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NEW EXHIBITION AT OLD YORK HIGHLIGHTS THE GRAND TOUR

York, Maine—The Old York Historical Society has opened a special exhibition, “New Englanders Abroad: Souvenirs from the Grand Tour, 1830-1880,” in the historic Emerson-Wilcox House. The installation, on view through October 8, features grand tour scrapbooks and journals from the 1850s to the 1870s, as well as photographs, artworks, and objects collected in Europe by New Englanders.

The Grand Tour—or extended travel through continental Europe and the British Isles—was an essential part of a proper education for wealthy young Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries. While visiting historic monuments and museums, American tourists were exposed to Europe’s high culture. They also had the opportunity to socialize with Europeans of similar social standing and other Americans abroad, to develop friendships, and occasionally to meet a future spouse.

Travelers brought back souvenirs of their trip—decorations for the home, fashionable clothing for their wardrobes, and other mementos of the beauty and splendor they had seen. The exhibition in historic Emerson-Wilcox House features many of these objects, including copies of Old Master paintings, contemporary gouaches and watercolors, large-format photographs, jewelry, and decorative arts. These items are shown along with journals and scrapbooks compiled by several New Englander residents, including several with connections to York.

“Imagine you had grown up in York—or even Boston for that matter—and you were traveling abroad for the first time, experiencing places you had only read about in books,” says Joel Lefever, Executive Director of Old York, and curator of the exhibition. “So much of what you would have seen, from ancient ruins to spectacular carnivals, would have been mind boggling.” The objects in the exhibition, paired with first-hand accounts of travels, capture the excitement and wonder of 19th-century Europe—a place so profoundly different from New England. “The Grand Tour left an indelible stamp on those who were lucky enough to experience it,” says Lefever, “and Old York is fortunate to have a significant collection of items brought home from Europe in its permanent collection.”

The exhibition is open to the public Tuesday through Saturday 10am to 4pm, and Sunday 1pm to 4pm. Entrance is included in museum admission, and is free to members.

ABOUT THE EMERSON-WILCOX HOUSE

For more than 250 years, the Emerson-Wilcox House served as a general store, stage tavern, tailor shop, post office, and home. Now part of the Old York Historical Society, it is a house museum offering a series of ten period rooms ranging in date from 1750 to 1850, and a small exhibition gallery. The dwelling is typical of the vernacular Georgian architecture of Southern Maine. Built in 1742 by George Ingraham, the small center chimney house consisted of a parlor, hall, and two bedchambers. The subsequent owner, Edward Emerson, expanded the house in 1760, by moving a 1710 structure from elsewhere in town. This created the “L” shaped building seen today. A final addition in 1817 brought the total number of rooms to fifteen. Today, the house is interpreted to tell the stories of the families who lived here, from their challenges to earn a living, to their attempts to create comfort at the edge of American civilization.

Special tours of the house are available Tuesdays through Saturdays 11:30am, 1:30pm, 3:00pm, Sundays at 1:30pm and 3pm, or by special arrangement.

ABOUT OLD YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Old York is a vital part of the York, Maine community. The organization maintains 16 buildings and 20 properties including the 17-acre Steedman Woods; has 5 full-time and 25 part-time employees; more than 20,000 artifacts and 50,000 archival materials in the library; and serves thousands of people year-round through tours, educational programs, and special events. For more information please visit the website oldyork.org.

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IMAGE CAPTION:

Hand-colored engraving of the Roman Carnival of 1852, from a scrapbook of a tour of Europe assembled by William Henry Wells and Frances Tracy Wells, 1850s. Old York Historical Society, Perkins House Collection.

*Please note that higher resolutions of the press image are available upon request.