

# Friends of Mechanics Hall

Tour of the Orchard House, home of Louisa May Alcott and Family, in Concord, MA

August 5, 2012

Attendees: Judy Tyler, Elizabeth Hammond, Alex and Mark Fiandaca.

The Friends of Mechanics Hall participated in a one hour tour of Orchard House followed by a private meeting and behind-the-scenes tour with Director Jan Turnquist.

Jan explained that in 1857, Mr. Alcott purchased two structures dating to 1690-1720. The larger structure was a former manor and the smaller, a tenant farmhouse. The farmhouse had been built behind the manor on a sloping hill and Mr. Alcott and his friends moved the farmhouse by lifting the structure onto logs and rolling it down the hill. The farmhouse became the rear ell of the larger manor house and was attached without a foundation.

The Alcotts left Orchard House in 1877. Over the next several years the building became very unstable, due to the lack of foundation in the rear ell, Mr. Alcott's haphazard renovations (cutting into weight bearing beams without reinforcement) and a general lack of maintenance. Orchard House served as a camp in the early 1900s and by 1910 it was considered unsalvageable and was in danger of being torn down.

The building's neighbor, Harriet Lothrop, loved history and put the word out that the building needed to be saved. She bought Orchard House to keep it from being demolished. Harriet continued to try to stir up interest in the building and eventually put it up for sale. The Louisa May Alcott Memorial Association bought the house after persuading their husbands to join the effort to raise the necessary \$3,000. The Association needed an additional \$5,000 to fix up the building and buy the adjoining land that had been parceled off. The Orchard House barn, which served as Mr. Alcott's School of Philosophy, had been moved to Harriet's property for storage. In 1923 it was moved back to its rightful location.

For years after the Orchard House was opened as a museum, attempts were made to support shifting and sagging beams but all proved to be short-term solutions. In the 1990's, an ambitious stabilization project was launched to address the building's underlying issues once and for all. At that time an additional culprit was discovered: the pyramid-shaped, rubble stone columns (presumed to be supporting the main building) were actually hollow.

The rear part of the building was lifted and placed on cribbing piles (resembling Linkin Logs<sup>®</sup>) which held the house while the foundation was put in. The main part of the building was supported by similar methods so that the hollow columns could be restored as solid supports. The work was performed by Yankee Steeple Jack and was briefly featured on This Old House as an example of a historically sensitive restoration. Sometime after the stabilization project was complete, the Orchard House received a grant from Lowe's to help restore the bedroom of artist May Alcott.

Orchard House is now equipped with a humidistat to control moisture levels throughout the building. 80% of the building's furnishings actually belonged to the Alcott's and careful climate control is critical to their preservation.

Jan shared some valuable fundraising insight regarding grants, corporate donors and private contributors. State and federal grants tend to be matching grants, which requires an intensive level of fundraising efforts to meet the matching goal within the given time limit. If funds are not raised then the grant is withdrawn which can be a very embarrassing blow to an organization. Corporate donors expect payback for their contributions, such as naming rights, which is generally not appropriate for historic structures. Jan suggested focusing on private contributors. Unlike corporations, private donors do not expect or want a formal presentation; they want to get to know the people involved. Having a list of potential uses and ideas on hand might be helpful. Jan indicated that private donors are typically looking to make a large impact. Jan stressed that our enthusiasm toward Mechanics Hall will make much more of an impression on a private donor than a foundation or corporation.

Jan stressed the importance of acknowledging donors. She also suggested highlighting the project and its contributors in creative ways that complement the integrity of the building, such as an outdoor interpretive sign or display.

The Friends are extremely grateful to Jan for her time, insight and encouragement and to Elizabeth for arranging this inspiring visit!

*Compiled by Alex Fiandaca*