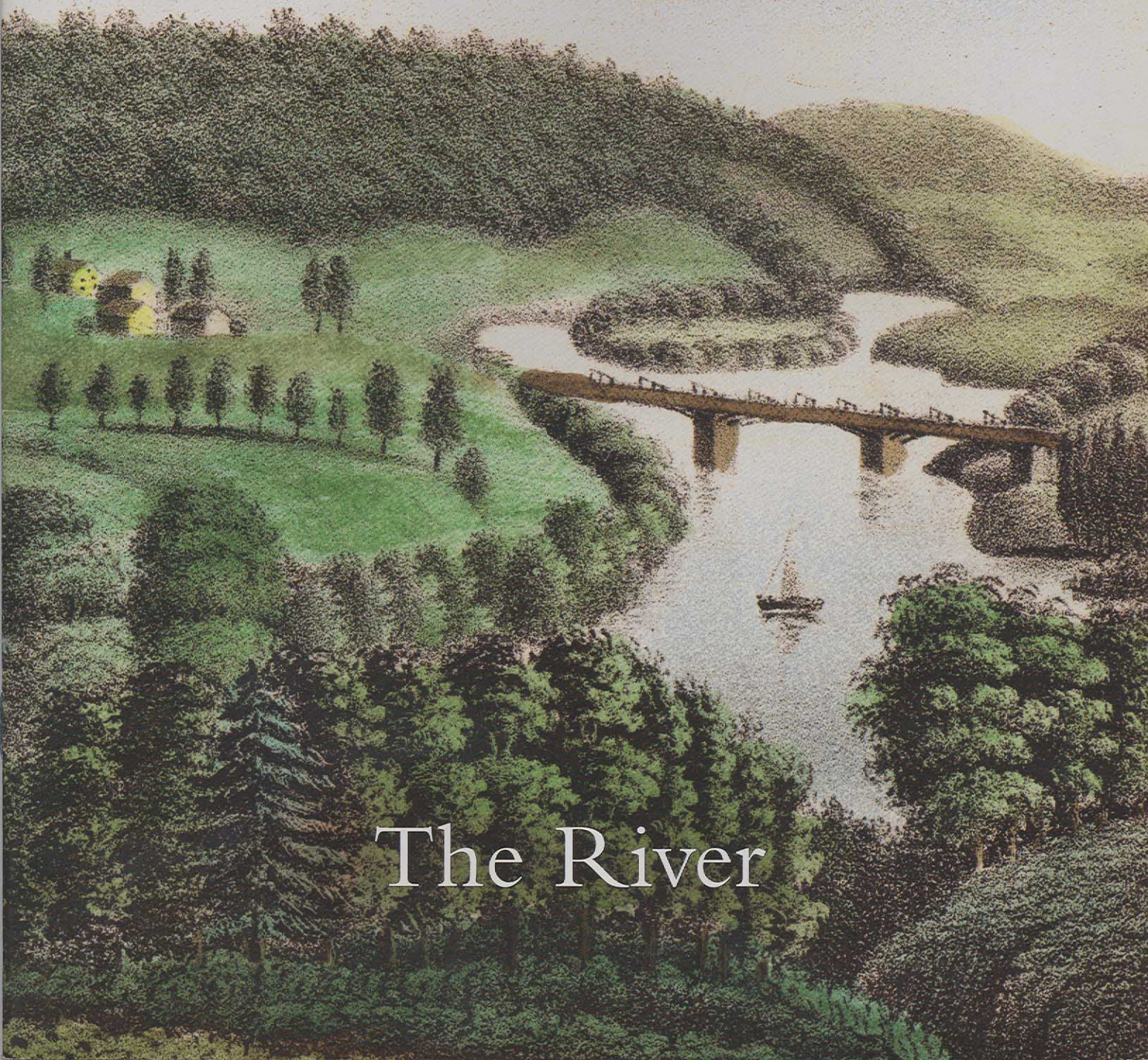
