



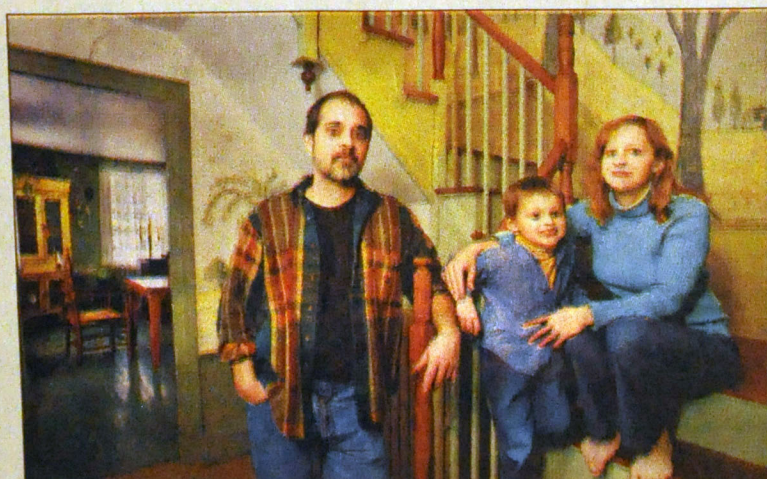
This Federal-style home, built in Bridgton in 1828 and once called Far Hills for its view of the Oxford Hills, is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Art brings past alive



Staff photos by John Ewing

Murals by artist Rufus Porter cover the walls of the 19th-century home built for Benjamin Cleaves and now owned by Anthony Tafuri and Natasha Tiaht. Cleaves' descendant, Henry Bradstreet Cleaves, was governor of Maine from 1892-96.



Anthony Tafuri and Natasha Tiaht, pictured with their son Davin, bought the former Cleaves home five years ago after seeing it for sale online.

Rufus Porter murals portraying 19th-century New England scenes adorn the walls of the Benjamin Cleaves House in Bridgton.

BY STEPHANIE BOUCHARD
News Assistant

BRIDGTON — Five-year-old Davin Tafuri races through his house, sliding across painted wood floors in stocking feet. As he races from the dining room to the living room, he zips past rolling hills dotted with trees and boats sailing on gentle waters.

Davin isn't dashing past huge windows with a view. He passes murals that cover walls in the historic home his family owns.

The murals, which are close to 200 years old, are attributed to Rufus Porter, an itinerant painter, inventor and founder of *Scientific American* magazine.

"Davin pretty much knows, and I've heard him tell his friends, 'Don't touch the walls,'" says his mother, Natasha Tiaht, of the murals that are in remarkably good condition and with their colors of blues and greens and yellows — still seem vibrant.

The art would be coveted by art and historic preservationist types. But the murals are just a part of the distinctive place Davin's family calls home.

The house, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is not far from Route 302 in Bridgton, located on a hill that was once the center of town. It is one of those unusual, privately owned old houses in Maine that everyone drives by but rarely sees inside.

Every community in Maine has such homes. They are the places where tourists stop to snap pictures. Some are mansions, some small cottages, some may be former churches or taverns or school buildings. Most are too old to guess their age and have a historical story you can only guess at.

Beginning today, the newspaper offers weekly "tours" of a handful of historic homes in Maine communities that are not open to the public.

BUILT IN 1828

The Federal-style timber-framed Benjamin Cleaves House is home to Davin, his mother, his father, Anthony Tafuri, 19-month-old twin siblings, Jonah and Norah, and the family dog, Luna.

The house has the distinction of being one of a dozen in the Lakes Region that was decorated by Porter. The *Bridgton Times* reports that only four homes with Porter murals remain intact in the Bridgton area today.

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

TODAY WE INTRODUCE a new weekly series, *Historic Homes*, that offers readers a peek inside private homes in Maine that have artistic, architectural and historic significance.

The Cleaves House originally was called Far Hills because you could see Oxford Hills across the fields in front of it. The two-story home was built in 1828 for Benjamin Cleaves, whose descendant, Henry Bradstreet Cleaves, was governor of Maine from 1892-96.

Originally a family home situated in the center of town (the center of town has since moved), the house passed hands from the Cleaves family through a succession of owners that included a deacon who converted the home to a farmhouse and owners who ran the two-bedroom home as an inn.

