



The Doorknob Collector

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THE ROUND HOUSE

By Melville E. Webb Jr.

What follows is an article from the Boston Globe from Sunday, March 8, 1903 by Melville E. Webb, Jr., about long-time hardware manufacturer and dealer Enoch Robinson and his unusual domicile (which still stands and has been restored) just north of Boston. Many thanks to Rhett Butler for this article and the accompanying photos from his archive.

"The "Round House" in Somerville was built more than 50 years ago (1851) by Enoch Robinson, who for four years previous to 1850 had resided on Central St, only a short distance from the site of

the Round House on Beech St

Enoch Robinson, from what can be learned of him, was a typical Yankee, inventive, practical, economical. A man of mechanical mind who had worked in metals as a young man, later trained in the warehouse of a ship trimmer and maker of steering apparatus, and finally launching on his own independent career as a manufacturer of glass door knobs - a trade which was the basis of his son's all-round hardware establishment on Cornhill in Boston today.

It was a theory of Enoch Robinson's that a "round house" not only could be erected at less expense than the ordinary "frame" house, but that more room in it could be made practically available. Moreover, the question of light, he thought, could be best disposed of, since each room must necessarily have it's outside windows, and all would be more or less lighted within from a central shaft covered with a roof sky light.

Sometime in 1850 Mr. Robinson decided to build. The site selected was on the southern slope of Spring Hill, Somerville, and adjoining a large, open tract of land, which, until a few years ago, was not broken by any house.

The lot was a good-sized one, but for the house itself a circle, 40 feet in diameter was laid out, a cellar dug, and a solid stone foundation built about it.



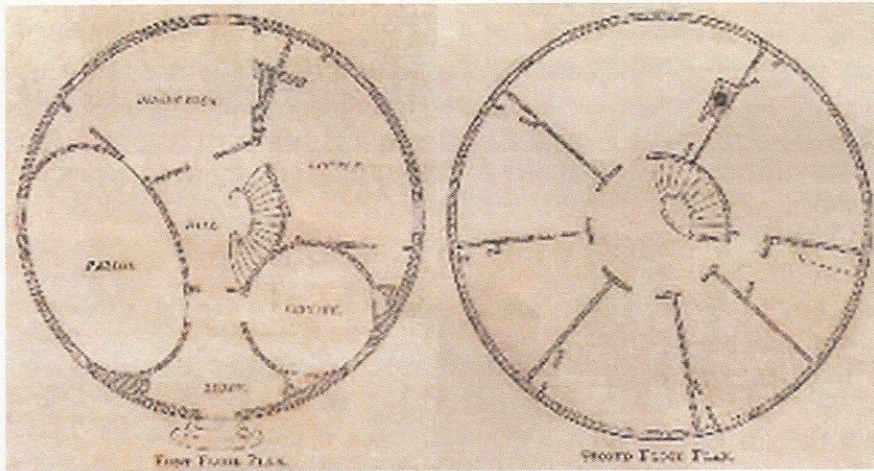
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In the construction of the house not a stick of timber was used. The walls were made of plank, sawed to fit the circular foundation, and nailed together, one above the other, in regular courses. On the first floor four rooms were provided, three of them with two windows each, and the other, a room like the house itself, laid out in a perfect circle, having only one window.

These windows comprised four large panes of glass set in a single sash. These slid up in cases between the outer and inner walls, and entirely out of the way, in much the fashion as do the small square windows in our modern railway coaches.

The blinds of the house also were constructed on this plan. The blinds were the same as ordinary outside house blinds, only they were joined and also set in a casing similar to that which held the windows. These raised up between the walls, as did the windows themselves.

With such an arrangement for the blinds and windows, it was not possible to have those of the second story directly above those of the first. So when the seven upstairs rooms (at right) were laid out, care was taken not to have the windows above those below. Moreover, as sliding windows



and blinds were used upstairs, it was necessary to have a place for them to push into when raised, and for this purpose a series of battlements was built to surmount the second story of the house, and into the space thus provided the upper window casements were fitted. These may be easily observed in the exterior photograph of the house.

The front door of the house entered into an odd-shaped vestibule formed by the outer circle of the house and the irregular outer walls of the circular library on the right and an oval-shaped parlor on the left. The parlor was 24 feet long and 15 feet wide, while the library opposite was exactly 13 feet in diameter.

