

Contesting History in 1899:

The Old Gaol at York, Maine

Historic buildings have been implicated in debates over the content and control of historical interpretation ever since the idea of restoring past architectural monuments became a preoccupation in Europe at the middle of the nineteenth century. In the United States, as Elisabeth Blair MacDougall has suggested, architecture has consistently been seen as “a symbolic expression of a culture’s ideals and achievements and as an instrument for intellectual and moral improvement.”¹ Thus the preserved or restored monument has been credited with a certain power to persuade its public to a given view of history.

As the example of the Old Gaol in York, Maine, illustrates, the nascent preservation movement in New England raised questions about who were the rightful guardians of local history, and about the very con-

tent of that history. Accounts of the origins of early museums such as the Old Gaol tell us that history mattered intensely to many turn-of-the-century New Englanders. These stories also reveal to us the ways in which historical projects became a means of achieving political and social objectives as well.

The notion of contested interpretations of history implies the existence of two ongoing debates—over the contents of narratives concerning a given moment in the past, and between rival groups having particular interests in controlling the dissemination of historical knowledge through institutional means. Conflict over building preservation or restoration has occurred when constituents have disagreed over the validity of the historical perspectives embodied in a given structure. A second sort of battle takes place when one group challenges another group’s very right to shape historical knowledge through preservation.



Fig. 1. Old Gaol, York, Maine, built about 1719, photograph from the foot of "Gaol Hill" in about 1890. All photographs courtesy Old York Historical Society.

Because architectural preservation and restoration require substantial financial resources, as well as expertise in a number of areas, in the history of restoration in the United States these projects have not infrequently been controlled by the possessors of both economic capital and specialized education. Kevin Lynch has described in general terms the economic pattern that, at least in the Northeast part of the United States, produced conditions that were conducive to the appropriation of a region's material history by "outside" groups. Lynch observes that "many now charming New England towns and farming areas" experienced periods of prosperity in the early nineteenth century that were followed by decline as a result of "the westward wave of national expansion": "This stagnation must then be followed by a second period of wealth (whether belonging to

the region itself or brought in by visitors) that can bear the costs of preservation."²

The Piscataqua River region of sea-coast New Hampshire and southern Maine is an area that corresponds to the criteria for appropriation Lynch has outlined.³ In this area, as elsewhere in northern New England beginning in the 1860s, economic depression ensured the survival of examples of colonial architecture that urbanites took up as representations of a more homogeneous and stable past. The first building in the Piscataqua region to be preserved and operated as a museum was the so-called "Old Gaol" (fig. 1). Believed to date from the seventeenth century, the Old Gaol was more likely the result of a series of additions made to two stone cells constructed at the center of York Village in 1719. The most significant expansion provided quarters for the jailer and his

family in a one-and-one-half story, hall-and-parlor house added to the east side of the cells in 1729. The appearance of the building was regularized by the gambrel roof that unified the series of added parts; the stone walls of the cells are still visible in the west elevation of the expanded building.⁴ After the transfer of the seat of York County from the town of York to Alfred in 1832, the use of the Old Gaol for its original function declined, although the jailer's quarters were rented out by the town to individuals who sometimes gave tours of the building as its notoriety spread.⁵ Photographs (fig. 2) of the Old Gaol from the last two decades of the nineteenth century show that during those years the building was dilapidated but tenanted.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, York began to recover from what was generally acknowledged to have been a period of economic decline. As George Alex Emery commented in the 1870s, "While the town had been stationary, if not nearly retrograding, for many years up to a recent date, its advantages as a watering-place have since then attracted increasing attention, and have given a new impulse to its growth."⁶ This was a somewhat optimistic statement of York's fortunes. Between 1850 and 1870 the population of York declined from nearly 3,000 inhabitants to 2,654. Despite increasing tourism, the number of year-round residents in York dipped to 2,463 in 1880 and dropped by twenty more by 1890. By 1910, when the census listed 2,802 people in York, the population had begun to climb,

