



the **MERCHANT** Salem, Mass.

by **Emilie-Noelle Provost**

photos by
Rare Brick for
The Merchant

Rum, pepper and a little bit of mystery. This is the phrase that Lark Hotels, owner and manager of The Merchant in Salem, Mass., uses to describe and promote the visionary 11-room boutique property, which in former lives served as a private home, a tavern, an office building and a warehouse for a dealer of rare books.

The hotel's name was inspired by the building's original owner and resident, wealthy sea merchant Joshua Ward, who built his fortune importing Caribbean molasses for rum production, Sumatran pepper (known in the late 18th century as "black gold" because of its high price tag), silk, tea and Asian art objects. Ward built the grand house in 1784 on what was then Salem's waterfront, on a wharf bearing his name. *(text continues on page 22)*



The former Salem, Mass., home of wealthy merchant Joshua Ward was vacant for 16 years before Amesbury-based Lark Hotels renovated the building and opened The Merchant, an 11-room inn, last November. The Merchant's decor was the brain child of Boston-based interior designer, Rachel Reider, whose use of jewel-tone blues, greens and purples, along with calming grays are at times reminiscent of the sea, and in some rooms a subtle reminder of the Asian-inspired decor that was surely part of the Ward family's home. The guest lounge, shown here, still manages to retain much of its 18th century charm while simultaneously taking on a thoroughly modern sensibility.



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An attractive outdoor deck off the second floor will provide a relaxing place for reading or sipping drinks during the warmer months.





American history buffs will appreciate that President George Washington stayed at the house on Oct. 29, 1789, when he came to Salem to attend a celebration that included fireworks, speeches and a grand ball. The room where Washington slept, shown here, is known today as the “George Washington King Deluxe.”

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American history buffs will also appreciate the fact that newly elected President George Washington stayed at Ward’s house on Oct. 29, 1789, when he came to Salem to attend a celebration that included fireworks, speeches and a grand ball. The room where Washington slept is known today as the “George Washington King Deluxe.” Anyone can ask to stay in it.

General Manager Jennifer Rein says that the historic building had been vacant for 16 years before the hotel opened last November. I found that hard to believe as she led me on a tour of the property.

Expertly decorated by Boston-based interior designer Rachel Reider, the hotel’s decor is respectful of the building’s notable roots, staying true in spirit to its 18th century architecture while managing

to infuse the former mansion with a thoroughly modern sensibility. The large guest rooms and public lounge area have managed to retain much of their original woodwork while offering amenities such as heated bathroom floors, USB charging stations and LED smart televisions with Apple TV. All guest room fireplaces, many of them original to the building, have been converted to gas, and the fireplace in the public room—still wood-burning—features its original iron hearth plate forged by Paul Revere.

Reider’s design, rich with jewel-tone shades of blue, green and purple, along with opulent reds and soothing grays, is at times reminiscent of the sea, and in some rooms a subtle reminder of the Asian-inspired decor that was surely part of the Ward family’s home.

The hotel’s guest rooms all look slightly different, although

some evoke the same “feel.” An attractive outdoor deck off the second floor will provide a relaxing place for reading or sipping drinks during the warmer months, and The Merchant’s Lark Suite, located beneath the eaves of the old house, has its own dedicated staircase, insuring almost complete seclusion and privacy for those who stay in it.

Guests are encouraged to help themselves to water, juice, soda, coffee, tea and light snacks from two hospitality stations, one off the lounge and the other on the third floor. A light breakfast,



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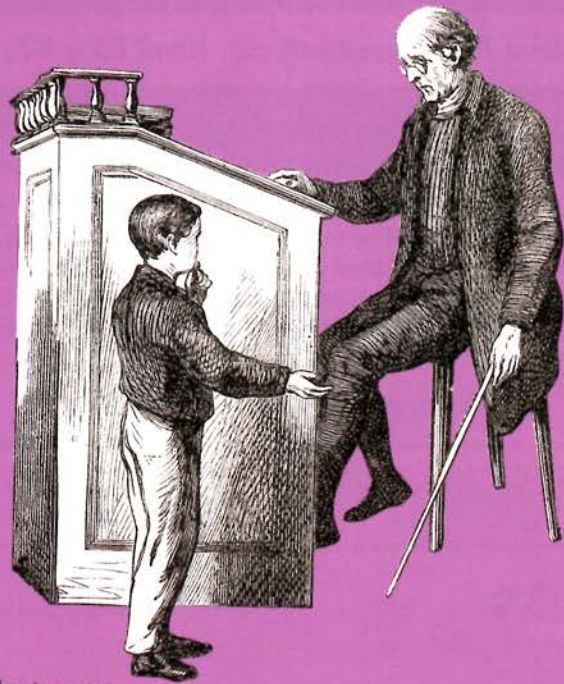
included in the room rate, is served daily in the lounge.

