

THE SEA'S TREASURE IS NOT ALWAYS GOLD
Discovering a Unique Relic of American History
By Robert Porter Lynch,
former President, Massasoit Historical Association
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Today, nearly thirty years after buying the Maxwell House, most members of the Massasoit Historical Association might find it strange, or even somewhat amusing to learn of the struggle and challenge of acquiring one of Warren's finest colonial houses.

In the early 1970's, energized by new blood from a small but growing band of preservation minded families moving into town to restore old homes, and the nascent glory of the waterfront being placed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Massasoit Historical Association began to emerge with a newfound passion. Beginning in 1973, the once moribund organization had begun to swell its ranks, spurred on by programs and events, guest speakers and new leadership. With the growing recognition that our town had historic merit, the seeds of a new vision for Warren were being born.

Our walking tour in 1974 was quite a hit, luring several hundred visitors to town -- a feat that stunned many of the local cynics, who unflinchingly considered historic artifacts something to take to the dump. In 1974 Warren was designated Rhode Island's Bicentennial community in recognition of our newly launched revitalization efforts. The Association wanted to play its part, to take the next step. But what would that next step be?

In 1975 we learned the Sivigney family might be interested in selling the Maxwell House for \$13,000, (at the time a typical modern house sold for \$40,000-\$75,000). Some of us became quite excited about joining the ranks of established historical societies by having our own house. However, even the small sum of \$13,000 represented a small fortune for an Association that could only attract a handful of members just four years earlier. We had no money, no endowment, and the average age of our members was about 65.

Acquiring the Maxwell House, then called by many as the "Pop Eye" house (referring to the faded image of the cartoon figure on the back,), was considered risky and foolhardy

by most of the town's pundits. After all, what would anyone do with such an old building? Who would ever go out of their way to see such a thing? Were we daffy? The building had no central heating, faulty plumbing, inadequate electricity, and, fortunately, none of the requisite plywood paneling on the walls that was the vogue in the 1970's.

But a few younger visionaries had urged the Maxwell House acquisition, making its restoration a "Bicentennial project." Another Walking Tour was scheduled in 1976; we'd need to clean up the house to exhibit our newly acquired treasure.

Every weekend a few stalwarts, including myself, would venture into history to repair, restore, and discover another piece of Warren's past at the Maxwell House. We'd devote the better part of a day removing clutter from the cellar or attic, casting out old kitchen fixtures, removing layers of paint, and making necessary repairs. Volunteers were essential; we couldn't afford to pay craftsmen on our miserly budget.

During the winter months, with no central heating, the fireplaces were the only possible source of warmth. But during the first year, the central chimney was in such poor condition, we refrained from using it, for fear we'd set the house ablaze. (soon we raised enough money to have Mariano Pimental of Fall River rebuild the chimney from the attic upward and repair the internal chimney structure.).

Discoveries abounded in the early days of the restoration as we uncovered the original kitchen fireplace and bake oven, the painted rugs on the parlor floors, the hand-painted wood graining on the parlor woodwork, and the gaudy colonial pastiche wallpaper. Every weekend was hard but rewarding work; every moment of discovery – finding an artifact like a two tined fork in a wall, or an original color under layers of paint, or an old cupboard door found in a heap in the cellar -- was a moment of exciting revelation.



One cold, gray Saturday in February or March, 1978 after lunch, I met Captain Bob Baker at the house for our weekend ritual. This day he was prepared for the damp, wearing a blue wool skipper's cap, and double-breasted p-coat to match. Captain Baker was quite a colorful character, looking as if he had roamed Warren's wharves in the 1850's. Rough-hewn hands, a chiseled face, flashing blue eyes, leather-like skin, mutton chop whiskers, and military straight carriage made this colorful old Yankee a relic straight out of a Herman Melville novel. Saltwater seemed to run in his veins.

In addition to restoring old houses, Captain Baker restored and built wooden boats at his boat works at the foot of Baker Street on the Warren River, just a few hundred yards away. (Captain Baker was no relation to Virginia Baker, for whom Baker Street was named). Blessed with hands that had a natural affinity for wood, he didn't have much regard for fiberglass as a boat-building material, though Warren and Bristol were a haven for such manufacturers. "If God wanted fiberglass boats, He'd make fiberglass trees!"

grouched the old salt. Sailing was obviously preferred to any waterborne vehicle with a motor, which he sarcastically referred to as “stinkpots.”

He was strong and Spartan with words, never wasting time with the irrelevant or superfluous. He gave no slack to the inept, the verbose, or the superficial. If he didn’t like the cut of your sails, you’d know it. Occasionally a pithy comment or a sardonic observation of the sorry state of the world would intersperse our times of quiet intensity.

