Let there be (*authentic*) light

Capturing the true ambiance of the colonial home is a balance of history, design, and illumination.

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

With the flick of a switch you can wreck the perfect colonial look you've spent untold hours and dollars to achieve. All the serenity, rich heritage, and deep tradition of our forefathers' habitats melts away in bright, modern lighting. You might as well live in an operating room. All the effort to get just the right flooring, furniture, wallpapers, paint colors, hardware, and rugs will be for naught.

Modern lighting ranks right alongside indoor plumbing as one of the most dramatic historical departures from actual colonial living. Before the 1850s Americans lived much of their lives in darkness or near darkness. The scant light that seeped into their homes after sunset came from a slim assortment of fixtures that relied upon tiny open flames to fend off the night.

"Early American households depended primarily on natural illumination—a flickering hearth fire, a smoking oil lamp, the occasional guttering candle, or, if it became necessary to venture out into the night, a lantern with its vulnerable flame protected by panes of glass,

Even as late as the mid-19th century windows were the dominant source of light for meals and indoor activities, leaving most rooms in murky shadows. Candles were expensive and unlikely to be used when daylight was available.

Wall sconces were rare in working-class homes but might have been found in a well-to-do mansion. Sconces brighten the upper reception hall at the reconstructed 1801 Blennerhassett Mansion in Parkersburg, West Virginia, but even here, most of the light streams in from windows.

ventories provide an often startling insight into how little artificial lighting was typically available before the widespread adoption of gas, kerosene and electricity," says Moss.

Typical lighting in an early home would have been similar to what John J. Janney experienced in the Shenandoah Valley at his grandparents' farm in the early nineteenth century when he wrote, "In the evening, after the dishes were washed and cleared off the table and the table set back, the candle stand would be moved out from its proper corner and the whole family gathered round it; some of the men reading a newspaper or a book, and the women sewing or knitting, or spinning flax or tow."

Leath says that even in Virginia's more affluent homes, lighting remained a precious commodity, and a small collection of candles could be regarded as a spectacle of illumination. "In 1773, Philip Vickers Fithian described an elegant supper served at the plantation, Nomini Hall," Leath says. "Fithian thought the dining room appeared 'luminous and splendid,' lit with seven candles – four on the table 'where we supp'd,' he wrote, and three others 'in different parts of the room'."

Farther south, in North Carolina, surviving records indicate that members of the Moravian Protestant sect who settled there in 1766 also lit their homes with candles, sconces, and lamps fueled by oil or fat.

To accurately match historic décor, you should install fixtures similar to those available during that time your home represents. "Selection of the home or building's interpretative date will largely determine the lighting technologies that are appropriate," Moss notes. "A target date of about 1800 will probably limit the fixtures to those designed to burn candles or whale oil, while a date of about 1850 may extend the choice to allow for fixtures fueled by burning fluid, lard oil, or gas."

Precisely duplicating a colonial atmosphere can have unanticipated effects, warns Plimoth Plantation's

Maureen Richard. "A candlestick or lantern, lit while the hearth is going, gives off the most colonial-type atmosphere," she says. "An earthenware lamp with a cotton wick and cod liver oil gives you the lighting ambiance, and a very distinctly fishy smell!"

The dim light afforded by burning waxes and oil also brought another hazard. Johanna Brown, curator and director of collections at Old Salem and the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, points out one real danger with early lighting—the possibility of fire.

"Early lighting devices could be quite dangerous, especially when used carelessly," she says. "The October 8, 1779, church board minutes describe one resident's 'bad habit of hanging a candlestick with a lighted candle on a chair by his bed, and when he was fast asleep, the flame caught on the bed – it was put out with difficulty,' according to the minutes."

MUSEUMS AND INNOVATION

The lighting problems faced by period homeowners dim in comparison to those museums confront. While they must approximate as closely as possible the ambiance of their historical period, they need to meet stringent regulatory codes for visitor safety and convenience.

