

The Doorknob Collector



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BACK FROM THE DEAD – TWICE! THE CORBIN-NORTON MANSION ON MARTHA’S VINEYARD

By Lois Blomstrann and Allen S. Joslyn

One of the silliest adages is that “there are no second acts in America”, a strange concept given that the country was largely peopled by immigrants for whom America was itself a second act (whether or not they really wanted it). Occasionally there are also second, and third, acts for buildings as well. This is the story of one of those buildings, the Philip Corbin–Peter Norton Mansion on Martha’s Vineyard.

Philip Corbin

Philip Corbin started as a farmer and became a leading industrialist from New Britain. He was the third of 10 children, was born in Willington, Connecticut in 1824. When he was seven years old, the family moved to Farmington and then to a farm in West Hartford. Almost 200 years later the location is still known as Corbin Corners. Philip and his brothers attended the district school and Philip spent a term and a half at the West Hartford Academy. From the age of 15 he worked at farming, mostly away from home. His wages were paid to his father. When he was 20, he heard about jobs in New Britain and received consent from his father to take a job at \$14.00 a month in a factory, which later became Russell & Erwin. To add to his earnings he swept the entire factory floor once a week for 50 cents. In the fall of 1844, he was receiving \$19.00 a month and was spending evenings with Mr. Bucknell, a lock contractor, who was teaching him how to make locks. He did so well that he received a contract to make plate locks, a lock set in a wooden case. By the time he was 21 he had 19 men in his employ and at the end of his last contract, his work force had grown to 35.



After the Second Rebuilding

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Over the years all of this grew into Corbin Cabinet Lock, Corbin Screw Co., Corbin Hardware etc., which all eventually became part of the American Hardware Corp. And this is what leads us to the mansion that was built in 1891 on Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts for Philip Corbin.

The Mansion

Oak Bluffs began as a religious camp-meeting site, first with tents, then modest cottages. The Methodists encouraged the New England Black Baptist Association to hold camp meetings in Oak Bluffs, and it became a popular black summer resort. But Philip Corbin's house was on a bluff and on a grander scale than the cottages.

The house was Queen Anne style and was 5,071 square feet. It was a massive three-story building with towers, turrets, porches and balconies and was built in just over six months. People approaching the island on the ferry coming over from New Bedford were able to spot it when they were still a mile away from Oak Bluffs.

Philip Norton was not the only New Britain hardware magnate to have a summer house in Martha's Vineyard. William H. Hart, President of Stanley Works, George W. Landers of Landers, Frary & Clark (which manufactured cutlery) and others also summered there.

Peter Norton

Over the years, however, the big cocoa brown house became run down, an eye-sore. Enter Peter Norton, a California entrepreneur who is best known for Norton Utilities, the must-have program for early and present-day computers. In 1990 he sold his company to Symantec for a bundle, and went off to do philanthropy and other things. One of the other things he and his family did was to visit, and fall in love, with Martha's Vineyard. Most particularly they were entranced with the



During the First Rebuilding

Corbin mansion. That was rather strange because by the time that they saw it, a prior owner had largely stripped of all its ornament, both inside and out. On the exterior, the structure was stripped down to the board sheathing. On the interior, the natural wood doors were gone and the entire range of P & F Corbin hardware (knobs, hinges, escutcheon plates, cabinet latches, window sash locks, window sash lifts, etc.) had been sold off and scattered about the island.

There were only the bare bones of a building left.

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Peter decided to resurrect the mansion. He hired Design Associates, Inc. of Cambridge and Nantucket as his architects for the restoration and Doyle Construction of Martha’s Vineyard as his contractor. Based on extensive investigations, replacement exterior and interiors were designed, fabricated and installed. The “new” mansion was a faithful copy of what had stood there in Philip’s time. This restoration is credited with a vast ripple effect on owners of other houses in the area.



That brings us to the hardware. Weeks after starting on the first restoration, Chris Dallmus of Research Associates and Peter met with the contractor who had been responsible for stripping the house, and who lent them original hardware which probably represented about 85 - 90% of the styles used in the building. They shipped it to Cirecast in San Francisco - which does very high-end fabrication of hardware and other projects for large commercial and institutional projects as well as high-end residential assignments - to make molds of every bit of hardware that they were loaned. (Some members may recall we visited Cirecast in 2004 during the San Francisco Convention, TDC # 127.)

