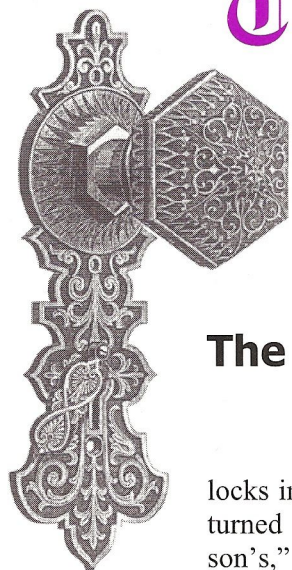


# The Doorknob Collector

Number 123

January – February 2004

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## The Decorative Hardware of Enoch Robinson

By Preuit Hirsch

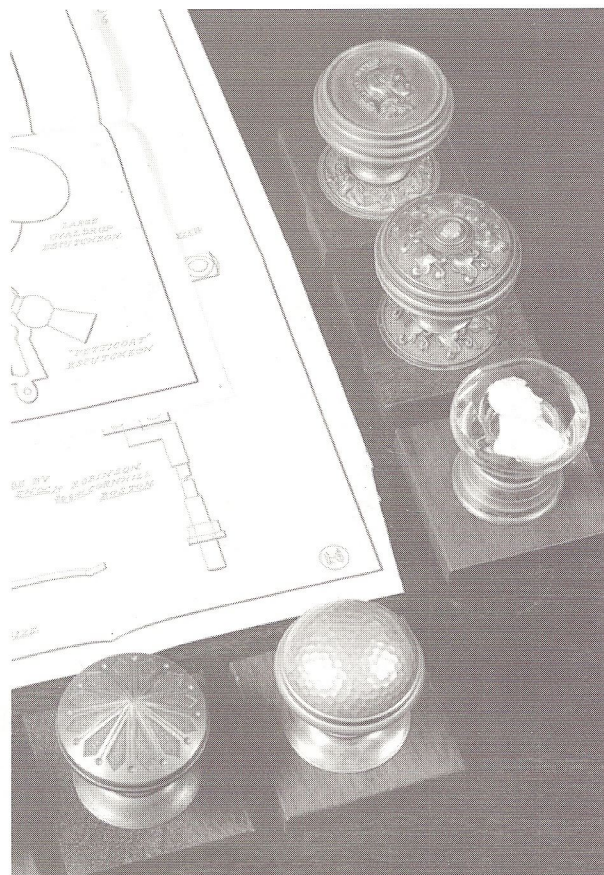
“Boston dealers consider that the best locks in the country are the hand-made goods turned out by such firms as Enoch Robinson’s,” wrote Clarence Howard Blackall (1857–1941), the founder and first president of the Boston Architectural Club.<sup>1</sup> However, Enoch Robinson (1801–1888) of Boston influenced building, construction, and hardware throughout the United States. His influence changed the decorative hardware industry, and examples of his originality remain today. Blackall’s book *Builder’s Hardware* of 1890 was written from an architect’s point of view to educate other architects about this important subject. He advocated selecting hardware carefully not only to determine the best made and most reliable but also the most aesthetically appropriate. He explained that

“no one of the art industries is capable of so wide an aesthetic expansion or presents so varied a field for the play of individual fancy, and few have been so persistently misapplied and misunderstood”.<sup>2</sup>

Blackall was not the only authority of the time who had high praise for Robinson’s hardware. Charles S. Damrell in *A Half Century of Boston’s Building*, published in 1895, wrote that Robinson’s was the oldest business of its kind in Boston and that

“The products of this concern are in demand all over the country, the business having been so long established and the reputation which it enjoys among the trade giving it a name, which is known all over the world, wherever the goods it handles are used.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Damrell, Robinson supplied hardware in Boston for the Old City Hall, the Old State House, and three elegant hotels: the Parker House, Young’s Hotel, and Adams House. The Parker House (now the Omni Parker House) is one of the oldest continuously operating hotels in the country. Its meeting- and banquet-room doors still have locks, knobs, and bolts made by Robinson.



