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Abbott Lowell Cummings DuPont Award Winner 1998

BY LAURA BEACH

SOUTH DEERFIELD, MASS. -- On a quiet street in South Deerfield, Abbott Lowell Cummings tends to the 40-foot herbaceous border leading to his home, a chocolate-brown cape with apple-green trim. A sash of gold and purple irises is in bloom right now. By summer it will be replaced by bright red poppies.

Intensive cultivation of a few choice varieties, culminating in a breathtaking and progressively varied display, suits Cummings, an architectural historian who has spent half a century toiling the fields of New England's domestic culture.

Teacher, scholar, and museum professional by equal measure, Cummings will be honored at Winterthur on June 20 when the Wilmington, Del., museum presents him with the Henry Francis du Pont Award. The evening ceremony will follow a day-long seminar on "The House and Its Surroundings." Several colleagues and former students - Earle Shettleworth, Christopher Monkhouse, Edward S. Cooke, Jr, Richard Candee, Jane C. Nylander, Bernard L. Herman, Brock Jobe, and Richard C. Nylander among them - will celebrate the historian's contributions. The day's events are funded in part by Ronald Bourgeault and the Croll Foundation.

"This year we are honoring one of America's best teachers in architectural history and the decorative arts," says Brock Jobe, deputy director for collections, conservation, and interpretation at Winterthur. "His enthusiasm and knowledge are remarkable. His teaching and lecturing skills are unrivaled. His greatest strengths are most apparent in the field."

Cummings chose the road less traveled, enjoying a more than usual number of scenic diversions on the way to his destination, teaching and the study of New England architecture. Throughout his professional life he has assumed unexpected responsibilities. To each post he has in turn brought unusual dimension.

"This represents a new but very appropriate direction for us," Jobe says of Winterthur's choice. Previous recipients of the du Pont Award - Bertram and Nina Fletcher Little, Pamela Cunningham Copeland, Frank Horton, Alice Winchester, Clement E. Conger, Wendell Garrett, and the Sack family - have all been involved, in one way or another, in building collections.

"Abbott is much more of a pure academic than the others," Jobe continues, "but an academic with a love of history, architecture, and the way in which decorative arts, or household furnishings, relate to the buildings where they lie. He has a remarkable track record."

It is tempting to say that Abbott Lowell Cummings may be known by his name - assured in its footing, stately in its cadence, a triumvirate of New England traditionalism. He has lived a life marked by clarity and conviction, the underpinning of which was early and unwavering self-knowledge.

As an adolescent, Cummings joined the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, where he later worked for nearly three decades. Before he turned 20, he was a fixture at the town clerk's office in Southington, Conn., tracing the titles of Eighteenth Century structures once in his family.

In his June 20 remarks at Winterthur, the historian will

acknowledge the individuals who most shaped his life: his grandmother, Lucretia Amelia Stow Cummings; Elmer Keith; and Clarence Ward. From these three he learned to investigate, record, and transmit.

Born in St Albans, Vt., in 1923 and educated at the Hoosac School in New York, Cummings spent winters with his parents in Bennington, Vt., and summers with his grandmother in Southington. "At a personal level, my grandmother had as much influence as anyone on my life. She was a scientist by training, a Vassar graduate who had studied astronomy. She drilled into me the need to be very factual. I also fell right in with all her genealogical interests," the scholar says.

Elmer Keith, a Wallingford, Conn., antiquarian and collector, taught Cummings to deconstruct a building, forcing it to yield up centuries of secrets buried beneath repairs and later additions. "That is where Abbott is at his best," notes Edward S. Cooke, Jr, the Charles Montgomery associate professor of American decorative arts at Yale. "He goes into a house, scrambles all over it, bubbles up with ideas, inspires his students to look and think. It's an extraordinary quality he has."

"It never really occurred to me that I wouldn't teach," says Cummings, who studied American art and architectural history at Oberlin College before receiving his doctoral degree from Ohio State University in 1950.

Clarence Ward, best known for his writings on French medieval building, was his academic mentor. "I wanted to model myself on him. He was an excellent lecturer. He inspired you to pick a subject and do something with it. You felt that he had singled you out as the very best person to tackle a project. He had a real feel for his students - motivating them, inspiring them, and all the rest of it," Cummings says.

