

Royall House Reporter



Royall House & Slave Quarters

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2011-2012

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MERCURY RISING

This summer the Royall House and Slave Quarters brought one of its unseen treasures out of the attic and into the public's view. A wooden statue of Mercury, which once oversaw the estate from the top of the Royalls' summer house, has a new home as part of the exhibit "Learning from the Landscape." Bringing Mercury out of storage led board members to consider his role as one part of a grand landscape with roots that can be traced all the way back to the the birth of the Commonwealth.

Winthrop's Ten Hills Farm

John Winthrop, the second governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, wrote in his journal in 1630, "Here is as good land as I've seen ... sweet air, fair rivers, and plenty of springs, and the water better than in England."

In 1631, Winthrop selected for his personal estate a 600-acre tract of land along the western bank of the Mystic River, about six miles north of Boston. The records of the colony's Court of Assistants describe this land grant as being "near his house at Mistick to enjoy it, to him and his heirs forever." Winthrop called his estate "Ten Hills Farm," either because of ten small knolls on the property or to describe the ten hills around it.



A Winthrop family member drew this map in 1637.

"A fine Estate for a Gentleman to live on"

A century later, in 1732, Isaac Royall, a wealthy planter seeking to retire to the Boston area from his sugar plantations on the Caribbean island of Antigua, purchased 504 acres of land that had been part of Winthrop's original farm. The property was located in a section of Charlestown often referred to as Mystick; in 1754 it would be annexed to Medford. The farm straddled the Mystic Road, a main thoroughfare that stretched

from Boston Harbor across the Mystic River to the small settlement in Medford and on to Salem in the north.

Isaac Royall wrote to a colleague in the summer of 1736 about the condition of his new property, “I have desired my Brother [Jacob, who served as his agent for the purchase] to dam in forty or fifty acres of my salt meadow at my Charlestown farm, to cut all the wood down, but a shade for the cattle and to break up all that ground as soon as conveniency will permit and after it has been manured for two or three years to lay it down with grass seeds, for as it is now so full of woods and shaded the feeding must be of little worth.” [Massachusetts Historical Society, *Edmond Quincy Papers*]

At the time of the Royall purchase, the property included four farm buildings: a farmhouse and barn midway along the road, and a simple brick saltbox farmhouse with adjacent stable on a small hill that rose above the road and the river in the northern section. At least five years of renovation and construction transformed the property into a showplace. In a letter to Isaac Royall in November of 1736, Massachusetts Governor Jonathan Belcher wrote, “When you have done what you intend at Medford, it will be a fine Estate for a Gentleman to live on.”

In addition to the significantly expanded house (now known as the Royall House) and a brick Out Kitchen building, enlarged c. 1760 as living space for enslaved Africans, the estate included a coach house, stable, corn house, pigeon house, and four barns. The farm produced wool and cider, livestock, and English and Upland hay. These products were likely destined for the Caribbean, whose overwhelming emphasis on sugar production made the colonists there heavily dependent on the mainland colonies and European sources for necessities and foodstuffs. In 1750 a traveler wrote that he had “passed through Mistick, which is a small town of about a hundred houses, pleasantly situated; near to which is a fine country seat belonging to Mr. Isaac Royall, being one of the grandest in North America.” [Captain Francis Goelet’s journal, printed in *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, Vol. XXIV, p. 58]

Thirty years later, writing from England, Isaac Royall’s son-in-law submitted this description of the estate as

part of an attempt to get his wife’s inheritance restored after the Revolution:

Situated 5 miles from Boston, containing 636 acres of exceedingly good land in high cultivation. It has an elegant mansion house in complete repair when left and very well furnished. Every convenient out house and office, with stables and coach house, cow house, dove house. A large garden containing the best collection of fruit trees and plants of any in the province. Also 7 very neat and commodious tenements upon the premises.

This was a meticulously constructed landscape, designed both to impress and to demonstrate the imposition of man’s will upon nature, a common approach to the design of country estates in its time.

