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Inside SPNEA:

Of Pointed Arches

SPNEA's Gothic Revival symposium, its Bowen house in Connecticut, and its collections reveal people's long fascination with this medieval style.

Nineteen ninety-six marks the 150th anniversary of the construction of Roseland Cottage, an SPNEA property also known as the Bowen House in Woodstock, Connecticut. To celebrate the occasion, SPNEA held its eighty-fifth annual meeting at the property in June. In November, the second Abbott Lowell Cummings Symposium focused on various aspects of the Gothic Revival style in America.

The Gothic Revival style in architecture and decorative arts had several manifestations from the eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, both in Europe and in this country. In the eighteenth century the taste for Gothick, as it was commonly spelled at the time, did not rely on


an understanding of mediaeval architecture, building technique, or decoration. Rather, it was a fanciful decoration applied to a fashionable piece of furniture, such as a pointed arch on a mantelpiece or the splat of a Chippendale chair.

During the nineteenth century, a more serious interest in the style developed, especially in England. Augustus W. N. Pugin (1812–52), the pioneering proponent of an archaeologically correct Gothic style, thought of it as the true Christian architecture; historically, the style had been expressed principally in the design of European ecclesiastical buildings from the middle of the twelfth century until the beginning of the Renaissance. Pugin disapproved of decoration applied for its own sake; ornament should be organic or true to the underlying structure. His designs

and theories became particularly influential in the United States during the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

At midcentury, however, the most well-known advocate of the Gothic style in America was Andrew Jackson Downing (1815–52). His books on architecture, landscape, and furnishing became manuals for the American consumer. Downing promoted the Gothic cottage as the ideal building style in which to live, especially for “men of imagination—men whose aspirations never leave them at rest—men whose ambition and energy will give them no peace within the mere bounds of rationality.” Such men, Downing believed, needed a country house whose steeply pitched roof and gables and “unsymmetrical and capri-

cious forms” matched their “originality, boldness, energy, and variety of character.” Still, like Pugin, he disapproved of forcing Gothic design onto most household furnishings. Popular taste often disagreed, and a pointed arch or quatrefoil applied to an ordinary object made it fashionably gothic.

This installment of *Inside SPNEA* focuses on a variety of objects that date to this mid-nineteenth-century period. While the Bowen House is the single largest statement of the Gothic Revival style in SPNEA’s collection, objects in other SPNEA properties, the study collection, and the Library and Archives illustrate how pervasive the style was in architectural design, the decorative arts, printed material, and even household accessories. 



Roseland Cottage, unidentified artist, c. 1847, watercolor on paper. Framed: H. 31"; W. 28 1/2"; Unframed: H. 12 3/4"; W. 17 3/4". 1970.442 Gift of Margaret Carson Holt.

Roseland Cottage was built in Woodstock, Connecticut, as a summer residence for Henry Chandler Bowen (1813–96) and his wife Lucy Tappan (1825–63) in 1846. By that date, Bowen, a Woodstock native, had gone to New York City and become a successful dry goods merchant, marrying his former employer’s daughter after he had established his own business. Although the house sits on a typical New England common, it is very much a product of New York in its origins. It was designed by Joseph C. Wells (1814–60), an English architect working in New York City, and many of the building materials and most of the furniture were shipped from the

city as well. Wells designed many public buildings in the Gothic style, and a notice of his death published in *The Crayon* praised his residences as “remarkable for domestic conveniences and good taste.”

This house portrait, appropriately surrounded by a frame with gothic motifs, shows the residence shortly after it was completed. The fence and the barn, to which a bowling alley was attached, were also constructed in the Gothic Revival style. The grounds are landscaped and include a garden surrounded by a lattice fence to the left of the house.



Settee, attributed to Thomas Brooks (1811–87), Brooklyn, New York, c. 1846, black walnut. H. 60⁵/₈" ; W. 81" ; D. 20¹/₄". 1970.438 Gift of Margaret Carson Holt.