Having written his thesis on Seventeenth Century Massachusetts buildings and his dissertation on the Federal architect Asher Benjamin, Cummings took a teaching post at Antioch College in 1948. His memorable first class included Eliot Fremont-Smith, later editor of *The New York Times Book Review*; Bob Vogel, who would become chief curator of industrial history at the Smithsonian Institution; Mike Spock, son of the legendary pediatrician and later a director of the Children's Museum in Boston; and Cory Scott, better known today as the widow of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King.

Cummings had been at Antioch for several years when the Korean War broke out. As it gained momentum in 1951, schools began cutting staff. Out of work and with a folder full of rejection letters from universities across the country, Cummings reluctantly entered the museum field, but at the highest level. His first job was as an assistant curator in the American Wing at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

"I didn't have a strong grounding in the decorative arts, but they apparently liked me," says Cummings, for whom the offer was one of series of serendipitous successes. His starting salary was \$4,200. "I made a sacrifice which would have been unconscionable had I married and had a family," he now acknowledges.

Though he remained at the



American Wing for four years, the historian dreamed of returning to his first love. The opportunity presented itself in 1955, when Bertram K. Little, director of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, asked Cummings to join SPNEA as assistant director and editor of *Old-Time New England*. He succeeded Little as director in 1970.

Bert and Nina Fletcher Little, scholarly collectors who shaped an entire generation of dealers, had a profound influence on Cummings, as well. "Nina was one of the most extraordinary women many of us have ever known," he says. "She made it perfectly clear to dealers just what it was that she collected. She wasn't interested in having them parade a lot of undocmented stuff under her nose. Over and beyond that she was a warm person. When you went to the Littles' home for the weekend, it was full of all the people you loved best."

"Bert and Nina's relationship is one which I have thought about many times," he continues. "I was a frequent guest in their house. Bert and I would be going off on a field trip and he would say, 'Come out for dinner beforehand. We'll leave right after breakfast.' Many times I would come downstairs in the morning to find Bert and Nina deep in conversation. It was the most loving, fascinating, man-wife relationship I have ever known."

Founded in 1910, SPNEA today owns and operates 35 historic house museums in five states, ranging from the circa 1654 Coffin House in Newbury to the 1938 Gropius House in Lincoln, Mass. "The principal work of all directors since my day has been judiciously cutting that organization down to size," says Cummings, who helped devise a way to discard properties that were draining institutional resources.

"You can quietly deaccession a painting or pewter mug, but you can't dispose of a house without the whole membership being up in arms," he explains. With preservation attorney Albert B. Wolfe, Cummings found a legal solution that allowed SPNEA to sell properties but impose restrictions on future occupants. "It immediately satisfied the entire dissident element in the society," the former director concludes.

At the same time, Cummings began expanding SPNEA's capabilities. "When Abbott came here there were just a few people with a collection of buildings and objects to take care of. The whole museum field was beginning to be professionalized, and the public was demanding much more from museums. Under Abbott, the staff increased dramatically and we started our consulting services, which has grown into our conservation department," says Richard Nylander, chief

curator and director of collections, on SPNEA's staff for 31 years.

Cummings' contributions are perhaps best reflected in the properties themselves. "He has always been fascinated in the connection between furnishings and buildings," remarks Brock Jobe. "Several buildings - Codman, Gropius, and Wheeler - came with their contents. They were wonderful architectural statements, but their value was enhanced by the survival of their original furnishings. Abbott has always seen the importance of preserving the total environment."

"He ushered in the new philosophy to preserve intact and not restore," notes Jane Nylander, SPNEA's current president. In 1969, SPNEA acquired Codman House, which came with a 9,000-object collection and a layered history. "Codman House was so overwhelming in what had happened to it that the only way to show it was as received," reflects Richard Nylander. "Abbott loved to learn how a building began, but he had great respect for later additions."

Cummings' exacting scholarship dramatically shaped the 1796 Harrison Gray Otis House in Cambridge. "Abbott had just reviewed all the samples of original wallpapers and was anxious to get them reproduced," Richard Nylander recalls. "In the end, it was so much brighter and more garish than other Federal period restorations. People were shocked."

