

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Legends of the Province House"

His Use of Architecture, Artifact, and History

By JOHN S. GARNER

HAWTHORNE first collected the "Legends of the Province House: Howe's Masquerade, Edward Randolph's Portrait, Lady Eleanor's Mantle, and Old Esther Dudley" in Book II of *Twice-Told Tales* of 1842, though the tales had been published separately between 1838 and 1839 in the *Democratic Review*. During that period, just before 1840, Hawthorne (Fig. 1) was employed as measurer of salt and coal at the Boston Custom House. The job provided him with a steady income and with time to travel and write. While living in Boston, he passed his evenings reading at the Athenæum and strolling the city's "narrow and crooked streets." It was on one of these strolls that he happened upon the Province House and was "thus reminded of a purpose, long entertained, of visiting and rambling over the mansion of the old royal governors of Massachusetts."¹ Fascinated by its history, he viewed this formidable structure as a symbol of aristocratic pride and opulence. He also regarded it as an impediment to the right of self-government. The "Legends" disclose strange portents hostile to those governors and guests who infringed on this right, and scourges from out of the Puritan past menaced their presence. Evidence in support of the tales narrows Hawthorne's sources to a few artifacts, a handful of books, and, of course, the Province House. By examining this evidence, we can further reveal

his knowledge of colonial history and fascination with material objects, factors important to the success of the tales.

The Boston visited by Hawthorne in the late 1830's was a town two hundred years old and rich in history. Time-worn and in a serious state of disrepair, what we today would consider in need of urban renewal, it had already been surpassed as a leading city in the new nation. Its growth was circumscribed for lack of soil on which to build, since the narrow neck of the peninsula had yet to be widened by the Back Bay land fill. Because of a decline in mercantile trades and a shortage of deepwater docking facilities, the powerful and prestigious Cunard Line hesitantly chose Boston over New York as its American port. The era of building great canals, a period and achievement so critically important to the economic future of other large cities, bypassed Boston completely. However, the significance of Boston during this period, which no other city could rival, was its surviving heritage from a colorful past. Slow to make changes, the city retained much of its provincial character, if not in its institutions at least in its architecture.

Hawthorne was aware of this heritage and found in the setting of at least two seventeenth-century houses, which at that time still stood in Boston, the substance from which four tales and a chapter of one novel evolved.² These two

