Classical Revival

Classical Furniture Graces a Greek Revival Home

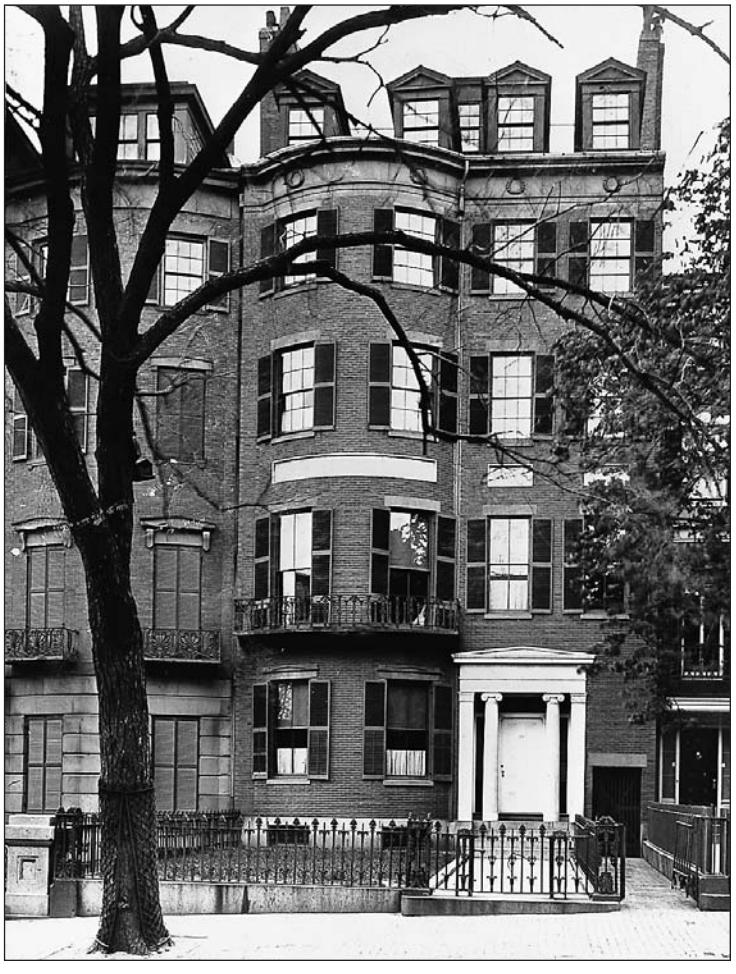
BY GAYLE HARGREAVES WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY J. DAVID BOHL

The adage, "it's not just what you know, it's who you know" applies to collecting as it does in life, according to the owners of an 1837 Beacon Hill row house in Boston, Massachusetts. This couple moved into the building in 1979 and began collecting seriously in the 1990s, relying on a combination of self-education and a network of fellow collectors, advisors, and dealers to help them amass a very fine collection of classical furniture from Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia, circa 1825–1840.

The couple "began tentatively," says Carswell Rush Berlin, a New York City dealer specializing in American classical furniture, who has helped the husband and wife build their collection. "But they have become very enthusiastic collectors." In addition to the splendid Greek Revival house and period furniture, Berlin notes that the couple "has one of the greatest collections of period lighting for a private home in the country, made additionally special by being original to the house."

THIS PAGE, BOTTOM LEFT:
A white marble Ionic portico marks the front door of the lavish Greek Revival row house Edward Shaw (1784–1859) designed for Adam and Mary Thaxter. Shaw's influence was greatest in the field of architectural education. In his introduction to a 1996 reprint of Shaw's 1854 classic, *The Modern Architect: A Classic Victorian Stylebook and Carpenter's Manual*, Earle Shettleworth writes, "Edward Shaw is now remembered not so much for any particular building as for his contributions to an emerging body of American architectural publications and their effect upon the New England landscape."

ABOVE AND BELOW:
1904 photographs of the exterior and entry hall.



Many of the home's lighting fixtures were most likely purchased by the original owners. This chandelier is from Thomas Messenger and Sons of London and Birmingham, England, circa 1830. As one of the largest makers of oil lamps in England at the time, the Messenger firm provided merchandise to retailers from Boston to New Orleans. The raised platform visible here was built to provide enough headroom to walk horses through a passageway below that ran from a preexisting stable on another property to the street. When the couple moved in, the stair railings were covered in a black paint (see opposite page), which the couple removed. The classical landscape painting is by Michel Felice Cornè (1752–1845). Cornè emigrated from Italy to America as a young man. Before moving to Boston in 1806, he helped establish the tradition of marine painting in the Salem area.

