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**Wagging Tongues in East Greenwich
Didn't Faze the Youthful Lawyer;
He Went Ahead and Built His House**

James Mitchell Varnum's House

Patriotic and historic museum will open again Wednesday

STORY BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

Pictures by Edward C. Hanson and Frank J. Farley

EAST GREENWICH people shook their heads, called it "Varnum's Folly." Tongues wagged in the Bunch of Grapes and on the docks. Was ever such foolishness heard of? A tarnation Johnny-Come-Lately from Massachusetts, fledglin' lawyer scarce 22 years old, building him a big house on the hill back of the courthouse! And not just an ordinary house, either. Regular mansion it's goin' to be—eight rooms, with a fire-place in each one; and wainscoted, too. Big central halls on both floors and a fancy doorway with a columned porch.

What's the man thinkin' of, the wisecracs demanded. Hear he's goin' to have a walled garden set with shade trees. Wife's planted some of them already. Fine-lookin' woman, and they do say she's a toppin' cook. Warren girl, name of Martha Child. Varnum calls her "Patty." Where's the money comin' from, him or her?

One thing's certain sure, Varnum ain't a wealthy man—although you'd think he was, way he dresses. Reg'lar fop. Ever see him come into court to try a case. Well, it's quite a sight. Brick-colored coat trimmed with gold lace, buckskin breeches with more gold lace at the knees, silk stockings, powdered hair. Powerful pleader, they say. Well, he'll need to be smart to scratch up enough law business to pay for that house on the hill.



PATTY VARNUM planted the elm whose branches shade the hilltop lot where her husband built the house.

Thus, in 1773, the wagging tongues of East Greenwich. James Mitchell Varnum wasn't one to be bothered by mutterings about a fool and his money; he was ever a man a-marching.

By the fall of 1773 the mansion was completed and stood—as today it stands—overlooking the town and the bay; a fine big two-story house flooded with sunlight, a white house with green blinds, a proud house for a good-living man. But the name "Varnum's Folly" stuck and maybe the neighbors weren't so far wrong, at that, for Varnum didn't live long enough to get all the good out of his house that he should have. He was 22 when he purchased the two John Peirce lots for \$90 and started building on the westerly one. Eighteen years later he lay dying in Marietta, Ohio, far from the hip-gabled mansion which that famed chartered command, the Varnum Continentals, purchased in 1939 and have preserved as a patriotic shrine and museum which opens its doors to the public this Wednesday for another summer season.

The Varnum house cost about \$4000 to build, and that was quite a lot of money in those days. We have no idea what it cost him to furnish it, but one thing is certain: if the shade of James Mitchell Varnum ever returns to pay it a spectral visit, he must find himself living away beyond the means of a boy lawyer just starting practice. The chances are that it was furnished rather simply and not with the lavishment of do-

nated articles which now adorn its spacious halls and rooms.

It seems almost a pity that the Varnum house contains, according to Col. Howard V. Allen, chairman of trustees, not one stick of original Varnum furniture. But that's something that couldn't be helped. James and "Patty" Varnum left no children to carry on the name, and after the General's death in 1788 his widow moved away. What became of the Varnum household effects nobody knows; there is said to be a desk in Roxbury that belonged to the brilliant man whose whiz-bang career as jurist, soldier and statesman crowded the 40 years of his life with strenuous living. But if the Varnum house lacks the family heirlooms which might—had they been available—have given it the stamp of his vibrant personality, it at least affords a striking demonstration of the life of the period in which he lived. The interior is not so much a restoration as the re-creation of a colonial-Revolutionary country seat.

And "Varnum's Folly" had its day in history, its association with stirring events in the years that saw a new nation fight its way into being. There, on an April Day in 1775, Varnum received the news of that brief but memorable spatter of musketry on Lexington Common. Three hours later he was on his way to Boston at the head of the Kentish Guards. You picture him kissing his Patty a hasty goodby at the door, then descending the hill—probably at headlong pace—to muster his command for the march. The drums tap, the fifes shrill, and off they go, among them a Pvt. Nathanael Greene, who walked a little lame. Colonel Varnum marched his Guards as far as Pawtucket, where an express rider met them and turned them back with the news that the British foray was over and the well-peppered lobsterbacks in retreat to Boston. Colonel Varnum was back home in time for supper.

