

This podcast transcript was created for accessibility purposes using an automated transcription service. It has been reviewed for general accuracy but may contain minor discrepancies. It should not be considered a definitive record of the conversation. If you have any questions, please contact us at podcast@masshist.org.

1154 Boylston Street

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:08

[Sound of door opening] It is a late summer day, and I am on the roof of the Massachusetts Historical Society, looking out onto the Back Bay Fens. Dan Sweeney, the Facilities Manager at the Society's historic home, is telling me about a renovation project that he oversaw.

Dan Sweeney 00:23

I'm going to imagine it was sometime in 2014, when I was up on the roof, and I was looking at the balustrade, you know, just doing a tour of the roof, and it was leaning somewhat, leaning to the outside. So that led me to believe that we might have some issues. And in fact, we did. We got some structural engineers here, and in 2015 we undertook a project to replace all the limestone balustrade right across the roof, produced in Indiana. It matched perfectly the existing limestone. And that was a project completed in 2015 at which time we also replaced the roof.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:18

How was it replaced? Were there cranes? Did they take it out piece by piece?

Dan Sweeney 01:23

It was done mostly by hand. The new stuff was lifted by crane, but there was staging completely around the exterior of the building.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:32

Is that when we had scaffolding up?

Dan Sweeney 01:34

Yeah, yeah, the scaffold, and it was, most of it was done by hand.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:39

Well, all right, so it was leaning a little bit, which is probably not unusual for a building that's that was, at that time, about 110 years old.

Dan Sweeney 01:47

I would say, not unusual. No, you'll get water infiltration underneath and the freeze thaw cycle, and so will, you know, cause problems. And so, it was decided that we would replace right across from end to end. An interesting fact about when we had the structural engineers here, there was a man who came in looked at all our building and, you know, from top to bottom. And he said there was no doubt in his mind that our building was one of the first steel and concrete buildings in the city, without a doubt.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:28

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 02:41

This is Cassie Cloutier, and this is The Object of History. The podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the Society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections. On this episode, we speak with MHS staff members, Dan Sweeney, Anne Bentley, Peter Drummey and James P. Harrison III to learn more about the building that houses the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:27

We are dedicating the fourth season of The Object of History to visiting institutions and organizations that have a connection to the MHS, whether it be through collections that we house or objects that we have loaned to them. In the following episodes, we shall take you around the

greater Boston area to visit some historic sites and structures. But we could not begin such a season without first discussing our very own headquarters, purposefully built for the Historical Society, and opened in 1899. So let us return to the conversation that I had with Dan Sweeney on the roof of 1154 Boylston Street. Well, what are some of the other challenges of running a building that was built in 1898 and moved in in 1899?

Dan Sweeney 04:18

Well, the challenges predominantly are on the exterior. I mean, we had an additional three floors put on in 1970 and since that time, we had a building wide renovation that ended around the year 2001. So, the interior of the building was completely done over at that time. You know, the balustrade is a good example of an exterior deterioration, but you know, it's not a ton of challenges when they do a complete building wide renovation like this. I wasn't here at the time, but the renovation, it was done in stages. I got to believe it was five or six years from concept to completion. I'm very happy to be in charge of the facility here. This job kind of fell on my lap through an outside concern who made me aware of the opening here where I, you know, applied 13 plus years ago, and here I am. It's a very, very nice place to work. There's wonderful people here, and the National Register part of it does make this a little hard to do anything to the exterior of the building because it has to be all granted permission, and there's a permitting process and an acceptance process and so on. So that can be a little difficult at times.

Cassie Cloutier 05:52

We first sit down with Anne Bentley, Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita, and later Peter Drummey, Chief Historian at the MHS, to learn more about the building itself, its vision, its construction and its history.

Anne Bentley 06:07

We have had architects in training from the architectural school down the street come in and go over, and we have shown them behind the scenes, behind the walls, in the roof. Definitely, it's not

just historians who are interested in architectural details, but it's architects who are interested in designing and finding out what goes on behind the scenes in a 19th century structure.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:37

One of the most common questions we get is, what was here before the Historical Society? And I have to say this was built for the Historical Society.

Anne Bentley 06:44

Right. We were part of the brand-new Fells [Fens] Park that [Frederick Law] Olmsted had designed. And the development of the Fens the Fenway started at the other end of it with the Museum of Fine Arts, and with Isabella Stewart Gardner [Museum] and with Simmons College, those were the initial buildings. And when we started building our building in 1897, we were the very first building, at this end. There was nothing around us, and for the first year of our existence, we were the only building in this area. We have a photograph of us in solitary splendor there at the beginning of the Fens. And with the next year that the medical society building next to us, that's our adjoining building on the Fenway side.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:39

Which is now the Boston Conservatory.

