

1 Yankee
Sept. 1996

HOUSE FOR SALE

Living in a Legend

The "Ocean-Born

Mary House" in Henniker, New Hampshire, now

on the market, has been an integral part of New

England folklore for over 200 years. Problem is,

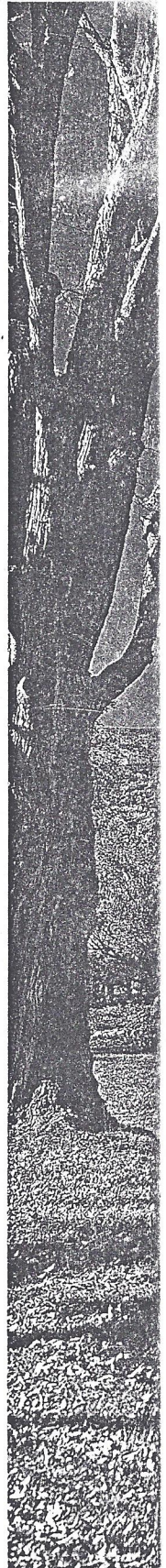
much of what's been said about it isn't true . . .

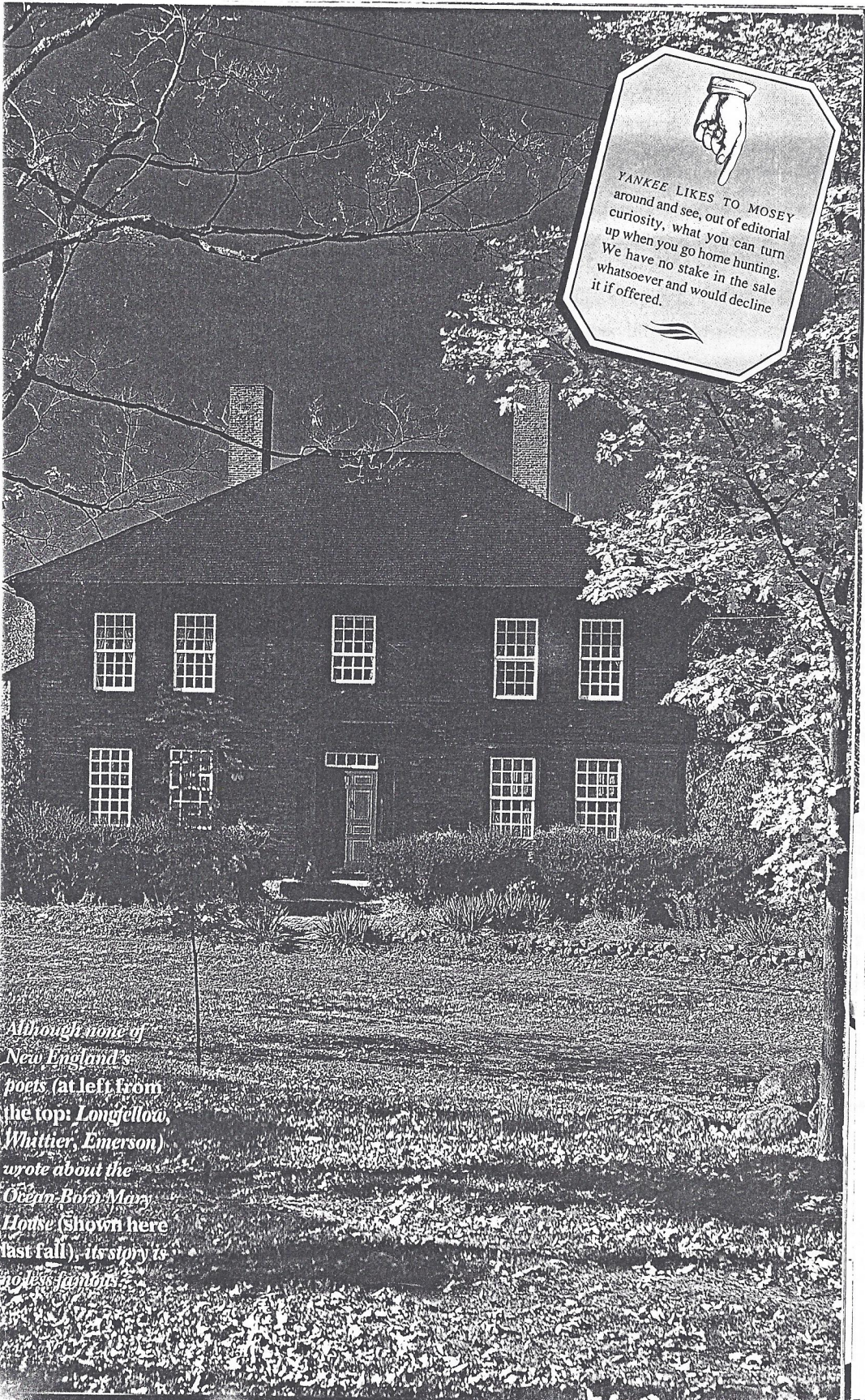
EVERY WELL-ESTABLISHED region in the United States has its share of legends. New England, being well established longer, probably has the most. And you can bet all your wooden nutmegs that over the past 61 years, *Yankee* has covered every one of them — from the *Palatine* of Block Island to the Wedding Cake House of Kennebunk, Maine, to the mystery stones in North Salem, New Hampshire, to Vermont's "Thunderbolt and Lightfoot" stories. And dozens more.


