

C. BRIEF HISTORY OF PROPERTY

1. Events

With the exception of Mr. Porter's visit and artistic contribution, the history of the Reed Homestead is pure New England vernacular, but all the more reflective of our social history because of its simplicity.

The land was first acquired by a Captain Timothy Fessenden, who had a tanning business there in 1789. This business he sold to John Jewett who then sold it to Oliver Reed in 1808 or 1809. As these earliest deeds are apparently not extant, we do not know whether Jewett or Reed actually built the homestead, but stylistic and physical evidence (cut lath nails, transitional lath, mature Federal hardware, etc...) point to c.1801, and we know that Oliver married Letty Wilson on December 21, 1809. He, born in 1779, was then thirty, and she twenty-one.

Oliver Reed had come from Westford, and carried on the tanning business until his death on April 13, 1839, at the age of sixty. As we know that Porter did his wondrous work between 1830 and 1835, Oliver was obviously well-to-do in his latter years, and the fact that the murals were executed only a few years before his death explains their extraordinary state of conservation. After the Oliver Reeds, the Homestead -- while loved and occupied -- was never again to be home to a growing family, and the party room upstairs was never again used.

Oliver and Letty had five children: daughters Catherine, Hannah and Harriet, and sons James Wilson and James Oliver. Of the sons, the first died at age 4, and

the second went to sea at 17 and took his inheritance in cash before his mother's death. Tragic Hannah married, but hanged herself (at the Reed House) when she lost her daughter Lettie at age 10, while Catherine also married and moved away to Harvard. She, too, died young. That left the homestead to the youngest daughter Harriet, who lived there only a short while before Catherine's death drove her out to Mason, to live with her married brother, James Oliver.

It was James Oliver's daughter, Harriet Caroline Reed Strout, then, who bought the homestead from her aunt's estate in 1910, and left it, in turn, to her own daughter Letty Amanda Strout in 1942. She married a Proctor, and had two sons, Edward Hildreth Proctor and Robert Reed Proctor, the fifth generation of Reed descendants to occupy the house. Mother and sons generously conveyed the property to the Townsend Historical Society in 1973, and Mr. E. Hildreth Proctor is still much interested in all matters pertaining to the house.

What an incredible good fortune! We have a house that is approximately 178 years old, and was owned by only a few members of one family. First, the Oliver Reeds, who enjoyed the house for thirty years, and then their spinster daughter Harriet, who used the house little, but lived to be 85. Just two owners bridge the first 100 years! For the second, and present, century, we have Harried Reed Strout from 1910-1942, and her daughter Letty from 1942 to 1973, when the homestead entered public stewardship.

There are many family stories and events which, together, form a vivid picture of life in a small New England town: Harriet Reed's baskets, in which she kept her money, rolled up in linens and stockings...or her

stolen silver, finally recovered under the pulpit of the Harbor church. Mr. E. Hildreth Proctor, a charming gentleman, can still paint a vivid, eyewitness account of his family's past, and his recollections should be taped as a vital part of the history of the Reed Homestead. I had the pleasure of interviewing him at length with respect to the furnishings and contents of each room in his mother's and grandmother's times, but I did not begin the task of collecting his ordered memories into oral histories. It would be a worthy task for the Townsend Historical Society.

2. Rufus Porter

Two rooms at the Reed Homestead bear the imprint of Rufus Porter's decorative genius. These are the Parlor, where the monochromatic mural paintings were papered over, and are now only dimly visible, and the upstairs parlor, closed since the death of Oliver Reed, where the polychromatic river scenes, houses and steamboats are as vibrant and fresh as if they had been finished yesterday.

In spite of the incredible condition of the upstairs murals, there is no doubt at all about the attribution or authenticity of these remarkable works of art. First, there is family tradition which, with only four successive occupancies, has little room for error. Mr. Proctor's grandmother, in the house by 1910, attested to their originality and, indeed, the yellowed and cracked blinds which keep the frescoed room in semi-darkness have splendid Eastlake stencilled designs of the 1880's, a time before Rufus Porter was fashionable enough to copy.

The two great scholars of Rufus Porter are Jean Lipman, author of Rufus Porter, Yankee pioneer and organizer of the major exhibition Rufus Porter

Rediscovered, and Nina Fletcher Little, whose 1952 American Decorative Wall Painting is the classic in its field. In fact, Ms. Lipman dedicated her book-length exhibition catalogue to Ms. Little. Both have seen the Reed Homestead frescoes, and both have praised them as an outstanding example of the artist's work. Back in 1952, Nina Fletcher Little wrote:

"On the Main Street of Townsend Harbor, the old Reed House, built soon after 1800, contained two rooms by Porter. The lower northeast room was papered over many years ago, but the upper northwest chamber glows with the original fresco colors which are in an exceptionally fine state of preservation. No border is used at the cornice line, nor is there any dado. The familiar rolling hills are dotted here and there with the foursquare houses which he loved to draw. A steamboat with alert pilot plies the waters between an island and the mainland, while on a nearby hill, a man holding the hand of a child watches through a spyglass a sailing ship approaching the shore. His dog sits on his haunches beside him. The background of these walls is white, with strong lemon yellow and green predominating in the design. Here, as in other of Porter's murals, one forgets the essential confinements of a room and senses the freedom of looking into the actual out-of-doors. Also in this house, many of the door panels are finely grained in crotch and swirl patterns, and the mantel in the landscape room is stippled or sponged in dark green."