PREVIOUS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:
A nineteenth-century Chinese export reverse glass painting of the allegorical figure *Liberty,* Chinese school, after Edward Savage (1761–1817), hangs above a trick-leg table, circa 1810, attributed to New York cabinetmaker Michael Allison (1773–1855), a contemporary and neighbor of Duncan Phyfe (1768–1854), the most prominent cabinetmaker in New York in the early 1800s and one of the first to introduce the Empire style to the city.

Both the giltwood overmantel mirror and this pier table were made in Boston, circa 1830. The table is one of only a handful of similar tables produced in this area. None bear a maker's signature but this one is a wonderful example of Egyptian influence in Classical furniture. A set of late-eighteenth-century mezzotints of the four continents (two shown) hangs above a finely carved klismos-form dining chair from Boston, 1820. It is one of a set passed down from Mary Lyman Eliot to her son, former Harvard president Charles Eliot (1834–1926). Klismos is an ancient Greek chair form characterized by a broad, curving crest rail and saber front and rear legs.

Furniture that incorporates the ancient motifs Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) popularized after encountering them during his forays into Italy and Egypt is a perfect complement to Greek Revival architecture. In Europe and later in America, ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman motifs became prominent features of the sumptuous Empire style as seen on this Philadelphia game table, 1825–1835. Note the scaled-dolphins and lion-paw feet.

A Sheffield plated tea urn with sphinx finial and Egyptian caryatid columns sits on a New York marble-top pier table. The candleholders are French. Nineteenth-century artist Catherine Davis depicted the Massachusetts State Capitol Building (erected 1795–1798) before its dome was gilded; John Hancock's brick house, since demolished, is to the side.

ABOVE:
The oval mahogany table, that seats from eight to twenty-two people, and the sideboard, were probably made in New York. Though they're quite delicate, our couple uses the Boston klismos chairs, 1820, and another set of chairs from Philadelphia, 1825, for seating when company arrives. A carved mahogany Restauration tilt-top center table, 1825–1830, from Boston or Salem, nestles into the bay window, which was added shortly after the house was built and makes a picturesque breakfast nook. A Charles Herbert Woodbury (1864–1940) sketch depicting the Shaw Memorial to the Massachusetts 54th Regiment hangs on the far wall. The 54th was one of the first formal units of the U.S. Army to be made up entirely of African American men (apart from the officers). Woodbury is best known as a marine painter.

The gem of the collection is the Greek Revival row house itself, designed by Edward Shaw (1784–1859) for Adam Thaxter, Jr (1807–1862), a well-to-do merchant, his wife, Mary, and their family. The Thaxters joined other wealthy Bostonians flocking to the newly developed south side of Beacon Hill in the late 1790s and early 1800s. In *The Book of Boston* (1916) Robert Shackleton (1860–1923) described the houses these Boston Brahmins built: "They are generous, comfortable, well proportioned, dignified houses, with their soft-toned brick and their typical bowed fronts and their general air of spaciousness and geniality…."

Federal, Victorian, and Greek Revival architecture can all be found in Beacon Hill, but the latter was in its ascendancy when the Thaxters built their house in 1837. Sparked by the discovery of Herculaneum and Pompeii in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, interest in all things classical swept across Europe, reaching America by the late 1700s. Often called "the first truly national style in the United States," Greek Revival architecture can be found in all regions of the country.

By the time our collectors started looking in Beacon Hill, gentrification had not yet reached the neighborhood. "The houses needed a lot of work," says the husband. While walking down the street with an architect friend after touring yet another house in which the once elegant, high-ceilinged rooms had been chopped up into small apartments, our couple came across the place they would soon call home. It was a fortuitous stroll. Approaching a brick row house, their friend told them the owner had just died and wondered aloud what would happen with the property. "We asked, 'What's it like inside?'," recalls the husband. "He told us, 'It's just the way it was built.'"

That was enough information to encourage our couple to pursue the property. They eventually discovered that the Thaxters sold their home to Dr. Jacob Bigelow (1786–1879), Rumford Professor of Medicine at Harvard University and a leader in the garden cemetery movement in the United States. Thomas Bailey Aldrich (1836–1907), editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1881 to 1890, was another illustrious owner. Our couple bought the house from the estate of Aldrich's daughter-in-law, Eleanor née Little, sister to Bertram Little, who was the director of The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (now Historic New England) for twenty-one years. "A lot of people thought we were crazy," remembers the husband.

