prentis to Mr. Harry du Pont, 7-10-1950, in the collection of the New-York Historical Society Archives.

⁷⁴ Letter from Robert Vail to Katharine Prentis Murphy, June 30, 1949; Letter from Katharine Prentis Murphy to the New-York Historical Society. August 1, 1950. Both letters in the collection New-York Historical Society Archives.

⁷⁵ See the New-York Historical Society website at <https://www.nyhistory.org/web/>, retrieved 5-30-2011, and information at the library at <http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/nyhs/pictorial-images.html>.

⁷⁶ Letter from Robert Vail to Katharine Prentis Murphy, June 30, 1949, in the collection of the New-York Historical Society Archives.

⁷⁷ Letter from Edmund Astley Prentis to Dr. Fenwick Beekman, December 27, 1951, in the Collection of the New-York Historical Society Archives.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Letter from Robert Vail to Katharine Prentis Murphy, December 13, 1949, in the Collection of the New-York Historical Society Archives.

⁸⁰ Letter from Robert Vail to Katharine Prentis Murphy, July 28, 1950, in the Collection of the New-York Historical Society Archives.

⁸¹ Letter from Edmund Astley Prentis to Dr. Fenwick Beekman, December 27, 1951. See also Richard J. Koke, "An 18th-Century Connecticut Valley Doorway is Added to the Society's Prentis Collection in the Collection of the New-York Historical Society," article in the New-York Historical Society Annual Report for 1958. Both documents courtesy of the New-York Historical Society Archives.

⁸² Albert Sack, "The Katharine Prentis Murphy Rooms, N.Y. Historical Society," *Israel Sack: A Record of Service, 1903-1953*. Courtesy of The Winterthur Library: Winterthur Archives.

⁸³ In 1978, the un-named author of "The Prentis Rooms of the New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord, New Hampshire," noted that the rooms were "Shaped more by the manners of modern living than by documentary research...[although] the rooms installed at the Historical Society provide a warm and appropriate setting." At the Prentis House in Shelburne, Vermont, a visitor brochure from 1997 noted, "The "period room" designers of the 1950s created an attractive, though historically flawed, picture of the colonial interior...early American life was more austere than the first period rooms indicated." "The Prentis Rooms of the New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord, New Hampshire," excerpted from the records of the New Hampshire Historical Society, *Antique Collecting: The Heritage of Lancaster County* (October 1978), 21; "Prentis House: History and Exhibits," floor plan and visitor guide, catalog number 4.22, dated 1997, from the Shelburne Museum Archives, Shelburne, VT.

⁸⁴ Rodris Roth, "The New England, or "Olde Tyme," Kitchen Exhibit at Nineteenth-Century Fairs," *The Colonial Revival in America*, Alan Axelrod, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 162.

⁸⁵ Greenfield, *Out of the Attic*, 187.

⁸⁶ Peter Thornton, *Authentic Décor: The Domestic Interior, 1620-1920* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), 8.

⁸⁷ Inventory in "Gifts of Mr. Edmund Astley Prentis to the New-York Historical Society," and "Gifts of Mrs. Katharine Prentis Murphy to the New-York Historical Society," both dated May 5, 1953, in the Collection of the New-York Historical Society Archives.

⁸⁸ Two photographs of the New-York Historical Society's 1951 "Early American Toys: Prentis Collection," can be seen online at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/n-yhs/5143035916/in/set-72157625179604133/>.

⁸⁹ *The National Society of The Colonial Dames in America in the State of Connecticut* owns three adjacent historic houses on the Main Street of Wethersfield, Connecticut, known collectively as the Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum. The organization also manages the Buttolph-Williams House, a few blocks away from Main Street. See the Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum website at <http://www.webb-deane-stevens.org/history.html>. Elizabeth George Speare used the Buttolph-Williams House as the setting for her young adult novel, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, which was first published in 1958.

⁹⁰ The information on the furniture and donors was taken from the "Furnishings Plan" currently used by docents for interpretation and education at the Buttolph-Williams House, and is used courtesy of The Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum, Wethersfield, CT.

⁹¹ Pilgrim, "Inherited From the Past," 15. See also the biography of Luke Vincent and Mary Louise Lockwood at The National Gallery of Art's website at <http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/tbio?tperson=10389&type=o>.

⁹² Dorothy and Richard Pratt, *A Guide to Early American Homes – North* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1956), 111-112.

⁹³ Comstock, *100 Most Beautiful Rooms in America*, 16-17.

Chapter 3 Endnotes:

⁹⁴ Knox, "For the Collector: Opulent New England Antiques in Exhibit," *The New York Times*, 26.