In her exhaustive book, which, unlike Little's, speaks only of the work of Rufus Porter, and has remained the ranking work on this eccentric genius, Jean Lipman states that Porter was in the Townsend area from 1830 to 1835, and lists the Reed homestead as follows, in words obviously drawn from Little:

"Reed Mansion. Owned by Mrs. Walter Proctor, built shortly after 1800. Frescoes in an exceptionally fine state of preservation in upstairs room; lower room papered over well before 1950. Grained decoration on many door panels, and mantel in upstairs landscaped room stippled or sponged in dark green."

To satisfy myself that the frescoes are as Nina Fletcher Little saw them more than 25 years ago, I examined the painted surfaces carefully. There is no sign of repair, infil, overpainting, or any other change in the brilliant designs, which are executed with such economy of media that any alteration would be readily apparent. Not only are these the original work of Rufus Porter but, judging from a score of other examples I have seen, they are probably the best preserved of his room frescoes extant. The second decorated room -- the downstairs parlor -- is now no longer fully papered, and a tantalizing shadow of past glory is visible. Here the frescoes were monochromatic black, but the overmantel decoration includes borders and patterns of great interest.

As there is a justifiable desire to restore the second Porter Room in the house, I examined the evidence with care. The overmantel stencils could probably all be accurately recut and applied, but I have some doubts about the murals on the other three walls, which have suffered greatly. Before any decision can be made, the remaining paper must be carefully removed (probably by limited steaming) under the care of a paintings conservator. Please note that it was the dry removal (peeling and ripping-off) of paper on the non-exposed wall which further lifted pigment and detail. Once all paper, glue residue and grime is cleaned from the walls, we will be able to evaluate what remains.

Since the monochromatic murals of Rufus Porter (night scenes, deftly using black outlines, gray skies and glowing white houses to create an eerie but lovely effect) are so different in visual impact from his full-color murals, having both in the same house would be superb. Once all evidence is collected and the damaged murals are carefully recorded, a release coat could be applied to the wall, and infil painting and new stencilling could be applied in a soluble paint media to bring the murals back to their 1825 appearance. I used such an approach at the Job Lane House in Bedford several years ago, with conservator Casey Carey doing the infil work. There, however, infil was kept at a bare minimum, since a great deal of detail had survived. At the Reed Homestead, I think we will find surviving detail much fainter and sketchier, so that the infil would have to be somewhat conjectural within the framework of the overall composition. If such a restoration is to be attempted at all, therefore, we shall have to be extremely careful. As Porter used a well-established vocabulary of trees, houses, steamboats, figures, etc... it may be possible to lift missing detail from other works: educated conjecture, if you will. We recommend that cleaning of all four walls be accomplished first, and that Jean Lipman and a small panel of professionals (including MHC staff) be then invited to brainstorm a good plan of action.

Rufus Porter (1792-1884) was not just an artistic genius but a true Renaissance man. Founder of Scientific American magazine, inventor of horseless carriages and airships, fiddler and drummer, teacher, builder of grist mills, dancing instructor, voyager to the northwest and distant Hawaii, writer and journalist, and father of sixteen children by two wives (where did he find the time?), he nevertheless travelled almost constantly, using his art to fund his peregrinations and satisfy his insatiable geographical curiosity. A letter he wrote in

1878, at age 86, stated that he was in good health, and had just walked seventeen miles, and he was still travelling at age 92 when felled by a sudden illness during a visit to a son in West Haven.

In the words of Jean Lipman, however, "Rufus Porter's place in American art history is that of our chief early mural painter, and one of our outstanding native artists".

As a muralist and itinerant painter, he travelled steadily from 1815 to 1840, working throughout New England and as far south as Virginia. While decorating houses, he also produced inexpensive portraits with a camera obscura of his own design: filled-in silhouettes, which Ms. Lipman describes as "sensitively drawn and delicately colored".

While this brief H.S.R. could easily be totally dominated by the life and talents of this great American, I prefer, at this point, to include Jean Lipman's brief biographical article in the appendix (section L), and to refer the reader to the bibliography (section K) for further reading.