

# New Building, New Walls

WITH PLANS UNDERWAY TO RELOCATE TO A LARGER DOWNTOWN FACILITY, THE RUFUS PORTER MUSEUM IN BRIDGTON, MAINE, GAINED EXTRA INCENTIVE—THE RECENT DONATION OF A HOUSEFUL OF VIBRANT WALL MURALS PAINTED BY PORTER'S NEPHEW JONATHAN D. POOR.

A small Cape built by a young doctor in 1838 holds a treasure trove of folk art—elaborate murals painted along the stairway, landing, and two bed-chambers. The walls look untouched, likely because the house in East Baldwin, Maine, remained in the doctor's family until the 1940s.

The fifth and most recent owners, Glenn and Norma Haines, lived there for nearly three decades before moving last year. Talk of the railroad reactivating lines 15 feet from the house and the fear that subsequent owners might not properly care for the murals prompted the couple to donate the walls to the Rufus Porter Museum, with the stipulation that they remain accessible to the public.

Dr. James Norton moved to East Baldwin in 1834 to establish his medical practice and raise a family. He hired Jonathan D. Poor, who lived in nearby Sebago with his wife, Caroline (Porter), and four children, three of them younger than five, to decorate the house.

Poor's wife took ill and died in 1840, the year the artist decorated Norton's house. Because Poor's work at the Norton house is more extensive than any other murals attributed to him, researchers speculate that he painted them in payment for his wife's medical treatment.

The museum hired David Ottinger, an authority on antiques and building materials from Arlington, Massachusetts, to oversee the removal and storage of the murals as well as trim boards, a fireplace mantel, staircase, and all interior woodwork. Ottinger's team applied hide glue to keep the plaster, lath, and



CARL LINDERBERG/COURTESY OF THE RUFUS PORTER MUSEUM

The waterfall painted by Jonathan D. Poor in the master chamber of the Norton house in East Baldwin, Maine, is among the most visually pleasing of those depicted by painters of the Porter School, according to Linda Carter Lefko and Jane E. Radcliffe, authors of the recently published *Folk Art Murals of the Rufus Porter School*.

vertical studs intact.

“Had these murals gone to an antiques dealer, they would have been broken up and the public would not be able to view the rooms in their original state,” said Julie Lindberg, the museum’s founder and curator. “The whole is much greater than all the parts. Keeping the two rooms and stairway hall together with all the woodwork is necessary to appreciate the visual impact of the house.”

Once the museum reopens, these walls will be installed next to the signed Rufus Porter murals removed from the Dr. Francis Howe house in Westwood, Massachusetts.

A capital campaign will help finance the new museum, which will include research and archive space, as well as the \$60,000 cost of removing the Poor murals. Museum officials plan to seek grants to finance the re-installation of the murals in the new facility.

For more information or to donate to the capital campaign, visit [www.rufusportermuseum.org](http://www.rufusportermuseum.org) \*



Poor’s initials and the date remain easily readable in the mural scene at the top of the staircase.

The second-storey exterior walls of the Norton house have been opened up to facilitate removing the mural walls.



curry



hsead

CARL LINDBERG/COURTESY OF THE RUFUS PORTER MUSEUM



The overmantel in the master chamber portrays a Federal house and barn, possibly representing the Chadbourne house next door. The signpost reads "J Norton/Hotel/1840," identifying the homeowner rather than the artist. Poor carried the mural's foliage into the built-in bookcase above the scene. The walls retain their vibrancy because they were never varnished or papered over. The only signs of age are water damage from a roof leak in a few places and some minor inpainting.



CARL LINDBERG/COURTESY OF THE RUFUS PORTER MUSEUM

**RIGHT** Detail of a ship from the scene on the wall of the staircase landing. Local iconography, such as sailing vessels in various sizes, is typical of Poor's work.

**OPPOSITE** The front entry of the Norton house opens to a staircase leading to a "good morning" landing. Eighteen walls along the staircase, landing, and two bedrooms accessed off each side are decorated with Poor's murals. The detailed water scene at the top of the stairs includes his initials and the date. Local history suggests that some of the first-floor rooms also had murals, although no trace of them remains.

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