



PHOTO BY JOOK LEUNG

# Merchant's House Museum • High School Curriculum Guide

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## About the Merchant's House Museum

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Following the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, business in the City boomed. It was the Golden Age of Trade. To escape the increasing noise, congestion, and commercialization of the seaport area, wealthy merchants and their families moved northward on the narrow island of Manhattan.<sup>1</sup>

By the 1830s, “above Bleecker Street” was the place to live. Which is why on June 3, 1831, Joseph Brewster, a hatter and part-time real estate speculator, paid \$3,500 for the lot that would become the site of the Merchant's House. East Fourth Street was part of the Bond Street area – an exclusive residential suburb – and prices were on the rise. Brewster had purchased the adjacent lot to the east just two months before for \$3,000. By year's end, eight houses were under construction. Brewster completed this house, and its twin next door, in 1832. He lived there for three years and, in November 1835, sold the house to Seabury Tredwell for \$18,000, making a tidy profit for himself.<sup>2</sup>

Merchant Seabury Tredwell had retired from the hardware business in 1835, but was still active in business, when he, along with his seven children and his wife, moved into the Greek Revival-styled home on East Fourth Street. Their last child, Gertrude, was born there in 1840. The Tredwell family occupied Fourth Street for ninety-eight years.

When Gertrude Tredwell died in 1833, a distant cousin, George Chapman, saw the value of the house and convinced Gertrude's niece to sell him the house and all its furnishings. He then created the Merchant's House Museum in 1936.

For eighty years, the Merchant's House Museum has educated visitors about life in nineteenth-century New York City. The house, remarkably preserved, appears as if the Tredwell Family has just left for an outing. The only changes made by the Museum are the addition of electricity and installation of a bathroom.

The Museum's collection is an astounding example of wealthy living in the nineteenth century. The furniture, clothing and many other artifacts are perfectly preserved. This affords visitors a unique experience to see what a New York City family lived like in antebellum America. The house is a gateway to understanding social expectations of a wealthy merchant and his family. It is the only historic house museum in the Greenwich Village/Soho/NoHo neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup>

### THE FURNISHINGS

Some of Merchant House Museum's collection predates the Tredwell Family's residency on Fourth Street. The family brought several pieces from their previous home at 12 Dey Street.<sup>4</sup>

In the ground floor family room is an example of the Empire style (1815-1840) of sofa. This was one of the pieces moved from 12 Dey Street. Presently, over the sofa, hangs an engraving of George Washington and his generals from 1856.<sup>5</sup>

Duncan Phyfe (1768-1854) was one of nineteenth-century New York's leading Neoclassical cabinetmakers. Phyfe supplied Seabury Tredwell with twelve chairs, now one of the few complete Phyfe sets known to exist.<sup>6</sup>

By the mid-1850s, the house was equipped for gas lighting. The parlor's pair of gas chandeliers are prime examples of the type used in the mid-nineteenth century. The gasoliers were electrified when the house was converted to a museum in the 1930s and conserved in 2007. From candle stands to Argand oil lamps with crystal prisms to fancy gas chandeliers, the Tredwell lighting devices represent a full range of nineteenth century lighting technology.<sup>7</sup>

### THE COSTUME COLLECTION

As socially prominent young women, the Tredwell sisters naturally dressed in the height of nineteenth-century fashion. Some forty dresses survive as part of the Merchant's House Museum collection. Eliza Tredwell's wedding dress from 1820 features an empire waistline and embroidery at the hem. This cream-colored dress is in a Grecian style, popular in the Regency era.<sup>8</sup>

By the 1840s, many of the dresses are whalebone “hoop” skirts, which by 1856 are crinoline supported by steel ribs underneath. The corset was cinched by lacing to contract the wearer's abdomen by two to three inches. These dresses could be worn every day.<sup>9</sup>

A fascinating feature of the house is the infrastructure used for storing clothes. As hangars had not been invented yet, cupboards and shelves were built between the bedrooms on the second and third floors. Clothes were not only stored in



ELIZA TREDWELL'S WEDDING DRESS FROM 1820 FEATURES AN EMPIRE WAISTLINE AND EMBROIDERY AT THE HEM  
COLLECTION OF MERCHANT'S HOUSE MUSEUM