Doorknobs, including examples by or attributed to Enoch Robinson and Company (1840–1888), Boston. *Except as noted, the objects illustrated are in the collection of E. R. Butler and Company, and photographs are by Helga Photo Studio*

Newsletter Deadline - Monday, February 16, 2004

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In Washington, D. C., some of Robinson's fixtures still operate doors in the United States Treasury Building. They were ordered at various times between 1861 and 1864 for the addition to the west wing of the building. The four existing receipts refer to two other orders for hardware for the building.<sup>4</sup> According to these orders, Robinson supplied fifty mortise locks, thirty-six pairs of octagonal glass knobs, twelve plain knob sets, twenty-six argil knobs, and forty-eight escutcheons.

American glass collectors are familiar with Robinson's patented glass-pressing machine and his participation in the patent infringement claim filed by the New England Glass Company of East Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1829 against the Union Glass Company of Kensington, near Philadelphia.<sup>5</sup> Robinson's architectural and cabinet hardware also merits serious consideration for innovative mechanisms, artistic strength, and high quality.

Many members of Robinson's family worked in the metal and glass industries. His cousin Obed Robinson (b. 1762) of Attleboro, Massachusetts, began as a blacksmith and made gunlocks for the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. Later he made clocks, jewelry, and buttons. Richard Robinson (d. 1837) and Willard Robinson (1799–1879), also cousins of Enoch, made glass and gilt buttons and built a two-story brick factory, a shop, and a rolling mill in Attleboro. They employed one hundred workers who lived around the factory in a section of town that became known as Robinsonville. In the spirit of the time they boasted about the superiority of their buttons to those made by domestic and foreign competitors.<sup>6</sup>

Enoch Robinson's brothers George W. (b. 1795) and Ezra (1811–1899) ran a locksmith and brass foundry business in Boston from 1832 to 1873 and also obtained patents for innovations.<sup>7</sup> Four of Enoch Robinson's sons, Shepard (b. 1832), Albert M. (1841–1905), Charles (1835–1919), and Frank (1837–1899), and his nephew William (c. 1839–c. 1900) carried on his business after his death in 1888.

Before opening his own business Enoch Robinson worked at the New England Glass Company, where he and Henry Whitney (1786–1859) patented what was possibly the first glass-pressing machine. According to Joseph N. Howe, an agent for the company, Robinson attempted new methods of pressing glass "against the ridicule of the craft, [and] succeeded in moulding a salt stand and various articles for table use."<sup>8</sup>

Enoch Robinson left the New England Glass Company after the company sued his brother George for breaking his contract as foreman of the pressing department. The three brothers worked briefly together on Richmond Street, after which Enoch Robinson opened his own locksmith shop at 32 Dock Square, the center of hardware manufacturing and distribution in Boston during the nineteenth century. While his brothers' company maintained the name G. W. Robinson and Company, Enoch Robinson changed the name of his business at least four times, calling it E. Robinson and Company, Enoch and Company, Enoch and Son, and Enoch Robinson and Company. He sometimes described his business as a locksmith but most often as "locks & knobs."<sup>9</sup> Although it remains unclear why Enoch Robinson started his own business, it was not because of family conflict. All three brothers lived at the same address in Boston, and they became neighbors when they moved to nearby Somerville in 1847.

In his obituary Enoch Robinson was called a man of "industrious habits, energy, and sterling integrity. Though somewhat eccentric, no man had ever a kinder heart or more generous impulses."<sup>10</sup> His eccentricity is nowhere more evident than in the round house he built for himself in Somerville.<sup>11</sup>

It is one of six built in New England in the nineteenth century that still stood in the mid-twentieth. Architectural historians have studied the