The kitchen, immediately behind the library, was finished in white wood, varnished, and had a slate floor; adjoining was a large dining room with windows facing the southeast. Between the dining room and kitchen was the large chimney, and space adjoining was utilized for closets. Other closets were built in spaces left otherwise unavailable by the curves of the parlor and library.

These four rooms, it will be seen, were built about an irregular hallway, and stairway in the middle of the house, which was lighted from above. The stairway was built in a spiral, and on the second floor, led to a large rotunda 13 feet in diameter, from which led the seven chambers. Two of these chambers had two windows, the largest room being over the dining room.

Five years later (1856) a third story or cupola was built over the second story. In this were arranged five rooms, completing a house of 15 rooms, not including the cellar of something more than an area of 300 square feet.

The Doorknob Collector



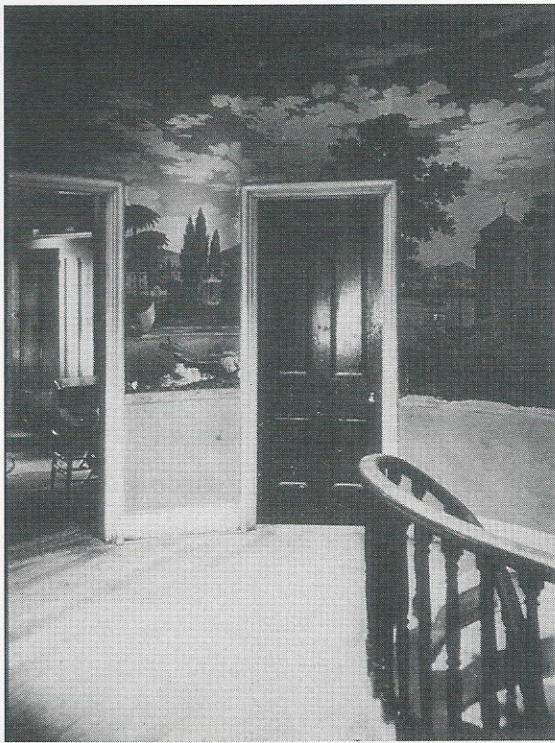
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It took Enoch Robinson nearly two years (1849 - 1851) to construct the house. Into it was put the best of materials and superior workmanship. Yet it was erected at an expense much less than a square house built in the ordinary way.

Later, a barn, built on semicircular lines, was erected behind the round house, but this was demolished about 15 years ago (1888).

The house as it stands today has remained unchanged outside since the addition of the cupola. Inside, beyond a few repairs and improvements it is as Mr. Robinson's family moved into it more than 50 years ago.

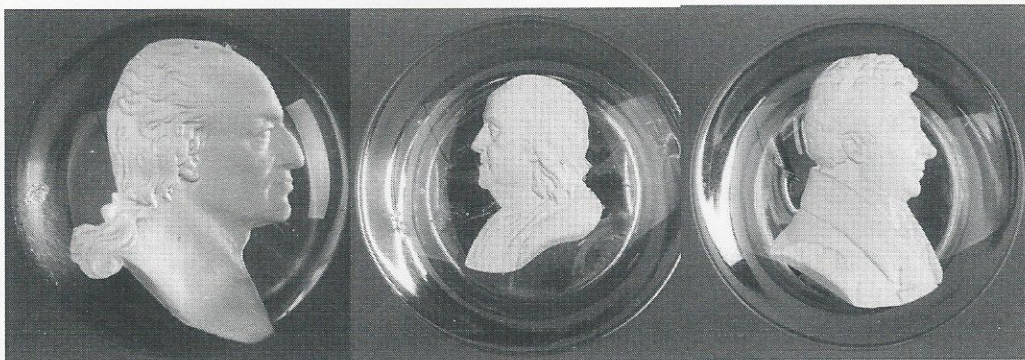
In building, Mr. Robinson laid out a system of gas piping, and the house was lighted by means of a portable gas apparatus. Now, of course, the regular city supply is used. In 1852, however, there were no sanitary arrangements made, water being pumped into the kitchen. Later modern improvements came, but probably were another round house to be built today, a very different arrangement would be made, for the slight partitions allow very little additional piping.