but it still had not recovered its 1850 level.⁷

A kind of tourism that capitalized on both York's coastline and its historic character was the engine of the town's rebirth around the turn of the twentieth century, as historian Dona Brown has demonstrated.⁸ The Old Gaol occupied a particularly important place in York as a summer resort, both in the literal geographic sense and on a more ideological level. The Old Gaol stands on a rock outcropping above the center of York, in close proximity to the Town Hall and the Congregational Church (fig. 3). These buildings flanked an area that was reworked at the end of the nineteenth century as a village green. Between 1899 and 1904, the Old York Historical and Improvement Society, an organization dominated by wealthy "summer people" who would go on to restore the Old Gaol, planted shrubs and trees around the



Fig. 2. "Old Jail in York, Maine with Old Church Spire,"
photograph by Emma Coleman, 1882.

public buildings and cemetery along York's main street to create the impression of a common green space in the absence of an extensive open area at the center of the town. Some of these efforts at "improvement" were thwarted by the local water company, which destroyed a grass plot constructed in the

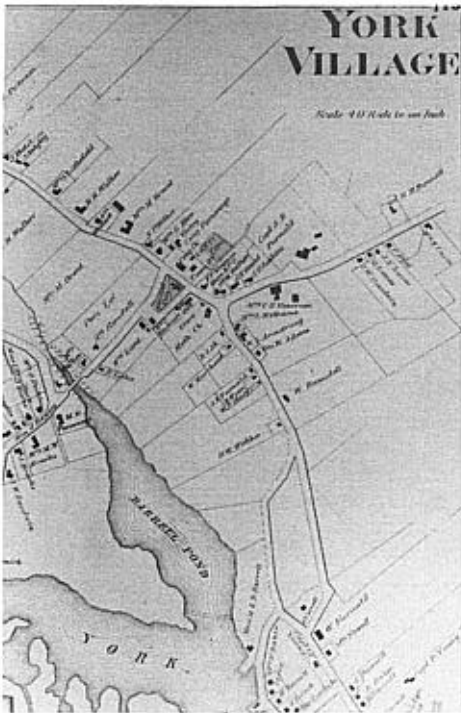


Fig. 3. Detail of York village from 1872 Atlas of York County. Among the buildings labeled are (clockwise from upper left) the Congregational Church, Cemetery, Town Hall, Methodist Church, the "old jail," and "Ancient Cemetery."

middle of the main street, and by vandals who pulled up the trees the Historical and Improvement Society had planted along the road that led from the village to the beach.⁹

This contest over improvements to York's landscape made manifest the tensions that existed between York's "native" population and the vacationers. In his "welcoming" address at the celebration of the town's 250th anniversary in 1902, York resident John C. Stewart explicitly addressed the relationship between the two groups. Stewart suggested that the year-round and summer residents had been passing one another for years "without becoming really acquainted." He continued: "You will, I know, pardon me if I take some

of my time in telling you who we are and what we think of you." Stewart portrayed the populace of York as simple, self-sufficient farmers and mariners whose rural ways were disturbed by the "ruthless invader." Soon, summer people wanted to "purchase our ancestral acres," Stewart reported. "Part with our heritage? Never! We locked our doors and pulled down our curtains that we might not even see you pass! Still you persisted. You wearied us by your constant importunings and in a moment of weakness we yielded." Abruptly, the tone of Stewart's remarks changed and he thanked the recent arrivals for their efforts at "improvement," which had brought new roads, schools, churches, houses, and libraries.¹⁰

Both the newcomers and the natives traded on a mythic view of York's past. The summer residents brought to York an idealized notion of a picturesque "colonial" village center, in which the Old Gaol would become a component. On the other hand, Stewart, and perhaps other longtime residents of York as well, thought of themselves as having a more legitimate claim on the history of York by virtue of being descended from earlier inhabitants. While Stewart asserted that York's landmarks had been snared from their long-standing owners by wealthy outsiders, in fact many of the town's best-known colonial- or federal-period houses were used as summer residences by families with historical ties to the town. For instance, Coventry Hall (1794-96), which is York's finest residence built before the mid-nineteenth century, was lived in summers by the Reverend Frank Sewall, a descendant of the original owner.¹¹