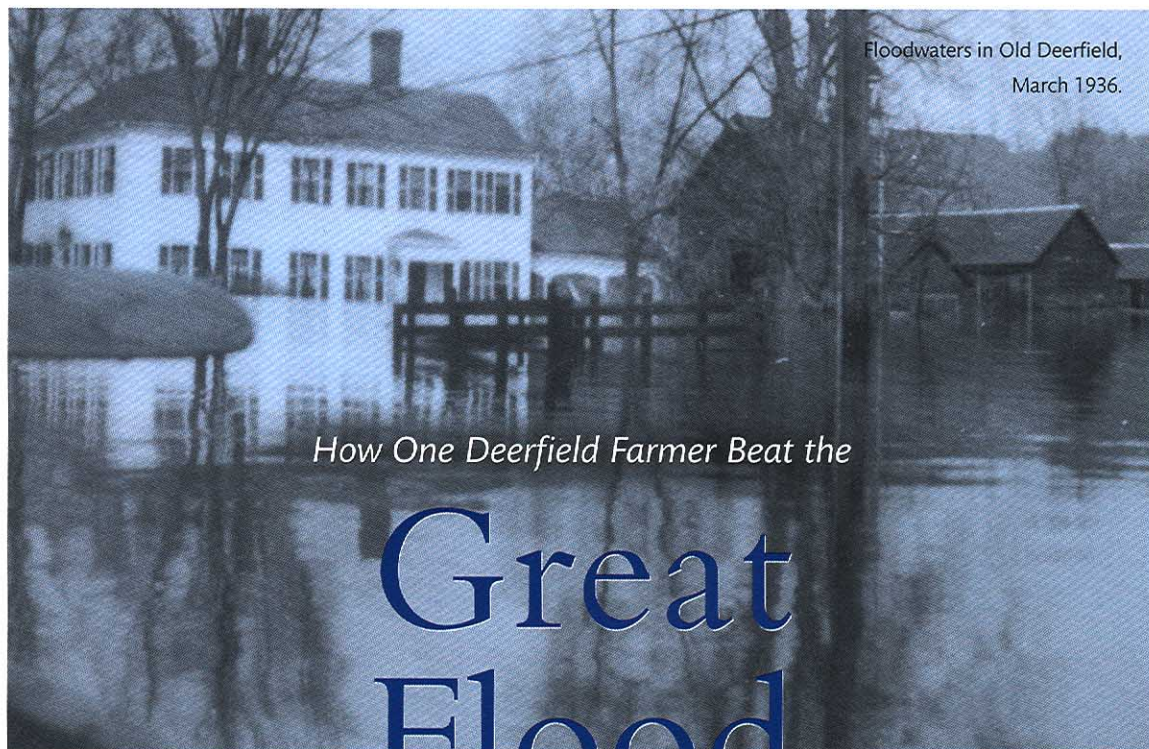


