

Chapter 1

Shaping the Field: Early Collecting and Scholarship

by Lois Olcott Price

By the last decades of the 19th century, a sweeping nostalgia and desire to connect specific objects with historic personages prompted an interest in the history of American decorative arts. The “colonial” kitchen on display at the 1876 Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia proved to be a major attraction, and objects that were associated with the Pilgrims, George Washington, or any colonial dignitary became venerated relics. In 1909, as part of the Hudson-Fulton Celebration, the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted an exhibition that brought together a significant collection of American antiques in a public venue for the first time. As the colonial-revival movement spread to the broader public, every man wanted a piece of history, and books on collecting and furnishing homes with antiques proliferated. Imagemakers such as Wallace Nutting populated interiors with costumed figures that fueled the public’s yearning for a simpler life symbolized by colonial furnishings.

At the same time, a scholarly approach to American decorative arts and an appreciation of their aesthetic as well as historic value was growing among serious collectors. Early proponents such as Irving Whittall Lyon (1891), Esther Singleton (1901), and Francis Bigelow (1906) introduced the use of documentary evidence, including inventories and advertisements, to illustrate the activities of early craftsmen. With the opening of the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1924 and the 1929 Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition in New York, American domestic furnishings were presented as art objects in a chronological, regional, and historical context. These exhibits provided the impetus for collectors who sought information almost as avidly as objects. The movement to document, research, and publish scholarly information about American decorative arts had taken root, and H. F. du Pont would soon found the library that played a significant role in shaping the field.

Although it grew out of a personal and family collection, the Winterthur Library was, from the beginning, conceived as a tool for educating graduate students and providing the resources necessary for advanced scholarship in the decorative arts. Well before 1946 du Pont had begun buying material in anticipation of the library’s needs. Fortunately, his perspective was both deep and broad. His purchases laid the foundation for important scholarly advances as well as developments in the field of material culture. We all are beneficiaries of his foresight.

1. Esther Singleton, *The Furniture of Our Forefathers*. New York: Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1901. Deluxe edition printed on Imperial Japan paper, no. 34 of 50, with critical description of plates by Russell Sturgis. Hand-colored photogravure.

NK2406 S61a pt. 2 Printed Book and Periodical Collection, gift of Mrs. James H. Dawson*

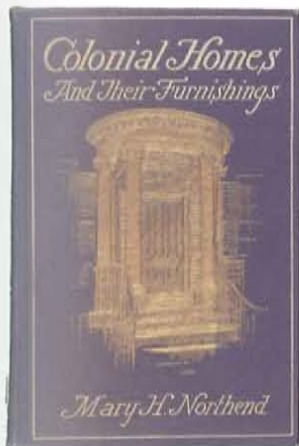
Ranked with Irving Whitall Lyon and Luke Vincent Lockwood, Esther Singleton was part of the first generation of authors to use historical documents such as estate inventories, newspaper advertisements, and cabinetmakers' price books to date and categorize American antiques. She sought to place antiques within an accurate social and cultural context that renounced most of the fanciful illusions current at the time. Singleton served as editor of the *Antiquarian* (1923–30) and was author of numerous texts. The frontispiece seen here illustrates Washington's bedroom at Mount Vernon, with a note that all the furniture is original. Although a revered figure is cited, the emphasis here and in the text is on documentation and authenticity.



2. Wallace Nutting, *Ready for the Afternoon*, 1912–17. Hand-colored platinum print. (Photo, facing page 1)

02x63 Downs Collection

Wallace Nutting was an early collector and promoter of American decorative arts. His publications, furniture reproductions, and widely advertised and readily available photographs of colonial-revival scenes fueled nostalgia and an interest in American history and art. Much of his work carries an implicit message promoting a return to the earlier values of home, hearth, and family. This photograph of the front hall of the Wentworth-Gardner house (1760) in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, shows one of several historic houses Nutting owned and charged admission to tour. Nutting numbered each of his images; this example is E, G 9035. The letters refer to sizes in which the image was available: E = 11×14 inches at a cost of \$5; G = 16×20 inches at a cost of \$8.



