

Gibson House Museum Benefit Honoree Professor Robert Allison's Comments

Charles Hammond Gibson had his own reasons for preserving his house as a museum, but we are all indebted to him for doing so.

We are also indebted to the Gibson House Association, and the Victorian Society of America's New England Chapter, and to all of you for continuing the work of preserving this wonderful house, and for telling its story. Not only is the house well cared for, as it was in Charlie Gibson's day, it is presented to the broader public, inviting us inside to experience this very different world.

Because Boston has a seeming plethora of historic houses—museums preserved from every century of the city's life, so far—an outsider might think that preservation is one of our primary goals.

As with most notions outsiders bring to Boston, that would be wrong.

Half a decade after the Gibsons built their house on the new lands of the Back Bay, Bostonians tore down the Hancock Mansion on Beacon Hill. The Gibson House was still relatively new when Boston moved to demolish the Old State House, and the congregation of Old South, moving to a much more elegant edifice in Copley Square, sought to sell their real estate on Washington Street.

The generation that built the Back Bay was looking ahead to a new Boston, not back to the quaint Boston of buckle shoes and powdered wigs. The sentiment was perhaps best expressed by a Boston city councilor during the creation of another new Boston: that when visitors came to Boston they wanted to see something more substantial than the dingy print shop where William Lloyd Garrison turned out the *Liberator*.

The few votive places survive, not because of civic will, but because a handful of devoted citizens have taken the time and invested the effort, and capital, in preserving them.

And what stories they can tell: the Paul Revere House initially was preserved to tell the story of an American patriot; he only lived in North Square for a few short decades of his, and the house's, life, but now it also tells the story of a 17th-century Boston merchant, and the backyard privy has revealed the lives of 19th-

century immigrants who made it their home for the long century after the Reveres moved out.

The Shirley-Eustis House in Roxbury, turned into tenements when the neighborhood changed from bucolic orchards to industrial Irish, now is an elegant centerpiece to a well-kept neighborhood of Cape Verdean and Latino residences.

The Harrison Gray Otis House, from which the Otises moved after just a few years in residence, would be saved both from the widening of Cambridge Street and the demolition of the West End, and now tells some of the story of the Otises but also of the boardinghouse culture of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The others—the 19th-century African Meeting House, the 20th-century Vilna Shul, the contours of the Boston Common and Public Garden, the McKim Building of the Boston Public Library—saved through great private and sometimes public effort—are worth preserving not because we venerate the past, but because we cherish the future. Shouldn't our children and their children, and the children arriving in the city today, grow up to enjoy these places that have defined our city? Can one understand Boston without coming to terms with these seemingly incongruous places—the site of the Boston Massacre across the street from the site where John Boyle O'Reilly published the *Pilot*, the home of Paul Revere across the street from the site of the church of Cotton Mather, now the thriving Church of the Sacred Heart, adjoining St. John's School, across from the Mariners House, and a few steps from the home of Governor Thomas Hutchinson, destroyed by a mob in August 1765, and that across from the tenement house where Rose Fitzgerald was born? That the Vilna Shul, a synagogue on Beacon Hill founded by Lithuanian Jews—its Torah scrolls held in a converted pickle barrel—has pews from the 12th Baptist Church—founded by men and women who had escaped from slavery—the other synagogues in the West End had fled to the South End and Roxbury, and the 12th Baptist followed—and one day Martin Luther King would preach in its new home.

It is always a struggle. We won't always win. But it is worth taking on, and we can find allies in unlikely places. Think of the Gloucester fisherman Benjamin Franklin Butler dispatched to sail USS *Constitution* from Annapolis to Newport, or the alliance of the 1890s between Congressman John Fitzgerald and Mass Historical

Society president Charles Francis Adams to preserve the ship the Navy knew was 80 years past its prime.

One can easily imagine Silas Lapham imagining his own dream mansion as he stepped inside the Gibsons' foyer, or Olive Chancellor and her Mississippi cousin Basil Ransom pursuing Verena Tarrant in the parlor or the music room, or George Apley reading Emerson in his study and pondering his wayward children in the dining room.

Here is the kitchen where Mother Skeffington worked, and from which she was expelled for filching bananas. If that's a story based in truth, we can conjecture that the bananas passed through the hands of Isaac Smith; in the fictional world we know that they came from the Faneuil Hall marketplace of Bart Judson.

We do not know when we preserve something how future generations will experience it, but we preserve these pieces of the past so that our children's grandchildren can understand their own world.