

The Murray House *from Our Perspective*

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My husband, Bob, and I have an enduring interest in Maine history and architecture. As a Maine native, Bob claims that as his birthright, but as an Ohioan, I acquired this passion only through marriage. In the 1970s, two local historians and I provided the documentation for the nomination of West Lebanon, a rural 19th-Century community, to the National Register of Historic Places. West Lebanon, where we then lived, and

York Village were the first such designated districts in Maine.

We subsequently moved to York, where we built a replica of the circa 1740 Fitch House (the original stands in Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts) using the 18th-Century building materials we had collected for more than ten years. After becoming firmly hooked on history by these projects and many years of curatorial and educational activities with the Old York Historical Society (now Museums of Old York) and other regional historical agencies, I earned a Ph.D. in Early American History

from the University of New Hampshire in 2000.

Since we acquired the Murray House in 1997, its historical character and setting have guided our treatment of its buildings and grounds. The house was built circa 1769 in the Georgian (late colonial) style by Samuel Montgomery, an early resident and the owner of a saw- and gristmill a mile to the east on the Mill Pond and the Damariscotta River in East Boothbay (then called Montgomerys Mills, later, Murrays Mills).

Montgomery adopted his young nephew, James Murray, who inher-



Early in the 20th Century, Nellie Murray Rice, great-granddaughter of James Murray, and her husband, Will Rice lived in the house. Will relocated the Murray Hill roadway from its original course just steps from the home's front door to its present location about 55 feet out from the house.

The mural the Lords commissioned for the front stair hall depicts the property's buildings, both old and new, including Mill Pond Cottage at left and the carriage barn at right.

ited the property and the house down Murray Hill Road in 1808. About that time, James moved the gristmill operation from the Damariscotta mill into a new mill about a quarter of a mile south of the house where the marsh across the road emptied into Linekin Bay.

After selling the mill in 1827, James turned to farming, and by the time his son Samuel bought back the mill property in 1836, the gristmill had ceased operation. Since then, Samuel and subsequent generations of Murrays engaged primarily in farming, interspersed with occasional seafaring and shipbuilding endeavors.

Therefore, the Murrays' two barns and outbuildings were integral to the site's history. Although only the granite foundation of the main barn, which stood across the road until the 1950s, survives, we have restored and enlarged the smaller barn that once was attached to the house.

STRUCTURAL CHANGES

The two-story house retains its essential core: a center chimney with five working fireplaces and a two-over-two front room plan with a rear keeping area. Beginning with the addition of a Federal-style hip roof and frieze details, the house underwent several significant changes that date from the early 19th Century to the mid-20th Century.

It now exhibits neoclassical (including Federal, Greek revival, and Egyptian revival) elements, popularized in rural New England in the early 19th Century, as well as neocolonial architectural details, introduced in the mid-20th Century.

The "replacement" Federal woodwork in the front entry/stair hall and probably that in the southwest parlor (living room) was itself replaced by woodwork in the Greek revival style (circa 1820-30), leaving the southeast parlor (dining room) with the earliest extant period wood-



work in the house.

The three original bedchambers on the second floor were also finished in the neoclassical style, two (in the southwest and northwest corners of house) with Greek revival woodwork and the third (in the southeast corner) with slightly later Egyptian revival-style (circa 1830-40) woodwork.

Although there are no records documenting these changes, it is reasonable to assign them to the changes in ownership of the house. Thus the improvements in the Federal style most likely coincide with James Murray's ownership beginning in 1808, and those in the Greek and Egyptian revival styles with his son's (Samuel Murray) ownership starting in 1841.

It appears that the house and ell, which originally connected via a shed to the barn, were reconfigured into two separate living spaces, perhaps about 1841. In that year, Samuel, who was then married with a young family, assumed ownership with his father before inheriting the entire property in 1852. One living space comprised the ell with its own kitchen and sleeping area above and an adjacent first-floor bedroom in the northwest corner of the house; the other comprised the remainder of the main house.

SUBSEQUENT OWNERSHIP

After Samuel's death in 1870, his son, Isaac (Ike) Murray, occupied the ell with his wife, Emeline, and her two bachelor brothers. Ike's brother, Samuel, and his family occupied the main house until moving out in 1895.

After Ike's death in 1915, his daughter, Nellie Murray Rice, and her husband, Will Rice, moved into the main house to care for her mother. About this time, Will installed the first indoor plumbing, which occupied a small, second-floor room (in the northeast corner) located behind the back stairway. He also further divided the formerly open chamber behind the second-floor chimney stack into a back hallway and a spare room (middle bedroom).

After Nellie inherited the house in 1926, Will removed the shed and the second floor of the ell (also removing the bachelor uncles) and converted the first floor into a sun porch, thus restoring the house as a single-family residence. The ell's second floor became a "camp" on Mill Pond, while the shed moved farther around the pond, a quarter of a mile west on Murray Hill Road.

Further altering the exterior aspect of the house, Will relocated the Murray Hill roadway from its origi-



Among the Lords' favorite aspects of the property are its proximity to the water and the views it affords.

nal course just steps from the front door to its present location about 55 feet out from the house. The house remained in the Murray family until Nellie's heirs sold it to the Edward Lancaster family in 1940, ending 170 years and five generations of Montgomery-Murray ownership. So too ended local ownership and reliance on the property for a livelihood—the Lancasters came “from away” to make it a second home, as have subsequent owners.

The Lancasters made essential repairs but no major structural changes except for the addition a first-floor lavatory behind the back stairs. In the keeping room/kitchen, they replaced the wood cook stove with a modern electric range, still placed in front of the boarded-up fireplace.

