

PATRIOTS AND PERIOD CLUES

By John F. Cole

“The Old House Whisper” examines the architectural history of the Nathaniel Tracy mansion owned by The Newburyport Public Library.

The Newburyport Public Library is performing a major service to the community in maintaining and utilizing this prominent building. Many changes have been made to the original structure through the years. It is very important to recognize and identify the features that confirm its vital place in the history of our country.



Original 1771 Georgian House



Pre-1881 Stucco House



Current View

Historic photos courtesy of the Newburyport Public Library

The photo of the original 1771 Georgian building reveals its projecting brick belt courses and heavy-hipped Georgian roof. The belt courses and brick wall were covered in stucco and the Greek columned porch added prior to 1881. The current exterior shows the Federal style brick veneer wall installed after 1881.



The detail in the south west parlor reveals bold raised 18th-century panel work on the wall and over the fireplace. Similar period dental cornice details compliment these paneled features. Just off the south west parlor, a great Georgian tuned balustrade central hall stairway once stood in the Audio Visual area.



The rear wall of the house reveals a six-over-six Georgian sash sliding window in the Reading Room. (These windows are visible in the early black and white exterior photograph, circa Civil War.) The current windows are two-over-two Victorian.



This Colonial Revival period balustrade stairway was part of the expansion which occurred after 1881. This style celebrated the one-hundredth birthday of our country.



Acanthus leaf detail embellishes the capitals of a fluted column in the Reading Room. These elements, Colonial Revival in nature, enhance the colonnade also in the room.

The clues pictured here are important to understanding the life of this iconic dwelling still standing in Newburyport. The Georgian roof still overlooks the building, as it did during the visits of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. This knowledge also helps us understand a great period house, especially during the celebration of July 4th and Yankee Homecoming.

John Cole, also known as the “Old House Whisperer”, was Property Manager for the SPNEA (now Historic New England). He worked extensively with Abbott Cummings, foremost American architectural historian. John has overseen countless preservation projects in New England as well as Arkansas. He founded Shaker Workshops, Inc. and taught Historical Preservation at the Harvard School of Design and at the University of Arkansas, Graduate School of Architecture. Today, he shares his expertise through lectures and consulting and by writing books and dating documents for private homeowners.

For more information on John Cole, visit oldhousewhisperer.com or email info@oldhousewhisperer.com

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