

*History, Memory, and a House Museum:
Artemas Ward of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts*

*A Harvard Seminar
Looks at the Wards*

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IN 1926 ARTEMAS WARD, a New York businessman, donated his family's ancestral home in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, to Harvard University in memory of his great-grandfather, the Revolutionary War general Artemas Ward. The house came with a substantial bequest, the will stipulating that the university could use the money as it pleased as long as it used some of the income to establish the general's reputation 'as a devoted and faithful friend of his country' and maintained the general's home as a 'public patriotic museum.' In 1938 Harvard fulfilled one part of that requirement by erecting an equestrian statue of Ward in a prominent circle in Washington, D.C. With the help of faithful docents and local antiquarians, they have also kept the house open to the public during the summer months. In addition, they have devoted a small portion of the income to support a fellowship for graduate students in American history. But until recently, few people at Harvard, even in the history department, had ever heard of Artemas Ward and his house.

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When I arrived at Harvard in 1995, I had only a vague recollection of his role in the American Revolution. Prodded by Jane C. Nylander, then president of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, I inquired about the house, its history, and its long and curious relationship with Harvard. I discovered a treasure. The house, built as a modest farmhouse in the 1720s, was doubled in size during the 1780s, then extended further in 1830. Despite remodeling in the nineteenth century, it retains much of its eighteenth-century character. The huge barn behind it is even more interesting. Formed from three separate barns joined together and fitted for the latest mid-nineteenth-century farming techniques, it is itself an encyclopedia of agricultural change in Worcester County.

Even better, a huge collection of family papers has survived. The American Antiquarian Society holds thirty-eight boxes, twenty-five octavo volumes, and twenty-five folio volumes of account books, letters, journals, and miscellaneous papers. The Massachusetts Historical Society owns the Artemas Ward orderly book and other eighteenth-century materials, especially pertaining to the general's political and military career. Other papers, including documentation of the house, can be found in the Harvard archives. Almost as important are published works by the Wards themselves, especially the local and family histories written by Andrew Henshaw Ward and the charming, late nineteenth-century memoir by Elizabeth Ward, *Old Times in Shrewsbury*. Fortunately, historians at Old Sturbridge Village (OSV) became interested in the Ward household while doing research on a project on agricultural development in central New England, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Jack Larkin, "Labor is the Great Thing in Farming": The Farm Laborers of the Ward Family of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, 1787-1860' (1989), and Holly V. Izard, 'The Ward Family and Their "Helps": Domestic Work, Workers, and Relationships on a New England Farm, 1787-1866' (1993), published articles based on this research in the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*.



Fig 1. Artemas Ward House, Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, 1957. Kenneth Gould photograph for E. B. Luce Co. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

These essays and unpublished reports in the OSV library offered a useful starting point for further exploration.

Inspired by this wealth, I organized my graduate research seminar in 2001 around the Ward family, its papers, and the house. Izard, one of the investigators in the Sturbridge project, oriented my students to the house and made available her unpublished research, and Larkin, then director of research, collections, and library, supplied copies of Old Sturbridge Village reports. The staffs at the Harvard University Archives, AAS, and Massachusetts Historical Society were also very helpful. Since the seven students enrolled in my seminar were interested in different periods of U.S. history and in different approaches to the past, the many-layered records of the Ward Family turned out to be an ideal focus. Lauren Brown, a student of twentieth-century culture, was delighted to



Fig 2. Farm teams and men. General Ward Homestead, Shrewsbury, Mass., October 1910. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

discover that the donor of the house, who liked to call himself ‘Artemas Ward of the Seventh Generation,’ made his fortune in advertising. She was especially entranced with his sponsorship, on behalf of Sapo Soap, of a transatlantic voyage in a rubber boat at the time of World’s Columbian Exhibition. In contrast, Sheri Shepard discovered nuances of nineteenth-century family life in the intimate letters at AAS. Intrigued with *Old Times in Shrewsbury*, Erin Royston interpreted the book alongside family relics and photographs of the early twentieth-century museum installation. Daniel Wewers, whose interests were in antebellum politics and culture, wrote on the travel journey of Henry Dana Ward. Judy Kertesz was initially skeptical about the project. Of Lumbee descent, she was wary of taking on a project that celebrated, once again, the lives and achievements of white colonists. To her surprise and delight, she discovered in the corners of the house and the deepest recesses of the attic, evidence of the Wards’ encounters with American Indians.

The two papers selected for the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* take contrasting approaches to the old problem of

establishing the general's reputation. Justin Florence began with the orderly book, then moved outward to soldiers' diaries, reconstructing the social history of the revolutionary encampment in Cambridge. He challenges both antiquarian memory and recent scholarship that puts the emphasis on George Washington. The making of an American army was a complex process: it took more than a moment to turn minutemen into soldiers. In contrast, Rebecca Goetz examined the many efforts to elevate the general, from Andrew Ward's genealogically inspired histories to the statue in Washington, D.C. In the process, she uncovered the unseen work of the female caretakers of the general's memory. She argues that the many efforts to transform Artemas Ward into a national hero became instead a way of preserving one family's identity over time. Both papers look beneath hero-focused histories of the American Revolution to discover broader and ultimately more interesting stories. Ironically, they are able to do so because one family wanted to make its ancestor a hero.

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