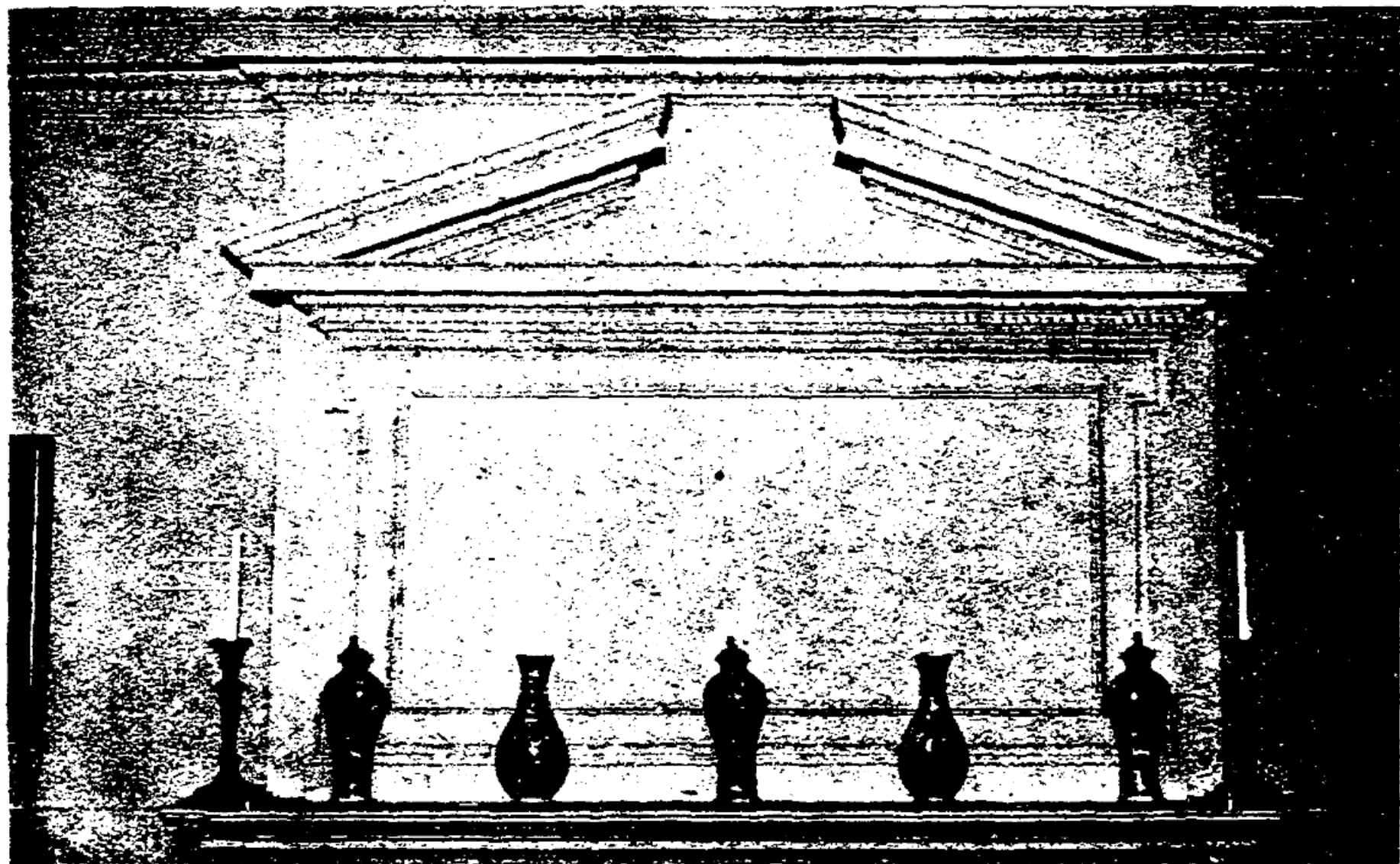
But his marching had only begun. He had a gift



SWORD and LETTER. "This life," wrote the General to his Patty shortly before he died, "is but a bubble. It soon bursts. . . ."



LAWYER'S WORKSHOP. Here James Mitchell Varnum pondered his legal cases—including the one that established the authority of the U.S. Government.



DINING ROOM MANTEL (original) with broken pediment copied by famed Architect Stanford White for R.I. Building at St. Louis Exposition, 1907.



A **QUAKERESS** figures in Varnum legendry. Fittingly, therefore, a quakeress gray silk taffeta gown is modeled by Madeleine Goldmacher, R.I. School of Design.

The Varnum House continued

Village Belles and French Dandies

for the profession of arms, this stoutish, florid young man, and his appointment as Brigadier General of the Continental Line involved him in campaigns that took him far from his Patty and "Varnum's Folly." He was present at the shelling of Roxbury, the siege of Boston, the action at Harlem Heights and the Battle of White Plains. In 1777 he commanded all the American troops on the Jersey side of the Delaware and fought them in a stubborn defense of the river forts. "I have lost a great many men today," he wrote after the action at Red Bank. "Many officers are killed and wounded. My fine company of artillery are almost destroyed."

Varnum was at Valley Forge in 1778, and Patty, too. Washington liked him and called him "the life of the camp." Later in the year he took his brigade into the Battle of Rhode Island and helped beat back three British attempts to turn the Americans' right wing. That was about the last of General Varnum's active soldiering; he resigned his commission in 1779 and resumed the practice of law.

