



The Old Landing

Volume 8, Issue 1

May 2009

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President's Letter...

After a long winter, we welcome spring and were again pleased, once again, to help sponsor Marion's Arbor Day celebration on May 9, which is further detailed in this issue.

You'll see that our newsletter also contains a short article by architect Mark Wright about the smallest house that the famous architect Henry Hobson Richardson designed. The house is located in Marion at 192 Front Street and was built for Rev. Percy Browne and his family in 1882 as the result of a bet. Reverend Browne bet Richardson, who was famous for his large Romanesque style buildings (the Trinity Church in Boston, for example), that he could not build a house for \$2,500. Richardson won the bet. Tabor Academy recently purchased the home from the TenBrook estate, which is adjacent to its campus. The Society was very excited recently to rediscover in its collection a small photograph of the Browne house. It is the only existing photograph of the house as it was originally built, so is a valuable artifact of that distinctive and important structure.

As you will note, work is well underway on our summer fundraiser, the 17th annual Marion Antiques Show, to be held August 14-16 at Tabor Academy's

Fish Center. We look forward to this terrific event, and to the worthy civic endeavors its proceeds will support.

I hope you will join us at the SHS Annual Meeting on June 16, when I will present an illustrated talk about *Marion in the Golden Age*, the topic and title of my new book. At the Meeting, we will also present to the Stone Family the Sippican Historical Society Award, which honors those who have given dedicated service and commitment to the preservation and enrichment of the Town of Marion. For over one hundred years, generations of the Stone family have faithfully preserved the largest privately-owned parcel of land in our town, for which we are all grateful. If you haven't yet visited our photographic exhibit on the magnificent Great Hill property, it's not too late; the exhibit will continue at the SHS Museum through May.

Please enjoy this issue of *The Old Landing*. I look forward to seeing you on June 16.

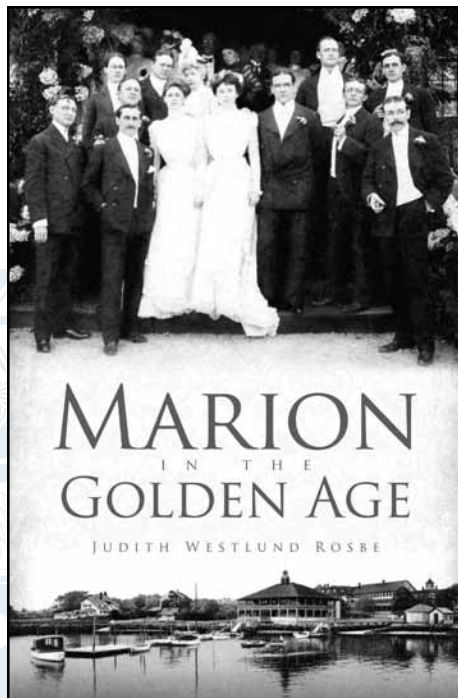
Kind regards,

Judy Rosbe

The Gilded Age of Marion to be Topic of Annual Meeting

All members of SHS and the general public are invited to attend the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Sippican Historical Society, to be held Tuesday, June 16 at Marion's Music Hall. The meeting will begin at 7:00 pm, and will feature a brief wrap-up of the Society's business year, followed by a lecture and image presentation by Judy Rosbe. The topic for Ms. Rosbe's presentation will be *Marion in the Golden Age*, which is also the title of her latest book. The presentation will take the audience on a virtual trip back to the late 19th century when, as the book explains, "Marion became a treasured sanctuary from city life. Teeming with prosperity and the blossoming arts, this hamlet offered a setting so breathtaking that it inspired some of the world's foremost creative minds . . . prominent artists, architects, writers and celebrities flocked to Marion." Mark Twain, Henry James, President Grover Cleveland and Ethel Barrymore were but a few of the famous faces that graced our shores. Join us as we explore this magical time in Marion's past.

Marion in the Golden Age will be available for purchase and autograph at the Annual Meeting.