3. Mary H. Northend, *Colonial Homes and Their Furnishings*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1912.

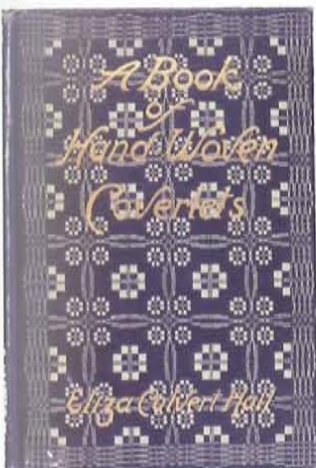
NA707 N87 c. 2 Printed Book and Periodical Collection, bequest of Miss Katrina Kipper

Mary Harrod Northend was a native of Salem, Massachusetts, whose books and photographs helped popularize the collecting of American decorative arts. Focusing on the charm of colonial furnishings in domestic settings, her books project a romantic rather than scholarly view, where a tasteful colonial appearance is more important than authenticity. Northend amassed an unsurpassed collection of photographs of private collections and interiors, which she and other authors used repeatedly. Those photographs—some 2,200 prints made from the original glass-plate negatives—now reside in the Winterthur Library.

4. Eliza Calvert Hall, *A Book of Hand-Woven Coverlets*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1912.

NK9112 H17 Printed Book and Periodical Collection

Eliza Calvert Hall Obenchain was born and resided in Bowling Green, Kentucky, where she was best known for her poems, stories, and essays about Kentucky life that were published in periodicals such as *Scribner's* and *Cosmopolitan*. *A Book of Hand-Woven Coverlets* explores the charm and history of coverlets through folklore and oral interviews, an approach that emphasizes the memoirs of women and is consistent with Hall's active involvement in the suffrage movement.



5. Robert and Elizabeth Shackleton, *Quest of the Colonial*. 1907; reprint, New York: Century Company, 1921.

NK2406 S52 Printed Book and Periodical Collection

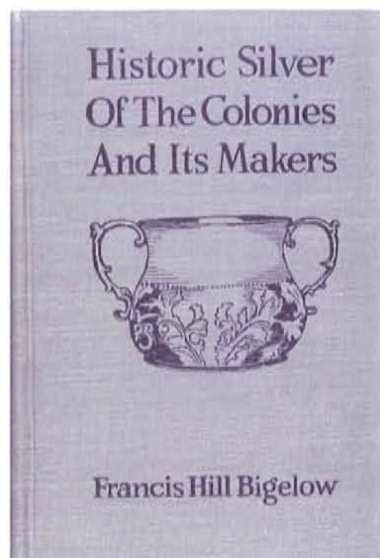
Beginning with a few chance purchases, Robert and Elizabeth Shackleton developed a taste for antiques, used them to furnish their home, and continued to write about their quest for several decades. Robert began his law and collecting careers in Ohio. By 1895 he had become associate editor of the *Saturday Evening Post* and moved to Connecticut.

With authors such as Mary Harrod Northend, the Shackletons brought collecting to the attention of the American public. However, they eschewed established dealers. Because they valued the personal histories that often accompanied objects found in less-commercial settings, the Shackletons pursued antiquing as a pastime that justified pleasant journeys to quaint locales.

6. Francis Hill Bigelow, *Historic Silver of the Colonies and Its Makers*. 1917; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1925.

NK 7112 B59 c. 3 Printed Book and Periodical Collection, gift of Stanley B. Ineson

Francis Hill Bigelow was a scholar, collector, and dealer in American decorative arts with a particular interest in silver. His organization of the 1906 and 1911 exhibits of American silver at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, lent the work of colonial artisans a credibility and visibility that had previously been reserved for European silver. Bigelow's *Historic Silver of the Colonies and Its Makers*, which includes photographs of objects from numerous public and private collections, was the first comprehensive survey of American silver. Bigelow was a charter member of the Walpole Society. He relentlessly sought silver from church and private sources, which he then sold to enthusiasts such as Francis Garvan and Judge A. T. Clearwater, whose collections formed the foundation of those at Yale and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



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7. R. T. H. Halsey and Elizabeth Tower, *The Homes of Our Ancestors as Shown in the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1925.

N611 A51b Printed Book and Periodical Collection

Richard Townley Haines Halsey began his collecting career in the 1890s while a member of the New York Stock Exchange. He joined the Grolier Club in 1900 and became a Trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1914. His absorption in the study of American antiques led to his resignation from the Stock