

Homes of Our Forefathers: by Edwin Whitefield A Nineteenth-Century Tribute to Our Colonial Past

By BETTINA A. NORTON*

The blessing which belongs to those who revere old landmarks and seek to preserve memorials of the past should rest with Mr. Whitefield. . . . The views are drawn by Mr. Whitefield with scrupulous fidelity, and they constitute a study over which one who is interested in old New England life might linger delightedly for hours.

Boston Journal, in a review of *Homes in Rhode Island and Connecticut*, April, 1882.

BY the time this assessment of Edwin Whitefield, a nineteenth-century itinerant artist, was written, he had published three volumes of lithographs of houses for *Homes of our Forefathers*; the first, *Homes in Massachusetts*, had been published in three editions. While drawing views of towns in Massachusetts, he had begun collecting sketches and wash drawings "from Nature" of many of the old New England houses. He appreciated landscape and terrain with an observant and sensitive eye, and was impressed with one of the great characteristics of the Colonial house—its most satisfactory siting. Admiration for the scale, material, and gentle aging, are all portrayed in the many pencil sketches, wash drawings, and watercolors which he executed for the books.

It would be a mistake to label Whitefield a yearner for the past; several pages from one of his diaries, written in

* This article is an excerpt from the book, EDWIN WHITEFIELD: *North American Scenery, Faithfully Delineated*, by Mrs. Norton, to be published this Spring by Barre Publishers. The sources for this essay were the Whitefield collections at the Boston Public Library and THE SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NEW ENGLAND ANTIQUITIES.

Quebec, criticized the Canadians for not being advanced or forward-thinking. He also acidly criticized their taste, the lack of which he deplored in spite of the antiquity of their buildings.

Whitefield talked with old residents, visited town halls, and sought out deeds in the county registries throughout New England for verification of dates and names. Abbott Lowell Cummings, Director of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, has pointed out that a date assigned by Whitefield to the Boardman House in Saugus (1686/1687), although almost fifty years later than the one commonly believed, is the correct one. A booklet at the Society has produced Whitefield's rough draft for a letter:

I have for many years been engaged in Newport sketching the historical houses of New England and collecting whatever facts there may be of interest connected with them. I shall be highly gratified if you can grant me a brief interview at an hour that may be convenient to yourself as I should like to ask you a few questions, especially in reference to your birth-place.

I am stopping at 27 High St. where an answer to this communication will reach me.

In conclusion, I beg to subscribe myself,

Very Respectfully Yours,

Both the Boston Public Library and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities own many letters from owners of houses. The latter has the following:

I return your sketch, with some changes in the L part. . . . You have got the lower windows in the end of the house as they should be. Neither of them should appear as a door. . . . The two chimnies on the main house have square caps over them, supported by bricks at the corners. . . . I believe this answers all your questions; but I am so interested in your getting everything as it should be, that I hope you will ask further questions, if you have doubts how anything should be represented.

Ch^s H. Bell

1 March, 1886

Mr. Bell sent another letter:

There is no door on the side of the L, although there was one when the photograph was taken. It is better not to put it in, as it did not belong to the original building.

This letter shows one of Whitefield's routes to accuracy, but it also suggests that he occasionally worked from photographs. This was not general practice, however, as his letter of introduction indicates. Also, he has, in many sketch-books, wash drawings of landscapes through which he traveled: "Piscataqua River | Schooner is going up Cochico R. to Dover" (the Maine-New Hampshire border); sketches of "The Common—South Royalston" and "Bennington, a branch of the Walloomac" (Vermont). There is one photograph reproduced in the volume, *Homes in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont*, published in 1886.

Whitefield made many rough sketches in pencil. (Fig. 1.) To some he added details with pen, to some, washes, and some, both. (Figs. 2 and 3.) Occasionally, the pen work was done with a thin watercolor line, sometimes red, as in the

pleasing Drowne House, Barrington, Rhode Island. The pen would delineate the roof lines, the windowpanes, the doors; the more dramatic of his efforts have darkened panes. The rapidly executed line was always thin, delicate, and spidery, but not nervous, and the effect is of antiquity at rest.

The finished drawings, ready for transfer to stone, are clearly and accurately drawn; often, blue lines heighten the important lines. Examples in the Boston Public Library collection are the Gray House, used as a British Hospital after the Battle of Bunker Hill; the Tremere House, built before 1674; the Hancock Inn, on Corn Street, built in 1634; the Green Dragon Inn, a meeting place during the Revolution but razed in 1828; and the Walds House, where the British Major Pitcairn died. All the streets in the North End are still there, populated from the beginnings of the twentieth century with Italian immigrants and their descendants. Almost none of the houses remain. Since most of the models fell to the early twentieth-century tenement development, the drawings and lithographs are a valuable record. Although not suitable for restoration reference, yet they are more accurate than many picturesque etchings.

