Good Fellows: The Walpole Society

by Jeanne Schinto

"Outsiders are often unclear as to what the Walpole Society actually does. [Member Robert Lincoln McNeil Jr.'s daughter] Vickie recalls as a child telling her grade school class that her father was going to spend time with the Tudpole Society!" The Walpole Society Note Book, 2009/2010, p. 17.

On an October weekend in 1955, the Walpole Society invited Emmy Lou Packard of Wilmington, Delaware, a first-timer, to visit Winterthur. For more than two decades, this exceptionally exclusive men’s club devoted to early American material culture numbered Henry Ford, Jr., among its members. In 1951, however, the main house had been opened to all as a museum; the men now had to share it with others. Certain clergymen, though, set themselves apart from the hoi polloi in true Walpolean fashion. A 26-year-old student in the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture (Winterthur, Delaware) opened.

In Flynt's 1952 book Frontier of Freedom he wrote that Old Deerfield "demonstrates the calm strength of the American today." He felt that this strength was particularly needed in a world that seemed "the murky midst of the 19th century." The problem this time wasn't immigrants; it was our "ideological conflict with Communism." And our weaponry of choice? In Flynt's words, "Visual truth speaks louder than words in contradicting propaganda. A graphic picture...of American life..."—a specific village street...can be the most eloquent response to the strident falsehoods poisoning the air today.

There's no evidence in the society's records, archived in Winterthur’s library, that the Walpoleans took up as a common cause the fighting of the Red threat with antiques and historic preservation. As a group they were more concerned with immediate issues. One was their ongoing issue of an aging membership. During the mid-century period, as before, the members, many of them white-haired and using walking canes, knew they needed to attract younger men. And they did! Ralph Emerson Carpenter Jr. joined in 1950 at age 41. Vincent Dyckman Andrus was 37 when elected in 1952. William Bradford Osgood got in at age 29 in 1957. Still, youthfulness had to have something else going for it. Carpenter was a collector, historic preservationist, and later a Christie's consultant. Andrus was a curator in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Osgood was a collector of toy soldiers. Toy soldiers? Hmm.

"Bill Osgood is really too young, and should not have been elected when he was," Chauncey Cushion Nash wrote to another club member when J. William Middendorf was under consideration in 1958. Maybe so, but Nash was Osgood’s proposer—and Osgood, whose soldiers are now in the Wenham Museum in Wenham, Massachusetts, remained a member in good standing until his death in 2013 at age 85. In fact, for 25 years he had served as the society’s treasurer. As for Middendorf, who turned 91 on September 22, 2015, he is the oldest Walpolean and has enriched the society in many ways. He was the son of one Walpolean, Theodore Salisbury Woolsey of Yale, and the cousin of two others, Judge John Munro Woolsey and William Brownell Goodwin.

Judge Woolsey’s particular interest was clocks. Goodwin, an amateur archaeologist, was a proprietor of a group of dealers in 17th- and 18th-century Americana, a mid-century hobby he credited with saving him from a mid-life crisis. He had been elected when he was," Chauncey Cushion Nash wrote to another club member when J. William Middendorf was under consideration in 1958. Maybe so, but Nash was Osgood’s proposer—and Osgood, whose soldiers are now in the Wenham Museum in Wenham, Massachusetts, remained a member in good standing until his death in 2013 at age 85. In fact, for 25 years he had served as the society’s treasurer. As for Middendorf, who turned 91 on September 22, 2015, he is the oldest Walpolean and has enriched the society in many ways. Not the least of them was his ability, as secretary of the Navy under Gerald R. Ford, to secure an invitation to society members on July 4, 1976, to go aboard the giant carrier U.S.S. Forrestal, where they observed the bicentennial International Naval Review and Operation Sail 1976 Parade of Sail in New York harbor. And the clubmen do love their special privileges.

A second, immediate issue for them in the mid-century period was their continuing need for well-connected members. What they wanted from them was invitations to private collections; the chance to go behind the scenes at public institutions; and entries to private clubs where they customarily had their black-tie dinners or other functions on their weekends away. The Century Association in New York City and the Cambiate Club of Newport were typical of the exclusive, members-only venues to which they’d had access through Walpolean brethren in the past. They wanted to keep it that way.