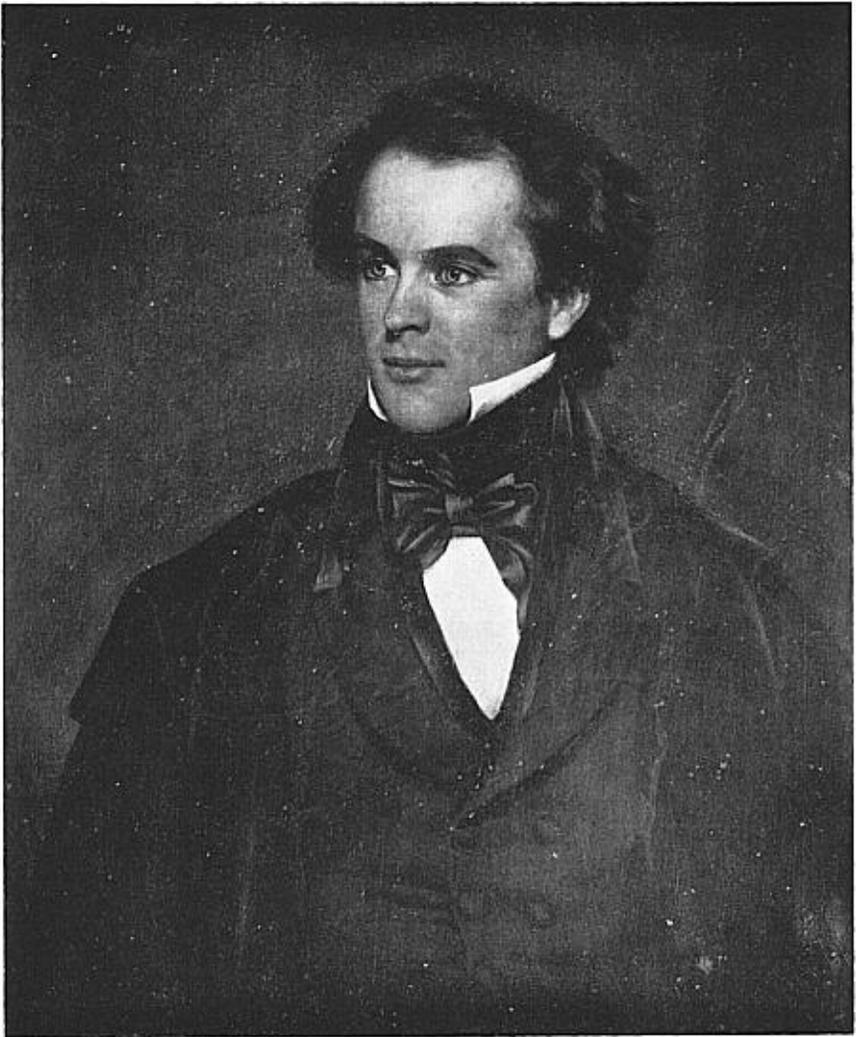


FIG. 1. NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, PAINTED BY CHARLES OSGOOD IN 1840

Photograph by Baldwin Coolidge in S.P.N.E.A. Collection.

Painting now owned by the Essex Institute.

buildings were the Province House on Washington Street, located near the Old South Meeting House, and the Old Feather Store on North Market Street, situated just a few hundred yards from Faneuil Hall. Both were historically important before Hawthorne described them, yet their significance escaped others in Boston, who misused the houses and finally discarded them.

The *more* impressive of the two, the disposition of which becomes so pervasive in the "Legends," was the Province House. Although it was torn down in 1922,* documents including descriptions of construction, household inventories, engravings and photographs have survived, and during the period of Hawthorne's visits it still retained some of its earlier charm. Thomas Waite, an innkeeper, who is mentioned in the opening lines of "Howe's Masquerade," occupied the house between 1835 and 1851. He sold fine liquors and attracted gentlemen boarders accustomed to old-fashioned hospitality. Such company entertained Hawthorne and, no doubt, added verisimilitude to the tales. It was not without some difficulty that he managed to recapture the historic atmosphere with which the house was once imbued. To verify events associated with the house, he consulted Thomas Hutchinson's *The History of Massachusetts*, Caleb Hopkins Snow's *A History of Boston*, and George Bancroft's *History of The United States of America*. To check architectural facts, he may have referred to John Claudius Loudon's *An Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture and Furniture*, for it is recorded that he borrowed these books from the Salem Athenæum at the time he was writing the tales.³

* See OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND, Special Province House Issue, Vol. LXII, No. 4.

The Salem Athenæum was Hawthorne's principal repository of sources during the period from 1825 to 1837, known as his "solitary years," when it was said "that he had read every book in the Athenæum."⁴ Voracious as his appetite for reading was, he became vexed by the shortage there of material on New England history. This situation must have improved, however, when he moved to Boston and discovered an entire room at the Boston Athenæum given over to American history.⁵ Proof of his having used its library as early as 1836 is found in a letter to his mother, though at that date he did not own a reader's ticket.

I have merely the liberty of reading at the [Boston] Athenæum, and am not allowed to take out books . . .⁶

In fact he never owned a share in the Boston Athenæum, so his name is not included in the records of books borrowed.⁷ But during his residence in Boston, between 1839 and 1841, when he was boarding at the house of George S. Hillard, the problem of borrowing books must have been solved; for Randall Stewart mentions in editing *The American Notebooks* that:

In this early period of his residence in Boston, Hawthorne was admitted to the reading room of the Athenæum probably through the courtesy of Hillard, who was a proprietor of the institution and as such was allowed to extend visitor's privileges to two friends.⁸

Hawthorne undoubtedly made good use of this facility where all the standard histories plus a generous assortment of early journals and magazines were shelved. There he could also consult the *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections* and other published records of the colonial period.

A short walk from the Athenæum, a

distance of three blocks, was the entrance to the Province House. Its origin was unknown to Hawthorne, though the engraved letters and numerals above the entrance provided a clue. Introducing the house at the beginning of “Howe’s Masquerade,” he observes:

These letters and figures—“16 P.S. 79”—are wrought into the ironwork of the balcony, and probably express the date of the edifice, with the initials of its founder’s name.

The only published source containing a description of the Province House was Snow’s *A History of Boston*.⁹ Although Hawthorne personally investigated the house, he seems able only to paraphrase Snow, who is also at a loss to know the origin of the house.

