

Maine History

Volume 26
Number 2 *Henry Knox*

Article 3

9-1-1986

Montpelier: The Home of General Henry Knox

James B. Vickery

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal>



Part of the [Architectural History and Criticism Commons](#), [Historic Preservation and Conservation Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vickery, James B.. "Montpelier: The Home of General Henry Knox." *Maine History* 26, 2 (1986): 102.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistoryjournal/vol26/iss2/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine History by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

JAMES B. VICKERY

MONTPELIER:
THE HOME OF GENERAL HENRY KNOX

Maine coastal towns are noted for their beautiful houses, many of which were built during the late eighteenth or the first quarter of the nineteenth century, either by West Indies merchants or sea captains. At hand were crews of skillful shipwrights extremely knowledgeable in carpentry as well as the intricacies of wood carving. From Kennebunkport to Calais many elegant residences survive to testify to their handiwork. On the waterfront of Thomaston is one such imposing mansion, a replica, alas, of General Henry Knox's Montpelier. During Knox's lifetime the home was regarded as one of the finest private residences in New England. After Knox's death Montpelier was allowed to deteriorate. Even as early as 1825 the original house had fallen into a state of neglect, and in 1871 it was demolished. The replica (now again in poor condition) is based on the original and was rebuilt by the Knox Memorial Association under the supervision of the architectural firm of Putnam and Cox of Boston and with funds provided in part by Cyrus H. K. Curtis of the Curtis Publishing Company.*

With the emergence of the Federal government in 1789, a wave of optimism swept through the new republic. Opportunities for investment abounded, especially in foreign trade or land. At this time Maine lands came on the market for speculation, lands owned by proprietors of the Kennebeck Purchase Company and the Waldo Patent, along with other tracts. General Henry Knox, secretary of war under Washington, had married Lucy Flucker, granddaughter of General Samuel Waldo, who in the 1740s was granted by Massachusetts an

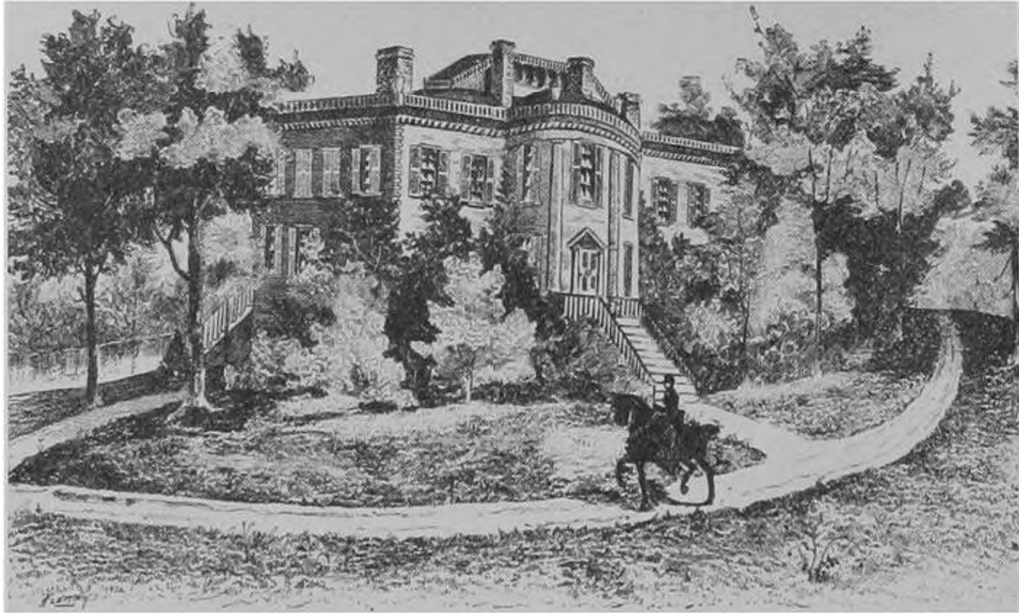
*The site of the replica is somewhat removed from the original site. Montpelier was located on a brow of a hill near Knox's wharf, near present-day Knox Street in Thomaston.