SIPP

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Trivial Pursuits

It probably comes as little surprise that Massachusetts has an official State Berry (Cranberry) or State Vessel (the Schooner Ernestina), even an official State Historical Rock (Plymouth Rock). You might not imagine, though, that there are several more types of State Rock, as well, including State Explorer Rock (Dighton Rock) and State Building Rock (Granite). The list of emblematic items of the Commonwealth goes on. For example, Massachusetts has a:

- State Tartan: Bay State Tartan
- State Children's Author & Illustrator: Theodor Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss
- Children's Book: Make Way for Ducklings
- Donut: Boston Crème
- Reptile: Garter snake
- Colors: Blue, green & cranberry
- Artist: Norman Rockwell
- Sport: Basketball
- Glacial Rock: Rolling Rock (in Fall River)
- Dessert: Boston Cream Pie
- Polka Song: Say Hello to Someone from Massachusetts
- Heroine: Deborah Samson (who fought in the War of Independence under the name Robert Shurtleff)
- Muffin: Corn
- Shell: New England Neptune
- Folk Dance: Square Dancing
- Soil: Paxton series

Reverend Percy Browne's House: 192 Front Street

By Mark Wright, AIA

Henry Hobson Richardson (1838-86) is acclaimed the greatest American architect prior to Frank Lloyd Wright. Beginning with his design for Boston's Trinity Church in 1873, Richardson broadly influenced the national taste. Across the United States there is scarcely a town founded before the turn of the last century that doesn't boast at least one "Richardsonian" building. Marion is distinguished in that 192 Front Street is the genuine article, and one of only a handful of the architect's residential designs to have survived the 20th century. Reverend Browne's cottage was among Richardson's most personal, intimate creations: a small, relatively inexpensive house for a middle-class professional man who knew the value of the great architect's work but was bold enough to ask for it. Within a few years of Browne's death in 1901, alterations obscured the exceptional qualities that marked the house as one of Richardson's most thoughtful designs, and caused it to be misunderstood and then all but lost to memory. Recently, however, a photo of the house as it was originally built has been rediscovered in the SHS collection. The image supports a new understanding of the house.

Richardson's early inspiration for monumental buildings such as Trinity Church had been in the Romanesque architecture of medieval France, but beginning in 1880 his work was animated by a new, muscular primitivism and relied much less on European precedent. The Browne house exemplifies this primitivism in its revival of the gambrel roof that had once been common throughout colonial New England (though not in Marion); in an especially artful use of a utilitarian material (the humble cedar shingle); and in the exotic

front porch that resembled the mouth of a hermit's cave (a romantic touch that must have pleased the Reverend). Richardson complemented the house with a privy shaped rather like the renowned pyramidal monument he had just completed beside the transcontinental railroad in Wyoming. He oriented the house to views east over the harbor and inland across the meadow to a great, cleft boulder that a glacier had dumped a stone's throw away. What a splendid place it must have been for Browne's children Katherine and Percy Jr. to romp in with their enormous Irish wolfhound, Bruce! The Browne house was at once a highly sophisticated cultural artifact and a sensible building suggestive of abstemious Yankee rectitude. Much of its fascination lay in the tension between.

Completed at a cost of about \$2,500 in the spring of 1882, at the dawn of Marion's heyday as a resort, the radical-looking little house was a landmark on the route from the train depot into the village. Beginning in the summer of '82, a group of powerful, articulate,

(Continued on Page 6)



192 Front Street, photo taken after the house was spruced up for sale ca. 1902.

Many thanks to our wonderful supporters in 2009!

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We at SHS are grateful for the gift of time and talent offered by our wonderful volunteers. From our Board and MAS committee members to our database specialist and docent, we benefit greatly by their energies and expertise. A special thanks to all who so generously give of themselves.

