The American Wing will celebrate its thirtieth birthday on November 10, 1954. To reread the speeches made at the opening ceremonies is to realize that Mr. and Mrs. Robert Johnston de Forest's gift of the addition to the Museum known as the American Wing provided a new conception and marked a milestone in the appreciation of the American decorative arts, not only in their relationship to American history but to the main stream of taste in the Western world.

While the actual building of the American Wing was opened in 1924 the seed of the idea was planted in 1909 when an exhibition of American furniture was held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art as part of the Hudson-Fulton Celebration. As chairman of the art committee of the Celebration, Mr. de Forest sought ways to illustrate the early American period. With Mr. Henry W. Kent, then Secretary of the Museum, he decided "to use the opportunity to test out the question whether American domestic art was worthy of a place in an art museum and to test it out not theoretically but visually."

For those who know the American Wing today it is hard to believe that in 1909 not a single piece of American furniture was owned by the Museum. Everything was borrowed for the occasion. But before the exhibition was over, Mrs. Russell Sage had purchased from it the entire collection of Dr. Eugene Bolles and presented it to the Museum. Thus was laid the foundation for the American Wing's collection, which now numbers between nine and ten thousand individual pieces of furniture, silver, ceramics, textiles, metalwork, and architectural settings.

After the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition ended and the newly acquired American pieces were installed in the vast, high-ceilinged galleries of the Museum it became obvious that material of such intimate domestic character demanded an architectural background in rooms of appropriate periods and proportions if it were to appear at its best. To meet this need Mr. and Mrs. de Forest gave the three-story addition containing original architectural settings and entire rooms ranging chronologically from the reproduction rooms of the mid-seventeenth century to the Georgian and Federal period rooms of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which, with their furnishings, made up the American Wing. In 1937 the copies of rooms from the Hart and Capen houses were replaced by original rooms from the Hart house in Ipswich, Massachusetts, built in the second half of the seventeenth century, and the Wentworth house in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, dating from the first quarter of the eighteenth century.

The American Wing grew and prospered because both historically and psychologically we had, as a nation, arrived at a moment when we could pause to look back and revalue our past. Americans were beginning to realize that the wave of colonization which had cast their forebears on the Atlantic seaboard in the seventeenth century had flooded relentlessly across the continent until the last Western frontiers had been reached. And they realized too that the world of the thirteen original colonies and of the formative days of the early Republic was rapidly disappearing. The instinct to preserve both the spirit and substance of that vanishing America became active in a number of far-sighted people who believed that nothing would evoke the spirit of the past more vividly than the physical preservation of the houses, furniture, and objects associated with the daily life of our ancestors.

The building of the American Wing constituted recognition of the fact that although the origins of our art and architecture were European, transplantation to a new world, with its frontier conditions and new materials, had created a distinctively American expression in craftsmanship worthy of cultivation on its own merits.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, as a pioneer in the field of American interior architec-
Parlor, or keeping room, from the Thomas Hart house in Ipswich, Massachusetts. Second half of the xvii century. Munsey Fund, 1936
ture and decorative arts, has been the inspiration for many other museums and private collections. The opening of the American Wing did much to kindle an interest in Americana which has borne fruit in innumerable historic house restorations and private and public collections and in the publication of hundreds of serious pieces of research, popular books, and periodicals devoted to the American field. Today, as a nation on wheels pilgrimages about the country, historic houses and gardens, museums devoted to Americana, and reconstructions of whole communities like Williamsburg and Sturbridge have become popular objectives for a vast motoring public.

Over a period of years during which the supply of first-rate seventeenth- and eighteenth-century material has become more and more limited the American Wing has been able to maintain its prestige and the quality of its collections. There is no category in the American decorative arts which is not adequately represented by outstanding pieces that would enable the student, specialist, or amateur to form an accurate impression of the origin and development of the American interior from the mid-seventeenth century through the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Visitors may circulate in all parts of the rooms and inspect all objects at close range. Furthermore, the American Wing has a particular asset in the fact that it exists as part of a great museum of art rather than as an isolated entity. Here the American arts may be compared and studied in relation to European source material of the same periods.

Perhaps because of this an interest in the aesthetic qualities of American craftsmanship has developed to balance the preoccupation with historic associations. Certainly the Alexandria Ballroom will properly continue to be a room of rich historic interest in view of its intimate associations with Washington and its romantic overtones as an eighteenth-century ballroom. But increasing interest now centers around the painted room from "Marmion" in Virginia, purely on the grounds of its architectural importance. Only recently scholars have proved the importance of paint in the eighteenth century as a colorful and sometimes extravagant means of enhancing the architectural effect. Few examples of the eighteenth-century painted room with its variegated marbleizing and pictorial panels are of more interest than the room from "Marmion" in the American Wing or have survived in a better state of preservation.

In the years between the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition and the opening of the new wing many splendid gifts and wise purchases were added to the American collections. Since the Metropolitan is primarily a museum of the fine arts and not of history or folk art, the collections in the American Wing were formed to illustrate the outstanding examples of craftsmanship within the several categories of the decorative arts rather than to emphasize the genealogical or sociological aspects of Americana.

During the thirty years of its existence the American Wing has been the recipient of many generous and distinguished gifts. When the Wing was opened in 1924 the gift from Mrs. Russell Sage of the Bolles collection was supplemented by gifts from Mr. and Mrs. de Forest, Charles Allen Munn, and R. T. H. Halsey and by many individual gifts, loans, and purchases.

