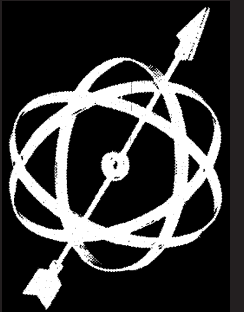


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ANTIQUES • ART • HISTORIC HOMES • COUNTRY LIFE • PRESERVATION & RESTORATION • INTERIOR DESIGN

Collections of American Life

The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History

By Tom O'Hara

The Smithsonian Institution National Museum of American History, Behring Center, is *the* collection of objects in American life of the past 400 years. It is dishes and silver, textiles and tools; there are complete houses illustrating how they were built, used and changed over their lifetimes. The collection depicts the American way of life even as it has changed with each generation, each era, each century.

It is the place where the objects of American History are saved and are on display for all to see and ponder. There is so much in its collections that only a fraction of the total can be out at any one time. As such, the exhibits open to the public in this free forum are changed frequently. What about the rest of the collection, then? What is in the back rooms waiting its turn to be put out there on display? Early this year, *Northeast* accepted an invitation, extended by Dr. Brent Glass, Director, Smithsonian Institution National Museum of History, to visit these tremendous archives, with special emphasis on a tour of the back rooms, conducted by a number of the curators.

Dr. Glass is unassuming in his



A nineteenth-century game table, made by Peter Glass, with marquetry inlays featuring generals of the Civil War.

role as the head officer of the museum, still known to many by its old abbreviated name, History and Tech, on the corner of 14th Street and Constitution Avenue in Washington. A student of American History and former teacher at the college level, he considers his position the dream job for someone with his interests. Of course, the management can be taxing at times, but to be able to guide a force of curators, restorers and experts who study, protect and show the artifacts and ordinary objects of American life is clearly a thrill to him. Dr. Glass considers it to be the ultimate educational experience for the visitors; an opportunity to see American life in the everyday, ordinary ways; to see how we have evolved over the last 400 years in this nation.

Bill Yeingst is the chair of the Division of Home and Community Life, the leader of curators in the Museum and also responsible for many areas of American Life. Mr. Yeingst has been in charge of re-inventing the exhibits at the Museum to "keep a record of ordinary American heritage and everyday life." He took great pleasure in showing how a house, which

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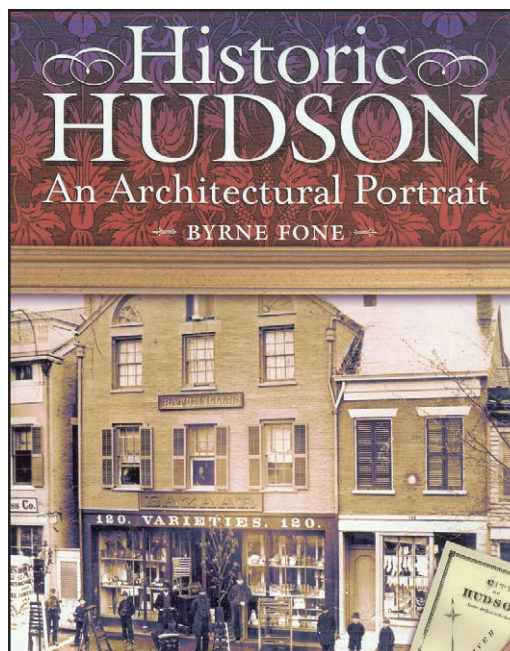
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Byrne Fone On The Record

By Philip Alvare

Editor's Note: There are very few people in the antiques business in Hudson, NY – and the Hudson Valley for that matter – that don't know Byrne Fone. He is an original to the town's antique renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s, and has become a celebrated writer, teacher, restorer and historian in the process. As part of Alain Pioton Antiques/The Hudson Antiques Center, Fone has been there through the good and the bad both, and is a venerable figure on the scene. Last year, he released his book, Historic Hudson An Architectural Portrait, to praise from readers and critics alike. It is a beautiful book, available from Black Dome Press, which features outstanding photography by Lynn Davis, one of the very best alive, along with priceless archival photographs from Historic Hudson. It is a complete and fascinating portrait of a city that is as socially and philosophically diverse as it is architecturally. What follows is Part One of Philip Alvare's two-part interview with Fone.

In his most recent book, *Historic Hudson An Architectural Portrait*, Byrne Fone has assembled an impressive array of archival and contemporary photographs reflecting the architectural evolution of a city whose fortunes and failings echo the ebb and flow of the eponymous river. Emeritus Professor of English and American Literature at the City University of New York, Fone is a pioneer in the field of Gay Studies,



The cover of Fone's acclaimed "Architectural Portrait" of Hudson, NY.

and author of six books. He and his partner, Alain Pioton, who runs Alain Pioton Antiques, 536 Warren Street, Hudson, NY, have divided their time between Hudson, NY, New York City and France for the past 30 years. When I interviewed Fone he was busy at work finishing a novel.