Anne Bentley 07:41

Yes, so we moved out here. We started building in 1897 because Charles Francis Adams [Jr.], our president at the time, and his fellow board members were concerned because they had all lived through the Boston fire, and it was only by an enormous stroke of luck, that in 1872 when we had the fire, that our collections were not on site because we had torn down our original building at budding King's Chapel Burial Ground there on Tremont Street, and we were building our new fireproof building, so our collections weren't anywhere near the business district. You know, they

must have been just thanking God that our collections were nowhere near it because the fire was halted a block away from our building. So, they built, and they built to last, but that was 1872. Yeah. And by 1897, we outgrew the building they built very, very quickly. So, they had started looking around and realizing they really had to build a bigger building, and there was no more room for them to build where we were. So, they hired Wheelwright and Haven as our architects, and they designed this Georgian palace. Charles Francis Adams [Jr.] found the lot for us here and purchased it. The building, as I say, we started building in 1897. There were a lot of issues, as there always are, between the architect and the owners. The architects wants to do his thing, the owners want to do their things, and resulting building, while beautiful, was not quite what our ancestors hoped it would be. It was a beautiful building, a stately building, but it really never functioned properly as a library, and from day one, you read in our proceedings of the Mass. Historical Society the lament that we don't have enough space. We need more space. So, it was a not a failure, but it was a challenge to fit all of our square pegs into this round hole and the round rooms literally.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:56

Well, tell us a little bit about the architect?

Anne Bentley 09:58

Edmund March Wheelwright was the Boston city architect at the time, and so he is responsible for a lot of the schools and the fire stations. And in fact, I think it's the one in the South End that has that lovely Roman Tuscan sort of tower that you can see when you're driving the expressway. Just in the middle of all of these buildings, there's this stone tower, and that's actually the hose tower for one of his fire stations because they had canvas hoses that had to dry out between uses so that they didn't have mildewed hoses. And so, they built these long, very tall towers that were also did double duty as scouting towers. They could see where the fires were by the smoke standing on these towers and looking over the city roofs. But he was responsible for a lot of these things, and he had just come out of his civic duty as the city architect and opened his business with [Parkman Blake] Haven. And so we were, I think, one of their first major clients.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:05

Anne was talking about how architects had come to study the design of the building, the construction of the building, the original building.

Peter Drummey 11:12

I think it's interesting because it's a building where there's a much praise and much criticism of it from the very start, and partly because, as originally built, it was only partly complete according to the original plan. It allowed people who perhaps were both unhappy, this is members of the Historical Society moving here from their long-time home on Tremont Street, and they sort of took it out on the building itself. They were very unhappy with the building as originally built. And I think part of that is unhappy with the idea of the building.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:54

We'll talk about the building, but there are a couple of personalities that were responsible for it, right? So, first is Charles Francis Adams, Jr.

Peter Drummey 12:02

He is the person responsible for it. The architect is important to the building, but he is very much an employee of the Historical Society. But essentially, he is the person that Charles Francis Adams [Jr.] selected. And there's some problems with some tension within this relationship, but very much building something according to the wishes of Charles Francis Adams. I call him Charles Francis Adams. It's confusing because he was Charles Francis Adams, but in the convention of the 19th century, at the death of his father, he dropped using 'Junior' in his name. So, under our roof, we give different members of a family with the same name roman numerals to take this into account. So, he's often referred to as short but as 'C.F.A. II' under our roof, but I think he's called Charles Francis Adams, and we'll know we're talking about. Born in 1835, trained as a lawyer, a Civil War soldier, commanded a black cavalry regiment from Massachusetts and the headquarters guard of the

Army of the Potomac. Had a long career in the West in railroads, first as a railroad reformer, and like many reformers, he went on to run the Union Pacific Railroad and pushed out, comes back to Boston and to Quincy, where the family home is in 1890 and devotes himself to school reform, open land preservation, but essentially been a member of the historical society since 1875 but much of that time away, but elected a vice president in 1890 and without giving it too much thought, perhaps knew that he would be in line to become the next president of the Historical Society, but clearly had been thinking very hard about what to do to transform the Historical Society. He thought the first and most important step was to move out of downtown Boston and construct a new, more functional building.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:17

Why?

