



FIG. I. VIEW LOOKING DOWN HANCOCK STREET, BOSTON, FROM THE ORIGINAL NEGATIVE EXPOSED BY SOUTHWORTH AND HAWES, CA. 1865
Courtesy of The Bostonian Society.

The First Harrison Gray Otis House in Boston

A Study in Pictorial Evidence

By ABBOTT LOWELL CUMMINGS

MR. Robert Bayard Severy of Dorchester has recently conveyed to the writer an important piece of information hitherto overlooked by students of Boston's architectural history. The item in question is a photograph looking down Hancock Street which frames a distant view of the first Harrison Gray Otis House at the bottom of the Hill (Fig. 1). The date of the picture, the original Southworth and Hawes negative for which exists in the collections of The Bostonian Society, can be fixed at about 1865, making this the earliest-known photograph of the Society's headquarters, antedating by a full thirty years or more any other pictures of the house now in our files.

At first glance the evidence which this view presents may seem disappointing, for it reveals at once (with the aid of a strong glass) no real differences in detail when compared with later photographs taken around the turn of the present century (see, for example, Fig. 2). Yet this fact by itself is of striking importance, for we learn that the principal alterations in the facade of the building at the hands of nineteenth-century owners, had occurred by the time the picture was exposed at the close of the Civil War. On grounds of style alone one might have been tempted to assign a later date to these changes by which one of Charles Bulfinch's earlier and most distinguished designs had been significantly altered.

The publication of this interesting document provides an opportunity to remind

our members that the work of restoration on the Otis House undertaken by the Society's founder, William Sumner Appleton, in 1916 has never been entirely completed. The facade was restored about that time to much of its former importance with the removal of the enclosed "storm" porch and recreation of the Palladian window in the second story and fan light in the third story above it. The original cornice of wood, however, with its cone-like ornaments, fragments of which survived at the rear of the building, was not replaced then, presumably for reasons of economy. This work was not accomplished, in fact, until the occasion of the Society's 50th anniversary in 1960, when the nineteenth-century cornice of brick was replaced with a copy of the original in wood and later dormer windows in the roof were removed. It was at this time also that the impressive second story withdrawing room was furnished with a meticulous copy of the original wallpaper, including its colorful floral borders in two widths.

Now, a decade later, and in anticipation of the Society's 60th anniversary, we are engaged once more in an ambitious program of refurbishment and restoration, concentrating upon those few remaining features which have not been completed before, or have come in for renewed scrutiny in light of modern scholarship and technology. Thus, additional original wallpapers with English tax stamps of the 1790's will be reproduced by means of silk screen from samples

which Sumner Appleton carefully preserved in 1916. And with respect to modern technology, recent advances in the analysis of early paint colors, particularly those involving the use of a high-powered microscope, have produced fresh evidence of rich color combinations in the

assemble for our 60th Annual Meeting in May.

Returning in conclusion to our mid-nineteenth-century photograph, with its implications of early change, it would seem wise to advise our members and friends of one policy decision over which

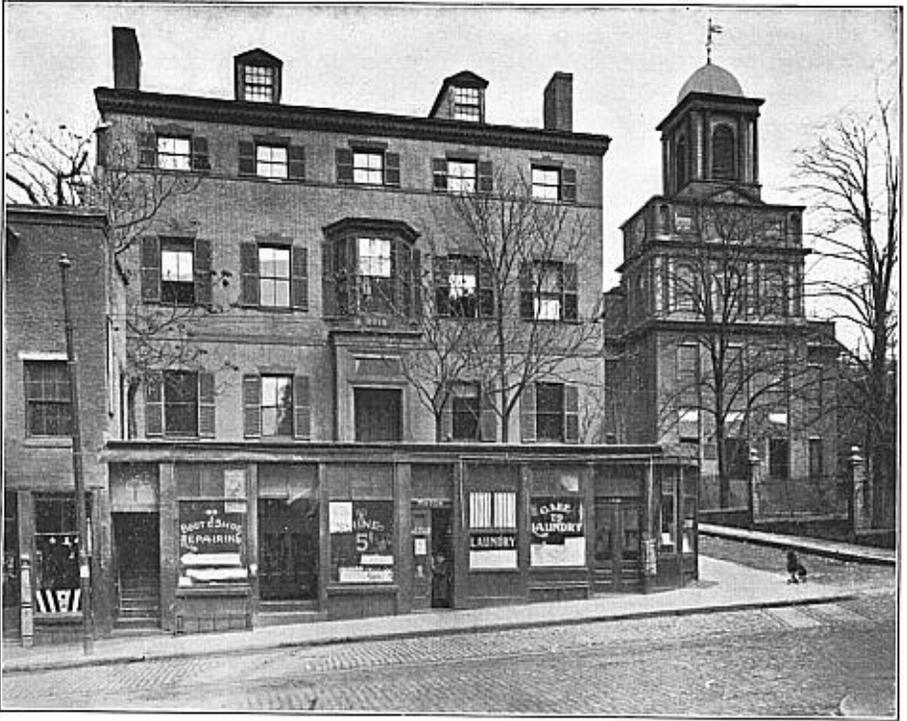


FIG. 2. FIRST HARRISON GRAY OTIS HOUSE, BOSTON, AS IT APPEARED ABOUT 1916

From an early photograph in the Society's Collections.