A pioneer on two counts, Fone forged a path in Hudson as one of the earliest and, perhaps, most intrepid souls who braved the early days of revitalization. The town is now galloping toward full-fledged gentrification, which in itself is a controversial issue much explored in other publications. Similarly, Fone championed the Gay Rights/Human Rights cause, Pre-Stonewall, and edited the book *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*. Columbia, 1999, that codified the field of scholarship known as "Queer Studies."

Fone's contribution to the stabilization, if not the memorialization, of the historic architecture of Hudson, NY is major. I had the good fortune to interview Fone for

Northeast before and after one of his trips to his home in France.

Northeast (NE): You've achieved many things, lived an enviable, cosmopolitan existence in France and the U.S. How does Hudson fit into this picture?

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Byrne Fone (BF): Hudson was a bit of an accident. We – my partner Alain Pion and I – were living in New York City and had a summer place in Pine Plains (in Dutchess County, NY). One Sunday in the summer of 1980, we went out for a drive and discovered Hudson, which I didn't know was there. We came into it from Third Street and, going up Warren, which was lined with empty stores and without any people, we were amazed at the quality of the architecture.

We were so impressed that eventually we bought two and then two more buildings – not terribly hard to do then, since the price for a house in the early 1980s was less than price of a middle brand car today – and in one, opened our antiques shop, The Hudson Antiques Center (now Alain Pion Antiques/The Hudson Antiques Center) in 1985 — this year is Alain's 20th anniversary.

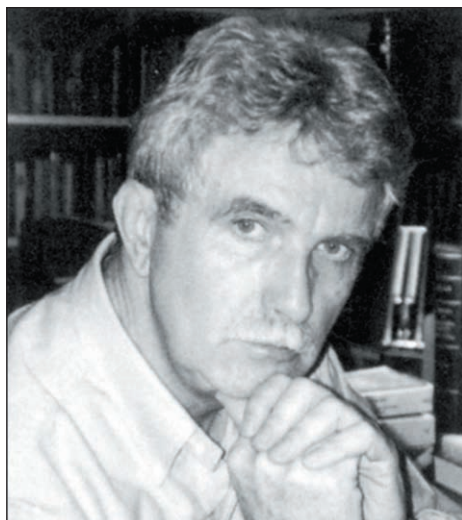
For a long time we were the only boys on the block, but Alain doggedly stayed open, even on Sundays, even though he was the only business open, and eventually we got more dealers and soon others of our dealers eventually opened their own shops. We like to think – and others agree – that opening the Hudson Antiques Center was one of the incubators for Hudson's rebirth, since, as I say, several of our dealers went out of our shop and opened their own shops and soon all the other antiques shops began to appear.

We have lived in the area now for 30 years — at first in Pine Plains and then in Chatham, but it was soon inevitable that we move to Hudson, which was increasingly the center of our lives.

As to how Hudson fits into my life outside of the antiques business, though I am Alain's partner in the shop, he is the guiding force behind it, and ran it all while I continued my career as a Professor of English at the City College in New York, from which I am now retired and working as a professional writer.

Because I am also a writer, Hudson was instantly fascinating and I've also had some experience in saving some old houses; I have an obsession with architecture, not as an expert or professional, but as a passionate, and I hope knowledgeable lay-person, and so on many counts Hudson offered me a wide range of opportunities from the outset.

NE: How, when and why did you decide to do *Historic Hudson: An Architectural Portrait*?



Byrne Fone

BF: The beginning of it came when I was asked to join the board of Historic Hudson. This group cannot be praised enough. Under the leadership of then President Tim Dunleavy, and the current President Carole Osterink, the group – the (City of Hudson's) volunteer preservation group, has done much to help educate people about the value and history of the city's buildings and even saved some of them, and is in the process of protecting another, the Plumb-Bronson House.

Why did I want to do this? I guess because I'm a writer I've always thought there was a book in Hudson. But I was never quite sure if it was to be fiction or fact. Obviously, because Hudson's current renaissance and its architecture is so unique and special, there is something to be said about it. The actual writing of the book took me about a year to 18 months, but I had been thinking about it and I guess subconsciously preparing for it for far longer. The city has been called a dictionary of American architecture, and it is – Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Second Empire, all our great styles are here. In the early years it seemed to me that this heritage was under-appreciated and too much of it was being lost, much of it through careless destruction by the city itself, which did not seem to appreciate its own buildings; consider the loss of the General Worth Hotel. Over the years more and more people came to the city and bought and restored buildings. Some did it very well, but others seemed not to be so sensitive to the importance of the heritage and the obligation to preserve it that goes with being an owner of an historic house.

Watching Hudson in the 1980s and



Shopping at Cyrus Macy's Shop at 133 (Now 305) Warren Street, c. 1847.

1990s, it was clear that often the city was quite willing to demolish its heritage and that some owners seemed to feel that mere ownership allowed license to do whatever they wanted with a historic building – alter it beyond recognition, rip out its interiors, throw away marble fireplaces because they weren't "modern" enough, remove its cornices because they were too "old" looking, lop off its porches or toss out its "Victorian" trim, or cover it all with aluminum siding to "update" it until the original building had in essence disappeared.