Homes of our Forefathers in Boston, Old England, and Boston, New England, contains many of these historic Boston buildings. The *Boston Journal* wrote, on December 19, 1889:

There are in all forty pictures of noteworthy old Boston buildings—houses, taverns, and churches. Some of them stand in places where their antiquity is unsuspected and their history unknown. The interest of some of the places is enhanced by the fact that even since Mr. Whitefield began his work they have been pulled down to give place to more modern structures. . . . we cannot easily exaggerate the service which Mr. Whitefield has rendered in preserving them. . . .

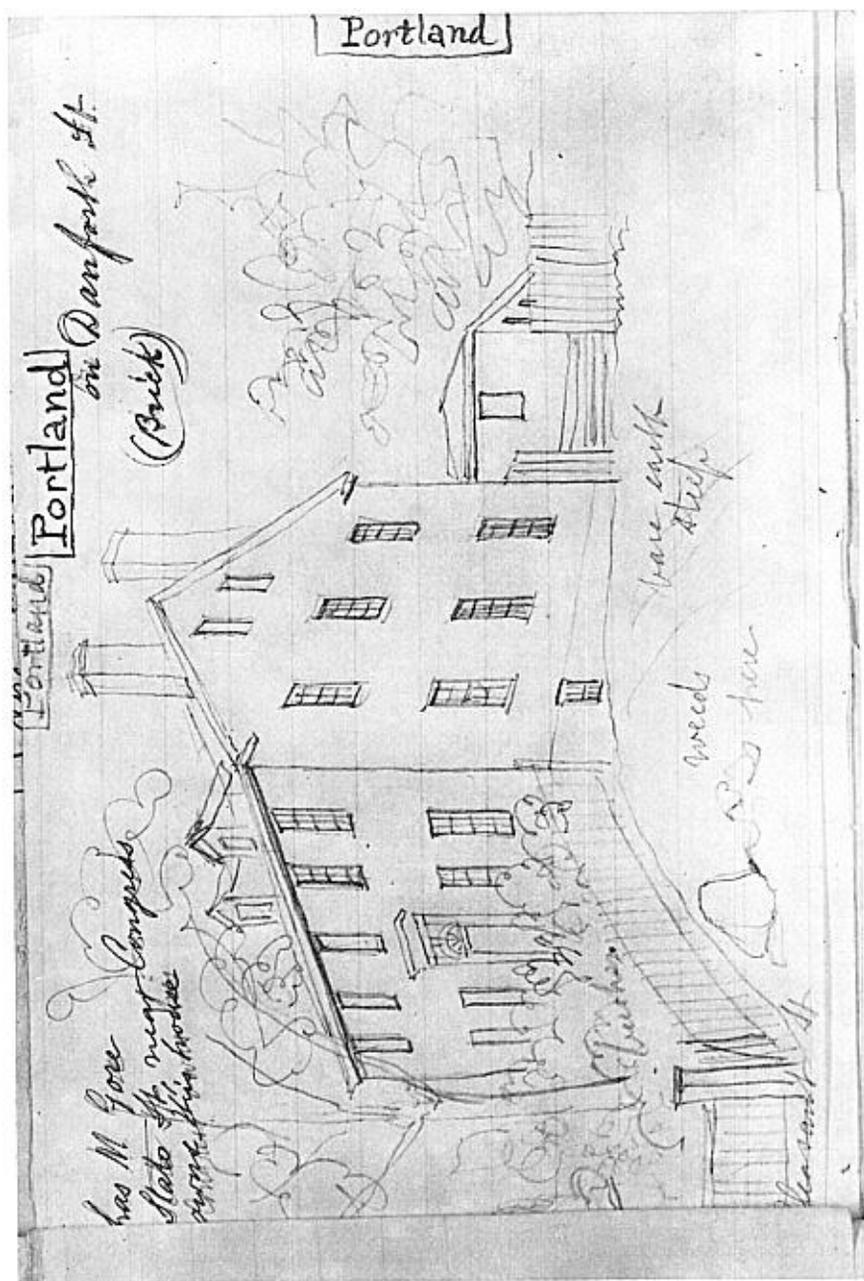


FIG. 1. GORE HOUSE, PORTLAND, MAINE
7/4 inches x 5 inches. Example of preliminary pencil sketch by Whitefield.
S.P.N.E.A. Collection.

