

chapter 20

The really old Essex, the Essex that the tourist will go out of his route to see, consists chiefly of Wentworth Street. This is a short broad thoroughfare overarched by wine-glass elms of large growth. On Wentworth Street are situated the eleven houses that give Essex a kind of fame.

It is of course true that the very oldest of these houses, the Wentworth House, is almost entirely a restoration. But no secret is made of this. The studied character of the grim, solid, almost fortified structure is quite simply admitted by its being used as a museum. The other houses date from a later time, from after the violence of the Indian Wars which had destroyed the original Wentworth House and other houses like it. And there is even enough of the original Wentworth House still left to justify the 1670 marker, for its stone chimney is still standing and, although the original door is now kept inside the house as an item in the collection of historical objects, it bears not only an explanatory placard but also the scars and holes of the arrows and bullets which had been directed against it when it was actually used as a door.

The tourist who pays his twenty-five cents for admission to the Wentworth House experiences the morality that inheres in pewter and wood,

in iron and copper and dark flawed glass. He sees the many utensils that pertain to fire, the flint-pistol and the bellows, the kettle and the trivet, the spit-jack, tongs, warming-pan and grog poker, and he remembers the cold hardships of a vanished, handmade world. The collection of weapons, the Indians' and the colonists', puts him in mind of the old life of daily mortal danger. Here, as in any such New England museum, hardship seems to go hand in hand with innocence. He reads the framed legal instruments on the walls and concludes from the quaintness of their language that the intention of their makers in regard to the transactions described was of an almost childlike intention.

And if the tourist is of a certain age, he is sure to be stirred by memories not only of national but of personal youth. For here, all about him, is the matter of his earliest picture-books and classrooms, suggesting the turkeys and blunderbusses and tall hats which he had cut out of paper with blunt-nosed scissors and colored with crayons of black and orange. And this is the paraphernalia of his boyish play, of his own knowledge of snow and then of snug warmth, of simple weapons, spears and bows and the gun that is lethal upon a loud shout of Bang, of forts and fires, chase and ambush and hand-to-hand fighting.

The other treasures of the street cannot speak to the visitor quite so intimately. Yet they will surely reach him in their own way, for the quiet thoughtful shapes of the old Essex houses are very eloquent. These fine doorways could have allowed the entrance and exit only of gravely happy people, or of people saddened only by meaningful sorrow. Thus the American will dream for an hour his modern dream of a past life that moved with the order, economy and significance of a narrative. Thus he makes his American Mont St. Michel, his white and wooden Chartres.

Wentworth Street begins with the restored Wentworth House, which, in its fortified seventeenth-century strength, is so very different from the houses of the later time, and it ends with the old church and what is left of the Common. What is now but a single street once constituted the whole of the town.

The tourist, unless he is of a satirical mind, will have no interest in the many new residential streets of Essex. For on these streets the houses are not white but tan or yellow or green. They are not beautiful in their proportions but likely to be hunched and high-shouldered. Their flower-beds are often outlined in brick or in large clam shells and their lawns are sometimes decorated with whimsical jigsaw representations of cockatoos, scotties and mickey-mice.

But somewhere between the charmed perfection of Wentworth Street and this sad negation of it, there is an intermediate architecture which is beginning to win an interest for itself. This is the part of town that was built in the forty years after the Civil War. It includes the flamboyant houses constructed of the brick that is part of Essex's industry and most of the public buildings, which are structures heavy with native stone and foreign porticoes. After having seemed ridiculous for some two decades, these buildings are now beginning to be thought of as having a certain interest and dignity. Sensitive people who once would have felt a kind of indignation with the conscious imposingness of their style, now regard them with wry respect. Even the W.P.A. guide-book of the state, which is written with so severe a feeling for the chastely simple that it is inclined to speak slightly of the elaborate detail of the Federal period, admits that a certain moderate pleasure is to be derived from the confident affluence that these buildings show. There are few forms contrived by the human mind which, once they have been emptied of their immediate intention, do not have a measure of peace and nobility. The bedeviled tourist who, twenty-five years before, would have hated these post-Civil War buildings as the visible signs of the corruption of life that was at the root of his own uncertainties, can now think of them as the monuments of a more successful attempt at security than that of his own time. It is therefore not impossible to suppose that the ugly houses with their mickey-mice may one day come to seem, to a yet later tourist, the signs of a vanished peace.

As for the chief business street of the town, it has the rather huddled ugliness of so many American main streets, an ugliness that is pleasant and comfortable because of its large typicality. This same chain grocery store, this pair of competing hardware stores, this rather sad delicatessen kept by a rather sad Jew whose brother-in-law, more learned and political than he, is the proprietor of one of the three stationery and cigar stores, the several drugstores, the small dark easy bars, all of them are repeated by the reassuring thousands.