Obviously Philip could, and did, pick the best Corbin designs with whatever finish he wanted, which in the case of his house was silver plated with a “tiger” striped finish . Cirecast produced a virtually identical version with sophisticated Nickel-plating.

All seemed well, until February, 2001 when Peter, who was at a board meeting of a theatre company in New York, got a call that his Vineyard house was burning, apparently started by some defective wiring. Despite the efforts of 65 firemen and an estimated 1.6 million gallons of water, it was a total loss.



After the Fire

Virtually every – or perhaps absolutely every – rational person would have moved on, after a period of grieving. Peter did not. While the building was still smoldering, he decided to rebuild. They had detailed plans for the house, and he decided to rebuild it completely. (Incidentally the fire protection in the “new” house is very extensive, as you might expect). Cirecast produced the hardware again. At one point, Peter was asked whether if he had to do it all over again, what would he change, responded: “Excuse me, I did, and I didn’t change a thing.”

A Postscript About Later Corbin History

In researching this article, several contemporary articles on the adventures of the family of Philip Corbin turned up which are interesting enough to merit mention.

Philip’s son was Charles Corbin. Philip reportedly kept him “in exile for many years in Martha’s Vineyard” because of “intemperance”. Charles’s first wife was Lillian Blakesley, but Corbin family disapproved of the marriage because “they were social leaders and Mrs. Blakesley was not at all prominent”. In any event, when Charles was dispatched to Martha’s Vineyard, Lillian and her two children moved in with Philip in New Britain. After the children had grown up, she began divorce proceedings against Charles in 1908 (granted in 1909) on the grounds of desertion. Philip Sr. was believed to have encouraged Lillian to divorce Charles and to have given her \$10,000 for it. In 1908 it was reported that “no secret is made of the purpose of Mrs. Corbin” to marry one Paul Smith a hotel proprietor, a millionaire, “nearly 80 years old”. By 1909 she was engaged to marry another guy, but “the wedding did not take place”.

In 1909 Charles met his second wife while in “exile” on the Vineyard, but tried to keep her name secret. (It eventually leaked out). Upon that marriage, Charles received \$75,000 which Philip Sr. left in trust on the event of remarriage. And on reaching the age of 30, Philip Sr.’s grandson, Philip Jr., received shares of stock worth \$1 million. His mother (and Charles’s first wife), Lillian, received nothing from Philip Sr.’s estate, but announced in 1914 that she would not sue to set aside Philip Sr.’s will.

Charles eventually went to work in the offices of P.& F. Corbin, but later moved to New York.

Events turned in 1915. It was revealed that by then, Lillian had determined that her divorce decree from Charles was “faulty” because she had been “led to consult counsel” on the advice of a Connecticut judge and was the subject of “fraudulent representations”.

The last report we have of this family feud is in 1916, when Lillian accused private detectives of following her everywhere, asserted that they had broken up her two marriage opportunities, and said that she and her 88 year-old mother were compelled to live in “the hall room of an attic in New York”. Her effort to reopen her divorce decree was still pending. She feared she would be “forced to apply to the Charity Department for assistance”.

So you think you have problems?

Lois Blomstrann is a founder and member of the Executive Board of the New Britain Industrial Museum, and parts of this article were published in its Summer/Fall 2013 Newsletter . Thanks to Peter Norton, Chris Dallmus of Design Associates, Inc., Neil Galligan of Doyle Construction, and Peter Morenstein of Cirecast. Photos from Peter Morenstein and Chris Dallmus.

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Some outstanding Corbin hardware



VICKY BEROL, The Go-To “Gofer”

By Allen S. Joslyn

We have been treated to Vicky’s articles on other members of the Club for many months. Now it is time for Vicky’s turn. Her first Convention was in Valley Forge, PA in 1997, the result of her husband Marshall “playing Santa”. She was entranced, as she reported: “The hardware was so beautiful – just like jewels. Table upon table of round knobs, oval knobs, shiny black cast iron knobs, porcelain knobs, glass knobs and sterling silver knobs with detail so sharp you could cut your finger. The displays – some whimsical, others grand. I even got to see (and handle) the famous ‘doggie’ doorknob.” (TDC #85). She subsequently was elected to the ADCA’s Board of Directors and is still there.