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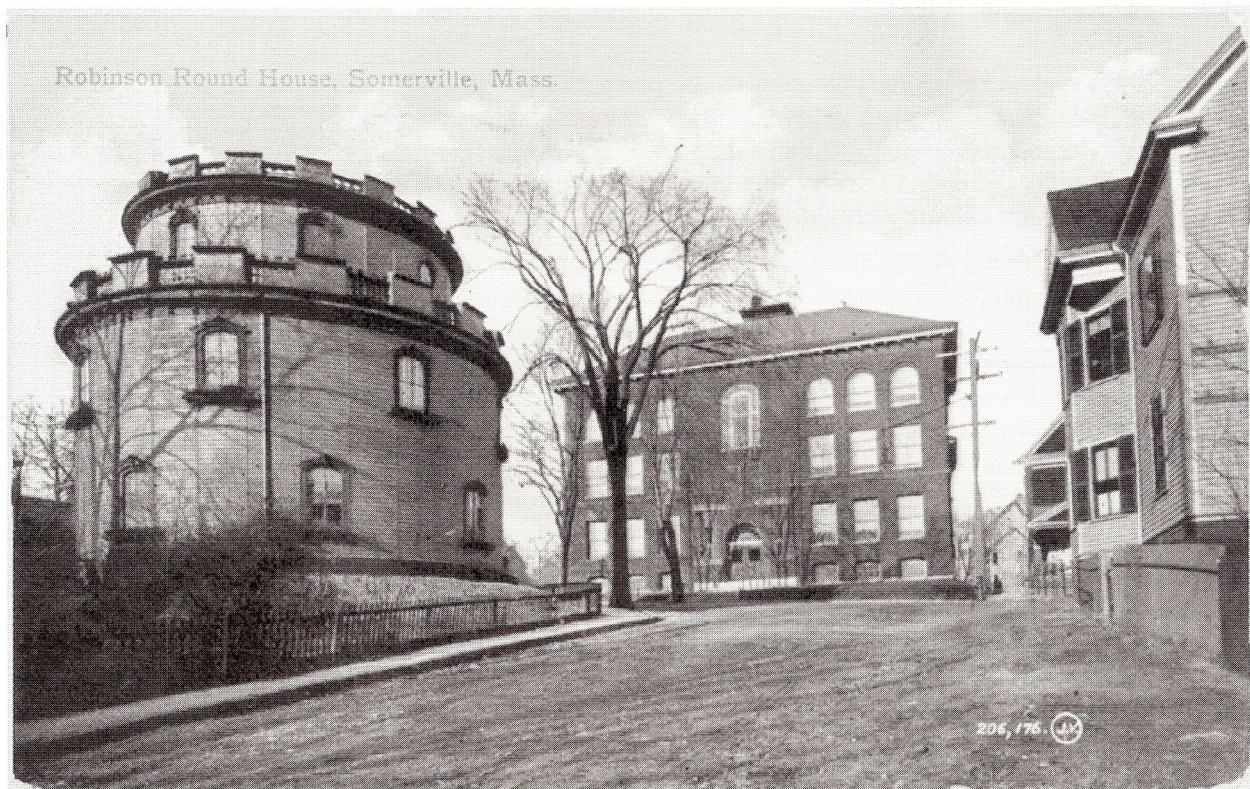
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Robinson Round House, *Somerville, Mass.*, postcard published by Valentine and Sons Publishing Company, and printed in Great Britain. It shows the round house that Enoch Robinson built on Beech Street, Somerville, Massachusetts, between 1852 and 1856. Lithograph, 3 3/4 by 5 1/2 inches. The house is privately owned. *Photograph by courtesy of E. R. Butler and Company.*