Inside, the most picturesque rooms today are the library and parlor. The latter has undergone few, if any, alterations since the house was built. In this room the elaborate ceiling decorations suggest the frescoing of 70 or 80 years ago, while the walls are papered with a French paper imported by Mr. Robinson.

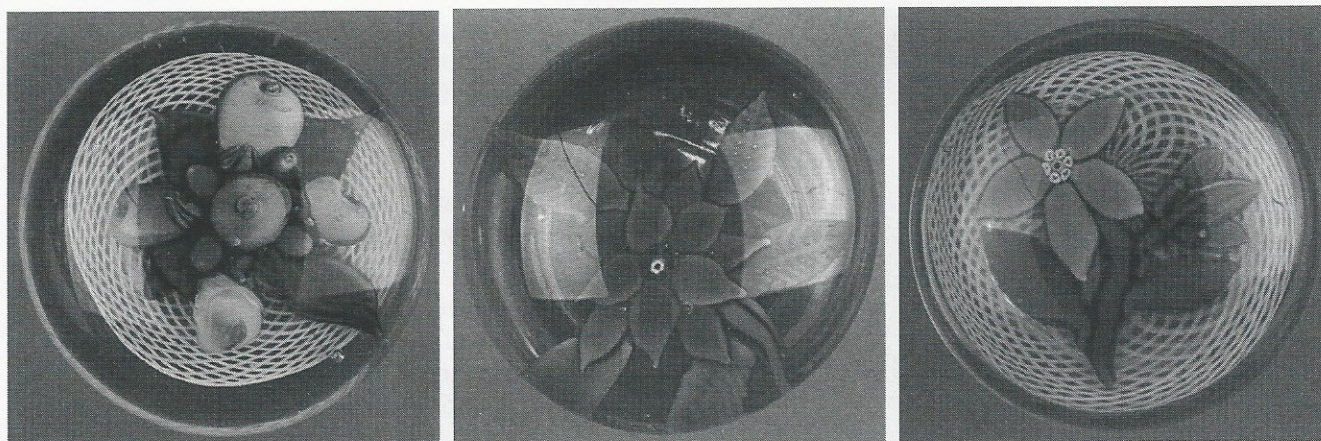
This paper is unlike that of today. Instead of being symmetrical in its decorative design, it depicts scenes of French royalty. On it are emblazoned ancient castles and garden and hunting scenes, none of which are repeated in the wide oval stretch of paper. The figures cover half the height of the surface of the paper, being surmounted with a clear blue sky. Originally the sky extended above the upper half of the decoration, but Mr. Robinson, not wishing to have the figures and scenes come too near the floor, cut off a strip of sky nearly three feet wide, and, raising the body of the paper, placed the extra strip beneath as a dado.

From the center of the ceiling hangs an elaborate glass chandelier, with scores of pendants. Mr. Robinson, it is stated by his son, was the first man to devise a method of pressing and molding glass, instead of cutting it, and this chandelier was considered quite a curiosity by the Somerville folk. The affair supported a number of jets, and is an impressive ornament still.

In this room, as well as in several others in the house, the door handles were of glass. These were molded, but transparent, and in the center of each was a white medallion. Some of these medallions were in the form of flowers, but others were likenesses of the Presidents of the United States (Washington, Franklin & Lafayette, at left). Many of these old knobs are still in use in the round house. [Note: Robinson exhibited 42 of his different medallion knobs at the 1844 Boston Mechanics Fair].



Another decorative feature of the parlor is a series of wood carvings about the door cases. There are raised combinations



of festoons of flowers and cupids over each doorway, and also surmounting the interior window casings. The other rooms, however, are much plainer, and the old-fashioned doors were replaced with new ones about 25 years ago (1878).

In the round library, the most unique features are two niches set in the wall and which contain books. These niches, although built into the library, formerly were part of some older establishment and were among the many purchases made by Mr. Robinson in one of his transactions at the razing of some building in Somerville or Boston.