Obviously she was hooked, but good. Together with the Blumins, she hosted the 2004 Convention in San Francisco. Normally that town would be outside our price range, but the hosts, operating in a climate of reduced tourism, a year before the Convention, found a fine motel near the airport. By the time we arrived, tourism had revived but we got the old prices.

Vicky had the recent distinction of speaking at the Annual Convention of the Door Hardware Institute held in Oakland, CA. It is an international organization founded in the United States in 1975 and in Canada in 1977, and serves as the advocate and primary resource for information, professional information, code standards and certification in the architectural openings industry, mostly in commercial buildings. The audience was fascinated by her display of fancy Victorian hardware – as they should have been.



As described in the following article, Vicky is known as the “go-for” – if you need to find something Victorian for your house, Vicky is the person to contact. With her wide network of contacts built up over the years, if it can be found for sale anywhere, she undoubtedly will find it. Her most unusual commission was to find a pair of cannon for a Victorian Castle in San Francisco. Her hobbies, other than travelling with Marshall, involve socializing cats (and dogs). She is also on the committee for the Annual Canine Hero Wine Auction to benefit Guide Dogs for the Blind and member of the design guild Artistic License. She will be happy to discuss cats, dogs and architectural antiques the next time you see

VICTORIANA: HARDWARE, ACCESSORIES, FURNISHINGS AND THEIR WAY OF LIFE

An Address to the Door Hardware Institute

By Vicky Berol

Thank you for asking me to speak about antique builders’ hardware in the Victorian era. Before I became Gofer #1, I was in the management of a human resources department for an international insurance brokerage firm. In 1995 our Victorian home was severely damaged by fire, and I determined to restore it to as good as old. I thus set about tracking down and acquiring the needed hardware and lighting, and setting up mills to replicate the period detail. It was so much fun that I quit the corporate “rat race”. After my project was completed, I formed Gofer Unlimited, a service to locate and match vintage hardware, antique lighting and plumbing fixtures. I work with designers, contractors, architects and individual homeowners. I am comfortable working in every era, from 1880 to present, but

with all the shopping I do, Victorian hardware is my specialty.

The Victorian era was the period of Queen Victoria's reign, from 1837 until her death in 1901. The Victorians were a proper people and Victorian Society was a collection of "do's" and "don't's". The rules of conduct for the prosperous governed everything, from good society to the décor of the home. It was also an era of social contradictions, from prudishness to wealthy men keeping mistresses to both decorous and open prostitution. Added to that, the composition of the upper class was changing from a traditional "aristocracy" (think of the Dutch in New York) to new wealth based on trade and industry. The Victorian era was also a time of tremendous scientific progress and the emergence of a true passion for art, paintings, fashion, jewelry, architecture, literature and furnishings – including hardware.

When one thinks of the Victorian home, be it European or American, overrated, elaborate and romantic come to mind. The photographs from the period did not, of course, show the riots of color the Victorians enjoyed. The architecture and furnishings for the home advertised the wealth and social stature of the owners. It was an age of materialism. Most houses of the wealthy had double parlors, waiting rooms, morning rooms, afternoon rooms, sitting rooms, libraries, and even ballrooms. Whether or not the family had any musical talent, appearance was everything, and thus pianos and rooms for them were required. (As you may have guessed by now, fancy hardware was not to be found in the houses of working men.)

The exterior of the Victorian home would have been muted whites or pastels, and highly decorated fretwork or gingerbread around the doors and porches. There would be turrets with witches' caps in the peaks of the houses, heavily ornamented with nature as a common theme. The interior was dark and lavish, heavily draped. This is where craftsmen were able to strut their stuff.

The interiors had dark wood, patterned wallpaper, hardwood flooring covered with rich, dark floral rugs. The large houses had two hallways and two staircases. The main staircase was for the owners and grand appearances. The back staircase was for servants and children. Back halls and servants' rooms were often only whitewashed, with simple wooden floors. Kitchens were utilitarian workrooms, peopled only with servants and hardly any center of family life.