Third, the organization was old enough now that they had to consider admitting legacies, but if those legacies came with a good network, all the better. Lammot du Pont Copeland, a 17th-century descendant of Pierre du Pont and Henry du Pont’s cousin, was elected in 1954. "Mots," as he was known, developed world-class collections of art and antiques with his wife, Pamela Cunningham Copeland, and they had an appropriately grand house in which to display it all on a 250-acre estate in Wilmington called Mount Cuba. On many counts Copeland’s was a worthy election, and after his death, his widow carried on the couple’s collecting traditions. Certainly, however, Heathcote Munro Woolsey got into the club in the same year as Copeland partly because of his relatives. He was the son of one Walpolean, Theodore Salisbury Woolsey of Yale, and the cousin of two others, Judge John Munro Woolsey and William Brownell Goodwin.

What they ate was not recorded, but we know what they drank. The society was founded in 1910, when the aesthetics of early American furniture, silver, and ceramics were being questioned and even pooh-pooed. Its charter members championed these native-made products. They wrote the first reference books about them. They helped create the shows and first institutional exhibitions devoted to them. As time went on, however, 17th- and 18th-century Americans, as well as New England and the Atlantic states, no longer needed the Walpoleans as their cheerleading squad. Large city museums were on board, and scores of ordinary citizens were driving around engaged in what had become the mainstream hobby of "antiquing." They were also visiting newly opened historic houses and museums such as Winterthur. And so, while former generations of the clubmen had been renegades in cultivating their taste for Connecticut chests and Boston silver, later ones found themselves in the mainstream, if anything, it was the world of American modernism and post-modernism that needed to be studied and better understood.

Still, according to an old notebook. They had helped define Americania, and, by extension, America itself, but even as those definitions were being rewritten by both cultural and political forces, their aesthetic stance remained exactly as before. The membership also kept doing what it had always done. Being without a clubhouse and parapetia by choice, they met two or three times a year for weekend trips together to see the collections of like-minded private individuals and public institutions.

The same ordinary Americans who liked going antiquing and visiting historic houses and museums were now also traveling to an increasingly popular kind of educational entertainment called “living history.” Walpolean Henry Needham Flynt founded one of these demonstrations in Deerfield, Massachusetts. He, who lived in Greenwich, Connecticut, Flynt had a sizable and the social network that came with it—as was to be expected of the former Helen Geer, with more of the same. He had been elected to the society in 1951, the year before Old Deerfield (now well known as Historic Deerfield and). Earlier members of the club had viewed collecting American antiques partly as a way to honor their ancestors and preserve what they saw as American values. This was the 19th-century cultural challenge presented by the immigrants from southern and eastern Europe coming to American shores. Often the men equated these values with the very furniture and decorative arts in their collections. As Henry Wood Ewing wrote to George Dudley Seymour on June 11, 1913, about a circa 1660 Carver seat, "It happened to have been restored. You will have to comport yourself in a singularly upright manner in order to live up to that chair." Similarly, Flynt felt that Old Deerfield could inspire exemplary behavior.
the Walpoleans certainly enjoyed the dinner parties he and his wife, Anne Seddon Kinsolving Brown, gave them in Providence that were inevitably “carried out with...swank and style.”11

Perhaps this is the right place to talk about the men’s gastronomic habits. They ate well. They also drank well. When they drank alcohol, it has always been part of club life in general. So naturally it has been part of Walpole Society life. Regarding member Dwight Blaney and his love of rum, the society’s memorial to him in the Note Book said: “Let us thank Heaven that Walpoleans have all and always been believers in its efficacy.”12 In fact, the club’s self-published collective journal went even further to link spirits with the main ingredients of the society’s antiques and friendship: “But who could be a good collector or a good fellow without knowledge of conventions and society’s expectations?”13