The Tafuri-Tiaht family bought the home five years ago after seeing it for sale on Realtor.com.

They had been looking for an old farmhouse for a long time, says Tafuri. Most of the old farmhouses they looked at had major structural damage that required more work than they wanted to undertake.

But when Tiaht saw the Cleaves House online, she knew it was something special.

The house had been vacant for a while and had been on the market for some time.

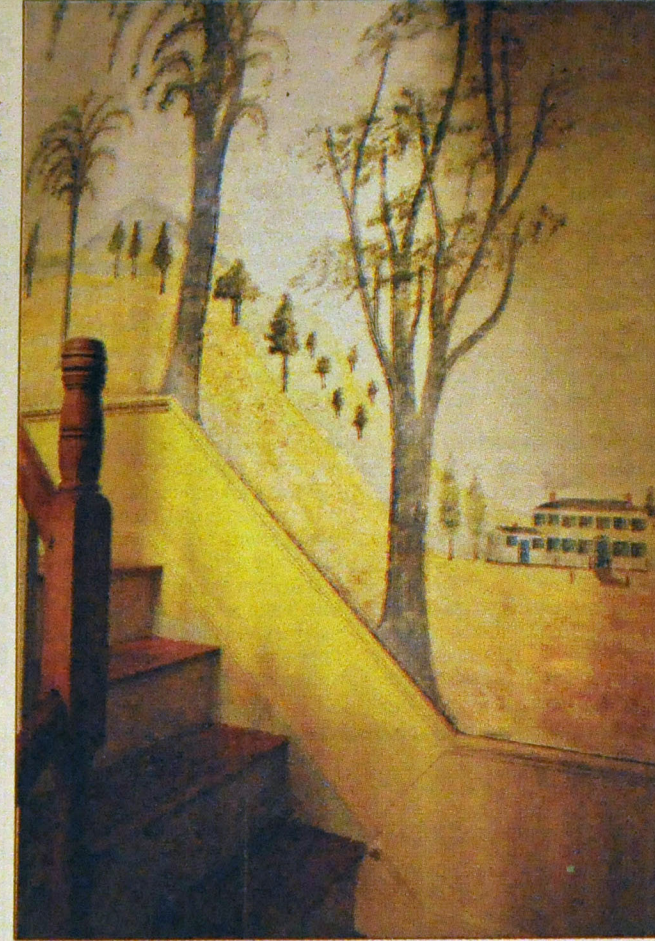
It needed work, but it was just what Tafuri and Tiaht were looking for. They made an offer the same day they walked through it with their agent, paying about \$84,000 for it in 1999.

"The place is built amazing," says Tafuri, a sculptor with a background in construction. "Every time we work on the house, we're impressed with the construction."

In the attic, he says, you can see the timber that frames the house, complete with the ridges that mark the beams as hand-hewn.

Yellow with green and white trim today, the Cleaves house was originally painted white.

The front entrance of the home is a six-paneled door with sidelights and a demi-lune fan above the door frame. Through this front door, you walk into a small hall between the dining room and living room.



Staff photo by John Ewing

The Rufus Porter mural on the stairwell wall of Anthony Tafuri and Natasha Tiaht's Bridgton home includes a depiction of the house shortly after it was built in 1828.

Fine trim, painted wide-plank wood floors, moldings with simple but elegant lines, and fireplaces in the dining and living rooms enhance the historic feel.

In the entrance hall is a tight L-shaped staircase painted in several shades of green as the family has experimented with paint colors trying to match the green tones in the Porter mural wrapping up the stairwell walls.

Thought to have been painted between 1830-35, the Porter murals are scenes not of any specific location but an amalgamation of rural and coastal New England landscapes.

From the first-floor landing rising up to the second floor, the walls of the stairwell are covered with a countryside landscape

with tall trees in the foreground and smaller trees suggesting distance. Settled on a rolling hill in this mural is a white house, reputed to be the Cleaves House as it looked shortly after it was built.

