A fabulous house was built in Salem between 1795 and 1799 for Elias Hasket Derby, merchant and shipowner, and his wife, Elizabeth Crowninshield. The best available talent was sought for its design, building, and furnishing. No less than three architects in turn submitted plans, Jonathan West in New York, Charles Bulfinch in Boston, and Samuel McIntire in Salem; and innumerable craftsmen in Philadelphia, Boston, Salem, and London combined their skills for its completion. It was known as the Derby Mansion, to distinguish it from numerous fine houses that three generations of Derbys had built in Salem and the vicinity. The praise of visitors proves the finished mansion and gardens a fitting background for New England’s first millionaire, whose ships sailed the seven seas exchanging the sober products of Massachusetts for various exotic cargoes.

Robert Gilmor of Baltimore, then a young artist, later an eminent philanthropist and connoisseur, sketched the house in 1797 (see above) and noted: “The principal merchant here, Mr. Derby, has just built a most superb house, more like a palace than the dwelling of an American merchant.” Five years later, Eliza Southgate wrote:

“Mr. Hasket Derby asked if we should like to walk over to his house and see the garden; we readily consented, as I had heard much of the house. The evening was calm and delightful, the moon shone in its greatest splendor. We entered the house and the door opened into a spacious entry; on each side were large white marble images. We passed on by doors on each side opening into the drawing-room, dining-room, parlor, &c., and at the further part of the entry a door opened into a large, magnificent oval room, and another door opposite the one we entered, was thrown open and gave us a full view of the garden below. . . . The large marble vases, the images, the mirrors to correspond with the windows, gave it so uniform and finished appearance that . . . everything appeared like enchantment.

“. . . We descended into the garden, which is laid out with exquisite taste, and airy irregularity seems to characterize the whole. At the foot of the garden there was a summer house and a row of tall poplar trees which hid everything beyond from the sight, and formed a kind of walk. I arrived there and to my astonishment found thro’ the opening of the trees there was a beautiful terrace, the whole width of the garden; ’twas twenty feet from the street and

ABOVE: The Derby Mansion, Salem, by Robert Gilmor, 1797. Courtesy Boston Public Library
Drawing by Charles Bulfinch for the Derby Mansion, about 1795. Used by Samuel McIntire in his final design. Courtesy of the Essex Institute, Salem

gravelled on the top with a white balustrade round; 'twas almost level and the poplar trees so close that we could only occasionally catch a glimpse of the house. The moon shone full upon it, and I really think this side is the most beautiful, though 'tis the back one. A large dome swells quite to the chamber windows and is railed round on top and forms a delightful walk;—the magnificent pillars which support it fill the mind with pleasure.

"We returned into the house and... entered the drawing room, which is superb, furnished with blue and wood color."

The house was hardly completed when Mrs. Derby died, on April 19, 1799; her husband followed five months later. Seven children shared their parent's possessions, and for ten years their oldest son lived in the house. William Bentley, the faithful chronicler of Salem events, gives its final history on November 20, 1815: "I took my last view of the Mansion of the late eminent merchant E. H. Derby, situated easterly from the Old Meeting House in Essex Street & going back with its gardens to Front Street. It was the best finished, most elegant, & best constructed House I ever saw. It was entirely of wood with an excellent façade in the Ionic order, with a noble flight of marble steps to the top of the basement story. Its stucco work had nothing like it in the rotunda on the south side and the buildings and gardens were in exquisite taste. It had fallen to the oldest son who had left it. The heirs could not agree to occupy it & the convenience of the spot for other buildings brought a sentence of destruction on it & before the world it was destroyed from its foundations. I saw the front demolished and left in ruins."

From the working plans of the house, elevations of the exterior and interior, and from bills
paid by Mr. Derby, we know that the principal genius of this great enterprise was Samuel McIntire. He was the talented son of a Salem housewright, and he never moved far from the smell of codfish and spicy oriental cargoes on the Salem wharves; he did not even go to Washington when he entered an ambitious design in the competition for the National Capitol in 1792. His architectural style was formed from books, and by keenly observing the work of his more urbane contemporaries—particularly Charles Bulfinch, in whom he found a worthy model. Bulfinch, well-born, and polished with two years of the Grand Tour in Europe after his graduation from Harvard in 1785, soon proved himself the most gifted native architect of his time. Some existing monuments to his talent are the state capitol in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine, part of the National Capitol, and many houses in the classical Roman style. “Mr. Bulfinch’s” façade in the perspective drawing (ill. opp. page), inscribed by Mrs. Derby, was largely retained by McIntire in his final exterior design, but the interiors were entirely his own.

