

About Those Photos

by Doris Sherrow, September 2000

This year's **Portland Historical Society calendar** will feature photographs from the prolific historical research of **Jessie Alsop** for the **Colonial Dames Old Houses of Connecticut** project.

In the early 20th century, the Colonial Dames began to inventory the oldest houses in the various towns. Local history buffs did this research (people like me living half a century ago). The form they had to fill out was lengthy and complex. They had to shoot a clear photograph of the house for the front page, and describe, in detail, its exterior. They had to describe each room, noting fireplaces, paneling, chair railing, wainscoting, courting benches, triple-run staircases, and a host of colonial-period architectural details.

If there was a local historic name for the house, they jotted it down in the blanks for "Known as..." Then they embarked on the tangled puzzle of the historical title search, transcribing the essence of each deed onto the form. Sometimes you can hopscotch from buyer to seller to buyer to seller to original builder in a single afternoon. Sometimes not: the **c.1690 William Cornwell house**, which stood on Glastonbury Turnpike until a decade ago, took me one full 37 ½ hour week to nail down in 1980! (But what a week that was---!)

Jessie Alsop was born on Staten Island in 1875, although she was a descendant of the well-to-do Middletown Alsops. Somewhere on her family tree was poet **Richard Alsop**, who had been one of the early 1800s literary group known as the "Hartford Wits." Jessie's father's business took the family to the midwest where she grew up, but in adulthood she came to Middletown to live with her aunt, **Lucy Alsop**. She worked as a clerk at the Middletown National Bank for many years, retiring in 1934.

All in all, she wrote several pamphlets and books on local history, numerous columns for the Middletown Press, and completed the forms for nine Colonial Dames monographs. These are filed at the Connecticut State Library; Portland Public Library has photocopies of them.

Miss Alsop's photographs were taken around 1948 and often show how these buildings have changed in the intervening half-century. My house, for example, the Job Bates house, didn't have its east side picture window at that time, just an ordinary double-hung 2-over-2 window.

Portland Public Library also has a file of pictures and partial research for perhaps 40 other old houses for which the Colonial Dames forms were not completed or submitted to the State Library. Consequently this file contained original photographs!

This year's Historical Society calendar, which we hope to have ready for the Portland Agricultural Fair in early October, will show fifteen of these old photographs. One actually dates from 1912, and another, perhaps the 1890s.

Many of these houses have since been researched by the Greater Middletown Preservation Trust in their 1979-80 project, and we can supply you with the builder's name. Of the fifteen, ten are still standing, though perhaps changed. Three are gone. And two--we have no idea where or what they are or were! We are offering these old photographs in the hope that someone will recognize them and tell us!

One house stands on a slight rise behind a white picket fence--or at least it did in 1948! It has dark wood shingle siding, original 12/12 and 8/12 windows picked out in white trim, and a center chimney. At first, I thought it was the **Elisha Shepard house** at 32 Indian Hill Avenue. After I had gazed at this picture for, all totaled, several hours, it hit me that the Elisha Shepard house has a 5-bay façade and this has 4 bays. (A "bay" in this sense is an opening, door or window, on the front.) So it's **not** the Elisha Shepard house!

The other "mystery house" is a classic 5-bay, 2-story center chimney colonial with a Victorian bay window added to the left side. This photograph was not taken by Jessie Alsop--she was probably still out west, or maybe even just a tot in Staten Island when this picture was snapped!

Near the house are a boy of 8 or 10, a bearded man, possibly his father, and, near the open front door, a woman in a long dress with her hair pinned up--likely the mother. In the foreground sit a white-haired, white-bearded old man (the grandfather?) with his cane clutched in one hand and his broad-brimmed hat doffed in the other, and a sweet-faced little girl with chin-length hair and a dog at her knee.

At first I thought this was the house referred to in a typed sheet next to the picture--that house

was reputed to be haunted! Then I realized the haunted house had been made of stone, and this house is clearly clapboard. Consequently we have no idea where this house is, or was, either!

So come to the **Portland Agricultural Fair**, look for the Historical booth, and get yourself a set of pictures that haven't been seen for half a century. And please, let us know where the two mystery houses are! Or were!