

Then & Now

The Boylston Villa, Farm, and Gov. Gill Estate



Painting Boylston Villa, Notice the lack of Trees & The Large Barn As Part of The Boylston Farm

The Ward Nicholas Boylston Villa has been a central part of Princeton's history for over 200 years. The house stands high atop a hill at 73 Worcester Road, overlooking Eastern Massachusetts and Boston. Accounts of the ability to see the tall ships in Boston harbor from the East veranda continued into the mid 20th century; a view that has now been obscured by the gleam of the sun reflecting off of Boston's distant, increasing skyline. What started as a summer home for one of Princeton's most illustrious families has been host to presidents, famous artists, politicians, and a destination for some of Princeton's most memorable entertaining.

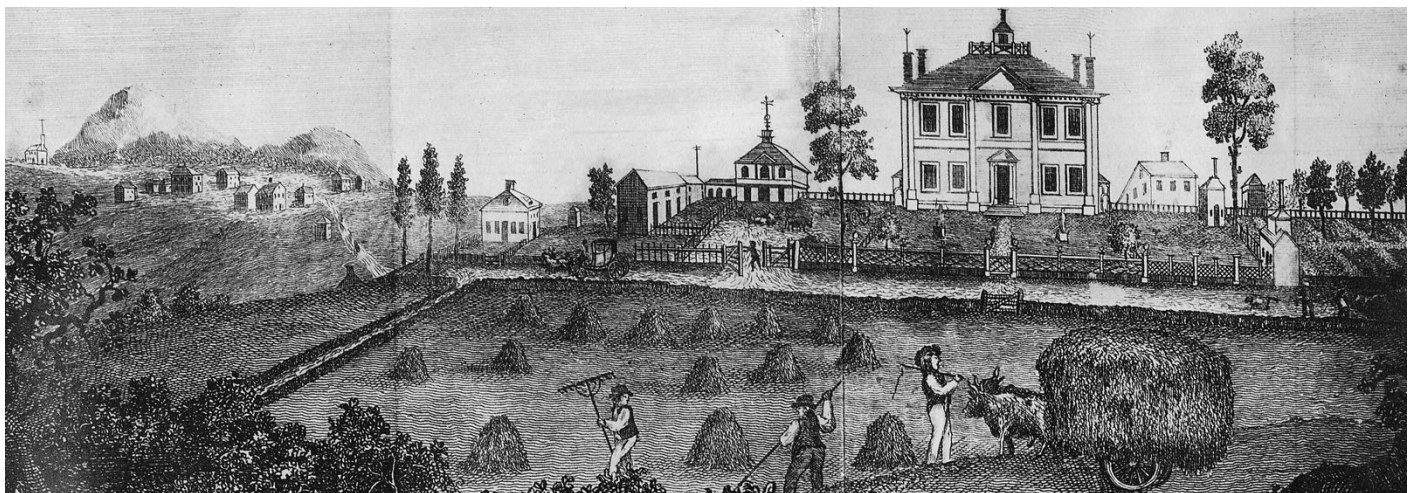
To appreciate the understated sophistication of Boylston's villa, one must first understand the man who built it and made it his home. Ward Nicholas Boylston, originally Ward Hallowell, was born in 1749 to Benjamin and Mary Hallowell of Jamaica Plain, MA. At the age of 21, he took the name of his uncle, Nicholas Boylston, a wealthy Boston merchant who had no direct heir. A year later, he inherited his uncle's estate and soon thereafter left for the next 27 years, taking up residence in London, and traveling extensively across Europe and the Middle East. This time undoubtedly shaped Boylston's taste and culture. Most notably, his time in Italy included a visit to Vicenza where Boylston wrote of viewing buildings designed by "the great architect Palladio,"ⁱ an experience that most certainly influenced the symmetrical Palladian lines and

proportions of his future Princeton home. He returned home to a newly independent country in 1800.

Boylston inherited the 3000 acres of land upon which he built the villa in 1804. Originally the country seat of Moses Gill, a prominent Judge of the court of common pleas for the county of Worcester who rose to the role of lieutenant governor and eventually acting governor of Massachusetts upon the death of governor, Increase Sumner in June 1799 until his death in May 1800. Boylston's mother, Mary (Boylston) Hallowell was sister to Rebecca (Boylston) Gill, the second wife of Moses Gill. Gill's original residence on the property was by all accounts a magnificent, large, and ornate structure—a fitting testament to his prominence and stature in late 18th century Massachusetts, but a stark contrast to the elegant, yet modest taste that Boylston would eventually choose for his own dwelling.