I stayed in room No. 1 on the first floor, overlooking bustling Washington Street. Although I had to close the curtains at dusk to ensure my privacy, I was surprised by how quiet the room was in spite of its proximity to the passing traffic. The city view of Salem from the room, almost reminiscent of Boston or London, was pleasant, as well.

In fact, The Merchant’s location is one of the hotel’s best selling points. It’s within close walking distance of downtown Salem’s

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restaurants, shops and attractions, including the fantastic Peabody Essex Museum and the city's waterfront. Although there is no on-site parking, hotel guests are given free parking passes for a nearby garage (about a two-minute walk from the front door), enabling them to explore the city without the usual hassles of finding a place to park, which can be challenging, especially on weekends and during the summer.

Salem has made impressive strides over the past several years. Once one of the



Designer Rachel Reider's unique modern touches augment the inn's original woodwork and design. Amenities such as heated bathroom floors, USB charging stations and LED smart televisions with Apple TV are right at home alongside early 18th century fireplaces and windows that, although new, were made to look like those original to the home.

country's richest ports, and currently best known for its 17th century witch trials and ghostly intrigue, the city's tourism industry had long thrived on a vast assortment of T-shirt shops and New Age bookstores. Today, there is a burgeoning dining scene in Salem, featuring a variety of cuisines created with fresh and local products, including off-the-boat seafood sourced from docks in nearby Boston and Gloucester. The city's retail offerings have improved, as well, with many upscale clothing stores, wine shops

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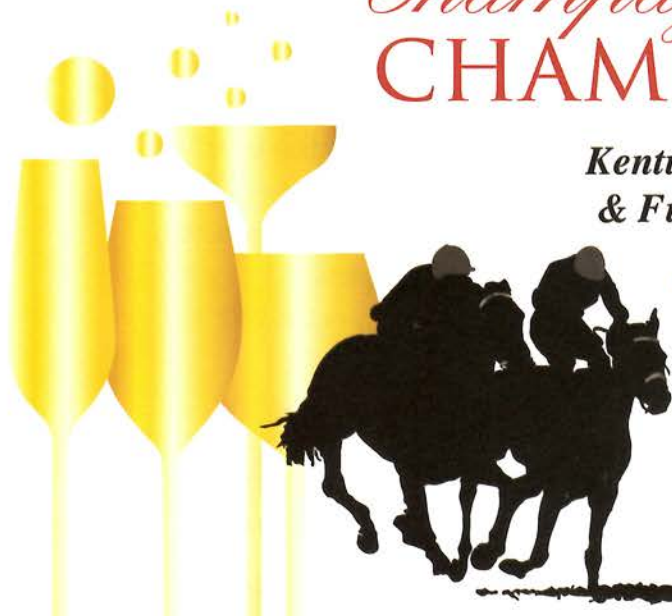
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and boutiques taking up residence among the more established occult-themed stores. There is even a European-style gourmet cheese store, The Cheese Shop of Salem on Lafayette Street, which I couldn't resist popping into to try a few samples.

That's not to say that many of the city's witch-themed attractions aren't worth a visit. The Salem Witch Museum, the Witch House and the Witch History Museum all make for fun and informative outings.

And if you're interested in otherworldly spirits, The Merchant hotel itself might have something in store for you. According to its website, the land where Joshua Ward built his house was, in the 1680s, home to Sherriff George Corwin, whose professed responsibility was to interrogate individuals suspected of witchcraft and to carry out death sentences. Corwin maintained a jail on the property.

Rumor has it that a few of Corwin's guiltless victims might still roam the hotel's hallways. One in particular is a dark-haired woman who mysteriously appeared in a photograph taken on the premises. I didn't see her myself, but you never know.

mvm

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