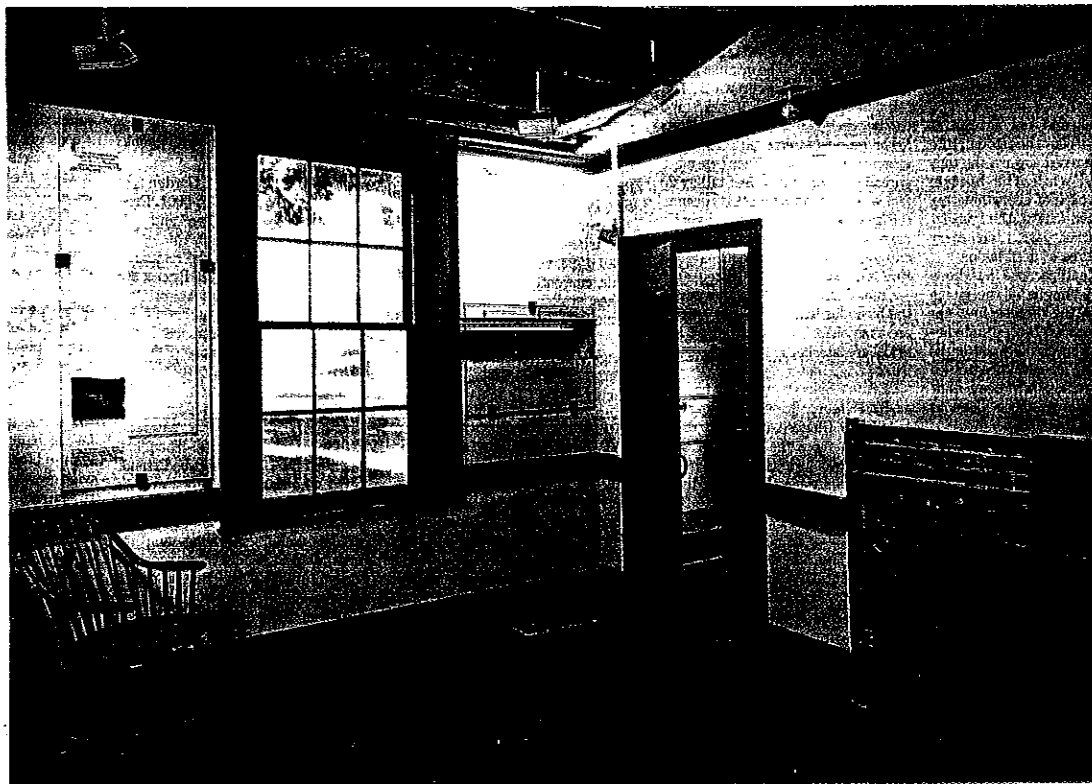


AT HOME

THE BOSTON GLOBE • THURSDAY, MAY 20, 1993

a window on the past



At right, the former kitchen area of the 1750 Dillaway-Thomas House; below, the facade in 1932 and today.

PHOTO/STEVE ROSENTHAL



PHOTO/ARTHUR HASRELL



PHOTO/STEVE ROSENTHAL

Inside Roxbury's Dillaway-Thomas House, an archeological approach to restoration lays bare a succession of styles

By Robert Campbell
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

"It's

the story of anyone's house. They started with not enough money and just added things as they could afford to."

Robert Olson, a Boston architect, isn't talking about your house or mine. He's describing what's believed to be the oldest surviving house in Roxbury, the Dillaway-Thomas House of 1750.

The house was a wreck, a burned-out hulk, until recently. But it's now alive again. It's a Heritage Center, funded by the Commonwealth. It is host to community meetings and school groups and exhibits, many of them on black issues and history. And it preserves and displays the history of the Roxbury community in documents and exhibits. But its most remarkable display is itself.

Olson did the restoration. He preserved what hadn't burned and recreated what had, then added a new library wing behind the house. But he did something else that is much more surprising. He converted the old house into what can best be described as an archeological dig. He lit-

Exposing the styles of renovations past

■ ROXBURY

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erally dug into its walls, floors and ceilings to expose a hidden past.

Chunks of the interior are carved away as you might peel the covering from a mummy, revealing older layers of construction beneath them — sometimes several such layers, going all the way back to the 1750s. In one place, where a Federal mantel of the 1790s was attached over a Georgian mantel of the 1750s, Olson has hinged the newer mantel so you can fold it back like a piano cover and see the old one behind — still with its original paint on it.