"Given the historical evidence, most New England houses would have been very dark, but modern museum visitors need adequate lighting for safety and appreciation of the decorative art objects and interior furnishings," notes Historic Deerfield's Lange.

Homeowners might consider some novel approaches to lighting now employed by some museums, supplementing period lighting with concealed twenty-first-century technology. For example, at Colonial Williamsburg, new fiber-optic technology is brightening some buildings without damaging the historic atmosphere.

"Because our expectations for lighting today are so much greater than those of people who lived in the eighteenth century, we've begun recently to supplement period lighting with fiber-optic pin lights recessed into the ceilings for many of our historic sites," Leath explains. "This can increase the light level without altering the basic arrangement."

Historic Deerfield now supplements conventional fixtures with another approach. "Much of the modern lighting in our houses is for guest safety," Lange says. "One technique employed is the placement of a fluorescent tube with a reflector along the backside of doors so that light is bounced up toward the ceilings. Given this technique, the fixture is not visible to the museum visitor."

PROTECTING THE ORIGINALS

With today's awareness of the growing scarcity of antique lighting devices, both the museums and the manufacturers (each for their own evident reasons) strongly discourage retrofitting early fixtures to produce electric light.

"In the 1940s and '50s, collectors often electrified period lighting devices—candlesticks, sconces, and chandeliers—by drilling the objects for wires and installing low-wattage light bulbs in their sockets," Lange explains. "At that time, this technique was the latest in historic-house lighting and provided a soft, atmospheric effect reminiscent of candlelight. Today, given our duty to protect the collection objects for future generations, we would not drill an object to provide light for a house interior."

Brown at Old Salem agrees. She says many original fixtures are on display at Old Salem, where they are described to visitors but not lighted. "We do not actually use early lighting devices unless we're having a special event," she says. "In the cases where we need light, we sometimes use reproduction candlesticks, lamps, and lanterns. There are many good reproductions of early lighting devices available today, and I would recommend using them because continual use of originals can be very damaging and counter-productive to their preservation."

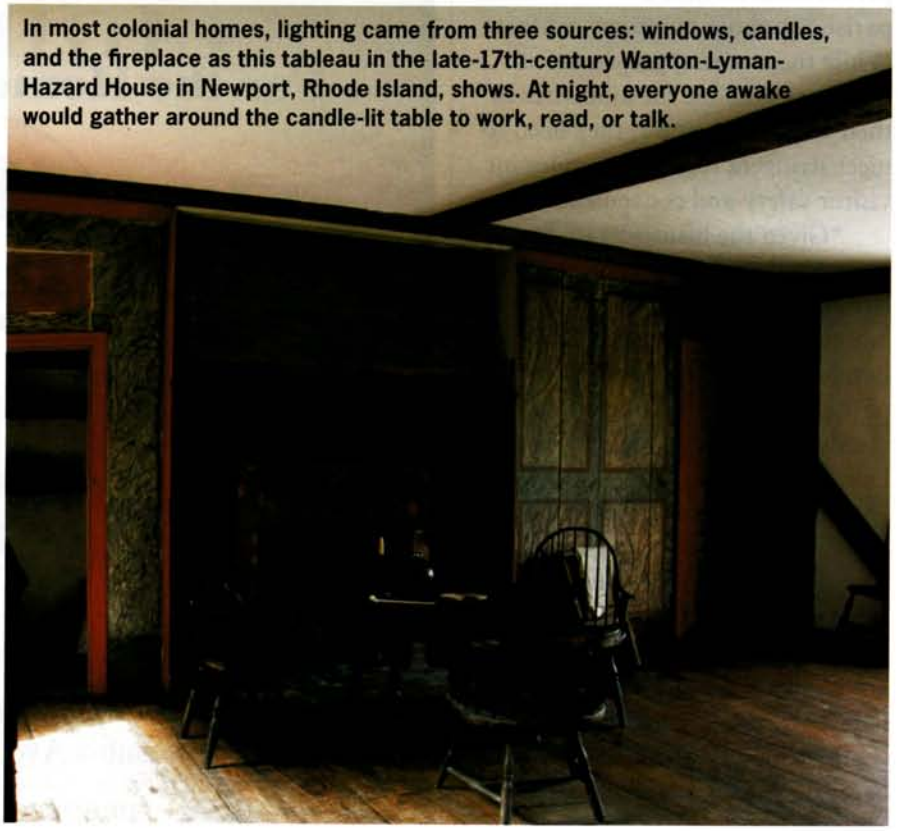
Maria Peragine at Authentic Designs, Inc., in Vermont, stressed the same point from the manufacturer's perspective. "If clients bring in original pieces, we will almost never retrofit them for electricity and will dissuade our clients from doing so. Often we'll make an exact copy that we then adapt for electricity, making sure the wiring is completely concealed. Our advice is to never retro-wire old fixtures. Instead, restore them with minimal changes to the design and have a copy built."