192 Front Street *(Continued from page 3)*

and colorful summer visitors, attracted by the charming village and the joys of boating on Buzzards Bay, gathered around Browne's next-door neighbor, Richard Watson Gilder. Many were certainly given a tour, and on at least one occasion Browne allowed Gilder's friends the extended use of his home. Anecdotes in the *New York Times* and in Gilder's memoir, *Grover Cleveland: A Record of Friendship*, record President and Mrs. Cleveland's stay at the house for two weeks in 1889. Other visitors certainly included architects on pilgrimage from Boston, a brief train ride away.

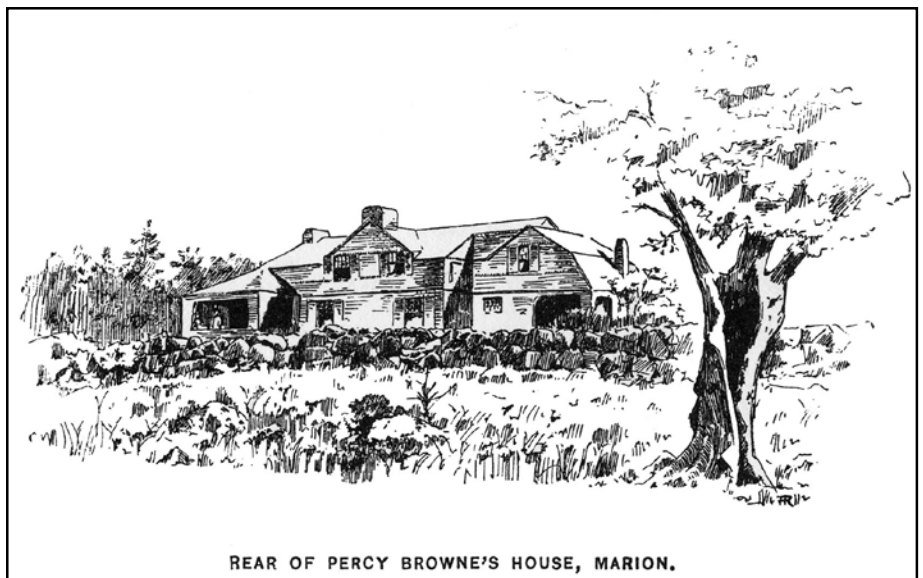
Among Gilder's first visitors was the architect Stanford White, who helped him renovate the Old Stone Studio building on Spring Street. White was a voracious and creative consumer of built form. He turned a keen eye on the newly completed house and immediately incorporated the gambrel into the work of his firm, McKim, Mead & White. Though Richardson was not the first to take an interest in the gambrelled, shingled buildings of the colonial era, he placed his commanding imprimatur on the old form and so sanctioned its use by other architects and wealthier clients. Within a few years, the gambrel profile was showing up everywhere. Significantly, the original design incorporated the gambrel as only one part of an irregular linear composition. The house was enlarged after 1901 – lovingly, and probably with the advice of Richardson's professional successor Charles Allerton Coolidge, who, beginning shortly after Richardson's death, built a number of gambrelled houses on and around his estate across the harbor on Point Road. More gambrelled gables were added as the house was enlarged. But it had taken Richardson no more than a nip and a

tuck on a prominent site in Marion to establish a new fashion. By the time he died in 1886, the malleable gambrel roof was again part of an American architect's usable heritage and the gambrelled Shingle Style was spreading rapidly across the continent.

Although it was enlarged and eventually stripped of its patterned shingles, the house remains in excellent condition. Richardson's plain interior is largely intact, and most of his original trim, doors, and windows are still in good shape. I believe that giving it back its shingle patterns and cedar roof would go a long way to restoring the house as Coolidge left it, and a shingle restoration would have the practical benefit of reinstating the sensible system of integral drip lines with which Richardson protected his windows. The architectural community hopes that the new owner, Tabor Academy, will prove to be an ideal steward of one of the principal ornaments of Marion's golden age.

