

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ROCKINGHAM

In 1785 a large three-story mansion was built on the site where the Rockingham House now stands, the house of Woodbury Langdon. The house reflected Langdon's wealth and social standing as Superior Court Judge, member of the Continental Congress and brother of Governor and State Senator, John Langdon. The mansion, built for \$30,000, set the style for the merchant elite along Court and State streets in the late 1700s and early decades of the 1800s.

The Rockingham began its long, illustrious history when, in 1830, it was converted to a 90 room hotel to lodge borders and travelers. Legend has it that Frank Jones, a young farmers son from Barrington, N. H., made his first trip to Portsmouth to deliver a load of coal to the Rockingham; a few years later he was to own it.

Frank Jones (1832 – 1902) has been described as one of the most outstanding men in Portsmouth's history. Records show that he could sign his name but it was rumored that he could not read, however this did not stop him. By the age of 26, he owned his first brewery. He went on to become a railroad magnate, banker, Congressman, mayor of Portsmouth, hotel owner and racehorse fancier. At one time he owned the biggest button and shoe company in New England.

Frank Jones purchased the Rockingham House in 1870 and hired the Boston architectural firm of Bryant and Rodgers to design improvements to the building. Their design doubled the length, added a fourth floor with a "French" or mansard roof, and further enlarged it with a major annex, now referred to as the J-wing. In 1871 the Rockingham House reopened.

In the 1800s the expanding New England railroad system and the establishment of hotels were closely intertwined. Fleeing the oppressive summer heat of large cities and lured by cool ocean breezes, large numbers of tourists came to Portsmouth and the seacoast. Frank Jones, by then a railroad magnate and always a smart businessman, invested in a series of hotels. The grandest and most elaborate were the Rockingham and the Wentworth in nearby New Castle, the latter which he acquired in 1878.

In 1884 a devastating fire destroyed the Rockingham with only the colonial Langdon room surviving. Jones immediately made plans to rebuild his profitable business. He hired the Boston architect, Jabez H. Sears and at the expense of over \$300,000 (some say \$600,000) in 1875 dollars made the Rockingham House, according to Sears, "a palace open to the traveling public" with 130 rooms. It was also described as "the most elegant and superbly furnished establishment . . . outside Boston".

The exterior of the Rockingham is made of Philadelphia brick and Nova Scotia limestone. Across the front is a frieze series depicting the four ages of man ranging from very young to old, represented by the seasons, spring to winter. Two more friezes exist on the triangular pieces atop the façade. The profile on the right is Frank Jones, on the left, Woodbury Langdon.

Inside, the current entry hall is the original front lobby of the hotel. The main fireplace, perhaps reflecting Jones' interest in horses, is in the shape of a horseshoe. Handmade by the artist F. Mortimer Lamb the hearth is a terra cotta bas-relief depicting a foxhunt. The floors are Italian marble, the woodwork, mahogany. The lobby ceiling is Lincrusta – Walton, a form of wall covering that is actually molded paper. (After it was molded and while still wet, it was placed on the ceiling, allowed to dry in place, then painted). The ceilings in the Rockingham Restaurant (originally the hotel dining room) are painted frescoes by John Gannin. The restaurant's bar is the former hotel front desk; the lighting fixtures in the entry hall are the originals by Shreve, Crump and Lowe of Boston.

Frank Jones had a major role in the development of Portsmouth, architecturally and politically. Three years after his death, a Jones trustee wrote President Theodore Roosevelt offering one of his hotels as a site for the signing of the Russo – Japanese peace treaty. Roosevelt accepted, however the treaty was signed at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. American officials resided at the Rockingham.

The Rockingham House has been host to many well-known people. To name just a few, they include Oliver Wendell Holmes, Celia Thaxter, John Greenleaf Whittier, Mark Twain, John and Ethyl Barrymore, Edwin Booth, William H. Taft, Adlai Stevenson, William K. Vanderbilt, and John F. and Robert Kennedy. It is said that Harry Truman, while campaigning in Portsmouth and out for a morning walk, tipped his hat to the Rockingham lions.

In 1973 the Rockingham House was purchased to be converted into condominiums, the first such conversion in northern New England. Today, the Rockingham House (its historic name filed with National Register) has 37 condominiums, which include the colonial Langdon room and the Rockingham Library Restaurant.

In 1982 the Rockingham House was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, the official Federal listing of significant historical and cultural resources.