The Walpole party was described in the word “meeting” in the Note Book when they returned for another feast some years later. It is made by mixing together three quarts Maryland rye whiskey, one quart Jamaican rum, a half-pint of peach nectar made a big red slab of steak taste all the better through the meat, and a bottle each of brandy, Bénédictine, rye whiskey, strong black tea, sugar, the juice of oranges and lemons, and maraschino cherries. That concoction is meant to sit awhile. Then it is ready to be served; a champagne is to be added to this high-octane brew. Sometimes the liquor and comestibles threatened to overdose the guests. Walpole Society functions. At an October 1957 lunch at Bertram K. and Nina Fletcher Little’s house in Brookline, Massachusetts, member Charles F. Montgomery, the Winterthur Museum’s director, commented in his report for the Note Book that “Walpoleans were torn between food, drink, and furniture.” And what the men ate and drank at a dinner at Boston’s Ritz Carlton on the same weekend (e.g., boned royal squab Bordighera, cassoulet of oyster crabs, coeur flottant à la Ritz, cocktails, Chateau Lafite Rothschild 1947 (double magnum), Bolinger extra-dry champagne, and cognac, followed by coffee (and cigars) was recorded in the Note Book as almost as lovingly as the things they had seen at the Littles’ house and elsewhere that afternoon. On a spring weekend in Greenwich, Connecticut, in 1958, their dinner menu at the Round Hill Club was no less bouncy and rich. The printed souvenirs lists “Partie de Fois Gras sur Pain Grillé, Aperitifs, Velouté Argentueil, Sole à la Bonne Femme, Pouilly-Fusé 1952, Baron d’Aignau de Lait à la Ronde Colline, Chateau Margaux 1953, Salade à la Française, Bombe Ambassadrice, Panier de Friandises, Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin 1947, Café des Princes, Liqueurs.” The menu indicates, if nothing else, that while American antiques has long been embraced by the society, its members still did not think to appreciate American food. Of course, thanks to Julia Child, “Mastering the Art of French Cooking,” and PBS, it would be a long while before any Americans did.

More significant, when the men considered candidates during the mid-century period, there was deliberation about whether a man’s consumption of spirits was in synch with those of current members. To judge by the society’s archived correspondence, Bert Little was especially inclined to discuss this variable. When Henry Flint was nominated, Little wrote to Nash that he approved of his election “although he does not bend the elbow as consistently as some!”14 Of another prospective member, Little wrote to the same correspondent with some concern about the opposite extreme. Little was “fully aware of the present [S]jurn and his fondness for spirits,” and he had seen him around for years at two other clubs, Union and Harvard. But many times, “far too many times,” he said, “I have seen him too emboldened—swanky and stylish and only sort of silly, show-offy, and rather pathetic.”15 And of a third, Man, Little wrote, “He has taught himself a lot about American silver, furniture, and glass, and would thoroughly enjoy learning from our meetings as much as the accompaniments of fine food and drink and socializing.”16 However, he added, the man’s “tendency to overindulge in alcohol could make him an irritable and grouchy companion on some of the Saturdays or Sundays of our meetings, but perhaps our Walpole plane would offset this.”17