house for its unique plan, plank siding, bowed windows, maritime ornament on the exterior, and French inspired decor inside. The source of the plank siding has been attributed to Orson Squire Fowler (1809–1887), a phrenologist and a champion of the octagonal house, while the shape itself has been traced to the folly built in the Désert de Retz in Chambourcy, France, in 1780 and 1781 by François Nicolas Henri Racine de Monville (1734–1797) in the shape of a huge, round, ruined, classical column.<sup>12</sup> Inside, Robinson covered his parlor walls with a French scenic paper depicting royalty in castles, gardens, and hunting scenes. The parlor doorknobs were molded glass with a white medallion at the center, sometimes bearing the image of flowers, and sometimes the silhouette of a United States president or other statesman.<sup>13</sup> He hung the curved doors in the library using highly decorated throw hinges with cast finials and extremely wide leaves. The knuckles extended into the room, allowing the door to clear the curved walls when opened. Five bedroom doors on the third floor had porcelain knobs each painted with different flowers or patterns. Each knob is numbered, but the numbers follow no apparent sequence. It is possible the knobs were leftover stock from his shop.<sup>14</sup> The only handle on the front door was a brazen dog's head.<sup>15</sup>

Fascinated by challenges, Enoch Robinson invented perpetual motion machines as a hobby.<sup>16</sup> He also obtained a patent for a windlass for raising weights.<sup>17</sup> With his fellow hardware manufacturer William Hall (1811–1875) he obtained patents for a lock latch and a window fastener.<sup>18</sup> However, most of Robinson's patents addressed the problem of securing a doorknob to its base. The first of these, which he shared with Francis Draper and Joseph H. Lord, involved a knob fastened to a spindled base by a ferrule screwed into the socket, securing the base of the knob.<sup>19</sup> The knob could be glass, ivory, stone, metal, or other material and would stay in place when turning a latch, lock, or bolt. Robinson's next patent, also with Draper and Lord, was for a method of attaching a knob to the socket by turning over the edge of the socket to grasp the bottom of the knob. This could be done either on a lathe or by heating the socket.<sup>20</sup> Enoch and his brother George patented a method for attaching a glass knob to a metal socket by cutting a groove around the neck of the knob and then pouring molten metal to fill the socket and the base of the knob.<sup>21</sup> Enoch Robinson thought this method too time consuming and expensive. In addition, air and moisture intruded when the hot metal cooled and contracted from the metal wall of the socket, allowing the decorative silver disk seen through the glass knob to oxidize. In his next patent, the socket was molded around the neck of

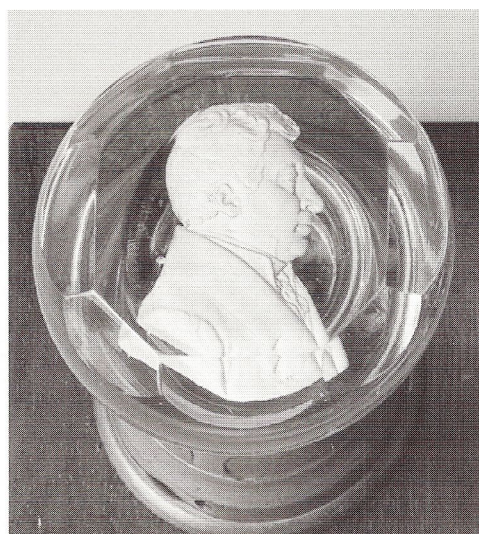


the knob, thereby preventing the intrusion of air or moisture and allowing the manufacturer to plate the socket during the process.<sup>22</sup> The drawings Robinson included with his patent applications show profiles of doorknobs similar to those his company sold. These drawings help collectors identify his hardware.

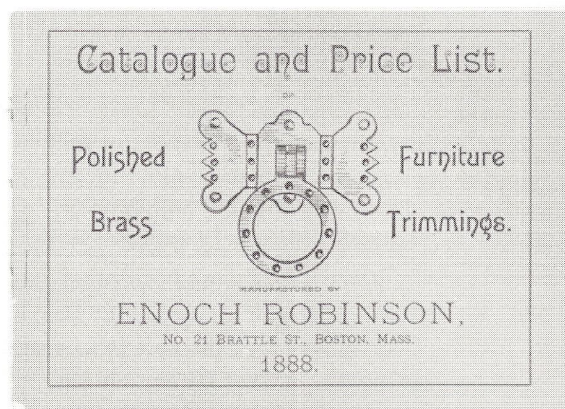
The industrial revolution provoked a transition from hand-craftsmanship to mechanized manufacture. Nonetheless Robinson maintained a successful firm turning out handmade products renowned not only for their reliability but also for their decorative nature. In contrast to larger hardware companies, he kept his stock low, relying on specific orders for the wide variety of hardware he offered in many styles and finishes.

