

Arthur Cushman Haskell

New England Architectural Photographer

By ABBOTT LOWELL CUMMINGS

ARTHUR C. Haskell, as he has been known throughout his long and productive career, was born at 12 Boardman Street, in Salem, Massachusetts, on January 23, 1890, the son of Hubbard C. and Caroline (Macolief) Haskell. His middle name recalled a Mayflower lineage and both parents were native New Englanders, his father having been born in New Lebanon, New Hampshire, and his mother in Medford, Massachusetts. From the age of about six his youth and schooling were spread over a wide area—Somerville, Boston, and Gale's Ferry, Connecticut, as his father's business drew him from one place to another.

In 1910 he went directly from high school into the Boston architectural offices of the celebrated Ralph Adams Cram. His work here and in various other Boston architectural firms between 1910 and 1922 was limited entirely to drafting. Throughout this period, however, he was brought into continual contact with the commissioned work of those architectural photographers then active in Boston. It became an insistent conviction, as he recalled to the writer in July, 1968, that "he could do just as well as they did—or better." And from this simple conviction evolved a lifetime of distinguished photographic craftsmanship.

His earliest efforts in the field were entirely on his own time and from the outset, he limited himself to architectural photography, never engaging in any other

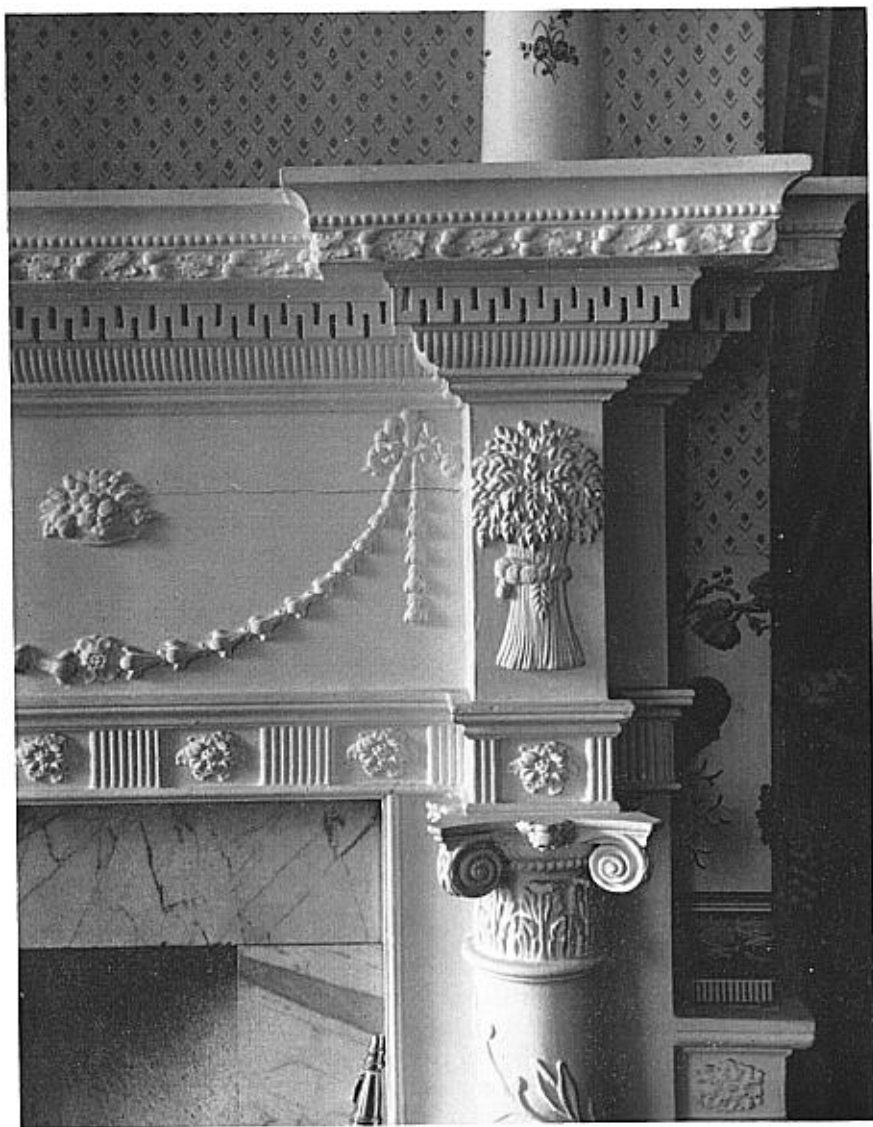
branches. His picture taking was entirely with an 8 x 10-view camera, and having little means to acquire expensive equipment he built his own darkroom, printing and enlarging equipment and consistently oversaw all details of developing and printing.