Although based on histori-



cal facts, legends usually consist of a lot that cannot be verified. In the case of New England legends, this is often because our famous three-name poets — like John Greenleaf Whittier, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow — felt no compunctions about altering history in order to write a good poem. Especially history in which mystery or romance was involved. Other New England legends, however, are created simply by the retelling of a certain historical incident over many generations. Such stories tend to







YANKEE LIKES TO MOSEY

 around and see, out of editorial


 curiosity, what you can turn

 up when you go home hunting.

 We have no stake in the sale

 whatsoever and would decline

 it if offered.



Although none of

 New England's

 poets (at left from

 the top: Longfellow,

 Whittier, Emerson)

 wrote about the

 Ocean-Born Mary

 House (shown here

 last fall), its story is

 no less fabulous.

get *better* over time.

Thus it is with the famous legend of the Ocean-Born Mary House in Henniker, New Hampshire. Here in our offices in Dublin, New Hampshire, we have a file literally a foot thick containing what's been published in past magazines and newspapers on the Ocean-Born Mary House. The last time we hauled this file out to peruse it was in the spring of 1972, which was also the last time the property was for sale. We featured it here in July of that year. We remember how adamantly the owner, then a Mrs. David Russell, had stressed that no one was to visit the property without a specific appointment.

Depicting Henniker in the 1800s, this mural (detail) hangs in the living room. (Top, r.: old N.H. Statehouse; center: "O.-B. Mary" House.)



She had been bothered by gawking tourists, some of whom came with shovels in order to dig around for a pirate's "buried treasure." Obviously, by 1972 the legend of the Ocean-Born Mary House had gotten totally out of hand.

So before describing our visit several months ago, perhaps we should first separate the historical facts from the fiction. We owe

that to posterity — and to all future owners.

• **THE HISTORICAL FACTS:** On July 28, 1720, the ship *Wolf*, carrying Scotch-Irish immigrants to New England, was captured off Boston by a pirate vessel captained by one Don Pedro. Among the passengers were a James Wilson and his wife, Elizabeth, who had given birth to a daughter earlier that same day — or possibly a few days before. When the pirate captain saw the newborn child, he said he would spare the lives of everyone aboard if the Wilsons named her Mary after his mother. The Wilsons agreed. Don Pedro allowed the *Wolf* to continue on to Boston, and he even gave little Mary some green silk to be made into her future wedding dress. Pieces of that silk exist today — in both the Henniker and Londonderry (New Hampshire) libraries.

• **MORE FACTS:** James Wilson died some time after landing in Boston, at which point Elizabeth and her daughter, Mary, moved to Londonderry, where Elizabeth married James Clark, a great-great-grandparent of "Go-West, Young-Man" Horace Greeley. In 1742 Mary, wearing a wedding dress made of the pirate's silk, married James Wallace. They had five children, four sons and a daughter, three of whom eventually settled in Henniker. One of the sons, Robert, built what's now known as the Ocean-Born Mary House sometime between 1760 and 1780. After her husband died, Mary came to Henniker to live out her years — but *not* in

Robert's house. Instead she lived with one of her other sons, William, (in a house that no longer exists today) until her death in 1814. She's buried in the cemetery behind the Henniker town hall, known today as "the community building." In front of her gravestone is a small marker saying "Ocean-Born Mary."

• **THE FICTION:** When pirate captain

Don Pedro retired from the sea, he built what's known today as the Ocean-Born Mary House in Henniker, invited Mary, then a widow, and her children to come live with him there as a housekeeper, which she did. Somewhere on the 140 acres that now comprise the property, Don Pedro buried a chestful of loot from his pirate days, and then he was murdered in the orchard. His body was placed beneath a three-ton hearthstone in front of the fireplace in what's now the den — where it remains to this very day.