Surviving invoices, a catalogue, a price list, and advertisements reveal the variety of hardware Robinson made.<sup>23</sup> An invoice of March 7, 1864, for the Treasury Building project indicates that he carried powder proof bank and safe locks, silver glass doorknobs, padlocks; painted, glass, mineral, wood, and argil knobs; patent door springs; blind and sash fastenings; plated and bronzed butts; French window fixtures; hooks; and door handles. His *Catalogue and Price List of Polished Brass Furniture Trimmings* issued in 1888 illustrates polished brass drawer and cabinet handles, hinge plates, real hinges, curtain poles and brackets, door handles, and escutcheon plates.<sup>9</sup> An undated price list refers to handles, escutcheons, plates, and hinges available in nickel-plate or gilt finishes. An advertisement placed by Robinson in *Damrell's Half Century of Boston's Building* describes him as a manufacturer and dealer in house and cabinet hardware; cut-glass knobs from French patterns; brass doorknobs and escutcheons from colonial patterns; and hinge plates and door knockers of "all the old styles." In other words, he catered to emerging American taste without relinquishing the influence of European hardware.

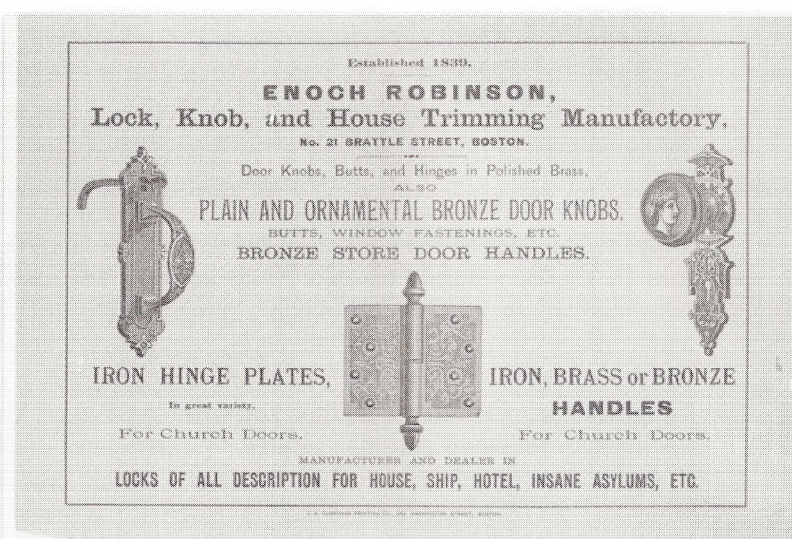
Enoch Robinson left his estate to his son Albert and his daughter Ann (1829–1907) to be invested to support his wife and other daughters. He asked that the business in Boston be continued only as long as Albert judged it expedient.<sup>24</sup> Eventually, L. S. Hall, a former clerk and draftsman for Robinson, became the owner of his patents, machinery, and hardware. W. C. Vaughan and Company bought Hall's shop in 1902



Doorknob made by Enoch Robinson and Company, probably 1850–1860. Glass with a brass shank and a medallion possibly depicting the marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834), diameter 2 1/4 inches. Many similar knobs were used in Robinson's round house (see Pl. IV), according to the *Boston Sunday Globe*, March 8, 1903. The base of this knob is similar to those illustrated in Robinson's patents.



