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The Beginning of the Past: Boston and the Early Historic Preservation Movement, 1863-1918

By

Marc Callis

The year 1863 was a watermark year in the history of Boston. In that year the house built in 1737 by Thomas Hancock, and later occupied by the Revolutionary patriot John Hancock, was demolished to make way for a real estate development. Although John Hancock had originally intended to bequeath the house to the state for use as a governor's mansion, he died before this intention had been expressed in his will. His heirs offered to sell the house to the state for that purpose, but the state legislature did not act. When the heirs finally sold the house to a real estate developer, that developer offered the House itself, minus the land, to the city of Boston if they would be willing to move it to a new site. The city did nothing, so in 1863, the John Hancock House came down.¹ But although nobody acted to save it, everyone missed it when it was gone. The John Hancock House became a martyr, the rallying cry that would launch the movement to preserve historic buildings in Boston and throughout New England. People vowed never to let anything like that happen again.

¹ Michael Holleran, *Boston's "Changeful Times"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1998), 91-94.

Although the destruction of the John Hancock House is the “event” that launched the preservation movement per se, it is by no means the deeper cause. For that one must look to the situation in Boston, and indeed a great part of America, found itself at the end of the nineteenth century. It was a nation coming of age, and a nation that, similar to half of the western world at the time, was struggling with the societal changes inherent in the Industrial Revolution.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the earliest settled parts of the United States were, for the first time, old. A country that had always looked at itself as young was for the first time able to look back on more than two hundred years of history. The founding of Jamestown or Plymouth was something not even their grandfathers’ grandfathers could have remembered first-hand. Not only did the nation finally have some antiquity worth mentioning, but that past was very different than the present in which most people lived. The Industrial Revolution had increased the pace of change in everything, such as technology, production, urban expansion, economics, society, transportation, to a rate unprecedented in the entire history of humanity. A man in 1650 could be teleported to 1750 and see a world much like his own. True, styles had changed, and technology evolved, but beyond a few surprises, at least in his every day existence, the man of 1650 would feel right at home in the world of his descendants one hundred years in the future.

The man of 1800, however, would not even feel at home in the world of 1850. In those fifty years, so much had changed in the way people fundamentally lived (trains, factories, the arrival of immigrants and Catholics, mass-production, the explosion of cities, etc.) that a person of 1800 may as well be on another planet than live in 1850. As time passed, the pace of change only increased, and with the new pace of change the past, always distant and ancient, assumed in addition the aspect of the truly exotic. When visiting a historic building, one was no longer merely visiting the antiquity of his own experience, but a truly different world.

Some people began to look back with pride to this exotic past. Not only was it now distant, not only was it a different world (with all the potential for both education and romanticism that such entails) but it was also the beginnings of a great country. The historic buildings were not just old shacks. They had seen the footsteps of Sam Adams, Paul Revere, John Hancock, and the other heroes that led and participated in the fight to make America an independent country. Many began to

believe that to preserve these buildings was to preserve the memory of the historic people and events, and a way to instill people with a sense of national pride. Many Americans further believed that preserving the buildings would give new immigrants a stronger sense of identity with their new-found home.

The rapid pace of change also meant a change in the built environment. The needs of a growing city, enabled by new machines of the industrial age, resulted in buildings being knocked down on a huge scale. True, knocking down a building to use the land for new construction was nothing new to the late nineteenth century -- it was a practice as old as cities themselves. Before this time the destruction was gradual -- a few buildings here and there, barely noticeable. Buildings came and went, but overall the character of the neighborhoods remained the same. With the growth of industry, entire neighborhoods were knocked down, and vistas and structures that many cherished as part of the city they lived in began to disappear at an alarming rate. Almost as if a precursor to the resistance to the "urban renewal" disasters of the mid to late twentieth century, eventually people began to say "enough."

By focusing on the events and people associated with structures, then moving on to a philosophy of maintaining some continuity in an ever-changing built environment, eventually it dawned on some Americans that the buildings themselves had intrinsic value. More than just monuments to glory days and fallen heroes, or magnificent monuments in their own rights, it eventually came to be realized that buildings -- even the simplest wooden houses -- represented the evolution of style and standards of material culture through time, and as objects of art history and archaeology they could also be extremely valuable. As George Reisner at this time was revolutionizing archaeology, turning it from a treasure hunt for the great riches of antiquity into a science, so would historic preservation evolve into a science as well.

