

Introduction

This introduction is a convenient and logical place for essential descriptions, disclosures, rationale, ruminations, navigation, sources, and acknowledgments. For starters, here is a descriptive introduction to what you will find in this book.

The HABS and the HABS Nots takes a look back at the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), the federal program that advanced historic preservation in the 1930s. For viewing pleasure, the book presents the crisp analog photos and elegant measured drawings for surveys conducted in Newburyport, Mass., a small coastal city known widely for the riches of its authentic 18th- and 19th-century domestic architecture.

The historic American Buildings Survey, the brainchild of National Park Service architect Charles E. Peterson (1906-2004), took shape in 1933 as a New Deal make-work program for unemployed architects and draftspeople. HABS teams were dispatched to all corners of the U.S. to document the most at-risk historic structures through rigorous data collecting, photography, and standardized measured drawings. Documenting structures of all types, in all regions, from all classes, was a key component of the HABS mission. The program's historical objectivity and inclusivity, as well as its insistence on high standards of documentation, built the lasting legacy of the Historic American Building Survey that continues to influence the preservation profession today.

The small city of Newburyport, Massachusetts, located on the coast about 40 miles north of Boston at the mouth of the Merrimack River, was a frequent stop for HABS teams. Between 1934 and 1942, HABS teams documented structures and landscapes in Newburyport ranging from dignified Federal-era mansions, to a crumbling 1845 textile mill, to a working class neighborhood of 18th- and 19th-century homes about to be flattened for highway construction, to a fortress-like decommissioned jail.

The "HABS Nots" Gallery then takes a look at the future of preservation in the once down-and-out but rejuvenated port city. The city's smaller-footprint historic homes, never the subject of the HABS-like attention lavished upon the more grand Georgian and Federal-style showplaces, are found throughout the city's 750-acre National Register Historic District, and contribute to neighborhood ambiance. Yet their authenticity is at the greatest risk of being lost to the "march of progress."

Viewed individually, some might view a particular 19th-century tradesman's house in the "HABS Nots Gallery" as a bland and ordinary box. But viewed in place among its companion homes of similar scale, that home contributes to the streetscape, the neighborhood ambiance, and by extension, the city's singular sense of place – still a significant component in Newburyport's continuing renaissance. Therefore, if more small, modest tradesmen's homes should ever be erased from the inventory of the *National Register Historic District*, for whatever reason, at least some of them are documented in these pages.

For additional context, the book includes chapters on the economic history of Newburyport; the origin and evolution of the HABS program; and other notable efforts at documenting the architecture of Newburyport. Also included is an illustrated guide to the 300 years of house styles found throughout Newburyport, plus a bibliography-by-topic that is sure to thrill history enthusiasts and preservation advocates.

Disclosures. Your author – that is, me – is a 21st-century museum, history, and preservation professional who first "blew in" to visit a friend in Newburyport in 1972. My first stop was the infamous Jake's Cafe, where I swaggered in looking for a pay phone. I vividly recall my observations of the city in its "before" state. In 1983 my wife and I, in the midst of our showbiz career, came to Newburyport in search of high ceilings for an acrobatic juggling practice space. We were among the wave of hammer-and-saw homeowners who helped lift neighborhoods from the depths, encouraged by "old timers" affectionately recalled, now departed.

Rationale. The big-picture rationale for preservation of human-built material culture could fill volumes. The rationale for a book devoted to Newburyport architecture and its preservation? Ever since a relatively small group of visionaries redirected the urban renewal bulldozers in the 1960s, the city's historic atmosphere has been key to its prosperity. Maintaining awareness of its value can help secure the city's authentic ambiance – and economic vitality.

Ruminations. The legacy of the HABS program has cut a double-bladed swath through historic preservation since the 1930s. HABS standards helped professionalize the new field of historic preservation. New practitioners, following the HABS model, were more objective and inclusive than the antiquarians that launched the wave of historic house “restorations” in the early 20th century. Over time, however, standards in place for historic designations, protections, grants, and permits became skewed toward architectural significance, and away from historical significance. Admittedly, it is easier to make an on-paper case for a building than it is to make a case for hard-to-quantify human events. Max Van Balgooy, long on the vanguard of public history interpretation, suggested in a 2016 essay, “We need to move the goal posts so that historic preservation is not *about something*, but *for somebody*.” In his view, preservation is only a *means* to an end, and that the *end* itself should be about *people*. Not everything of historic value to people can be quantified. The houses in the “HABS Nots Gallery” are such examples. The houses may not be architecturally distinctive, but they ooze the history of a working class in an evolving city, and they do stand as “contributing structures” within the Newburyport *National Register Historic District*.

The HABS documentation. The photos and drawings from the Historic American Buildings Survey are in the public domain and accessible at the Library of Congress website (www.LOC.gov). Not all sheets and photos from the Newburyport surveys are included. Some drawings were not suitable for reduction. Other hard choices were made based on space, proportion, or content. But all materials from each survey are viewable at the LOC website.

In the basic HABS information for each survey, sometimes cryptic or nonexistent, I have in some instances added parenthetical information in italics that is not part of the original record. For some surveys, I have added “Commentary” to provide details about the property or specific individuals.

Sources. The sources of quotations and facts are attributed in the text, instead of in separate endnotes. General sources are noted in the bibliography. Facts on individuals were verified through census records and other public records. Facts on houses were gleaned from the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System, the Newburyport National Register Historic District data, the Newburyport Property Information database, and the South Essex Registry of Deeds. The *Daily News* of Newburyport was consulted for 1930s-1980s background.

Other photos & illustrations. All photos and illustrations in the history and documentation chapters are from pre-1923 public domain sources, or from U.S. government publications (also public domain). In “Appendix I: Home Sweet Home – Newburyport House Styles,” and in “The HABS Nots: A Gallery of ‘Undocumented’ Newburyport Houses,” all diagrams and photos are by the author.

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– **Reginald W. Bacon**
Newburyport, Mass.
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