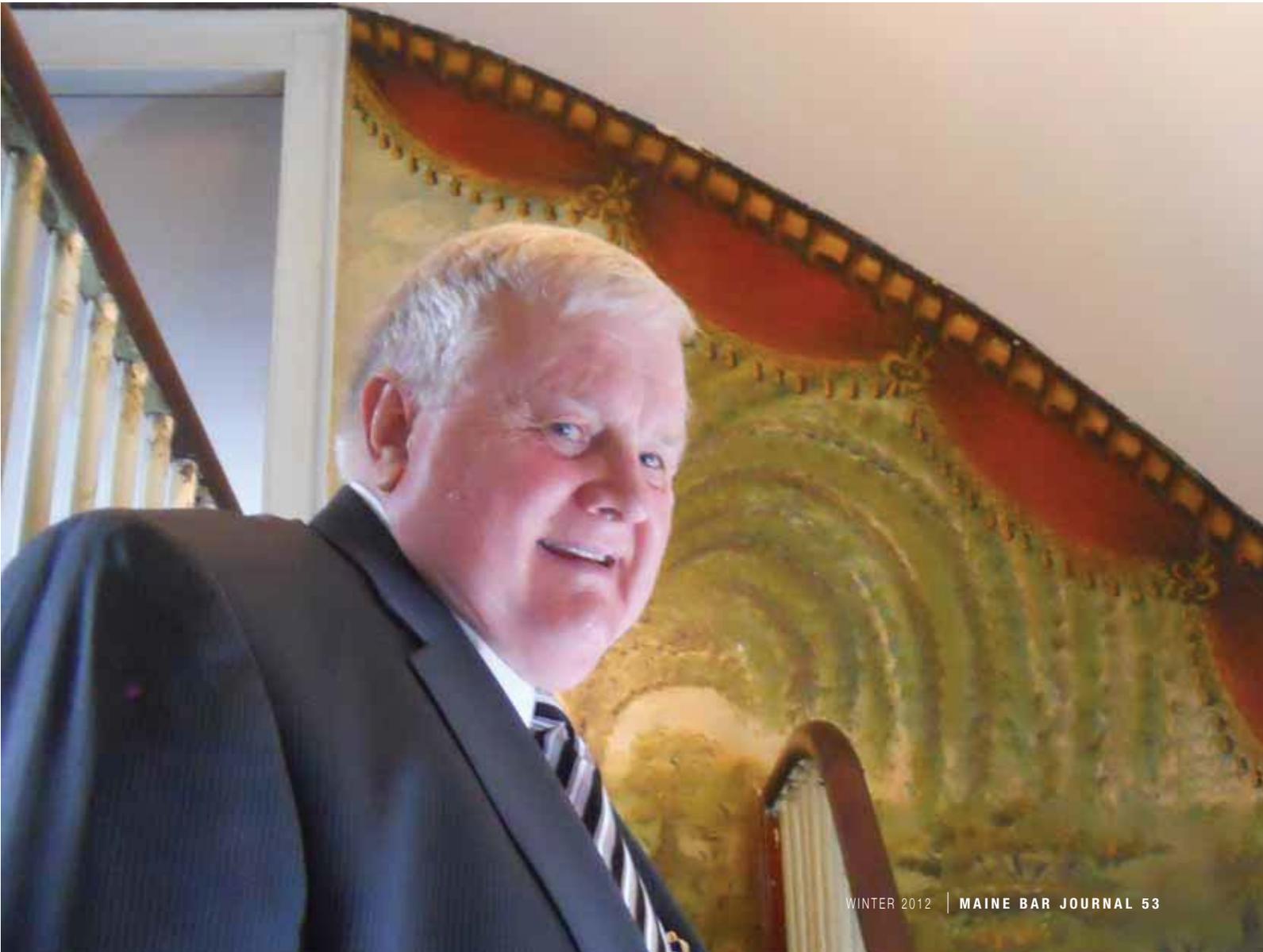


244
3754

Beyond The Law: Ray Pallas, Restorationist

Interview and photos
by Daniel J. Murphy

Ray Pallas not only has a love of American history; he lives and works in its midst. Seeking to find a new home for his law office, Pallas purchased an early 19th century home in the heart of Westbrook. The building was rich in detail—including a unique curved ceiling that likely was designed by a shipbuilder—but also in need of extensive renovation. Undaunted by the challenges ahead, Pallas and his wife, Pamela, embarked on multiple restoration projects to help bring the home back to its



past form. It is during one of those projects that Pallas made an extraordinary discovery: underneath multiple layers of wallpaper, the interior walls were graced with extraordinary folk art murals. The paintings depicted not only local scenes, but also naval battles from the War of 1812, including the U.S.S. Constitution sparring with British frigates. Since making their discovery, the Pallas family has spent countless hours restoring the murals, preserving a rare

glimpse into Westbrook's past for future generations. Pallas sat down with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss his interests.