Front cover (left) and back cover (right) of the *Catalogue and Price List of Polished Brass Furniture Trimmings*, issued by Enoch Robinson in 1888. Lithograph, 5 3/4 by 7 3/4. *Butler and Company photographs*





and later entered into a partnership with E. R. Butler and Company, which endures today. The Vaughan archive contains several drawings by Robinson, among them drawings for a colonial brass-plate hinge, colonial door trimmings, and a French window weather strip and bolt. There are also wooden patterns for hardware attributed to the Robinson shop because of their profiles and shanks.

For their generous assistance in assembling material for this article I wish to thank Robert Adam, Rhett Butler, Maud L. Eastwood, Tom Hennessy, Dora St. Martin, and Derik Trelstad.

*PREUIT HIRSCH is the manager of foundation relations at the World Monuments Fund in New York City.*

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**Notes:**

1 Clarence H. Blackall, *Builder's Hardware: A Manual for Architects, Builders and House Furnishers* (Boston, 1890), p. viii.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 279.

3 Charles S. Damrell, *A Half Century of Boston's Building* (Boston, 1895), p. 483.

4 The receipts are in the United States National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C. For more about these receipts, see the correspondence between Maud L. Eastwood and Katherine Whitney regarding a modern restoration of the Treasury Building in 1987. The letters are dated March 16, 1986, and February 4, March 9, and April 2, 1987 (archives of E. R. Butler and Company, New York City).

5 See Helen McKearin, "The Case of the Pressed Glass Knob," *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 15, no. 2 (August 1951), pp. 118–120; and Kenneth M. Wilson and Kirk J. Nelson, "The role of glass knobs in glassmaking and furniture," *The Magazine Antiques*, vol. 149, no. 5 (May 1996), pp. 750–759.

6 John Daggett, *A Sketch of the History of Attleborough*, ed. Amelia Daggett Sheffield (Boston 1894), pp. 349–351, 581–582.

7 Their patent for a "spring bolt for door and other locks," no. 1,626, was granted on June 10, 1840; their patent for a "Spring-Fastener for Window-Sashes," no. 2,452, was granted on February 7, 1842; their patent for "Steering Apparatus for Vessels," no. 2,797, was granted on September 30, 1842 (List of Patents for Inventions and Designs, Issued by the United States, from 1790 to 1847 [Washington, D. C., 1847]).

8 George S. and Helen McKearin, *American Glass* (Crown, New York, 1941), p. 334.

9 See Boston directories for 1831–1846, 1848–1849, and 1851–1943.

10 Somerville [Massachusetts] Journal, February 18, 1888.

11 The round house (privately owned) still stands, although it is much in need of restoration. It was recently listed as one of the ten most endangered historic structures in Massachusetts by Preservation Mass (formerly Historic Massachusetts Incorporated).

12 Walter L. Creese, "Round Houses of New England," *Old-Time New England*, vol. 43, no. 4 (April–June 1953), pp. 87–88; and Derik Trelstad, "Enoch Robinson's Round House," (master's thesis, Columbia University, New York, 1989).

13 "The 'Round' House," *Boston Sunday Globe*, March 8, 1903.

14 This suggestion was made by Robert Adam of North Bennet Street School in Boston during a telephone conversation with me on October 16, 1997.

15 "The 'Round' House."

16 Creese, "Round Houses of New England," p. 87.

17 This is patent no. 2,473, dated February 28, 1842 (List of Patents for Inventions and Designs).

18 The lock latch is patent no. 1,995, dated March 3, 1841; and the window fastener is patent no. 2,248, dated September 11, 1841 (*ibid.*).

19 "Ferrule-Knob for Doors, &c.," patent no. 65, dated October 20, 1836 (*ibid.*).

20 "Door, Commode &c. Knob," patent no. 98, dated December 2, 1836, and antedated September 2, 1836 (*ibid.*).

21 "Method for Attaching Glass Knob to Metallic Socket," patent no. 434, dated October 20, 1837 (*ibid.*).

22 "Improvement in the Method of Attaching Door-knobs to their Spindles," patent no. 2,904, dated January 10, 1843 (*ibid.*).

