

Door entry restoration reveals treasures

by Lora Whelan

A venerable Eastport doorway is gleaming in a manner that hasn't happened for years. The Richardson house, or known by some as the Buxton house, on the corner of Washington and High streets, has undergone a year-long restoration of its door entry, including its fan and sidelights, with the result an astonishing showcase of decorative leaded glass design from the early 19th century.

When owner Anne Stanley bought the house with her husband in 2014, the door surround caught their eyes, not only for its extraordinary workmanship and unusual design, but also for its state of disrepair. "It was beautiful," Anne Stanley says, but it needed work. Nature's more unfriendly elements could infiltrate the cracks around the door, and had for years, contributing to wood rot and glass to crack. Two years ago Stanley decided it was time to deal with it. A practical New Englander, Stanley says, "It was a project to keep the snow, rain and cold from seeping in." But it was more than that, with Stanley recognizing the historic nature of the house. "I did it to stay warm, but then I realized that I'm also doing it for the City of Eastport. It's part of this place, and it's Eastport's house."

Dr. Erastus Richardson bought the land in September 1822, and shortly after the house was built with a much larger footprint than currently stands. Originally a carriage house and barn extended behind the house along High Street in a very similar vein to the Hobbs house carriage house and barn extension on the corner of Middle and Shackford streets. At some point years later the Richardson house barn was taken down and the house received two full-length dormers to increase the second floor living space. The dormer on the south side reconfigured the interior space of the entryway because of structural concerns, and that was a major element of the restoration project that the Perry-based finerartistmade restoration business undertook to rectify.

Joyce Jackson and Patrick Mealey have worked on a number of the region's historic homes, diving deep into the history behind the houses they work on. "It became apparent right away and then increasingly more so how unique the glasswork is," says Mealey.

A portion of the fan's arch had been covered years ago by framing to accommodate the dormer. Jackson and Mealey took down a portion of the ceiling to find clues to the original entry layout. It had once had a full-height ceiling, allowing for light and space to welcome Dr. Richardson's patients into his practice. It also may have been a love letter to his wife, Mary, and their first child, whom they lost. It's impossible to know exactly why the glass designs were made as they were,

but Jackson and Mealey say that they have never seen one of the elements used to great effect in its design.

Along with symbols found in similar fan and sidelight patterns from the era, such as urns, acanthus leaves, lions' heads and stars, there are 14 hearts curling and curving across the top arch of the fan light. Mealey says of the design, "It is reflecting the love in the house." He doubts it was left up to the builder to come up with the design, although that's speculation on his part. It's rare to know the builder of these old houses, he and Jackson explain, but they know of one other house in Eastport that shares some identical design elements, but not the hearts. The hearts are unique.

Much of the door and surround had to be rebuilt. The wooden arch surrounding the glass was made from one piece, which was and is unusual in woodworking because it cuts across the grain, an unstable approach to use for a piece of wood that provides structural support to the window it is framing. Over time the glass was no longer supported properly. The lead buckled and the glass cracked. In addition many of the soldered decorative elements, such as the stars and acanthus leaves, fell off and were lost. These design elements were not apparent "until we started to deconstruct the whole thing. We could see spots where things were missing," says Jackson. There are still some elements at the bottom of the urns that remain a mystery. "We didn't want to create something, because we really didn't know," adds Mealey.

Almost all of the glass was replaced with antique glass from the finerartistmade stock. Portions of the door were replaced where rot had settled in so badly that, even after months of being in the company's workshop, the wood was still wet. On eBay they found an antique lock from an 1830s house in New Hampshire. "The guy wanted to be sure that the house it was going to was 'worthy,'" says Mealey with a grin. When they sent him photos of the project, the lock was quickly sent their way. They used historic preservation modeling materials to recreate the acanthus leaves and the lions' heads. And while working with one of the original acanthus leaves to create the molded replacements, they came upon traces of gold leaf. Once upon a time all those small ornamental pieces had gleamed as the sun poured on to the south-facing doorway, and Stanley was delighted to see them gleaming again upon completion.

"It was worth it," says Stanley of the year-long dismantling of her entry. She keeps wandering back to it, marveling at the shadows cast on her walls by the leaded hearts, reveling in the designs and the light much as the early inhabitants of the house must have done just about 200 years ago.



BEAMING WITH DELIGHT at the rediscovered beauty of her home's entryway is Anne Stanley, center, with finerartistmade's Patrick Mealey and Joyce Jackson, who spent a year restoring the badly deteriorated glasswork. In the process they found some uniquely beautiful design work in the 200-year-old home's fanlight. (Lora Whelan photo)