The Royalls, like other eighteenth-century landowners, used their personal landscape to illustrate their taste, power, and wealth. Most specifics about the Royalls’ gardens are lost, but the surviving evidence begins to develop our understanding.



This 19th century photograph illustrates the openness of the former Royall estate before it was developed as an urban neighborhood.

The eighteenth century garden took two forms—the utilitarian farm and the elegant pleasure grounds found on large estates. Isaac Royall Sr. had both, and Isaac Jr. expanded them. Formal gardens were not only an expression of beauty; they were also a visual representation of the wealth and power of the landowner. Paths, flower beds—sometimes filled with exotic plants from foreign places—and recreational buildings like summer houses were only accessible to those who could afford to purchase and maintain them. The Royalls were able to do so because of the enslaved Africans working on the property.

The ostentatious display served to distance the wealthy Royalls from their humble roots in woodcutting and carpentry, and to distinguish them from their

neighbors. While most eighteenth-century Americans relied upon their land for food, the Royall estate devoted substantial acreage to ornamental gardens and manicured lawns in addition to orchards and grazing areas for sheep and cattle.

Gardens and Summer House

The property included marshlands along the banks of the serpentine tidal Mystic River, an elm-lined drive, extensive orchards, and elaborate gardens. According to historian Samuel Adams Drake, writing in the late 1800s:

The Royall House stood in the midst of grounds laid out in elegant taste, and embellished with fruit trees and shrubbery. These grounds were separated from the highway by a low brick wall, now demolished. The gateway opening upon the grand avenue was flanked by wooden posts. Farther to the right was the carriage-drive, on either side of which stood massive stone gateposts, as antique in appearance as anything about the old mansion. Seventy paces back from the road, along the broad gravelled walk, bordered with box, brings you to the door.”

A visitor arriving in a carriage either alighted at the front entrance or passed by the broad drive, under the shade of magnificent old elms, around into the court-yard previously mentioned, and paved with round beach pebbles, through the interstices of which the grass grows thickly

Drake goes on to describe the summer house, topped by a carved wooden statue of winged Mercury, the Roman god of commerce. As the structure is not mentioned in Isaac Royall, Sr.’s 1739 probate inventory, we assume his son, Isaac Royall, Jr, had it built after that date.



“Behind the house, as we view it, was an enclosed garden of half an acre or more, with walks, fruit, and a summer-house at the farther extremity. No doubt this was the favorite resort of the family and their guests.

This summer-house, a veritable curiosity in its way, is placed upon an artificial mound, with two terraces, and is reached by broad flights of red sandstone steps. It is octagonal in form, with a bell-shaped roof, surmounted by a cupola, on which is placed a figure of Mercury. At present the statue, with the loss of both wings and arms, cannot be said to resemble the ideal. All of this delightfully suggestive and picturesque affair has now disappeared except the mound itself. We discover that utility led to the elevation of the mound, within which was an icehouse, the existence of which is disclosed by a trap-door in the floor of the summer-house.” [Samuel Adams Drake, *Historic Mansions and Highways around Boston*, 1873]

Modern History

When the Royall House Association purchased the property in 1908, the grand estate had dwindled to less than an acre of land, and the salvageable parts of the summer house, dismantled in the late nineteenth century, were stored in the attics along with the Mercury statue. One small section was installed on the property as a reminder of the once-impressive structure’s classical architecture.

Nearly all of the family’s belongings were dispersed in the chaos of the Revolutionary War and loyalist Isaac Royall’s sudden and permanent departure. However, one item that is believed to have been on the property made its way back to the museum in its early days: a heavy stone lawn roller (also known as a garden stone) with a wrought iron handle, listed in Isaac Royall, Sr’s 1739 probate inventory as “1 Garding Stone,” value £6. This symbol of the family’s immense wealth and luxurious lives, presumably used to smooth the lawns and gravel paths, is also included the exhibit, along with Mercury and a carved Ionic capital. We are pleased to bring these treasures out of the attic and to provide a glimpse of the landscape of which they played an integral part.