When the Province first obtained possession of it, we have not ascertained. Its builder and the year of its erection are probably indicated by the letters and date 16 P.S. 79 which appear on the rail that surmounts the iron balustrade over the portico.¹⁰

The P.S. stood for Peter Sergeant, who was a Puritan merchant, magistrate, and friend of Samuel Sewall. Sewall mentions that Sergeant was prevailed upon to give up his home to Governor Bellomont in 1698.¹¹ After coming to Boston from London in 1676, he purchased from Samuel Shrimpton the property on which the house was erected in 1679.¹² In 1715, one year after his death, the house was purchased by the Province for the sum of £2,300, and was to serve as the permanent governor’s mansion.¹³ But this information was unavailable to Hawthorne. Sewall’s “Diary” was not published until 1875, and it was not until 1885 that records of the General Court of Massachusetts containing information about the house was published.¹⁴

Hawthorne’s description of the ex-

terior of the house contains essentially the same information as found in Snow. But fortunately he goes beyond Snow and probes the chambers and attic recesses; and it is during this exploration that the idea for the tales seems to emanate from the walls, fixtures, and appointments described within. Moreover, artifacts such as “Edward Randolph’s Portrait” appear strangely lifelike, as if trying to warn against evildoings. And at the close of that tale Hawthorne himself emerges from the house feeling a supernatural presence in its past.

In the course of generations, when many people have lived and died in an ancient house, the whistling of the wind through its crannies and the creaking of its beams and rafters become strangely like the tones of the human voice, or thundering laughter, or heavy footsteps treading the deserted chambers. It is as if the echoes of half a century were revived. Such were the ghostly sounds that roared and murmured in our ears when I took leave of the circle around the fireside of the Province-House and, plunging down the doorsteps, fought my way homeward against a drifting snowstorm.

On his first visit he climbs the central stairway, which leads to a cupola atop the roof; there he stops to conjure scenes of past events. He imagines seeing Generals Gage and Howe surveying from that vantage point their military positions during the engagements of 1775 and 1776, when Washington’s army was besieging the city. Typical of Hawthorne’s celerity, he is quick to inform the reader that one of the hills of the Trimount may have interfered with Gage’s view. Descending the grand staircase, “which may be termed, without much hyperbole, a feature of grandeur and magnificence,” he is reminded of all the governors from the century past who must have tread those steps.

The climactic scene in “Howe’s Mas-

querade" takes place at the entrance and stair. A funeral procession of patriots dressed as former governors, beginning with Endicott and ending with Gage, descend from the top of the stair and pass General Howe, whose ball on the eve of the Revolution is stilled by a deathly pall. Frightened and outraged by this display, Howe is admonished by Colonel Joliffe and his beautiful granddaughter—two provincials who reluctantly attend the ball but serve to interpret the event. All the merriment ceases as the procession allegorically symbolizes the end of British rule.

For information concerning such an event, Hawthorne again consulted Snow's *History*. It mentions that amusements were undertaken during the period of military occupation to ease relations between the citizenry and "those, who were held to be the instruments of despotism."¹⁵

Some of the crown officers, who thought the publick gloom disloyal, circulated a proposal for a regular series of dancing assemblies, with the insidious design of engaging the higher classes in fashionable festivity, to falsify the assertions of the prevailing distress, and also to undermine the stern reserve, that was maintained towards the army, and thereby allay the indignation against the system, which they were sent to enforce. But . . . elegant manners, gay uniforms, were resisted: the women of Boston refused to join in ostentatious gaiety, while their country was in mourning.¹⁶

The description of Endicott, the first in the procession, as a man of stern visage wearing a skull cap and a dark cloak, might well have been inspired by the portrait of Endicott which then hung in the main hall of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Surely Hawthorne had this image in mind when describing this stalwart Puritan, who appeared in two other of the *Twice-Told Tales* to protect and enforce the Charter.

"Edward Randolph's Portrait," the title of the second tale, as an artifact, probably never existed. However, an old canvas—"dark with age, damp and smoke that not a touch of the painter's art could be discerned" may once have hung in the state-chamber of the house. If such a painting survived Hawthorne's time, it most certainly perished in a fire of October 25, 1864 (Fig. 2), which completely destroyed the contents of the house.¹⁷ More likely, the image of Randolph's portrait stemmed from a visit to the Essex Historical Society in 1837 when Hawthorne, after looking at some old paintings, jotted in his notebook:

Nothing gives a stronger idea of old worm-eaten aristocracy—of a family being crazy with age, and of its being time that it was extinct—than these black, dusty, faded, antique-dressed portraits . . .¹⁸

The tale recounts Lieutenant-Governor Thomas Hutchinson's deliverance of Castle William, the seventeenth-century fortress of Boston which had always been manned by the militia of the Commonwealth, into the hands of the British army. This act of October, 1770, signaled a principal concession to British rule, and in the narrative of the tale—at the very signing—the following exchange takes place between Hutchinson, an aged selectman, and Hutchinson's niece, Alice Vane, as they stare at the portrait of Edward Randolph.