Historic Deerfield

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The River



Floodwaters in Old Deerfield,
March 1936.

How One Deerfield Farmer Beat the

Great Flood of 1936

by Adam Voiland

Russell Cowles always liked the old scenic French wallpaper in the parlor of his Deerfield home — now the Hinsdale and Anna Williams House and one of Historic Deerfield's 12 house museums. Cowles, whose family occupied the Williams House from the 1860s to the early 1980s, liked the paper so much, in fact, that in 1936 when the Deerfield, Green, and Connecticut rivers conspired to create the largest and most destructive flood in Old Deerfield's history — a flood that left his extraordinary paper muddied and flaking — he went to incredible efforts to save it.

In doing so, Cowles, who died in 1981, helped preserve one of Historic Deerfield's most prized Federal-period artifacts.

Called Venetian Scenes, the paper is a fine example of a unique type of wallpaper produced during the first half of the 19th century, which the

French called *papier peint panoramique* — literally panoramic wallpaper. The origins of panoramic, or scenic, wallpaper lie in an early form of European entertainment called “panoramas” or “dioramas”.

Before television, radio, or photography, sophisticated European audiences would pay top dollar to sit in the center of fancy circular rooms — often 40 feet in diameter — and watch dramatic and exotic painted scenes revolve about them, while piano music played in the background and a lecturer pointed out exquisite details in the artwork. A successful panorama trans-

ported audiences to a world of beauty, leisure, and laughter.

The purpose of scenic wallpaper like Russell Cowles's Venetian Scenes is the same — to transport viewers to another world. Today, visitors to the north parlor of the Williams House step across the threshold and become the center point of a bustling European seaport: masts from moored vessels slice the horizon; dock workers tote cargo into waiting skiffs; children play under a shade tree; lovers picnic alongside a canal; classically-styled buildings rise above fenced estates; a boy in a canoe with livestock glides down a waterway, and a lone man fishes atop a rock. Above it all, popcorn shaped clouds glide across the sky.

“Venetian Scenes is something of an enigma,” says Director Emeritus Donald Friary. “The name was given to it early in the 20th century. We don't know what it was called in 1816

RIGHT: As part of an extensive remodeling of his house between the years of 1816 and 1820, Ebenezer Hinsdale Williams elevated the entire structure allowing for a front entrance with a large elliptical fanlight, enlarged and changed the positions of the windows, doubled the size of the house by adding a two-story ell, and graded and terraced the land around the building.

BELOW: The Williams House, north parlor.



RIGHT: Wallpaper advertisement from the *Franklin Herald*, published in Greenfield, Massachusetts; detail from the Venetian Scenes wallpaper.

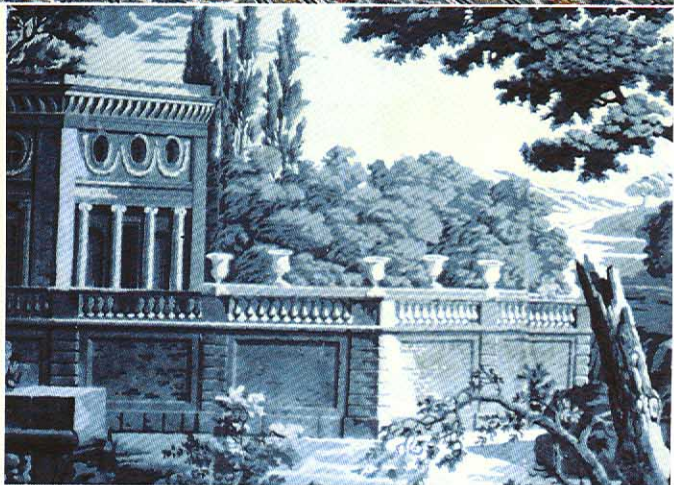
Paper Hangings. DENIO & PHELPS,

HAVE on hand for sale, a large assortment of Paper Hangings and Borders, comprising some of the newest and most fashionable patterns, and which come unusually low. One set of Marine Views. very elegant.

Likewise. Writing & Wrapping Paper

Also, for sale as above, a Sermon, delivered at the Installation of Mountain Lodge by Elder Geo. Witherell, price 12½ cts.

October 26, 1819.



[when it was probably installed].” Nor is it clear from which French wallpaper manufacturer this paper came from, when it arrived in America, or what western Massachusetts retailer it was purchased from.

In 1985, Summer Fellow Carol Edwards, while researching Deerfield wallpapers, hit on a possible clue. She found what she thinks may have been an original advertisement for Venetian Scenes in the October 26, 1819, edition of the *Franklin Herald*, published in Greenfield, Massachusetts. Placed by the company Denio & Phelps, the ad reads: “Paper Hangings . . . One sett [sic] Marine Views, very elegant.”

Peter Spang, museum trustee and founding curator, points out that there are images of Napoleon in the wallpaper. He theorizes that such a design might have been unfashionable in France after the emperor’s exile in 1815. Consequently, the outmoded paper may have been shipped off to be sold to unwitting American buyers.