You can duck into the kitchen fireplace and look up the chimney, which is spotlighted so you can see it all the way up. It's 1750s. You can see where, in the 19th century, someone changed the shape of a wood post to allow new curving plaster to cover it. You can compare old hand-split wood laths in one place with sawn versions in another.

"The idea of a 'dig' just evolved as we worked," says Olson. "When the house burned in 1979, layers of old construction were exposed, things no one had seen in centuries. Along with our consultants and the preservation agencies, we decided to use the house as a lesson about how things get built and change over time."

The Dillaway-Thomas house, named for two of its owners, was built to be the parsonage of the First Church of Roxbury, which stands on a green knoll across the street in the middle of John Eliot Square.

"The original owner, Reverend Oliver Peabody, never finished it," says Olson. "The next, Reverend Amos Adams, tried to do better but probably ran out of money. Successive owners continued to renovate in different styles. There was a major 'restoration' in the 1930s, by a noted preservationist named Frank Brown. Brown, we discovered, introduced a lot of Colonial details that never existed in the original house. In the basement, for instance, he put in rough plank doors with wrought-iron hinges that he just invented. In another room he added a chair rail. He was making things more 'authentic' by faking them."

Olson has been similarly loose,

but without any pretense of authenticity. "In a house that's changed so much, anything consistent would be misleading," he points out, "so we fostered inconsistency." The front hall features three reproduction electric wall sconces of three different eras — although there probably were never sconces in the original house. "The sconces are plausible," says Olson. "We never intended a house museum. The sprinklers and exit signs, which we need for the community meetings and exhibits that are held here, would have been enough to dilute any sense of authentic history."

When he has built new, in the library addition, Olson is entirely contemporary. He just adds one new

Where a Federal mantel of the 1790s was attached over a Georgian mantel of the 1750s, Olson has hinged the newer mantel so you can fold it back like a piano cover and see the old one behind.

layer in another new style to the layered landmark. His main stair is a modernist swirl of white metal, and part of his exterior is sheathed in lead-coated copper for no more practical reason, apparently, than to accentuate the sense of an ongoing collage of ever-changing styles and materials.

When a house has been in almost a continual state of change since the day it was started — and recently gutted by fire — how on earth do you decide what to restore it back to? 1950? 1850? 1750?

"It depends on how much information you have about the past, and how much you can find in what's left of the house," says Olson. "Then you



Before its recent restoration, the Dillaway-Thomas House in Roxbury was a burned-out hulk.

The history inside a house's walls

Ask what the preservationists call the Period of Significance. You restore it to what it looked like in that period."

In the case of Dillaway-Thomas the Period of Significance turned out to be the so-called Federal period, around 1790. That's when the elegant new front door and portico were added, parts of which survived the fire. Behind these cosmetics, the house is a bulky shape in the earlier Georgian style. It has a gambrel roof, a roof with two slopes, like a Dutch barn. Its windows are set forward from the clapboard surface of the wall, making a bold pattern outdoors, and indoors creating pleasing effects where the light bounces off the deep frames.

Federal is one of those style names that don't mean anything obvious and thus confuse people. It refers to the early years of our federal government, 1790 to 1810 or so. Federal style is elegantly understated, with delicate thin ornament set against plain flat surfaces. It's what the British call Adam style. Among the best-known local examples are the State House by Charles Bulfinch and the Federal houses of Salem by Samuel McIntyre.

The Dillaway-Thomas House has just been named winner of an award for preservation from the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Certainly the honor is deserved: Miracles have been wrought here. But this writer, nevertheless, has two mild quibbles.

First is the fact that each of us thinks everybody is interested, or should be interested, in whatever we happen to be interested in. Renovations are performed by architects and preservationists, and such people tend to assume that the public will be ecstatic at the opportunity to compare different eras of brick or wood lath. It is possible to exaggerate this hope. Such information may, in fact, be of rather trivial significance to anyone but specialists.