Montpelier, an impressive monument to Henry Knox's ambitions, was built in the mid-1790s, fell into disuse a half century later, and was torn down in 1871. The grounds included a lavish garden, housing for servants, a store, and Knox's office, all arranged in a semicircle behind the main house. Maine Historical Society Collections.

extensive tract known as the Waldo Patent. This included thirty square miles on the central coast, plus other land elsewhere — an estimated holding of over 500,000 acres.

General Waldo died in 1759, and except for Lucy Knox, the Waldo heirs remained loyal to the crown. Consequently, their estates were confiscated, permitting Lucy's husband to gain title to them. In 1791 Knox was appointed administrator of his father-in-law's estate and became his wife's agent for the unsold lands of the Waldo Patent, her share being one-fifth. As administrator, Knox bought some of the land for unpaid taxes; other portions had been auctioned off to Oliver Smith, who later conveyed his title to Colonel Henry Jackson, who in turn sold



MONTPELIER HOME OF MARY ELIZABETH HENRY KNOX, THOMASTON, MAINE.
From an original sketch by Mrs. C. A. Weston

Knox's home, although apparently drafty, was warmed by the family's widely acclaimed hospitality. Holman Day memorialized a Knox soirée:

*Oh, welcome was the silken garb, but welcome was the blouse,
When Knox was lord of half of Maine and kept an open house.*

Magazine of American History, 1886.

out to Knox. In 1793 Knox acquired holdings from the other heirs, eventually gaining possession of four-fifths of the original Waldo Patent. A new survey revealed that certain parts actually belonged to the Kennebeck Purchase Company. To indemnify Knox, the Massachusetts Commonwealth granted him four townships north of the original boundary, containing the towns of Bangor, Hampden, Newburgh, and Hermon. In 1793 he came into full possession of these communities.

Recognizing the opportunity to take advantage of this vast property for development, Knox resigned from his cabinet post at the close of 1794. Already the General had made plans to erect his home in Thomaston, where he could manage his large

empire. Because he had acquired an immense domain, he wished a house of imposing scale. It is probable that he consulted Charles Bulfinch, Boston's famed architect, for house plans, as Montpelier has features similar to the Barrell Mansion in Charlestown. However, there is no evidence that Bulfinch made any plans. He did, however, draw plans for the grounds around Montpelier. The master builder for Montpelier was Ebenezer Dutton of Boston. Assisted by his brother, William, and Tileston Cushing, Henry Simpson, and Ebenezer Alden, Dutton began the project in his Boston workshop by fabricating doors, window frames, cornices, balusters, sash, shutters, and pilasters.

In April 1794 William Dunton, accompanied by Alden and Simpson and nine carpenters and seven masons, arrived in Thomaston to construct a basement and some of the out-buildings, such as a store and an office. Since Thomaston lacked many building materials, construction of the house dragged on through 1795. Evidence suggests that the work proceeded satisfactorily however. In a letter dated from Boston, Prince De Talleyrand, then a French emigré on a tour of Maine, wrote in 1794:

Six miles from Camden and at the head of navigation of George River, in a municipality called Thomas Town, General Knox has built a three-story house, which would be handsome even in Europe. Its location is charming for the view and fortunate for business, ships can come to load and unload at his wharf under his eyes and 400 yards from his house. He has a farm of two hundred acres of which are cleared and produce very fine hay. He assures us that there are already eight thousand souls on his lands and that he will encounter no insurmountable difficulties drawing (in time) the payment for the lands on which people settled without titles.

In all probability Knox had taken up residence awaiting completion of the house before his family settled there permanently.

Montpelier was a two-story* frame structure 120 by 40 feet, with front piazzas 20 feet wide on either side. It was designed in the Federal style with a match boarded facade. A seven-bayed front arose above a brick basement, which was concealed by the ample extension of the piazzas. At the center of the wings was a bowed front making a semi-ellipse and having a central doorway with a fanlight. The low hipped roof was concealed by an urn-tipped balustrade and a balustraded monitor rising between the chimneys. The windowed monitor lighted a central hallway, from which a finely-carved double staircase led to the upper chambers.

Inside there were nineteen spacious rooms, including an oval drawing room, a dining room, and a library housing 1,600 volumes. The downstairs rooms were thirteen feet in height, while the upper rooms were eleven. Twenty-four fireplaces heated the dwelling, including a large dutch oven in the basement. Behind Montpelier were housing for the servants, a store, and Knox's office, all arranged in a semicircle. Montpelier was painted white with green blinds, and folding shutters inside the windows closed off drafts and retained the heat in winter.