Peter Drummey 14:19

Why? Because he had a bigger plan behind that, and that was to open the Historical Society to a wider public. It's unfair, but in short, a clubhouse for enthusiastic amateur historians and a previous generation of literary historians to introduce essentially the new history at the end of the 19th century, to the place along one line, but to address a larger public. And it was either possible to go to the Tremont Street home, or desirable in the minds of the people who were members of the Historical Society. The Historical Society was always open to the public, but within the constraint that people would come in see some wonderful artifacts or paintings, and that would be about it. But I think he really thought right from the start, this should be fully open to the public to make use of the collections and draw upon it.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 15:19

So, he wants more of a space for the public to come in, but coming out to the Back Bay at the time, I understand we lost membership because a few people didn't want to come out here.

Peter Drummey 15:28

Yes, but that was not necessarily a bad thing in his mind. The Historical Society had a fixed membership of 100 and a public institution, the membership of the Historical Society was never going to be. He thought having a place that you could invite the public, but also a place you could invite the American Historical Association, very new in the world, to have their annual meeting in Boston, hosted by the Historical Society. That's who he was aiming at, Charles Francis Adams. The tension he had was with the people, the survivors of the previous generation. People that he personally got often got along with well but were sort of obstructions to this larger plan. And I think in some cases, I suspect the fact that they didn't come for symbolic or practical reasons, is probably not the worst thing that happened to the Historical Society. The idea being this inward-looking club was sort of broken in some respects. I think that was harder to accomplish. The new home didn't fix everything. And in fact, Charles Francis Adams, who died in 1915, I don't think he really lived to see fully the kind of place that he wanted to. He ran out of time and energy and money, but the long term history of the Historical Society very much moved in the direction that he was thinking about, and I suspect being a president of the AHA [American Historical Society] was as important to him as being a president of the MHS.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:13

And historically speaking, the Historical Society has moved around. This is our, some would say, sixth or seventh home.

Peter Drummey 17:21

Our Tremont Street home was built on a previous building because they sold the Tremont Street building to the city and moved here two years later, they had essentially storage rooms. They had a place you could look at things. But I think one of our homes was temporary quarters for the collection. In fact, after the first bleak meeting in this space, they didn't hold any more meetings of the Historical Society there. So, I don't think a building where you can't hold your own meetings you can call as your home. But you're right. There's a confusion because some of our homes have been essentially rooms within existing institutions. But we were at the Tontine Crescent on Franklin Street for decades, and then at Tremont Street for most of a century. So, we've had various homes,

but essentially for important lengths of time, we're in two places before we came here. I may be stinting some of these other places important in our history, but most of the history of the Historical Society has been in free space provided by Charles Bulfinch at the Tontine Crescent and this building, and then another newer building built in the same location on Tremont Street by King's Chapel Burial Ground.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 18:40

It's still a pretty grand building!

Peter Drummey 18:43

Impressed and pleased many of the people who saw it, and as it was described in the newspaper accounts, and it was all over newspapers. It's amazing how much coverage there was of the opening this building and early meetings here 'An Ornament Upon Boston.' And I think that's probably how it's been seen. But it's sort of interesting to know there's a back story going on that this is, in some respects, being built for different purposes, and in some respects, never built according to that original purpose.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 19:23

If you want to learn about a building, it is often useful to ask its caretaker, James Harrison, better known as 'Harry,' has been keeping the MHS building sparkling for decades. We chatted with him about his experiences. So, what do you do for the Historical Society?

James 'Harry' Harrison 19:40

I keep this place looking well. I keep the bathrooms spotless. You can actually go in there and eat in there if you wanted to. Well, I used to keep the front, but I don't have time now, because I only work three hours a day, so we have George handle the yard work and stuff now, but I used to do all that. I used to love that, cutting the hedges, hosing down the front. I used to be crazy and go out on these windows and take a board and walk across. People would say, 'Harry what are you crazy, man?' Yeah I stopped that. Back then we did everything. We had huge tables on the first floor, like

six of them, and you had to slide them on the side in order to move them around. It took two people. But if you're going to lift it, it took four so thank God, things have changed, because these tables ain't nothing, but these other tables were like, I guess, around 14 feet long and about 12 feet wide. That's how wide and big they were. So, you had to turn them on, then you had to move them in these other rooms when you're setting up stuff. So, oh man, I'm glad we got a lot of changes done, because this building was obsolete.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:47

You said the building was obsolete. So, tell us about the building when you first got here.

