



Rufus Porter

## THE MAN, THE MOVE AND THE MUSEUM

BY LEIGH MACMILLEN HAYES

Rufus Porter was an entrepreneur who painted miniature portraits, as well as highly-prized wall murals that are still visible in houses throughout New England. Besides being a traveling folk artist, he was also an inventor, musician, dancer, writer, teacher, and founder of *Scientific American* magazine.

Circa 1823, Porter began painting murals on plaster walls in clients' homes. Martha Cummings, executive director of the Rufus Porter Museum says they were seen as an alternative to using expensive wallpaper. Because he'd supposedly spent some time in Hawaii and had what she describes as a wacky sense of humor, Porter was known for adding volcanoes and other Hawaiian

features to his New England landscapes. Some of his scenes even reflect a childhood spent near Moose Pond in Bridgton.

When Main Street was being reconfigured in 1985, the Mary and Donald Johnson family saved a house near what was to become Shorey Park from demolition because they had been told by a local historian that she remembered seeing murals in the house when she was a child. For \$1.00, they purchased the building and had it moved to a North High Street location next to their home. The Johnsons peeled back wallpaper to reveal the murals painted about 1830 by either Rufus Porter or his nephew, Jonathan Poor. Tom Johnson, son of Mary and Donald, and an Advisory Trustee to Maine Preservation and the current Executive Director at Victoria Mansion, recreated part of the mural where plaster had fallen away.

Eventually, the Johnsons sold both houses to folk art collectors Julie and Carl Lindberg. The Lindbergs chose to share their collection with the community and supported the Rufus Porter Museum in its infancy by housing it in the red cape. Founded in 2005, the museum's mission is to "celebrate the life and times of a remarkably creative American genius who worked throughout Maine, New England and beyond."

The Board of Trustees recognized a need to expand the campus and through a fundraising effort they were able to purchase the 1842 John and Maria Webb House at 121 Main Street in 2011 with the plan of moving the red cape to the property.

Structural repairs were paramount at the Webb House and took several years.

Under the direction of John Mickalowski, Jr., former RPM executive director who had a background in architecture, and with the help of a Bridgton Community Development Block Grant and a Kendal C. and Anna Ham Charitable Foundation Grant, as well as other grants and donations, work was completed on the exterior of the building.

The red cape is a 200-hundred-year-old house that was built by the members of the Congregational Church circa 1789, including Enoch Perley, to serve as the home for Nathan Church, the local minister. The building was originally located on South High Street near First Congregational Church. Augustus Perley acquired the house following Nathan Church's retirement and in 1840 had it transported by oxen to the foot of Highland Lake, where it housed workers for the Gibbs Woolen Mill. Then, of course, there was the move from the lake up to North High Street.

It's fourth, and potentially final move, took place a year ago. With great caution, the last move was made after the house had been shored up.

It's not every day one walks down the street with a house, but that's exactly what many of us did last November. Central Maine Power and Fairpoint workers walked in front, checking on and occasionally lifting wires along the route. Cole Watson of Watson and Son Building Movers, Inc., slowly drove the truck that pulled the house down the road, while his father Dana walked beside with Eric Wissmann of M&S Builders—both keeping a cautious eye on the operation.

Many of us became sidewalk engineers over the course of that day, something Rufus Porter would have embraced, as we tried to determine the next steps. Main Hill was our main concern. What if . . . some had visions of failing brakes and a mad dash down Main Street to Food City. Others foresaw the mill pond at the bottom of the hill coming into play. Fortunately, the Watsons had it all figured out and this was just another work day for them. They chained Kyle Warren's truck to the back of the rig before the journey continued—without mishap.

After the house was positioned on its new foundation, it was closed up and spent last winter with no heat, thus allowing it to climatize.

This past spring, Martha says, "The volunteers on our facilities committee worked non-stop preparing the second floor office space in the Webb House, installing two





new entrance doors in the store and Nathan Church House, and fixing the structural support underneath the Church House, while making sure the floor joists were stable.” With a long project list, everyone on the Board and other volunteers pitched in for there were those physical features to attend to and the exhibits and gift shop to set up.

Enter the museum through the back door of the Webb House . . . and step back in time as you learn more about Rufus Porter. The best way to begin is to sit in the small front parlor and watch a video that tells the story of the man. It’s a story that will continue to evolve as new art work or copies of *Scientific American* are found.

It is known that Porter would knock on doors and offer his artistic services. In fifteen minutes, using the camera obscura pinhole technique, he could trace a person’s silhouette and dominate features, then use

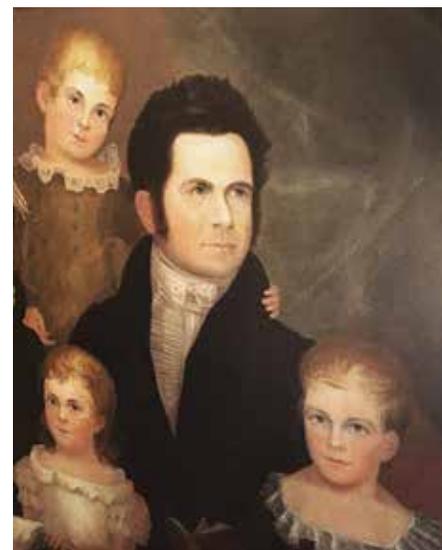
watercolors to complete the painting.