General Knox was immensely gratified with Montpelier and wrote to Captain Thomas Vose, his construction supervisor, in September 1794:

Having with great satisfaction viewed the progress of the building — under your direction aided by the industry and exertion of Messrs. Simpson and Hersey, and Messrs. Dunton and Cushing, I conceive it a matter of duty to thank you particularly for your care and attention in the arduous task imposed upon you, and to express to them my approbation of their conduct; for your time and trouble in this business, I shall be desirous of making you satisfactory compensation.

*The third story mentioned above by Talleyrand was actually a high basement wall.



PRESBYT RIVER FRONT OF MONTPELIER THE KNOX VILLA [From a Photograph]

Little remained of the Knox properties in Thomaston after Montpelier was dismantled. The *Magazine of American History* in 1886 reproduced an engraving of the waterfront facilities that once welcomed visitors to the Knox home.

Two contemporary accounts furnished descriptions of Montpelier. In August 1796 the Reverend Paul Coffin, an itinerant clergyman, wrote in his diary:

Dined at General Knox' His house is admirably situated looking south, almost directly down George's river, which makes a kind of bay, on salt water here ... The General ... has a garden fenced ovally. Indeed, circles and semi-circles in his fences, etc., seem to be all the mode here. His house draws air beyond all the ventilators which I had before seen. I was almost frozen ... before we took dinner and plenty of wine

The second account, in a letter written by Alexander Baring, later Lord Ashburton, in December 1796, places Montpelier at the center of the local society and local economy.

To return to General Knox's settlement the house he has built is very fine one and on the whole of his stile [sic] rather bordering on magnificance It attracts very much attention in every part of the country. His house is talked of everywhere and is certainly equaled by nothing out of the larger towns He farms about two hundred acres of land in high order, as an example and carries on besides a lime kiln, brickmaking, ship building, lumber trade, saw and grist mills, and a store for all imported articles.

In this oasis of comfort, Knox dispensed lavish hospitality. His daughter Lucy (later Mrs. Ebenezer Thatcher) wrote of her memories of a Fourth of July housewarming:

At early dawn ... the company began to assemble in crowds of men, women, and children and poured in until the house was completely filled, and babies without number were placed in different beds, which caused confusion among the mothers, who found it difficult to remember where they had placed them. Tables were set out on the broad piazza, where about a hundred sat, while in the vast kitchen and out houses preparations were made to feast the throng.

On another occasion Knox invited the Penobscot tribe, who camped nearby and feasted on Knox's bounty. In fact, they overstayed their welcome and nearly exhausted the General's larder. After they had encamped several weeks, he told them: "Now we have had a good visit and you had better go home."

In 1796 a more elite company visited Knox. First came Alexander Baring and William Bingham. The latter, accompanied by his wife and daughters, was interested in inspecting the Maine lands which he had recently acquired. Then arrived three Orleanist princes: the Duc de Chartres, Montpensier, and Beaujolais, brothers of Louis Phillipe, who came to the United States to escape the horrors of the French Revolution. Always the genial host, Knox indulged them in regal splendor.

Two years before Knox died, Cyrus Eaton, author of *History of Thomaston, Rockland, and South Thomaston, Maine*,

provided his impression of Montpelier's host:

The General usually dressed in black, carried a cane, and habitually concealed his mutilated hand by a handkerchief or otherwise. [He had lost two fingers of his left hand on a hunting venture when his fowling piece exploded.] His features were regular; his grecian nose prominent; his face full and open; his complexion florid, hair naturally dark; eyes grey, sharp, and penetrating, seldom failing to recognize a countenance they had once rested upon. His mental perception was equally penetrating; and he needed but little time to form an opinion of a person's character, nor many words to express it.