While historians may never discover the precise origins of Venetian Scenes, most researchers agree that Ebenezer Hinsdale Williams installed the wallpaper between the years of 1816 and 1820. The repapering of the north parlor was part of an extensive remodeling project that modernized a Georgian style house built in the mid 1700s by Colonel Ebenezer Hinsdale, Williams’s great uncle and the founder of Hinsdale, New Hampshire.

According to Carol Edwards, French wallpaper like Venetian Scenes, although not entirely unknown in the Connecticut Valley during the early 19th century, was most certainly found in only the most prosperous households. Scenic wallpaper of that era was difficult to produce. Before the introduction of roller printing in the 1840s, all wallpaper had been block-printed by hand. This was a particularly laborious process for scenic wallpapers, which involved the use of hundreds of carved wooden blocks. It could take

weeks to complete a design and the resulting papers were inevitably expensive. Venetian Scenes, which is printed in a monochromatic *grisaille* (shades of gray) design, would have cost less than colored panoramas, but was certainly a luxury item.

The value of such paper was not lost on the Cowles family. In a 1981 interview with Pricilla Greeley, Mrs. Cowles recalled it being “the conversation piece” for her family. “We’ve had a steady stream of people in here...our children’s school friends, their college friends...one of the first things we always did was take them in to [the north parlor] to see that wallpaper,” she said. In a recent interview with the writer, Cowles’s daughter Mary agreed: “We always knew that the wallpaper was something very special...The whole family always thought it would be such a shame to lose it, especially my father.”

The Flood

Imagine: Roiling waters have completely submerged Routes 5 and 10. Just a few feet beneath the Cheapside Bridge a mighty torrent of muddy water, cumbered by dead livestock, twisted steel, splintered wood and tree trunks, swirl by in a steady march towards the Connecticut. The north end of Main Street in Old Deerfield looks like a pond. Rows of previously magnificent elms — the town’s great pride — protrude awkwardly from the inundation like stalks of desiccated broccoli. A motorboat piloted by the chief of police, cruises from house to house searching for marooned residents. Bachelor teachers from Deerfield Academy work frantically to bring residents of the north end, weary and frightened, to safety at the school. As they paddle back and forth, midway down the street, these teachers pause, crane their necks, and gaze over the side of their crafts. Below the boat, one of Headmaster Frank L. Boyden’s

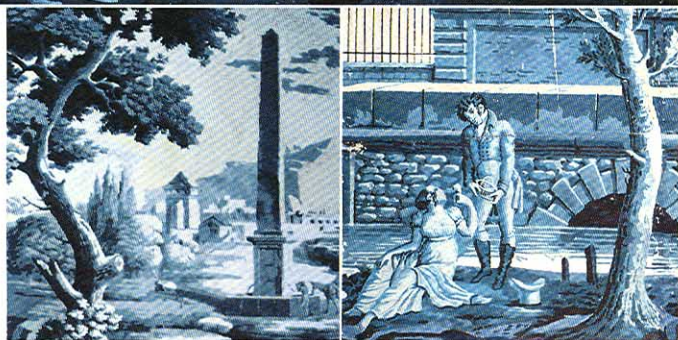
famed buggies glimmers through the muck. Meanwhile, at the academy, Mr. Boyden struggles with a “moving-picture” machine trying to distract the 70 or so evacuees from thoughts of the rising tide. Despite Mr. Boyden’s best efforts, nobody can concentrate on the movie. Rumors run rampant. The Vernon Dam is going to burst, people say.

The first sign of trouble had occurred on March 11, 1936. In her paper “Old Deerfield in the Great Flood of 1936,” read at the annual meeting of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association (PVMA) in 1938, Deerfield resident Margaret Miller described the first phase of the flood: “[The river] rose from its bed like a roused giant, stretched out its arms, and threw the winter’s accumulations of ice abroad in fury. It overflowed its banks south of the street, swept around the south end and northward into the curve of Harrow Meadow with such a rushing sound and din of grinding ice cakes that it was fairly terrifying . . . This was the first flood and we innocently thought it was all there was to be! But we were mistaken.”