The first building to be preserved in Boston was the Old South Meeting House on Washington Street in the downtown area. Saved from the fire of 1872 by the actions of heroic firemen who risked their lives to save this historic landmark, a few years later one of its own deacons would state that as there was "no sense in having such a sentimental veneration for bricks and mortar," the church should be torn down and its

valuable land sold to developers.² Its story has much to do with the dynamics of the growing, changing city; and how people reacted to it by taking a stand to preserve their heritage.

After the Civil War, the Back Bay became the most fashionable part of Boston. Not only was it the newest land in the city, but the proximity of downtown to immigrant slums such as the North and West End made that area increasingly unattractive for the city's upper class. Also, the current idea was that buildings themselves had little value. The institutions were important. The congregation of the Old South Meeting House was determined that their institution move out of the cramped colonial structure into a more spacious, more fashionable one in the city's most posh district, such as a Venetian style church right on Copley Square. At that time, Copley Square was the great center of institutions in Boston: Trinity Church, the Boston Public Library, the Museum of Fine Arts, and MIT all had their buildings either on or right near the square.³ The land on which the colonial church stood would be sold to the highest bidder, to be put to any use the new purchaser saw fit and the building itself was advertised as available for salvage.⁴ If as the deacon said, it was only the institution and not the building that mattered, and if the opportunity was available to sell the church's old land at a huge profit and move into a spacious, beautiful new church right in the middle of where all the action was -- what indeed was a pile of "bricks and mortar" compared with such a deal.

Not everyone, however, believed the Old South Meeting House was but a relic to be cast aside. There were those who felt that even if the congregation should move to new quarters in the Back Bay, the old building should be saved for future generations. It was, after all where Samuel Adams gave his famous yearly addresses reminding people of the Boston Massacre every year on that event's anniversary, and where the group of patriots assembled prior to departing to undertake the Boston Tea Party. While the building was being torn down (some of the copper on the roof had already been removed), a man by the name of George W. Simmons obtained a seven day stay of execution on the

² Ibid., 97-98.

³ Ibid., 173-176.

⁴ Ibid., 99.

building's destruction, and suspended banners from the church warning of the irreplaceable loss that would be suffered if that building were to be torn down.⁵ Half way through the stay of execution, Wendell Phillips gave a famous speech urging people to save this historic building.

Phillips's speech was a dramatic appeal, both emotional and intellectual, for the importance of the building not only to America, but to mankind. He said Greece, Italy, and Holland "had their republic(s)," but never before the United States had their been such a republic based on the notion "that God intended all men to be free and equal."⁶ "The history of the world has no such chapter,"⁷ said Phillips, "Except the Holy City, is there any more memorable or sacred place on the face of the Earth than the cradle of such a change?"⁸ "You spend forty thousand dollars here, and twenty thousand dollars there, to put up some statue of some old hero...shall we tear down the roof that actually trembled to the words that made us a nation?"⁹ As a warning of the potential for disaster in the Old South affair, Phillips reminded people of what had happened to the John Hancock House,¹⁰ and pointed out that the Old South Meeting House was important not only as a piece of the American heritage in and of itself, but also as an invaluable tool in educating future generations in that heritage: "You spend half a million for a schoolhouse. What school so eloquent to educate citizens as these walls?"¹¹

Phillips's speech, combined with other publicity surrounding the Old South Meeting House, aroused the public's sympathy. Women fundraisers raised \$60,000 towards the building's preservation in the first

⁵ Ibid., 100-101.

⁶ Wendell Phillips, "Address in the Old South Meeting House, June 14, 1876," in *Old South Leaflets* 202a (Boston: Old South Association), 1-2.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 2.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.

