DESIGN NOTEBOOK

A Landmark House Survives the Odds

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IN February 1965, this newspaper carried an article announcing that the Old Merchant's House, a New York landmark at 29 East Fourth Street, had reached the end of the line. After 133 years of existence and almost 100 years of continuous occupancy by the Seabury Tredwell family, the house, then operating as a museum, was losing its battle with decay and the costs of upkeep.

There was no particular outcry; the place was distinctly seedy and its neighborhood was even seedier. The house contained all of its original furnishings, but they were dusty and disintegrating. The graceful iron baluster urns in front of the marble-framed entrance, half a block from the Bowery, habitually flanked one or more of life's losers on steps decorated with broken bottles. Sale and demolition seemed just a matter of time. I know, because I wrote the story.

By 1970, all the best efforts of the private, nonprofit group that owned the building, aided by the Decorators Club — which had adopted the house at its time of greatest adversity — had failed to save the shabby structure. It had acquired a new exterior cornice and a brief moment of hope in the late 1960's. But the richly ornamented ceilings were about to fall, deteriorating exterior conditions made the house virtually open to the elements, and there was no way to carry out critical structural repairs. This was really the end of the line. I know, because I wrote that story, too.

Now, in February 1980, 15 years after its obituary appeared, the Old Merchant's House is not only still around, it has a new life. Structural repairs have

Continued on Page C10

Original carved mahogany newel post from hall stairway of the Old Merchant's House.

The New York Times / Gene Maggio

Design Notebook

The distinction of this house is that it is the real thing.

Continued From Page C1

been made, and the handsome parlor floor has been restored and is open to the public again. (Visitors are welcome Sundays from 1 to 4 P.M., by appointment; call 777-1089. There is a $2 admission charge for individuals, and group visits and fees, including talks and refreshments, can be arranged. All income goes to maintenance and further restoration.)

The survival of the Old Merchant's House has confounded cynicism in a city that celebrates despair. Underneath the pessimism, however, New Yorkers are incurable believers in miracles, and what is more important, they make those miracles happen.

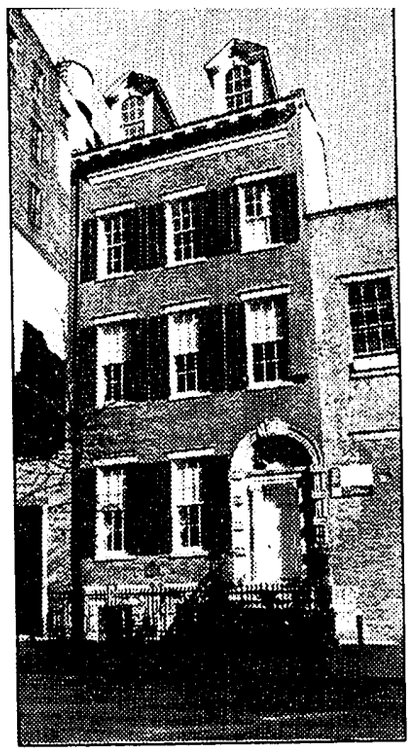
The turning point for the house came in late 1970, with initial grants from the Fund for the City of New York and the New York State Historic Trust. Other contributions followed, and by 1972 the scaffolding was up and repairs were under way. This miracle was a labor of persistence, generosity and care.

There is a long list of credits, but one name, like Abou Ben Adhem's, should lead all the rest. Joseph Roberto, the restoration architect, has also functioned as coordinator, fund raiser, and vice president and trustee of the Old Merchant's House Inc., which now owns and operates the building.