'By Heaven!' said he [Hutchinson], in a low inward murmur ' . . . if the spirit of Edward Randolph were to appear among us from the place of torment, he could not wear more of the terrors of hell upon his face.'

'For some wise end,' said the aged selectman, solemnly, 'hath Providence scattered away the mist of years that had so long hid this dreadful effigy. Until this hour no living man hath seen what we behold.'

'Twould drive me mad, that awful face,' said Hutchinson, who seemed fascinated by the contemplation of it.

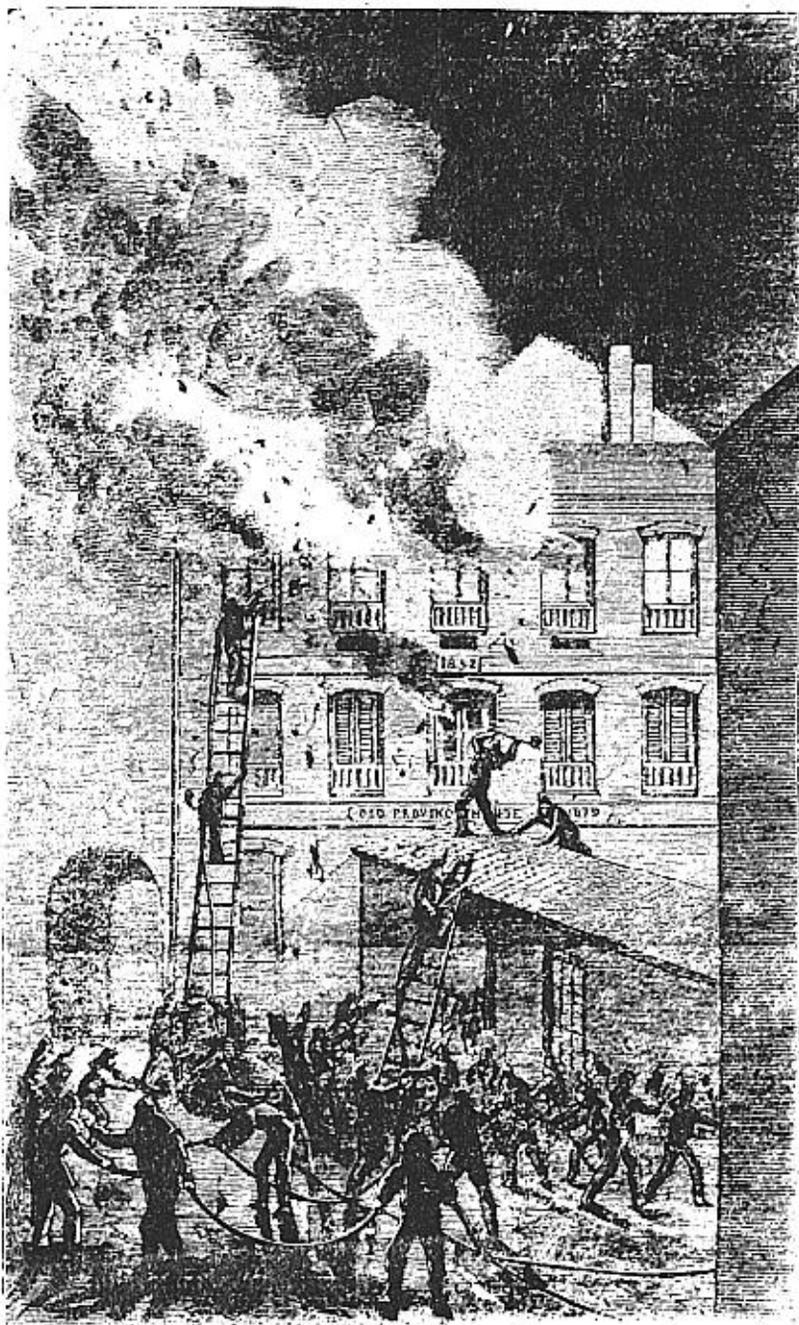


FIG. 2. PROVINCE HOUSE FIRE OF OCTOBER 25, 1864
From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, November 26, 1864
(New York, Vol. XIX, No. 478, page 157).

'Be warned, then' whispered Alice. 'He trampled on a people's rights. Behold his punishment, and avoid a crime like his.'

