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Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



Brookhouse

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On the Cover: The Brookhouse home as it looked in the early twentieth century, from a postcard in the collections of the Brookhouse Home.

Just across Orange Street from the Custom House stands a three-story Federal period brick structure on the corner of Orange and Derby Streets in Salem, Massachusetts. A well-patinated plaque attached to the front fence indicates it is a “Home for Aged Women.” Though curious, the description accurately represents the building’s present function, which it has actively maintained since 1861.

Samuel McIntire and the Crowninshield Family

But there is a much more of a story here than meets the eye. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the Benjamin W. Crowninshield House, it is a component of the Derby Street Historic District. The building’s design is attributed to Salem’s premier architect, Samuel McIntire (1757-1811).¹

The building’s forward section was built between 1810 and 1812 for Benjamin W. Crowninshield (1777-1851) of the prominent Salem merchant family. Mr. Crowninshield was a member of the Massachusetts State Legislature, and the first President of the Merchants Bank of Salem (1811-1814). He served as Secretary of the Navy during the Madison and Monroe administrations (1815 -1818) and in 1823 began the first of his four terms in the United States Congress. He and his wife Mary (Boardman) raised their children in the house. In July 1817, President James Monroe was the guest of the Crowninshields during his visit to New England.

In 1822, the Crowninshields moved out and altered the house for tenants. General James Miller, the Collector of Customs for the District of Salem and Beverly, who was immortalized by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, lived here from 1825 until his retirement in 1849. Other residents of the house included Captain William P. Endicott, General George H. Devereux, Edmund Smith, Treasurer of the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Co., Edward I. Norfolk, also employed at Naumkeag, and finally Captain John G. Plander. Plander, a dealer in provisions, shared the structure with the Home for Aged Women until 1877, when the home was expanded to accept more pensioners.²

Robert Brookhouse buys a House

Title for the house passed from Mr. Crowninshield to John B. Knight (Deputy Collector of Customs, 1839-1843) in 1843, then to William Dean Waters in two transactions (1843 and 1845). In 1854 Waters sold the property to Robert Brookhouse.³

Robert Brookhouse (1779-1866) made a fortune in the West Africa cowhide trade in the 1830s and 1840s. Once his fortune had been made, Brookhouse, like

many of Salem's wealthy inhabitants, began to use his money in philanthropic efforts, such as his 1840 endowment of the Carpenter Street Home for Orphan Children, one of a number of charitable objectives that he championed. In March 1854, Brookhouse bought the old Crowninshield house for \$5,000, intending for it to be an "Old Sailor's Home."

Sailors' Homes in the Nineteenth Century

Ports such as Boston and Salem had long since established marine societies dedicated to the relief of the families of members who came upon hard times; however, these organizations operated as mutual aid organizations. The concept of charitable institutions for the general betterment of seamen's social and working conditions began as prayer, or "Bethel," meetings aboard ship in the last decade of the eighteenth century. In 1823 a Seaman's Society was formed in Salem to provide a place of worship for sailors in port. The American Seamen's Friend Society, incorporated in 1833 and based in New York, had affiliated organizations around the country, such as the Boston Seaman's Aid Society, to advocate for the civil rights of seamen and provide decent living quarters for them when in port.⁴ Nineteenth century social reformers such as Richard Henry Dana and Sarah Josepha Hale worked tirelessly to improve the lives of the men who worked before the mast under the harshest of conditions and were all-too-often ill-used by their employers.

Unfortunately, Mr. Brookhouse's plan to establish a Sailors' Snug Harbor did not come to fruition during his lifetime. It was not until eleven years after his death that his vision of establishing a home for aged seamen was realized. In 1877 the Salem Home for Aged Men was finally established by Captain John Bertram (1796-1882), Salem shipping merchant, railroad investor, philanthropic contemporary, and Masonic lodge brother of Mr. Brookhouse.⁵

Right: one of the carved wheat sheaves on the mantelpiece in the east parlor. The wheat sheaf and basket of fruit, both of which appear on this mantelpiece, are signature designs of the famous Salem architect and carver, Samuel McIntire.





Above: the elegant east parlor, with its McIntire designs on the plaster work and wood work, is still used as a social room by the Brookhouse Home residents and their guests today.

The Home for Aged Women

When the plans for a sailor's home fell through, Brookhouse ultimately donated the building and related property to the Association for the Relief of Aged and Destitute Women in Salem. His gift was accepted by the association in June 1861. Robert Brookhouse's son was serving as one of three Vice-Presidents on the association's Board of Government when the Home was opened⁶.

