

Picturing Home

The Historic American Building Survey documents a vanishing legacy.

TEXT BY RUSSELL VERSACI

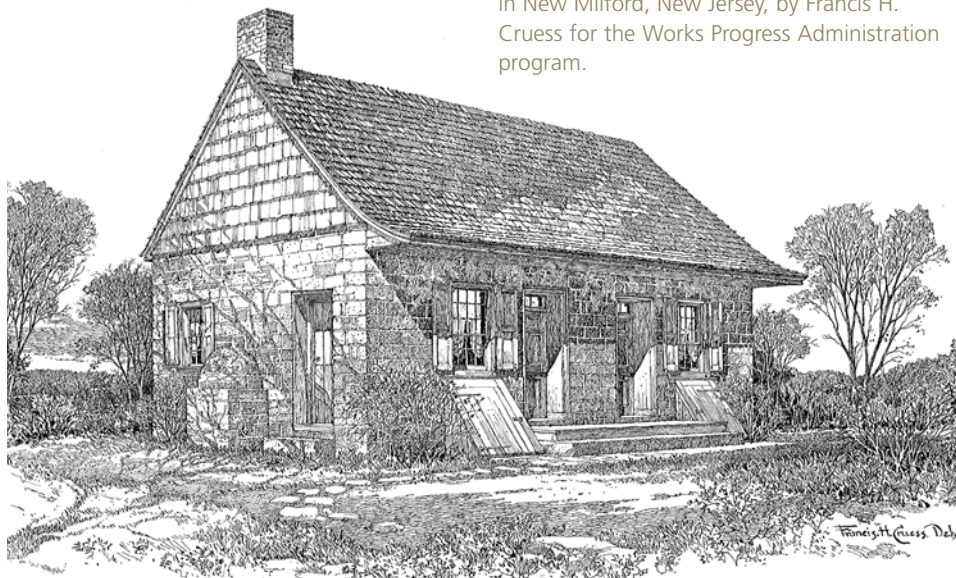
On the wall above my desk hangs an exquisite pen-and-ink drawing of a two-room stone cottage in New Milford, New Jersey, called the Samuel Desmarest House. The drawing renders in loving detail a classic early Dutch Colonial house with shuttered front windows, an overhanging spring eave, and ivy tendrils winding up sandstone block walls.

I didn't buy this rare rendering in an art gallery. Instead, I downloaded it via the Internet from a public archive in Washington, D.C., legally and free of charge, and then printed it.

The drawing documents an early American house in danger of crumbling. It is the work of one Francis Howse Cruess, an architect and watercolorist who came to New York City from England in 1889. Cruess made the drawing in the 1930s for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and today his drawing resides with thousands like it in the Prints and Photographs Collection of the Library of Congress. The files are part of a vast archive of drawings and photographs of early American buildings, interiors, and details called the Historic American Building Survey (HABS).

The story of how HABS became America's repository of its architectural legacy is the story of idealism and foresight in the face of inevitable loss. It begins in the late 1920s when America's first woman photographer, Frances Benjamin Johnston, carted her 8 x 10 Kodak view camera along the highways and byways of the American South searching out endangered landmarks. Her mission was to capture on film the South's earliest buildings before they were gone completely, prey to neglect and the onslaught of progress.

For years Johnston journeyed down country roads and through small towns



A rendering of the Samuel Desmarest House in New Milford, New Jersey, by Francis H. Cruess for the Works Progress Administration program.

COURTESY OF HABS

photographing common old buildings—houses, cabins, barns, inns, and outhouses—many of which are now gone. Today we have her to thank for preserving, at least in pictures, a record of the South's colonial architectural heritage, and it is now part of the HABS collection.

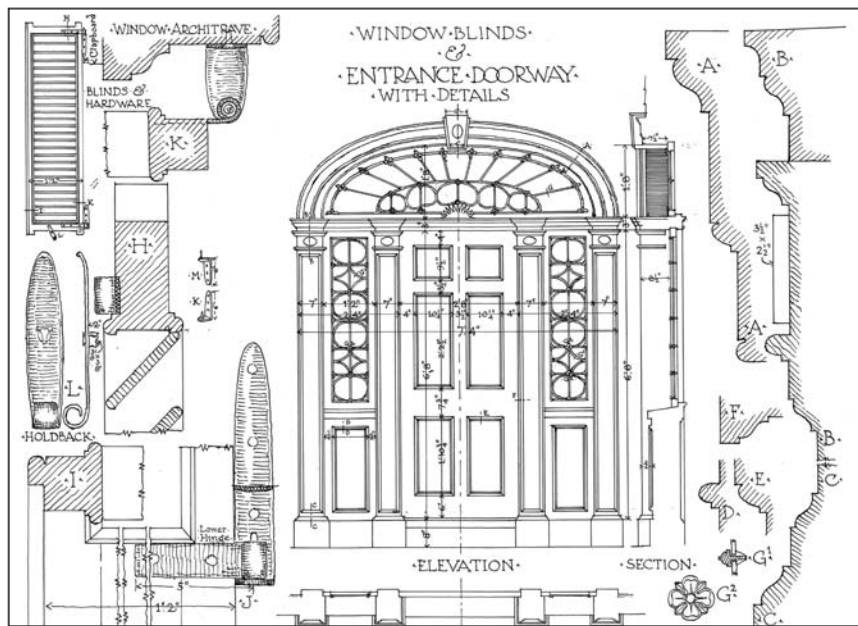
In fact, Johnston was not the first to recognize the need for a visual record of what was fast disappearing. The seeds were sown in 1876 with the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, when American architects began taking note of the colonial buildings still standing. Guided by architect William Rotch Ware, they began to document the most noteworthy buildings in measured drawings, which were included in a 12-volume portfolio called *The Georgian Period*, published from 1898 to 1902.

