



The Alden Kindred of America, Inc. · Alden House Historic Site

This short history of the Alden property was written by Curator James W. Baker, and is a revised version of that published in *Alden House History: A Work in Progress* (Duxbury, 2006).

The Alden Kindred of America and Charles L. Alden

The increasing interest in colonial history and genealogy in the 1890s that led to the establishment of the Mayflower Descendant societies also inspired the founding of the Alden Kindred. Miss A. Ella Alden of Middleboro conducted a correspondence campaign with as many Aldens as she could identify, urging them to attend a family reunion on September 11, 1901. About 150 people were at that first gathering in Highland Park in Avon, Massachusetts, when the decision was made to create a permanent organization, the Alden Kindred of America. The second reunion in 1902 was at the Alden house in Duxbury at the invitation of John W. Alden. In 1905, the Alden Kindred began a discussion about acquiring the property, which now consisted of about 2.7 acres. Nothing changed after the Kindred purchased the house in 1907, and John W. and Sylvia Alden continued to live there until 1920. John W. Alden worked as a gate tender for the railroad for many years. He had an avid interest in music, and even published popular musical compositions. He taught his children to play different instruments. “Sometimes while the family still occupied the Alden House, the place would jump with music. [John’s daughter] Sylvie, her dad and her brothers having another of their “jazz” sessions with piano, drums, flute and clarinet.” (Patriot Ledger, Nov. 23, 1977)

Charles L. Alden, treasurer and founding member of the Alden Kindred, never lost the enthusiasm for the Alden property that had inspired him to try to buy it in 1883. It was he who arranged the purchase from John T. Alden’s guardian. In 1909 he reported to the AKA Executive Committee that repairs to the shingles, corner boards and blinds had cost \$135. In November 1919, in anticipation of the Pilgrim Tercentenary celebration, the Executive Committee recorded:

Mr. Charles L. Alden reported that he had personally bought back from the Wright estate thirty-six acres of the original grant of land belonging to John Alden. Mr. Alden also reported that he had, at his own expense, restored the Alden House; that he had calcimined, painted and fixed up the house. Had old-fashioned brick tiles placed at the back door. One window was put in the pantry and the L roof covered with fireproof paper.

In October 1921, Charles was given a twenty-year lease on the house to continue improvements and manage it, at one dollar a year. He guaranteed that “the members of the Alden Kindred of America, Inc., individually or collectively shall have the right of entrance or assembly upon said premises at any time without charge or cost.” John W. and Sylvia Alden had moved out and Charles set about to make the



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house a public museum. Two sisters ran an antique business out of the house for a short time before the museum was ready.

Over the following few decades Mr. Alden spent an estimated \$20,000 of his own money on the property. He refurbished the rooms and installed antiques from his own collection alongside the few pieces owned by the Kindred, as the John W. Alden family had few really old pieces of furniture left when they moved out. Charles L. Alden's exhibition philosophy was to present the house as "a home that, from the first, has been inhabited by successive generations of the same family. The characteristic furnishings of each room thus appear to represent the best of what a continuing family of well-to-do people have accumulated in the course of three and a half centuries during which they have lived there" (Edward S. Alden *Alden Homestead*, 1932, p. 50), rather than "restore" the structure to some hypothetical original look that was common practice with historic colonial houses of the time.

He did restore one room, the old "middle kitchen," on the advice of Wallace Nutting, the contemporary expert on historic house restoration and exhibition, in 1924. When this kitchen, built by Colonel John Alden, became obsolete with the addition of the kitchen ell, the old fireplace was boarded up and the room turned into two dining rooms, although the partition was apparently removed by John W. Alden. At Nutting's suggestion Charles opened up the old fireplace and restored the external flue of the kitchen chimney that had been removed above the roof level. He also painstakingly removed the paint, plaster and wallpaper in the room to try to achieve the look of a kitchen during John and Priscilla's lifetime. At that time everyone believed the entire house had been built in 1653. Unfortunately, as this room was actually early 18th century, it never had the bare wood typical of 17th century rooms. The removal of the original gray 18th century paint, plaster and lathe rendered the kitchen an early 20th century impression of a 17th century room, although it was nothing of the sort. We are fortunate; therefore, that Charles resisted the contemporary fashion of restoration for the rest of the house.

