

= Mission House (Stockbridge , Massachusetts) =

The Mission House is an historic house located at 19 Main Street , Stockbridge , Massachusetts . It was built between 1739 and 1742 by a Christian missionary to the local Mahicans . It is a National Historic Landmark , designated in 1968 as a rare surviving example of a colonial mission house . It is now owned and operated as a nonprofit museum by the Trustees of Reservations .

The town of Stockbridge was established in the late 1730s as a mission community to the Mahicans . John Sergeant was the first missionary , formally beginning his service in 1735 . His first house , built in the valley where the Indians lived , has not survived ; this house was built in the white community on the hill above the town following his marriage in 1739 . It remained in the Sergeant family until the 1870s , and survived Gilded Age developments of the late 19th century .

In the 1920s the house was purchased by Mabel Choate , owner of the nearby Naumkeag estate , and moved down into the valley . She and landscape designer Fletcher Steele restored the building , furnished it with 18th century pieces , and designed gardens to Steele 's vision of what a colonial landscape might have been . Choate opened the house as a museum in 1930 , and donated it (and eventually Naumkeag as well) to the Trustees of Reservations , who operate both properties as museums .

= = Background = =

Before the arrival of British colonists , the area that is now southern Berkshire County , Massachusetts was inhabited by communities of the Mahican tribal confederation . The population of these communities changed over the 17th century as war (sometimes with European settlers and sometimes with the neighboring Iroquois) , disease , and migration made them smaller and more diverse . By the 1720s they had sold off most of their tribal lands , and lived in relative peace in two remaining tracts of land on the Housatonic River .

Beginning in the late 1720s the Mahicans became a point of interest to British missionary organizations , because they were seen as potential conversion targets and to counter the possibility of influence on them from Roman Catholic New France . This effort was managed in New England by a commission headed by the governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay , Jonathan Belcher . Belcher suggested in 1730 that the province lay out a town in the Mahican lands , and that London missionary groups pay for a mission there . Funds were allocated for this effort in 1733 .

In 1734 Massachusetts residents in the Northampton area met to organize the mission . John Sergeant , a recent graduate of Yale College , agreed to take on the task , and spent some time that fall among the Mahicans . After negotiations involving Governor Belcher and Mahican leaders , it was agreed in 1735 that a mission would be established , and Sergeant was ordained to serve as a minister among them . He immediately moved to the Mahican lands and began preaching to and baptizing them .

In 1736 a township of six square miles (16 km²) was formally granted to the Mahicans by the Province of Massachusetts Bay , which would be incorporated in 1739 as Stockbridge . Included in the grant were provisions that the minister and schoolteacher receive land grants , and that four English families settle the area , in part to set an example of Christian living for the natives . John Sergeant built a modest frontier house in the township , and the Indian village grew around this area , which included a meeting house used as a church and school .

= = House history = =

In 1739 Sergeant married Abigail Williams , the seventeen @-@ year @-@ old daughter of one of Stockbridge 's English settlers . She wanted to live outside the village , so Sergeant had a new house , the subject of this article , built on Prospect Hill , overlooking the village . The date of its construction is uncertain : Sergeant received the land in 1739 after Stockbridge 's incorporation , and the house is known to have been built by 1742 .

The Sergeants lived there until his death in 1749 . Abigail remarried and eventually moved out of

the house , but it remained in the family . She returned to it after her second husband 's death , living with her son 's family until her own death in 1791 . Jonathan Edwards , a minister who rose to fame during the First Great Awakening , succeeded Sergeant as missionary to the Mahicans (who also became known as " Stockbridge Indians " and " Mohicans ") , but occupied the first house Sergeant built . That house has not survived , but its site is now marked by a sundial near 23 Main Street .

Sergeant 's second house remained in the family until 1879 , when the property was sold to David Dudley Field , Jr . , a New York lawyer . Field amassed an estate of some 115 acres (47 ha) , on which he built a large summer house ; the mission house he rented out for several summers to friends . It subsequently fell into disrepair , and was rescued in the 1920s by Mabel Choate , the daughter of New York lawyer Joseph Hodges Choate and owner of the nearby Naumkeag estate , who sought to establish it as a museum in memory of her parents .

Sometime around 1926 , Choate purchased the mission house . The house was then disassembled , and its pieces carefully numbered . In 1927 she purchased the lot at 19 Main Street where the house now stands , formerly the site of the Stockbridge Casino ; the casino building she sold for \$ 1 , and it was moved to its present location east of town , where it serves as the home of the Berkshire Theatre Festival . In 1928 the house was reconstructed at its present location under the guidance of landscape designer Fletcher Steele . The property on which it originally stood is now the site of the Roman Catholic National Shrine of The Divine Mercy .

The house 's gardens were created between 1928 ? 1932 by Steele (who was also responsible for significant work on Naumkeag 's gardens) . The house was furnished under Choate 's guidance with pieces appropriate to the Sergeant period , and opened as a museum in 1930 . She donated the house and surrounding property to the Trustees of Reservations in 1948 , and bequeathed it part of her collection .

Included in Choate 's bequest to the museum was a two @-@ volume Bible that had been given to the Mahicans in 1745 by Francis Ayscough . Choate had in the 1930s convinced the elders of the Stockbridge @-@ Munsee tribe (successors to the Mahicans) to sell her the Bible for display in the museum . Tribe members objected to the sale after it took place , but no action was taken , and the Bible 's location was lost to the tribe until it was spotted by tribal members in the museum in 1975 . Following negotiations , the Trustees of Reservations returned the Bible to the tribe in 1991 .

= = House and gardens = =

The mission house now stands on a lot approximately 0 @.@ 4 acres (0 @.@ 16 ha) in size . The layout of the house is a standard Georgian center @-@ hall plan , with fireplaced rooms (a parlor to the left , and kitchen to the right) on either side of a central hall , which has a stairway to the second floor . Behind the parlor is an office space where Sergeant would have met with Indians . A diversion from the typical Georgian plan is the presence of a second entrance on the right side of the house , and a narrow hallway running from that entrance to the office . This made it possible for Sergeant 's Indian visitors to reach his office without passing through the front of the house . The front door is adorned with a remarkably well @-@ preserved specimen of a Connecticut River valley front door pediment .

The property features several outbuildings , generally dating from the time of the restoration . A small one @-@ room frame building in the southwest corner serves as a visitor center . Behind the house is a long one @-@ story building that houses museum exhibits , as well as a storage and utility area . It is connected to the house itself by a 25 @-@ foot (7 @.@ 6 m) grape arbor . Northeast of the house is a large barn @-@ like building housing function facilities and a caretaker 's apartment .

The gardens and outbuildings of the property were designed to Fletcher Steele 's vision of what colonial garden should be . He drew on ideas seen in the gardens of George Washington 's estate at Mount Vernon to design a property where " a hundred forms of industry were carried on " . Rows of vegetables , fruit trees , and bushes , were lined with flowers for aesthetic appeal , and spaces for carved out that he envisioned would have been used for performing outdoor work such as chopping

wood , churning butter , and preparing preserves . Echoing statements made in his Design of a Little Garden , published just a few years earlier , Steele laid out the outbuildings in such a way to provide the homeowners a private retreat .

The house was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1968 , and listed on the National Register of Historic Places . It contains a collection of eighteenth @-@ century American furniture and decorative arts . It is open to the public on summer weekends or by appointment .