23 These documents are in the archives of E. R. Butler and Company.

24 Will and inventory of Enoch Robinson, file no. 23592, Middlesex County Probate Court, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



## EDITOR'S COMMENT:

A short note on The Magazine Antiques: it is a beautiful publication and a premier source on architecture, interior design and fine and decorative arts. Unfortunately we could not reproduce all of the pictures in the article, and none in color. Single issues of the magazine are, however, available for \$10.50.

The article does not address, due to a lack of evidence, a topic of much spirited speculation in doorknobbing circles, whether Robinson was responsible for the original Doggie and Lion knob designs which are associated with MCCC and then R&E. Some versions of these knobs have been found with the "Robinson-style" foot. The footed versions may predate the MCCC knobs or may simply have been contemporaneous imitations of the MCCC knobs. And there are other footed "dogs" of unknown origin. It's a mystery.

## In Memoriam

**Norval Eastwood** died quietly on November 2, 2003 at the age of 85. Maud tells us that he was "a barber by trade, a woodworker by preference." Norval was born Dec. 10th, 1917 in Morrill, Nebraska, and married Maud in 1942. They marked their 60th anniversary on New Year's Eve 2002! Called "Mr. Doorknob" by some, Norval provided the steadfast support and encouragement that allowed Maud to pursue her distinguished career in hardware research and writing. He is survived by his wife, Maud, two children, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Their son Bill, known to many ADCA members, died just last year. We in ADCA extend our condolences to Maud and the entire Eastwood family as they contemplate the rich and loving memories Norval has bequeathed to them

**Katlan (Kacie) Jo Brekhus**, daughter of Mel and Candace Brekhas and granddaughter of Tedi Fredrick and Arnie Fredrick (deceased), died on Oct 3, 2003 in an auto accident. She was born on September 13, 1984 in Dubuque, Iowa, and was a freshman at the University of Texas in Austin where she was working towards a degree in business administration. Kacie was a member of the 2003 pledge class of Zeta Tau Alpha Sorority. The ADCA extends its condolences to Mel, Candace, Teri and the other relatives and friends of Kacie.

## Special Thanks To:

Those members who went the extra mile to support the club with a donation in addition to the basic membership fee. We thank them for their thoughtfulness and their contribution to the continued success of the ADCA:

### Supporters (\$50):

Anonymous, Philip Austin, Cheryl Blam, Norm Blam, Ted Bremble, Bill Byington, Helen Byington, Jeff Cain,

Karen Caulfield, Nicholas Doto, John Hay, Richard Hubbard, Reynold Lowe, C. David Miller, Patricia Ramey, Stephen Rowe, Helen Ryan, Sam Skibicki, Kenneth Spahr, William Varitz, and Bud Wol-ski

### Sustaining Members (\$100):

Steven Champlin, David Hyslop, Sally Hyslop, Carol Meermans

### Patrons (\$250):

Two Anonymous Persons

Thanks also to those who made contributions in memory of deceased members: Ralph and Carol Meermans in memory of Barbra Menchhofer, Stephanie Ishikawa in memory of Gunilla Joslyn and Dolores and Debbie Fellenz in memory of Ed Thrall and John Holland



# CONVENTION 2004 SAN FRANCISCO

## JULY 27-31

### TOUR DAY IN SAN FRANCISCO

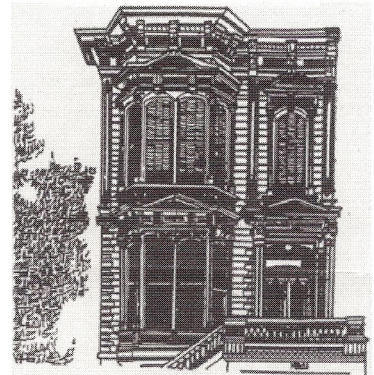
By Vicky Berol

One of the three Victorian homes that will be visited on the tour on Wednesday, July 28, 2004 is the Brune-Reutlinger House.