If "invaders" were not actually in con-

trol of all of the most valuable landscapes and monuments, they had nonetheless acted in very public ways to enhance the historical character of the town. Moreover, everyone acknowledged that tourism was responsible for lifting York out of the economic doldrums that attended declines in shipping, shipbuilding, and agriculture after the middle of the nineteenth century. Local resentment of the economic superiority of the “outsiders” was most palpable when the summer residents used their money seemingly to take control of the town’s past.

Despite conflicts between “natives” and “invaders,” wealthy members of both groups could act in consort when united by the interests of their class. Such was the case with the restoration of the Old Gaol, “rescued” in 1899 by a committee headed by two wealthy women, “native” Elizabeth B. Davidson and summer resident Mary S. Perkins. The committee made few physical repairs to the building and concentrated its efforts instead on assembling a collection of objects with local provenance to exhibit in the Old Gaol during the summer months.

The resulting “Museum of Colonial Relics” and vaguely period rooms portrayed two aspects of local history. First, they presented a traditional understanding of colonial history through displays of heraldry, firearms, and artifacts associated with famous men. Second, in the period rooms, women enacted scenes of “colonial” domesticity that included tea parties (fig. 4), spinning thread, and open-hearth cooking.

The Old Gaol provided a space for the interpretation of women’s history and represented an effort on the part of its women organizers to take a public role in the community. Its colonial history was an important aspect of the town’s identity, and the period room proved a powerful method of conveying the lessons of the past. Making the Old Gaol a museum enabled its animators to advance two interpretations of colonial history (with which men and women visitors identified to different degrees and in distinct ways, it is presumed) at the same time that



Fig. 4. *At the Old Gaol Museum in 1907, women attempt to recreate the ritual of “colonial” tea parties against a background of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century objects lent by members of the community.*

the project meant that upper-middle-class women with access to economic capital would control public understanding of local history, at least to the extent that it was represented in the building. The architectural envelope, which included jail cells as well as domestic spaces, was ideally suited to illustrate both the supposedly superior penal system of the colonial period and the idealized colonial home, which during the last quar-



Fig. 5. *Garden Party, York, Maine, 1899. The clothing includes both "colonial" costumes and historic clothes from earlier in the nineteenth century.*

ter of the nineteenth century was perceived as the setting for the cultivation of moral qualities that were found lacking in contemporary urban society. Several interpretations of local history could be incorporated into the Old Gaol because it had spaces that represented both public and private life and because preservation had not yet become professionalized to the extent that women were excluded from the field.¹²

Nonetheless, these women failed to receive sole credit for the project publicly. A 1901 article on the Old Gaol attributed the idea to William Dean Howells, a summer resident of York during the 1890s and editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*:

It was Mr. William Dean Howells who suggested that the old jail ought to be saved...

"This is the oldest public building in this part of the world," remarked Mr. Howells, "and it is a very interesting place. Why can't something be done about it?"

One of the ladies of York, Mrs. Davidson, the banker's wife, was so impressed by these words that she induced her husband to hire the jail, and then, in co-operation with Mrs. Newton Perkins (who owns and lives in the oldest private house in the town), Mrs. Davidson undertook to get up some entertainment to secure money for repairs [fig. 5].