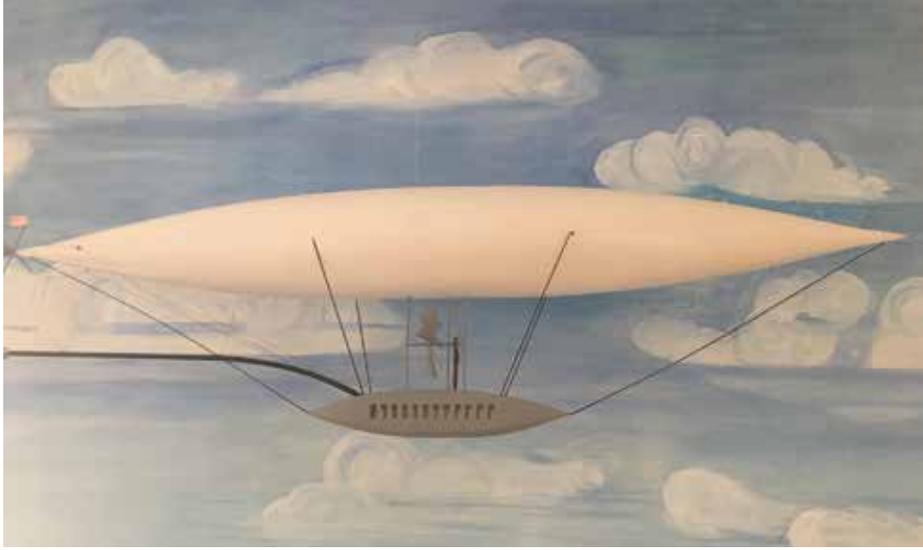
In the parlor of the Webb House, several portraits painted by Porter decorate the walls, including a portrait of Betsy Long Ellis. Near her is another entitled “Young Lady in the White Ruffled Dress” for her actual name is unknown.

A larger parlor features photographs and models of Porter’s inventions and some of his patents. Models of his inventions, such as the Porter and Bradley Rotary Pump, are on display. The pump was first created to drain the privy without getting down below to do it; Porter would be pleased to know it continues to be useful for pumping stomachs or in open heart surgery.

In the Invention Gallery you’ll also find an area for kids—where they can use a variety of materials to make creations which stay at the museum. There are even some materials provided for take-home inventions.

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Though Rufus is the inspiration and his story is important to tell, in time Martha foresees that the collection will expand beyond him and include inventions and folk art by others.

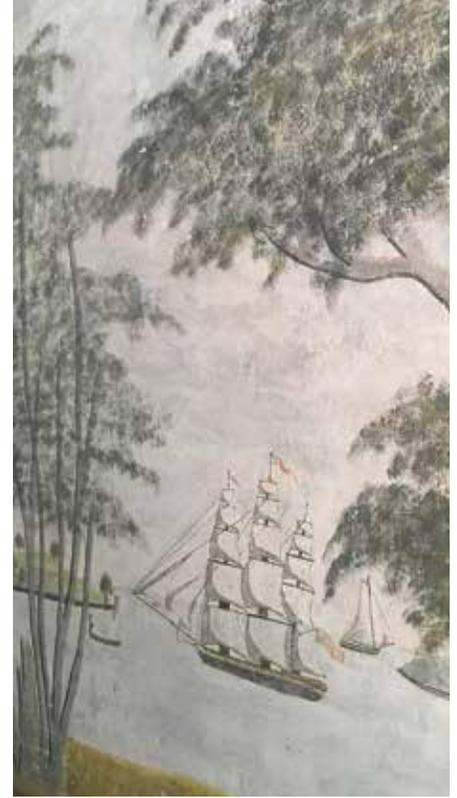
After visiting the gift shop featuring the work of local artisans and beyond, step across the new connecting deck to the Church House. Martha notes that for the first time in its history, the house is located on a dry spot. (Those who know the amount of water that flows in the South and North High Street vicinity, especially in the spring, can fully appreciate this.)

The first two rooms currently contain a photo display of the move down Main Street, but Martha sees the exhibits as ever changing. The mural room, however, hasn't changed much and fortunately didn't suffer much damage from its most recent journey. Period furniture has been added to this

room, creating a feeling of the parlor where Nathan Church once met his congregants.

Originally, the house had an ell, which was left behind in the last move. Though she notes that the ell was important to Bridgton history for the second floor was where parishioners met, based on evidence from the second floor, it has been hypothesized that when the house was previously moved, that section was broken into bedrooms. "Bringing the ell would have been cost prohibitive," says Martha, "and it wasn't going to work with the barn in the back. For the Rufus Porter Museum and our mission, this was an important point."

In honor of the extension, however, the third and final stage of the museum campus will be construction of an education center with a barn-like exterior, that will mimic some of the former ell-shaped structure. A concept drawing created by RKB Associ-



ates Architects shows that the connector between the Webb House, Church House and new building will have a contemporary flair as it harmoniously blends the old and new, thus calling attention to each building's unique history.

The new structure will be used for educational programs, temporary exhibits and community space. Once fundraising is completed in a few years and the building constructed, it is there that the John Poor murals and those donated from a house in Lexington, Massachusetts, which are now in storage, will be displayed.

With its new downtown location, museum programs that went on hiatus a year ago in anticipation of the move were resurrected such as the children's hour in conjunction with Bridgton Public Library, Curious Arts for adults and Mystery History Tour. The season continues to extend from June 1 through October 7, and opens again on December 2 for a holiday open house.

And then . . . the museum will take a long winter's nap, but that's OK because we know that it will reopen next year with new displays and exhibits. Martha is keen on changing things up so people continue to return year after year and find new inspiration from Porter and his contemporaries, whether it be as an inventor, dancer, painter, writer, Mainer or New Englander.

A year ago we walked with Porter and now he stands as a guardian on the corner of Main and Church Streets, looking like he'd been there all along. 🌀