

NEWBURYPORT
PRESERVATION TRUST

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www.nbptpreservationtrust.org

Linking the past with the present and future



Quarterly Newsletter of the Newburyport Preservation Trust

Winter 2013/14

Downtown Newburyport's deteriorating brickwork needs attention 40 years after the first restoration effort

No, the sky isn't falling, but downtown bricks might be falling soon without proper repairs

Over 40 years ago, the restoration of downtown Newburyport's early-19th-century brick buildings earned well-deserved praise. But as anyone who has survived over 40 years in this life knows, with the passage of time there are usually some "trouble spots" that need attention. So it is with our downtown brickwork.

Deteriorating downtown brickwork has been on the radar of the Newburyport Preservation Trust for several years. NPT routinely distributes information on the maintenance of historic masonry, and has frequently engaged the region's most expert restoration masons for both educational programs during Preservation Week, and for work on the restoration of the 1822 Powder House on Low Street.

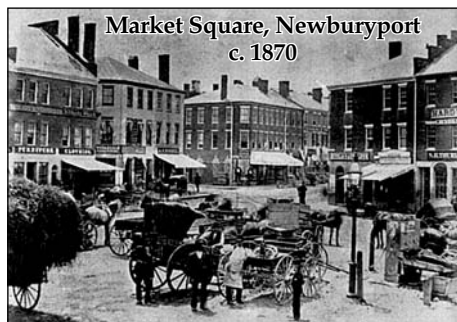
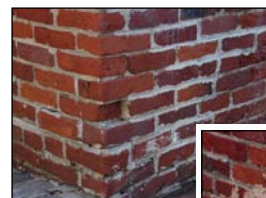


Photo documentation of downtown "trouble spots" in recent years shows clear evidence of deterioration – and evidence of less-than-ideal repairs (... to phrase it gently.) (See the accompanying photos and captions.)

One central issue with downtown Newburyport's brickwork is the unadvised use of Portland cement instead of lime mortar when repointing joints and seams between bricks. Use of proper mortar is critical to the continued survival of historic bricks. In masonry, the mortar not only holds the joints together, but also provides the porosity that releases moisture through



At left is a crude repair attempt with Portland cement, in a photo taken in 2008.

At right, a recent repair made a bad situation worse, as seen in this 2013 photo.



Above, this building only *looks* like it's smiling. Mortar has fallen out, allowing moisture to penetrate into the wall. Subsequent freeze-and-thaw cycles will cause further damage.

a wall or chimney. The guiding principle is that the mortar joints should be "softer" than the material the joints support. Since our city's early 19th-century bricks are softer and more porous than modern bricks, a softer mortar must be used to ensure that moisture can escape. When the much harder Portland cement (a hard-fired combination of limestone, clay, and gypsum introduced in the U.S. from England in the 1870s) is used around older bricks, the moisture is trapped, then forced into the soft brick. Over time this results in the old bricks spalling, or peeling away in chunks. Historic brickwork requires a softer "high-lime" mortar, a mix of ground limestone and sand, which allows both movement without damage and the transmission/release of moisture.

Other ill-advised "repairs" that actually accelerate the deterioration of historic brick include grinding out old mortar joints with

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Two celebrations for Preservation Week 2014: Newburyport's 250th & Historic District's 30th

Preservation Week, the signature annual event of the Newburyport Preservation Trust (NPT) will be Wednesday through Sunday, May 14-18, 2014.

The theme in 2014 is one of multiple anniversary celebration, so NPT members are advised to mark calendars now and get those party hats-and-horns ready. The year 2014 is the 250th anniversary of the town of Newbury's "Waterside" separating into the new town of Newburyport in 1754. The year 2014 also happens to be the 30th anniversary of Newburyport's designation as a National Register Historic District by the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Newburyport's National Register Historic District, comprised of over 2500 contributing buildings when first designated in 1984, extends from the Joppa area of the city's South End to Atkinson Common at the city's North End. Within the 7500-acre district are 10 neighborhood districts.

