Colonial or Colonial Revival?

Clarissa F. Dillon, Ph.D.

With the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, our independence was accepted. Our focus shifted from looking east to England to looking west, across the Appalachian Mountains and with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, across the Mississippi River.

In the 19th century, progress was the name of the game. Anything colonial was considered old-fashioned and of no value; an example was the destruction of the Graff House [sometimes mistakenly referred to as the "Gratz" house - Ed.] where the Declaration of Independence was written. Furniture and household objects were discarded or hidden away in attics.

> *As all old American families too well know, there came a time when old ideals having slipped away, like children's outworn garments, it was long esteemed a weakness to have a care for heirlooms as such.*[1]

Hearths were boarded up so cook-stoves could be installed. Fashions in clothing changed radically.

With the approach of our centennial in 1876, attitudes changed again. The nation had survived a horrible, bloody civil war and the losers were under the control of federal troops. Our 100th birthday was viewed as an opportunity to celebrate our glorious past, and is considered to mark the start of the Colonial Revival.

In 1975, a reproduction of the Graff House was built where the original had stood. Many discarded household items were long gone, but the contents of attics up and down the East Coast could be retrieved, displayed, and interpreted. Many people did not know what these odd objects were called or how they had been used. Colonial men and women were long dead and only memories survived, handed down as family stories and available for use. In the 1880s, a New England woman, Alice Morse Earle, busied herself collecting information that identified 18th-century artifacts, then spreading this information for people to use. She was a great fan of "oral history" and deliberately did not use information valued by today's scholars:

> *GROWN folk had in colonial days a habit of keeping diaries and making notes in interleaved almanacs, but they are not of great value to the historian ... they are instead barren of accounts of happenings, and descriptions of surroundings, and are chiefly devoted to weather reports and moral and religious reflections, both original and in the form of sermon and lecture notes.*[2]

That may have been true of New England diaries, but those kept by both men and women in 18th-century Pennsylvania are treasure troves detailing lives of ordinary people. All references to diapers were omitted when extracts of one diary

The Graff House, at 7th and Market Streets in Center City, Philadelphia, was the boarding house in which Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence. Originally built in 1775 by bricklayer Joseph Graff, Jr., the building was reconstructed as Declaration House in 1975, prior to the U.S. bicentennial celebration, to memorialize one of the nation's most important founding events, and is now part of Independence National Historical Park. Prior to its demolition in 1883, the original building had been joined with an adjacent building and raised a story higher, more than doubling its size, as can be seen in the 1854 McClees & Germon photo below.

ABOVE: 2013 photo – Beyond My Ken [Creative Commons license BY-SA 4.0];
BELOW:1854 photo – The Library Company of Philadelphia

were published but all were included when the entire diary was published in 1991.[3] If descendants made diaries available, they edited them, removing details felt to be too private or inappropriate for public perusal.

Alice Morse Earle did more than just identify objects and describe how they were used. Here is an example:

> *The bake-kettle, which in some communities was also called a Dutch oven, was preferred for baking bread. It was a strong kettle, standing, of course, on stout stumpy legs, and when in use was placed among the hot coals and closely covered with a strong metal, convex cover, on which coals were also closely heaped. Such perfect rolls, such biscuit, such shortcake, as issued from the heaped-up bake-kettle can never be equalled by other methods of cooking.*[4]

The description and the way a bake-kettle was used are fine, but there are some flights of fancy as well. Baking bread in one will only produce a single loaf—very inefficient when feeding even a small family. Bake-ovens, which began to appear as soon as settlements had stabilized, were commonly used for bread as well as many other baked goods. And then there are Ms. Earle's comments about the products. Not only have I used a bake-kettle to produce cornbread that was bitter, damp, and gritty, I can produce wonderful baked goods in my modern gas-oven with a thermostat to control the heat. So much for "can never be equalled."

In 19th-century America, clothing for men, women, and children was generally made of cotton, produced in the South; after the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, the short-fiber variety was available to be made into cloth in New England textile mills. The work in these mills was hard and required long hours at spinning-jennies and water-powered looms, but the work was eagerly sought after by farm girls. They were used to hard work and long hours, so the conditions were not as daunting to them as we might think. The great draw was the pay! Even low pay was more than they had received on farms at home.

These enormous changes in textile production made clothing cheaper and more available than the garments produced by hand. Not everyone, including Ms. Earle, was pleased with the changes:

> *When a people spin and weave and make their own dress, you have in this very fact the assurance that they are home-bred, home-living, home-loving people. You are sure, also, that the lives of the women are home-centered.*[5]

But Alice Morse Earle has distorted the past in her assumption that women were "home-centered." The Colonial Revival focus on women as keepers of the home, a peaceful, restful retreat from the work-oriented lives of men in factories and business outside of the home is inaccurate. Colonial women worked alongside their husbands in foundries, shops, textile operations, and more. Deborah Franklin, for example, ran her husband's print shop when he was off in England and France. He valued her expertise:

> *It was lucky for me that I had one [a wife] so much dispos'd to industry and frugality as myself. She assisted me cheerfully in my business, folding and stitching pamphlets, tending shop, purchasing old linen rags for the paper-makers, etc., etc. We kept no idle servants.*[6]

It sounds as if Deborah not only worked in the shop, but also did the housework. If she did have help, she had to supervise the work to be sure it was properly done. Her work was described in Colonial Revival terms very differently by Ms. Earle:

> *The average mother took great pride in having her floor spotless, in making the clothing for her children as well as for her husband, and in collecting china, brass, pewter, or possible silver for her pantry shelves.*[7]

Although the author said "average" she really meant "better sort." One aspect of Colonial Revival is the presentation of the "top one percent." Houses of the rich and famous, like Mount Vernon and Monticello, were shown, with an undercurrent of "and this is how the colonists lived." As a 20th-century historian has said, presentation and interpretation

> *... did not rely on documentary evidence for their colonial restoration, but based their work instead on tradition and memory, romanticizing, sentimentalizing, and idealizing the images of the colonial styles, copying only the most elite feature.*[8]

When we celebrated the Bicentennial, the emphasis nationwide was on the lives of ordinary people. Historians investigated colonial lives, using diaries, account books, correspondence, etc., looking for the mundane details of ordinary life.

With the Centennial, along with Colonial Revival descriptions of colonial women, their clothing, and their lives as "quaint" and "dainty," additional flights of fancy were applied to tools and utensils.

> *If one of these flax-wheels could speak today, it would sing a tale of the patient industry of the tiring work of our grandmothers, even when they were little children, which ought never to be forgotten.*[9]

It is sometimes possible to take an 18th-century source and compare it to the way Alice Morse Earle used it. The Swedish visitor, Peter Kalm, spent several years in the mid-Atlantic colonies and kept an extensive travel journal filled with descriptions, comments from and about residents, and his own observations. In Philadelphia in 1748, he wrote

> *There is a plant here, from the berries of which they make a kind of wax or tallow ... The berries ... are gathered in autumn ... and are then thrown into a kettle or pott full of boiling water; by this means their fat melts out, floats at the top of the water, and may be skimmed off ... The tallow, as soon as it is congealed, looks like common tallow or wax, but has a dirty green colour; it is for that*

> *reason melted over again, and refined, by which means it acquires a fine and pretty transparent green colour ... these candles are made use of by poor people who live in the neighbourhood of a place where the bushes grow, and have not cattle enough to kill in order to supply them with a sufficient quantity of tallow.*[10]

Mr. Kalm does mention the pleasant smell given off when extinguished, but his account is mostly about making the candles and their use by poorer people.

Alice Morse Earle's presentation is very different, even though she used Kalm as her source.

> *[the scent]. .. of bayberry, whenever I pass it, seems to awaken in me an hereditary memory, to recall a life of two centuries ago. I recall the autumns of trial and of promise in our early history, and the bayberry fields are peopled with children in Puritan garb, industriously gathering the tiny waxed fruit. Equally full of sentiment is the scent of my burning bayberry candles, which were made last autumn in an old colony town.*[11]

Colonial Revival was not only a period of nostalgia. It was a reaction to the conditions of the time in which it flourished. Descendants of the early settlers in the English colonies were distressed by the "new" Americans. The immigrants flooding into the country were from southern and eastern Europe. They were not Protestants and their cultures were very different. They settled in cities and were welcomed as workers in the factories. Immigration, urbanization, and industrialization were creating an America very different from its colonial past.

Because of the Civil War, Southern contributions to colonial events were not presented; Washington and Jefferson could not be overlooked, but they were lauded as Americans, not as southerners or Virginians.

There are some ugly undercurrents swirling throughout the Colonial Revival movement. A reprint of a Colonial Revival book is currently on sale through mail-order catalogues and is described as presenting a picture of colonial life. Here are two selections about Virginia:

> *... the pure Anglo-Saxon blood which was once capable of such eminence, is still there; but it may remain in the indolence of the climate and the terrible incubus of the free negro [sic], with whom social equality is impossible and whose influence is degrading .. .in a community where the mass of the people is composed of negroes and indolent whites the degenerating influence can scarcely be held in check by any form of environment, short of an oligarchy.*[12]

> *... in the civil war the fidelity of the negroes to their former masters was remarkable, for the negroes' blood had been diluted and his character changed. The gift of freedom has, however, developed vices in him which were unknown in colonial times. He had not then the mad passion for raping white women and children, which causes so many lynchings in the South, nor did he show the incredible criminal instincts which are now his characterization.*[13]

Colonial Revival attitudes glorified the northern European colonial immigrants at the expense of everybody else.

The Colonial Revival period can be viewed in three stages. The first began with the Centennial in 1876 and continued until World War I. When that war ended, people's attention shifted to other interests—the "roaring twenties," Prohibition, women's suffrage, and others. When the Wall Street crash occurred, many people found themselves without the money they once had, but they still had their ancestors. This second phase of Colonial Revival lasted until the outbreak of World War II. At the end of that war, the third phase began. It was characterized by the construction of huge suburban developments filled with "colonial" houses. Furnishings and accessories from stores like Ethan Allen continued this style. When the Bicentennial loomed, the sources and resources available were often materials from Alice Morse Earle and others like her.