¹¹ Ibid.

month of the preservation campaign. Later, twenty women spent \$3500 to buy the building itself. In the event that the money to buy the land could not be raised, the Old South Church was to be moved to a new location. Surely the city's failure to do the same with the John Hancock House prompted this particular precaution. Ironically, the proposed location should the Old South need to be moved was in Copley Square, right next to the Congregation's new building.¹²

The preservation of the building was sealed with some large scale help. Mary Hemenway, wife of millionaire merchant Augustus Hemenway, donated \$100, 000 to the cause and a mortgage of \$225,000 was arranged with the New England Mutual Life Insurance Company.¹³ The first successful preservation effort in Boston was complete, and its example would embolden preservationists to take on other projects.

The next major building that preservationists sought to preserve was the Old State House. By the 1880s, the building had long ceased to perform the functions for which it was originally constructed. The state and city governments had both moved to other structures, and the Georgian building stood, in a somewhat altered state, as the home to retail establishments. The building was seen by some as a traffic impediment to be torn down in order to widen the street. A Chicagoan, hearing that it was threatened, proposed moving it to his city if Boston was to tear it down. Luckily, the city of Boston stepped in and saved the building, and restored the exterior to its original condition (although the interior is now believed to have accidentally been restored to the 1830s appearance¹⁴) for a total cost, all included, of \$34,850.¹⁵ Another shrine to the Revolution was saved, but it was not the only state house in Boston that would need saving, and this next building would be its own preservation milestone. For the first time in Boston's history,

¹² Holleran, 102.

¹³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴ Ibid., 109.

¹⁵ George A. Clough, "Statement of the total cost of reconstructing [the Old State House]." June 27, 1882, microfiche, Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Boston. Final page of document.

preservationists fought to preserve a building that had no ties to the American Revolution.

As the nineteenth century pushed on towards the twentieth, the growing demands of state government had caused the it to outgrow the classic Bulfinch structure that had housed the state government since the end of the eighteenth century. In 1895, an annex was added at the back end of the State House.¹⁶ Although the annex was intended to be sympathetic to the original Statehouse, after its construction people began to question its continued existence. This case had an interesting twist in two ways: not only did the building lack ties to the American Revolution, but it was proposed that the building be knocked down and preserved for posterity at the same time.

The Bulfinch statehouse, it was believed, was old and built of decrepit materials (the colonnade in the front was wood, not stone, as was the dome). The new structure that would form the front of the statehouse would not be a threat to history for it would be rebuilt in the same design, only the superior materials would preserve Bulfinch's building more successfully than saving the eighteenth century structure would. As it was to be rebuilt larger than the original, it would balance better with the larger annex.¹⁷ "We desire to preserve the idea," stated William Endicott, Jr., the head of the commission appointed to decide the fate of the Bulfinch Building,¹⁸ in a statement reminiscent of what the deacon of Old South had said about that structure almost twenty years before.

Preservationists thought differently. Led this time by architects, they felt the Bulfinch State House to be an irreplaceable artifact. Once it was gone, it would be gone, and a replica would not be the same as the actual building that Bulfinch had designed. "Anybody can make a copy," said Massachusetts Institute of Technology President Francis A. Walker, "but it takes a master to make an original."¹⁹ Opponents to preservation tried to counter this argument by saying that Bulfmch had intended a bigger front, and that he would have used stone to build the columns and

¹⁶ Holleran, 141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 139-144.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

dome had it been available, but this did not sway preservationists from their opinion that it should be saved.²⁰ “The things that he [Bulfinch] did have a value that nothing we do in the more complicated days of the present can equal,” in the words of H.C. Wheelwright, showing that the idea of the past as an exotic (and often superior) entity had crept its way into the philosophy of preservation in the case of the Bulfinch state house alongside the more practical concern of preserving the actual building itself.

Some people took the anti-preservation movement even further by asking whether the Bulfinch statehouse was even historic? It was it not that old, but it was built after the Revolution and the great events that had prompted the preservation of the Old State House and the Old South Meeting House. “There is nothing particularly historic about the present State House, most of the great events in our local history took place before it was built,” said an editorial in the *Herald*.²¹ But preservationists argued that there was more to history than just the great events of the American Revolution. Not only was there the fact that this was the real Bulfinch State House and that at the same time represented the exotic aesthetic of the pre-industrial age, but it had also witnessed its own history. It had presided over the early history of state and republic, and much of the history of Boston in the Civil War had occurred in front of the State House. Many of the Massachusetts regiments, including the famous 54th Massachusetts (immortalized in the Augustus Saint-Gaudens statue that now lies across the street from the state House), had paraded up to the State House before going off to battle. This was recent to the current generation, but what about future generations? “We cannot know how precious everything connected with that war [will be] 200 years from now,” stated Edward Robinson, secretary of the Boston Art Commission.²² Wendell Phillips had mentioned the Civil War associations of the Old South Meeting House in his plea for that building’s preservation twenty years before,²³ but that was a building that

²⁰ Ibid., 145-146.