In 1933 Judge A. T. Clearwater bequeathed his magnificent collection of more than five hundred pieces of American silver, of which the major portion had previously been on loan.

The American Wing was enlarged in 1931 by the addition of a one-story ell to contain the great hall from Rensselaerwyck, given by Dr. Howard Van Rensselaer. In 1941 a second story was added to the ell containing a room from Coldenham, New York. This room has become the setting for the gifts from Mr. and Mrs. Bayard Verplanck, James De Lancey Verplanck, and other members of the Verplanck family of the superb pieces of furniture, textiles, porcelain, silver, and family portraits by Copley which had been in the Verplanck mansion on Wall Street in the eighteenth century.

In 1946 the family and friends of the late Mrs. Harry Horton Benkard presented in her memory an early nineteenth-century New England room with its exquisite furnishings, taken in its entirety from her Long Island house.

Over many years the collections have been enriched by a series of outstanding gifts from the
Room with carved and painted woodwork, from "Marmion," in King George County, Virginia. Middle of the xviii century. Rogers Fund, 1916
late Mrs. J. Insley Blair. In 1951 she bequeathed her unique collection of Bristol glass to the Wing, in addition to numerous pieces of furniture and other objects of the highest quality and rarity. Her daughters, Mrs. Screven Lorillard and Mrs. J. Woodhull Overton, have continued their mother’s generosity and interest.

As early as 1913 Frederick W. Hunter presented the Museum with his important collection of early blown and molded glass at a time when little was as yet known about one of the first industries of the American colonies. Later additions to the glass collections were made by Dr. and Mrs. Charles W. Green and Mrs. Emily Winthrop Miles, both of whom gave large and representative collections of glass from the nineteenth-century manufactories.

Pewter is excellently represented by the collection given by Joseph France, as well as by many gifts from Mrs. Blair and loans from Mrs. Stephen Fitzgerald.

It is unfortunately not possible because of lack of space to recapitulate here the very large number of splendid individual gifts and loans which have been previously published in the Museum Bulletin.

One may, however, draw attention to certain aspects of the American Wing program that exist behind the scenes. Documentation of its collections, for instance, is of particular concern. Re-evaluation of existing knowledge and a relentless search for more information about the earliest periods has turned up unsuspected factual riches. Actually the keeping of records was not at first a matter of vital concern. Dr. Eugene Bolles and George W. Palmer, many of whose pieces are represented in the collections of the American Wing, did much of their collecting on week-ends. Traveling by horse and cart and dressed in old clothes, they scoured the New England countryside, canvassing from house to house and ferreting out some of our best seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American furniture. But only seldom did it occur to them, or in fact to many other collectors, to inquire about the history of the individual pieces at the time they were bought out of attic and parlor. Museums and students of early American decorative arts require more exact knowledge of the objects on which they base their conclusions, and the files of the American Wing have been oriented around a concept of furnishing ready information about the history of each item in the collections.

The American Wing is, however, much more than the sum of its contents. While its collections are a continuing source of inspiration and study to the specialist in Americana, the collector, the appreciative amateur, and the many foreign visitors, the peculiar function of the American Wing is that of a teaching instrument on many levels. On almost every week-day large classes of students from professional art schools come with their instructors to paint and draw in the galleries. Gallery talks in the Wing by Museum staff members never fail to draw a large public. But above all the American Wing serves as an adjunct to the teaching of history in the public and private schools of New York and its environs. From October to May classes of children of every type and background, with their teachers, are conducted through the Wing by staff lecturers. How many of us realize that for thousands of children growing up in New York in apartment houses and tenements the conception of family life in a separate dwelling house is a hard one to grasp? It would seem that the American Wing and similar museums have an extraordinary opportunity to help young Americans understand some of the traditions and the ways of life which shaped their country. This is no matter of teaching children nomenclature or the subtle distinctions of architectural styles and furniture. They grasp quickly, however, the transition from the rugged simplicity of the seventeenth-century oak to the elegance and comfort of the eighteenth century and the refinement of the Federal period. Any adult visitor who pauses to listen will find himself as interested and fascinated as the children by the kind of history-teaching which uses the visible and tangible evidences of the past as a springboard to enliven and make real the American story.
Court cupboard made of oak, with spool turnings. Connecticut, about 1700. This cupboard was originally owned by Governor Robert Treat. Gift of Mrs. J. Woodhull Overton in memory of Mrs. J. Insley Blair, 1953.
Japanned high chest of drawers made in Boston, about 1735. Joseph Pulitzer Fund, 1940
High chest of drawers, Chippendale influence. Philadelphia, about 1765. Kennedy Fund, 1918

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Desk with cabinet top. Boston, about 1760. Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1909
Mantelpiece of painted wood and cast composition, designed by Samuel McIntire, who carved the columns and capitals. From the Elias Hasket Derby Mansion in Salem, Massachusetts, about 1795. Rogers Fund, 1946
Bed with painted and gilded tester, from the Derby Mansion, Salem. About 1800. Kennedy Fund, 1918
Detail of the Caswell carpet embroidered by Zeruah Higley Guernsey, later Mrs. Caswell, in Castleton, Vermont. Initialed and dated 1835. Gift of Katherine Keyes in memory of her father, Homer Eaton Keyes, 1938