The murals in the living room decorate each wall in the room. Over the mantel are a collection of houses nestled comfortably together. Flanking walls feature rolling hills and humped islands languishing in calm waterways. Skimming the waterways are three sailing ships: a canoe, a three-masted schooner and a single-masted sloop. That sloop has special significance. It is considered a self-portrait (a single top-hatted man is sailing the boat) and Porter's signature.

The couple constantly work on

HOUSE BIO

THE BENJAMIN CLEAVES HOUSE was built in 1828 for Cleaves, a Bridgton tinsmith.

THE HOME WENT THROUGH a number of owners after being sold by the Cleaves family in the 1830s. Those owners included a deacon who transformed the home into a farmhouse, and owners who used the home as an inn. It was purchased five years ago by Anthony Tafuri and Natasha Tiaht.

THE FEDERAL-STYLE, timber-framed home is located off Route 302. Now painted yellow with green and white trim, it was originally white. It has two bedrooms and two baths, a dining room, living room, kitchen and study. The home features wall murals by itinerant painter Rufus Porter in the stairwell and living room. A red barn with white trim sits behind the house. It is used in part by Tafuri as a sculpture studio.

THE BENJAMIN CLEAVES HOUSE is on the National Register of Historic Places.

WHO WAS RUFUS PORTER?

RUFUS PORTER (1792-1884) was born in West Boxford, Mass.

He spent most of his life wandering. He regularly traveled throughout New England and the East Coast, and even voyaged to Hawaii. Porter spent his life experimenting: He worked as an itinerant painter, painting murals and portraits; he patented inventions such as a revolving rifle, a life preserver, a fire alarm, and a washing machine; he founded *Scientific American* magazine; and he wrote, including a booklet he titled "A Select Collection of Valuable and Curious Arts and Interesting Experiments."

GETTING ON THE REGISTER

CHRISTI MITCHELL is architectural historian at Maine Historic Preservation in Augusta and state coordinator for the National Register of Historic Places. Here's what she says about the process (which takes about a year) of getting a property listed on the register:

■ Contact her at 287-2132 to request an information form be sent to you.

■ Fill out the form including information on the history and condition of the property; include current photos of the property.

■ Once received, the information will be compared to the National Park Service's criteria for listing.

■ If the property is eligible for listing, the property owner(s) will be notified that the property has been scheduled for nomination.

■ Mitchell will make an appointment to view and photograph the property and will research the property and write a nomination document based on her findings.

■ The nomination document will be presented to the state review board at one of its quarterly meetings.

■ If the property is approved, the Keeper of the National Register will get the nomination for final consideration.

■ If approved by the Keeper, the property will be listed.

THERE IS NO cost to the property owner to have a property listed on the register.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION on the National Registry of Historic Places and the listing of properties, go to www.cr.nps.gov/nr/index.htm.

Porter's murals are painted onto the plaster walls. You can see where previous owners have nailed or screwed things into those walls, sometimes within the murals themselves. Where nails have been pulled out, plaster has come out with them. In order not to cause further damage, where nails remain in the plaster, Tafuri and Tiaht have left them.

The murals are a strong presence, but they are easy to live with, Tafuri says. They don't overpower the home.

He says he has heard of Porter murals that have been removed from the homes in which they were painted and sold. He can't fathom doing such a thing. "We'd never sell them. I'd feel awful. They belong here."

The couple constantly work on

their nearly 170-year-old house. They've painted and done repair work in every room, gutted walls, rebuilt cabinets and done major renovations in the kitchen and study. While working on the study, Tafuri found a hand-sewn baseball in one of the walls.

The attic was insulated with old farmers' wives magazines and newspapers. One newspaper, Tafuri says, carried a story saying that the Coast Guard and Navy were still optimistic in the search for Amelia Earhart.

Because of quirky alterations made after the house was built, the family is faced with some challenges.

"You have to build things tapered and crooked to look right," says Tafuri. And in the winter, the house heaves around, so they have to change the

position of door latches to get the doors to close properly.

As much as possible, the couple is not making changes to their home that will affect the historic value of the house because the historic character of the house contributes to their love for it.

"It's amazing to think how many people lived and cycled through here," Tafuri says.

The historic value of the house really hit home for him while he was watching a TV documentary on the Alamo.

"It really struck me (watching the TV documentary) ... when the Alamo (happened), ... this house was (already) standing."

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