²¹ Ibid., 146-147.

²² Ibid.

²³ Phillips, 5-6.

had Revolutionary War associations. It is in the enthusiasm over the historic associations of the Bulfinch state house that one truly sees that people were beginning to realize that even recent events were history.

The views of the preservationists prevailed, and the Bulfinch State House was saved by the state legislature. In 1914, that victory was tested. When the wings that currently exist on either side of the State House were proposed, many were worried that they would spell the end of the Bulfinch State House.²⁴ Their concerns proved unnecessary. When the bill was drafted by the House of Representatives regarding the wings, it was specifically stated that “the Bulfinch front shall not be altered.”²⁵ The preservationists in 1896 had succeeded in convincing the ages of the value of one of the priceless antiquities of both American and art history.

The combination of treating a building as an artifact in the art historical and archaeological sense, and forward-thinking preservation philosophy (preserving things for historic associations that would not be “old” until far in the future) would presage the contribution of William Sumner Appleton. Appleton was the man who would eventually single-handedly orchestrate historic preservation as it is known today.

The next struggle occurred over Park Street Church. With the opening of the subway at Park Street Station in 1897, the land that Park Street church occupied became prime retail space -- anyone emerging from the train would see that parcel of land first, as well as any store or advertisement that occupied that space. The Park Street Congregation received an offer for their land, from a syndicate whose agent described the Park Street Church site as being “the most conspicuous site in the whole city, and there can be no more advantageous position for a retail establishment.”²⁶ The Congregation decided to accept the offer. This set off the preservationists, and the battle lines were drawn.

This, however, was a different type of argument for preservation. For one thing, Park Street Church was not that old, did not have any

²⁴ Letter to William Sumner Appleton, Apr. 11, 1914; letter to Mr. Bolton, Dec. 12, 1913; letter to William Sumner Appleton, Mar. 13, 1916. Microfiche, SPNEA, Boston.

²⁵ Act of the Massachusetts State House of Representatives, No. 1043, passed Jan. 19, 1914.

²⁶ Holleran, 154.

Revolutionary ties, and was not designed by Bulfinch. Many felt that the corner, being near the State House, the Boston Common, the historic buildings of Beacon Hill, needed a monument instead of a store. Furthermore, Park Street Church was not only a monument extremely well-suited to the site, but it was a piece of the landscape familiar to many Bostonians and hence worthy of preservation for that reason.²⁷ Park Street Church was made offers to preserve the church, but it would not accept for any less than the difference between the price of their land, and the cost of relocation. They were not at first willing to fund any of the preservation themselves.²⁸ Eventually, however, outside pressure got to the congregation itself, and the parishioners forced the church to stay in its current structure. The irony of it all being that a year or so later, Park Street Church was begging for less money than it had been offered by preservationists and making far bigger promises to preserve the building than had even been demanded by the preservationists.²⁹ This was not the first time preserving scenery was seen as important. The movements to create parks and preserve wilderness areas had been under way for some years now. But Park Street Church preservation was the first time the value placed on scenery was applied not to the natural environment, but to the built environment.

The year 1905 saw the preservation of the Paul Revere House in the North End. The Paul Revere House was purchased in 1902 by a man named John Reynolds, a Revere descendant, who, in an interview with the *Boston Globe* in 1902 expressed interest in saving the building for historic preservation.³⁰ In 1905, however, a news article ran in which it was stated that the house was in danger of being razed.³¹ In all likelihood, it was an attempt to arouse public sympathy and raise money. The Paul Revere Memorial Association, or PRMA, was founded in 1905 for the express purpose of preserving the Paul Revere House. It

²⁷ Ibid., 154-155.