On trips to Connecticut in decades past, Walpoleans were inclined to visit the birthplace of Nathaniel Hale. By the fall of 1865, they were more self-reflexive, instead making stops at the former Hartford home of Henry Wood Eving, an original member, and that of William Hutchinson Putnam, elected in 1943. The Erving house (above) at 281 Prospect Avenue is next door to the residence of a current Walpolean, Jared Ingersoll Edwards. Edwards’s house was designed by architect George E. Putter between 1879 and 1882. The Putnam house (below), just a few blocks away, at 1010 Prospect Avenue, was built in 1919. “Putnam’s sons were on hand to greet us,” the Note Book wrote. “Looking into the dining room, Lionel recalled another visit of Walpoleans some forty years earlier. ‘I remember seeing them on their hands and knees, under that dining table, just like those gentlemen are doing now...only you were much larger then!’ he said.”18 Schinto photos.
were more or less restricted to early American portraiture. Institutional members stressed the same, including Macgill James, who, elected in 1945, was assistant director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. One exception was Bill Middendorf, who was precociously collecting Frederic E. Church. Now here was Wilmerding, newly minted Ph.D. who, while still at Harvard, had begun collecting seascapes by an obscure 19th-century American artist then known as Fitz Hugh Lane.26 Three years before his election to the society, Wilmerding had published his first book, the first-ever scholarly treatment of Lane. Like Middendorf, he was also collecting Hudson River school artists well ahead of the pack. As Joseph Alsop wrote in The Rare Art Traditions: The History of Collecting and Its Linked Phenomena, based on a series of lectures he gave at the National Gallery of Art in 1978, “No self-respecting art collector would have been caught dead with an [American 19th-century landscape] until only a few years ago.”27 Two years later, a groundbreaking exhibit curated by Wilmerding, American Light: The Luminist Movement: 1850-1875, would go on view at the museum. So once again a Walpolean was doing a very Walpolean thing, leading the way into a new field of collecting.

Following Wilmerding’s election, several more fine arts collectors and art historians were admitted to the club. In addition, the society’s weekend trips began to include more fine art venues. In 1973, for example, on the society’s first trip to Atlanta, they took in typical sights such as Mimosa Hall, the home of Mr. and Mrs. C. Edward Hansell in Roswell, Georgia. Built 1847, it was still occupied by the sixth generation of the Hansell family. But the men also made sure to take in the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. That was indeed the semblance of progress. After their visit to the High, the group hit up NoHo at member Alfred Elliott’s Bissell’s teahouse in Southeastern Pennsylvania, for informal refreshments and the chance to chat with him and his son Nicholas.28 Later that same weekend, the artist and his wife, Betsy Wyeth, accompanied the society at member Alfred Elliott Bissell’s teahouse in Wilmington, Bissell, a du Pont relative through his wife, Julia, owned Wyeth paintings, but the greater connection he had been Wilmerding, whose interest in the artist has led to several books as well as exhibitions including The Helga Pictures. Then in the spring of 1984 the brethren did something truly bold. They took a trip abroad together—to Venice—and even brought their wives. (Maybe the fine arts and communing with an artist and an artist’s spirit had emboldened them?) Sixteen years earlier, they had taken a weekend trip to Bermuda, and wives had come along. On the Bermuda trip, 17th- and 18th-century houses were opened to them, where they studied Bermudian case pieces and learned of the connections between Bermuda silver and silver made in New York. They even brought home pieces like Verdmont, built circa 1710, and examined its Bermuda silver high wooden drawers with carved shells on its knees. They also saw portraits of early Bermudians and two ship models made from salvaged materials and native cedar by the shipwrecked crews of the actual vessels. But the Venice trip, an extended stay across the Atlantic, was different, and does raise a pertinent question—what did Italy have to do with Americans?

“The Walpoleans may have visited Palladio’s Italy for the first time as a group...but we have known his architecture, in America, for all our lives,” wrote member Frederick D. Nichols, an architecture professor at the University of Virginia who established UVA’s department of architectural history. As Nichols, the driving force behind the trip, put it, “by Palladio, will I say? It is Palladianism. And by Palladianism of whose works are the former Venetian Republic, he was "the most influential single architect who ever lived.”29 Palladianism was brought to America by Peter Harrison, who designed the Redwood Library in Newport in 1749—a building that Walpolean Ralph Carpenter had been instrumental in restoring. Other places with Palladian architecture that the society had seen over the years included Newport’s Brick Market, built in 1762; Drayton Hall, on the Ashley River in South Carolina, circa 1742; Mount Airy of Richmond County, Virginia 1758; Gunston Hall in Fairfax County, Virginia, 1755-59; Mount Vernon, 1740-73; and the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City, which Wilmerding had directed, respectively. Then of course there was Monticello and UVA. Nichols, an authority on Thomas Jefferson, said the third U.S. president considered Monticello and UV A’s architecture, in America, for all our lives,” wrote member Frederick D. Nichols, an architecture professor at the University of Virginia who established UVA’s department of architectural history. As Nichols, the driving force behind the trip, put it, “by Palladio, will I say? It is Palladianism. 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California), designed by sculptor Robert Graham for Roy and Carol Doumani, was one of their stops. It had been completed only five years earlier. They also visited an early 1920s house by architect Rudolph Schindler, an Austrian émigré who had worked for Frank Lloyd Wright. And since it was L.A., they made a celebrity stop, too, paying a call on actor-comedian-writer-musician Steve Martin, who collects contemporary art.