principal rooms, with the more prominent members of the cornices picked out in gilt. These discoveries, together with the wallpapers and renewed attention to fabrics, floor coverings and furnishings, will create for our members—as we sincerely hope—a startling and exciting new impression of the Otis House when we

we have deliberated at great length. For those who have become pleasantly accustomed to the circular porch which has graced the facade of the Otis House since 1920, it may come as a surprise to learn not only that the original Bulfich design was conceived without such a porch but that the present construction, a product of

the first restoration, must be regarded as somewhat imaginary in character. The historical facts of the matter are these: the original elevation of the facade by Bulfinch, which has survived among the Otis family papers, and surviving structural evidence as well, reveal clearly that

lished in that year, a small projecting porch had been added to the facade, concealing to some degree the line of the semi-elliptical fanlight above the door. As the mid-nineteenth-century photograph (and later pictures) show, this afterthought was replaced in turn by a "storm" porch.

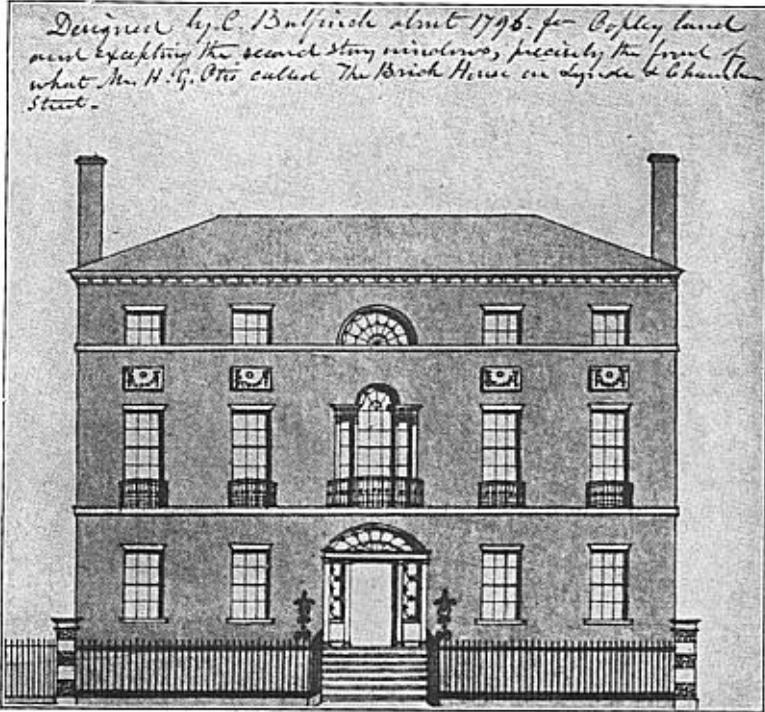


FIG. 3. ORIGINAL ELEVATION BY CHARLES BULFINCH IN 1796,
PROTOTYPE FOR THE FIRST HARRISON GRAY OTIS HOUSE
Courtesy of The Massachusetts Historical Society.

the architect relied entirely for aesthetic interest upon the arrangement and proportions of the various architectural elements within a single plane, unmarred by any projecting feature (Fig. 3). At some time during the early nineteenth century, and in any event before 1834 when it appears in a woodcut view of the house, pub-

Thus in 1920, when restoration of the facade was considered, any knowledge of the earlier (though not original) projecting porch was confined almost entirely to the woodcut of 1834. A decision having been made in 1920 to reproduce this subsequent feature, it is of interest—and not a little puzzling—to discover that the

exact profile of the porch as revealed somewhat crudely in the woodcut was not followed, and the resulting "restoration" was in reality a matter of tasteful embellishment.

cial entrance until a bit later in its history, and that the present re-creation of 1920 follows imperfectly the lines of that early-nineteenth-century addition, it has seemed logical to remove the present



FIG. 4. FIRST HARRISON GRAY OTIS HOUSE, BOSTON, IMMEDIATELY AFTER HAVING BEEN MOVED BACK ON CAMBRIDGE STREET

From a photograph in the Society's Collections exposed in 1926.

With full realization that the Society's goal from 1916 onwards has been the restoration of the Otis House facade by degrees to its original Bulfinch appearance, and with precise knowledge that there was no projecting porch at the prin-

porch altogether. The result, we feel, may gain in value what is lost in effect as the facade of the earliest surviving dwelling house in Boston, designed by Charles Bulfinch, assumes once again the character he gave it.