

Holmestead porch restoration finished

by Lura Jackson

One of the unique historic homes of Calais is a step closer to its original design following the completion of a major restoration to its front stoop on September 17. Appropriately, the first people to walk up the steps of the Holmestead, designed and built by local architect Asher Bassford in 1850, were descendants of Bassford himself.

The iconic Holmestead was among the projects completed by Bassford after he settled in to Calais and began establishing his trade as a master builder. Bassford designed and constructed several noteworthy buildings in the area, including the Calais Academy of 1851 and a dry goods store in St. Stephen known as the Golden Fleece.



WALKING UP the newly-restored steps of the Holmestead – designed and built in 1850 by Asher Bassford – are Bassford’s descendants, John (left) and Portia (center) Thompson. Greeting them is Jerry LaPointe, vice president of the St. Croix Historical Society, the organization responsible for maintaining the building. (Lura Jackson photo)

Over time, the Holmestead’s porch fell into disrepair, and it was subsequently replaced with a vastly different design. The building’s caretakers, the St. Croix Historical Society, sought to replace the porch to restore it to its original style.

Local craftspeople Joyce Jackson and Patrick Mealey, who have earned a reputation for their quality restorations that replicate historic details as accurately as possible through their business fineartismade, were recruited for the task.

To restore the porch, the fine artists knew they would need either the plans to the house or photographs that would enable them to determine what materials and measurements would be involved in the

recreation of the stoop. With few photos to draw from in the historical society’s records, Jackson reached out to Portia Thompson – Bassford’s great-great-granddaughter – to find out if she could help. After looking through her records, Portia found that “plans those days were written on the back of a shingle.” She did, however, have pictures of the Holmestead in her home in Rhode Island, and she shared those freely.

Portia and her son John are both genealogy enthusiasts, with Portia having long been interested in the family trees that reach back to Calais. Along with Bassford, the Thompsons are related to W.J. Fowler and Marshall N. McKusick, both of whom served as mayors in decades past.

John, who now lives in Massachusetts, is the manager of the abandoned Medfield State Hospital and gives guided historical tours. Seeing the Holmestead in person with the work completed was a treat. “It’s fantastic,” he enthused. “I love this kind of restoration. They don’t build them like this anymore.”

For Jackson and Mealey, the more than two-year process of restoring the steps was a “labor of love,” Jackson says. The project included the complete removal of the porticos, the stripping of several layers of paint, the excavation of a surprise boulder, and the restoration of the original finials. At each step of the rebuilding process, original or near-original materials were used, including fir for the wood.

Underneath the layers of paint on the porch were the original colors, including a rich brown on the steps and stoop and a golden coating along the underside of the roof. The fine artists completed each detail, including restoring the doorbell mechanism – a device that, as it turns, causes a bell hanging inside the entryway to ring. In an era of electronic simulacrams, the distinction of original function is almost startling.

To complete the work, Jackson and Mealey were assisted by several organizations and individuals in Calais. Among those who helped were John Ramsey and the late Lenny Lloyd at Hammond Lumber, David Johnson and the staff of Johnson’s True Value, Steven Brown of Brown’s Tractor Services and the City of Calais.

For Portia, who remembers visiting the area as a young girl, being able to walk up and admire the restored steps of her great-great-grandfather’s design was a grand experience. “It’s wonderful to see. My grandmother would be happy.”