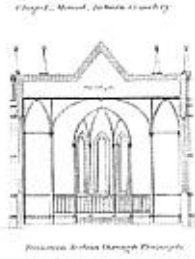
The furniture the Bowens chose for their new summer residence complemented the style of its architecture. Bowen's ledger for February 13, 1847, lists "Mr. Brooks bill of furniture [\$] 1085 [.] 21." Mr. Brooks was probably Thomas Brooks, a Brooklyn cabinetmaker, and the substantial sum indicates that he probably supplied a good deal of the furniture. This triple-back settee is the largest of ten pieces of a suite of furniture that remain in the double parlor at Roseland.

A. J. Downing's distinction between fashionable furniture and furniture in "correct taste" may serve as a clue to why later generations of the Bowen family did not replace the parlor set. Downing wrote that furniture reflecting the latest fashion loses its charm quickly after it goes out of style while furniture in correct taste, because it is designed to be in keeping with the style of the room where it is placed, "never loses its power of pleasing, but only grows dearer to us by age and association."



*Chest of Drawers, New York, painting attributed to C. N. Smith, c. 1846, painted pine. H. 89¹/₄"; W. 44"; D. 20¹/₄". 1970.461
Gift of Margaret Carson Holt.*

Beginning in the 1840s and continuing for the rest of the century, sets of painted furniture were popular for furnishing bedrooms, especially in country houses. The typical set, as illustrated in Downing's *The Architecture of Country Houses*, consisted of a bedstead, bureau, commode, small table, and a set of four chairs. The Bowens ordered two identical bedroom sets in the Gothic style for Roseland, and pieces from both remain in the house. Included is this bureau with its original trompe l'oeil painting. The painted graining turns the pine into more expensive oak; the realistic shading makes the bureau's simple construction appear to be more complicated joinery of framed panels on the drawer fronts and on the sides of the piece. The set also includes a bed and a washstand with a marble top, which, when removed, reveals the identity of the talented craftsman who decorated the set. A pencil inscription reads "C. N. SMITH / PAinter / 86 Fulton."

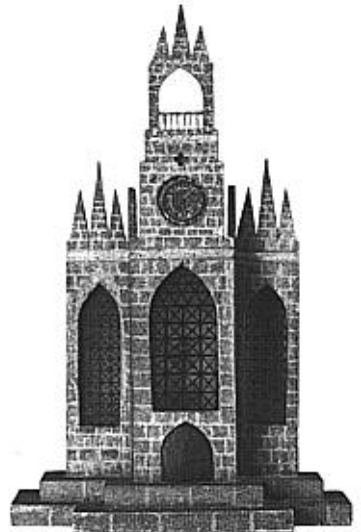


Competition Drawing, Gridley J. F. Bryant (1816–99), 1843, ink and watercolor on paper. H. 27 1/4"; W. 19 1/8". SPNEA Library and Archives. Gift of William Sturgis Bigelow.

