



INTERIOR VIEW OF THE EARLIER LYMAN GREENHOUSE

Photograph by Richard Merrill, 1959.

The Lyman Greenhouses

By ANN E. COMPTON

THE country seat called Lyman House or The Vale in Waltham, Massachusetts, is the sole survivor of the country houses known to have been designed by the celebrated architect Samuel McIntire. This ambitious house was built in 1793 for Theodore Lyman, a prosperous merchant, and the property is today owned by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

The estate, which is composed of some thirty acres, is a rare and pleasing integration of both architectural and landscape design. The numerous lawns, ponds and gardens surrounding the stately main house were laid out by William Bell, an English gardener, after the manner of Humphrey Repton's theories on the subject, and the setting has been continually developed over the years.

In addition to the architectural beauty of the house and the wide varieties of plant material to be found on the property, there are two unusual greenhouses of particular interest to visitors. The smaller building, located in the kitchen garden, was built about 1800 and is still standing, although it is no longer in use. The larger greenhouse at the end of the pleach wall was built about 1804. These structures are important because they reveal a special system of heating and because few greenhouses dating back to the early nineteenth century are in existence today.

This heating system operated on a very simple principle—best explained by first examining the smaller greenhouse. Clearly visible in the illustration is a small firebox, with a similar space directly below it for removal of ashes and draft control. At the rear of the firebox a brick flue

about eighteen inches square runs horizontally for some distance to a chimney at the other end of the building. Large-size fire bricks laid in a single row form the top of the flue. The heat was drawn from the wood-burning fire down the length of the flue, thus warming the surrounding air en route.

The same heating principle was utilized in the larger western greenhouse, but judging from what partial evidence can be seen today, the construction of this system was slightly more complex. We know there was a large wood-burning fireplace area at one end of the greenhouse and a connecting chimney which is still extant. From this fireplace or firebox two brick flues run horizontally side by side down the length of the greenhouse, then apparently join to form a single flue which moves upwards diagonally and finally debouches into a second chimney. These two flues are separated from each other by a brick bearing wall and are supported by two rows of barrel vaults built up against the wall.

Enough of the architectural evidence remains, therefore, to give us a fascinating glimpse into one solution of the problem of interior climate control as practiced in the early nineteenth-century botanical world. It is believed that Mr. Lyman was able to raise in these specially constructed greenhouses varieties of exotic fruits and other plant material not indigenous to the New England area.

The larger greenhouse has been used for the last eighty or ninety years as a grapehouse, and superb black Hamburg and Muscat grapes are grown there even

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today, although admittedly a somewhat more modern heating system has had to be employed. Another adjacent greenhouse, which is later in date, is also of special interest to botanists because it houses a group of very old and magnificent camellia trees which flourish and bloom in handsome profusion.

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