Randolph secured a job as the American agent of the London Custom House and sailed to Boston in 1679 to spy on shipping and to report to the Crown all violations in trade. His presence in Boston was met with great hostility. Later, in 1684, he connived to rescind the Charter. Hawthorne suggests in the tale that Randolph was the founder of the Province House; his reasoning is partly logical, considering the association of the date of Randolph's arrival with the construction of the house. But, of course, the initials P.S. do not match. Another oversight placed Hutchinson in the Province House when he, being a native of Boston, resided in his own house at North Square. Hawthorne's description of Randolph, "that of a wretch detected in some hideous guilt and exposed to the bitter hatred and laughter and withering scorn of a vast surrounding multitude," probably derived from George Bancroft's *History of the United States of America*. In the first volume Bancroft mentions:

Randolph . . . belonged to that class of hungry adventurers with whom America became familiar. . . . Twice did Charles II remonstrate against the disobedience of his subjects; twice did Randolph cross the Atlantic and return to England, to assist in directing measures against Massachusetts. . . . In December, 1679 . . . Randolph, the hated messenger, arrived in Boston with the writ.¹⁹

In 1838 the Massachusetts Historical Society published a document and seal discovered in the state archives granting Randolph jurisdiction over the supervision of Massachusetts trade and outlining his duties. Could this discovery have inspired Hawthorne to use the character of Randolph in his tale? The editors of the *MHS Collections* wrote in introducing the document:

our civil authorities were far from wishing him [Randolph] success in carrying out his purpose into all the effect, which he desired and sought. They looked on the instructions as trenching too much on their Charter privileges. . . .²⁰

This last sentence seems to reiterate Alice Vane's warning to Hutchinson.

Hawthorne's sources are less evident in the last two tales, "Lady Eleanore's Mantle" and "Old Esther Dudley." The first takes place during the smallpox epidemic that visited Boston during the governorship of Samuel Shute, mentioned by Hawthorne as "nearly one hundred and twenty years ago." (Shute held office between 1716 and 1727.) Lady Eleanore Rochcliffe, a relative of the Governor, brings with her visit from England the dread disease. An embroidered golden mantle designed to enhance her beauty supposedly conceals the virus which ultimately destroys her and many of the town's inhabitants. According to the tale, the contagion first appeared during a ball at the Province House honoring Lady Eleanore. Sewall mentions in his diary that on January 7, 1718, "the governor had a ball at his own house that lasted until three in the morning."²¹ However, the epidemic did not strike until 1721. Snow mentions nothing of Shute's administration or social affairs except the ravages of the disease that infected 5,889 people, killing 844 before it was brought under control in the spring of 1722.²² The cause of the disease is attributed to the Sal Tortugas fleet, bound from the West Indies, which landed at Boston in April, 1721. Thomas Hutchinson's *History of Massachusetts* provides this information, plus a chapter on the life and character of Samuel Shute.²³

During the ball, Lady Eleanore is visited by an uninvited admirer named Jervase Helwyse, who offers her a chalice

filled with wine. But the Lady disdains his presence and declines the offer, refusing to drink not only with him but with the guests as well. Later, after the disease has consumed her body, she bemoans her scorn and cries "My throat!—my throat is scorched . . . A drop of water!" It has been suggested that Helwyse was a name borrowed from one of Hawthorne's English ancestors, and that the wine offered Lady Eleanore symbolized "democratic communion," whereas the mantle represented "aristocratic pride."²⁴ Her refusal to drink from the cup of communion perhaps signaled declining relations between England and the Province, for Hutchinson mentions that Shute had difficulty with the House of Representatives. The chalice, "a chased silver goblet," recognized by the guests at the ball as belonging to the communion plate of the Old South Church, is probably the Winthrop Cup, which was presented to the First Church by Governor Winthrop and is still owned by that congregation. Hawthorne's curiosity in art and interest in the Puritan past surely brought him in contact with this relic.

In 1839, the year "Old Esther Dudley" was published, an anonymously written article entitled the "Province House" was issued by the *Southern Literary Messenger*. The article was not written by Hawthorne. Apart from obvious stylistic differences, the anonymous author says that he is an older gentleman who remembered the house in his youth. Furthermore, his great-aunt, whose name goes unmentioned, was a member of the household. Lamenting that the house was now a tavern, the author carefully describes the artifacts inside the house, remembering when they still retained vestiges of royalty.²⁵ Did Hawthorne know this writer? Perhaps he is Mr. Bela Tiffany, or the curious old

gentleman who narrates the tale. Both supposedly shared Hawthorne's company at the Province House and are mentioned at the beginning and again at the end of the tale.