As the middle class grew, smaller homes were built, mimicking the grand mansions. Equally as stylized and architecturally rigid, interiors had crown mouldings, chair and plate rails, paneled redwood doors, often faux painted to appear as mahogany.

Every house had, of course, doors and hardware to open, close and lock them. While we think of doorknobs today, older houses that may date back to the 18th century more commonly used latch or lever hardware. Rim locks or box locks were mounted on the surface of the door. Beginning in the 1850s, they began to be replaced with mortise locks.

Beginning around the 1830-1840s was the start of industrialization. The hardware industry flourished in New England, chiefly in Connecticut. Enoch Robinson developed a machine (hand-powered, to be sure) to produce pressed glass knobs. In the mid-1860s manufacturers of ornate metal builders' hardware began to appear. Robinson was an early producer and continued until his death. The Metallic Compression Casting Company pioneered highly detailed hardware produced by casting molten metal under high pressure, the patents and designs for which it assigned to the well-established Russell and Erwin Manufacturing Co. That company went on to become a major factor in the industry. Soon to follow was the Yale & Towne Co., which by 1904 had over 250 designs to choose from. Other manufacturers of decorative builders' hardware emerged, such as Hopkins & Dickenson, Reading, Corbin, Sargent, Nashua, Norwalk and Mallory Wheeler. (Eventually they either were either absorbed into the American Hardware Company or disappeared.)

The patterns of Victorian builders' hardware were generally based on geometric elements, or floral or figural designs. Designs used on the exterior of a house were often repeated in the interior hard-

ware. The acanthus leaf is a classic example of ornamentation taken from nature and has been used over the centuries as decoration. The rose, lily, pomegranate, thistle, oak leaf, dolphin, lion, eagle and dove were also natural forms popular since time immemorial and are still used in successful designs. Beginning in 1879 Japanese-influenced designs also hit the market. There was also a great deal of copying by one manufacturer from others, a process facilitated by the fact that most manufacturers were located in New Britain, Connecticut or nearby.

The principal metals used in builders' hardware were bronze, iron or brass. Cast iron knobs found their way into the homes of the less wealthy and often were "patinated" with a thin overlay simulating brass and retarding rust. Later, however, a process was developed that made iron virtually rust-proof and it was used by Yale & Towne to produce hardware designed by Louis Sullivan. Other materials were also used – glass and various compounds, including one made of animal blood and sawdust. Hardwoods were also popular, using oak, cherry and other woods, which were compressed under high pressure and steam to imprint the design.

In the Victorian home, various pieces of hardware – knobs, escutcheons, hinges, doorbells and so forth – were commonly in the same pattern, called a design suite. Enameling over bronze also had a very brief life. While spectacular, it did not last long because of its high cost. The most common knobs were porcelain (black or white); Bennington pottery knobs were also popular. The first Bennington knob had both the knob and shank made of pottery, but since the shank tended to break, it was replaced with a cast iron shank.

The hardware used in a room depended on the user's rank. Ornate bronze was found in first floor rooms (except, of course, the kitchen). In the second floor bedrooms, sitting rooms and baths, pressed glass was common. In children's and servants' rooms, black or white porcelain knobs appeared.

Customized bronze hardware was specially produced for individual buildings - office buildings, hotels, school districts and governmental buildings such as the Treasury Department.

By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, designs changed. There developed the "schools of design" concept, based on the fantasy of what the hardware would have looked like if it had been produced for Louis XIV or the Puritans. Craftsman design became popular, followed by Art Nouveau and Art Deco. Then ornate hardware faded from use, being replaced by plain glass or brass knobs and undecorated brass escutcheons. Within 60 years, the story was pretty much over.

But there are companies today replicating the ornate designs of the Victorian era, cast from molds made from the original patterns. Cirecast is in San Francisco, Crown City Hardware in Pasadena, the House of Antique Hardware in Portland, Oregon, and in New York City, E. R. Butler Co. and P.E. Guerin (which casts hardware to order from its original molds). Al Bar Wilmette Platers of Wilmette, IL, specialize in restoring historic hardware and metal fixtures and plating new hardware to match historic finishes.

