

CREATION AND RECREATION:**DR. JAMES LINCOLN HUNTINGTON'S****FORTY ACRES: THE STORY OF THE BISHOP HUNTINGTON HOUSE (1949)**

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We stand in the midst of an unusual historic property. Unusual for a number of reasons -- not the least among them that the Porter-Phelps-Huntington House offers us an rich combination of resources to interpret: a house dating back to the middle of the eighteenth century; one lived in by the same family for more than two hundred years; one containing -- in the furnishings and decorations -- the artifacts of the lives of those generations; and one, moreover, whose visual record is backed by an extraordinary collection of a written record -- the family papers now housed at the Amherst College Library and containing in 177 boxes that cover 90 linear feet, material from the eighteenth century to the middle of this one. Rare indeed in this country is there such a rich and complicated conjunction of family, buildings, their possessions and papers.

Before we can begin the process of reinterpreting what we see, we have to understanding that what we see is shaped by the vision of Dr. James Lincoln Huntington -- the Doctor who knew the house as a child in the 1880s as he came from his boyhood home in Ashfield, whose mother used this as a summer house from 1922 until her death in 1926, who decided to buy out the other heirs in 1929, and himself moved here

from Boston in 1943 well after he had taken on as his love's labor the task of preserving and saving the property. Dr. Huntington represents a fourth generation that came after the three that Professor Christopher Clark mentions in his talk -- a twentieth-century generation some of whose members committed themselves to preserving the past.

His was a heroic effort. For decades, he devoted his time, energy, and funds to the challenge of preserving the house and grounds. Writing grant proposals, soliciting funds from family and friends, and at key moments saving the home from dangers that threatened its existence, Dr. Huntington worked to preserve this piece of the past for the pleasure and education of future generations. Nonetheless, it is possible to honor his achievement at the same time that we come to terms with the heritage with which he left us. As is true with any act of preservation, so with the Porter-Phelps-Huntington House: the act of preservation always involves specific choices that shape how we see the past. To understand these choices, and the contexts in which they emerged, is to pay Dr. Huntington the high compliment of taking his work seriously.

Let us begin the task of understanding his choices with an examination of the most familiar visual image, the cover of Forty Acres: The Story of the Bishop Huntington House (N.Y.: Hastings House, 1949), the book Dr. Huntington authored. A number of things immediately strike us about the

visual icon. The title of the book refers back to a commonly used phrase. With the subtitle, an admiring grandson recalls the life of his grandfather Frederic, Episcopal Bishop of Central New York who took possession of house in 1879 and who gave his name to the house, known in late 19th century as "The Bishop Huntington House." The choice of type evokes a certain elegance. Above all, our attention turns to the picture of the house -- a beautiful idyll, framed by tress at top, left, and right and by a lawn at bottom. "This historic structure. . . with its store of inherited treasures accumulated through so many different lines and yet all in harmony," Dr. Huntington wrote, "making . . . a well furnished Colonial Mansion." Focusing on this text is one way of beginning to understand the vision that undergirded the restoration that Dr. Huntington undertook with such dedication.

What fascinates this observer is the way in which the book -- its cover and text -- define the borders of this house. "My chief interest," he tells us, "was in the contents of the house," especially family papers and furniture. What Dr. Huntington provides, intentionally or not, is a series of borders that exclude the Connecticut River, place commercialism beyond the boundaries of the property, help prevent us from seeing the role of work in the history of the family property, and minimize the contributions of women, African Americans, and Native

Americans. In other words, what does Dr. Huntington's larger picture exclude, or put more positively how did he shape what we see and do not see.

First, let us begin, as any consideration of this place should, with the Connecticut River. The first sentence of the book mentions "the lordly Connecticut." But soon the river disappears from story and from visual images (except the map at rear) only to reappear as cause of floods of 1927 and 1936. As anyone who has approached the house from the south and west knows, the River shaped the historic location of the Porter-Phelps-Huntington House. Consequently, any reinterpretation of the site should take this into account. I am reminded here of Plantation houses in Virginia and South Carolina where the visitor to a historic house can go from house to river bank, a walk that enhances the sense of the connection between building and land. Visitors would understand the house better if, through visual and verbal clues, they saw the Connecticut River as something that connected the property to a larger world. In a larger sense, a full interpretation of the House should tell visitors where the boundaries lie -- how people, social movements, goods, and ideas came from all over the world and, in one way or another, broke down boundaries between house and the larger world.

Secondly, any reinterpretation of this historic site should, through an emphasis on the relationship between land and structures, demonstrate the changing role of work on the property. Dr. Huntington's calling this house a Colonial Mansion prevents us from seeing the house and land as the locus of work. Work plays very little role in the book and to some extent in the interpretation of the property. For example, in working to preserve the site, Dr. Huntington had to move the barn so he could focus his energies on the preservation of the house itself. "Since there was to be no farming on the place," Dr. Huntington remarks, "it had no further use." The absence of the barn, built in 1783, moved to Hadley in 1929 and opened as a Farm Museum in 1931 (on anniversary of original roof raising) is understandable.