To celebrate the Bicentennial, many people found an old house in the community to restore, for programs, demonstrations, and interpretation. "Colonial herb gardens," with yards of box hedges, were created, although such gardens are not "colonial."

Clothing for docents was invented instead of being based on research. Some 18th-century garments had survived, in attics and storage areas of houses large enough to provide the necessary space. These articles of clothing were usually ball gowns or wedding dresses, not what was worn by ordinary people as they went about their work. Sometimes these surviving garments were put on by descendants, who often look uncomfortable or embarrassed about their appearance. The clothing will never look right unless it is worn with appropriate items from the skin out.

As 1976 approached, some historic sites, bolstered by academic research into the lives of ordinary people, began to try to recreate these lives. The diaries, formerly considered of little or no value, became important; documentation became critical. Clothing for docents and site workers changed; research in this area became important and continues to this day. Many serious historians are no longer applying 19th- or 20th-century practices and attitudes to 18th-century life. Getting into the mind-set of a colonial person is not easy, but the attempt should be made, if someone is trying to interpret colonial life.

There were many impressive examples of Colonial Revival architecture in our area. Many are still standing and they are worth studying and enjoying in their own right.[14] We should remember, however, that they are not colonial. We have an interesting example here. After the Wayne family sold Waynesborough, a later owner added things, like settees on either side of the front door, and altered the dormers to make the house "more colonial." When the property was acquired by the Landmark Society, those alterations were expensively

removed, to put the house back into its colonial appearance. When a garden was considered for the site, it was first planned as a Colonial Revival herb garden. After finding out that a kitchen garden was more accurate, the plans were changed and a small kitchen garden was installed. It is properly and lovingly maintained by volunteers.

Not all historic house kitchens have removed the musket or rifle and powder-horn from the wall above the hearth. Some people like it there and think it's appropriate, but as a practicing hearth-cook, I do NOT want a firearm and explosive black powder hanging over my pots, kettles, and me. Imagine what could happen...

Hearth in the restored William Garrett House at Historic Sugartown, in Malvern, with a rifle, but thankfully no powder horn, hanging above the mantlepiece. *Courtesy @ 2019 John O. Senior*

Bibliography

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1955.

Butler, William. "Another City upon a Hill: ... " in *The Colonial Revival*, ed. by Alan Axelrod. New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, pub. for The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, DE, 1985.

The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker, ed. by Elaine Forman Crane. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991.

Earle, Alice Morse. *Child Life in Colonial Days*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1899.

____ . *Home Life in Colonial Days*. New York: Grossett & Dunlap Publishers, 1898.

Extracts from the Journal of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker from 1758 to 1807, ed. by Henry Drinker Biddle. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1889.

Fisher, Sydney George. *Men, Women & Manners in Colonial Times*, in 2 vols. Philadelphia & London: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1898.

Hechtlinger, Adelaide. *The Seasonal Hearth...* Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1977.

Kalm, Peter. *Travels Into North America* [1-vol. abridged ed.,], trans. by John Reinhold Forster. Barre, MA: The Imprint Society, 1972.

Smith, Helen Everton. *Colonial Days & Ways*. New York: Published by The Century Company, 1900.

Teitelman, Edward and Fahlman, Betsy. "Wilson Eyre and the Colonial Revival in Philadelphia," in *The Colonial Revival,* ed. by Alan Axelrod. New York & London: Published by W.W. Norton Company for The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, DE, 1985.

Footnotes

1 Helen Everton Smith, *Colonial Days & Ways*. (New York: Published by The Century Company, 1900), p. 106.

2 Alice Morse Earle, *Child Life in Colonial Days*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1899), p. 163.

3 *Extracts from the Journal of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker from 1759 to 1807*, ed. by Henry Drinker Biddle. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1889; The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker, ed. by Elaine Forman Crane. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991).

4 Alice Morse Earle, *Home Life in Colonial Days*. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1898), p. 66.

5 Ibid., p. 247.

6 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1966), p. 59.

7 Adelaide Hechtlinger, *The Seasonal Hearth ...* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1977), p. 112.

8 William Butler, "Another City upon a Hill: ... " in *The Colonial Revival*, ed. by Alan Axelrod. (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, pub. for The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, DE, 1985), p. 46.

9 Earle, *Home Life*, op. cit., p. 167.

10 Peter Kalm, *Travels Into North America* [abridged 1-vol. ed.], trans. by John Reinhold Forster. (Barre, MA: The Imprint Society, 1972), pp. 102–103.

11 Earle, *Home Life*, op. cit., p. 41.

12 Sydney George Fisher, *Men, Women & Manners in Colonial Days*, in 2 vols. (Philadelphia & London: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1898), Vol. I, p. 116.

13 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 314.

14 Edward Teitelman and Betsy Fahlman, "Wilson Eyre and the Colonial Revival in Philadelphia," in *The Colonial Revival*, op. cit., pp. 71–90.