Charles L. Alden brought running water into the ell, closed off the old well, and added a modern bathroom on the northwest side of the house. He had the old house wired for electricity, with careful directions that the wires and outlets should be inconspicuous. As most of the walls were a single thickness, he installed the outlets in the floors and hid the wiring along the beams. There was also a toilet in the house itself, just above the new bathroom in a corner of the Workroom. In 1923 in an attempt to recoup some of his investment, he built a number of hencoops and a log cabin tea room near the house. In those days everyone "knew" Pilgrims lived in log cabins, and ornamental tea rooms were the fashionable alternative to the standard American "greasy spoon" lunch counter. Charles' son Arthur and Arthur's wife Marguerite (who researched and wrote an Alden House guide book) managed the museum and attended to the summer visitors for many years.



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Mr. and Mrs. Charles L. Alden sometimes stayed in the upper westerly rooms in the summer. These were never shown in early publicity shots or visited by guests (which was also true during John W. Alden's residency), and the only interior door lock can still be seen on "Henry's Room" today. In 1932 during the Great Depression, Arthur Alden lost his Ford dealership and home in Brockton, so his father allowed him and his family to move into the ell of the old house for a year or two. They used the bedrooms in the original house (but had to clear their things out when visitors arrived in the summer). In 1933, Charles built a simple frame structure as an "assembly hall" for the Alden membership and turned the log cabin into a summer residence.

Charles L. Alden renewed his lease for another 20 years in 1938, and the Arthur Aldens continued to manage the museum after his father's death in 1943. This arrangement continued until the mid-1950s, when new officers in the Alden Kindred decided it was not satisfactory. Some members were apparently upset with the gift shop located in the Great Room and other perceived problems. The Kindred, which as an organization had declined in membership during the Depression and World War II, was enjoying a resurgence in 1953 or '54 when the idea of taking over the management of the house was proposed. In 1955, President Joseph P. Dring notified "the Alden heirs" (as the Kindred referred to Charles L. and Bessie Alden's children) that the lease was invalid and they should plan to vacate the property. Charles L. Alden, Jr., pointed out that the greater part of the contents of the house actually belonged to them, and offered to sell the furnishings to the Alden Kindred at a considerable discount for \$5,000. This offer was declined, as the Kindred ascertained that repairs on the house itself would take up all their funds. The contents of the house were sold at an auction conducted by local auctioneer Louis Cook in October 1955.

Under New Management

The Alden Kindred then took direct charge for the first time. The wallpaper was removed throughout the now-empty house, the walls sprayed with disinfectant, and painted white. Some reshingling was done on the roof, and the plumbing and electrical wiring in the main house was removed. The hencoops, garage and bathroom addition were torn down. The house was jacked up, the front sill replaced and the front entrance way rebuilt. A trumpet vine that was tearing away shingles was cut back. The Kindred also applied for tax-exempt status for the house, which they received in 1956. The leading figure in this stage of the Alden House's history was Helen Delano Howe. Acting as museum benefactor and moving force behind the changes that occurred, Mrs. Howe was instrumental in overseeing the restoration and refurbishing of the house, personally underwriting various acquisitions, repairs and projects.

The Alden House was closed to the public for these repairs but opened in time for the arrival of Mayflower II in June 1957. The new room exhibits were sparse at first, and instead of Charles L. Alden's concept of a house showing continuous occupation, a restored date of circa 1810 was decided upon.



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Although the rationale is not made explicit, this appears to be a date for which antiques could still be gotten cheaply enough and in sufficient quantity to make refurnishing feasible. A steady stream of artifact donations came in from Alden family members and soon enough antiques were acquired to replace those that had been sold in the auction. The house opened to the public with local high school girls as guides.

The most significant contemporary project was the archaeological excavation (April – October, 1960) of the “First Site” conducted by Roland Wells Robbins. Although the general location of the earlier house was known, it wasn’t until Mr. Robbins conducted his excavation that the exact placement and configuration was discovered. Robbins’ very thorough survey greatly increased the understanding of the earlier dwelling’s design while the artifactual remains cast more light on the Aldens’ possessions and material culture. Robbins’ findings were published in his account of the excavation, *Pilgrim John Alden’s Progress* (1969) and plans were made to stabilize the old foundation as an Alden memorial.

Further restoration of the existing house was undertaken in the 1960s. The unused chimney was touched up and capped with stainless steel in 1965. The old woodshed on the northeast corner of the house was removed and the entryway turned into a “butt’ry” or pantry. The justification for this new little room is unknown. Perhaps as both the Winslow House in Marshfield and the Harlow House in Plymouth had a room filled with early household gadgets called a “buttery”, it was felt the Aldens should have one as well. This project took a number of years, and the “butt’ry” was finally completed in 1969. Charles L. Alden’s log cabin, which was in a perilous state of disrepair as well as an embarrassment from the realization that Pilgrims didn’t use log cabins after all, was torn down in 1971—except for the caretaker’s apartment at the rear. As the back wall of the old cabin was also the front of the apartment, it and the huge fieldstone fireplace embedded in it were by necessity retained, resulting in the odd situation of the interior face of the fireplace on the exterior of the cottage. In 1972, Chris and Heidi DeLowery moved into the cabin to act as caretakers for the property. Chris would dependably maintain the house and grounds for over thirty years, until 2004.