"Let's have a lawn party at my house," said Mrs. Perkins. "Well," said Mr. Howells, slipping a bill into her hand, "I want to be your first patron."¹³

This piece of writing suppressed the less progressive motivations behind the preservation project, which were noted in 1952 by a Mrs. Tabor, the daughter of James T. and Elisabeth B. Davidson. Tabor recalled that her father, whose home was adjacent to the Old Gaol, "was annoyed by the people who lived in the Gaol at that time," "undesirable neighbors" who "took in to board some of the rough foreigners who had been brought here to work on the railroad." Tabor continued:

An opportunity arose and Mr. Davidson had a chance to get them out of the gaol by renting it himself, which he did. It appears that about this time Mr. Davidson, William Dean Howells, and Mrs. Newton Perkins met at some social function and discussed the possibility of rescuing the old gaol. Mr. Howells immediately offered a donation to start the ball rolling, and Mrs. Perkins said that she would give a garden party at her place, the proceeds to go to this project. This was the start of the Old Gaol Museum.¹⁴

To remove the immigrants from the Old Gaol, it was only necessary for Davidson to rent the building himself, but Davidson and his affluent collaborators went further: they contributed to the larger objective of their class, which was to give York a more convincingly colonial appearance. The Old Gaol, a well-known landmark by the turn of the century, was an important component of the mythologized York. Not only did it stand at the center of the village; it also spoke of a disciplined colonial community.

The importance attached to the Old Gaol above other local landmarks helps to explain the animosity felt for the “foreigners” living in the jailer’s quarters. Immigrants represented only a tiny proportion of the town’s population. Whereas other cities in northern New England experienced great influxes of immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century, the fact that York had virtually no industry meant that the town could offer little permanent employment to unskilled laborers, who went elsewhere in southern Maine. Local historian Charles Edward Banks acknowledged this demographic phenomenon in 1931 when he wrote that “York was still in the sole possession of its ancient peoples” in the mid-nineteenth

century. Of six hundred families living in the town in 1850, he continued, only ten were from other states, and none were European immigrants. Banks acknowledged that “alien immigration has never been a problem in this homogeneous Anglo-Saxon community.”¹⁵ The census returns for 1910 corroborate the claim of homogeneity: among the population of 2,802, the number of native whites with native parents amounted to 2,290. An additional 263 inhabitants were native whites born to foreign or mixed foreign and native-born parents. Less than ten percent of the population consisted of foreign-born whites (244), and there were only five African Americans or Asians listed as living in York.¹⁶

The “rescue” of the Old Gaol from immigrant workers is only one example of the use of preservation to disassociate minority groups from monuments associated with the history of the dominant (Anglo-Saxon) culture. The “rough foreigners” in York, which was otherwise a virtually homogeneous community, were ousted from the Old Gaol because of prejudice but also, I would assert, because they were not considered to have any particular claim on the history of the community. At the public celebration of the 250th anniversary of the town of York in 1902, speaker Thomas Nelson Page, a novelist and local summer resident, contrasted the town’s original colonists and their descendants, “all of the same race” and all sharing “the same history,” with immigrants elsewhere who “have not the past that we have, but... bred under tyranny, have suddenly found themselves in a liberty which they know not how to appreciate or to preserve.”¹⁷ Not only could immigrants not be counted on to preserve the political traditions of the

United States, Page might have continued, but they were hardly reliable guardians of the architectural monuments that were associated with the birth of American democracy in the colonial period.

The example of the Old Gaol illustrates how preservation became a ground on which various interpreters of history clashed. Differences between longtime residents and recent arrivals that were based on economic inequities erupted into disputes over who should control York's history, yet the elite of both groups were united when members of a minority group installed themselves in the very heart of the town's historic center.

The historical narratives that are presented in the preserved buildings of the United States promote certain ideologies concerning the development of democracy, the role of the home in the eighteenth century, and many others. However, it is less often acknowledged that preservation was used to advance certain social objectives that make us uncomfortable today, among them the exclusion of minority groups from certain areas. It is time to contest the history of preservation itself, to go beyond the analysis of history as disputed intellectual property, to see how the restoration of historic buildings made them instruments in political, economic, and social struggles.

