ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO
How the Portsmouth Historical Society and John Paul Jones Saved a Colonial Mansion and Started a Museum in 1917
By J. Dennis Robinson

Although his name is synonymous with the stately yellow mansion, naval hero John Paul Jones was only a guest in the house that bears his name. And Jones, as famous as he may be, is only one of the many stories told inside the Portsmouth Historical Society. The newly formed nonprofit society saved the iconic 1758 structure from demolition a century ago in 1917--with a little help from Captain Jones.

Here's how it all started.

In 1714 the plot of land where the house stands was part of a 30-acre pasture known as Hunkins' Orchard. It was, even then, well positioned at the intersection of two unpaved highways, one leading to "the Portsmouth Plains" and another to "the Creek." The owner leased the land to George Jaffrey, who willed it to his daughter Ann, who married a guy named Nathaniel Peirce, whose family mansion is still visible across the street. Peirce sold the land to a ship captain named Gregory Purcell, who married the niece of New Hampshire's royal governor.

Hopestill Cheswell, a mixed-race "housewright" is believed to have built the three-story gambrel-roof home in 1758. The Purcells moved in and had a dozen children. On the eve of the American Revolution, Gregory Purcell died, leaving his wife Sarah in debt, with lingering lawsuits and liens to prominent Portsmouth businessmen. Legend says that in 1777 Widow Purcell rented a room to an ambitious Scotsman named John Paul Jones, who sailed the Portsmouth-built sloop of war *Ranger* into the history books. Jones returned in 1782, but failing to obtain a new ship, he moved on.

The house had many wealthy owners.

In 1783 Sarah Purcell sold the house to Woodbory Langdon, the brother of New Hampshire's first "president," John Langdon. It was John, a member of the Continental Congress like his brother, who had built the *Ranger* for Captain Jones. Jones and Langdon men despised one another. Woodbury, reportedly a handsome, bold, and sarcastic man, became a controversial NH justice. Woodbury built a costly brick home next door that became the original Rockingham Hotel.

Over the next 30 years the Purcell House changed hands four times. Both of Woodbury Langdon's sons owned it after his death. One of them sold it to a rich local family named Ladd who rented it to John Parrott, a Portsmouth Postmaster and later US Senator. In 1826 the house was purchased by Samuel Lord, a

prominent Portsmouth banker, insurance man, and stockbroker. When Mr. Lord died in 1871, his daughter Mary Morison, a widow, stayed on through the turn of the century.

Here the plot thickens.

Frank Jones, the local ale tycoon, robber baron, and Portsmouth mayor, bought the Rockingham Hotel next door. When it burned in 1884, Jones rebuilt the towering brick hotel, now adapted to condominiums. One local legend suggests that Jones had plans to raze the old Purcell House to build an insurance office, but he died in 1902. Woodbury Langon's daughter died the following year. The house was briefly used as a doctor's office and tea room.

Despite local protest, the Lord House, as it was then known, went on the auction block on Monday noon, April 16, 1917. Bids came in at $500, $800, $1,000 and $1,200. The winner was "Cappy" Stewart, a local antiques dealer and former manager of a Portsmouth bordello. Stewart bought the aging mansion, according to the local newspaper, "for wrecking purposes."

The captain returns

Naval hero John Paul Jones died in France in 1792. Then in 1905, under President "Teddy" Roosevelt, his corpse was discovered under the streets of Paris. Jones' body was shipped to the United States with great fanfare and entombed eight years later in an ornate sarcophagus at Annapolis Naval Academy. Jones' popularity had never been higher.

Local support to save the Purcell House, where Jones had stayed, was high. Many locals believed that a group or young Portsmouth women sewed the flag of the USS *Ranger*, the first American flag ever seen by a foreign power. The story is a hoax, invented by a biographer of John Paul Jones. But the story helped inspire a descendent of Woodbury Langdon and his wife to purchase the house from Cappy Stewart for $10,000.

In 1917 the Portsmouth Historical Society was formed. According to the newspaper, "several well known citizens...intend to preserve the building for future generations." They inherited an aging building stripped bare of everything that wasn't nailed down. The Society reached out to the people of Portsmouth, asking them to donate or lend their historic family treasures to the new museum that officially opened in 1920.

People responded with vigor. Those items and many more are on display a century later. A special centennial exhibit, "Odd & Elegant" includes strange and wonderful items from the museum collection. The house, its historic wooden fence, and gardens are lovingly maintained by the nonprofit museum. The Portsmouth Historical Society, with more members than ever, now maintains the Discover Portsmouth Center across the street. The visitor center and museum

galleries, located in the city's 1810-era academy building, offers advice, exhibits, lectures, tours, gifts and rental space. The John Paul Jones Museum at 43 Middle Street is open to the public from May through October.

J. Dennis Robinson is the author of a dozen history books on topics including Strawbery Banke Museum, Wentworth by the Sea Hotel, Privateer Lynx, and the Smuttynose Murders. Look for them in the Discover Portsmouth gift shop.