The museum’s installation of “Learning from the Landscape” was supported in part by a grant from the Medford Arts Council, a local agency which is supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency. Additional support came from Historic New England, which selected the Royall House and Slave Quarters as the first Massachusetts recipient of its new Community Preservation Grants, designed to support preservation projects in each New England state.

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As I write this column, early fall is around the corner with its mix of warm days, cool evenings, and hints of color in the trees. The summer, however, is a recent memory, too, and one that encouraged discursiveness. So, if you'll indulge me I thought I'd devote my space here to two different topics.

The first consists of some thoughts about our teacher workshops. It has been our busiest summer ever on this front. This summer we did five intensive teacher workshops, including: two National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Scholar events (with the African American Studies Program at Boston University); an NEH seminar managed through the Rhode Island Historical Society; an all-day workshop co-sponsored by The Tracing Center on Histories and Legacy of Slavery (Traces of the Trade) and the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities; and a Teaching American History group working with the National Park Service.

These events have brought public school teachers from all over the country to our site and broadened our partnerships with universities, scholars, and public history institutions. Overall, the feedback has been excellent. The newly furnished spaces and the new Landscape exhibit have played a big part in our ability to interpret the landscape, social system, and daily realities of the Royall estate. These displays and our careful thematic approach to the tour all prompt understanding and questions, including queries that have suggested additional ways of thinking about what we have, what we know, and what we don't know.

All of this goes directly to our role as an educational resource. Every teacher that learns from us goes on to teach others. We don't always (perhaps not even often) know how they meld the information and insights gained here into their classrooms, but we're confident that they do. We often hear variations on these comments: "Hearing the stories and seeing the place really brought this history to life" or "I had heard about Northern slavery, but your site has enriched my understanding of what it was and what it means." And, of course, we're even more delighted if they come back with their students.

My second theme is broader and a bit polemical. You may have seen news stories about the decline in the emphasis on history in our schools. Although the curriculum has always been crowded, increased emphasis (panic?) on science and math, as well as standardized testing, have reduced the time and resources spent on history and social studies. Reporting on this trend was accompanied by dire examples of the public's ignorance about the most basic facts of U.S. history.

I am not a teacher, nor an education expert, but I know what it means to live in modern America as an engaged citizen. As an increasingly diverse society, we need shared values in order to function as a democracy, provide equal opportunity to all, and mete out justice. These values are born from an understanding of the dreams and struggles of the past and their reverberations today. History is the route to that understanding.

This doesn't mean everyone has to be an expert on the minutiae of 18th century life, for instance, but a grounding in the "when, how, what and why" of our society and its foundations is surely essential. And when the social fabric is made up of people from a dizzying number of countries, belief systems, and religions, a core of commonality is even more important.

I don't pretend to have the answer to the problem, but I worry when I think about it. But I am hopeful, too, especially when I meet a class of elementary students and look out on what must be a mini United Nations as I talk about the Royalls, the enslaved Africans, and the world in which they lived. Of late, I have expressed this hopefulness this way: "In a few years, you'll be in charge. It will be your country and your society. Ask yourself, what kind of country do you want to live in, and how you are going to make sure that we live up to the dreams of the people who lived here so long ago?"

Tom Lincoln
Executive Director

NEWS BRIEFS

On a bright, chilly day in late March, former U.S. Poet Laureate **Rita Dove** and her husband, **Fred Viebahn**, enjoyed a special tour of the Royall House and Slave Quarters. The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet was in Medford for a reading and public lecture organized by Tufts University's Center for the Humanities. Ms. Dove's poem "Belinda's Petition" centers on the appeal of an African woman enslaved fifty years by the Royall family for financial support for herself and her infirm daughter. In what many believe was the first instance of reparations for slavery in America, in 1783 the new Massachusetts legislature awarded Belinda a pension from the proceeds of Isaac Royall, Jr.'s estate.



Rex Passion, one of our advisors on building preservation and maintenance, conferred with our executive director and co-president **Peter Gittleman** on several ongoing repair and maintenance issues, including the white fence, painting, and the Slave Quarters. Plans are afoot for a first-ever "Painting Day" for volunteers interested in applying some historic color to the mansion. Stay tuned for details.

