

Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion

Park History

Benning Wentworth (1696 - 1770) was appointed Royal Governor by King George II in 1741 following New Hampshire's separation from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1679.

For ten years he rented a brick residence (now known as Warner House) in Portsmouth, capital of the new colony. When the colonial assembly refused to provide the governor enough funds to purchase the house, Wentworth relocated the governmental headquarters to Little Harbor. The mansion he built is one of the few existing colonial governor's residences to survive almost unchanged.

Originally the mansion was part of a 100-acre estate which the governor operated as a typical 18th century gentleman's farm. From the council chamber Wentworth signed the charters that incorporated towns over a wide territory including present-day New Hampshire and Vermont (Bennington, Vermont was named after him.). As surveyor general of His Majesty's Woods, he channeled the forest wealth of New Hampshire to the shipyards and fleets of the Royal Navy. Wentworth served as Royal Governor from 1741 - 1767.

A widower, the governor married for the second time in 1760 when he was 64 years old. His new wife was his 23-year-old servant. The circumstances surrounding the wedding were immortalized by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his poem, "Lady Wentworth" from *Tales of a Wayside Inn*.



Division of Parks and Recreation
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The Middle Years

Following the governor's death in 1770, Martha married Michael Wentworth, a retired British army colonel and accomplished musician. They made the mansion a hospitable social center and entertained George Washington when he visited Portsmouth in 1789. They had one daughter, Martha, who inherited the estate from her widowed mother in 1805. She and her husband, John Wentworth, remained on the property until 1816 when they sold the house and the 113 acres to the successful merchant, Charles Cushing of Roxbury, Massachusetts.

Cushing, his wife, and seven children lived permanently at Little Harbor and continued operating the estate as a working farm. After Cushing's death in 1849, the property eventually passed to his nephew, William P. Israel, in 1860. Israel actively promoted the property to tourists, making the house one of the first historic dwellings in the United States to be opened to the public. In 1886, he sold about 15 acres with various buildings, known as "the Governor Wentworth Estate," to John Templeman Coolidge, III, of Boston.



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The Coolidge Years

John Templeman Coolidge was an artist and antiquarian and lover of the sea. The Wentworth mansion no doubt appealed to all his interests. Coolidge carefully restored the neglected house and grounds with advice from his friend, Sumner Appleton, founder of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

Coolidge added a guest wing about 1920, replacing the former carriage house; however, he was careful to maintain the building's architectural integrity.

The house served as an active gathering place for the family (Coolidge had seven children) and friends, many of whom built residences nearby. Coolidge's first wife, Katharine, was the daughter of the historian Francis Parkman, who used a second floor bedroom as a summer writing retreat during his later years. After Katharine's death in 1900, Coolidge married Mary Abigail Parsons in 1913. The widow Mary Coolidge donated the property to the state of New Hampshire in 1954.



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