As one stands in the room the niches seem to protrude even beyond the limits of the house, and a story is told that years ago, a local minister, after visiting the Robinsons, went outside the house for the purpose of seeing the minutive bulges on the otherwise smooth, round exterior of the house. Of course he did not find them. This feature is not well shown by the plan in the above cut, as there really is only an inch or two between the inner wall of either of the niches and the outer wall of the house. An interior view of one of these niches is shown in the photograph of the library.

From the outside the house presents an unique appearance. As the Globe photographer was taking the picture, an interested small boy spectator chirped out, "Say, mister, looks like a Bug light, doesn't it." but general shape is the only thing in common with the two structures. There is an odd irregularity in the locations of the windows, and all chimneys are hidden.

A single, heavy metal door swings from the street into the entry. The door is covered with brass upon which have been raised many odd designs, and all have become bronzed by the 50 years exposure to the weather. There are four very narrow glass panels in the door, but the strangest arrangement of all is a brazen dog's head in the very middle of the door. At first sight this well may be taken for an immense knocker, but in fact it is the only handle the door has.

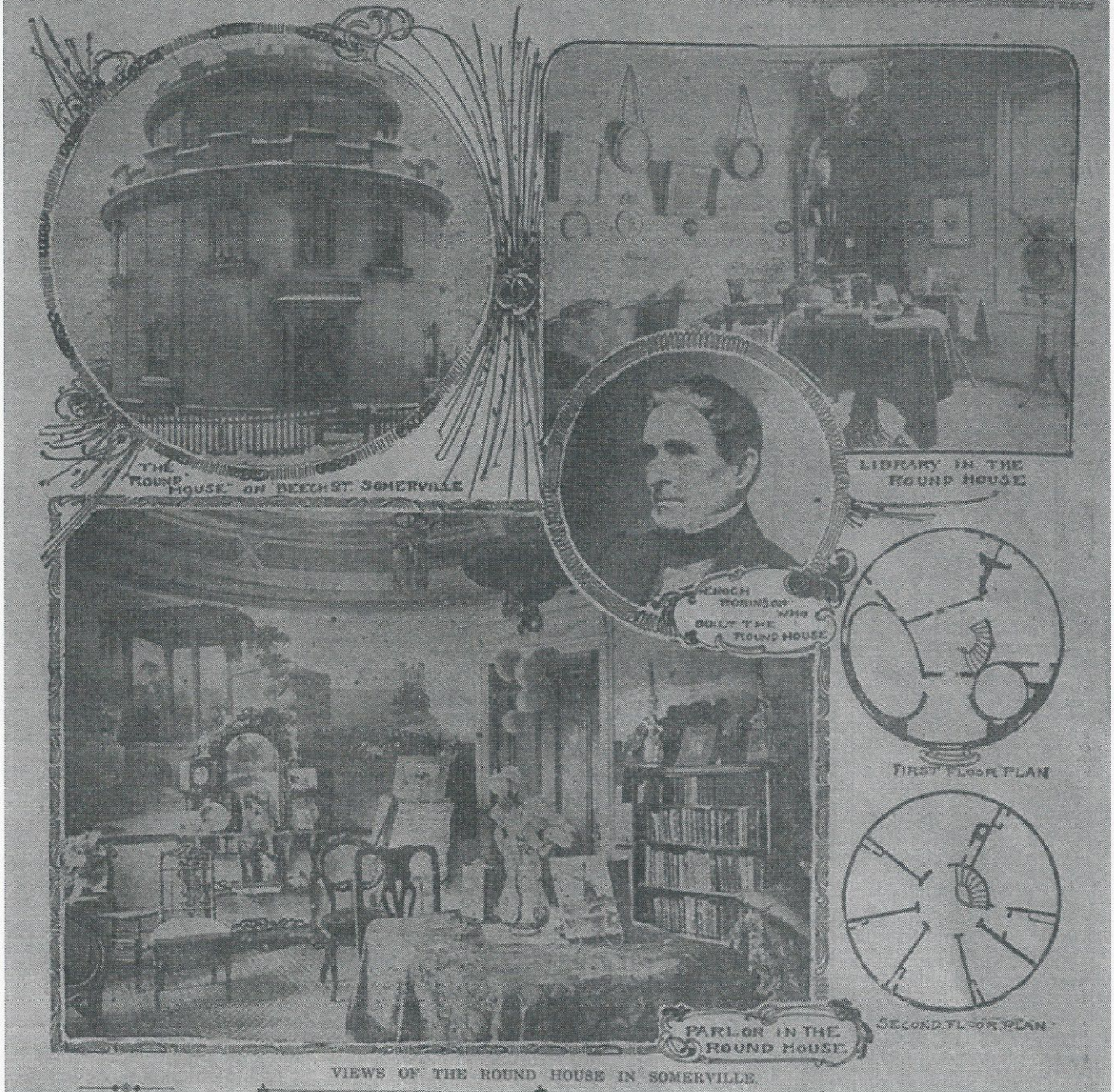
Metal decorations extend along the ledges of the windows, while a part of the battlement decoration above the first story is a intricate network of brass and iron. Another iron balcony extends over the top of the narrow porch over the front door.