MBJ: Please tell our readers about your pastime.

RP: We have been restoring an old building, along with historic, museum-quality murals that we discovered by accident. My background is in United States history, particularly the early

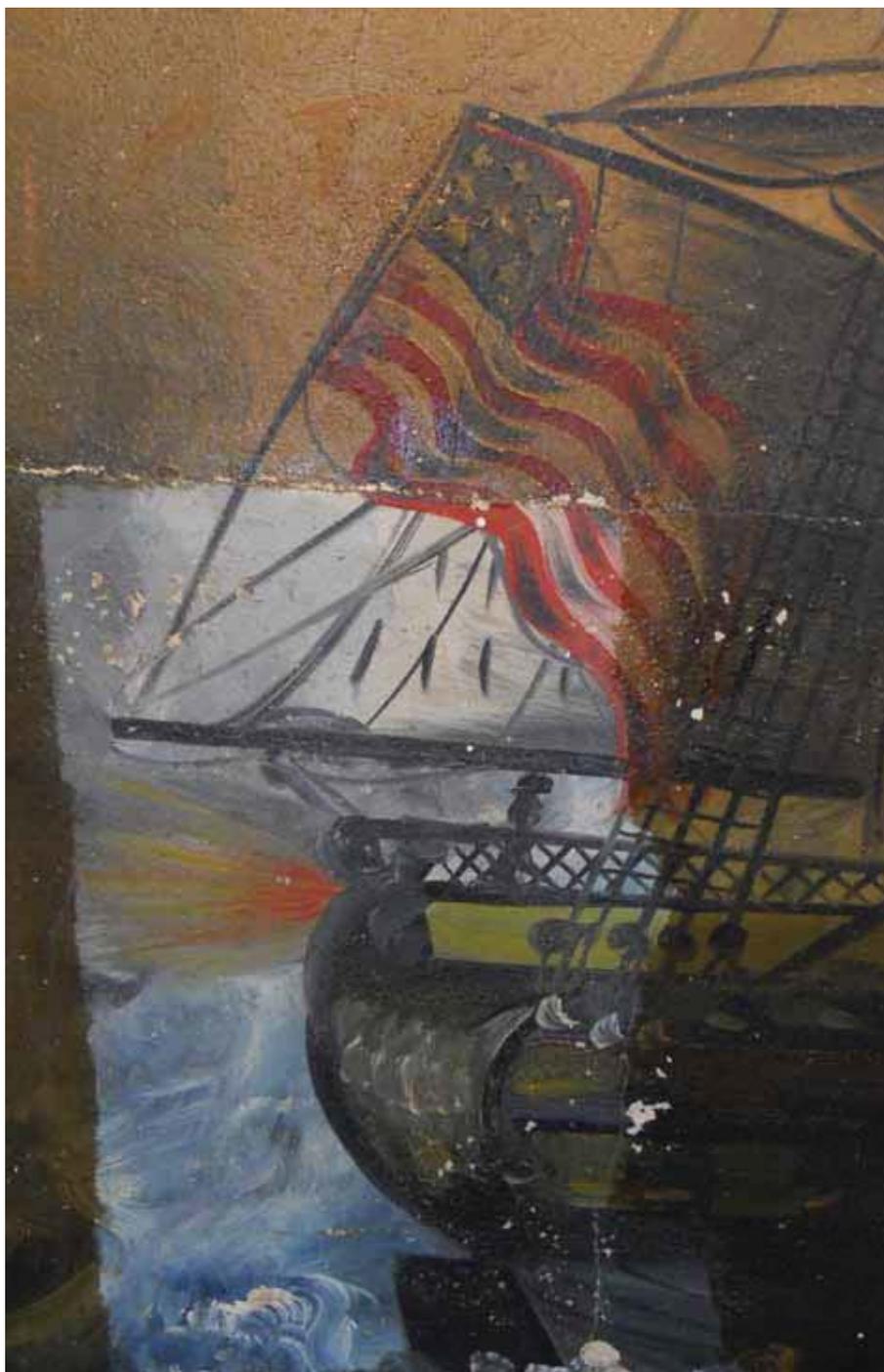
American colonial and federalist period, while my wife happens to be a European historian. When I became aware that this particular building was available, I recognized that it had to be a Greek Revival building that would fit into the period between the presidencies of James Monroe and Andrew Jackson. I purchased the building without any indication that there were any murals in it. It was pretty austere. Once my wife saw the interior of the building, she immediately said, "Oh, we've got to restore this building to its original condition."

MBJ: Tell our readers about the murals that you discovered.

RP: When Pamela said she wanted to restore the interior of the building, I said, "You have no idea what you're talking about, because that's a major undertaking. It can take years and years and cost a lot of money." She said, "That's alright. We can do this over time." We weren't into it a week when she came to me and said, "There's a lot of wallpaper that has to be removed and I really need your help." So she assigned me one room, which would eventually become my office: the formal parlor. I was working on one small patch of wall when I got to a piece of wallpaper that I could not raise. I kept trying to raise it and it wouldn't come up. Pamela discovered that it was not a piece of wallpaper—it was a painting.