Those who collect antique hardware look for the finest examples of a design, pattern or manufacturer, but are not interested in multiple examples, because they are seldom used on a door. Rather they are displayed on boards, bowls or mantles, both for the collector's personal enjoyment or a competing collector's jealousy. Prices range from \$30 to four figures, but they have declined with the advent of eBay. "Demand creates supply", and the earlier high prices when the public first became aware of the hobby have dropped as people started to look in their attics.

I have brought several examples of antique builders' hardware (none in the four figure range). I am sure that once you see the intricacy and balance of these pieces, you will never look at a door knob in the same way again (i.e. you will actually look at them). I thank you for this wonderful experience.

New Show of Japanesque Hardware

As this edition of the TDC is being put to bed, the Architectural Heritage Museum (Bosco--Milligan) in Portland, Oregon has opened an exhibition entitled “Designs from the Hidden Kingdom, ‘Japanesque Hardware’ and American Buildings” which will run into the summer. It is sponsored by the House of Antique Hardware.

“Japanesque” Hardware in America

In the 20 years after Commodore Perry's 1854 so-called “opening” of Japan, the art and architecture of the East Asian nation slowly gained a foothold in Victorian Era America, albeit mostly among the wealthy upper class. In 1876, however, the Japanese Exhibition at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition gave many middle and working class Americans their first taste of Japanesque artwork. The result was a flurry of interest in a style of decoration that at the time was considered both exotic and informal. In reality, however, Japanese art was just as refined as its European counter parts.

From the time of the Centennial Exposition through the next two decades, American manufacturers of products ranging from wallpaper to furniture introduced Japanese design elements into their goods. Rather than employ a physical or structural design approach mimicking the Japanese, American manufacturers most often just applied Japanese style decoration to products they were already making. In this instance, hardware was no exception. By 1879, Japanesque doorknobs and hinges were appearing in builder hardware catalogues from companies such as Hopkins & Dickenson, Russel & Erwin, and Sargent.

Common design elements seen in the decorative Japanesque hardware of the period included bamboo, birds, chrysanthemums, and a variety of geometric patterns. Some hardware even included human forms, such as the female figure with a parasol seen in this exhibit. While a few American hardware manufacturers managed to successfully recreate authentic looking Japanese or “Oriental” designs, others simply added Japanese elements into their design vocabulary—the result of which might be a doorknob displaying a blend of Japanese, Egyptian, and Native American motifs.



Now on Exhibit

Designs from the
Hidden Kingdom:
“Japanesque” Hardware and
American Buildings



The “Oriental Craze”

An 1881 edition of *Carpentry and Building* magazine showed that manufacturers of Japanesque hardware had plenty of critics from the outset of its popularity. Some of this opposition may have been the result of the anti-Asian sentiment that was especially prevalent on the West Coast of North America, but others simply viewed the popularity of Japanesque hardware as yet another design fad enveloping the nation during a time when an interest in design and decoration were at an all-time high. Whatever the reason, Japanese design influenced numerous significant artists in the late 19th century including James McNeill Whistler, Vincent Van Gogh, and Edouard Manet—even a young architect named Frank Lloyd Wright found inspiration in the exciting design palette that differed from many of his colleagues’ interest in western classicism.

By the 1890s, American interest in Japanesque decoration began to fade as public interest moved toward the emerging Art Nouveau and Arts & Crafts movements. While ornamentation was waning however, there remained an interest in Japanese forms up until around the time the U.S. entered the First World War. This interest can be seen today in the numerous houses scattered about Portland (most dating to the 1910s), that mimic Japanese temples.

Years of demolition and the repeated remodeling of buildings from this period have made it difficult to find Japanesque hardware still in use today. Thankfully, steadfast hardware collectors from around the country, including Maud Eastwood and Allen Joslyn who generously loaned pieces from their collections for this exhibit, cherish the increasingly rare Japanesque hardware from the late 19th and early 20th century. With their help, we’ve been able to share this snapshot in time, when ornament mattered more so perhaps than actual function.



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