²⁸ Ibid., 157.

²⁹ Ibid., 158-159.

³⁰ *Boston Globe*, 1902.

³¹ *Boston Globe*, April 11, 1905.

conducted its restoration in 1907-8 under the guidance of restoration architect Joseph Chandler, and opened as a museum in 1908.³²

It was not the restoration of the Revere House that was truly significant to the restoration movement. In and of itself, the Revere House was nothing that had not been done before. It was purchased by a family member, restored to memorialize a Revolutionary hero who had lived there. The PRMA was formed to preserve one house, all of which was very much in keeping with what had been done up to that point (the Rumford family historical society founded in 1877 to preserve the Count Rumford House in Woburn, Massachusetts³³). It was one man in particular that made the Paul Revere House stand out. The secretary of the new PRMA was a man by the name of William Sumner Appleton. The Paul Revere House would be the first house preservation Appleton would be involved in, but it would by no means be the last.

William Sumner Appleton was of Brahmin background, born in 1874 on Beacon Street in Beacon Hill. Harvard-educated, he worked for a while in a real estate firm, but then had to quit for reasons of health. In 1905, two events would happen that would define his life. The first was that he came into possession of a trust fund left by his father. The trust fund could only be released gradually, dashing any possibility of becoming a big-time Gilded Age industrial investor, but freeing him from the need to earn a living. Also in that year he started his involvement in the Paul Revere Memorial Association.³⁴ The Paul Revere House whetted a hitherto latent passion for historic preservation in a man whose trust fund would allow him to pursue whatever he wanted with his life. Hence the foundation for the man who would emerge as the single most important man in New England -- and perhaps the entire United States -- in creating and defining the modern historic preservation movement.

Appleton had more than just the Paul Revere House and the other preservation efforts around the Boston area to inspire him. He took several trips to Europe, where he saw and admired the preservation work

³² William Sumner Appleton, "Letter to Boston Transcript," *Boston Transcript*, June 21, 1905.

³³ Charles Hosmer, *The Presence of the Past* (New York: Putnam, 1965), 108.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

there.³⁵ When the PRMA was formed, he was appointed secretary, and from these experiences, an idea sprang. His interest in preservation already established, his idea was to form an association that would preserve more than one historic building, that would do the task with corporate efficiency, and that would plan ahead in order to more carefully select the buildings to be preserved and maximize resources, rather than preserving buildings last minute only when the wrecking ball was parked at their front doors. The idea for SPNEA was born.

SPNEA, or the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (even Appleton himself would later regret that the organization's name was such a mouthful³⁶) would be founded in 1910 with an act of the legislature giving it tax-exempt status.³⁷ True to its purpose of thinking towards the future, SPNEA did not have any property when it was first founded.³⁸ But it would revolutionize the way preservation was carried out. For one thing, it was corporate in structure, with Appleton, although only secretary, exercising almost complete de facto control.³⁹ Since he was serving for free, he did not need to answer to a board for his salary. This gave him the freedom to pursue the objectives he felt most important to the extent that someone who did not have control over his own purse strings could not.

Appleton began to look in a light different than most people previous to him. He saw them as archaeological and art historical objects and not as monuments to people and events. When the town of Lexington, for example, proposed altering the Buckman Tavern to bring the appearance of the building back to its most famous day in April of 1775, Appleton was against it. "The 19th of April, 1775 is the tavern's historic day," Appleton said, "but a great part of the interior finish is more recent, and the house is emphatically one to be preserved about as

³⁵ Ibid., 221.

³⁶ James Lindgren, *Preserving Historic New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 52.

³⁷ Act of the Massachusetts State Senate, No. 281, passed Mar. 4, 1910.

³⁸ Alan Axelrod, ed. *The Colonial Revival in America* (Winterthur, DE: Winterthur Museum, 1965), 222.