The Robinson family have lived in the house since it was built, or rather since about 1854, for during the first year after the building was completed Enoch Robinson was willing to remain on Central St. The first use for the building was as a place to hold a church fair, and at this time the house was considered a great curiosity - an eighth wonder of the world to the local residents.

While he lived in the round house, Enoch Robinson established himself in the hardware business in Dock sq, Boston, and his old sign is still above the doors of his son's store on Cornhill. His daughters, Mrs. Jane M. Robinson and Miss Ann Robinson, and his grandson, Frank H. Robinson, have lived in the round house since it was built, while Enoch Robinson's youngest son, Albert M. Robinson, lives two doors above, on Beech St."

THE "ROUND" HOUSE.

One Built in Somerville by Enoch Robinson in 1850, the Only House of the Kind in This Country—Mark Twain Need Not Have Traveled to Scotland for the Realization of His Idea.



Many thanks to Rhett Butler for this article and the accompanying photos from his archive. His research is for his forthcoming book (in a few years) on Enoch Robinson.

New York Times Building New York, New York

The New York Times newspaper was established in 1851. After publishing in several rented buildings, the Times built the own building in 1858 on Park Row in Manhattan, near to City Hall and most businesses. By the mid-1880s they hired architect George B. Post to rebuild and greatly expand their present building. Post's design plan accommodated the existing presses in the basement, rentable offices in some of the lower floors, and newspaper space in the rest of the building. The thirteen story steel and iron building featured editorial offices in the mansard roof at the top. The Post building was completed 1889 and the growing paper stayed until they moved to the newly-renamed Times Square at Broadway & Seventh Avenue in 1904.

The hardware shown at right is by Yale & Towne and was bought years ago from a NYC seller and clearly was for the NY Times, but no publications about the 1889 building identified anything about the hardware. However, the paper's 1/1/1905 supplement about their new building said regarding the hardware for their 1904 building on Times Square building, "the material of which all door fixtures are made is bronze metal, which is specially adapted for this use because it is easily kept free of dirt and rust". So clearly the earlier Times building had iron hardware that might attract dirt and rust!

The doorknob later became the Rokeby design by Yale & Towne in 1897, but was used for the Times and other landmark buildings in Cleveland, Denver, Minneapolis and Chicago in the early 1890s. Great designs are always in demand, and Yale &