By 1915, this ad hoc effort had been formalized into a commercial venture funded by Weyerhaeuser Mills called the "The White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs." Designed as a marketing

tool to promote the use of white pine in new construction, the monographs were distributed free to architects. The series included essays by top practitioners, photographs of colonial buildings, and superb measured drawings of details. The White Pine Series was published from 1915 to 1929, and while it became an indispensable tool in drafting rooms, it remained the exclusive province of professional architects.

It was Frances Benjamin Johnston who first recognized the importance of bringing awareness of our vanishing architectural legacy to a popular audience. Her interest in old buildings was kindled in 1926, when she was hired by *Town & Country* to photograph gardens along the eastern seaboard. As Johnston journeyed through the southern states, she fell in love with the old colonial buildings that she encountered but was also alarmed by what she saw.

"Wherever I traveled I came across tragic examples of decay and neglect,"



Frank Chouteau Brown rendered the details of the 1812 Larrabee Carl House in Kennebunkport, Maine, under the Edward Langley Scholarship 1944–45 for the National Park Service.

COURTESY OF HABS

she recounted years later in an NBC radio interview. “Often, too, fire had destroyed and left no trace of some of these once-beautiful homes.” She noted that while the great Virginia manors had been photographed often, “the old farmhouses, the mills, the log cabins of the pioneers, the country stores, the taverns and inns—in short those buildings that had to do with the everyday life of the colonists—had been overlooked. In fact, no photographic records of them existed.”

Johnston urged comrades from the Library of Congress and University of Virginia to persuade the Carnegie Corporation to fund a photographic survey, and from 1927 to 1943 she toted her camera through the South photographing old buildings. As Johnston hurried “along the road ahead of the march of neglect and progress,” she recorded some 8,000 images, along with detailed diaries and field notes, for the *Carnegie Survey of the Architecture of the South*.

Like Johnston, architectural historian Charles Peterson was appalled by what he saw happening to our early buildings. In 1933 Peterson proposed an ambitious new project to his employer, the National Park Service. He suggested

that America’s remaining landmarks be photographed and measured, with drawings made of elevations and details, for a permanent archive. “The ravages of fire and the natural elements together with the demolition and alterations caused by real estate ‘improvements’ form an inexorable tide of destruction destined to wipe out the great majority of the buildings,” he lamented, and he urged the Park Service not to let them pass into unrecorded oblivion.

Thus began the Historic American Buildings Survey. This WPA project gave employment during the Depression to out-of-work architects, photographers, and historians, many of them the best in the country. Recruited by Peterson, these professionals set out to record America’s legacy, starting with the most vulnerable buildings “before they go to wrack and ruin.”

Fortunately, the HABS project didn’t end when the Depression did. Today, some 75 years later, the archive has more than 350,000 images, and it’s still growing, with field teams scouring the country to document old buildings.

But although the collection has always been open to the public, it has been hard to use until recently when, with

funding from the Shell Oil Company, the National Park Service took on the herculean task of digitizing the archive. Now the gates of HABS are wide open to anyone with Internet access, and it’s all free.

In store for one who ventures into the HABS collection (www.loc.gov/rr/print/catalog.html) is nothing short of the best library of traditional building details anywhere on the planet. The archive contains a bounty of material: high-resolution photographs that can be downloaded and printed at full size; large-format black-and-white photos of historic houses; close-ups of details inside and out—cornices, porticoes, mantels, and stairs; hand-drafted measured drawings with exact profiles and dimensions; and gorgeous perspective renderings like the Dutch Colonial house on my wall.

Whether you want to build a new old house or simply dream about one, this database of details can help you make it as authentic as a real historic house. If you want to design a Classical portico with the correct molding profiles, you’ll find everything you need in one place, waiting to be downloaded. Likewise, if you want to build a true replica house, you can search HABS for accurate plans, sections, elevations, and details. No other country has anything remotely similar in scope and sophistication. HABS is a resource that we use in my architecture office as our principal reference tool every day.

In HABS the Great Depression spawned a national treasure that doesn’t replace the buildings that we have lost but does preserve their images for all time. HABS offers a lesson to us all about what can happen when people stop lamenting losses and begin thinking creatively about our vanishing heritage—and how to preserve the best of what remains. In our trying times, that is a cause we can all believe in. **NOH**

Russell Versaci is the author of Creating a New Old House (Taunton Press, 2003) and Roots of Home (Taunton Press, 2008).

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