⁹⁵ Greenfield, *Out of the Attic*, 6.

⁹⁶ Hillary Murtha, "The Reuben Bliss Bedchamber at the Brooklyn Museum of Art: A Case Study in the History of Museum Period Room Installations," *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Winter 2005), 205.

⁹⁷ "Electra Havemeyer Webb's speech at the dedication of the Prentis Collection at the New Hampshire Historical Society," June 28, 1958. From the Papers of Electra Webb, Shelburne Museum Archives, Shelburne, VT.

⁹⁸ Lauren B. Hewes and Celia Y. Oliver, *To Collect in Earnest: The Life and Work of Electra Havemeyer Webb* (Shelburne, VT: Shelburne Museum, Inc., 1997, third printing 2007), 41.

⁹⁹ Hewes and Oliver, *To Collect in Earnest*, 41; Jean Burks, Senior Curator, Shelburne Museum, in an interview with the author.

¹⁰⁰ “Reminiscences KPM,” 35.

¹⁰¹ Stillinger, *The Antiquers*, 240. Stillinger devoted the chapter entitled “A Triumvirate and One Lone Texan” to an examination of the work of these four women, and their different approaches to collecting.

¹⁰² Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 565.

¹⁰³ “Reminiscences KPM,” 20-22, 23-25.

¹⁰⁴ Hewes and Oliver, *To Collect in Earnest*, 21-23. The authors quoted Webb as admitting, “I’m afraid I’m a killer; I like hunting.” Webb also installed a hunting lodge on the grounds of the Shelburne Museum.

¹⁰⁵ Wendell Garrett, “Alice Winchester,” a speech commemorating the presentation of the 1990 Henry Francis du Pont Award to Alice Winchester, in Wilmington, DE. “Alice Winchester Papers, [ca. 1925] – 1990,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

¹⁰⁶ Although Murphy and Webb believed the house dated from 1732, in a 2002 *Magazine Antiques* article, Henry Joyce and Julie Eldridge Edwards noted “When the museum purchased the Prentis House, it was believed to have been built in 1733. However, recent research reveals that it was actually built forty years later, in 1773.” It is unlikely that knowledge of the later date would have deterred Murphy and Webb from going forward with their plans for an installation that represented an earlier period. Henry Joyce and Julie Eldridge Edwards, “Three Historic Houses at the Shelburne Museum Reinterpreted,” *The Magazine Antiques* (April 2002), 110.

¹⁰⁷ “Reminiscences KPM,” 6-7.

¹⁰⁸ “Reminiscences KPM,” 10.

¹⁰⁹ Sarah B. Sherrill, “Oriental Carpets in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century America,” *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 109, no. 1 (January 1976), 143-144.

¹¹⁰ Sherrill, “Oriental Carpets in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century America,” 142, 143.

¹¹¹ Sherrill, “Oriental Carpets in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century America,” 144, 165.

¹¹² Alice Winchester, ed., *The Antiques Treasury of Furniture and Other Decorative Arts at Winterthur, Williamsburg, Sturbridge, Ford Museum, Cooperstown, Deerfield, Shelburne* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1959; reprinted 1974), 234, 242.

¹¹³ John A.H. Sweeney, “New Rooms at Winterthur,” *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 67, no. 2 (February 1955), 30, 31, 132.

¹¹⁴ Singleton analyzed records from Virginia and Maryland, including the 1647 inventory of Thomas Deacon, of York County, Virginia. Singleton, *Furniture of Our Forefathers*, 22.

¹¹⁵ Alice Winchester, “The Prentis House at the Shelburne Museum,” *Antiques Magazine*, vol. 71, no. 5 (May 1957), 440.

¹¹⁶ Jean M. Burks, Senior Curator and Director, Shelburne Museum, email message to the author, September 16, 2011.

¹¹⁷ “Katharine Prentis Murphy speaking about the Prentis House,” (Summer 1956), 1. Transcript from the Audio Tape Collection, courtesy of the Shelburne Museum Archives, Shelburne, Vermont.

¹¹⁸ *Time Magazine* published a brief obituary of Esther Singleton in “Milestones,” *Time Magazine*, July 14, 1930.

¹¹⁹ Esther Singleton, *Furniture of Our Forefathers: Distinctive Styles and Periods* (New York: McClure Phillips & Co., 1903); *Furniture* (New York: Duffield & Co., 1911).

¹²⁰ “Katharine Prentis Murphy speaking about the Prentis House,” (Summer 1956), 1. Transcript from the Audio Tape Collection, courtesy of the Shelburne Museum Archives, Shelburne, Vermont.