Though there was a lot of surface grime, and the plumbing and electrical systems needed work; the house was otherwise well preserved. The lighting was original but much of it was disfigured by the ugly pipes and wires of gasification and later, electrification. The couple didn't realize the true worth of the fixtures until they invited Carswell Berlin to look at photographs of the pieces they had taken down and stored in the attic. The wife recalls, "He told us 'These light fixtures would have been installed by the person who built your house.' So needless to say back up they went."

The house was sparsely furnished for years while the couple worked on restoring the building. The husband says, "We really loved the

Classical themes prevail in the reception room with scrolling volutes atop Ionic pilasters and a lotus and palmette pattern carved into the architrave above the doorway. Evidence of later gasification and electrification has been removed from the chandelier (Johnston-Brooks of Birmingham, England, circa 1820), so it now appears as it would have when burning oil. The carved mahogany work table with demi-lune bag, raised on acanthus carved saber legs with brass toe caps and casters was made in Boston, probably by Timothy Hunt. The marble-top center table, 1825–1830, maker unknown, was made in New York.

architecture of the house and that's what we focused on for a really long time. Then we realized, 'Gee, we need to sit down somewhere…we need to get some furniture.' "

They were unsure how to proceed until the wife's sister made an observation. The wife recalls, "She said, 'It's a Greek Revival house. What you should have in here is furniture that people in the Greek Revival bought.' And that was classical furniture."

Classical furniture in the United States, says Carswell Berlin, "was a uniquely American interpretation of English and French furniture designs of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It was made by designers and cabinetmakers, often of European origin and training, in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, the principal high-style furniture making centers of the new American Republic between 1790 and 1840." The late classical period encompasses Directoire, Restauration, and Empire styles, all of which take their names from periods in French political history.

Minds made up, our collectors began an ongoing process of learning, looking, listening and buying Classical furniture. They already had a relationship with Richard Nylander (Chief Curator) and other experts at the SPNEA/HNE to whom they had turned for advice on restoring the house. "We had a lot of help from them. It sharpened our senses about what was appropriate and what wasn't

THIS PAGE, TOP:
"This house is a little unusual for Beacon Hill," says one of the owners. "It's wider. The typical house in Beacon Hill is maybe twenty-four feet wide and this is thirty-two." The extra width allowed Shaw to incorporate this dramatic spiral staircase into the plans.

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Ormolu is an eighteenth-century English term for applying finely ground, high-karat gold to an object in bronze but it can also refer to lacquered brass resembling gold in appearance and used to ornament furniture, moldings, architectural details, and jewelry. Ormolu often adorned classical furniture as on this early-nineteenth-century mahogany New York pier table. The green shade *verde,* of the foot, was meant to simulate oxidized bronze to give the appearance of an ancient object uncovered from antiquity.

The New York secretary bookcase houses a collection of Paris and Coalport porcelain with silhouette scenes of classical deities and warriors. The mahogany Restauration pier table with the Egyptian marble top is one of a pair in the double parlors that Carswell Berlin says "are as fine as anything produced in Boston of this period." The pier mirror, New York, circa 1820–1830, has been attributed to Isaac Platt (1793–1875).

in preserving an old house," says the husband. Now they began to investigate period furniture, enrolling in classes, attending forums, networking, and reading everything they could find on the subject.

Through contacts at HNE, they met Stephen Harrison, curator of decorative art and technology at the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans (now curator of decorative art and design at the Cleveland Museum of Art). Harrison became their eyes and ears in New Orleans, where Boston-made classical furniture was often to be found at auction. When pieces they'd purchased at a distance arrived on their doorstep, "It would be like Christmas…," remembers the husband.

The couple formed friendships with other collectors they met at auctions and through organizations such as HNE and a collectors group associated with the Ellis Memorial Antiques Show held in Boston every Fall. Each new relationship brought more opportunities to learn. They also had help from dealers such as Berlin, Stuart Feld of Hirschl & Adler Galleries, and Diana Bittell. "They've helped us upgrade and find better examples," says the husband.

The couple explains that the parameters of the collection are defined by the house so anything they purchase "has to be complementary." Even though nineteenth-century affluent Bostonians preferred to patronize local cabinetmakers, they haven't restricted their purchases to Boston-made furniture, "because that would rule out too many interesting things from New York, Philadelphia, even Europe."

As they've learned more, the couple has begun replacing early purchases with pieces that can be attributed to a specific maker. A good example is a mahogany and bird's-eye maple chest of drawers, circa 1815–1820, by Salem cabinetmaker William Hook (1777–1867). "We sold what was probably an American classical chest — it could have been British — and replaced it with what we think is a fine piece of Massachusetts furniture. We know where it was made, we know who made it, we know when it was made," says the husband.