Each year in the spring, NPT's Preservation Week features a varied program of illustrated lectures, architectural tours, social events, and a closing reception to present the annual Preservation Awards. For the latest information about Preservation Week 2014 as it draws closer, visit www.NbptPreservationTrust.org.

At right, at least this brick wall does not suffer the damage from Portland cement.



The good news is that this earnest repair, with silicon caulk, is reversible.

Deteriorating brickwork ...

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a carbide-tipped grinding wheel instead of by hand, and sandblasting that obliterates the outer “fireskin” layer of old bricks.

Information on proper maintenance of historic masonry is readily available. The Newburyport Historical Commission offers a free downloadable guide on the subject that even includes recommended formulas for mixing lime mortar. (www.cityofnewburyport.com/historical.../nhcs-advisory-on-lime-mortar) Further afield, but just a few mouse-clicks away, are free U.S. government publications on the proper care of historic masonry. (<http://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/2-repoint-mortar-joints.htm>) Awareness of this information – and perhaps carrot-or-stick incentives to use it – will help property owners and contractors stay on the path of responsible stewardship of our city’s assets.

In 2014 the Newburyport Preservation Trust aims to ensure, through advocacy and education, that the preservation of our downtown brickwork receives the attention it deserves. The restoration of our downtown 40-plus years ago became a point of pride in Newburyport and fueled its renaissance that continues today. Our city’s assets should not be allowed to crumble right before us.

– R.W. Bacon

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Newburyport Historical Commission in consultation with Richard Irons, restoration mason. *Masonry: Advisory to Contractors & Homeowners*. Newburyport, Mass.: Historical Commission, City of Newburyport.

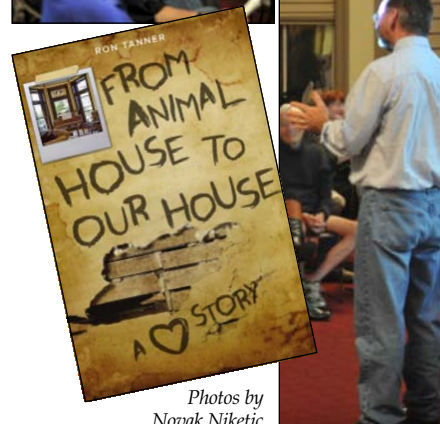
Preservation project author draws SRO crowd – and keeps ‘em laughing

The Newburyport Preservation Trust hosted author/preservationist Ron Tanner on October 17, 2013, co-sponsoring a free program at the Newburyport Public Library: “From Animal House to Our House.”

The crowd heard Tanner’s comical-but-true story of how he and his wife bought condemned property – a wrecked former fraternity house in Baltimore, Md. – and restored it to its original Victorian splendor.

Ron & Jill Tanner knew nothing about fixing up houses when they started, but their work reclaiming the 19th-century inner-city brownstone led to a feature in *This Old House* magazine, and later to Ron Tanner’s book, *From Animal House to Our House: A Love Story*, published in 2012.

Promotion of the book evolved to include Tanner’s comic monologue accompanying his slide show of “hilarious and harrowing” restoration adventures – a subject that resonates with many NPT members.



Photos by Novak Niketic

A few words from JFK about preservation

“I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty, which will protect the beauty of our natural environment, which will preserve the great old American houses and squares and parks of our national past, and which will build handsome and balanced cities for our future.”

– President John F. Kennedy
October 26, 1963

NPT member Michael Sales alerted us to this preservation reference in a speech by the late President John F. Kennedy at Amherst (Mass.) College on October 26, 1963. The

occasion was a ceremony honoring the poet Robert Frost (1874-1963), and the above excerpt is from the President’s remarks on the place of art and culture in American life.

Powder House update

Powder House Park is closed for the season, but work continues on the Historic American Building Survey by Boston Architectural College students. Fall Trails & Sails events were well attended, landscape planning continues, and the warmth generated by the national preservation award from AASLH will last all winter.

Words not necessary ... Built c. 1810. Guttled 2013.

Newburyport National Historic Register District Documentation Photo, 1980.



November 2013 photo.