³⁹ Holleran, 234-235.

found, in order to show the evolution of various periods and styles.”⁴⁰ More generally speaking, he worked according to the maxim: “What is left today can be changed tomorrow, whereas what is removed today can perhaps never be put back.”⁴¹ This way of looking at architecture led him to have a special interest in the pre-1700 buildings that most people wrote off as unworthy of preservation. Many of these buildings, although old, were simple wooden shacks and were not great mansions like the Hancock House or public religious and government buildings like the Old South Meeting House or the Old State House or the works of great architects like Charles Bulfinch (in fact, the earliest New England buildings seldom had any architect at all). But to Appleton, these buildings were worthy of preservation for their own sakes, and in one particular way even more important, as he considered these early buildings more “the Anglo-Saxon type,” whereas the Georgian, which he was also interested in saving, was nevertheless “an importation from Latin countries...with which our ancestral lines are not particularly concerned.”⁴² He realized that buildings that date back to the very first settlers in New England, however plain, were treasures to be cherished.

Perhaps here it should be mentioned that he made these observations at a time when America was being inundated with immigrants from many strange foreign countries, including large numbers from Latin countries like Italy and Portugal. While his argument does hold water in that the Georgian, being based ultimately on the work of the sixteenth century Venetian architect Palladio, is imported from Latin countries and hence less Anglo-Saxon than the earlier wood frame buildings, the possibility that the large amounts of seemingly alien people caused him to more highly value the Anglo-Saxon cannot be ignored off-hand. Nevertheless, his ability to appreciate the antiquity of New England’s oldest buildings regardless of whether or not they were the most impressive is to be much admired.

Appleton was very practical in his approach. He tried whenever possible to get another organization to do the preservation for him so that

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 234.

SPNEA's resources could be saved for another time.⁴³ He often would not take property that did not have an endowment attached, and would allow things such as life occupancy as a condition of sale if it would reduce the property's cost to SPNEA.⁴⁴ He started an emergency fund to be used by him personally to buy structures in cases of dire and immediate need; that could not be tapped again unless it was refilled.⁴⁵ He distrusted individual ownership, for if that person died, the next owner could knock the building down or alter it.⁴⁶

Appleton insisted that large-scale historic preservation was best undertaken as a private effort. He distrusted the government, which at that time was dominated by immigrant ward bosses who were little concerned with historic preservation. James Michael Curly, for example, threatened to tear down the Shirley-Eustis house in Roxbury for code violations, requiring an act of the legislature to prevent its demolition.⁴⁷ John F. Fitzgerald, the influential Irish mayor preceding Curly, would say "Old Boston....fingers the withered leaves of laurels they won in bygone days."⁴⁸ To give credit where credit is due, John F. Fitzgerald did push for moving the *USS Constitution* to Boston in 1897, but he did so "hoping Eire would emulate it [the American Revolution]."⁴⁹ Such incidents only frightened people like Appleton all the more, since Fitzgerald's poor knowledge of the details of American history -- the *USS Constitution* was launched after the Revolution had already ended -- showed that America's historical heritage was not on the top of his mind. And although the *USS Constitution* would prove to be one of the main points of pride for historic Boston, Fitzgerald was thinking of the contemporary conditions in Ireland, not the historic character of Boston

⁴³ Ibid., 225.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 238-239.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 237-238.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 238-239.

⁴⁸ Axelrod, 32.

⁴⁹ Lindgren, 34.

when he made the gesture. Surely men such as Curley and Fitzgerald could not be relied upon to preserve the relics of Boston's and New England's past that men like Appleton held so dear.

In the first issue of SPNEA's newsletter, *Bulletin of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities*, published in May, 1910 (the Bulletin's very existence was itself ground-breaking since at the time, it was the only publication in the country devoted to the field of historic preservation⁵⁰). Appleton told the world why traditional methods of preserving historic buildings would no longer be adequate, and as such deserves to be quoted at length:

Our New England antiquities are fast disappearing....Historical, ancestral, patriotic, and similar societies....are practically powerless to meet the situation as it faces us today....only rarely does one of them save some old building....and when this is accomplished other local landmarks are likely to be neglected. The home of Paul Revere in Boston and the Royall home in Medford were preserved because special societies were formed for that particular purpose. This is splendid as far as it goes, but since the mechanism is elaborate it is seldom used, and it is wasteful because without much more elaboration it can be used to cover the whole field. Family associations are by their nature limited.... The situation requires aggressive action by a large and strong society, which shall cover the whole field and act instantly wherever needed to lead in the preservation of historic buildings and noteworthy sites.⁵¹

Key to Appleton's long range approach was making sure that the resources of the society were efficiently used. Although the Society did acquire many houses through a variety of mechanisms, it did not always acquire houses itself. If it could get someone else to pay for it all the better. In the case of the Cary House in Chelsea and the Shirley Eustis house in Roxbury, separate societies were formed for their preservation

⁵⁰ Holleran, 236.