CAPTURING THE AMBIANCE

The challenge for the homeowner who wants to create a reasonably accurate colonial mood is balancing authenticity with adequate illumination, convenience, and safety. Candlesticks, sconces, and lanterns can enhance a setting and still provide adequate illumination.

Most handcrafters of reproduction fixtures have spent years researching original lighting at colonial-era museums. They create their lights from authentic materials, often using original manufacturing techniques. Many museums use these reproductions in their exhibits to avoid risk to the originals. But, as Chris Burda, president of Period Lighting Fixtures in Clarksburg, Massachusetts, notes, "Most of these designs can be used in any circumstances, even in modern homes."

Some living history museums have their own craftspeople who make colonial-era fixtures, often out of tin-plated steel. If you acquire a sconce made by a museum artisan, its tin is apt to be bright and shiny. "But most of our customers want to see something that looks antique, something with the appearance of having been made in 1750," says David Sposato, owner of Historic Housefitters in Brewster, New York.



In most colonial homes, lighting came from three sources: windows, candles, and the fireplace as this tableau in the late-17th-century Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House in Newport, Rhode Island, shows. At night, everyone awake would gather around the candle-lit table to work, read, or talk.

"Our goal is to make it difficult to tell that it wasn't actually made back then."

Colonial purists might counter that a dark, tarnished look is the mark of a lazy housekeeper. Fixtures might be polished down to bare steel to keep a shiny finish that would reflect and reinforce the tiny light from the candle's flame. A dark tin sconce might be more at home in the barn.

Polishing aside, colonial decorating allows great flexibility in your choice of fixtures. As long as a fixture can be dated to the time period of a home (or earlier), matching styles and finishes to a colonial home is not an issue.

"The colonists were an eclectic bunch, and with the exception of the most formal room settings, we recommend you don't get hung up coordinating finishes and styles," says Peragine of Authentic Designs.

Rather than decorating style, placement dictated the colonists' choice of fixtures, particularly those that would have had exposed flames—candleholders, chandeliers, and open sconces.

"A common error is hanging inappropriate fixtures in passages or vestibules where a puff of wind from an open exterior door would have immediately extinguished an exposed flame," advises Moss. "Household estate inventories often list a glass-enclosed lantern hanging in these locations. Protection from drafts was especially needed in houses originally lighted by candles and oil lamps. Hanging electrified 'candle' fixtures in such locations advertises a failure to appreciate the limitations of open-flame technology."

Practical considerations guide your choice of modern lighting for a period home, advises Carolyn Waligurski, who with her husband, Stephen, founded Hurley Patentee Lighting in 1972 in New York's Hudson Valley. "First you have to

decide on the amount of illumination you really need. Let's say you want to create mood lighting in the colonial sense. In that case, a sconce with a single 25-watt bulb will work just fine. It gets trickier if you need more light. You could have a three-candle sconce with three 25-watt bulbs, and that would still be acceptable. But anything more than that amount of light is going to destroy the colonial mood."

Historic Housefitters' Sposato elaborates, "People today simply anticipate a greater level of lighting than the colonials would have experienced. So one of things we recommend so you can have it both ways—the look you want but with a greater amount of light on demand—is to install the lights with a dimmer on the switch. That way you can adjust the amount of light up or down to suit your needs."