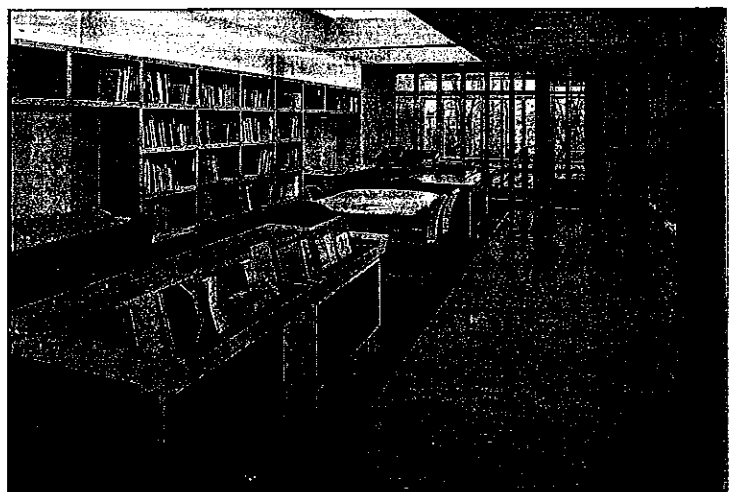
Second is the issue of the kind of environment you end up creating when you take this kind of archeological-dig approach. Few of us peel away the walls in our own houses. If we see a crack, our tendency is to fix it. In other words, by becoming an archeological representation of its past, the Dillaway-Thomas house has lost all resemblance to any house anyone in Roxbury ever actually lived in. Still worse, when you stand

in a room with peeling plaster and exposed wood framing, no matter how much it may have cost to achieve these effects, you can't help sensing an inappropriate metaphor. You feel, uncomfortably, that you are in a substandard environment. That's a message that may not be welcome in a community that's had more than its share of problems with such environments in recent decades.

What the architect and others have given us, at the Dillaway-Thomas house, is the fascinating, visible history of an artifact: the house itself, regarded as a physical object. That's one kind of history, but it isn't the only kind.

Robert Campbell is the Globe's architecture critic.

► The Heritage Center at the Dillaway-Thomas House, part of Roxbury Heritage State Park, is open at no charge to the public on Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Saturdays from 12 to 4 p.m. and by appointment. For information on viewing the house and the current exhibit on the relationship between the black and Jewish communities in Boston, phone 445-3399. The address is 188 Roxbury St.



The renovated house, now a community center, includes a newly built library by Robert Olson.

PHOTOS/STEVE ROSENTHAL

The Roxbury Heritage News

Published for the Roxbury Heritage State Park Advisory Committee

SPECIAL INAUGURAL ISSUE

FALL 1992, No. 1

Dillaway-Thomas House to Open in Eliot Square



Dillaway-Thomas House, then
Courtesy of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities

This Old House!

The following essay about the Dillaway-Thomas House was written by sixth-grader Erin Hannon as part of the Timilty's "Heritage Education Program" which enables students to explore the Roxbury neighborhood.

I attend the James P. Timilty Middle School in an area called Eliot Square. It's located in an old section of a hill. My school, which is an old building itself, stands beside an even older place called the Dillaway-Thomas House.

Since I started classes here in September, there has been a roaring renovation going on next door. The noise and dust have distracted me and I became very aggravated by this. I didn't stop to think that maybe there was some historical value to that old building. In fact, I even wished that they would tear it down instead of fixing it up with all that clanging and banging!

That was until Ms. Stevens came to our English class and told us about the Dillaway-Thomas House and why it's so important. Now, I'll explain it to you.

Although the house is named for the Dillaway family, it had many owners. The first was Reverend Oliver Peabody, pastor of the First Church of Roxbury. He built the house in 1750, but he died two years later. Then, the Reverend Amos Adam, a student from Harvard College, moved in with his family. Adams was a political activist and a gifted speaker who motivated many patriots. He died in 1775, and the new occupant of the house was General John Thomas of the Continental Army. Thomas held headquarters there. From the rear windows, he had a bird's eye view of the Battle of Bunker Hill.

The First Church of Roxbury went without a pastor for seven years during the siege of Boston. Finally, in 1786, the Reverend Eliphalet Porter bought the house from the Adams heirs. Porter was a smart man who was honored as Doctor of Divinity by Harvard College. His niece, Martha, eventually inherited the house. She married Charles Knapp Dillaway in 1835. This is where the name "Dillaway" comes in.

Mr. Dillaway was a teacher at Boston Latin School, as well as a trustee of Roxbury Latin where he held office for 50 years. He served as Superintendent of Sunday School for 25 years, and he was a Deacon for the First Church until his death in 1889. A memorial tablet was dedicated in his honor at the church in 1904.

Since that time, the Dillaway-Thomas House has had several owners and some interesting tenants. One of them, the famous photographer David Butterfield, took photos of Lincoln and the Civil War. Mr. Butterfield was a very old man when he lived in the Dillaway-Thomas House from 1920 to 1933, and, it was during this time that the City of Boston purchased the property.

The City planned to tear down the Dillaway-Thomas House in order to build our school. Luckily, the Roxbury Historical Society submitted a bill that saved the house. That's probably one of the reasons why the Timilty has a weird shape.