The house was next purchased in 1959 by Rita Davidson, who introduced structural, stylistic, and decorative changes based on the neocolonial aesthetic of the mid-20th Century. She returned the parlor to its original Georgian character, removing the Greek revival woodwork and fireplace mantel, and adding a raised-panel fireplace wall. Also on the first floor, she took out the back

stairway and lavatory to make space for a separate modern kitchen.

In the keeping room, she opened the 8-foot hearth with its roughly 2-by-4-foot-deep bake oven and its 5 1/2-foot firebox, exposed the ceiling beams, introduced natural pine sheathing and wainscoting (using the attic floorboards), and added a large bay window. She reconfigured the first-floor former bedroom area to enlarge the keeping room and to provide space for a powder room and a “telephone room” (back hall).

Likely under Davidson's tenure the first-floor ceilings were replaced, which resulted in the loss of the original crown and dentil moldings in the parlor and dining room. The original wide-pine floors were replaced with narrow hard-pine flooring in the main rooms of the first floor (with the exception of the dining room and front stair hall) and in the back hall of the second floor.

On the second floor, Davidson converted the northwest bedchamber into a master bath/dressing room. Throughout the house, she introduced new wallpapers and formal window treatments. On the exterior, her perimeter plantings of shrubbery

and groundcovers replaced the English cottage gardens established by the Lancasters.

OUR STEWARDSHIP

Bob and I became acquainted with the Murray House in the 1980s through our friendship with Rita Davidson and our mutual interest in early houses and gardening. Because we enjoy all the stylistic permutations of the house, we have chosen to simply fine-tune the interior, taking a traditional, but not strictly period, approach.

In addition to necessary structural repairs—most notably rebuilding the chimney from the attic floor up—we have installed cornice molding and an 18th-Century Connecticut corner cupboard in the parlor, added a chair rail to the stairway, remodeled the bathrooms, renovated the kitchen to open it to the keeping room, and also repainted and repapered throughout. In June 2015 we commissioned artist Doreen Conboy to paint a Rufus Porter-style mural in the front stair hall that portrays our properties' various water views as well as its buildings, both old and new.

The 18th- and early-19th-Cen-

tury history of the house also has determined our approach to the furnishings and accessories. These include country formal pieces of Maine and New England origin. Among them are several pieces that might be comparable to some of those in the 1870 inventory of Samuel Murray's estate. Listed along with other items were two looking glasses, a secretary, two clocks, a bureau, four bedsteads, sixteen chairs, and three tables.

Our approach to the exterior also reflects the Murray House's heritage. We have cleared out jungles of overgrowth that obscured the Mill Pond and Marsh Pond views, restored and expanded the perennial gardens, planted extensive vegetable and blueberry gardens, constructed more than 350 feet of stone walls and walkways, enlarged the barn, and erected various outbuildings.

The "Little House," or Mill Pond Cottage, added in 2001-02 upon removal of the Mill Pond camp, is an adaptation of Maine vernacular barn architecture. A joint project with California family members, the cottage embodies the notion of "East meets West." The street facades present a traditional New England aspect, while the Mill Pond facades and interior display the large-window expanses and openness of the West Coast aesthetic.

Located in the northwest corner of the field across the street, the seven-bay carriage shed, built in 2002, derives from regional design. The late-18th-Century prototypes of its one-and-a-half-storey facade, single-pitched saltbox roof, and arched double doors topped by six-over-six windows are located in two nearby towns, Head Tide and Newcastle.

The 70-foot stone wall (1998) bordering the driveway and curving around a bed of nearly 300 daylilies to the front rock garden is one of our earliest landscape projects, erected with granite from a barn foundation found in southern Maine.

A later project is the lavender-

bordered, 65-foot front walkway (2011), constructed from the native fieldstone walkway originally serving an Antrim, New Hampshire, tavern that was frequented by Revolutionary War soldiers. An 18th-Century granite gristmill stone, incorporated in the walkway, is a salute to James Murray and his circa 1808 gristmill.

One of the unanticipated pleasures of our stewardship of the Murray House is seeing the enjoyment many others take in the property—especially its scenic views. Among them are extended Murray family members and neighbors, who have generously shared knowledge of the property, as well as visitors from away and the local *plein-air* painters.

In 2004, we granted the Boothbay Region Land Trust an easement to forever preserve the open space and view shed across the road from the house. The ten-acre easement protects the field and "the Marsh," which is the historical name still in local use for the area that now comprises both marshland and the 4-acre fresh-water pond (Marsh Pond) with its half-acre island (Reels Island).

The pond flows into a saltwater

bay via an outlet in the dam that separates it from the bay. Before the dam was built, probably sometime in the first two decades of the 20th Century, a brook ran through the marsh and emptied directly into the saltwater creek and then to the bay.

This was the site of James Murray's early-19th-Century the gristmill. In the early 20th Century, regional Native Americans came to the Marsh in the fall to gather its sweetgrass, which they used for making baskets. Moreover, the creek and the pond have been the de facto community swimming hole and ice rink for generations of local children.

The appeal of the Murray House is not that it is a static remnant of the past but that the house and property have evolved to meet the needs and desires of each generation of owners, who have left their own lasting imprint.

We treasure this heritage and view our tenure as an opportunity to share it with the community. We thank *Early American Life* for providing an opportunity to share this corner of New England history with the extended community comprising readers far and near. *



Mill Pond Cottage combines Maine vernacular barn architectural style on the exterior with the openness of a contemporary California floor plan.