The mechanics that drove the flood Miller described (and the more serious one that was to follow a few days later) are the same that still cause the inundation of the Meadows golf course every spring — a backed-up Connecticut River. According to local geologist Richard Little, most floods in Old Deerfield are not caused by a swelling Deerfield River as many people think, but rather by an awkward confluence of the Deerfield and the Connecticut that pits the current of the smaller Deerfield against that of the larger Connecticut and ultimately “pushes” Connecticut River water upriver, causing the Deerfield to flow out onto its own floodplains. Little calls it the annual “watering.” Nathalie Ashley Stebbins, a resident of Deerfield during the flood, called it: “the backwash from the mouth of the river.”



Details from
Venetian Scenes
wallpaper.



What caused such an excess of water in the Connecticut that March? A cold, snowy winter left massive snow packs in northern New England that trapped much of the rain that fell during the spring, adding to an already impressive run-off potential. According to a New England Power Association report, by March 1, 1936, there was more water on the ground in the form of ice and snow than there had been for many years. Then, during the first half of March, a succession of unseasonably warm days began to loosen snow on hills in northern New England that quickly began to swell mountain brooks. On March 8, heavy rain started to fall. The same day, unusually thick ice sheets from the rivers began to splinter and flow southward. Already swelling rivers could bear no more when a storm dropped warm, heavy rain all across the northeastern United States on March 17.

The “backwash” of March 11 was only a prelude to the much larger inundation that overcame the village on the 18th. At 10 o’clock in the morning, the water was only a foot below the flood of 1927 high-water mark and rising about one foot per hour. During the day, frantic farmers moved animals and crops away from the rising tide. Boys from Eaglebrook School helped residents move furniture to the second floors of houses at the north end. At four o’clock the water began creeping up Main Street. By seven, the evacuation had begun. When the water finally stopped rising it had nearly reached the Brick Church in the center of town.

In the Cowles home, the water had risen fast. “It came up six feet,” recalled Russell Cowles, who spent the afternoon working to save the onions and potatoes in one of his barns, only to lose them later. In the evening,

shouts from outside the house indicated the evacuation boat had arrived. There had not been enough time to move the furniture to the second floor. Mrs. Cowles hurried the children — aged three and four — upstairs. They crawled from the second floor onto the roof of a side porch that has since been removed.

“Even though I was young, I have a distinct memory of that moment,” said Edward Cowles in a recent interview with the writer. “I can remember going out of a second-story window and onto the roof of the porch...from there I remember getting put into the boat. It’s all very vague, but something like that you don’t forget.” In the 1981 interview, Mrs. Cowles remembered evacuating the house in a “big black-bottomed boat,” while Mr. Cowles remained behind, saving what he could.

All over the north end, similar scenes unfolded. In the Allen House, sisters Mary and Frances — famed in Old Deerfield for their photography — were sleeping when their cellar flooded and a chimney began to settle. It was feared the whole building would collapse. The two sisters were roused. Frances, being both deaf and blind, needed the situation spelled out on her hand. She rose, dressed, donned the coat and rubbers that she had placed beside her bed in preparation, and felt her way down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs, she boarded a canoe floating in the hall. According to Margaret Miller, Frances put her hand in the frigid river water beside her and exclaimed, “All my life I have wanted an adventure and now, at 82, I’ve got it!”

When the boat returned for Russell Cowles, he boarded, as his family had earlier, through the second-story window. He had done all he could. The house was empty; the river would be left to its own devices. The chances that the wallpaper would survive intact seemed slim.