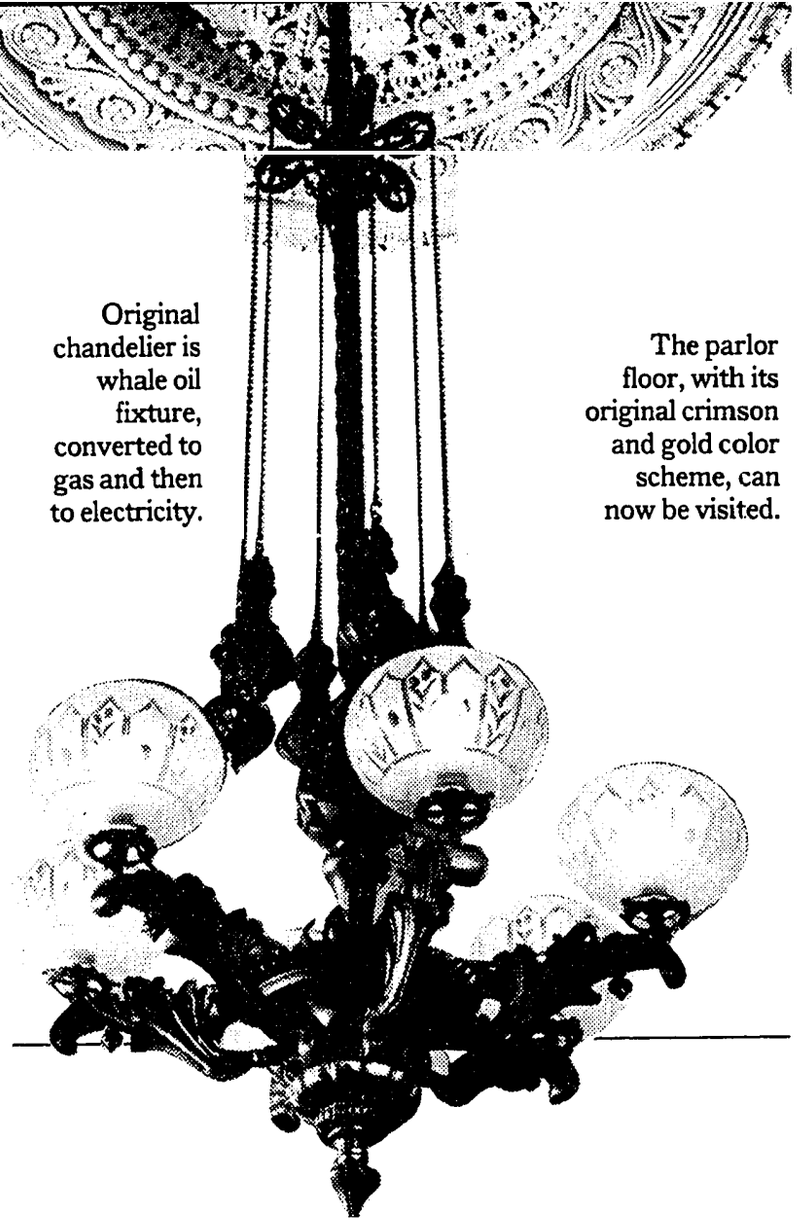
•

Mr. Roberto was originally called in for advice about the disintegrating cornice, and stayed on to carry out all of the exterior reconstruction and interior restoration. He rallied distinguished curators and historians to the cause.

The money raised, and the costs to date, come to $280,000, with Mr. Roberto's donated architectural and supervisory services adding up to about $500,000, if he cared to count. The money is from more than two dozen foundations and individuals and public appeals, with a major part, about $91,000, from Federal preservation grants administered through New York State. Another $100,000 is needed to help restore the bedrooms and kitchen, as well as for maintenance and curatorial functions.



Brick house with elaborate doorway was built in 1832.



Original chandelier is whale oil fixture, converted to gas and then to electricity.

The parlor floor, with its original crimson and gold color scheme, can now be visited.

The New York Times / Gene Maggio

The four-story and basement brick house was built in 1832 as part of a speculator's row of luxury "uptown" dwellings on a newly fashionable block that was still adjacent to farms. It was bought three years later by Seabury Tredwell, a prosperous hardware merchant and descendant of Samuel Seabury, the first bishop of the Episcopal Church in New York. One of the most impressive selling features was the 4,000-gallon cistern in the rear garden; this was before the construction of the Croton Reservoir.

The elaborate doorway that combined the best of the Federal and Greek Revival styles was then, and still is, one of the finest examples of this transitional manner in the city.