Drinks in hand they “strolled...amidst Diebenkorn, Hockneys, and de Koonings, a sapeth ’O’Keefe...and a comfortably familiar Hopper, and pondered over Twomby’s powerful but perplexingly scribbled canvas,” the Note Book scribe wrote. “When asked whether he thought Walpoleans were ready for the twentieth century, Osgood observed that many of the abstractiones were antiques in their own right, over seventy years old, and that the twenty-first century was just around the corner. Of course we were ready. But a gemilek William Bradford view of an iceberg floating behind the arc of a rainbow, a reminder that Steve Martin, abetted by [member Julian] Gan, began collecting the Hudson River School, attracted the most attention.” And alas, it’s also true that Herbert Augustin Clarborne Jr. was steadfast in his prejudices. “It’s not the abstract art that bothers me,” he was heard to remark, “it’s the abstract houses. I like things regular.”

And so, perhaps to appease the entire membership, their itineraries were regularly composed of both the old and the new. In Baltimore, for example, they took in the Basilica, designed by Benjamin H.B. Latrobe and built from 1806 to 1821 and then went to the home of Mrs. Arthur U. (Edith) Hooper, whose Marcel Breuer house of 1959 overlooking Lake Roland was decorated with artworks by Alexander Calder, Isamu Noguchi, Paul Klee, Jasper Johns, and Willem de Kooning. Similarly, on the South Shore of Boston, they secured an invitation to the 1647 Duxbury home of Mrs. Charles F. Eaton Jr., widow of the founder of Eaton & Howard Inc., a Boston investment management firm that became the Eaton Vance Corporation. But they also went to Quincy’s 1882 Thomas Crane Library, designed by H.H. Richardson.

“It is interesting to note that when the Society visited Quincy thirty years ago, it did not visit this structure,” wrote the Note Book scribe, “but instead confined its attention to the grounds on which Richardson had once come back into fashion.” Then Walpoleans of the late 1980s found plenty to admire at the library: there was not only the architecture but also the stained-glass window by John La Farge and the grounds by Frederick Law Olmsted. And from there they went to see more Richardson examples in North Easton including the town hall and public library.

In October 1990, the men made their first trip to Chicago, where they saw Glessner House (1888) and Newberry Library (1887) and did a walking tour of the Loop that had been designed by Daniel Burnham and the early architect fireman. They also went out to Oak Park to see the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio and his Unity Temple (1907). Even their dinner venues—the Art Deco Woman’s Athletic Club and the 1923 Racquet Club, designed in the classical revival style by Andrew Rebori—conquered to the theme. All went well until Sunday morning. While on tour of Art Institute of Chicago 20 of them got stuck in an elevator for 30 minutes.

Did the men take it as an omen? Did they think they were being warned about the consequences of cultivating antiquity for modernity? Or did they simply see it as just one of the downsides of going to a museum when it isn’t open to the public? Whatever they thought wasn’t addressed in the Note Book, and the club pressed on into the future.

The final part of this series is forthcoming in M.A.D.

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This year, the Walpole Society, whose annual meeting and trip to Chicago is a celebration of the opening of a new member that is also an antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, as the recipient of a 2015 Robert and Charlotte Baron Fellowship in Creative Writing, which helped support this series of articles. For more information, see her website (www.jeanneSchinto.com).

A Place Called “Walpoleshire”


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he men like to write tongue-in-cheek in their journal entries for the Note Book, and despite their tradition of rotating scribes, the droll and often self-deprecating humor on display is strikingly uniform through the years. Frequently, those scribes use the term “Walpoleshire” in referring to the places the club goes on their weekends together. It has been defined, in Note Book, 1977 as “a county of uncertain boundaries but containing the best of American antiquities.”