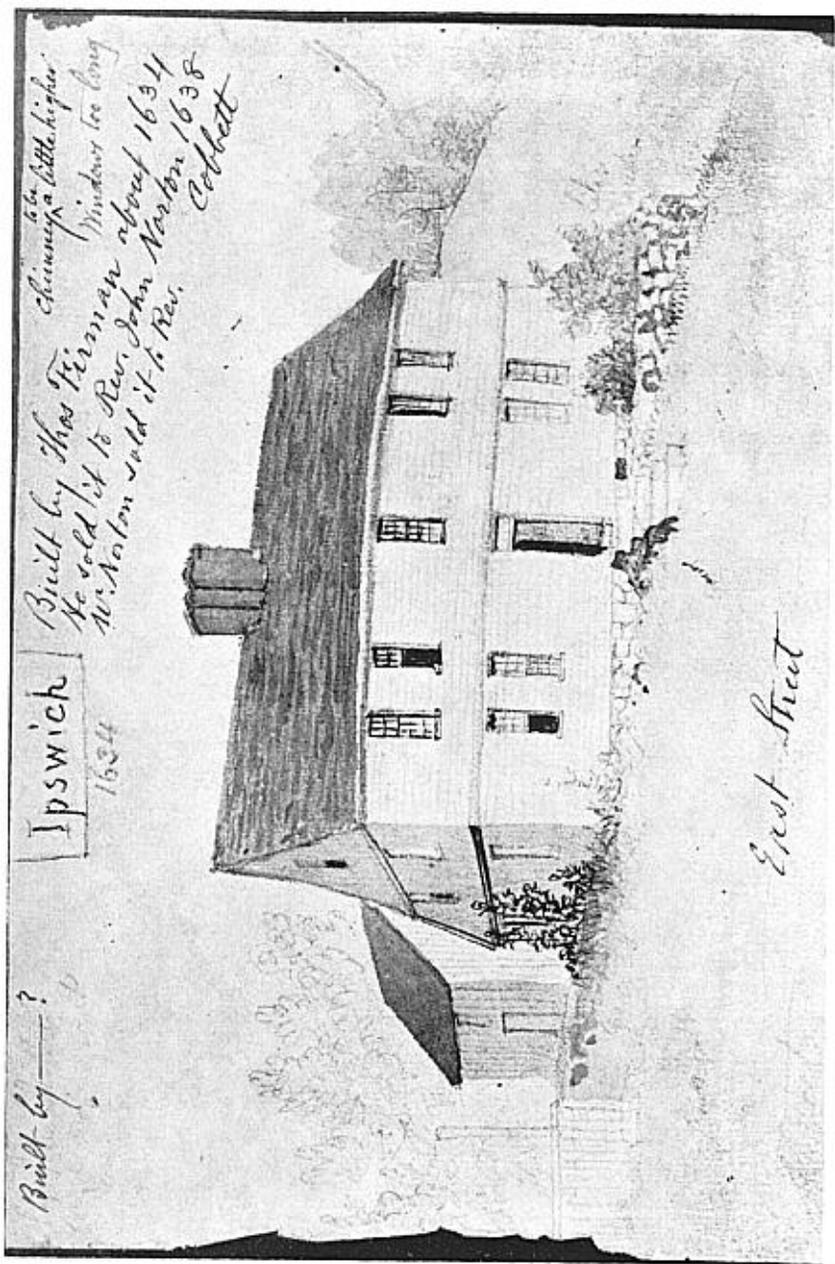


FIG. 2. THE CAPTAIN MATTHEW PERKINS HOUSE, 1634
Owned by the S.P.N.E.A. East Street, Ipswich, Mass. Pencil, ink, and watercolor sketch by
Whitefield showing typical notations about structure or its history. $7\frac{1}{4}$ inches by 5 inches.
S.P.N.E.A. Collection

The Preface to Volume I, *Homes in Massachusetts*, says,

The object of this book is to preserve and hand down to all future posterity representations of the *Homes of Their Forefathers*. From a variety of causes they are rapidly disappearing; and before long the places that now know them will know them no more. It has been a labor of love to the undersigned to collect these mementoes of the past, and his efforts have been ably seconded by many gentlemen to whom his thanks are hereby returned. . . . He has tried to do his work faithfully, and no liberties have been taken with the old buildings represented, or with their surroundings, merely for pictorial effect.

The Foreword to the new edition in 1892, "To Those Who Are Interested in the Early History of New England," is basically the same, with the addition:

Of these (800 sketches) he has published, in the five volumes thus far issued, about one-half that number, at a heavy expense to himself, without the least assistance from any person except what he has derived from the sale of these books, which have so far not equalled the outlays of one kind or another by upwards of nine thousand dollars. . . . This statement is made not by way of complaint but simply because it is a fact; and that the present and future generations may know under what circumstances this collection has been gathered together. . . .