⁵¹ Appleton, *Bulletin*, 4-5.

at the instigation of Appleton,⁵² and that was all the better to save SPNEA's resources for a house for which such public interest could not be generated. He would also try to get individuals to buy a building for SPNEA if he thought he could interest them by one means or another. He asked a man in Los Angeles, for example, by the name of Harrison Gray Otis to buy the Harrison Gray Otis House on Cambridge Street in Boston and donate it to SPNEA. Mr. Otis replied by sending the letter back to Appleton with a note on the bottom stating: "Would it not be more appropriate for *Boston* [emphasis original] to do what you suggest rather than for you to reach across the Continent for a purchaser on the mere ground that his name is Harrison Gray Otis?"⁵³ Mr. Otis's reply, though humorous and somewhat sarcastic, nevertheless underscores the efficiency and thoroughness of William Sumner Appleton as a man who would follow up every lead, including the obscure ones, if there was any chance of obtaining resources for his cause.

Appleton did not simply save every old building that came along either. Sometimes, he would let some houses go if he felt they were not worth the society's resources. In his own words:

It must be our policy to pick out the very best houses of each type as the ones for the preservation of which we are to work. Various factors will appear to modify this rule slightly. The very best may be in no danger today, whereas the second best may be doomed unless instantly protected; or perhaps the third best may be offered on such exceptionally good terms as to make it wise to postpone others for the moment.⁵⁴

He would also sometimes say of reasons for saving a building that "these are so good that they warrant local effort to save them, but they are not of sufficient importance to interest our society."⁵⁵ It is this approach,

⁵² Holleran, 225.

⁵³ Harrison Gray Otis, "Response to William Sumner Appleton." April 14, 1916. Microfiche, SPNEA, Boston.

⁵⁴ Holleran, 227.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

rational and long term, that made Appleton a pioneer. In shifting his sentimental attachment to historic buildings in general rather than specific buildings or just the desire to save a historic building, he allowed SPNEA to optimize its resources and save the most buildings with the smallest possible investment of time and resources. This new approach brought a degree of efficacy and efficiency to the field of historic preservation that before Appleton had simply not existed.

Although Appleton was in many ways an innovator, he did not stop to use traditional appeals. The first issue of the SPNEA newsletter had that old favorite rallying cry of the preservation movement, the John Hancock House, right on the front cover.⁵⁶ He also followed in the old tradition of making appeals to descendants of the people who had lived in the houses he wanted to save, such as the appeal mentioned previously to Harrison Gray Otis of Los Angeles, California.⁵⁷ Mr. Otis replied by sending the letter back to Appleton with a note on the bottom stating: "Would it not be more appropriate for Boston to do what you suggest rather than for you to reach across the continent for a purchaser on the mere ground that his name is Harrison Gray Otis?" Not all his appeals to nostalgia were so poorly received. One man specifically wrote to Appleton to tell him that he joined SPNEA because he had memories of how bad he felt when the Hancock House was torn down when he was at Harvard: "When I looked at the picture of the old Hancock House, I began to feel once more as I did when I was a sophomore at Harvard and we learned that that beautiful memorial of the past was destroyed."⁵⁸ Putting the picture of the John Hancock House on the cover of the first issue of the *Bulletin*⁵⁹ had the powerful impact that Appleton desired. While he was a trailblazer, he at the same time was able to continue the tried and true. This ability to integrate new and old preservation philosophies led to his large degree of success.

If Appleton's career can be said to have one moment of ultimate success, that moment came in 1918. In that year, he successfully

⁵⁶ Appleton, *Bulletin*, 1.

⁵⁷ Otis, Letter to Appleton, April 14, 1916.

⁵⁸ Marshall Snow. "Letter to William Sumner Appleton." March 17, 1911. Microfiche, SPNEA, Boston.