Unfortunately, Knox did not live many years to enjoy his impressive house or to carry out his multitudinous business transactions. On September 24, 1806, the Knox family attended the ordination of a new minister in Union. Local tradition claims that afterwards he attended a picnic or dinner at Ebenezer Alden's house in Union. While he was eating his meal, a chicken bone lodged in his esophagus. He returned to Montpelier, where medical help proved unavailing to remove the bone. Infection resulted, and the suffering patient died on October 25, 1806, widely mourned. At his military funeral the Honorable Samuel Thatcher of Warren (later of Bangor) gave Knox an impressive eulogy, and a long military procession bore his remains to a final place of internment — a family tomb on the estate.

The subsequent history of Montpelier is depressing. At his death, Knox's business affairs were in a turmoil; he never could extricate himself from debt. Of the twelve children he and Lucy had, only three lived to maturity. His son, Henry, died in disgrace. Mrs. Knox remained aloof from Thomaston society and died in 1824. When Anne Royall visited Thomaston in 1827, she referred to Knox's house as one of the most superb buildings in the United States, though it was then falling to decay. Knox's daughter and her husband then lived in the



Top photo: Montpelier shortly before its demolition. After Knox's death, the estate was found to be insolvent. The family turned inward and the house fell into decay. *Lower photo:* The Knox family grave in Thomaston. Top photo courtesy James B. Vickery; bottom photo, Maine Historical Society Collections.



house, but appeared to Anne Royall to be very poor. In 1837 Nathaniel Hawthorne recorded in his journal that the house was in a dreadful state of decay. In the summer of 1867 Judge John E. Godfrey of Bangor visited Thomaston and wrote in his journal that the house was going to ruin, and several of the rooms were being used for a ship carpenter's shop. Lucy Thatcher died in 1859 and shortly afterward the household effects were auctioned. The house was sold and soon passed beyond restoration and was torn down. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

James B. Vickery has been an active student of Maine history for the past thirty-five years. At the May 1983 University of Maine commencement ceremonies he received the University's Distinguished Service Award for his work in state history. Later that year he was recognized by the American Association for State and Local History for similar service. Mr. Vickery wrote a HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF UNITY, MAINE, and edited an ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF BANGOR, MAINE and two volumes of the JOURNALS OF JOHN E. GODFREY.

FURTHER READING

- Frederick S. Allis, Jr., ed., *William Bingham's Maine Lands, 1790-1820* (Boston, Massachusetts: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1954).
- Noah Brooks, *Henry Knox: A Soldier of the Revolution ...* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900).
- North Callahan, *Henry Knox: General Washington's General* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1958).
- Paul Coffin, "Journal of a Missionary Tour of Maine, 1796," *Maine Historical Society Collections* 4 (1856).
- Cyrus Eaton, *History of Thomaston, Rockland and South Thomaston, Maine ...* (Hallowell, Maine: Masters & Smith, 1865).
- Whitney L. Elkins, "Montpelier: The Old Mansion-House at Thomaston where Knox Lived," *Sun Up* (August 1926).

- Edward H. Elwell, *Fraternity Papers* (Portland, Maine: Pickard & Company, 1886).
- Albert Trowbridge Gould, *The St. George's River* (Portland, Maine: Anthoesen Press, 1950).
- Thomas M. Griffith, *Major-General Henry Knox and the Last Heirs of Montpelier* (Lewiston, Maine: Twin City Printery, 1965).
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The American Notebooks*, edited by Randall Stewart (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1932).
- Harold Kinker, *The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969).
- Martha J. Lamb, "Montpelier: Home of Major-General Knox," *Magazine of American History* 16 (August 1886).
- _____. "Two Ancient Landmarks: The Knox Mansion," *Scribner's Monthly* (March 1875).
- Ken Martin, "A Home with a Revolutionary Pedigree," *Down East Magazine* (November 1985).
- Portland Transcript*, "Home of General Knox," September 15, 1866.
- Anne Royall, *The Black Book, or a Continuation of Travels in the United States* (Washington, D.C., printed by the author, 1828).
- John Langdon Sibley, *History of the Town of Union, Maine in the County of Lincoln* (Boston, Massachusetts: Benjamin Mussey & Company, 1851).
- Mary Stoye Stimpson, "Thomaston — the House of Knox," *New England Magazine*, new series, 29 (February 1904).
- Talleyrand-Perigord, Charles Maurice, *Talleyrand in America: A Financial Promoter, 1794-96*, Hans Huth and Wilma J. Pugh, trans. (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1942).