If indeed Esther Dudley inhabited the house and guarded it after Howe's departure, seeking in vain the return of His Majesty's fleet, her name appears nowhere in papers of ownership or later occupancy. In 1776, after the British high command removed from Boston, the house was occupied by the Committee on Accounts, and from 1778 until 1795 it was rented by the Commonwealth to members of local and state offices and their families.²⁶ Old Esther Dudley may well have been a literary convention that Hawthorne used to symbolize "the spirit of the colonial past giving way to the spirit of the American future,"²⁷ as one scholar has stated. Whatever the reason, the theme of this fourth and final tale brings to an end British rule in Boston and frees the house as a symbol of tyranny and a target of Puritan wrath.

The "Legends of the Province House," more than any other of the *Twice-Told Tales*, serves to illustrate Hawthorne's appreciation for material objects. The care with which he describes the Province House and its artifacts reveals a quality imperative to the success of his writing. The balance struck between fiction and fact is a part of this success. By identifying the artifact and establishing its existence, he makes believable the setting in which the tales take place. But apart from his ability to produce a sense of reality, he is able to create a metaphysical rapport between the beholder and the object perceived. This preoccupation with the significance of an object permits him to bring forth the secrets of its past. Relics from the Puritan century surrounded him in Salem and

in Boston; and he must have been fascinated with the thought of retrieving events associated with their history. The

"Legends of the Province House" testify to this endeavor.

NOTES

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*, Book II (New York: Arcadia House, 1950), p. 82.

² The Old Feather Store is unquestionably the source for Governor Bellingham's house, described in Chapter Seven, "The Governor's Hall" of *The Scarlet Letter*. Charles Ryskamp discovered Snow as the source for Hawthorne's borrowing, but failed to establish the name of this building or the more recent evidence concerning it. See Charles Ryskamp, "The New England Sources of The Scarlet Letter," *American Literature*, XXXI (November, 1959), 257-272.

³ See Marion L. Kesselring, *Hawthorne's Reading 1828-1850*—A Transcription and Identification of Titles Recorded in the Charge-Books of the Salem Athenæum (New York: The New York Public Library, 1949), pp. 44, 53, 55, 61. The identification of these books and the dates they were charged are included on these pages.

⁴ James T. Fields, *Yesterdays with Authors* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1900), p. 47.

⁵ Caleb Hopkins Snow, *A History of Boston* (Boston: Abel Bowen, 1828), p. 358.

⁶ Manning Hawthorne, "Nathaniel & Elizabeth Hawthorne, Editors," *The Colophon*, September, 1939, p. 36.

⁷ A survey of the Boston Athenæum's *Records Books Borrowed* (1835-1843) failed to disclose Hawthorne's name. Only the names of shareholders and the books they borrowed are recorded.

⁸ Randall Stewart, ed., *The American Notebooks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), p. 331.

⁹ Snow, *A History of Boston*, p. 245. The exterior of the structure and immediate grounds are briefly but articulately described. This is the first known printed description of the house and is particularly valuable as an early record of its appearance.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ "Diary of Samuel Sewall," *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, Fifth Series VI: 13.

¹² Walter Kendall Watkins, "The Province House and Its Occupants," *OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND*, LXII (Spring, 1972), 95.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Judge Mellen Chamberlain, "Old Province House," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Second Series, II:122-131.

¹⁵ Snow, *A History of Boston*, p. 275.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Watkins, "The Province House and Its Occupants," p. 104.

¹⁸ Stewart, ed., *The American Notebooks*, p. lxxvii.

¹⁹ George Bancroft, *History of The United States of America* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1834), Vol. 1, pp. 396, 403-404.

²⁰ "Instructions From The Commissioners To Edward Randolph, Esq.," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Series 3 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1838), Vol. 3, p. 129.

²¹ "Diary of Samuel Sewall," p. 311.

²² Snow, *A History of Boston*, p. 218.

²³ Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of Massachusetts* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1795), Vol. 2, p. 187.

²⁴ Harry Levin, *The Scarlet Letter and Other Tales of The Puritans by Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961), p. 266.

²⁵ "Province House," *Southern Literary Messenger*, V (December, 1839), 794.

²⁶ Watkins, "The Province House and Its Occupants," p. 103.

²⁷ Michael Davitt Bell, *Hawthorne and The Historical Romance of New England* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 204.