*Ward Nicholas Boylston
Painting By Gilbert Stuart
In 1825*



A single drawing of this estate exists, though it is widely agreed that it mixes the reality of the estate with a level of artistic license. Regardless, Boylston spent his summers at the Gill mansion until it eventually fell into disrepair, and the loss of one of Princeton's important landmarks occasioned the construction of the next.

The Villa's designer remains uncertain, though its work has been ascribed to prominent period architects Charles Bullfinch, Asher Benjamin, and Elias Carter. The original plans purportedly existed as late as the 1970s, though they have passed from existence, supposedly loaned to an architectural student without return. According to Paul B. Morgan in his 1958 paper discussing the house, "Bullfinch has my vote for several reasons, not the least of them being that Boylston undoubtedly was acquainted with him through their mutual interest in the Adams family. And John Quincy Adams was

sufficiently intrigued with the villa's building to import and present to Boylston the French paper that graces the hall." ii



Construction of the house was completed between 1818 and 1819, traditionally said to be built of bricks that were brought over as ballast in English ships. The rural expanses of early 19th century Princeton were undoubtedly a welcome retreat from the hustle

and bustle of Boston, where Boylston retained his family residence in Jamaica Plain and spent the winters. By all accounts Boylston “entertained royally” at the villa, hosting the likes of his cousins John and John Quincy Adams, and being painted by the famous 19th century portrait artist Gilbert Stuart for \$200, a large sum for the time. A letter from the elder Adams in his later years to Boylston dated August 7th, 1821 speaks of his fondness and familiarity with the property, stating “...My little hills too have been tolerably fruitful, though they are molehills compared to your mountains. I long to look down upon my hillocks from your lofty heights but all such delights



Boylston Crypt/Tomb

are forbidden and unattainable to me. I must be contented with gazing at your Wachusett from my miniatures.”

Boylston died in 1828, enjoying less than a decade in his new residence, and was buried in the family crypt that he constructed in the center of town, west of the common. The house was then passed down through generations of Boylston descendants until it passed out of Boylston hands in 1918.



The Back Of The Farmhouse Facing East, With Rt 31 On The Other Side, Picture Probably Taken From Near The Large Barn

Farm Boylston had a keen interest in the study and practice of agriculture, which planted the seeds for the property to grow over the next 100 years into one of the largest farms in Worcester County. According to one contemporary account written around the turn of the 20th century, “Boylston Farm is at present owned by Ward N. Boylston [The

2nd], and consists of 550 acres, highly improved, with excellent buildings, a most convenient and abundant water supply. The view from the residence, looking eastward, is most charming and picturesque. This farm is considered one of the best in this section, and Mr. Boylston is one of the most successful farmers in town...It is thoroughly stocked with a dairy of 100 cows and 8 horses, and its dairy is one of the most prominent in that special line, and perhaps second to none in the county.” The estate’s original farmhouse, completed around 1830 still stands next door and there is evidence that a portion of that house was originally attached to the original Gill Mansion (pictured above).

The barn fell into disrepair by the 1970s and was eventually lost after a catastrophic floor collapse purportedly led to the hanging of the last herd of cattle that graced the Boylston fields. Today all that remains is a pair of large stone ramps.



Boylston Barn & Hired Hands circa 1900

The main house upon its completion was more understated than it stands today, though future owners were careful to make changes fitting the overall philosophy and feel of the original. Early views of the house seen from an 1850 daguerreotype and an 1860 lithograph, as well as more modern observations of the construction of the house, give clues to its evolution over time. The double wedding of Boylston's granddaughters Louisa and Mary in 1853 is thought to have occasioned what were perhaps the most impactful changes to the villa's appearance, with the addition of the current arched portico at the West entrance of the house. At the same time, a new marble mantle in the contemporary taste was added to the fireplace in the reception room and the sweep of the interior staircase was reversed, purportedly so that the brides could be better seen from the main reception room



Boylston Granddaughters Wedding Pin Cushion

descending on their wedding day. Over time, the second floor servant's quarters were converted into more broadly used living space, though the decoration and detail of the entire floor remain much simpler than the original family living quarters on the first. Such changes brought about the addition of the houses numerous dormers to allow for increased light and larger sleeping quarters.