So far, over a million dollars have been spent in the restoration process of the Dillaway-Thomas House. It has a rich history and it will soon be

The long awaited opening of the Dillaway-Thomas House, an eighteenth century structure in Eliot Square, is set for Sunday September 27! With special emphasis on young people, the house will provide many educational opportunities for learning about Roxbury's rich history as well as cultural, social, and economic opportunities for the community.

The opening of the Dillaway-Thomas House is an important event in the evolution of the Roxbury Heritage State Park. The building will house orientation and museum space in the restored rooms and a community history Resource Center. In the future it will be designed to host an oral history collection, as well as audio visual presentation space. The Resource Center will rely most heavily on cooperation from other community institutions as well as Roxbury citizens.

The Roxbury Heritage State Park Advisory Committee and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management have been working hard to revitalize the landscape and improve lighting, sidewalks, plants, and park space in Eliot Square. These improvements will increase residents' access to park sites and will link the Dillaway-Thomas House Community Resource Center with other important historic sites in the square.

The Dillaway-Thomas House will be one of the focal points of The Roxbury Heritage Park until an Orientation Center in the old Nawn Factory (Melnea Cass Blvd. at Washington) opens. It will sponsor cultural and recreational events, exhibits, and community meetings. Ultimately, it will be a Community Resource Center providing information and technical assistance in conservation, preservation, and community development.

Significant project resources will be directed toward developing a network of indoor and outdoor exhibits and activities that will, according



Dillaway-Thomas House, now
Courtesy of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management

to the RHSP Advisory Committee "Celebrate the diversity and richness of Roxbury's people in time and place—past, present, and future." This opening is a chance for citizens to become involved in the betterment of the Roxbury community and the welfare of its people. The Dillaway-Thomas House will provide support for all those who wish to preserve Roxbury's rich history as well as those who wish to contribute to it. With state, city, local agencies and community residents working together, the Dillaway-Thomas House Resource Center and the Heritage State Park in Roxbury will be a success!
Holly Andrews

Wanted! Information About Roxbury's
History and Heritage. See page 4...

filled with hundreds of valuable old photographs and records because it will be the headquarters for the Roxbury Heritage Park.

I'm glad that the Roxbury Historical Society got involved and didn't allow this special place to be ruined. I'm even pleased that it's being renovated because I now realize that all the racket has been for a good reason! If you are interested in seeing the restored Dillaway-Thomas House, just drop by 183 Roxbury Street.

Reprinted with permission from the James P. Timilty Middle School "Promising Pals 1992" Program Booklet, May 19, 1992; Mr. Roger Harris, Principal.

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Grand Opening: Sunday, September 27, 1992, 1:30 pm See, page 4

CITY

WEEKLY

OCTOBER 11, 1992

Roxbury house reopens to tell of past, future

By Sandy Coleman
GLOBE STAFF

ROXBURY — At some point during its 242-year history, the Dillaway-Thomas House must have developed a will of its own. It has lived through two fires, escaped a wrecking ball and survived a waiting game in which the players involved couldn't decide what to do with it.

Now, like a phoenix, it has gained new life through a \$2.2 million state-funded renovation that has transformed the 18th-century structure into the keeper of Roxbury's history.

"The general vision of Roxbury is one of violence, just negative energy in general," said Renita Martin, the Dillaway-

Thomas House program director. "This house is important because it allows Roxbury to tell its own story, to present its own picture, to present the positive images that do exist."

Believed to be one of the oldest wood-frame houses in the Boston area, the house sits on a spacious lot in John Eliot Square, just around

Dillaway-Thomas House

Location: 183 Roxbury St.

Tours: Thursdays and first and third Sundays of each month, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.; or by appointment.

Upcoming event: Reception for artist Vivian Scott, Nov. 8.

Telephone: 445-3399.

the corner from Maurice Starr's House of Hits.

It is designed as a place where people can come to learn about the past, debate the present and have a hand in directing the future through programs such as the "The Griots of Roxbury," a youth organization based at the house.

The Griots take their name from the African Griots, the historians for their tribes. The African Griots memorize their tribe's history, its folk tales, and pass the information on.

