



## News and Notes for Historic Homeowners - 5

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### New Contact Information: call 617 944 6645 with Historic Homeowner questions

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#### Old House Trivia: Building Materials

**The Favored Marble of the 1840s:** While granite countertops figure prominently in the real estate ads of today, in the 1840s and '50s, a different stone captured the homeowner's imagination: Portoro marble. A black Italian marble with dramatic veins of gold and white, Portoro marble was once, according to *The New American Cyclopedia* of 1861, "the most popular and the best known foreign marble in all parts of the United States."

Quarried on the Isola Palmaria, near Portovenere on Italy's northwest coastline, and exported from Genoa, Portoro marble appeared on fireplaces and mantels of Greek Revival and Italianate houses across New England and beyond. The *Cyclopedia* commented that (in 1861) it was "rather out of fashion" and said "It is a weak stone, and is for the most part used in thin slabs cemented upon a back of slate." Weak or not, Portoro marble made a showy statement in the mid-century parlor and was so often imitated by grain painting the colorful golden veins onto a plain black slate mantel, that it is difficult to know now how many mantels carry the "real thing."

Portoro marble is still commercially available and similar marbles are quarried in France, China and the Dominican Republic. One supplier, capitalizing on the gold color of the veins, now calls it "Port'oro" marble, but there is no need to "gild" this marble beyond its intrinsic opulence. Among Historic New England's properties, Portoro marble appears on the dining room fireplace at Roseland Cottage (built in 1846), where it complements the golden tones of the room's Lincrusta wallpaper. <http://www.historicnewengland.org/visit/homes/roseland.htm>

#### Green News: Super-thin insulation may offer significant old house potential

One of the more challenging aspects of retrofitting an older or historic home for energy efficiency involves insulation. Sprayed in place foam insulations are generally not appropriate in an older home because they require removal of interior plaster-work and by the nature of their complete coverage of the underlying framing, violate the core conservation principle of reversibility. (Reversibility in the old house context means that when you put something into or onto the house you ought to be able to remove it without harming or destroying the house's historic fabric.) Other forms of insulation have other problems: for instance, fiberglass batt insulation can be too thick to fit under the floorboards of an old attic with shallow joist depths, and rigid foam panel insulation is tricky to manipulate around old framing timbers. All of them may trap potentially damaging moisture if the house is not properly air-sealed before the installation and assiduously ventilated afterwards.

Several innovative green technology producers are just introducing new forms of highly-efficient, super-thin, gel-based insulation materials in flexible blanket-like sheets that can be cut and fitted more easily and with much less bulk and much more R-value than traditional batt or panel insulation. It will be interesting to see if these materials, developed with nano-technology from the space industry, can find a useful application in older and historic homes. We'll be investigating these materials further to

get a better sense of their cost and effectiveness, as well as their potential to be safely introduced into old and historic homes- and to be easily removed from them if they should prove destructive over time.

## Upcoming Programs:

### Anatomy of a Fireplace: the Hearth and Chimney

Saturday, May 22, 2010 10:00 am - 1:00 pm

Swett-Ilsley House, Coffin House, Spencer-Peirce-Little Farm, Newbury, Mass.

*This is the return of last year's sold-out program!* Join masonry expert Richard Irons in a special behind-the-scenes exploration of the heart of the seventeenth-century house - the chimney. Irons identifies original material, discusses the evolution of chimney technology, and explores how changing foodways and cooking methods influenced hearth configuration. Bring pictures of your chimney mysteries for his review.

Admission: \$25 Historic Homeowner members.

Session includes morning refreshments; a boxed lunch may be ordered for \$10.

### Take Advantage of Members' Month activities and programs this June!

Be sure to sign up early as many events are filling up!

<http://www.historicnewengland.org/things/calendar/Events.asp>

### Paint and Painters

Presented by the Newport Restoration Foundation's "Rough Point Gallery Nights"

Thursday, June 10, 2010, 5:00 - 7:30 pm

Rough Point, 680 Bellevue Avenue, Newport, RI

Three centuries of paint history and tips from a painting expert. 18th to mid-19th century lecture by Robert Foley, Director of Preservation, Newport Restoration Foundation (NRF), followed by mid-19th century through 20th century by Sally Zimmerman, Historic Preservation Services Manager for Historic New England. Demo table and Q&A session with Brian McCarthy, Head of NRF's paint crew with 25 years of experience. Also on display is the Young Architects' Gallery, featuring original art from students in the Newport Public Schools.

The cost is \$5 for adults; children 12 and under are free. Lectures begin at 5:30 PM and last approximately 1 hour. No reservations required, but seating is limited. For questions, call 401-846-4152 or see

[http://www.newportrestoration.org/calendar/details/17621-gallery\\_night\\_at](http://www.newportrestoration.org/calendar/details/17621-gallery_night_at)

### Passport to Historic New England Homes

Thursday, June 24, 2010, 10:00 am - 12:00 pm, Lyman Estate, Waltham, Mass.

Senior Stewardship Manager Joe Cornish and Manager of Historic Preservation Services Sally Zimmerman debut a new lecture for members that explores the architectural traditions and styles of the region by looking at Historic New England's thirty-six properties. Followed by light refreshments and a guided tour of the Lyman Estate. Admission: Free, Historic New England members only. Registration is required and space is limited. Phone 617-994-5934 to register for this Members' Month program.

### The Vermont History Expo is Back!

Saturday-Sunday, June 26-27, 2010, Tunbridge Fair Grounds, Tunbridge, Vermont

For a genuine New England experience, it doesn't get much better than the Vermont History Expo. Plan now for a weekend in the country and stop by to visit Historic New England staff at our booth at the Expo. Nothing beats a sunny day with a bag of freshly-made kettle corn in the green hills and historic fair grounds of Tunbridge with fellow lovers of history, Vermont-style.

[http://vermonthistory.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=190&Itemid=101](http://vermonthistory.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=190&Itemid=101).

As always, don't hesitate to call or email with your questions and concerns about your historic home! Thank you for your support of Historic New England. It is YOUR commitment that helps to protect the unique character of historic properties throughout our region!

[szimmerman@historicnewengland.org](mailto:szimmerman@historicnewengland.org) or 617 994 6645