Mark Wright's article "H. H. Richardson's House for Reverend Browne, Rediscovered" appears in the March 2009 issue of the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians. (A copy is available for review at the SHS.) The article presents a fully developed reconstruction, a portrait of the family around whom the house was designed, and an analysis of the place of both house and owner in the cultural and physical landscape. Mark Wright is a partner in the firm of Wright & Robinson Architects.

The Browne house as it appeared from the lane behind Gilder's house. (Richardson office drawing ca. 1881, from Van Rensselaer "Henry Hobson Richardson and His Works," 1888, Dover reprint 1969).



REAR OF PERCY BROWNE'S HOUSE, MARION.

SHS Welcomes Lizzie Borden Society

On April 24, we had the pleasure of hosting 14 members of the Lizzie Borden Society at the SHS Museum. Though not widely known, Marion has several notable ties to the infamous murder case:

- Josea Morrill Knowlton, prosecutor for the case, was a Marion resident. For many years, he and his wife, Sylvia Bassett Knowlton, rented the house at 294 Front Street. In 1900, the couple built a summer house at 283 Front Street, where he died in December of 1902; known as Knowlton House, the building now serves as a dormitory for Tabor Academy. Daggett House (275 Front Street), also a Tabor dorm, was built in 1913 as a permanent residence for the then-widowed Mrs. Knowlton.
- The week following the murders, Lizzie was scheduled to vacation in Marion with a group of approximately a dozen women friends, at the summer cottage of Dr. Benjamin Jones Handy, father of Lizzie's close friend, Miss Louise Holmes Handy. Dr. Handy, a prominent Fall River physician, often allowed the use of his property at South Street for his daughter's fishing expeditions, and Lizzie, an accomplished fisherman, had visited Marion many times for that purpose. In fact, Lizzie's alibi for the time of the murders was that she was in the barn loft of her Fall River home, looking for sinkers for her upcoming fishing jaunt in Marion.



Antiques Show Fast Approaching

Believe it or not, the 2009 Marion Antiques Show is just a few months away. Co-chaired this year by Trudy Kingery and Charlie Bascom, the event debuts with the gala Preview Party on Friday, August 14, from 5:30 to 8:30 pm. The Show then continues on Saturday from 10 am until 5 pm and Sunday from 11 am until 4 pm. This year marks the 17th anniversary of the event, which is our biggest fundraiser here at SHS. All proceeds from the Antiques Show benefit the Society, which, in past years, has used monies raised to complete preservation, beautification and education projects throughout Marion.

The proceeds from this year's Show will be utilized for the design and construction of a new bandstand for Marion's Island Wharf Park. This venue has long been home to the Marion Concert Band's summer concert series, a perennial family favorite. The structure currently in place, the Robert O. Broomstead Bandstand, was originally erected in 1934, and re-built in 1955, after being demolished by Hurricane Carol. SHS will work with Saltonstall Architects to replace the current, pavilion-style bandstand with a model that is acoustically efficient, environmentally sensitive and aesthetically appropriate, so that Marion may continue its tradition of providing a wonderful venue for its vital public offerings.



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Clean Sweep

Sippican Historical Society was proud to help sponsor Marion's annual Arbor Day celebration, held on Saturday, May 9 from 9-12. Organized by the Marion Tree Committee and Sippican Lands Trust, and co-sponsored by the Marion Garden Discussion Group, Marion Natural History Museum and the Town of Marion DPW, the focus of the day's event was a town wide cleanup. From the rallying point at Marion's Music Hall, participants were provided gloves and bags, and then directed to designated locations to clear the trash and other debris left in winter's wake. This endeavor served not only to build community spirit, but also to remind everyone involved how fortunate we are to live in such a lovely town, and how important it is to act consciously to preserve its natural assets. Funds raised for the Arbor Day event also serve the ongoing and critical purpose of maintaining the Marion park system through the Parks Committee Fund. The Sippican Historical Society has long been dedicated to historical preservation throughout Marion, and was pleased to support the town's natural environmental preservation, as well.



Judy Rosbe is shown presenting a \$500 donation check to event organizer Margie Baldwin.