The Roxbury Griots aim to perform a similar function by conducting oral-history projects, by interviewing neighborhood elders about the Roxbury of their youth. By developing an understanding of the past, the Roxbury Griots hope to

BEASTS IN BROOKLINE

Coyotes have been spotted at Lost Pond, a 30-acre tract of conservation land in south Brookline.
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CITY

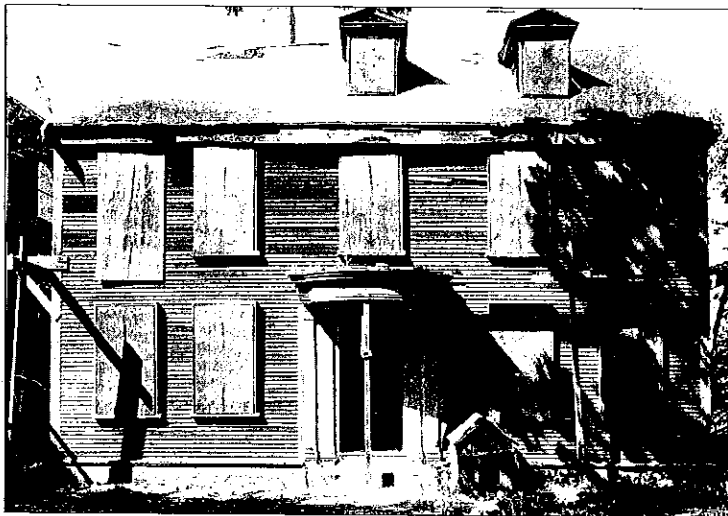
WEEKLY

OFF THE CUFF

Rev. Eugene Rivers, who has promoted a break with mainstream ministers, gives his views on issues.
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OCTOBER 11, 1992

NIGHT & DAY



At left, the Dillaway-Thomas house in 1986; at right, the renovated version, with Chris Greene (left), Abria Smith, Khalif Nelson and Chaka J. Meredith, the "Griots of Roxbury" who collect accounts of Roxbury's past.

A house reopens to bear witness to the past and future

HOUSE
Continued from Page 13

make positive changes, said Hazel Bright, a Roxbury resident, group coordinator and teacher who speaks with the intensity of a Baptist preacher.

"Every person has a story," Bright told four members of the group at a recent Saturday meeting. "Often you turn on the TV and you hear someone saying they are going to do a story on violence in Roxbury or on the city, and you don't see anything that reflects you because no one asks you."

"We're going to tell the story through the voice of ordinary people. We are part of history, and at the same time, we are making history."

In addition to the oral-history projects, the house, which officially opened last

month, will feature a history resource center in a wing added during the renovation.

Martin is in the middle of what she calls a scavenger hunt in which she hopes to find resource materials such as books and old newspapers to fill the center's shelves.

The search is a complex one because Roxbury, which was first inhabited by Native Americans, has such a diverse history, and materials are scattered, said Martin, a 23-year-old poet, actress and recent graduate of Boston University.

"There is such a need for a place like this to be able to find all the history," she said.

On the second floor in the oral-history room, video projects and lectures will be presented. An oral history on black veterans will be presented, as will a provocative look at black-Jewish relations.

The art-exhibition room will highlight lo-

cal artists. Currently, the work of Vivian Scott is featured. Her watercolors depict Roxbury scenes - from the familiar faces of homeless people pushing shopping carts to hopeful children bouncing basketballs.

Although programs have not been set in stone, Martin said plans include a drumming workshop, monthly concerts and a film series in which movies depicting issues that affect Roxbury will be shown and discussed. Martin is also asking Roxbury residents to donate historically significant items to the house's collection.

The Georgian-style house, painted yellow-ochre, features sections where the original construction has been left intact and covered by plexiglass. Information about the house's history is mounted on the building.

The house was originally built as a parsonage for Rev. Oliver Peabody, pastor of

the First Church of Roxbury. Many others lived there after Peabody, including Martha Dillaway, who inherited the house, and John Thomas, a Revolutionary War general who supposedly camped at the house with his troops.

Two fires, one of them ruled arson, damaged the house in the 1970s. For a long period the house sat idle while the city considered its fate, said state Rep. Byron Rushing, a former Roxbury resident who has been instrumental in the restoration project. He is vice chairman of the Roxbury Heritage State Park Advisory Committee, which oversees programming at the house.

At one point, there was talk of tearing down the house to make room for the James P. Timilty School. The school was built around the house after public objections.

In 1984, Rushing persuaded the legisla-

ture to approve funds for renovating the house as part of the Dukakis administration's plan to build heritage parks throughout the state.

Today the state Department of Environmental Management oversees the house, which is owned by the city and leased to the state, Rushing said. By summer an amphitheater will be built on an adjacent lot.

Across the street at the former First Church of Roxbury, which is now a youth center, director Rubina Qureshi said she is glad to see the house restored.

"It's beautiful," she said. "In terms of having a historical museum, it is useful for giving a broader view - especially for the youth - of what this neighborhood was like and how it has changed and how they fit into the picture."

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / JOANNE RATHIE