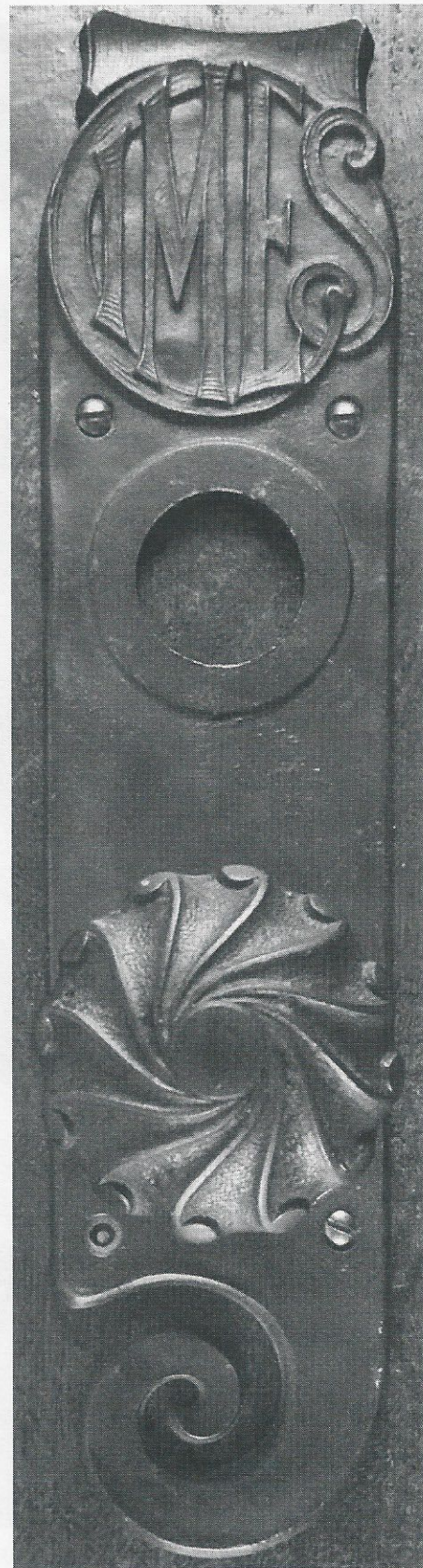
Towne clearly these Bower-Barff iron knobs would be popular with business customers.

The 1889 building at 41 Park Row still stands today. After the Times moved out, the mansard roof was removed and four full floors were added to the top of the structure. The building served for decades as office space for the publishing industry, becoming classroom and office space for Pace University in the 1950s, and is now once again office space.



References:

- Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_York_Times
- Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_Times_Building_\(41_Park_Row\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_Times_Building_(41_Park_Row))



Three Good Story Knobs

By H. Weber Wilson

Antiques = History = Stories = Antiques. And everyone loves a good story, right?

So here are three very collectible doorknobs set to sell in my New Year's Day auction—and all the information I could not put into the catalog.

Hannah Caldwell & The Seal of Union County, NJ

Hannah Caldwell was born 20 August 1737 and died tragically on June 7, 1780, during the battle of Connecticut Farms, near Morristown, NJ. It was one of the last Revolutionary War battles on the Northern front.

Details of the battle, and in particular the sad death of Hannah Caldwell, are contradictory. What is known for certain is that when the firing commenced she and two children, and two other ladies, ensconced themselves in a back room of their cabin home. This space was comprised of 3 stone walls and one chinked log wall that included a small window.



At some point during the skirmishing a musket ball slammed into Mrs. Caldwell, killing her instantly, and she fell back upon the bed.

Shortly thereafter the German Hessians under Gen. Baron Wilhelm von Knyphausen, as well as English redcoats, entered the Caldwell house and did off with some of Mrs. Caldwell's clothes as well as the bed sheets.

Neighbors took the body outside and the soldiers burned the house to the ground.

Naturally this senseless death caused tremendous publicity: bad for the English but good for the cause of the Revolution, for which her husband, Rev. James Caldwell, was as active and outspoken proponent.

From the American viewpoint, Hannah was shot point blank by a soldier who jammed his musket through the window and fired (one or two rounds).

From the English/German viewpoint it was a bizarre incident of an errant musket ball finding its way through the chinks between the logs. And even more unsettling was the fact that due to the positioning of the troops, it could well have been an American errant round.

The ultimate outcome, as we know, was the victory of the Americans, and thus history is mostly content with the indigenous version. But as is so often the case, history is still not enough. So, in 1857, when Union County, NJ designed their Seal, it was determined that moving the tragic death scene outside would make the story much more graphic. Thus we have the rendering of the two figures which has been described as "a redcoat soldier shooting her like it's the opening of deer season."

(also see TDC #32)



1895

Royal Neighbors of America



The Royal Neighbors of America (RNA) was founded as a ladies' auxiliary group to Modern Woodmen of America on December 5, 1888, in Council Bluffs, Iowa. In 1895, nine Illinois women reorganized the group as a fraternal benefit society with the goal of providing insurance for women who at that time could not vote and often did not own property.

RNA has continued as a mission-driven business, administered by woman, and for 124 years RNA has adhered to its founding principles of Faith, Unselfishness, Courage, Endurance and Modesty. These are historically known as the Five Graces and have been the inspiration for the RNA chapter system to deliver billions of dollars of financial aid and community service.