James 'Harry' Harrison 20:50

It was like, scary. It was like a house, basically, except for the front, the first and second floor. The rest of the floors going up was all the shelves, nothing but shelves, all the way up. On the fourth floor, one of the fourth floors was broken up between three and four, and they used to have a glass floor you could walk on, and that's where Chris used to do those glass portraits. He used to be in charge of all that, and then they discontinued that. So, they tore that third floor down, basically, because this building is huge, we could have added another floor if we wanted to. But, like I said, it was scary. All the Adam's family was in this gate, like, like a just a regular gate, and that was on the third floor, and the bathroom was really tiny. I mean, it was just maybe one person, but it was all marble and stuff and, like, it was scary in the morning, man, because you could hear stuff, like moving around and, like I said, you didn't know the building, this was like, oh my God.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:50

You say there were sounds in the morning?

James 'Harry' Harrison 20:54

The buildings are still settling around here, because all this is filled in land, dirt. It was weird, man and you could feel the vibration of trucks going by because them cobblestones underneath it, that thing out there, you know? But yeah, man, it was like, oh my God.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:10

I heard a story that you used to throw the shovels off the roof after you finished...

James 'Harry' Harrison 22:13

We would do shoveling, there was so much snow up on the roof we was afraid it was going to cave in, right? Because Peter's office used to be up there in that little round room, and all of a sudden we decided shoveling. Then all of a sudden, we said alright, it's over. All of a sudden you see one shovel go over [boom]. Then [boom, boom, boom] and they all landed in the yard, right? I said, suppose somebody would have been down there, but yeah, that was like, oh God. And then when we had that big leak. We was lucky man, because it was came from this end of the building, and lucky it didn't hit the portraits. But we had this much water, we had to come in with the vacs and, I mean, this was overnight, so they went into this wall on the other side of the hallway here they opened up the wall. I mean, you could actually put me inside the wall. That's how much space you got. And, I mean, man, they had to run all new pipes. That was a job and a half. And that took, like, almost a month. And they put in all new pipes upstairs. That's when they decided to get rid of that other room up there. One time we had a flood in the back of the door, the elevator was like two feet of water. That's how much water came into the building, man, and we had to use the wet vacs and stuff. Then we still had to wait for them to come and clear that drain out there because when they were doing the construction, when they washed all that cement, it went down there, and you know, it's gonna get hot. So that was another thing that was a pain. But like I said, there's been so many changes in this building because, like I said, man, all this, we never had it. This was long overdue, man, people don't even know we're here, unless you walk by and come in. So, like I said, so many changes for the good. I mean, people know what the building's all about. And I brag too. So, it's like people know me. They're coming in, 'Harry sent us.' You know. So, it's like, like my home, and I can hide in this building. You'd never find me, believe me, not that I would want to.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:14

So, you've seen many exhibits that have been set up. Did you have a favorite?

James 'Harry' Harrison 24:18

The one I like was the coins and then the one they had with the furniture, excellent show. You can never go wrong with that. People come in because that was a good show. We've furniture is so beautiful, man, it's upstairs, but yeah, man, it's like this building, to me, is like my second home.

Cassie Cloutier 24:38

Let us return to our conversation with Peter and Anne to learn about their own experiences at 1154 Boylston Street.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:48

You've also had to protect the building on occasion by spending the night here?

Peter Drummey 24:54

When we did a very large renovation now, many years ago, there were really old systems, electrical system, fire alarm systems that were replaced, and tying these in, setting the alarms up so they worked, was challenging. So, there was a time when we couldn't get our fire alarm system functional and reporting on into the evening. And at some point it became the everyone was just working on the project was just exhausted and it was no longer profitable. And to his very good sense, the then director [of the Massachusetts Historical Society], Bill Fowler, sent everybody home and it was, I think that was the first time I stayed overnight here just to be warm body present. The interesting thing about it was that I remember the next day, it didn't occur to me they just worked like through the night, even if it was sitting watching, being watchful. So, I went home and got changed and came back to work, because that just seemed like the normal course of things. At the same time, there was a burglar alarm on whether we have a door where you can go out onto our roof, and the burglar alarm went off. And the police are very overnight are very impressive, so I brought two