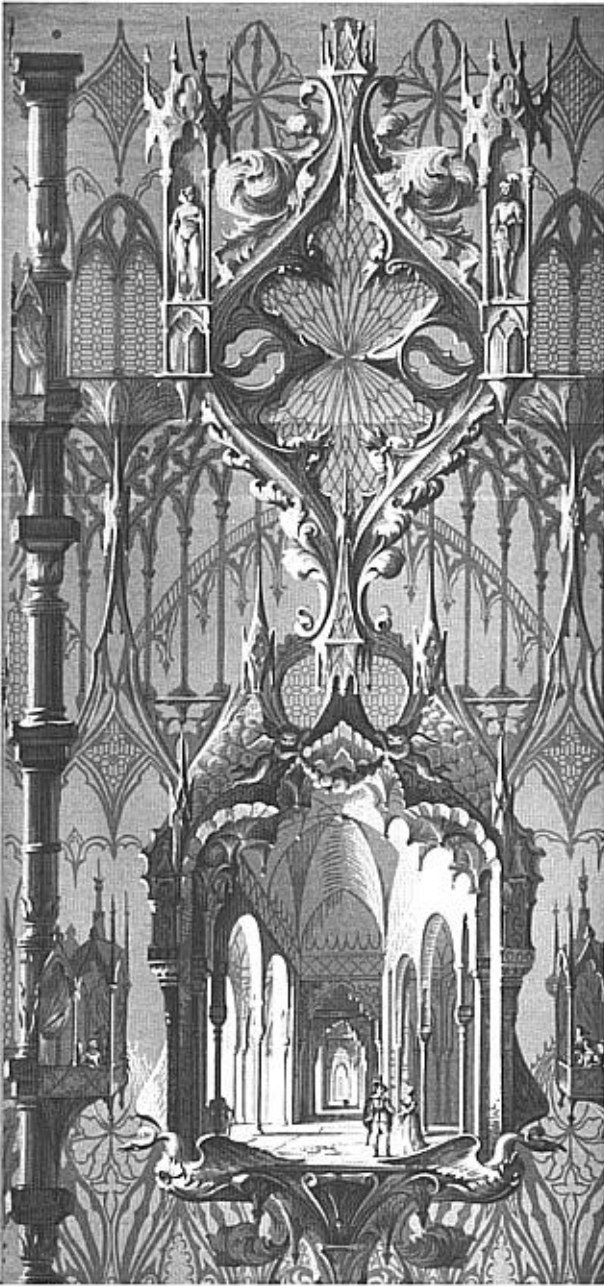
In 1843, a competition was held for the design of a chapel to be built in Mount Auburn Cemetery, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, one of the first cemeteries in the country to be landscaped in the picturesque style. Drawings by four entrants are in SPNEA's Library and Archives. All of the proposed designs were in the Gothic style. This example was submitted by Gridley J. F. Bryant, who went on to design several Boston landmarks, including the Charles Street Jail and Old City Hall. Bryant submitted two large sheets of plans and elevations. The one illustrated depicts a section through the transept and an elevation of the front facade. Bryant's elevation is the only one of the composition drawings that puts the proposed building in the context of the landscape.

Bryant's design, like those submitted by Richard Bond and Ammi B. Young, was not selected. The successful design is unsigned but is presumed to have been done by Jacob Bigelow, the cemetery's chief proponent. All of the drawings were given to SPNEA in 1927 by the estate of Bigelow's grandson, Dr. William Sturgis Bigelow.

When it was presented to SPNEA in 1917, this Gothic Revival facade was identified as a model of Trinity Church on Summer Street in Boston. The granite church, designed by George M. Brimmer and built in 1829, did indeed have a soaring central tower with a large window, but few other features of the model correspond with photographs of the structure taken before it was destroyed by the Great Boston Fire of 1872. Close inspection of the area behind the tower reveals that the object may have been made as an elaborate watch holder rather than a model. A small hook which could hold a pocket watch is fixed just above the round opening where the toy clock face is now mounted; just below this opening, the tower support is hollowed out to cradle the watch.