One mantelpiece is all that is left of the house (ill. above), except a fragment of cornice and a fence-post urn in the Essex Institute. The mantelpiece was purchased by the Museum last year from the great-granddaughter of Arad Pomeroy, who salvaged it in 1815 at the house-wrecker’s sale of the Mansion, along with other parts of the interior finish, which were later destroyed when his house burned in the great Salem fire in 1914. Twenty years earlier the mantel had been moved to a newer house at 11 Linden Street in Salem. In 1923 it was installed in a copy of the Richard Derby house at Hewlett, Long Island, whence it came to the Museum. Eventually it will be the nucleus of an enlarged
Mahogany side chair. Probably one of a set of eight carved by Samuel McIntire in 1798 for the parlor of the Derby Mansion. Courtesy of Mrs. William Arthur Dupee

Salem room in the American Wing.

Possibly our mantel was first used in the parlor adjoining the great oval room. Among McIntire’s plans, identified in Mrs. Derby’s handwriting, are the walls of the northwest room (parlor) showing a mantel with entwined columns. In 1796 McIntire listed in his charges for work completed “within side the New House:” “In the North West Room . . . Carving 2 Columns & Capitals for Chimney piece 20 Dolls.” Among the material offered at the house-wrecker’s sale in 1815 of the Mansion’s contents were: “8 richly ornamented Chimney Pieces, . . . 2 marble Chimney Pieces, one very elegant.” When, a few years earlier, Washington received a marble chimney-piece from London for Mount Vernon, he wrote that it seemed unsuitable to his simple republican way of living. But no qualms of guilt, if any ever overtook them, are recorded of the Derbys. Mrs. Derby’s inscription on the final building plans, that they were “not large a-nuf,” reveals her unrepublican taste.

The decoration on the mantel is a combination of carved wood and cast composition. The columns are entirely of wood. Some of the composition moldings are stock ornaments, also seen on woodwork in the Southern states and in England; those on the frieze seem more typically McIntire’s. The musical instruments, classic standards, and grape festoons are repeated on some of his other mantels. His Derby bills mention patterns for casting ornament.

Recently, when layers of paint were removed from the mantelpiece, the outlines of several classical figures were uncovered on the center block of the frieze; others were partly obscured by a carved basket of fruit, known to have been an early replacement. Why the figures were removed and replaced by a poor piece of carving is unknown. It does not seem probable that they could have suffered damage while surrounding parts, even more fragile, remained intact. More likely the eighteenth-century prejudice against the nude, which added fig leaves on the Vatican marbles and made Wedgwood’s faithful classic copies unsaleable, caused blushes to mount the decorous Salem cheek.

The restoration of this panel was beset with various difficulties. To begin with, the identification of the subject staggered the best classical minds. The group of nine human and grotesque outlines, so much more involved than the usual subjects employed in the new republic—a river god, a few cupids, a shepherd with sheep—yet so well suited to meet the Derby’s grandiose demands, is too diverse in character to be recognized. Perhaps it was even less recognizable when it was made. Wedgwood’s designers borrowed, and combined, and separated classical figures at will and sometimes gave them Biblical titles with little regard to their original significance.

It is only speculation how, from the vast vocabulary of neo-classical ornament published in Europe upwards of a century before the Derby Mansion took form, certain classic details
reached a snug Massachusetts seaport town and became crystallized as the especial property of her craftsmen. Few of these men had ventured far from home; few, if any, had seen the publications of Roman antiquities by Bartoli or Bellori, or even the work of Piranesi, whose mélange of Egyptian, Roman, and “Louis XVI” ornament for candelabra, clocks, commodes, mantels, pier tables, and sedan chairs, fused together with so powerful and fertile an imagination, contributed largely to the classic revival. The Adam brothers’ Works in Architecture, Placide Columbani’s New Book of Ornaments, Michael Angelo Pergolesi’s Designs for Ornament, Josiah Wedgwood’s five catalogues, and Bartolozzi’s engravings of Cipriani’s and Angelica Kauffman’s paintings were little known, though Bullfinch may have seen some of these in Europe.