During 1860 Robert Brookhouse had shared involvement in the incorporation of the Home for Aged Women with Captain Bertram, and other prominent Salem citizens including the Reverend Michael Carlton, who was for many years the minister to transient seamen at the Salem Bethel. On November 30, 1860, Mrs. Brookhouse, Mrs. Bertram, and Reverend Carlton were elected to be three of the twenty-four Managers (trustees) of the Women's Home.⁷ Another prominent long-term trustee and President of the Association was Robert S. Rantoul (1832-1922), one-time Mayor of the City of Salem (1890-1893). As Customs Collector of the District of Salem and Beverly (1865-1869), Mr. Rantoul was in a position to keep a close watch on the Home from his office at the Custom House.

When it opened on October 18, 1861, the Home consisted of the eastern half of the building at number 114 Derby Street and had twelve residents. The residential space increased in 1877 when Captain Plander vacated his (west) side of the house, designated 116 Derby Street. In 1895 Derby Street was renumbered and the present address of 180 Derby Street was assigned. There were further alterations in 1906/07, and again in 1916 when the rear of building was enlarged to plans drawn by architect William G. Rantoul (1867-1949), son of Robert S. Rantoul.⁸ By 1910 the building had steam heat, modern plumbing, electricity, and an elevator, but the Home retained many of its early features, such as splayed-and-reeded window lintels, central Doric Greek Revival porch, and interior carved woodwork tentatively attributed to architect Samuel McIntire's son, master cabinetmaker Samuel Field McIntire (1780-1819). Structures adjacent to the Home were demolished about 1920 and this space now constitutes the lawn and garden areas.⁹ The garden, restored to its 1933 appearance, is maintained by volunteers from the Salem Garden Club.



Above: the patio, added by famous Colonial Revival architect William Rantoul, overlooks the gardens.



Right: even on a misty autumn day, the flowers planted by the local garden club sparkle in their beds.

The Brookhouse Home in the Twenty-First Century

The Home continues to serve the needs of aged women. The occupancy is generally twenty-five to thirty residents, with thirty being the ideal capacity. As should be the goal in all institutions of this nature, the quality of life for the residents is the major consideration. The Association operates as a not-for-profit corporation in the tradition of its original charter, with income derived from various sources including conventional direct bequests, and more recently, Medicare and Social Security Insurance coverage of the individual residents. In a recent conversation, former President of the Home, Peter D. LaChapelle, said: “The Board of Government meets quarterly, and annual meetings are held to define the Home’s objectives in the twenty-first century.”¹⁰

The policy has been, from the beginning, to accept only residents who are able to take care of their own basic needs. Brookhouse is currently described as “a spacious single-occupancy residential care facility.”¹¹ Although professional assistance is available for various functions such as medical supportive care and meals, laundry and housekeeping services, no attempt is made to function as a nursing home. Residents needing more intensive care than can be provided at Brookhouse are referred to appropriate care providers.

Salem visitors are frequently heard to comment as they stand before the weathered plaque, sometimes in amazement, that such a quaint concept as an “old ladies’ home” still exists in the twenty-first century. Robert Brookhouse would be pleased by their observation.

Notes

¹ Fiske Kimball, *Mr. Samuel McIntire, Carver: The Architect of Salem*. (Salem, 1940), p. 14

² Hon. Robert S. Rantoul, Rev. DeWitt S. Clark, and Major George S. Whipple, *A Record of the First Fifty Years of the Old Ladies’ Home at Salem* (Salem, 1910), p. 21

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ John Frayler, “Mary’s Little Lamb and Improving the Condition of Seamen During the Nineteenth Century,” *Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions*, Vol. IV, No.3 (Salem, July 2003), pp. 5-7

⁵ Harold Pierce Hadley, *200 Years of Masonry in Essex Lodge 1779-1979*, pp. 96, 116

⁶ Rantoul, Clark, and Whipple, pp. 13, 14

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52

⁹ Charles W. Snell, *Historic Sites Survey Report (Some Derby Street Houses and Inhabitants) Salem Maritime National Historic Site: Massachusetts*, (Denver Service Center, National Park Service), P66

¹⁰ Conversation, August 15, 2005, with Peter D. LaChapelle, Past President, Board of Government, Brookhouse Home for Aged Women

¹¹ Informational brochure, “Brookhouse Home: A Residence for Women,” (Salem, 2005)

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