He was my ideal work mate; he knew wood, he understood old houses, and he came from the old school – “measure twice, cut once.” There was something almost holy in our mutual love for restoration. Bringing back the beauty in a broken, rotten old boat or house was a spiritual experience -- a resurrection -- evoking the soul of the deceased craftsman of a by-gone age. We bonded with our lost kin who made the beloved artifact in a co-creative moment that transcended the ages.

That cold and gloomy Saturday afternoon, our objective was to clean out the debris and start fixing the upstairs kitchen, which was just a small room on the west side of the house facing the Warren River. The kitchen was grungy; dirty old cabinets hung on the walls; an old sink had seen better days; the door from the kitchen to the back stairs was falling off; and a big patch of beaver board¹ about 2 feet square covered a hole in the ceiling. The Captain and I quickly disposed of the sink and cupboards, converting them to a pile of trash in the side yard, as pieces flew out the window.

Once we’d disposed of the debris, we pondered the next task in the kitchen. I observed the beaverboard patch in the ceiling – one end was unsecured, just hanging down enough seemingly to beckon us to grab it and tear it off. The door needed remounting too. Just as old people sag as they age, so do old houses, leaving nary a true perpendicular corner anywhere. Attempting to use a square and plumb would be futile with any door in the house, which made this task perfect for a shipwright who had a natural affinity for unsquare corners.

By default, the beaverboard ceiling became my domain. I donned my dust mask in anticipation of an avalanche of two centuries of dirt, dust, and mouse droppings that could be expected in a ceiling just beneath an ancient attic floor. After climbing the stepladder with hammer and crowbar in hand, I began to work loose the nails in the beaver-board as delicately as possible to prevent any damage to the original horsehair plaster and hand-riven lath. As the beaverboard started breaking up, the reason for the patch became evident – a small fire had burned a hole in the ceiling, scorching the beam, but by the



¹ Beaverboard is no longer used in construction because it's an awful fire hazard. Composed of compressed sawdust and glue, it was used as a cheap cover for ceilings when one could not afford plaster. By the 1980s it had been outlawed in housing construction and replaced by plasterboard. Beaver-board and Upson Board are a wood fiber product used as an inexpensive interior wall covering and draft blocker from about 1903 when Beaver Board was invented by J.P. Lewis in Beaver Falls, NY, to the 1950s, with its near-twin product Upson Board continuing in use into at least the 1980's.

grace of God had not spread throughout the house. Then the rest of the beaver-board broke loose with a jolt and down crashed the expected accumulation of dirt, including a mouse nest complete with a historic walnut shell collected by one of the nest's inhabitants.

Once the dust cleared, I could see the bottom of the attic floor plank. Expecting a rough-cut plank on the underneath side, it seemed strange that the floor plank was smooth with a beautiful patina. My curiosity piqued, I took another step up the ladder and poked my head between the ceiling joists, spotting something resembling a ship's plans scribed on the plank.

"Hey, skipper, come take a look at this; tell me what you think," I beckoned to the seasoned Captain, deferring to his keen eye and experience. He scrambled up the ladder, squinted in the dim gray light, cocked his head and paused, analyzing the discovery. "By Jove, looks to me like the plans of a ship. I can see the scantlings right there," he barked in his old Yankee twang, with a sense of excitement as if he had found the diary of one of his ancestors.

We pondered whether we should leave the plank or remove it, then agreed if we left it, no would ever appreciate it. Besides, maybe the plank held the name of the ship or its designer or its date hidden out of sight covered by a joist.

We headed for the attic, tools in hand, to survey the situation from topside. Fortunately, the old nails had loosened their grip over the years, their heads protruding a bit above the plank, offering us a grip on the nail head. With the crowbar and wood backing-block to prevent cracking the plank, we gently pried the plank from the joists.

Once removed, we knew the ship's plans were quite old, but still had no idea of its date or origin. Captain Baker wanted to take the board back to his boat works to make a copy. But we still needed a naval architectural historian to provide more information. I called Professor William Baker (no relation to the Captain) of MIT, who had spoken at our Association about a year earlier. He became quite excited when we told him of our find, and drove down from Boston with his wife to verify our discovery. When he saw the board, his eyes became intense, and validated our find: "this is the real thing," "looks like a coastal trader," "don't know of anything quite like this." He called it a "scaleboard."²

This treasure would have remained undiscovered, perhaps forever, had it not been for a shoddy beaverboard repair. I wonder how many other treasures lie within the walls of Warren's historic waterfront homes, just inches from our hands and feet?

² 2020 update: see [Scaleboard page \(massasoithistorical.org\)](https://massasoithistorical.org/scaleboard)