¹²¹ Helen Comstock, *100 Most Beautiful Rooms in America*, 32.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Williamsburg Restoration, *Williamsburg Restoration Reproductions*, 64-65.

¹²⁴ Roger W. Moss, *Paint in America: The Colors of Historic Buildings* (Washington, DC: The Archetype Press, Inc., 1994), 103.

¹²⁵ Moss, *Paint in America*, 13,15. Moss notes that colored surfaces appeared first and fairly early on the interior of houses, with the earliest color found at the ca. 1664 Eleazer Gedney House. An interior room was painted an optical green, which was followed by a yellow-tinted wash, and by 1700, a red ocher. The wealthier the family, the more likely they were to use several paint colors.

¹²⁶ Roth, “The New England, or ‘Old Tyme,’ Kitchen Exhibit at Nineteenth-Century Fairs,” 164-165; Stillinger, *The Antiquers*, 15.

¹²⁷ Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home, 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press), 114.

¹²⁸ Wallace Nutting, *Furniture of the Pilgrim Century (Of American Origin), 1620-1720* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., originally published 1924, republished 1965), 584,603.

¹²⁹ Clark, Jr., *The American Family Home*, 222-223.

¹³⁰ Marilyn Casto, “The Concept of Hand Production in Colonial Revival Interiors,” *Recreating the American Past: Essays on the Colonial Revival*, Richard Guy Wilson, Shaun Eyring, and Kenny Marotta, eds. (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 326.

¹³¹ Casto, “The Concept of Hand Production in Colonial Revival Interiors,” 326.

¹³² West, *Domesticating History*, 161.

¹³³ “Antiques in my home at Westbrook, Conn. which I wish to give to the Shelburne Museum and Suggestions for their use in furnishing the Prentis House,” dated October 6, 1954. Building File, Box 6, “Prentis Collection” Folder, in the collection of the Shelburne Museum Archives, Shelburne, VT.

¹³⁴ Jane Nylander, *Our Own Snug Fireside: Images of the New England Home, 1760-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 30.

¹³⁵ At the opening of her New-York Historical Society rooms, Murphy held a cocktail party for the workmen and offered a toast “to the men who made the furniture, because believe you me, I think they’re there.” “Reminiscences KPM,” 9.

¹³⁶ For an examination of the role of needlework in the Colonial Revival movement, see Beverly Gordon, “Spinning Wheels, Samplers, and the Modern Priscilla: The Images and Paradoxes of Colonial Revival Needlework,” *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 33, no. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn, 1998), 163-194; “Antiques in my home at Westbrook, Conn. which I wish to give to the Shelburne Museum and Suggestions for their use in furnishing the Prentis House,” dated October 6, 1954. Building File, Box 6, “Prentis Collection” Folder, in the collection of the Shelburne Museum Archives, Shelburne, VT.

¹³⁷ “Katharine Prentis Murphy speaking about the Prentis House,” (Summer 1956), 3. Transcript from the Audio Tape Collection, courtesy of the Shelburne Museum Archives, Shelburne, Vermont.

¹³⁸ Gordon, *Colonial Revival Needlework*, 180.

¹³⁹ Winchester, *The Antiques Treasury*.

¹⁴⁰ Winchester, *The Antiques Treasury*, 279.

Chapter 4 Endnotes:

¹⁴¹ Murtha, “The Reuben Bliss Bedchamber,” 212-213.

¹⁴² The story was recorded in one of the oral history interviews Murphy gave to Columbia University, and it was recorded in the transcript of a tour she gave of the Prentis Collection at the New Hampshire Historical Society with Mrs. Nyleen Morrison, a reporter for the *Concord Monitor*, Tom Leavitt, the museum director of the New Hampshire Historical Society, and Philip Guyol, the director of the New Hampshire Historical Society. “Interview with Mrs. Katherine (sic) Prentis Murphy on June 5, 1958,” Transcript of an Audio Tape from the Prentis Collection Folder, the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH.

¹⁴³ “Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Board of Trustees of the New Hampshire Historical Society,” March 23, 1957. Collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH.

¹⁴⁴ See Greenfield’s analysis of the “small-time” antiquarians, George Gardner and Jessie Barker Gardner, and their decision to maintain control over their collection by establishing a small historic house museum in Providence, Rhode Island. Greenfield, “Jessie Barker Gardner and George Gardner, Making a Collection Permanent,” *Out of the Attic*, 91-130.

