

Hingham's Hersey Workshop Discovering a Lost Treasure

By Christie Jackson, Senior Curator of Decorative Arts

Imagine unlocking a rusty-hinged door to a forgotten, vine-covered shed and discovering a treasure trove inside—rare handcrafted artifacts untouched for 100 years ...

That's just what happened to Peter W. Hersey, who opened the door to a time capsule on his family's farm in Hingham, Massachusetts. The farm was originally established by renowned toy and boxmaker Reuben Hersey in 1776. Many early outbuildings still stand on the 18-acre property, including a mid-19th-century workshop that was used by Reuben's descendants who continued the family's tradition of toy and boxmaking. Sealed for over a century, the shed contained handcrafted toys, personal artifacts, and tools left as if the artisan had just stepped away from the workbench more than 100 years before.

This small workshop brings to life Hingham's legacy as

"Bucket Town," the affectionate nickname for the town known as the woodenware capital of the country for more than 300 years. Hingham's sturdy pails and piggins were staples in New England homes and traveled as far as Canada and the West Indies starting in the mid-1600s. By the 1770s, enterprising coopers had begun to produce miniature versions of these goods to sell as keepsakes and novelties. From their shops emerged the first and largest community of professional toymakers in America. Their miniatures are charming—from a one-foot-tall highboy, to a rocking chair that could fit comfortably in the palm of your hand.

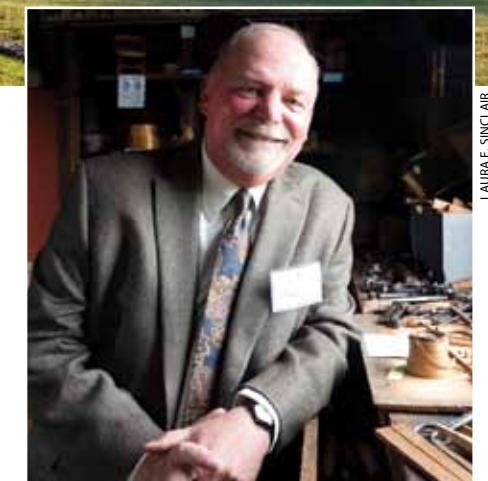
This summer, Old Sturbridge Village will open an exhibit celebrating the rich traditions of both toymaking and coopering in Hingham, Massachusetts, over the last four centuries. Coinciding with the exhibit is a new book published by the Hingham Historical Commission: *Bucket Town: Woodenware and Wooden Toys of Hingham, Massachusetts, 1635–1945*.

Members of the Hersey family were among the first craftsmen in Hingham. In addition to items made by the Hersey family, the OSV exhibit will include handcrafted toys and woodenware from dozens of Hingham's master coopers and toymakers. Out in the Village, visitors can see these traditions continue today in our cooper shop. Reproduction of various Hingham woodenwares will be used by our interpreters to show how these utilitarian objects were used in everyday New England life.

As a child, Peter W. Hersey tried in vain to look in the dust-covered workshop windows to see what was inside. "We weren't allowed in the shed, and as kids, my father and uncles weren't allowed in there, either." With the rediscovery of the Hersey workshop, we are invited into its story, that of the only surviving preindustrial toymaker's shop in America.



ALL ITEMS PHOTOGRAPHED BY GAVIN ASHWORTH



LAURA E. SINCLAIR

NEW EXHIBIT AT OLD STURBRIDGE VILLAGE

Bucket Town: Four Centuries of Toymaking and Coopering in Hingham

June 21, 2014 through January 18, 2015

CURATORS:

Derin Bray and Christie Jackson

FOR EXHIBIT INFORMATION:

www.osv.org/artifacts/exhibits

FOR LODGING:

Old Sturbridge Inn and Reeder Family Lodges

774-304-1011 or 508-347-5056

www.osv.org/inn



Peter W. Hersey inside the Hersey Workshop in Hingham, Massachusetts. Hersey is honoring the industrial legacy of his family and community through a collaborative effort with Old Sturbridge Village on the Bucket Town: Four Centuries of Toymaking and Coopering in Hingham exhibit opening in June at OSV.



Four Centuries of Massachusetts Furniture

This collaboration of 11 Massachusetts institutions celebrates the imagination and ingenuity behind furniture making in the Bay State: www.fourcenturies.org.