



The interior of the Back Bay's Gibson House reveals how Boston's wealthiest denizens (and their servants) lived and worked during the Victorian era. Inset: a photo of Charles Gibson Jr.

A GLIMPSE OF THE PAST

The Gibson House in the Back Bay offers a perfectly preserved snapshot of Boston life in Victorian times.

BY MALLORY ABREU

WALKING ALONG BEACON STREET IN THE Back Bay, you might not notice anything special about house number 137, located just a block from the Public Garden. But inside, this residence turned museum, where nothing has been altered since the 1930s, offers a rare glimpse of Boston's golden age.

Built in 1860 by Catherine Hammond Gibson for her son, Charles Sr., the Gibson House occupies the second lot developed

after Boston began filling in marshland to create the Back Bay neighborhood. Over the next 40 years, the public works project would yield 570 acres of land, where many of Boston's most affluent families built their homes.

The house was designed by Edward Clarke Cabot, the architect behind the Boston Athenaeum, and features the Eastern and Western motifs that were all the

rage during the Victorian era. From the French mansard slate roof and Italianate brownstone arches around the windows, to the foyer's gilded "Japanese Leather" wallpaper (embossed paper, added in 1888 by Charles Sr.'s wife, Rosamond, a member of the prominent Crowninshield family of merchants) and the master bedroom's faux-bamboo set, the Gibson House is considered a paragon

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of Boston residential design of that time.

Unlike other townhouses of the era, the entrance is centered on the façade. Inside its heavy carved walnut double doors is a spacious foyer with high ceilings crowned by a multistory ventilation shaft—a Victorian innovation that served to draw warm air up to all parts of the home while providing natural light from its skylight. Beyond sits the dining room, featuring a grand mahogany table. A majestic curving black walnut staircase leads to a landing where a copy of Gilbert Stuart’s famous painting of George Washington at Dorchester Heights hangs, along with many other works in heavy gilded frames.

The second floor was designed for entertaining guests following lunch or dinner. It is divided into men’s and women’s areas, including Charles Sr.’s paneled library where he conducted business for his cotton brokerage. Family portraits, lamps, tables, and wall-to-wall carpeting abound, just as they did during the home’s heyday. The third floor contains two bedrooms connected by a bathroom with plumbing that was last updated in 1902. The larger bedroom boasts a 14-piece bedroom set built of bird’s-eye maple.

A network of narrow hallways leads to the servant’s kitchen where a side door opens onto one of the Back Bay’s many public alleys, through which deliveries were received. Servants would also use this route as their entryway.

The preservation of the house was the vision of the eccentric Charles Gibson Jr., who lived there with his mother after his father, Charles Sr., died in 1916. As he watched the neighborhood decline during the 1930s following the Depression and his mother’s death, Charles Jr. tried to maintain the appearance of lost Boston opulence, dining regularly at the Ritz-Carlton in top hat and tails into the 1950s. Perhaps to honor his mother and Boston’s fading Brahmin heritage, he was determined to preserve every aspect of his family home, forcing his guests to eat in the stairwell so as not disrupt the dining room that, to this day, is set with Haviland Limoges china, as his mother left it.

Today, the property is overseen by the Gibson Society, which Charles Jr. founded for that purpose before his death, in 1954. ●