Both the wash drawings and the pen and pencil sketches are more charming than the finished lithographs. But the latter deserve more credit than was given them by Colonel Henry Lee, who showed the Massachusetts Historical Society copies of Whitefield's *Homes of our Forefathers* and a book of etchings of old buildings in Boston by Tolman, "and remarked that both these books possessed considerable interest and value, and the latter had also some artistic merit."¹

¹ *Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings of the*, Vol. XIX, Boston, 1882.

Whitefield's comments in the Foreword, edging on the ill-tempered, and the Colonel's evaluation, are facets of the same problem. As documents of the past, his books are valid. As the impetus to historic preservation, they were unquestionably highly important. As wash drawings, they are colorful and engaging. But as lithographs they are relatively lifeless. This is not so with the first volumes, on Massachusetts houses, but very much the case with the more commercial production of the volume devoted to Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, which forsook the Gothic lettering on stone for the block letterpress, and a more picturesque rendering for a quicker, more abbreviated one. A great deal of the problem is with the tintstones, which are drab.

More attention was devoted to the Massachusetts volumes. There were three editions, the 1879 subscriber's copy, the 1879 (evidently) second edition, and the 1880 third edition.² All the lettering was done on the stone. Above each picture, in Gothic letters, appears the name of the town in which the house was situated. Below is the name of the house, and a short description. Forty-three views are common to the first two editions. The 1880 edition is not consistent; the copy in the Houghton Library at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, contains six pages of sixteen pictures, not contained in the copy at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, and ten in the latter's version are not in the Houghton copy. However, the twenty-three found in all three editions are in the Harvard copy, though in different order.

² THE SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NEW ENGLAND ANTIQUITIES owns all three editions as well as others in the *Homes of Our Forefathers* series published by Whitefield.



FIG. 3. THE GOIT HOUSE, 1702, ROCKPORT, MASSACHUSETTS
Pencil, ink, and watercolor sketch by Whitefield. $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches x $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches.
S.P.N.E.A. Collection.

Whitefield was tired by the constant strain of supporting a family with the lithographic crayon, dreaming up ways that would appeal to the public. These books of lithographs and historical research involved a great deal of travel and correspondence, undoubtedly more than he had spent on any other project, yet the results go consistently downhill. However he derived great pleasure in sketching. His love for a body of water did not abate during the period in which he was drawing Colonial houses; one sketchbook has eleven wash drawings of Spot Pond in Melrose, Massachusetts, close to his home in Reading.

His spirits were revived by a trip to England and Scotland, the countries of his and his wife, Lillian's births, in 1888-1889. The resulting publication, *Homes of our Forefathers in Boston, Old England, and Boston, New England*, in regular and deluxe editions, was again as ambitious as the volumes on Massachusetts. The fancier volume, which he published from his home in Roslindale, Massachusetts, is three-fourths brown or red Turkish morocco, with gold tooling and lettering. The chromolithographs are pasted on bristol board, one to a page. The original price was fifteen dollars. The regular edition was published by Damrell & Upham, Boston, also in 1889, for six dollars.

Seeking subscribers and support for his books has left the Boston Public Library with a host of interesting signatures among the Whitefield notebooks: Julia W. Howe, Leverett Saltonstall, Hon. Thomas C. Amory, Senator Hoar, Henry Ward Beecher, and others. There are several very pleasant letters from John Greenleaf Whittier.

A clipping collection in the Whitefield papers contains some favorable reviews,

from the *Boston Courier*, the *Boston Journal*, the *Boston Evening Transcript*, the *Christian Register*, and several that are unidentified. Whitefield received little credit in the books that followed. Vincent Scully, in *Shingle Style*, published in 1955, allotted one half of one footnote to the comment that architectural renovation is impossible from his lithographs. Joseph Everett Chandler wrote of the activity in the 1910's (when the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities was founded), and "the less satisfactory . . . first awakenings of the 1880's."³ Whitefield himself collected many newsclippings from the 1880's, which he pasted among his sketches, and was also critical:

In Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly May/86 is a ridiculous view of the Woodworth House, well, &c. It states that the house is still standing, &c. . . . All wrong.

The fact is that Whitefield did publish, in 1879, the first record of Colonial houses, which represented work from the mid-1870's, and, as an unidentified newsclipping says, "(in many cases) it is reasonably certain that within a few years Mr. Whitefield's drawings will be the only memorial left."

A few of the houses depicted by Whitefield are owned by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, incorporated in 1910, and private corporations set up for particular houses, like the Wayside Inn in Sudbury, Massachusetts, and the Fairbanks House in Dedham. Although many of the houses are not under institutional control, the interest which Whitefield instigated carried many over the dangers of unconcern into the realm of respected antiquity.

³ Chandler, *The Colonial House*, Robert McBride & Co., New York, 1916.