Herein, then, are the places that were briefly Walpoleshire for the mid-century period 1950-1990, based in part on lists of the club’s semiannual trips compiled by Lawrence C. Wroth and William S. Reese, respectively.

1951: Deerfield, Massachusetts; and Westchester County, New York.
1952: Baltimore and Annapolis, Maryland; and Newport, Rhode Island.
1953: Boston and Concord, Massachusetts; and Princeton and Morristown, New Jersey.
1954: Charlottesville, Virginia; and Boston.
1955: Hartford and Farmington, Connecticut; and Winterthur.
1956: Charleston, South Carolina; and Philadelphia.
1957: Lexington, Kentucky; and Boston.
1958: Greenwich, Connecticut; and Shelburne, Vermont.
1959: Lancaster, Pennsylvania; and Williamsburg, Virginia.
1960: Providence, Rhode Island; and Cooperstown, New York.
1964: Old Salem, North Carolina; and New York City.
1965: Charlottesville, Virginia; and Boston’s North Shore.
1966: New Castle County, Delaware; and Winterthur; and Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia.
1967: Richmond, Virginia; and Farmington, Wethersfield, and New Haven, Connecticut.
1968: Bermuda; and Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and the southern coast of Maine.
1969: Annapolis, Maryland; and Worcester and Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts.
1970: Middleburg, Virginia; and Nantucket, Massachusetts.
1971: Old Salem, North Carolina; and Newport, Rhode Island.
1972: Westmoreland County, Virginia; and Westchester County, New York.
1973: Atlanta, Georgia; and New Haven, and Litchfield, Connecticut.
1974: Wilmington, Delaware; and Hanover, New Hampshire.
1975: New Orleans and Boston.
1976: Louisville and Shakerstown, Kentucky; and Savannah, Georgia.
1978: Baltimore and Houston.
1979: Richmond, Virginia; and the Berkshires, Massachusetts.
1981: Natchez, Mississippi; and the Hudson Valley, New York.
1982: Annapolis, Maryland; and Essex County, Massachusetts.
1983: The Brandywine Valley, Pennsylvania; and Deerfield and Amherst, Massachusetts.
1984: Venice, Italy; and Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.
1985: Cleveland, Ohio; and Hartford, Connecticut.
1986: Charlottesville, Virginia; and Providence and Newport, Rhode Island.
1987: North Shore of Long Island; and Los Angeles.
1989: Williamsburg, Virginia; and Boston and the South Shore.
1990: Baltimore and Chicago.
Endnotes to Part IV

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Chauncey Cushing Nash to Irving S. Olds, August 29, 1958. Records, Walpole Society (U.S.), Call No.: Col. 386, Winterthur Library. Unless otherwise noted, all other quotes from correspondence are from this source.
10. Two other Walpoleians were Monuments Men: Theodore Sizer and John Marshall Phillips.
13. Ibid.
15. Elected in 1946, Loring died in 1951. Loring’s son, his namesake, joined the club in 1957 and remained a member until his death in 1986.
20. Thomas W. Streeter papers, AAS.
21. See M.A.D., January 2016, pp. 6-10-B.
23. William S. Reese, elected in 2002, is one. Two others are Robert McCracken Peck (2003), curator of art and artifacts and senior fellow of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University; and the club’s most recently elected member, William R. Berkley (2014). In the past, Thomas A. Gray (2008) has been a collector of printed Americana of the South, but he has since given his collection to the library that he and his mother, Anne P. Gray, donated to the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Among the “inactive” members, Charles Eliot Pierce Jr. (1990) is the former director of the Pierpont Morgan Library.
28. One year after his election, in 1980, Powell became director of the Los Angeles County Museum, a post he held until 1992, when he returned to the National Gallery as its director, his current position.
31. Ibid., p. 20.
33. Ibid., p. 19.
36. The Walpole Society Note Book, 1977, p. 44.

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