* * *

BEFORE KNOCKING ON the back door of the Ocean-Born Mary House on one of those wintry April days this past spring, we found ourselves standing in the snow, admiring an incredibly beautiful mountain view to the west. There wasn't a view here when we visited 24 years ago. And it is all so quiet. We could even hear the soft swishing of the Contoocook River far down in the valley. We were amazed, too, at the lovely expanse of lawns, the well-cared-for shrubs and trees, and all the exposed stone walls. We recall nothing around this house but solid woods.

All the outbuildings and the wing off the south side of the house are different, too. For one thing, they aren't about to fall down as we remembered the 1972 outbuildings. The small barn, the four-car garage, and even the wing look brand-new. And visible through the cleared forest beyond the rushing brook on the north side of the house is an old-fashioned sugarhouse. That wasn't here before. Also, the house itself — a great old Georgian Colonial — looks so much better than what we remembered. No longer in need of paint and repairs, it's obviously in pristine condition today.

We finally knocked on the door and were

greeted by owners Bob and Mary Gregg, originally from Sherborn, Massachusetts, and Peterborough, New Hampshire, respectively, who purchased the Ocean-Born



The view from the porch off the new wing (containing a new kitchen) faces northwest toward Lovewell Mountain in the Sunapee range.

Mary House (its registered trade name) in 1972 after seeing our article. During these past 24 years, Bob and Mary not only raised their four children here, but also, little by little, they also transformed this entire 140-acre property from an "interesting-but-needs-work" sort of situation to one of the finest country estates in all of New Hampshire.

For the next hour, Bob and Mary escorted us through each of the 13 rooms (including seven bedrooms, 3½ baths) plus the attic and a very impressive cellar. It was immediately obvious to us that in the last 24 years the interior has been the beneficiary of as much loving care as has the outside. "We've totally restored, painted, and finished one room each year," Bob told us, pointing out a

HOUSE FOR SALE

spot near the front door (with original four-foot-long strap hinges) where he had deliberately exposed four layers of paint beginning with the olive green of over 200 years ago to gray to white and now, thanks to Bob, the original olive green once again on the top.

For us, the highlights of our tour include the original 16-star-and-eagle stenciling painted in the late 1700s (when there were just 16 states) over one of the six fireplaces; the two gigantic walk-in fireplaces — one in the study and the other in the living room; the original loom stored up in the attic; the original Indian shutters, one with an arrowhead hole; the fancy 18th-century raised paneling and Christian doors with the original hardware; the bridal staircase with its 16 steps (girls were expected to marry at age 16); and so many features such as the ship's knees moldings, the natural wide pine flooring throughout, and the original pine paneling in the loom/bedroom.

We should mention, too, that the large country kitchen is part of the new wing (or rebuilt wing), as is a nice screened-in porch facing that breathtaking brand-new view. All in all, there's not a single square foot that "needs work." It's all absolutely gorgeous.

Before we took our leave, Bob invited us to see his sugarhouse, built in 1976, where each spring he boils enough sap to provide about 40 gallons of maple syrup for friends and family. We could tell he was particularly proud of it, so we trudged along behind him in the snow, wishing we had worn boots, until we came to the rushing brook. Bob's sugarhouse is up the bank on the



Owners Mary and Bob Gregg posed outside the house last

Thanksgiving with their four children, two spouses, and dog.

other side. Without hesitation, Bob nonchalantly crossed a stone dam, partially covered with ice and with water spilling over between and over small stepping stones, casually holding onto a thin wavy rope that serves as a sort of handrail. Then it was our

turn. Heart pounding, we started across *very* slowly, timidly placing one foot on a slippery raised rock and then another, holding onto that practically useless rope for dear life — and then, just as we *knew* would happen, we slipped, plunged headlong into the icy waters below the dam, and were rapidly swept downstream to the Contoocook River in the valley below where, sev-

eral weeks later, our body was discovered by a fisherman.

Well, of course, that didn't happen. We made it across, and after inspecting the sugarhouse, we even made it back again — just barely. But the sudden, sodden demise of the Moseyer would kind of spruce up this story, wouldn't it? You could even say that the startling sight of the pirate's ghost in the woods on the other side of the dam was what caused us to slip and fall. In a hundred years, maybe, people would be claiming Don Pedro *pushed* us into the drink because he thought we were about to discover his buried treasure.

You know, it would be a real honor to be part of another bona fide New England legend.

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◀ **THE GREGGS** are asking \$875,000. For more information contact Robert E. Gregg Jr. at LandVest, 109 North Main St., Concord, NH 03301; 603-228-2020 days; 603-428-7550 nights. □ □