

Remembering Unsung Preservation Architect

HENRY CHARLES DEAN

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Architect Henry Charles Dean headed the 1915 restoration project that gave the Iron Works House in Saugus, Massachusetts, its medieval colonial design. The c. 1689 structure is now part of the Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site operated by the National Park Service. Photograph by Timothy T. Orwig.

In 2016 the curator at Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site in Saugus, Massachusetts, discovered a box of century-old plans that had been purchased decades earlier but had not been fully catalogued. The plans shed new light on the work of Henry Charles Dean, an architect who had a brief but important career. Dean, who died in 1919 at the age of thirty-three, was at the heart of the early debate in New England over the goals and practices of historic preservation, but his contributions were overshadowed by two prominent collaborators, who were a generation older: Wallace Nutting (1861-1941) and William Sumner Appleton (1874-1947).

For the entrepreneur Nutting, who headed a Colonial Revival tourism venture, Dean restored five houses in New England. For the preservationist Appleton, who founded Historic New England (as the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities—SPNEA) in 1910, Dean worked on three of the organization's earliest properties, including Harrison Gray Otis House (1796) on Cambridge Street in Boston. As we approach the centennial of Dean's untimely death, we can learn a lot from this architect whose work influenced modern preservation practices.

Born in Canaan, Connecticut, Dean (who went by Harry) attended Yale University and studied architecture at Columbia University, then worked as a draftsman for the preeminent Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram. Dean was an ambitious student of historic houses, photographing and studying them around New England, documenting them with measured drawings, and building a large ref-

erence library on colonial architecture. Dean believed that the earliest American architecture "must be sacredly preserved." He collaborated with several antiquarians, producing drawings of colonial houses with a close friend, Rev. Donald Millar, and designing memorial tablets honoring Revolutionary War hero Nathan Hale for historian George Dudley Seymour of Connecticut.

Dean's work for Nutting is sometimes overlooked. Nutting, a Harvard-educated antiquarian, artist, and capitalist, was also a Congregational minister who left the church at age forty-three after a nervous breakdown. During long bicycle rides in the countryside that he took for his health, Nutting made photographs of old houses. He started selling hand-colored prints and opened a studio, building a wide commercial audience through shrewd marketing. Nutting turned Colonial Revival nostalgia into a business, employing 200 colorists and selling ten million prints. He collected furniture as props and eventually began producing high-quality reproductions. He lectured and published widely.

In 1915 Nutting embarked on his most ambitious project to monetize Colonial Revival fervor. Connecting the established popularity of restored houses with the emerging interest in automobile tourism, he bought five historic houses in New England and inaugurated "The Wallace Nutting Chain of Colonial Picture Houses." Nutting hired Harry Dean to restore the houses. The houses, which charged an admission fee, became sets for staging and exhibiting Nutting's photographs, workshops for crafting colonial furniture reproductions, and gift shops for selling both. The entrepreneur's profit motive shocked New England

preservationists, who thought of the houses as antiquarian relics or patriotic shrines.

The oldest link in the Nutting chain was the Iron Works House in Saugus. Long celebrated for its age—c. 1689—and supposed connections to the adjacent ironworks site, the house came up for sale in 1912. Appleton and Nutting were in competition to secure the property. On January 30, 1915, Appleton toured the Iron Works House with Nutting and Dean; Nutting bought it the following March. After Dean restored it, Nutting romantically branded it as Broadhearth.

Perhaps the most striking change Dean made to the much-modified Iron Works House was the removal of the projecting front porch and the addition of a trio of dramatic front gables. Dean had first visited the property in 1908 and made measured drawings of the exterior; those drawings suggest that he had envisioned the front wall gables years before his restoration commenced.

The emphatic gables were criticized. After seeing the house in 1921, fellow restoration architect Joseph Everett Chandler, known for his conjectural restorations of Paul Revere House in Boston and the House of Seven Gables in Salem, Massachusetts, wrote in his diary that Broadhearth was "an overdone exterior whatever the intention may be."

But Dean justified his work at the Iron Works House in a 1917 talk. "The scarcity of the work of the seventeenth century makes the sacrifice of the later work (unless it is unique, or otherwise exceptional) necessary and imperative," he said. "When the time came to repair the injuries of many generations—it was quickly seen that the chief interest



Iron Works Ho - Saugus - Mass



*Iron Works Ho,
Saugus, Mass*

ABOVE Left, Dean added hints of the massive gables he would add to the Iron Works House in this measured drawing he made in 1908. On the right is his 1915 restoration drawing of the facade. Images courtesy of the National Park Service.

LEFT This photograph of the structure was taken c. 1900 by Sullivan Holman. It had housed a number of occupants over the decades. **BELOW** Dean made this photograph of the transformation of the house in 1915. In the foreground are timbers for the porch framing.



In a tribute to Dean, Appleton remembered taking “many trips with him, for the purpose of inspecting quaint towns or old houses, and during them had ample opportunity to observe his extraordinary fondness for old colonial work.”

Appleton noted how carefully Dean documented historic buildings. “In this work he always had his camera with him and took hundreds of snapshots of an astonishing variety of buildings, and of these photographs many are [now] in the Society’s collections,” Appleton said. “The particular feature in a house that most interested [Dean] was the plan, and he never inspected one carefully without being able, on leaving it, to give each floor plan as well as sketches showing the various elevations, and often even the cross sections.”