The double parlors that run the full length of the house are furnished much as they were when the family adopted the fashion of using the two parlors as living and dining rooms in the mid-19th century. Greek Revival Ionic columns and polished mahogany sliding doors separate them; the doors lack only their original silver-plated trim.

Nothing in these rooms has been chosen by restorers because it is "appropriate"; everything was chosen by the Tredwells themselves. Instead of "correct" curatorial taste, there is the taste of an affluent bourgeois family. These interiors do not offer the scholarly hindsight of connoisseurs of collectibles.

Anyone expecting the decorator touches or textbook examples of recreated period rooms will be disappointed. The distinction of this house — and it is a powerful one — is that it is the real thing. One simply walks through the beautiful doorway into the marbleized entrance foyer (the gold-colored painted veining that was once so fashionable was discovered under coats of gray) into another time and place in New York.

•

The great virtue and value of this house is that one family lived in it from 1835 to 1933 — that alone is miracle enough in New York. But even more remarkable is the fact that it was preserved as a 19th-century island while the 20th century rushed by.

The American Institute of Architects Guide to New York City sums up the importance of the Old Merchant's House in one bold-faced sentence: "The original house is all there." That is what distinguishes it from all the house-museums full of donated or purchased furnishings "of the period" arranged as stage sets and classy model rooms by scholarly guesswork and well-intentioned committees.

Seabury Tredwell had five daughters as his fortunes prospered. Two married and three stayed at home. The family's taste was conservative and very few changes were made. Fabrics and carpets were replaced and the furniture was re-covered in 1867, two years after Mr. Tredwell's death, when his wife and daughters gently updated the place from Federal and Greek Revival to early Victorian. The Duncan Phyfe and American Empire pieces were the same.

The last surviving daughter, Gertrude, died in 1933 at the age of 93, in the same canopied bed in which she had been born in 1840. The house was intact; it had been maintained "as Papa wanted it." A recluse in her last years, Gertrude kept everything.

"Everything" included dresses of embroidered muslin that evoke 19th-century summer days, and Worth gowns of somber silks that once swept the streets of New York. Side doors on a bedroom wardrobe open to reveal her books, with suitable 19th-century titles like "Markham's History of England," "Thoughts in Rhyme" and "The Autobiography of an Actress, by Mrs. Mowatt." The glass and china and household artifacts are all there.

•

What was not still in the parlors has been found by simple archeology. The wall color of the 1860's was an ivory white, with a darker tone for the ceilings and their plaster traceries, and walls and ceilings are white again today. Missing plaster elements have been painstakingly molded from the original designs. The crimson damask curtains, rotten to the touch, have been reproduced by Scalamandré, with their ornate tassels and trim, as a contribution to the house.

The disintegrating carpet had to be rewoven, faithfully following the red and gold "Pompeian" pattern with tiny blue flowers, which was revealed in its true colors under the piano. The manufacturer, Patterson, Flynn & Martin, will continue to make it, with royalties going to the Old Merchant's House.

The taste of the time was to use the brocade at the windows and on the important upholstered pieces, and to add no other colors or patterns. Smaller pieces were covered in black horsehair, and they are again.

The handsome chandeliers are the original whale oil fixtures that were later converted to gas and then electrified. Candelabra, pictures and mirrors are all Tredwell possessions. There is no wallpaper — that was a later 19th-century compulsion from which decorators have not yet been liberated, and without which most historic house "restorers" do not seem to be able to operate.

The plain white walls set off the simple crimson and gold color scheme splendidly, as well as providing the light backgrounds that were needed for 19th-century artificial illumination.

An authentic, original interior like this one is an extreme rarity among historic houses, in spite of the loose way the word "authentic" is bandied about. The completeness of these interiors is rarer still. There is all the period nostalgia that anyone would want at the Old Merchant's House, but it is also a unique social, esthetic and historical document and its loss would have been a particular tragedy for New York. Still privately owned and maintained, the house needs an endowment if it is not to be vulnerable again. This may, or may not, be the end of the story.