Royal Neighbors of America's building opened in Rock Island, IL. It is a fine examples of Art Deco architecture and was designed by Pond & Pond, out of Chicago. It is faced with Bedford limestone, has a Mansard style slate roof and the façade includes sculptors by Nellie V. Walker.

And how did this early hard work and dedication play out? In 1928 the Royal Neighbors of America Building

Regarding the RNA doorknob, two things are notable. First is that the design is definitely Colonial Revival, not at "Art Deco". Second is that by the late '20s, it was



not necessary that a building design included custom doorknobs. Pond & Pond were long established architects for public and social services building projects, where budgets were often skimpy. Also, Pond and Pond were known as influencers for turn-of-the-century architectural modernism. So one wonders who exactly made the decisions to include these custom doorknobs in the building plans.

Hotel Pritchard Huntington WV

The origin of the design for this hard-to-find doorknob, with the rather mysterious tower half covered with foliage, has long been a mystery. Now we know the rest of the story: it is an image of Blarney Castle in County Cork, Ireland.

This logo found on the doorknob created for the Huntington, WV Hotel shows up on dinner plates, bar ware, and other hotel items. But why would a hotel that opened in 1925, in the middle of a busy downtown, and without a tower nor a rustic woodland anywhere nearby, select such a distinct yet foreign motif?

The Hotel Pritchard was built by Frederick C. Pritchard who was an engineer who made a modest fortune in coal. He came to Huntington in the early 1900s and with a partner built a large office building. Then in the early 20s he and his wife began the Pritchard School for orphans. This project included a fine building that borrowed from multiple European architectural traditions and was set on 500 bucolic acres in nearby Ona WV.

Simultaneously, Pritchard began construction of the hotel, (in a austere Beaux Arts style) with the idea that the school farms would be a main supplier of victuals for the hotel kitchens, and revenue from the hotel would help support the school. And the hotel would need lots of meat and produce as it featured 300 rooms, each with a private bath, plus multiple dining areas.



Meanwhile, by 1923 the Pritchard's had built a home for themselves, a home expressing the Italian Renaissance style that included a dramatic square tower rising from one corner. So we see that the Pritchard's had a strong interest in Romantic architecture and would have been supportive of the doorknob design.

Another important clue emerges from the fact that the house builder, John J. West, was "known for his attention to quality and detail, and the Pittsburgh firms of Joseph Home Company and Boggs and Buhl Co., provided the *interior finishing, door knobs and bath fixtures...*". So again we see Pritchard's interest in

quality architectural details.

But the West connection ends abruptly as the house he built had several problems, including a leaky roof, and so Pritchard hired another builder for his hotel. And here the mystery of the Pritchard logo might have continued on, except for the diligent digging of Paul Woodfin who uncovered what really happened.



It turns out that Pritchard hired the A.E. Kelly Hotel Company to manage his new property, and apparently gave them the authority to make some big decisions. Kelly being Irish (!) not only came up with the tower design for the logo (creamer at right) but he also had a Blarney Castle fountain made for the main lobby.



These three quality knobs will be sold on New Year's Day 2022 via LooLoo Auction. See our auction at <https://looloodesign.com/auction-preview/>.