Several books dating from the close of the eighteenth century and containing more exact models for American woodcarvers and builders were, however, certainly in the hands of the Salem designers; for the garlands of grapes and *garrya elliptica*, the Ionic capitals, dishes of fruit, draped urns, and foliated moldings taken over as local favorites are in their pages. One of them is Pain’s British Palladio (London, 1786), from which McIntire took the plan of our mantelpiece, adding festoons of grapes to the frieze, garlands of grapes around the columns, and perhaps a bacchanal in the center, seemingly as a concession to his patrons’ taste. The grape was a favorite ornament of the Derbys and embellished much of their carved and painted furniture and their Sheffield plate (now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Other books were known locally in McIntire’s heyday—some as
reprints, like *The Practical House Carpenter* and *The Builder’s General Assistant*, by William and James Pain. It was not until 1797 that the first original American work on architecture appeared, *The Country Builder’s Assistant* by Asher Benjamin.

Two books of furniture design that inspired many Salem cabinet- and chair-makers were A. Hepplewhite’s *Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer’s Guide* (London, 1788) and Thomas Sheraton’s *Drawing-Book* (London, 1794). A design in Hepplewhite’s *Guide* was the exact source of the oval feather-back chair from the Derby house (ill. p. 76), and from it were adapted the well-known painted chairs once part of a set of twenty-four made for the Derby house (see ill. p. 77, right). They were billed in December 1796 by Joseph Anthony, Derby’s agent in Philadelphia whose promise had been “they shall be neat.” On February 17, 1798 Samuel McIntire rendered his patron a bill for carving eight chairs, possibly following the original Hepplewhite design. For this design Hepplewhite advised “. . . finishing with painted or japanned work” as the style allowed “a frame-work less massy than is requisite for mahogany.” He does not call the plume-of-feathers chair-back a Prince of Wales design, which indeed, without the crown, it is not, but his name for it is rather surprising—“banister back,” a name now given to quite a different chair.

The elaborate bed shown on the opposite page, originally in the Derby Mansion, was inspired by plate 9 in the Appendix of Sheraton’s *Drawing-Book*. It appears to be the work of John Seymour of Boston or his son Thomas, the creators of much Derby furniture after 1794, and is probably the finest American bed of the period. The reeded basket on the cornice, unusual in Salem carving, matches those on the doorways from Oak Hill (now in the Museum of Fine Arts), which McIntire and his son designed and carved for the Derbys’ eldest daughter, Mrs. Nathaniel West, later known as Madame Elizabeth Derby after her divorce in 1806.

Sheraton likewise furnished the pattern for the sofa shown above, which is characteristic of Salem furniture. His directions were: “If the top rail be thought to have too much work, it can be finished in a straight rail as the design shews.” It seemed never too much work in Salem, although in Portsmouth, Philadelphia, and
Mahogany bed with painted and gilded cornice. Made for the Derby Mansion about 1796. The green taffeta and moiré drapery is contemporary. Kennedy Fund, 1918
Baltimore sofas were often made with a plain top rail. The carved basket repeats itself on numerous mantels and overdoors carved by McIntire. Others, of course, had a hand in the furniture-making. A sofa, privately owned, similar to ours was made by Nehemiah Adams in Salem in 1810, according to extant bills, as part of the wedding furniture of Lucy Hill of Billerica. A description of its original upholstery is given in a letter from Miss Hill's friend Sally Hemenway: “I have purchased a brocade gown for your soffa at thirteen Dollars exactly. Such a one as Rebecca Pierce gave fifteen for.”

Madame Derby, too, had grape decoration carved on much of her furniture. The same motif is painted on two chairs (see p. 77, left) owned by Derby descendants until recent years. Were they perhaps two of the “5 new painted chairs” listed in the inventory after Madame Derby's death in 1814? Others like them stood in the garden pavilion in Danvers built by McIntire for the Derbys in 1795.

The Derby mantelpiece and the furnishings of the house that still exist, although far from average in their day, are important now as a measure of the ability of American artisans and the enterprise of their patrons. What higher praise can we offer than that of William Bentley, who wrote of the Derby possessions “the furniture was rich, but never violated the chastity of correct taste”?

The writer is indebted to Fiske Kimball, whose long study of Samuel McIntire has made familiar much of the material on the Derby Mansion used here. His research was first published in 1924 by the Essex Institute, in The Elias Hasket Derby Mansion in Salem. The staff of the Essex Institute has very kindly made available the original Derby documents in their charge.

Several members of the Museum staff assisted in the restoration of the mantelpiece. The drawings for the figures were made by Benjamin Knotts and the modeling and casting done by Hyman Filtzer. Abraham Fieldman also helped with the restoration.