¹⁴⁵ The New Hampshire Historical Society was founded in 1823 with the mission of collecting, preserving, and presenting the history of the Granite State through the objects, art, and manuscripts that relate the state’s stories. In 1911, Edward Tuck financed a new four-story granite library in downtown Concord, with a centrally located staircase and rotunda. A history of the society is available on the New Hampshire Historical Society official website, at <http://www.nhhistory.org/library.html>.

¹⁴⁶ Letter from Philip N. Guyol to the Trustees, May 28, 1957; the “Prentis-Murphy Rooms,” in the “Minutes of the Quarterly Meeting of the New Hampshire Historical Society Board of Trustees,” July 1958. Both documents in the collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH.

¹⁴⁷ “Architecture of the Prentis-Murphy Rooms,” undated document, in the collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH.

¹⁴⁸ Letter from Robert Vail to Louis C. Wills, May 12, 1952. Courtesy of The New-York Historical Society Archives, New York.

¹⁴⁹ Philip N. Guyol, “The Prentis Collection,” *Historical New Hampshire*, vol. 14 (December 1958), 14. Collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, New Hampshire.

¹⁵⁰ Letter from John F. Page, Director of the New Hampshire Historical Society, to Jacquelyn Oak, Shelburne Museum, November 15, 1972. Collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH.

¹⁵¹ “Murphy-Prentis Collection” Object Inventory, 1957. Collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH. See the New Hampshire Historical Society’s online catalog for information on the chairs at <http://nhhistory.library.net/default.htm>; also see Brock Jobe and Myrna Kaye, *New England Furniture: The Colonial Era* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 63. Two circa 1725 John Gaines chairs, seemingly identical to the two transitional Queen Anne style chairs Murphy placed in the bedroom, were appraised by Leigh Keno on PBS’s *Antiques Roadshow* on June 27, 2009. A transcript of the appraisal, video, and photographs can be found at “PBS Online by WGBH,” part of the WGBH Educational Foundation, at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/archive/200902A18.html>.

¹⁵² Kenneth Chorley, “No Compromise with Quality,” *The Prentis Collection at the New Hampshire Historical Society* (Concord, NH: New Hampshire Historical Society), 1-6. Reprinted from *Historical New Hampshire*, vol. 14 (December 1958). Collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH.

¹⁵³ Philip N. Guyol, “The Prentis Collection,” *Historical New Hampshire*, vol. 14 (December 1958), 9. Collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH.

¹⁵⁴ Murtha, “The Reuben Bliss Bedchamber,” 205.

¹⁵⁵ “Reminiscences of EAP and KPM,” 74.

¹⁵⁶ “Reminiscences of EAP and KPM,” 75.

¹⁵⁷ See Moss, “Accounts of Early Painting Practices” in Colonial and Federal America. Moss, *Paint in America*, 13-15.

¹⁵⁸ Stephen Fox noted that the architects working with Miss Hogg removed the ‘tap room’ in 1958-1959 to make way for the Murphy Room, “a Connecticut-colonial-style interior designed by Staub, Rather and Howze and the first museum room Miss Hogg built at Bayou Bend.” Stephen Fox *The Country Houses of John F. Staub* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press), 354.

¹⁵⁹ Information and a virtual tour of the period rooms can be found at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, website at <http://www.mfah.org/visit/bayou-bend-collection-and-gardens/bayou-bend-visitor-info/>.

¹⁶⁰ Virginia Bernhard, *Ima Hogg, the Governor's Daughter* (Austin, Texas: Texas Monthly Press, 1984), 106.

¹⁶¹ Michael K. Brown and Emily Ballew Neff, "Bayou Bend: Celebrating Fifty Years," *Antiques and Fine Art* (Summer/Autumn 2007), 174. Brown quoted Hogg's reaction to Murphy's gifts, "Now, let us have an understanding about them at once! If they are to go into the room I am going to buy them! Please, Katharine, dear, don't embarrass me by giving me so many things.... This room is to be in your honor and I can't think of having you supply the things which I would want to place there anyhow! It is my greatest pleasure!"

¹⁶² Jane Nylander, interview with the author, October 17, 2010, Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

¹⁶³ The numbers need to be interpreted with some caveats; it is unclear whether the Walnut Manufacturers Association took into account the use of other woods such as mahogany or maple in their study, which might have increased the numbers for traditional furniture. Additionally, modern furniture made significant use of metal, glass, and plastic, and these materials were not represented in the "Furniture Style Survey." Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the survey was limited to newly manufactured goods. The data did not take into account the persistence of antique furniture, or sales in the secondary market of antiques dealers, which would tend to under-represent traditional furnishings. Despite these caveats, the survey is a valuable tool for comparing the relative appeal of different styles over the course of the 1950s. The author would like to thank Karla Webb, Curator at the Bernice Bienenstock Furniture Library, for her research assistance, and Russell Bienenstock, Managing Editor of *Furniture World* magazine, for providing information on the history of the furniture industry, including his contribution of the "Furniture Style Survey."