Much of the Alden House, both inside and out, was painted in shades of gray, perhaps due to the contemporary fashion for displaying artifacts against a neutral background. On the other hand, surviving samples of the original paint in different rooms are either blue-gray or gray-green. Exceptions to this new universal color scheme were the unrestored “Workroom” (left untouched to show evidence of the partition, then thought to be Capt. Jack and Henry’s innovation), the little chamber over the entrance hall with its newspaper “undercoat” displaying the dates of 1812 and 1813, Charles’ restored Kitchen and the new “Butt’ry,” which was painted a reddish orange. Visitors were shown through the house by paid “hostesses” and occasional volunteers under the guidance of Ellen Fellows, a retired Duxbury teacher.



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During the 1960s and 1970s, the Alden House settled into a comfortable routine as an historic house museum and location of the Alden Kindred of America's annual meeting. Tourism numbers decreased slightly when Plimoth Plantation drew off potential visitors from the smaller and older Pilgrim attractions, and the new limited-access Route 3 enabled people to easily speed from Boston to Cape Cod, bypassing the attractions on Route 3-A. Repairs and maintenance became routine, and the pace of artifact acquisition slowed to a trickle. However, the volunteers who kept the house going recognized that the existing state of affairs could not continue without some important changes.

The structural condition of the Alden House was found to be satisfactory (although the ell needed work) when inspected in 1989, but the caretakers' cottage, decaying assembly hall and small toilet building presented a challenge. There was discussion of replacing all of them with a single building and repairs on the assembly hall were postponed in view of this eventuality. Alternative solutions included the possible acquisition of an historic barn on the neighboring Cushman property (which had been the easterly end of the original Alden farm) or the purchase of the "yellow house," a modern house built on the old railroad right of way immediately west of the Alden House. Neither of these options proved feasible so work went ahead on the design of a new building. The intent was to have the new support structure resemble a barn to indicate the property's long agricultural history.

The ell was completely renovated in 1992, including a new floor and joists. It had been a storage area and refuge for the guides, but now the old kitchen sinks and cabinets were removed, and the room opened to the public as a museum shop, complete with glass display cases. The guides were allotted the space behind the northerly partition as their break area. The well beside the ell was given a new enclosure and a new sign installed at the end of the driveway.

Mrs. Howe died in 1992 and bequeathed \$20,000 towards the building project. The Kindred decided to build a barn-like support structure where an old "wood shed" (not the one attached to the house) or barn had stood on the slope northeast of the house. This had been taken down in the 1890s after it was struck by lightning. The first design proposed a two-story 90' x 45' structure combining the caretaker's quarters (on the top floor), a large 2,700 sq. ft. meeting hall, gift shop and office on the first floor, and a mixed use area below on the basement level. The estimated cost was \$800,000. In the end, a more modest design for a 40' x 20' single story structure with a basement level by Hingham architect William Thayer costing about \$150,000 was chosen, and the caretaker's cabin was retained. Before the Alden Barn progressed beyond the planning stage, however, the last of Charles L. Alden's improvements was lost in January 1996 when the assembly hall collapsed under the weight of a record snowfall.

In 1994, an important milestone was reached when the Alden House hired its first professional full-time employee, Director Eln Hagney. Until then, volunteers and low-paid seasonal help had sustained the historic house function. Ms Hagney, who had worked at the Lowell Heritage State Park, took over the



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management of the house and grounds. She contacted the University of Massachusetts for an archaeological survey of the property in preparation for the construction of the new Alden Barn. She also improved docent training and scheduled special public events such as a two-day autumn festival that brought together craft demonstrations, military re-enactors and livestock from nine museums in 1995 and was attended by 600 people. In 1996 the museum docents were provided with improved costumes, the Massachusetts Society of Colonial Dames presented the Alden House with a bronze plaque honoring it as the residence of John and Priscilla, and another well-received autumn festival was held.