Original Library, Now Current Master Bath

The Boylston heirs spared no expense on modern comforts. The present cupola was a later addition, providing increased comfort on the hottest of summer days. And the unusually preserved, early attempts at plumbing include

a lead-lined cistern tucked into the eaves of the second story, likely added in the late 19th century, to provide gravity fed water to the house. The original crank used to pump water from the cellar to the cistern remains. Such advances made possible one of the more prominent changes to the villa's interior when Ward Nicholas' original library was converted into an indoor bathroom, likely completed by Ward Nicholas Boylston III.

Thankfully this change did not necessitate the removal of that rarely conserved, and even rarer worthy of mention 19th century necessity—the privy—for the villa retains its original. This atypically ornate, octagonal structure speaks to the breadth of activity occurring at the property, as a single-holer alone would not suffice. Boylston's privy contains 10 holes, separated into dedicated sides for gentlemen and ladies and including smaller holes for children. A hatch allowed servants to muck-out the contents as needed from the depths of its circular stone foundations.



10 Seat Privy



Boylston Club House Interior

Also extant is the “club house”, dating to some time in the early- to mid-19th century, and reminiscent of a small chapel with its distinctive multi-tiered cupola topped by a birdhouse. This building’s original use is lost to time, though it was frequently used by Boylston’s great-great-grandson, the third Ward Nicholas Boylston who inherited the estate on his 21st birthday in 1892. The 1900 publication “Princeton Mass. Illustrated” stated that “The present Ward Nicholas Boylston was a member of the legislature in 1898-99 and is very popular in

Princeton, where he makes his summer home. His Club House contains a fine collection of Moose and Caribou heads, which he has secured by his own efforts. This is where he entertains bachelor parties and holds his little political meetings.”

In 1918, ownership of the estate passed from the Boylston’s to Dr. Frank George, who made his most prominent mark on the house with the addition of a gun room on the second floor, which was later converted to a study. Ownership then passed to the Sigourney’s in 1926, who tastefully modernized some elements of the house and focused on the preservation of many of its original elements, including the historically significant scenic Dufour wallpapers, some of which were noted earlier to be a gift to Boylston from John Quincy Adams on the completion of the villa.



Boylston Club House Exterior

One of the more curious periods of the house’s history occurred from the 1960’s through the 1970’s under the ownership of Loring Coes, who similar to his father—the founder of the Coes Wrench Company and inventor of the monkey wrench—would leave his mark on history as an inventor. Coes was a scientist working for The Norton Company and focused on synthesizing the world’s first synthetic diamonds. Much of his research was conducted in his laboratory in the cellar of the home, where he fabricated all of his own experimental glassware as an accomplished glass blower. As noted by Robert M. Hazen in his book “The Diamond Makers”, “Coes was a meticulous, dedicated

scientist who worked long hours in his lab and at home.” And that “...Norton employees engaged in a variety of high-pressure experiments, but the work of chemist Loring Coes, Jr., yielded the most important discoveries.” Coes himself was a well-known, and certainly an eccentric resident of Princeton and like Boylston hosted many gatherings at the house, where he was known to host readings of plays until all hours of the evening with his guests in the dining room. He is perhaps best known for his tendency to ride his horse through the house, and by some accounts the horse



***Boylston Villa Scenic Wall Paper
(see more rooms at the end)***

was known to greet visitors at the door of the home.

After Coes' passing the house sat vacant for some time, and by one account there was a tree growing in the kitchen before a series of new owners undertook the necessary steps to preserve and bring the residence back to its former self. Today, the house stands as a thoughtfully restored, minimally changed version of itself that Ward Nicholas Boylston himself would certainly feel at home in.

ⁱ "A Yankee on the Grand Tour: Ward Nicholas Boylston's Travels in Italy and the Middle East", John W. Tyler

ⁱⁱ "Some Observations on the Boylston Villa", Paul B Morgan Jr.

This document was researched, written and assembled by Charles Koegler the current owner in 2024, with images were added by William "Bud" Brooks from the PHS collection.

Dufour Wallpaper in Various Rooms in the Boylston Villa