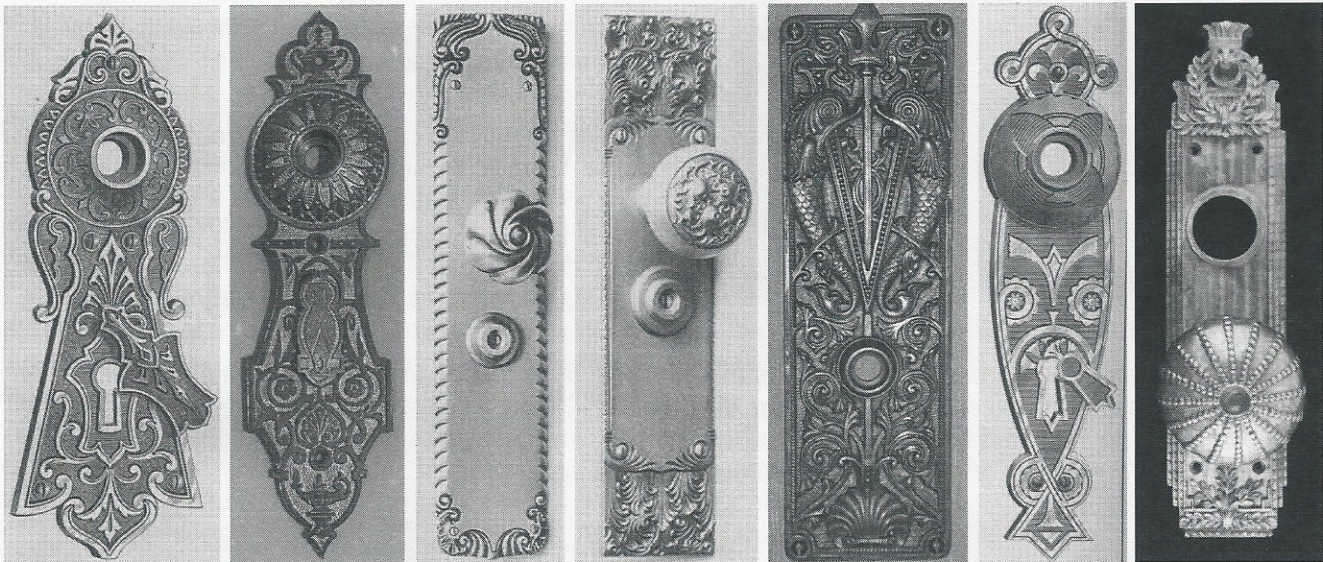
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Members are reminded that your dues entitle you to advertise items for sale, trade, or wanted at no charge. ADCA is not responsible for any transaction or the condition of the items advertised.

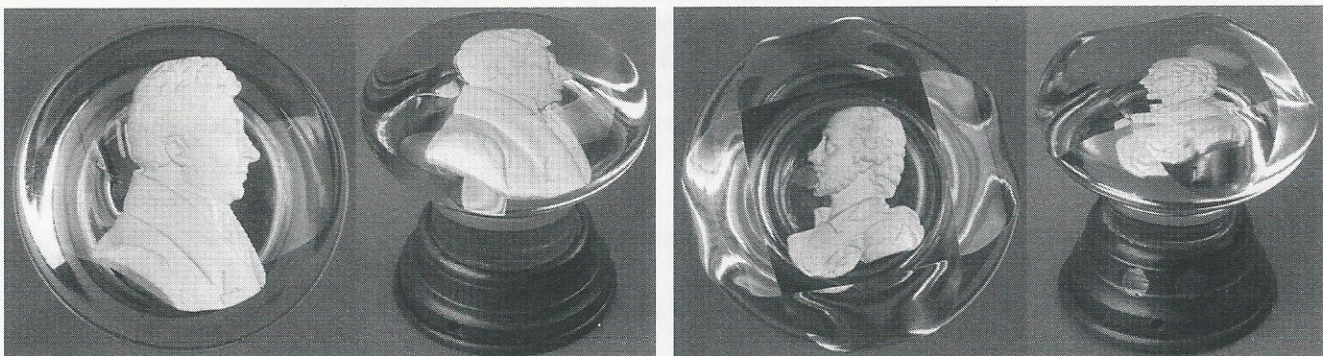


Steve Hannum is seeking a E-11700 doorknob in the Panama design by Barrows. Please contact Steve at hannum1415@comcast.net or (317) 429-9516 if you happen to have one.

Paul Woodfin is seeking backplates in the following designs (from left-Corbin, Newman, R&E, R&E, Yale, Corbin & Corbin). Do also need the knob for plate at far right (L-11010). Please contact Paul at paul.woodfin1@gmail.com or (254) 722-7353 if you happen to have any of these.



Rhett Butler is hoping to locate more of the glass Robinson Medallion doorknobs shown on page 3 (example with side view shown below). Robinson produced 42 different variations. Contact Rhett at rhattbutler@erbutler.com or (212) 925-3565 if you happen to have one (or more).



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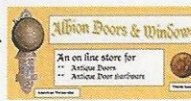
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