Colonial Williamsburg's Leath advises people to experience what the colonials did, then go from there. "My recommendation would be to experiment. In modern homes, people should use the lighting devices they enjoy—but experiment. Dine occasionally by candlelight. Perhaps even try lighting your dining room with seven candles for the same 'luminous and splendid' effect that Fithian described."

MODERN MAKERS

We invited four purveyors of colonial lighting fixtures to submit samples of their work to show the range of products available for bringing electrical lighting to colonial-era interiors. These makers offer superior craftsmanship—they supply many museums with reproduction lighting. All of the fixtures pictured use candelabra (miniature-base) bulbs.

For photography, we installed the fixtures so you could see how they look in operation. We recommend that a do-it-yourselfer with some electrical experience—someone who has previously connected a modern lighting fixture—do the installation. Wiring is only a matter of connecting two wires and a ground. You may need rudimentary tools and supplies: wire strippers and wire-nuts. Most fixtures (with the exceptions noted) install directly to existing electrical boxes.

AUTHENTIC DESIGNS

Authentic Designs prides itself as "America's oldest maker of colonial and early American lighting fixtures." Although someone might dispute that claim, the company does date to 1931 and produces an extensive array of early hand-wrought sconces, chandeliers, lamps, and both interior and exterior lanterns.

The company pays considerable attention to one-of-a-kind fixtures, relying on styles and designs from 1690 to 1820 and emphasizing traditional materials and manufacturing techniques. Its artisans work in copper, terne-coated copper, and brass, with available finishes ranging from deep verdigris to lacquered brass to aged shades of terne and pewter.

For the formal parlor, Authentic

Authentic Designs, as with other leading makers of hand-wrought early lighting, offers fixtures in a variety of materials and finishes. Above is a formal wall lamp in brass, featuring a facsimile candle. Opposite is a more primitive sconce, available in copper, terne copper, or brass.

Designs supplied a brass candlestick wall sconce, and for less formal rooms a fabricated pewter sconce. The bright brass finish on the fixture and matching shade was flawless, protected by lacquer so there's no need for a colonial-era daily polishing. The pewter was brushed to an attractive silvery-white finish that reflected a soft glow from the wax-covered electric candle. Both fixtures included all hardware and were the only ones we received labeled with an Underwriters Laboratory listing.

Authentic Designs, which focuses its entire attention on early American lighting, is housed in an old, converted mill in the mountains of southwestern Vermont and encourages visitors to stop by and watch the artisans at work.

HISTORIC HOUSEFITTERS

Historic Housefitters produces an extensive catalog of both early lighting and colonial hardware, and recently added a line of "period accessories" such as redware, tinware, and pewter—all patterned after eighteenth-century styles. Its lighting line offers sconces and lamps, chandeliers, and interior and exterior lanterns.

Its artisans create authentic prototypes but might employ more modern manufacturing techniques to maintain an authentic appearance while keeping prices lower. All lighting fixtures are of traditional materials such as tin, copper, and brass, with finishes often left to age naturally.

The two pewter wall sconces supplied by Historic Housefitters show colonial-era workmanship with an aged finish that mimics a hundred years-plus of neglect—stained almost black they look old, like something dug out of a barn before it was demolished. These are not fixtures for a formal room. Because they offer no protection for their electrical flame, their style suits use in a protected area, a wall far from drafts in a cabin. (You will have to buy screws to hold the mounting bracket to an electrical box.) Historic Housefitters, located in Brewster, New York, relies more on a standing inventory than on making one-of-a-kind fixtures. Its product line has more than doubled after twenty years in business.

Historic Housefitters' lighting designs span nearly 200 years—reaching into the 1830s—with these two sconces representative of some of the company's earlier fixture patterns. At the top is a single-light tin sconce with a delicate piecrust top. Above is a two-light sconce in primitive styling, available in two or three-light models, in either tin or brass.