Executive director **Tom Lincoln** participated in a panel on slavery and public history at the statewide Massachusetts conference. He spoke about our experience and approach, as well as recent reinterpretation work.

James and Lois Horton came for a tour in June. They are pioneering scholars on topics of American slavery, African-American history and public history. Their post-tour comments were most encouraging.

Many thanks to **Dale Rider**, who came over to help unload our new folding chairs, put two chair racks together, and took all the packaging to be recycled.

We welcomed 400 fifth graders and their teachers from Medford Public Schools for special guided tours in June. We are grateful to **Beth Fuller**, Medford School Committee member **Sharon Guzik**, **Ryan Hayward**, **Margen Kelsey**, **Dale Rider**, and **Gracelaw Simmons** for their help with this important educational program.

A large crew of volunteers from **Tufts University**

worked with the **Landscape Committee** to spruce up the grounds in late August. Thanks to all!

Tropical storm Irene brought down hundreds of walnuts and some small branches on our grounds, but otherwise spared the site. Thanks to **Karen Manning** for helping with the cleanup. Interestingly, the walnuts, while not edible, can be used to make Colonial-style dye for clothing.

Several students from **Masconomet Regional High School** (Topsfield, MA) came for a tour. The entire tenth grade class is

undertaking a semester-long history project focused on the 18th century. Our site was one of a number chosen as focal points in this interesting exercise.

Longtime AAC members **Joanne Pope Melish** and **Alexandra Chan** spoke at several of our summer teacher workshops. We are grateful to them for sharing their insights and knowledge.

We are delighted by the reaction of **Dr. Alexandra Chan**, who headed the archaeological dig on our site, to our recent interpretation of the Royall House service corridor:

"I have, of course, been keeping abreast of the various new projects underway at the Royall House and Slave Quarters, but living in New Hampshire, I had yet to see any of it in person. This summer, I have had the privilege of participating in a number of workshops at the site, however, and I finally got to see what everyone had been talking about. To me, seeing the reconceptualization of the kitchen and the kitchen chamber, as well as the carefully crafted replicas of the milkpans, cream pots, and gaming pieces recovered archaeologically, was a little bit like waking up on Christmas morning. I congratulate the museum on its continued efforts to bring its new vision of the site to the public, and for having so seamlessly woven the archaeological finds into the tour and the new visitor experience here. What a transformation!! Hurray for us! Let this just be the beginning!"

PROGRAM NEWS

This year's Annual Meeting followed a slightly different format than in the past. Following a vote on a revision to the by-laws and election of the 2011-12 Board of Directors and officers, **Benjamin Haavik** from Historic New England presented the site with a Community Preservation Grant, making the Royall House and Slave Quarters the first Massachusetts recipient of this prestigious award. After the formalities, the Board of Directors gave members the first look at the newly restored Kitchen and Kitchen Chamber.



The 2011 Spring Celebration was an unqualified success, despite heavy morning rains. **Margaret Vetare**, who served as our consultant on the furnishings for the restored rooms, described the process of determining the plan, and demonstrated how to interpret the story of the enslaved residents of the Royalls' estate with power and sensitivity. Several students from the Assabet Valley Regional Technical School were on hand to see objects they forged for the site on display in the Out Kitchen and Winter Kitchen.



Thank you to all who volunteered at the event or contributed to the bounty of food and beverage: **Beverly Cohen, Margherita Desy, Anne Donaghy, Peter Gittleman, Theresa Kelliher, Margen Kelsey, Kathryn Kucharski, Tom Lincoln, Karen Manning, Elizabeth Merrick, Mike Oliver, Rachelle Olsen, Sharon Olsen, Jennifer Pustz, Brenda Rosenberg, Gracelaw Simmons, Pamela Speciale, and the Landscape Committee, led by Lindsay Rider.**

A packed house enjoyed the remarks of Margaret Vetare followed by a first look at the newly restored Winter Kitchen and Kitchen Chamber. Below, Fred Mikkelson shares wisdom with students from the Assabet Valley Regional Technical School.



VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: ELIZABETH MERRICK

Elizabeth Merrick joined the Royall House and Slave Quarters volunteer corps as a guide-in-training in 2010 and started giving tours this season. She has lived in the area for many years and always loved the history of New England and the Boston area in particular. Elizabeth works as a health services researcher, so old houses and history is an avocation. After driving by the Royall House and Slave Quarters many times, she decided to take a tour. Her reaction to what she saw and why she decided to get involved are perhaps best described in her own words:

I was just struck by what a treasure was right there in middle of all that modern development. The house is beautiful, but I am even more interested in how the world was and how people lived in times past—and I think that understanding that helps to explain who we are, collectively, today. Books and the Internet and so forth are great, but there is something about physically being in the same environment that people lived in centuries ago that brings history alive for me, and I think for many people. The Royall House and Slave Quarters is also important to me as an illustration of complexity. Too often people want to simplify history into what we wish it had been, or something easier to categorize. In reality there are different perspectives and many different angles to any time period and place. The Royall House and Slave Quarters illustrates that with its story of its wealthy prominent family intertwined with slavery, in addition to the division between Loyalists and Patriots during the Revolution. At the time, none of these issues was as clear-cut as we may view them now with our 21st-century lens. As a guide I try to share with visitors this window into the past, as one enthusiast to (hopefully) another. I always try to keep learning more about the house, family, slavery, Revolution, etc., so I will keep growing and have more depth of knowledge to share. I really enjoy introducing visitors to this place, whether they are interested primarily in architecture, the Revolutionary War, colonial life, Northern slavery, or just old houses! I particularly think it's great when visitors bring children with them; nurturing curiosity about what life was like before our time, and appreciation of older forms of beauty in architecture starts early and—as in my case—may be enriching on a lifelong basis.



Thank you, Elizabeth, for sharing your time, talents, and passion with us and our visitors!

Your Membership Matters

Preserving two historically and architecturally significant buildings, teaching school children about an important period in American history, informing the general public on the subject of northern colonial slavery, inspiring and entertaining with thought-provoking public programs ... our members' support makes this work possible. A large portion of the Royall House & Slave Quarters' annual operating budget comes from our loyal and generous members. And we know – and appreciate! – that many of you give much more than your membership support: sponsoring special events, responding to the annual fundraising appeal, and donating your time and talents.

Please know how very grateful the staff and board are for all you do! If you haven't renewed your membership yet this year, please consider doing so today. If you aren't yet a member, we can fix that! Please contact executive director Tom Lincoln at Director@RoyallHouse.org or 781-396-9032. And please accept our sincere thanks!

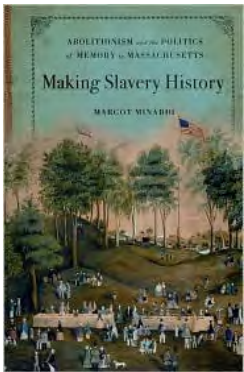
Shop Volunteers Needed for occasional weekend afternoons through October. Please call 781-396-9032 or email director@royallhouse.org for more information.

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

Acknowledging the 150th anniversary of the start of the Civil War, the RH&SQ's first two fall-winter programs will address issues of freedom and independence in the 19th century

Wednesday, November 16, 2011: Horace Seldon, *William Lloyd Garrison: Commitments, Connections, and Contradictions*

A Ranger on the Black Heritage Trail and a devotee of William Lloyd Garrison, **Horace Seldon** will speak about the “Preeminent Agitator,” examining Massachusetts resident William Lloyd Garrison’s public life as one of the great leaders of the abolition movement, and how his home relationships shaped both the man and his public message.



Wednesday, January 18, 2012 : Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History*

Historian **Margot Minardi** is the author of *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts*, published in 2010. She will discuss how New Englanders’ arguments about and commemorations of the American Revolution set the course for antislavery politics in the nineteenth century.

All programs begin at 7:30 p.m. in the Slave Quarters and are free and open to the public



Royall House & Slave Quarters
15 George Street
Medford, MA 02155