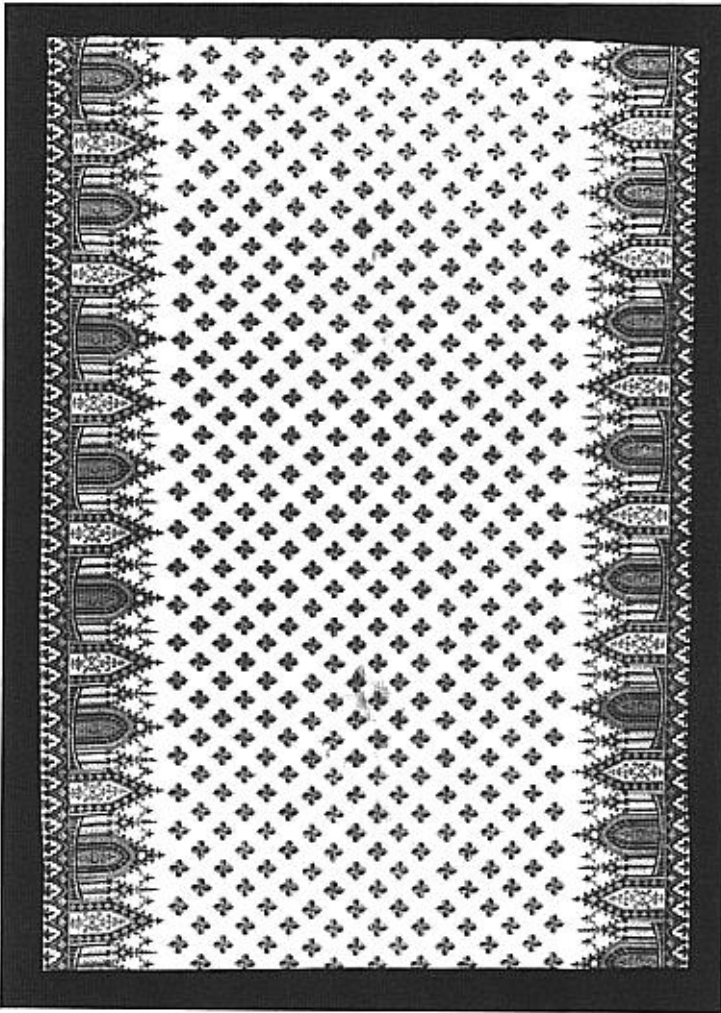


Watch Holder, W. Oliver, Dorchester, Massachusetts, 1820–30, painted wood. H. 13 7/8"; W. 8 1/2"; D. 4". 1917.398 Gift of W. W. Townsend.



Wallpaper, France, 1835–45, block-printed in white and shades of tan on continuous paper. Printed width 18⁵/₈”; repeat 43”. 1921.123 Gift of Ellen S. Bacon.

Gothic Revival wallpapers were immensely popular in the United States and were often used to “modernize” an earlier house. The most elaborate examples were produced by French wallpaper manufacturers who excelled in printing complicated designs with three-dimensional effects. This example is almost a lexicon of the Gothic style. The forty-three-inch repeat includes tracery, pointed arches, pinnacles, columns, crockets, and a variety of vaulting techniques. Thrown into the romantic confusion are figures dressed in both medieval and Elizabethan garb. The great promoters of Gothic architecture, Pugin and Downing, both deplored such random and incorrect combinations of Gothic elements in the decorative arts, especially in wallpaper. Pugin called such designs “miserable patterns,” and Downing could have had this particular wallpaper in mind when he cautioned his readers to avoid “all flashy and gaudy patterns, . . . all imitations of church windows, magnificent carved work, pinnacles, etc.”



Window Shade, England, 1850–1865, printed cotton, H. 31"; W. 48". 1945.151 Gift of Miss Lillias Page.

Fabrics printed with designs incorporating Gothic motifs survive in smaller quantities than wallpapers. In this example, the field of quatrefoils and the borders of intricate arches and tracery are block-printed in three shades of brown—a typical color palate of the 1850s. The fabric was used as a roller-blind or window shade. The sides and bottom are

hemmed and the top would have been tacked to a wooden roller. The shade may have been raised and lowered using a cord attached to the roller on one side, although evidence of a pull in the center suggests the roller may have been a patent spring roller, newly invented in the 1850s.



Mantle Clock, probably France, c. 1850, alabaster and brass; stamped "FC" on back of works. H. 19"; W. 7 1/4"; D. 4 7/8". 1941.1583 Gift of Miss Hattie Baldwin.

This alabaster clock stood in front of a gilt-framed mirror on the parlor mantle of the home built in 1852 for Mr. and Mrs. James W. Baldwin on what is now Massachusetts Avenue in Cambridge. Its intricately carved and pierced surfaces were protected from dust and coal dirt by a tall glass globe. Gothic detail abounds on this miniature cathedral, even to the trefoils used to decorate the bracket feet of the base on which it sits. While the ormolu dial represents the cathedral's stained-glass window, its classical detail would be more appropriate for a time-piece in the Empire style.



Vegetable Dish, England, 1835–1850, impressed "ADAMS" for William Adams & Sons. H. 2 1/2"; W. 12 3/8". 1971.1045 Gift of Ralph May.