The Aftermath

For residents of Old Deerfield, the flood came as a considerable shock. The high-water marks of 1815, 1840, 1862, and 1927 came nowhere near that of 1936. The Connecticut River reached 49.2 feet at the Turners Falls Dam in Montague during the height of the flood. According to the National Weather Service, the river crested 8.5 feet higher than it ever had before, and 67 years later the 1936 flood still holds the record. On March 19, the date of the crest, the average flow pouring over the dam in Montague was 238,000 cubic feet per second. By comparison, the *Greenfield Recorder* notes that the average mid-summer flow is 4,000 cubic feet per second. The rate of flow during the flood had increased nearly 60 times the average. The estimated damage to highways in Franklin County was \$274,655. Three bridges in Turners Falls and one in Sunderland had been swept away. Throughout New England, between 150 and 200 lives were lost, and property damage exceeded \$100 million.

In such a grim context, however, few in Deerfield overlooked the fact that they might have been hit much harder. Despite the rumors, the Vernon Dam had, after all, held. Many of the tales that had begun to circulate throughout the town in the days after the flood were more humorous than tragic. According to Nathalie Ashley Stebbins, who also wrote a piece on the flood for the PVMA, a calf born a few days after the deluge was named "Highwater." Mae West, a bulldog beloved at Deerfield Academy, had floated to Greenfield on an ice cake along with two pigs. One farmer, fearing the worst for the horse and Shetland pony that he had left in the bottom of his barn, discovered the two after the flood, happily munching hay high in the loft. Another woman, marooned in Greenfield during the

flood, had called to remind her family to "please see that my plants are watered." Little did she realize that as she spoke, her plants were under six feet of water.

After about four days, the waters had begun to subside and refugees staying at Deerfield Academy or with relatives elsewhere were able to make forays back to the north end to survey the damage. They found Main Street littered with driftwood, but not with collapsed houses. Muck, not structural damage, became the biggest cause for concern. At the 1938 annual PVMA meeting Stebbins recalled her return home in this way: "clay — mud — dampness — filth!" For the next few months, cleanup was likely to have been foremost on the minds of most residents.

To Boston

Russell Cowles returned to his house to find his north parlor wallpaper muddy, stained, and falling off the wall at points. There is genuine disgust in his tone when he describes the paper's sorry condition in the 1981 taped interview. "That flood — it made my paper look like..." At this point, Cowles's voice trails off. The precise words are unclear, but the message is obvious — the paper was in trouble.

Nevertheless, Cowles was determined to save it. He tacked up the portions that were falling and did something unexpected for a busy Deerfield farmer in the 1930s — he took time off from the farm to take a trip to Boston for expert restoration advice.

"I decided to go to Boston to see what I could see," Cowles said. Mrs. Cowles explained: "He went to find out how to take the paper off the wall, how to clean it, and how to put it back again." Boston was not his only trip. He later took a trip to Philadelphia to look at similar French wallpaper. The trip to Boston at first went poorly.

"One place, they wouldn't tell me a thing about it," he said. "Then I went to an art museum."

Cowles's Museum of Fine Arts advisers recommended he take the paper off in sections, clean each section with a fine steel-wool brush, put up a layer of white paper, paste the French paper onto it, and then repaint the paper as needed. This is just what he did. "I figured if they could do it, then I could do it," Cowles said.

Donald Friary believes Cowles may have had help. "There is some question as to what restoration work Russell Cowles did on the wallpaper. I have often heard that he restored it. I have also heard from his niece that her mother, who was Russell's older sister, paid to have wallpaper restorers from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts come to Deerfield to restore it. I suspect that Russell rescued the wallpaper and did a temporary job. Then, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts conservators came out to do a more thorough job," says Friary.

According to Cowles, it took him two years to finish the project. In addition to the cleaning and reapplication, he repainted a number of details that the flood had washed away, including several of the clouds. He spent a great deal of time on the project, working nights and weekends, whenever he had a spare moment from the farm.

The results are stunning. "He did a beautiful job!" exclaimed Pricilla Greeley, the researcher who interviewed Cowles in 1981. Friary agrees: "There are many highlights in the Williams House, and the scenic wallpaper is certainly one of them."

Visitors can view the paper, and the still-visible water stain from the flood of 1936, on tours of the Hinsdale and Anna Williams House.

Adam Voiland is a sophomore at Brown University.