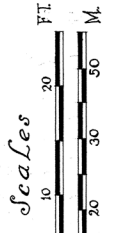
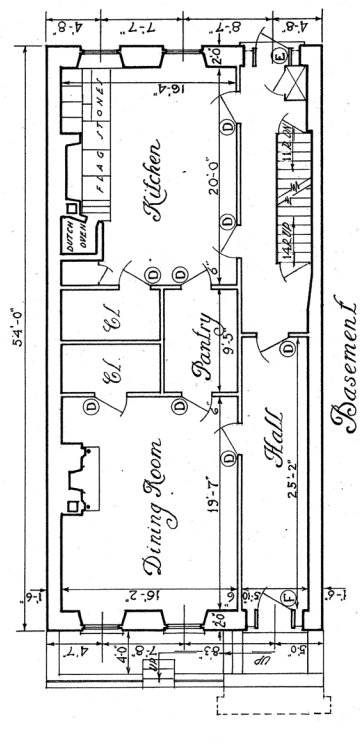
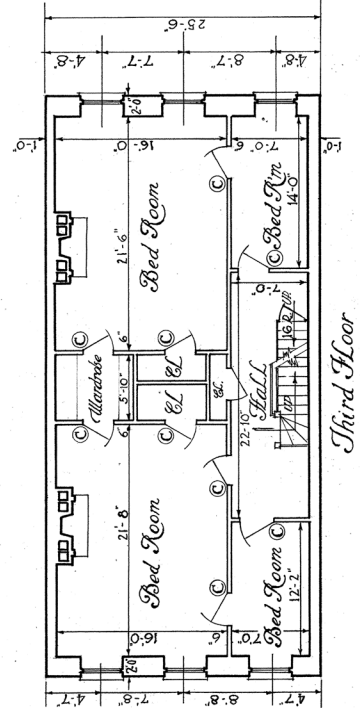
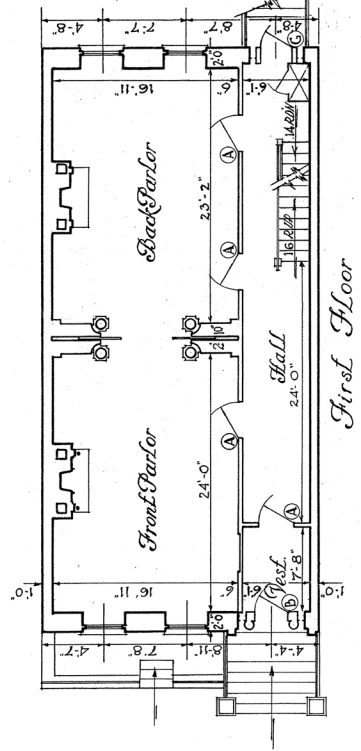
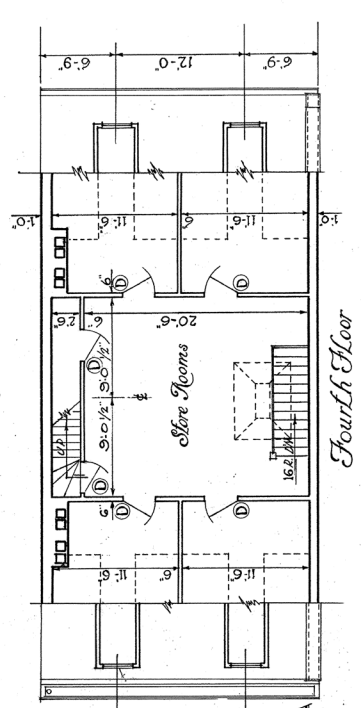
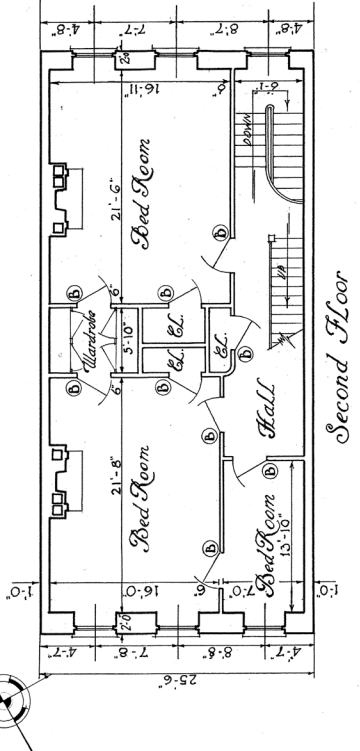
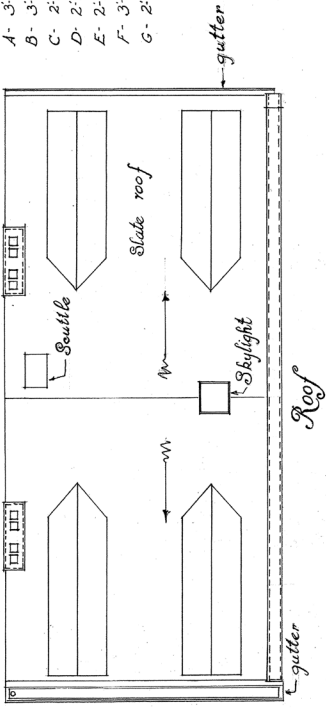