Sir Walter Scott's Waverly novels were a major force in popularizing romantic images of the medieval period. English ceramic manufacturers were quick to capitalize on this interest and produced a variety of tablewares that conveyed these images to a wide group of consumers. The transfer-printed scenes could depict such actual medieval buildings as Tintern Abbey or romantic fantasies such as Fonthill Abbey, the Gothic folly William Beckford began building about 1800. Between 1835 and 1850 the largest percentage of the scenes on blue and white Staffordshire were purely imaginary. The central design of this vegetable dish includes many of the stock images of the romantic movement—a calm lake in a picturesque landscape, a castle tower, and church ruins, all being observed by a group of people at leisure.



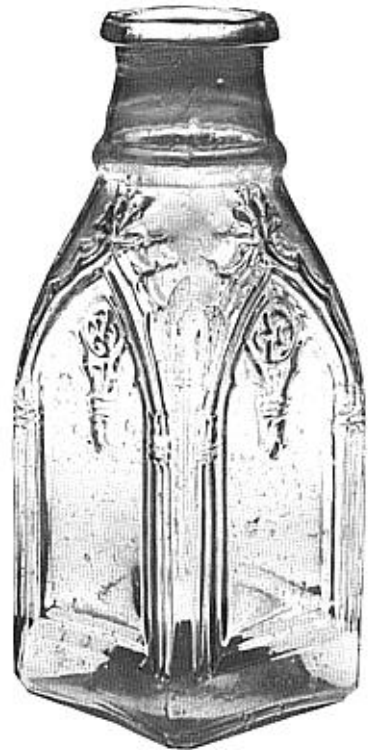
Sugar Bowl, Boston and Sandwich Glass Works, Sandwich, Massachusetts, 1835–50, glass.

H. 5³/₈"; W. 4¹/₄". 1942.2512 Gift of Constance McCann Betts, Helena W. Guest, Frasier W. McCann.

According to Kenneth Wilson in *American Glass, 1760–1930*, quantities of fragments of pressed-glass Gothic sugar bowls and covers have been excavated at the site of the Boston and Sandwich glass factory. The factory produced this immensely popular form in a variety of colors, this example being translucent white alabaster glass. For some reason the company did not make a matching cream pitcher. Four differently detailed pointed arches are repeated twice on the sides of the octagonal footed bowl and matching cover.

Pickle Jar, United States, 1850–60, glass. H. 8¹/₂"; W. 3"; D. 3". 1942.254 Gift of Constance McCann Betts, Helena W. Guest, Frasier W. McCann.

Perhaps the most utilitarian objects that were embellished with Gothic motifs were pickle jars. A number of glass factories in the United States manufactured pickle jars in varying sizes for commercially produced pickles. Characteristically molded of green glass (which enhanced the color of the contents), each of the four or six sides was ornamented with a pointed arch. One side usually had an undecorated arch in which the manufacturer's label could be pasted. Although the Gothic detail grew simpler over the years, the form persisted into the 1920s.





Pamphlet Cover, Sorrento Wood Carving Company, Boston, Massachusetts, 1872, printed paper. SPNEA Library and Archives.

One of the most common means of transmitting any style is through printed images, and the Gothic Revival style was no exception. Gothic tracery embellished a variety of printed material, from book covers to calling cards. A simple pointed arch surrounded by stylized foliage was boldly printed in red on this pamphlet cover. The illustration shows a woman creating a piece of fancy woodworking with a saw. The finished product could be

corner shelf, a bracket, the back for a needlework wall pocket, or any one of a number of fancy knick-knacks that were hung on the walls of the Victorian home. By the 1870s, when this pamphlet was printed, more archaeologically correct Gothic detail was being incorporated into buildings and furniture. Yet such decorative pieces as this perpetuated the popular image of the Gothic Revival style of the 1840s and 1850s.



Fig. 1. *The Massachusetts Agricultural College Class of 1878 on the steps of North College. Courtesy University of Massachusetts Special Collections and Archives.*