In recent years, they have expanded their collecting pursuits to include the work of period

The double parlor pocket doors were removed to create one large room by a previous owner, but our couple reconstructed the original opening based on interior photos taken in 1904 (see next page) and had new pocket doors installed. The piano is labeled William Geib (New York) and the case may have been made in Duncan Phyfe's workshop or that of Deming & Bulkley. The carved mahogany oval table, 1819–1824, between the two rooms, is attributed to Isaac Vose and Son with Thomas Seymour, the preeminent cabinetmakers in Boston at the time. Chairs such as the four shown here, which have closed spaces between the arms and the seat are known as bergères. Two are reproductions of Harrison Gray Otis' office chair from the Otis House museum nearby that bears his name, and is the headquarters of Historic New England. The other pair is probably early nineteenth-century English in the French taste. Harrison Gray Otis (1765–1848), who made a fortune developing Beacon Hill, served as a representative in Congress and later became mayor of Boston.

TOP: 1904 photograph showing original pocket doors.

BOTTOM: 1954 photograph showing the room without the doors. The glass chimneys and prisms of the chandelier were also removed. The couple had the doors reproduced and the chandelier restored.

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT:
A French nineteenth-century mantel clock probably designed for export, is adorned with a goddess and putti on a chariot pulled by butterflies. A Messenger and Sons chandelier, 1825–1830, is reflected in the parcel-gilt and ebonized mirror, Boston, 1915.

An Anglo-Indian ebonywood chair in the Regency taste sits beside a New York sideboard cabinet, 1825. The picture is a posthumous reprinting, 1803–1807 of a Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) copperplate etching depicting a bas relief from an antique marble vase in the Villa Borghese. Piranesi, a major Italian printmaker, architect and antiquarian, produced a series of copperplate etchings during the second half of the eighteenth century. detailing the views and antiquities of Rome, which encouraged the spread of Neoclassical design across the continent.

In this detailed image of the William Hook chest of drawers we can admire the maker's sense of restrained drama as illustrated by his use of ormolu ornamentation and contrasting woods.

The lyre, as depicted here on the base of the square piano, was a popular motif in the Empire period, and a particular favorite of Duncan Phyfe (1768–1854). Phyfe was the most prominent cabinetmaker in New York in the early 1800s and one of the first to introduce the Empire style to the city. An early adopter of factory methods, he ran a large workshop, each craftsman hired to perform a specialized task. Because of this division of labor, it is more correct to refer to the "school" or "workshop" of Duncan Phyfe, rather than to attribute the furniture directly to him.

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Except for the gracefully curved reclining couch, or récamier, most of the furniture in this room, belonging to one of the owners' daughters, is French export and came from a New Orleans auction house. The husband says this daughter showed early signs of an eye for collecting. When she was only ten or eleven, after looking at a book about Empress Josephine's house, Malmaison, she said, "I want to have a room like this.'"

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Often called a récamier, the Grecian couch is based on Greek or Roman examples and is named for Jeanne Françoise Julie Adélaïde Récamier (1777–1849), who in 1800 famously sat for artist Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825) on a Grecian couch.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP:
A mahogany and bird's-eye maple chest of drawers, 1815–1820, is attributed to William Hook (1777–1867), a member of the Salem Cabinet-Maker Society who set up shop in 1800 at a time when the cabinetmaking trade was blossoming in the area. Salem's merchant class was enjoying unprecedented profits resulting from voyages along new trade routes to the Far East and their growing prosperity transformed the community. Only a few of Hook's chests have come to light, one of which has its bill of sale. "This has a very distinctive front leg," says the husband. "The ball is typical Boston but the curved leg differentiates it." The tall-post bed, Philadelphia, circa 1815, has reeded posts with acanthus leaves. Note the architectonic nature of the classical pediment incorporated into the footboard.

This beautiful depiction of the Greek goddess Nike (Victory) in ormolu adorns a small side table in the daughter's bedroom.

artists such as Augustin Edouart (1789–1861), Michele Felice Cornè (1752–1845), Jacob Petersen (1774–1855), Antoine Roux Sr. (1765-1835), Charles Woodbury (1864–1940), John Smart (ca. 1740–1811), and Catherine Davis (ca. mid 1800s); a self-portrait by contemporary artist Julie Heffernan (b. 1956) has also become a part of the collection. Though they've made some good selections, the couple humbly admits to being novices in the fine art market. "Were just beginning, but it's fun," says the husband.

This couple's willingness to investigate new fields of knowledge and to reach out to others for help is the secret to their success as collectors. The husband advises newcomers to "go find some experts…take the furniture courses…have patience and try to get in a network of people…" His wife adds, "Train your eye…. Go to forums and read…. It makes such a difference."