police officers up to the roof, and as we went out on the roof, I turned to say to them, 'Don't let the door close,' because, in fact, we had changed the locks on the roof doors and I didn't have the new key. I heard the door clip shut, so in the middle of the night, I was on the on the roof. This was a long time ago, so it wouldn't affect anyone now, but it occurred to me that this was really embarrassing for the police officers to be locked on the roof of the building that they were expecting, and a member of our staff lived close by and had access to the building. So, I called him. Thank God cell phones were reasonably common at the time, but I remember, I think he thought I was playing a practical joke, because I think he laughed, and I think he went back to sleep. So I called him again, and by that time, I remember saying to reassure the people who were on the roof with me said, 'Well, he lives right over on Massachusetts Avenue, close to the Historical Society,' but they said, 'Massachusetts Avenue,' and Massachusetts Avenue is very long and runs through many towns, 'in Arlington?' They couldn't imagine someone coming a few blocks and taking so long to get here, and they were very anxious about their circumstance, so that I was waiting for him to come and thinking these people are going to try to climb down off the roof, which is not going to be a happy circumstance to be in. The roof has been visited by almost all members of the staff at one time or the other, because in our long run of winning championships, we've had quite a few celebratory parades come by, starting at Fenway Park, but coming by the Historical Society, one after the other. We had a good run of those, famously starting in 2004 but since then, there have been many a parade in front of the historical society and from out on our front steps, it's interesting, the view from the roof is really quite spectacular.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 28:24

Well, there must be some other memories of wandering the space, learning all the nooks and crannies when you first started here?

Anne Bentley 28:35

When I started here, Eddie Bligh was our janitor, and Julius Prince, they were our two maintenance men, and Eddie and his wife, Amy Bligh, were a team, and Amy was our stacks gopher. She was the one who would page the material from the stacks for the reading room. And she was really good at

finding lost things. You know, if it's put back in the wrong spot, it's lost until it's found again. And she could bird dog those things. She could find anything for you. But they lived, actually in the apartments across the street. After hours, when they were much younger, they would be in the building cleaning at night, and Eddie always swore that he'd be dusting the floor in the stacks the fourth floor. This is before the addition was put on, so it just the original building, and he would hear footsteps in the room above him, he swore. And I guess some other people have heard that. We had an intern who had a glorious voice, and we would hear her singing hymns while she was working in the stacks. So, it's just kind of weird to be wandering and all of a sudden have this glorious voice singing. For a while there we would, as a security measure, we'd leave our alarms on, but we turn our electricity off at night because they were worried about fires. And I was here on a Saturday working in the stacks, back in the coins, and Peter didn't know I was in the building, and all of a sudden, all the lights went out, all the electricity went out, and this was in the days before we had phones, so I had absolutely no lights. So, I had to find my way out of the stacks and down the elevator which, thank God, still worked. And I thought, oh my god, I'm going to get to the basement. I'm going to have to set off the alarm to get out of this building. Thankfully, Peter was there, but I thought I was going to have a heart attack. Oh, my God, that's when I discovered, I'm claustrophobic. To be in this building when there's not a light anywhere is terrifying. I know Peter spent nights in this building for because of various issues, whether nature or manmade, he might have heard things, but it's a wonderful building. It's just not a useful library, but it is an elegant building. It's lovely, and it is kind of intimidating to people who walk in off the street. And so, all the time I've been here, we've tried to figure out ways to make it a little less intimidating. I don't think it helped when in what 1973 we were given the chandelier that we have in the front home, that's not part of the building. That was an Irish chandelier that was given to us on terms that we not electrify it. Moving the reception desk from the interior of the building out more towards the door, at least, gives you a human presence that makes it seem a little more warm and welcoming. Just the contrast between the building and the grand entrance and the warmth and the assistance and the enthusiasm of the staff in the reading room such a huge contrast that I think a lot of our first time readers are very, very surprised and very, very thankful to know that the staff is so welcoming.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:00

Well, the building's also been used for films and television.

Anne Bentley 32:03

It has been. It has been.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:04

Do you remember any of those?

Anne Bentley 32:05

Yeah, well, I was usually in the basement at that point doing, you know, in the lab, doing work. So, I didn't get to hang over the balconies. I just know that the filming necessitates a lot of window cleaning afterwards, because of all the filters they have to put on the windows. It's not everybody's cup of tea to have the film crews in.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:27

Well, it is an elegant building.

Anne Bentley 32:29

It is an elegant building. I feel privileged to have been able to work in it and show it to people who want to see it and provide information about it. It may not satisfy everybody, but it has stood the test of time, and it is still glorious, just beautiful, beautiful building.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:48

Still an ornament to Boston.

Anne Bentley 32:50

Still an ornament to Boston. Most definitely.

Cassie Cloutier 32:54

[Outro music fades in] To look at the items discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast. The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank the following staff members at the MHS, Dan Sweeney, Facility Manager, Anne Bentley, the Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita, Peter Drummey, Chief Historian, James P. Harrison III, custodian, and Sam Hurwitz Podcast Producer. Music in this episode is Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.