THE PARLORS ARE FINISHED IN A GREEK REVIVAL STYLE, WITH GREEK ACCENTS ON THE COLUMNS, CEILING, AND TRIM  
COLLECTION OF MERCHANT'S HOUSE MUSEUM. PHOTO BY DENNIS VLASOV.



*Door Sizes*

- A- 3:3 x 8:5 x 1 1/8"
- B- 3:7 x 8:0 x 1 1/2"
- C- 2:10 x 7:1 x 1 1/2"
- D- 2:10 x 6:10 x 1 1/4"
- E- 2:10 x 7:3 x 1 1/4"
- F- 3:0 x 7:3 x 1 1/4"
- G- 2:11 x 8:0 x 1 1/4"

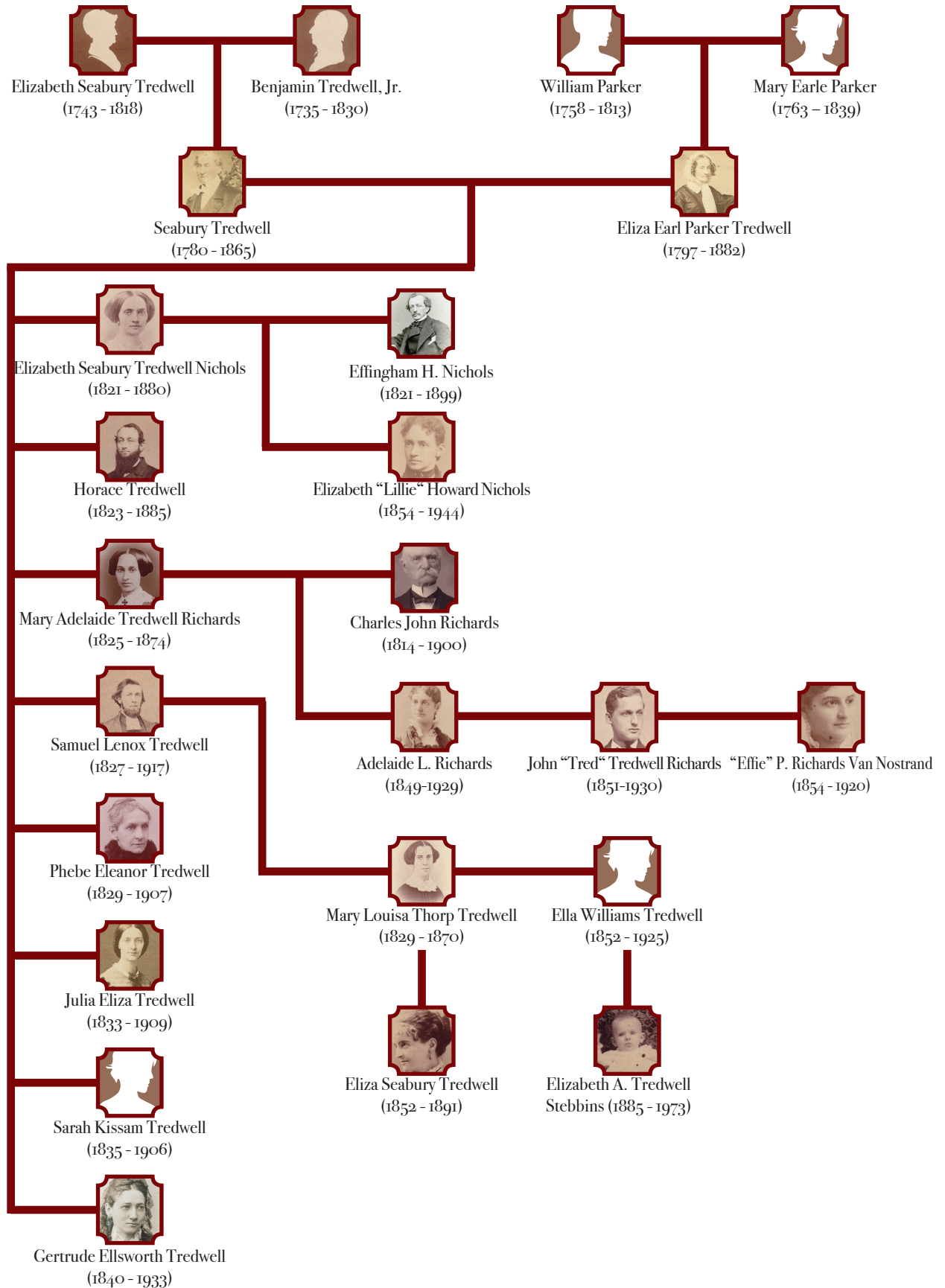


*Floor Plans*  
Scale 1/8" = 1'-0"

*Richard S. Herfberg } Del.'s  
Oleg Devom*

THE FLOOR PLAN OF FOURTH STREET IN THE HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY,  
MAY 25, 1936. BASICALLY UNALTERED FROM 1835.  
COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HABS NY-440

# The Tredwell Family





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## Merchant's House Museum — A Story Of Survival

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THE KITCHEN HEARTH, MAY 25, 1936  
COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, HABS NY-440

### A TOP-TO-BOTTOM RESTORATION IN THE 1970S

By 1959, when George Chapman died, the house was severely deteriorated and in need of repairs – and protection. By the late 1960s, chronic water infiltration had resulted in extensive structural damage.

New York University architect Joseph Roberto (pictured at right on the roof of the Merchant's House) and his wife, Carol, fell in love with the house and committed to a complete structural restoration, working tirelessly to raise grant monies from federal and state governments, private foundations, and corporate and individual donors.

The museum was closed for nine years and the top-to-bottom restoration was done in four stages, including extensive exterior structural work, interior repairs and painting, and restoration of the beautiful ornamental plaster work.

The Museum, finally, reopened to the public in November, 1979. In 1981, the interior of the Merchant's House was landmarked by the City of New York. Today, the house is one of only 120 interior and exterior landmarks in New York City only six of which are residences.

Following Joseph Roberto's untimely death in 1988, with the help of a number of the City's preservation organizations,

the Museum raised seed money to hire its first professional staff. In 1997, the Museum received a \$1 million grant from the Vincent Astor Foundation, thus for the first time securing an endowment that would provide for its future financial security. In 1999, the house joined the Historic House Trust of New York City, further ensuring its preservation for generations to come.

### THE PRESERVATION CHALLENGES CONTINUE, EVEN TODAY

Unfortunately, landmark designation does not guarantee protection from adjacent construction or demolition. In 1988, demolition of the building to the east caused extensive structural damage, forcing the museum to close its doors for repairs for several years. The restoration cost nearly \$1 million.

Since 2012, the Merchant's House has been fighting to prevent proposed development of an eight-story hotel next door at 27 East 4th Street. According to multiple engineering studies, the threat of damage, possibly irreparable, to the fragile almost 200-year-old building during the demolition, excavation, and construction of the new building is immense. The Museum has been spending tens of thousands of dollars each year on legal and engineering fees in an effort to protect the building.