⁵⁹ Appleton, *Bulletin*, 1.

petitioned the Massachusetts State legislature to amend the state constitution to include a proviso for historic preservation. As the first amendment dealing with preservation in any constitution in the United States,⁶⁰ it was the first time anywhere that preservation became the law of the land. As such, it laid the ground-work for later effective use of large-scale government resources for historic preservation.

It is from this early period of preservation that the preservation movement of today has its roots, but although Boston was one of the centers, if not the center in the early part of this movement, some credit must also be given to people in other parts of the country. Ann Cunningham, a woman from Virginia, preserved Mt. Vernon, the home of George Washington, in 1859: an event that brought nationwide publicity to the cause of historic preservation.⁶¹ Earlier than that, in 1850, the state of New York preserved the Hasbrouck House which became not only the first historic building ever preserved by a state government, but also the first historic house museum in the United States.⁶² Much credit must go to the city of Charleston that instituted the first historic district in the United States in 1929, followed close up by New Orleans in 1931, but a lead that Boston would not follow until 1955.⁶³ And of course one must not forget the Europeans who started the idea of historic preservation long before the Americans did, France for example appointing an inspector of historic monuments as early as 1830.⁶⁴

One must also realize that historic preservation was not an isolated movement. At the same time in Boston, there was also a movement to create parks, and preserve wilderness areas around the city. Related to buildings, it is also in this time period that other types of historic spaces, such as the Boston Common and the Granary and King's Chapel burial grounds, were saved from destruction. A whole separate paper could be written about the role of Boston in pioneering pre-historic preservation in

⁶⁰ Holleran, 244.

⁶¹ Hosmer, 51.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁶³ Holleran, 266-268.

⁶⁴ Hosmer, 23.

the Southwest. Many from New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado can thank one of William Sumner Appleton's mentors, Charles Eliot Norton, for founding the Archaeological Institute of America,⁶⁵ which not only started preservation of Indian ruins in the Southwest but continues to contribute to that effort today.

Nevertheless, the biggest impact of Boston would be in preserving buildings. Not only for the number of buildings preserved, but also in that the effort to preserve Boston's antique structures would give rise to the career of William Sumner Appleton and his Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. SPNEA would grow by 1940 to own more buildings than any other private historic preservation society in the nation, including the Williamsburg Foundation,⁶⁶ at Appleton's death in 1947.⁶⁷ Although the quantity of buildings in itself is impressive enough to give Appleton, SPNEA, and Boston an important place in the annals of the historic preservation movement, it was far beyond that. Appleton would eventually achieve an amendment to the Massachusetts state constitution in 1918 dealing with preservation -- the first such constitutional amendment in the United States⁶⁸ and as such a landmark in the quest to make large-scale historic preservation a publicly administered and funded endeavor. The forward-thinking, large-scale corporate structure Appleton initiated with SPNEA would for its own sake have great influence. The National Park Service, when it turned towards historic buildings in addition to natural phenomena and pre-historic ruins, would follow Appleton's lead, as would the Williamsburg Foundation.⁶⁹ Appleton's legacy lives on today to the extent that it would not be a stretch by any means to call him the father of American historic preservation.

In singing the praises of Appleton's contribution to his field, one must always remember that his pioneering work was rooted in preservation efforts of those Bostonians in the decades preceding his

⁶⁵ Lindgren, 20.

⁶⁶ Axelrod, 68.

⁶⁷ Holleran, 226.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁶⁹ Lindgren, 4-5.

involvement who, spurred by the destruction of the John Hancock House in 1863, vowed that such a catastrophe would never occur again. Throughout the early period of historic preservation in Boston, the Hancock House is mentioned as the warning of what could happen if action is not taken to save the past, be it the effort to save the Revere House or Old South or to create a larger society dedicated to saving a multitude of buildings. Although such a movement can never be fully attributed to a single event, to the extent that that is possible, one would definitely have to say that it was the Hancock House that provided the spark that ignited the powder that for various other reasons had been building towards the explosion of the preservation movement. While the destruction of the John Hancock House is, in and of itself, undoubtedly a tragedy one must but pause every now and then and wonder: all things considered, did it cause more harm or good?