By 1916, Dean was documenting and making “repairs”—Appleton’s term for the removal of newer materials that had been added to historic properties—to Historic New England’s first property, Swett-Illesley House (1670) in Newbury, Massachusetts. For Boardman House (1692), also in Saugus, though, Appleton conferred with several architects before Dean, his “consulting architect,” began restoration work. Appleton conceded that “owing to later alterations in the back of the chimney many questions arose as to the proper lines of restoration, and in solving these Harry Dean’s advice was of great value.” But Appleton became increasingly conservative



and glory of the place was its great age, and the old chimney [and] skeleton of the first building.”

Appleton, though he grew increasingly distrustful of Nutting’s brand of renovations, admired Dean’s abilities, and Dean had long been a supporter of Appleton, donating photographs, architectural fragments, and measured drawings to Historic New England’s collections.

The earliest American architecture “must be sacredly preserved,” Dean said.

in his work; when he next undertook a restoration, the c. 1698 Abraham Browne House in Watertown, Massachusetts, Appleton consulted his architects but supervised the work on his own.

Still, given the challenge in 1916 of quickly restoring the Charles Bulfinch-designed first Harrison Gray Otis House as a museum and the headquarters for his preservation organization, Appleton again turned to Dean. He wrote that Dean “was in full charge of this work and must be given credit for the excellence with which it was done.” After Dean enlisted in the Army, Appleton completed the work with Boston architect Herbert Browne.

Dean signed up for military service about a year and a half after the United States entered the World War. His draft registration card, dated September 1918, lists him as being thirty-three, single, and living in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was working for architect William H. Cox, who had offices in the Boston Stock Exchange Building. Cox was then designing a Colonial Revival company town at Danielson, Connecticut, for a textile mill.

The war ended just two months after Dean enlisted, on November 11. Tragically, Dean’s promising career as an architect ended in January 1919, when he died after contracting the flu. More deadly even than the war, the influenza pandemic killed an estimated 675,000 Americans in 1918 and 1919 and more than fifty million people worldwide. The flu was particularly deadly among people in the prime of their lives: college students, couples, and soldiers. Dean died of influenza-related pneumo-

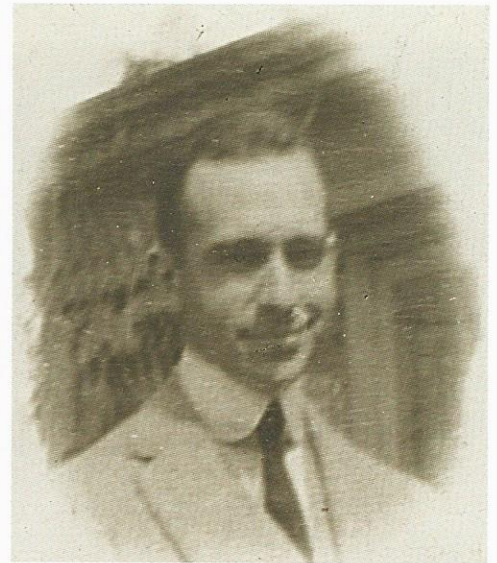
nia at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland, where he was stationed in the Army’s Architectural Division.

Dean’s family gave Historic New England his glassware collection, sketchbooks, and measured plans for twenty-two historic houses. Appleton selected some books from Dean’s library; the rest were given to the University of Virginia. In its 1922 catalogue, the university boasted that the School of Fine Arts was especially equipped for research into colonial architecture: “In this field the library is of exceptional strength, including the private library of the late Henry Charles Dean, one of the leading students on the subject.” Dean’s library supported the leading American architectural historian of the early 1920s, Fiske Kimball, who headed the university’s newly established art and architecture department.

Unfortunately, America’s entry into the First World War and gas rationing also doomed Nutting’s project; by 1919, he had emptied his chain of houses of their contents and began selling the historic sites. The Iron Works House was eventually saved by the First Iron Works Association, and fifty years after Dean’s death it became part of Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site.

The National Park Service had purchased the box of rolled drawings to secure Dean’s Iron Works House designs. The newly revealed work includes his student drawings from Columbia University and his brightly colored designs for “super frontals,” or altar vestments, for Grace Church in Providence, Rhode Island, which he completed while working for Cram, Goodhue,

and Ferguson. A blueprint details a tall clock Dean owned, built by Preserved Clapp, a colonial-era Massachusetts craftsman. Amid interior work for the house of Charles P. Kling in Augusta, Maine, is a 1916



Undated photograph of Henry Charles Dean.

drawing for a “Gothick” house Dean designed for himself.

Dean remains an obscure figure in architectural and preservation history, though, as Appleton noted, his memory would “live in the services he rendered” to Historic New England. Dean was probably most proud of his restorations, as he declared, “The appearance of the house does now suggest quite forcibly the charm and strikingly picturesque mass of the original Iron Works House in the Wilderness.” Partly due to Dean’s scholarship and documentation, though, modern preservation practice increasingly moved from this romantic vision to Appleton’s efforts to maintain the changes rendered to a structure over time as part of its historical record. 🐉

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