## Merchant's House Museum Glossary

Astor, John Jacob	German-American businessman, merchant, real estate mogul and investor in New York City.
Astor Library	A free public library founded through the collaboration of John Jacob Astor and Joseph Cogswell in 1854.
Astor Place Opera House	An opera house located on Lafayette Street and Astor Place, scene of the 1849 Astor Place Riot.
Bond Street Area	The fashionable district New Yorkers chose to get away from the docks of South Street.
Brewster, Joseph	The builder of the Merchant's House in 1832.
Calling Card	A small paper left when visiting neighbors.
Carte De Visite	A small paper photograph used as a calling card. This technology was developed in the 1850s. Horace Tredwell had them.
Cast Iron Stove	Stoves used to heat the fourth floor servants' room.
Chapman, George	The Tredwells' distant cousin who created the Merchant's House Museum.
Christ Church Cemetery	The place in Manhasset, Long Island, where Seabury, Eliza, and their unmarried children are buried.
Commission Merchant	Horace listed this as his profession in the draft rolls during the Civil War. They trade goods for a percentage of the sales price.
Cooper Union	Founded by Peter Cooper as Cooper Institute, this institution offered free education in arts, science and engineering.
Effingham, Kansas	A town named for Effingham Nichols' work on the railroads.
Gas Chandeliers	The first lighting devices installed in 29 East Fourth Street in the 1850s. Burned natural gas.
Grecian style	A popular fashion style in the 1820s. It featured predominantly muslin cloth in shades of white with geometric patterns.
Greek Revival	A popular architectural style in the 1830s that features repetitive plaster ornamental motifs.
LaGrange Terrace	Nine Greek revival row houses, of which four remain, originally built in the early 1830s, located at 418-426 Lafayette Place.
Marble Cemetery	Historic cemetery founded in 1830. Seabury was buried here until his body could be moved to Christ Church during the summer.
Mrs. Okill's Academy	One of the most elite private female academies of the time. Mrs. Okill's offered a "fashionable education" to young ladies.
Neoclassical	A style principally derived from the architecture of classical antiquity.
Parlor	In the nineteenth century, having a parlor room indicated higher social status than those who lived in one or two rooms.
Pearl Street	Seabury, Samuel, and Horace all worked on Pearl Street during their careers. They would walk there from Fourth Street to Pearl Street.
Phyfe, Duncan	Interpreted fashionable European trends. He became a major spokesman for Neoclassicism in the United States.
Pianoforte	An early type of piano. The Tredwells' pianoforte had an attachment that made it sound like an organ.
Pie Safe	A metal cabinet for keeping food warm and away from vermin.
Regency Era	Named for a period in Britain when King George III was unfit to rule and his son was regent instead.
St. Bartholomew's Church	The Tredwells attended St. Bartholomew's until 1872, when it moved uptown.
Tredwell, Gertrude	The only Tredwell child born at 29 East Fourth Street in 1840, she was the last to die there in 1933.
Tredwell Kissam & Co.	Seabury and his partners the Kissams ran this business for decades, supplying hardware from Britain to settlers.
Vauxhall Garden	A pleasure garden and theater named for a similar venue in London. Operated from 1768-1859.
Water-Cure	Hydrotherapy. Mineral-rich water used as a bath or tonic.

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## Student Questions - Before Your Visit

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- 1.) Reading the stories of the Tredwell family, how were their lives different from yours? How were they the same?

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- 2.) What do you imagine it took to run a 14-person household in 1854? Imagine planning meals for fourteen people daily. List some of the ways that the text mentions that the Tredwells prepared their meals.

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- 3.) New York was far removed from the battlefields of the Civil War, but very much caught up in the fighting. The text lists various ways the Civil War impacted the lives of the Tredwells. List some of them here.

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- 4.) In the nineteenth century, death was much more personal, with the family keeping the departed in the home for a period of mourning in the presence of the deceased. The text lists different ways the Tredwells and their relations dealt with death and mourning. List some of them here.

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- 5.) The Tredwells sought out the best, progressive education for their children. List some ways the text discusses education in the nineteenth century, and discuss whether or not you think it would meet modern “progressive” standards.

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## Student Questions - During or After Your Visit

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- 6.) These column capitals are called Doric, Ionic and Corinthian.  What kind are in the double parlor?

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- 7.) Why do you think the pie safe has marks from sitting in bowls of water to keep vermin out? If you were living in the nineteenth century, would you be concerned about mice, rats and roaches?

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- 8.) Consider the artwork hanging in each of the rooms in the Museum. Can you discern any motifs or patterns common to the selections? Are there any family or patriotic themes?

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- 9.) Each of the Tredwells' servant quarters has a large window and was heated by a cast iron stove on the fourth floor. Would the room comfortable in the winter? In the summer? Do you think the servants had much time to relax in their quarters?

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- 10.) Describe your favorite piece of furniture, wall decoration, or clothing that is part of the collection of the Merchant's House Museum. Why did you pick that piece?

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# New York State Learning Standards

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## **SOCIAL STUDIES:**

- STANDARD 1: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in the history of the United States and New York.
- STANDARD 2: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.
- STANDARD 3: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the geography of the interdependent world in which we live – local, national, and global – including the distribution of people, places, and environments over the Earth’s surface.
- STANDARD 4: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of how the United States and other societies develop economic systems and associated institutions to allocate scarce resources; how major decision-making units function in the United States and other national economies; and how an economy solves the scarcity problem through market and nonmarket mechanisms.
- STANDARD 5: Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the necessity for establishing governments; the governmental system of the United States and other nations; the U.S. Constitution; the basic civic values of American constitutional democracy; and the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship, including avenues of participation.

## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS:**

- STANDARD 1: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.
- STANDARD 2: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for literary response and expression.
- STANDARD 3: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.
- STANDARD 4: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for social interaction.