Unfortunately, even now, some residents – many of them new to the city – still are willing to sacrifice the heritage that belongs to us all. None of us will own our properties forever. But the buildings will survive; they are part of the fabric and history of the city and we are only temporary stewards of them. As stewards, do we have the right to destroy the fabric and history of the city? Do we have the right to deprive the

future of its history and damage our irreplaceable houses to make them dubious and idiosyncratic monuments to personal whim? I don't think so. I've always hoped that Historic Hudson would consider giving not only awards for excellence in preservation, but also a kind of "worst-dressed" booby prize to owners who destroy Hudson. That list, unhappily might be long and getting longer. Because of all this, it seemed to me that a book was needed to document both the glory of Hudson's architecture and the shame of its losses.

NE: There's impressive depth and breadth to the photographs in the book reflecting various eras in Hudson's history. Can you address your sources for the images and describe the selection process for what must have been a monumental task?

BF: Historic Hudson owns a remarkable collection of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photos of the city,



The Captain John Hathaway House in a photograph from the 1860s. One of the finest federal houses in the nation, it was built in the late eighteenth century and was located on Warren above Third Street. Later, as shown here, it was embellished with Greek Revival ornamentation.



The first Columbia County Courthouse, in the City of Hudson, built in 1835. A simple and elegant Greek Revival structure with a dome and six Ionic columns, this building located on Washington Square was torn down in 1900 to make way for the second Columbia County Courthouse in the City of Hudson.

taken by Hudson photographer Frank Forshew in the nineteenth century and his successor at the Rowles Studio in the twentieth. These show Hudson's houses and its streets as they were, and make up the bulk of the images in the book.

This seemed to me to be the perfect material for a book that would address the importance of the city's architecture and offer a cautionary word about the need to preserve it by showing what it was in its heyday. I suggested to Black Dome Press that this would make a superb project. Historic Hudson let me use our images, and I decided to add a written history of the city to it, since no complete history of Hudson had been written for several decades. In fact there are not too many sources at all – all told, no more than half a dozen that refer directly about the city – three from the nineteenth century, some twentieth-century documents, and most recently the very fine book by Margaret Schram that looks at Hudson's history up to the middle of the nineteenth century and punctures a few myths about Hudson whaling past. In addition this was a perfect opportunity to publish this great collection of Hudson photos that otherwise are hard for most people to access, and bring together the published strands of Hudson history in one place, and update it to the present day.

NE: One can't help notice the forward in *Historic Hudson* by John Ashbury (recently "Profiled" by Larissa MacFarquhar for The New Yorker), "...considered by many to be the most

important living American poet..." "Present Waking Life" The New Yorker November 7, 2005), and introduction by writer Rudy Wurlitzer and photographer Lynn Davis, rather illustrious company. Are these notables related more to your Academic and Literary life, Hudson life, or both?

BF: Along with the opening of the antiques shops – to which Hudson *absolutely* owes its renaissance – a small group of intrepid pioneers were already here when the first dealers came, among them John Ashbery and David Kermani. This early group was soon enlarged – Lynn and Rudy added their, as you correctly say, illustrious presence early on. The interesting thing about Hudson's history is that in its various forms and births and rebirths Hudson was always the creation of "new people." The proprietors – the founders of the city – were newcomers to the Dutch families who preceded them and they, I suppose, were newcomers to the Mohicans, from whom the Dutch bought the land on which the city stands.

In the early nineteenth century as the reputation of the city grew as a place of opportunity, hordes of new people poured into the city, increasing its population from around 1,500 in the year 1800 to 4-5,000 within a few years. This same influx of new people happened again in the mid- and late-nineteenth century. So the newcomers of the early '80s – who like other newcomers prior to them came to find work, open businesses and acquire homes, were follow-



Christ Church Episcopal on the corner of east Court and Union Street, across from Washington Square (which we now often call Courthouse Square), c. 1900, was designed by New York Architect Williams G. Harrison and consecrated in 1857. It is an elegant structure in the Gothic Revival style. Its soaring steeple was removed in the early part of the twentieth century.

ing a long standing Hudson tradition. Ashbery was, of course, in at the creation, and Rudy (Wurlitzer, fiction, non-fiction and screenwriter) has been devoted to the city since he came and Lynn Davis (world famous photographer) photographed the entire length of Warren street a few year ago.

In the April issue of *Northeast*, Philip Alvare's conversation with Byrne Fone continues.

All images from "Historic Hudson, An Architectural Portrait," Black Dome Press, 2005. Copyright 2005 Byrne Fone. ISBN-13:978-1-883789-46-6, ISBN-10:1-883789-46-X



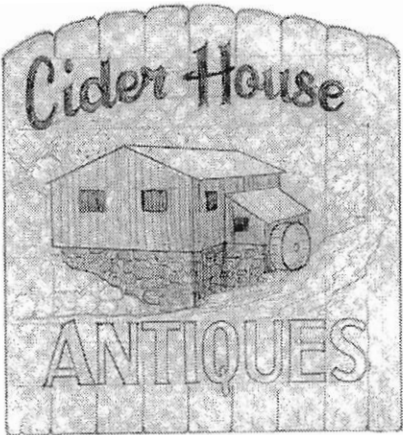
Warren Street from Fifth, looking West, c.1850.

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