

# Quincy House



**Historic New England**

**By Kate Eagen Johnson**



QUINCY, MASS. — “The signature object at the Quincy House and in Historic New England’s collections overall is the japanned high chest of drawers. It is a great example of mid-Eighteenth Century japanning and its accompanying story puts it over the top.” Nancy Carlisle, senior curator of collections at Historic New England takes a breath and enthusiastically continues. “It was saved from two house fires prior to 1770. We know that because Eliza Susan Quincy, the great-granddaughter of its first owner, was a remarkable historian. She recorded family history in a number of ways, including labeling family objects. Visitors can see the high chest in the bed chamber in which it stood when its original owner died in 1784.”



**Furniture scholars Tara Cederholm and Christine Thomson have attributed the japanned decoration on this high chest of drawers to Robert Davis of Boston, 1740–50. Maple, red oak and white pine; 84<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> by 42<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> by 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches.**

For the last three years, Carlisle has led a project to research, rethink and reinstall the Quincy House, a flagship property of Historic New England. Emphasis is now placed on Eliza Susan Quincy (1798–1884) and her two sisters, who resided in the structure circa 1880, the period for which the strongest documentation exists. Carlisle says, “The goal was to show the house and its history through Eliza Susan Quincy’s eyes. Because of the family’s role in the region’s and nation’s history, it is a tale worth telling.”



**The sword belonged to Josiah Quincy Jr, known as “the Patriot,” and is inscribed with his name and the date 1775. It leans against a Boston mahogany side chair, a wedding gift on the occasion of his marriage to Abigail Phillips in 1769. Colonel Josiah Quincy purchased the settee in England around 1748. A cut-paper valentine dated 1758 from New Brunswick, N.J., belonging to Maria Sophia Kemper Morton rests on it.**





Much is known about the furnishing of Quincy House through the diligent labors of Miss Quincy. Her “Memorandum Relative to Pictures, China, & Furniture &c, &c, &c” of 1879 and the formal photography she directed circa 1880 made the re-creation of the interiors possible. This devoted caretaker of family legacy recorded the provenances of individual possessions, thus making them a valued resource for attribution-building. Quincy also edited published volumes of family correspondence, which gained her the respect of academic historians.

To succinctly answer the question, “Who were the Quincys?,” Carlisle likens them to a Nineteenth Century version of the Kennedys. The prominent dynasty with mercantile beginnings included six civic and community leaders named Josiah. One

**The photograph above was taken circa 1880. The photograph below shows the newly installed west parlor following written documentation as well as the 1880 photograph. The likeness over the mantel is a reproduction of the portrait of Colonel Josiah Quincy painted by John Singleton Copley about 1767. The original portrait belongs to Dietrich American Foundation.**

or more of them held the title of mayor of Boston, president of Harvard, Boston City councilor and member of the House of Representatives, Massachusetts House or Massachusetts Senate. This “Pride of Quincys” was related to another New England familial powerhouse, the Adamses, through Abigail Adams...

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**Family history has it that this urn was a gift from Major Samuel Shaw, the first American to oversee direct trade with China, to his sister-in-law Abigail Phillips Quincy. He brought it back on his third trip to China in 1792. Covered urn, Jingdezhen, China, circa 1792. Hard-paste porcelain, 15¼ by 9 inches.**



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