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NOTES

- 1 Elisabeth Blair MacDougall, "Before 1870: Founding Fathers and Amateur Historians," in *The Architectural Historian in America*, ed. Elisabeth Blair MacDougall (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990), 15.
- 2 Kevin Lynch, *What Time is This Place?* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press, 1972), 31. Other historians argue that in addition to westward migration, variations in weather patterns in southern Maine during the nineteenth century also contributed to the decline of agriculture in the area. See David C. Smith, William R. Baron, Anne E. Bridges, Janet TeBrake, and Harold W. Borns, Jr., "Climate Fluctuation and Agricultural Change in Southern and Central New England, 1776-1880," in *Maine: A History through Selected Readings*, eds. David C. Smith and Edward O. Schriver (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1985), 467-76.
- 3 See Kevin D. Murphy, "The Politics of Preservation: Historic House Museums in the Piscataqua Region," in *"A Noble and Dignified Stream": The Piscataqua Region in the Colonial Revival, 1860-1930*, eds. Sarah L. Giffen and Kevin D. Murphy (York, Maine: Old York Historical Society, 1992), 193-204.
- 4 On the structure of the Old Gaol, see John Hecker, "Historical and Structural Analysis, Old Gaol, York, Maine" (typescript, Old York Historical Society, 1976), and Tom Jester, "Structural Analysis and Documentation Prepared... for the Old York Historical Society" (typescript, Old York Historical Society, 1988).
- 5 See Murphy, "Old Gaol Museum," in *"A Noble and Dignified Stream,"* 205.
- 6 George Alex Emery, *Ancient City of Gorgeana and Modern Town of York (Maine)*, 2d ed. (1873; reprint, York, Maine: Courant, 1894), viii.
- 7 *The Seventh Census of the United States: 1850*

- (Washington, D.C.: Robert Armstrong, 1853); *The Statistics of the Population of the United States, Ninth Census* [1870] (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1872); *Population of the United States, Eleventh Census of the U.S. by Minor Civil Divisions, 1890* (Washington, D.C.: Dept. of the Interior, Census Office, 1891); *Thirteenth Census of the United States [1910]. Abstract of the Census with Supplement for Maine* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912).
- 8 Dona Brown, "Purchasing the Past: Summer People and the Transformation of the Piscataqua Region in the Nineteenth Century," in *"A Noble and Dignified Stream,"* 3-14.
 - 9 Sarah L. Giffen, "Old York Historical and Improvement Society," in *"A Noble and Dignified Stream,"* 91-93.
 - 10 Hon. John C. Stewart, "Citizens' Welcome," in *Agamenticus, Bristol, Gorgeana, York: An Oration Delivered by the Hon. James Phinney Baxter ... on the Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Town* (York, Maine: Old York Historical and Improvement Society, 1904), 99-101.
 - 11 On the issue of summer residents with ties to York, see Dona Brown, "Purchasing the Past," 10-11. On Coventry Hall (the Judge David Sewall House) see Richard M. Candee, "The Appearance of Enterprise and Improvement: Architecture and the Coastal Elite of Southern Maine," in *"Agreeable Situations": Society, Commerce, and Art in Southern Maine, 1780-1830*, ed. Laura F. Sprague (Kennebunk, Maine: The Brick Store Museum, 1987), 75, 77, 78-79; Frank D. Marshall, "Historical Sketch of York," in *Agamenticus, Bristol, Gorgeana, York*, 72.
 - 12 On the professionalization of preservation, see Gail Lee Dubrow, "Restoring a Female Presence, New Goals in Historic Preservation," in *Architecture, A Place for Women*, ed. Ellen Perry Berkeley (Washington, D.C., and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).
 - 13 Pauline Carrington Bouvé, "Women Welcome Visitors Where Witches Were Confined," *The Sunday Herald* (Boston), August 25, 1901, 37.
 - 14 Old Gaol Museum, Reports and Minutes, July 11, 1952, Old York Historical Society, York, Maine. I am grateful to Frances H. Lord and Sarah L. Giffen for making this account known to me.
 - 15 Charles Edward Banks, *History of York, Maine* (1931; reprint, Baltimore: Regional Publishing Co., 1967), 2:385-86.
 - 16 *Thirteenth Census of the United States [1910]*.
 - 17 "Thomas Nelson Page's Address," in *Agamenticus, Bristol, Gorgeana, York*, 116-17.