"The Gedney House in Salem, Mass., is the one to understand him by," insists Ned Cooke, who, like Brock Jobe, first met Cummings while touring New England with classmates from Winterthur. "The Gedney House is not about furnishing, its about framing and how one peels off and reveals evidence. If you want to recreate an environment where you see Abbott getting most excited, the Gedney House is it."

In stark evolutionary terms, the next turning point in Cummings' life was the gradual reawakening of his desire to teach. At SPNEA, he had acquired a reputation as a brilliant lecturer, but he yearned to do more. Having served as an instructor in Louis Jones' summer program in American material culture at the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, N.Y., Cummings began imagining a similar "school without walls" that would tap the talents of Boston's architectural and decorative arts community. All he lacked was the support of a degree-granting institution.

When a Harvard colleague expressed little enthusiasm for the plan, Cummings confided his ambitions to a friend, John Armstrong of Boston University. Founded in 1971 by Cummings, Armstrong and David Hall, Boston University's New England and American Studies Program celebrated its 25th anniversary in 1996. "Though it never fully became the university without walls that I had imagined, it hatched a wonderful program in historic preservation and has settled down comfortably," Cummings says.

"The Boston University experience saved my life, and that brings us to the final chapter," notes the scholar, who has spoken for nearly two hours without misplacing so much as a comma. In 1981, Cummings received a call from Yale University professor Jules Prown inviting him to teach a course in New England architectural

history in the spring of 1982. The request led to Cummings' 1984 appointment as the first Charles F. Montgomery professor of American decorative arts, a position he held until his retirement in 1992.

Ned Cooke, who succeeded the architectural historian as Yale's only professor of American decorative arts, believes that Cummings slid easily into the role first defined by Montgomery, who died in 1978 after a long and colorful career as a dealer, curator, and teacher. "The field has changed from one that is connoisseurship-driven to one that is pursuing multidisciplinary work," says Cooke, who strives to perpetuate Montgomery's connoisseurship and Cummings' archaeological interests while introducing more contextual and theoretical aspects of study.

Though his first ambition was to teach, Cummings' legacy may be the dozens of books and scholarly articles he has produced since 1953. "He was adamant about documentation. I think he opened a whole group of people up to early buildings, and early building techniques, through his writing," says Richard Nylander.

Cooke, who has studied Cummings' work more closely than most, says three publications stand above all others: *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay, 1625-1715*, published in 1979; *Bed Hangings: A Treatise on Fabrics And Styles In The Curtaining Of Beds, 1650-1850*, compiled in 1961 following a symposium Cummings organized with Nina Little; and *Rural Household Inventories: Establishing The Names, Uses and Furnishings of Rooms In The Colonial New England Home, 1675-1725*, published in 1964. "There is still so much respect for his integrity," Cooke says, noting the author's straightforward, stone-by-stone approach.

In the years since his retirement from Yale, Cummings' routine has changed little. He spends much of each day writing, and is at the moment completing a family genealogy. The massive study will be published by the New England Historic Genealogical Society, one of the dozens of professional organizations on whose board he has served. As co-founder and first president of the American Vernacular Architectural Forum, he continues to inspire others. In return, scholarly forums - such as SPNEA's biennial Abbott Lowell Cummings Symposium in Material Life in Early New England - have been established in his honor.

"Abbott is always willing to listen. He is cautious about overstatement, and he instills that in others. He is consistent. When he disagrees, there is a gentleness about it that makes you feel that he has given it thought. He doesn't intimidate. He encourages people to open their minds," says Susan McGowan, who frankly acknowledges Cummings' critical contribution to Family & Landscape: Deerfield Homelots From 1671, the book she wrote with Amelia F. Miller, published in 1996.

The wilderness that backs up to Cummings' Deerfield home is gradually being subdued. Each morning, this persistent observer of life clears, plants, and tends his beds. Finches, hummingbirds, and bluebirds - attracted by the feeders he has set up around his property - keep him company. Slowly, structure is appearing in the inchoate green, one which Cummings delights in shaping.

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