Elln Hagney moved on in 1997 and the museum director's responsibilities were divided between past Alden Kindred president, Robert Edmunds, as Director, and a former Marshfield librarian, Linda Ashley, as Curator. The ten teen-age guides that year were of both sexes, although these were not scheduled simultaneously. Much of the staff's energy was focused on the construction of the new "Barn" with its attendant archaeological surveys and fundraising, and on the approaching Alden Kindred centennial. Groundbreaking for the Barn took place on 18 October 1997. The building was impressively constructed in a traditional timber frame manner that enhanced the interior barn motif by the Benson Woodworking Company. The frame was raised on 18 April 1998, and the building was ready for occupancy the following year. Many people contributed towards the Alden Barn, from major benefactors such as John Alden Williamson and his sister Priscilla Alden Higgins to those families, groups and individuals who bought a brick in the new walkway for \$35 each.

The ell was again resingled in 1998. A "haunted Halloween" event and "cold turkey" tours given in the unheated house on the day after Thanksgiving extended the public year into the late fall. New museum shop products included an "Alden Family Cookbook" by Kerri Schofield Lawson and an Alden afghan bearing family names and imagery, including the barn raising. The staffing changed again when Charles Coombs was hired as Director and Bonnie Chandler Conant as Administrative Assistant and Acting Curator in the summer of 1999.

Into A New Millennium

Although a routine commemoration might have acknowledged the 100th anniversary of the first meeting in 1901, the excitement surrounding the turn of the Millennium resulted in the observation of the 100th actual meeting in August 2000 as the major event. Over a five-day period, more than 340 Alden descendants descended on the old homestead for a variety of interesting activities ranging from a cruise to Provincetown, where in 1620 (as "Cape Cod Harbor") John and Priscilla first saw their new country, to a dinner of 17th century "Pilgrim" cuisine at Plimoth Plantation and a valedictory address by the Rev. Peter J. Gomes of Harvard University.



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Energized by the success of the reunion and inspired by Mr. Edmund's "VisionQuest" session at that meeting, the Alden Kindred attempted to launch a \$2 million capital campaign for further improvements to the Alden House Historic Site, such as the new farm design, the acquisition of the Gibson property just east of the House and the construction of a new assembly hall or pavilion. The University of Rhode Island volunteered a landscape and exhibit design that emphasized the historical usage of the Alden property, and John's vocation as a cooper or barrel maker. However, this proved premature. In 2002 a more pragmatic approach towards development was adopted. Director Charles Coombs successfully applied to the Institute of Museum and Library Services for a conservation and preservation grant to conduct conservation assessments of the Alden House and its collections. Historical architect Willard Gwilliam, former Director of Architecture, Engineering and Maintenance for Colonial Williamsburg (and an Alden descendant), conducted a comprehensive architectural survey of the house, including bringing in a team of dendrochronologists to try to assess the age of the structure. Christine Thompson of Robert Mussey Associates evaluated the artifact collection and provided a conservation plan for future preservation.

Mr. Coombs resigned in the summer of 2002, and his responsibilities were assumed by Alden Ringquist as Acting Director and by Genealogist Alicia Crane Williams as Acting Curator. Dr. Thomas McCarthy, now Professor of Environmental, Business, and Consumer History at the United States Naval Academy, Annapolis was made official Historian for the Kindred and began the process of acquiring National Landmark status for the Alden House Historic Site. Graduate student Thomas Doyle took on the daunting task of sorting out the Alden Kindred records and established an excellent archival system that greatly facilitated research into the history of the Kindred and the Alden property. Progress towards the more professional management of the Alden House continued with a grant from the American Association of Museums for their Museum Assessment Program. In December, 2002 James W. Baker, former Director of Research at Plimoth Plantation, was hired as Curator, and began by revising the traditional interpretation of the Alden House. In 2003, two American Association of Museums professionals analyzed the management and procedures of the Alden House and made a report on how the continued professional development of the museum might best be carried out.

More importantly, the long-term conservation of the Alden House was advanced by a campaign to repair the massive central chimneystack, which had been suffering ice-induced spalling of brickwork and external parging, and crumbling clay-based mortar. Estimated costs were set at about \$80,000. In June 2005, Jack Peet & Associates of Williamsburg, Virginia, experts in historic brickwork restoration, were able to remove the inappropriate steel cap which was trapping moisture in the chimney, and replaced decayed bricks and unsuitable cement mortar with appropriate true clay bricks and authentic lime mortar. The project was funded through Kindred member donations and a generous grant of \$43,000 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The following winter work began on badly deteriorated window sashes that required not only recaulking and painting, but also restoration of the



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frames and woodwork. In addition, UV filter film was added to the individual panes during the restoration effort to help protect the interiors and furnishings of the rooms. The Alden House Historic Site was fortunate in this instance to be awarded a grant of \$30,000 from the Duxbury Community Preservation Committee fund, and work was completed in May, 2008.