His first professional assignments were confined to newly constructed buildings, and he confessed to have given little thought then to the photographing of historic buildings. In the course of soliciting architectural commissions in Boston, however, he met the late Frank Chouteau Brown, at that time a practicing architect with an active interest in New England's architectural past. During 1923 and 1924 Arthur Haskell fulfilled several photographic commissions in connection with F. C. Brown's contemporary buildings, and then one day, as the photographer recalled, he received a postcard from Brown, asking him to take some pictures of a certain early house for use in the then flourishing *White Pine Monograph Series* of illustrated essays devoted to early American architecture. The results proved so satisfactory that henceforward Arthur Haskell took a major portion of the photographs used by the editors of the Series.

It was also during the late 1920's, after his removal to Marblehead in 1924, that Arthur Haskell decided to devote his career exclusively to architectural photography. During the years that followed he continued to solicit assignments from Boston's leading architectural firms, in-



ALEXANDER HOUSE, SPRINGFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS
Photo by Arthur C. Haskell.



DETAIL OF MANTEL, GARDNER-WHITE-PINGREE HOUSE, SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS
Photo by Arthur C. Haskell.

cluding in addition to Ralph Adams Cram (for whom he traveled to Pittsburgh to photograph the Mellon Presbyterian Church) Perry, Shaw & Hepburn; Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson & Abbott; Frohman, Robb & Little; McGuinnis & Walsh; Nelson W. Aldrich; David J. Abrahams & Associates; and Royal Barry Wills.

As so often happens, however, an accident of history helped to shape the specialized reputation which had commenced with the work he did for the Monograph Series. During the Great Depression of the 1930's, Arthur Haskell found himself with few if any commissions. The measures adopted under the Works Progress Administration to provide emergency relief for architects and the related professions resulted, it will be remembered, in the establishment of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Frank Chouteau Brown was employed as a regional director, and turned at once to Arthur Haskell who performed much, if not all, of the Survey's work in the more significant New England areas. It was, as he related, virtually the only professional work he had until the years just before the Second World War when he was asked to take many of the pictures for John Mead Howells' *Architectural Heritage* series and for Janet Waring's *Early American Wall Stencils*.

Despite his continuing contemporary commissions as business revived in the 1940's, Arthur Haskell had carved out a reputation as a photographer of early buildings, and much of his later work was centered in that field: for individuals, for Historical Societies, and for the Preservation Society which by then had appointed Frank Chouteau Brown to its staff.

The reputation was an enviable one. Continually praised for a particular talent

in the manipulation of light and shadow in which he never used flash or flood lighting, his work possessed the rare quality of combining in thoroughly satisfying proportions a straightforward artistry, technical perfection, and documentary scholarship. The great majority of his photographs, possessed always of a razor-like clarity, were distinguished for the beauty of their composition and sweeping thoroughness with which details of interest to the architectural historian were emphasized.

The final chapter in this brief biographical notice is concerned largely with the several thousand film negatives which Arthur Haskell had exposed during the course of his career and which, as the very core of his professional life's work he had carefully filed and catalogued through the years. When in 1957 he and his wife Marion moved from Marblehead to Montpelier, Vermont, the negative collection quite naturally went with them. High on a slightly ridge along Gould Hill Road they began a new life of semiretirement in a pleasant nineteenth-century cottage whose rear windows framed a superb panoramic view of Camel's Hump and the mountains ranging south. The Society's founder, William Sumner Appleton, had always recognized the great value of the Haskell picture collection and had nourished in his staff a hope that our Library might someday acquire these negatives. Arthur Haskell, as a warm friend of the Society, shared this hope, and it was the writer's pleasant responsibility to travel to Montpelier several times to work out the details of an arrangement by which the Society could afford to acquire the collection. This important consummation took place on July 13 of the current year, and during the course of that afternoon, the writer was privileged

to receive, in Arthur Haskell's own words, much of the story which has been recounted here. The real satisfaction which it is hoped and assumed that he felt that day on seeing the transfer of this all-important negative collection to the permanent archives of the Preservation Society had in retrospect a far greater significance; for within a matter of weeks, on August 20, Arthur C. Haskell

quietly passed away at his mountaintop home on Gould Hill Road. For the many who admired the man and his work, there will be lasting enjoyment of the impressions of New England's rich architectural heritage as seen through his eye and lens, and which thus captured, will always represent one of the most important pictorial assets of this region.