Hurley Patentee offers some of the most unusual early fixtures, such as wood lanterns for drafty spaces. The one above has a decorative punched-tin top. On the following page is a tall wood-and-glass lantern with three lights, which, when fitted with three 25-watt bulbs, offers greater illumination while maintaining an authentic feel. Both are based on authentic colonial designs.

HURLEY PATENTEE

Hurley Patentee is purist in its approach to early lighting, making every piece of every fixture in its Hudson Valley workshops on the grounds of a 1720 colonial manor. Since printing its first catalog in 1972, the small firm's authentic fixtures have been installed in numerous American historical sites, as well as in Europe and Asia and on several movie sets.

Because each fixture is handcrafted, each is truly one of a kind. Most of Hurley Patentee's lamps, sconces, chandeliers, and lanterns are available fitted for candles or electricity.

Although Hurley Patentee's overall selection of fixtures is smaller than some of its more mass-produced competitors, the company offers several unique styles of fixtures not found elsewhere, with each design culled from historic sources.

Hurley Patentee supplied two lanterns. One holds three simulated candles behind glass supported by a

glazes. Customers can even request accelerated oxidation to achieve the exceptionally deep verdigris of old, weathered copper. Historic Deerfield partnered with Period Lighting Fixtures to reproduce eighteenth- and nineteenth-century chandeliers, sconces, and lanterns so contemporary home owners can achieve the look of an early Deerfield home.

Our samples included two wall sconces, one with an open candle finished in wax and a second, smaller enclosed-candle fixture of tin-plated steel. A multi-faceted hemispherical mirror dominates the open sconce to reflect the candle's light. The multiple reflections will stunningly light up a formal room or serve as a showpiece in more primitive surroundings. The aged finish on the enclosed tin fixture is suitable for a more primitive entryway or even outdoors. Both fixtures use a cover for a conventional electrical box with a slide mount attached. You wire the fixture through a grommet-line hole in the cover, then screw it to your electrical box. The sconce then slides into place.

Founded in 1974 in Clarksburg, Massachusetts, Period Lighting employs a small group of artisans who, as much as is practical, use original manufacturing methods to build their authentic fixtures and avoid what the company calls the "awkwardness" of inaccurate reproductions.

Gregory LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

FURTHER READING

Lighting for Historic Buildings, by Roger W. Moss (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1995)

Noted historian Moss provides both a fascinating history of American lighting and a catalog of nearly 500 suitable reproductions now available from various manufacturers. His book discusses interiors from the 1620s to 1930s and the fixtures—fueled by candle, kerosene, gas, or electricity—that illuminated them, and how to re-create the effects.

SOURCES

Authentic Designs
The Mill Road
West Rupert, VT 05776
800.844.9416
www.authenticdesigns.com

Historic Housefitters
PO Box 26
Brewster, NY 10509
800.247.4111
www.historichousefitters.com

Hurley Patentee Lighting
464 Old Route 209
Hurley, NY 12443
800.247.5414
www.hurleypantenteelighting.com

Period Lighting Fixtures
167 River Road
Clarksburg, MA 01247
800.828.6990
www.periodlighting.com

ADDITIONAL VENDORS

Several makers of quality early American lighting offer fixtures in a variety of authentic styles and finishes.

American Period Lighting
3004 Columbia Avenue
Lancaster, PA 17603
717.392.5649
www.americanperiod.com

Ball & Ball
463 West Lincoln Highway
Exton, PA 19341
800.257.3711
www.ballandball-us.com

Josiah R. Coppersmythe Lighting
10 Mill Pond Road
Harwich, MA 02645
800.426.8249
www.jrcoppersmythe.com

Lighting by Hammerworks
6 Fremont Street
Worcester, MA 01603
800.777.3689
www.hammerworks.com

Old Time Lighting
501 Caroline Street
Fredericksburg, VA 22401
540.371.2799

Sandwich Lantern Works
17 Jan Sebastian Way
Sandwich, MA 02563
888.741.0714
www.sandwichlantern.com