This elegant Victorian was designed and built by Heinrich Geilfuss in 1886, for the princely sum of \$7,500. The architecture is basically Italianate, with some Eastlake features in the exterior decoration. The interior, with its 15 foot high ceilings and classical Greek and Roman woodwork, has a grand scale. The dining room extends the full width of the house and is dominated by a monumental sideboard. The smaller morning room has an adjoining conservatory and is original to the house. Very modern for its time, the house boasted coal-burning central heating, electric starters for the gas lights, an electric bell and speaking tube systems.

In 1965 Richard Reutlinger bought the dilapidated building and started a 30 year restoration, authentically returning the three story, ten room house to Victorian opulence. The basement ballroom is filled with fourteen turn-of-the-century player pianos, all in working condition.

Notable are Bradbury & Bradbury Victorian art wallpaper, stencils, lincrusta wainscoting, period light-fixtures and museum quality furnishings, representing the many styles popular on the Victorian era.



# Private

# Member Information

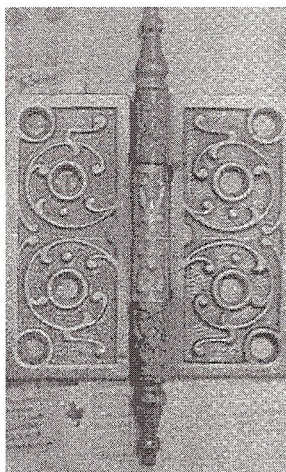


## The Doorknob Exchange

Members are entitled 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.

### Wanted

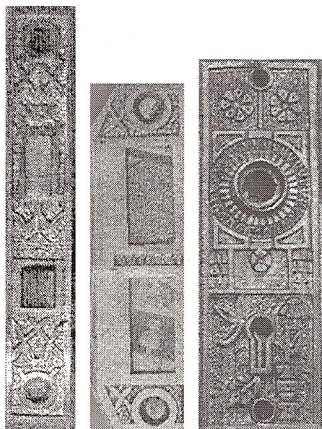
Cast Iron Hinges "4 x 4", 12 sets



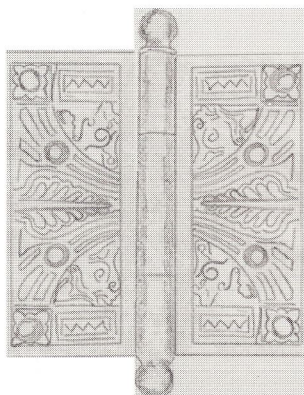
2 Eastlake redwood doors, 5 panel, 2'6" x 7' (6'9" okay)

2 Eastlake redwood doors, 5 panel, 2'8" x 7' (6'9" okay)

Up to eight complete locksets (or such lesser amounts as are available), including knobs (H-252), backplates, strikes and mortise locks, as shown below



Also wanted, 3 sets of iron hinges, 4 1/2 x 4 1/2 with design shown below



Contact Vicky Berol,  
2527 Gough Street,  
San Francisco, CA 94123  
(415) 771-9899  
[sfgofer@yahoo.com](mailto:sfgofer@yahoo.com)

### ANOTHER NOTE FROM THE (NEW) EDITOR

An old saying is that "those who follow in the footsteps of giants better learn to hop fast". And that is certainly true when one tries to follow Rich and Faye Kennedy as the Editor of The Doorknob Collector. They started this publication way back in 1977 and were the editors until 1981. In their second issue, they reassured us that "You're not alone" and that we were not "a bit crazy to be collecting doorknobs", a very reassuring message at the time (even we are indeed "a bit crazy"). In 1998 they resumed the editorship.

Rich and Faye will continue to run the club's membership and the other "back office" functions while they try to teach me the trade.

I would also like to ask for help from the members in keeping this newsletter interesting by sending materials for publication – if only a short article or a picture of your favorite knob or hinge, such as Dick Hartley's two lion door pull, TDC 122-5

Along those lines, the Board of Directors has decided that each Director has to submit one article every year. So we can look forward to some interesting stuff.

### Keep in Touch



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*News*



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