However, though it was true that the barn had no use in a technical sense, in others ways it did have use -- for that building is central to an understanding of much of the work that went on here. Dr. Huntington tells of the fate of other outbuildings in early 1930s and of his effort to turn the grounds (including the basement of the barn) into a delightful landscape and garden. Yet what is created as a result is something of an illusion -- without outbuildings (including caretaker's cottage, wood sheds, mills) -- it is difficult for many visitors to comprehend that what they are seeing is not a free-standing house but a house that stood at the center of complex social relationships of work.

Ironically, the only outbuilding we see is the garage, built in 1932.

In the third place, in the book itself when we see work it is usually men's work. Here the restoration of Bishop Huntington's study offers an important point of interpretation, for it affords us the opportunity to see one example of male work in the house. Yet ironically, the most prominent example of work we see in the book is Dr. Huntington's -- saving the main structures, persevering the documents from age and floods, transforming the decoration, recovering colonial pieces from attics, sheds and barns, and putting away "the Victorian pieces."

Surely one focal point of future interpretation should be the work Dr. Huntington did -- his achievement in preserving this house but also the kinds of decisions he made in the process. His decision to remove Victorian furnishings from the house and to place in their stead the colonial items he recovered from attics and barns -- this is a moment worth focusing upon and interpreting with some care. It involves the process of peeling away the levels of history so that we can understand historic preservation as a task undertaking in specific contexts. This process of replacing Victorian with Colonial occurs frequently in twentieth-century historic recreations. In the 1920s, three thousand miles way in the Los Angeles Basin, developers tore down Victorian Railroad stations and replaced them with

Spanish Revival ones. This too was an act of bringing the Colonial back to life.

Fourthly, women's work, largely absent from Dr. Huntington's portrait, ought to move toward the center of our reinterpretation. In his book, Dr. Huntington mentioned women as wives, diary writers, bearers of children, knitters, and story tellers. Yet except for mentions of their names, women virtually disappear in the story he tells of the 19th and 20th centuries. More generally, female family members do not seem to work, have beliefs, participate in making of important decisions. Even women outside family seem more defined by what their husbands do than what they do. Dr. Huntington mentioned Bishop Huntington's wife only as someone his grandfather married.

Fifth. A reinterpretation of the house ought to pay attention to the place of African Americans in its history. Dr. Huntington's book offers us a haunting first encounter with Blacks. This is the image from 1753: "Zeb Prutt, a young colored man, ascended to the summit [of the Hadley church], sat on the copper bird [that stood on top of the steeple] and imitated the crowing of a rooster." From diary of Elizabeth Porter in 1768 we learn of the slave's running away, capture, and return. Later, the book mentions slaves in the 18th century. But then African Americans disappear

from the book, leaving us to wonder how they remained in the lives of the owners of the house.

Sixth. Similar things can be said of the place of Native Americans in picture Dr. Huntington drew. He offers us a dramatic moment: Moses Porter going off to war in 1755, three years after the house built and then "ambuscaded by the Indians." Then, we learn, "Captain Porter's sword was brought back to Hadley by his Indian body servant and passed it through one of the north windows of the house. Mrs. Porter, hearing a knock as she was putting her little girl to bed, pushed back the heavy shutter and the sword was handed to her. She understood the significance."

These passages offer us contrasting images of Native Americans -- those who would ambuscade brave European colonists and the loyal body servant who returned with the symbol of his master's death. Then Native Americans, like African Americans disappear from the story -- in this case even earlier. What role Indians should have in the new pictures we might present remains unclear.

Why this concern in Forty Acres with defining borders and making invisible the river, work, women, Indians, African Americans? This leads us to the question of why Dr. Huntington took on to himself this task of preserving the home. Obviously complicated motives are involved and I want to explore one set.

There are hints of Dr. Huntington's desire to protect the house against any possibility of loss of something he profoundly identified as family, his part of America. In some ways, the process of separating the house off from outside world underlies Dr. Huntington's decision to preserve it.

A key moment in the book comes when he talks of visiting the house in 1919. On the way back to Boston, he tells the reader, "it swept over me for the first time that" he owned house as much as any member of family and he was as responsible for its condition. Remember this comes just after he speculated on how ghosts frightened away thieves "but that would not," he reminds his reader, "have deterred the professional antique robber." At another point, Dr. Huntington takes Lowestoft china back to Boston for safe keeping. What is involved here is a fear of violation, not from ghosts, but from people who might rob him of his heritage. Thus when Dr. Huntington discovers the 17th century kitchen table, he notes "a buyer of antiques from New York had tried so hard to get the table away from him that" the French Canadian cabinet maker who was restoring it "nearly had to call the police."¹ To Dr. Huntington,

¹ This is the only reference in the book to the complex social groupings near the house in the 20th century. It would be especially helpful to gain some sense, through oral history and tax records, of Dr. Huntington's response to the Polish-American farmers who, I assume, were purchasing some surrounding properties in this century.

protecting family, house, contents, heritage are all intertwined.

So once we begin to see what we see as an artifact of the early 20th century, we can begin to ask how we might see things differently. It is that task others will address -- both in this series of paper and in the larger task of reinterpretation.

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