¹⁶⁴ Stephen Bernasconi, "Big Time Bling, The Fifties," *Furniture World*, vol. 140, no. 2 (March/April 2010), 90-91.

¹⁶⁵ Murtha, "The Reuben Bliss Bedchamber," 212-213.

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¹⁶⁶ James Grote Van Derpool, "The Restoration of St. Luke's, Smithfield, Virginia," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 17, no. 1 (March, 1958), 12; "Reminiscences of EAP and KPM," 216.

¹⁶⁷ "Reminiscences of EAP and KPM," 119.

¹⁶⁸ Holly Collins, "The Preservation Society of Newport County, 1945-1965, The Founding Years," a research paper prepared for The Preservation Society of Newport County on September 8, 2006, and available on the society's website at <http://www.newportmansions.org/learn/research-reports/history>.

¹⁶⁹ Collins, "The Preservation Society of Newport County." Murphy discussed her role in the oral history, "The Reminiscences of Edmund Astley Prentis and Katharine Prentis Murphy," 29-30.

¹⁷⁰ "Reminiscences of EAP and KPM," 74.

¹⁷¹ National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Mrs. Katharine Prentis Murphy Received National Award," news release, October 7, 1962. In the collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH.

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- ¹⁷² Vivian Brown, "Everyone Can Learn Good Taste Says Woman Honored by Designers," *The Titusville Herald*, May 27, 1965.
- ¹⁷³ Monkman, *The White House*, 226.
- ¹⁷⁴ Bess Furman, "\$100,000 Room Given White House; First Lady Asks to Move 2 Chairs," *The New York Times*, June 30, 1960.
- ¹⁷⁵ Monkman, *The White House*, 226.
- ¹⁷⁶ "A Noted Collector Toasted Here at 85," *The New York Times*, March 14, 1967.
- ¹⁷⁷ "Mrs. David E. Murphy, 83, Dies; Collector and Donor of Antiques," *The New York Times*, May 13, 1967.
- ¹⁷⁸ Marvin D. Schwartz, "Antiques: It Promises to Be an Auction to Remember," *The New York Times*, September 2, 1967.
- ¹⁷⁹ O. Rundle Gilbert, "Public Auction Sale Estate of the late Katharine Prentis Murphy, Candle Light Farm, Pond Meadow Road, Westbrook, Connecticut, September 7, 8, 9, 1967," Garrison-on-Hudson, New York. In the collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH.
- ¹⁸⁰ Sanka Knox, "A Connoisseur's Antiques at Auction," *The New York Times*, September 8, 1967.
- ¹⁸¹ Sanka Knox, "Sale of Antiques Brings \$211,040," *The New York Times*, September 12, 1967.
- ¹⁸² Letter from Dr. James J. Heslin to Mr. Frank S. Streeter, September 19, 1967, in the collection of the New-York Historical Society Archives, New York.
- ¹⁸³ Letter from Dr. James J. Heslin to Michael I. Sovern, November 19, 1981, in the collection of the New-York Historical Society, New York.
- ¹⁸⁴ "Material Given to the Society in 1961 by Mrs. Katharine Prentis Murphy," inventory dated December 27, 1961; Letter from Carolyn Scoon to Katharine Prentis Murphy, December 26, 1963; "Gifts of Mrs. Katharine Prentis Murphy to the Society in 1966," inventory dated January 17, 1967; "Material in Katharine Prentis Murphy Collection," inventory dated June 8, 1967. All materials courtesy of The New-York Historical Society Archives, New York.
- ¹⁸⁵ Letter from Michael I. Sovern to Robert Goelet, February 3, 1982. In the collection of the New-York Historical Society Archives, New York.
- ¹⁸⁶ Sotheby's Incorporated, "Americana and Decorative Arts: The Property of the New-York Historical Society," auction catalog of Sale 6661, January 29, 1995, published by Sotheby's Incorporated, New York, in the collection of the New-York Historical Society Archives, New York.
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- ¹⁸⁸ Letter from John F. Page to Robert F. Upton, December 1, 1980. In the collection of the New Hampshire Historical Society Archives, Concord, NH.
- ¹⁸⁹ "Prentis Auction a Success," *The New Hampshire Historical Society Newsletter*, vol. 16, no. 6 (November 1983).

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