

Skowhegan History House

History House Association, Inc.

Archive Article

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Curator's Corner

***When it comes to stovepipe hats, cannon balls
and beavers, kids say what they really think!***

*By Lee Granville,
History House Curator*

Perhaps the most satisfying part of my job as History House Curator is the opportunity to host groups of students on their annual field trips. Every spring and fall, bunches of eager faced youngsters come tumbling off their yellow buses to line up at the front door, impatient to get on with their visit. After reinforcing their teachers admonitions not to touch anything", I lead the group through the mid-19th Century cottage explaining how life may have been for people who lived in our town 150 years ago.

I have found that actually touching an artifact can sometimes make a bigger impression on young students than a lecture of many words. I've designated certain sturdy items as "handle with care, please". The first of these on the tour is the "Benedict Arnold" canteen on the kitchen hearth. It is unlikely that General Arnold himself owned the heavy lead-copper canteen but it certainly was dropped by one of his soldiers on their ill-fated march to Quebec City in September of 1775. Feeling the weight of the empty vessel and imagining how it would have dragged on a soldier's neck when filled with water and suspended by the still attached narrow brown twine makes it easy to understand why it was abandoned.

Next on the list of touchable items is a small, Revolutionary War era cannon ball, about the size of a baseball but weighing four pounds. I pass it around with care, cautioning about dropping on toes. On one occasion, momentarily distracted by a question, I turned to find a fourth grader holding it over her head in a statue of liberty pose. She slowly brought it down to shoulder height saying, "Boy, I bet this would really hurt if it came down and hit me on the head!"

I suspect that this may have been the first time she had visualized the actual impact and resulting pain of being struck by something so hard and heavy. This was not at all like the sensation in a video-game episode where the "bad guys" get blown away and simply disappear.

As we progress through the cottage and museum, we handle some lamps for burning whale oil, we see some ladies combs made from tortoise shell and try on an Abe Lincoln era stovepipe hat made from beaver felt (pressed fur).

I tell the students how people thought the new lamps were good news because they burned so much brighter than candles.

"But" I say, "These were bad news for somebody too. Does anybody know who?"

The kids usually look blank. "The whales," I tell them, "had to give up their lives so that people could have whale oil."

This usually elicits comment such as "yuck" or "gross" as they realize what I mean. By the time we get to the combs, all I need to say is, "these were good news for the ladies who wore them in their hair. Were they bad news for somebody?"

By now the group has a better idea what is coming and, after some discussion as to "what is a tortoise, anyway?" they agree it was indeed bad. Finally, we reach the tall hats in the upstairs closet; when I mention they were made from beaver felt they chorus without prompting, "bad news for the beavers!"

Is it my intention to turn these kids into pacifists or rabid environmentalists? Certainly not! I'd just like to leave them with the impression that, historically, many forms of human progress have spawned unforeseen consequences. We can sometimes anticipate future problems by learning lessons from the past.

The last upstairs room on our tour is the guest bedroom. One of the fixtures is a commode holding a chamber pot. A young lady named 'Becca has no idea what such an item was used for. Some of her classmates do know, however, and from a whispered conversation, with much giggling, 'Becca's voice comes out clearly.

I'd have to *GO* in *THAT*?" she says in total disbelief. She is obviously still horrified by the very concept as her class finishes its visit and goes back to the waiting bus.

About a week later I received a welcome packet of letters from the group, thanking me for the visit. My favorite was from 'Becca. Obviously, she had given the matter more thought and decided how she would have dealt with the situation had she lived in an earlier time.

"Dear Mr. Granville", she wrote, "I had a great time. Thank you for having us. I loved the music box because its song is so pretty. I also liked the chamber pot. But, if I had to *GO*, I would *HOLD* it! I will come again if I can.

THANK YOU A LOT!!!
Sincerely, 'Becca"