MBJ: What do the murals depict?

RP: The murals depict scenes of Westbrook in the early part of the 19th century around 1830. They show shipbuilding on the shoreline, a steamboat, and sailboats going up and down the river here in Westbrook. They show a stylized version of this building, which was previously much closer to the river. There is also a very large mural that depicts the U.S.S. Constitution in a battle with three British frigates. We consulted with people from the Maine Maritime Museum about that mural. They thought the scene was a battle off Cape May in New Jersey that was fought during the war of 1812. And then in the outer hallway





there are some hunting scenes along the river and the obelisk at Bunker Hill.

MBJ: Was it common for homes in the 19th century to have murals?

RP: It was common for people who had a reasonable amount of money and there's a reason for that. Up until the War of 1812, people would wallpaper their walls. That wallpaper typically was obtained from Britain. The War of 1812, however, brought a huge nationalist patriotic surge to the country and it became unpatriotic to use wallpaper. Around that point, itinerate painters came into existence and people started painting their walls as a statement—to show that they were patriots. Depictions of the U.S.S. Constitution and Bunker Hill were seen as statements of patriotism, but there were also depictions of the local areas, too.

MBJ: What is the historical significance of the murals?

RP: Steven Brooks, formerly of the Maine State Museum in Augusta, who is a restorationist, took a look at the murals. When we met, he said, "Do you know what you have here?" I said, "No, that's why you're here. I haven't

the slightest idea what I have here." He said, "I think you have the finest set of oil murals in all of Northern New England." He was amazed at the murals. First, they were in very good condition. Also, they were very extensive, covering four walls in my office and the entire entrance hall. It turned out that the reason they are in such good a condition is because they're not tempera. These were not murals that were painted on wet plaster; these were murals that were painted on dry plaster with oil paint. That is why they have held up so well.

MBJ: How did you get started on the restoration work for the murals?

RP: Steve Brooks worked on them extensively. As you can imagine, the expense involved in restoring a building, much less these murals, is extraordinary. We had to take all the clapboards off and have the building re-clapboarded and insulated. So we were putting a lot of money into the building and Steve agreed to train my wife and me to do the restoration work on the murals.

MBJ: Could you describe the restoration process?

RP: You begin by placing some denatured alcohol in a suspension substance,

which is very neutral. You then coat a small area, such as a square inch, with the alcohol. Then you use Q-tips to peel off layers until you see the first little bit of color. The minute you see color, you neutralize the area by putting acetone on it. The acetone stops the alcohol from working. At this stage, you are at the actual paint level and remove the remainder of the varnish covering. Once you expose a larger area, you cover that area with a clear coating of polyurethane to preserve it as you found it. Later, you come back and do in-painting, which literally means that wherever there's a missing piece of the mural, you paint it back in with a three-haired horse-hair brush. Using a magnifying glass, you paint in that area with your three-haired brush for many, many hours.

MBJ: What is it about your restoration projects that give you satisfaction?

RP: Knowing that when Pamela and I finally leave this world, our intent, assuming everything goes right, is to donate this building to the Westbrook Historic Society so that they will have a home. The people of Westbrook will be able to have a building that they can visit and see part of their history. Knowing that I am contributing to the Society's historical knowledge base is satisfying.





MBJ: What is the best advice that you've ever received?

RP: I suppose that it came from my parents, from my father in particular. The advice was whatever you do, be committed to it. And if you can't be committed to it, then find something else to do. That advice has served me extremely well. It led me to the practice of law, and it keeps me, at almost 70 years old, still practicing when I don't need to practice. But I continue because I really love doing what I'm doing.



Daniel J. Murphy is a shareholder in Bernstein Shur's Litigation Practice Group, where his practice concentrates on commercial and business litigation matters.

Beyond the Law features conversations with Maine lawyers who pursue unique interests or pastimes. Readers are invited to suggest candidates for *Beyond the Law* by contacting Dan Murphy at dmurphy@bernsteinshur.com.

Arthur G. Greene
CONSULTING, LLC

supporting & advising the legal community

Consultants to Small & Mid-sized Law Firms

RETREATS FOR SMALL FIRMS

Read this important article featured in our Summer Newsletter and plan your firm's retreat this fall.

Now available online at
www.arthurggreene.com

Sign up online to receive future newsletters

603.471.0606 | 15 Constitution Drive | Bedford NH 03110

HELP YOUR CLIENTS HELP YOUR PEERS SUPPORT THE MSBA



The Maine State Bar Association's Lawyer Referral and Information Service has a long and proud history of connecting the public with quality legal counsel. Our strong network of attorneys includes specialists in nearly every area of law, including Social Security Disability. And, if you call to obtain a referral for a client, we'll waive the standard referral fee!

Call us at 1-800-860-1460