THE young Marquis de Lafayette visited the Varnum house in 1778 and slept in the southeast chamber, with his valet occupying a cot in the hall. One gathers that there wasn't much sleeping done during his visit. He had with him a group of dandified French officers, young fellows swaggering in green

uniforms faced with red and lined with gold. A "house-warming," Varnum called it, and indeed the fine new house on the hill glowed with hospitality while they were there. The nights, says a contemporary account, "were filled with conviviality." General Sullivan came over from Providence, and "Brave Barton," the kidnaper of the British General Prescott, was among the guests, bluff and bibulous in buff-and-blue.

And there was a touch of romance, too. Every evening, before the serious drinking began, there was tea, and all the village beauties were had up to meet the Marquis and his staff. Among them was a Miss Eleanor Fry, a handsome girl who later turned Quakeress. No Quakeress, she, when the Marquis visited "Varnum's Folly." In her old age she remembered the compliments paid her by Lafayette and his aides, treasured a quatrain penned in her honor by one of them. After her death they found it in a little chest.

For man to bow to man below

Is called Idolatry, I know.

But when angelic forms appear

Like thine, 'tis duty to revere.

And Lafayette, when he learned of her skill at the spinning wheel—Miss Fry could whiz you off enough linen for a dozen lawn handkerchiefs in the proverbial jiffy—called her "a fair Penelope." When the ladies had retired and the Madeira came on and the toasts began, be sure that the name of Eleanor Fry

wasn't unhonored by the gentlemen. She lived to a great age, a quiet woman in gray, devoted to good works but hoarding worldly memories of a candlelit gaiety and courtly men.

MISS Eleanor Fry's East Greenwich was a town of drab, unpainted houses and sandy, rain-washed streets. There was a courthouse at Head o' the Gutter and a whipping post—and above Main Street "Varnum's Folly" sitting on the hilltop with windows ablaze in the sun and two great chimneys smoking. In the library-law office at the end of the great hallway General Varnum prepared his legal briefs, mapped his defense of Weeden the butcher in the precedent-setting case which denied the power of a legislative body, the General Assembly, to set aside a court decision. In 1780 he was elected to Congress, in 1785 he was re-elected, in 1787 he was appointed to a federal judgeship in the Northwest Territory and went to live in Marietta, Ohio, a frontier town where log houses lined muddy streets with imposing Latin names. In 1788 he died, was buried in Marietta's "Campus Martins."

After Varnum's death, the house was purchased by Ethan Clarke, a Newport merchant and slaveowner active in the West India trade, a little man who went about attended by a gigantic blackamoor named Caesar, a Congo chieftain wearing a nose ring and



THE GENERAL. This portrait above his law-office mantel was copied from a miniature painted in Philadelphia during the Revolutionary War period by an unknown artist.

The Varnum House continued

Caesar Wore a Nose Ring and Earrings

huge earrings of yellow gold. In Clarke's day the Varnum house dispensed hospitality to guests of a different kidney—tough, enterprising skippers plying to the West Indies and the southern ports, slavers of the Three Cornered Trade. Ethan Clarke, too, had his day and died. They buried Caesar at the foot of his grave.

Subsequent owners of the house were members of the Greene family, Judge George Arnold, Chief Justice George A. Brayton of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island, Dr. William Shaw Bowen and A. Dudley Hart. There have been few interior changes, in no way has the colonial integrity of "Varnum's Folly" been impaired. Some 40 years ago, a two-story ell was added, and it was an addition which has proved to be of some benefit, inasmuch as it gives museum space for collections and single items which would otherwise jar the quiet dignity of the main house, the one that James Mitchell Varnum built. There are Indian relics and collections of Chinese fans, pictures of old East Greenwich houses, antique lead soldiers, ancient dolls, a notable marine collection, the mahogany desk at which John Brown sat in the first U.S. bank of Providence, a stuffed parrot, a "deacon's staff" once used to blip the nodding sconces of people who went to sleep in church. A number

of Varnum items, too; the pompous play the General wrote about the Battle of Bunker Hill, the sword he bore in battle, his last letter to "Patty." The room which seems to contain the most of him is the one he used for his law office. There his portrait hangs, copied from a miniature painted in Philadelphia when he was a boy general in the Continental Line. There are the book-lined shelves and the window bay where he wrote. It looks out upon sunlit lawns. Almost you expect to see Patty Varnum strolling in her garden. They say she loved flowers. The year Lafayette visited the Varnum house the great elm she planted at the northeast corner of the garden wall was just a young tree.

COVER PICTURE shows Nancy Robinson, School of Design student, modeling a white silk gown presented to museum by Miss Amy Varnum. Originally worn by Mrs. James M. Varnum. Photo is by Frank J. Farley.

