



The 1832 Merchant's House, Abolitionist Joseph Brewster, and the Early Underground Railroad in New York City

Built in 1832, the Merchant's House – an interior and exterior New York City Landmark open to the public as a museum – provides solid evidence that it was intended as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The late 1820s and early 1830s, were turbulent times for the abolitionist movement. New York City remained deeply entwined economically with the slave South; anti-slavery work was fragmented; abolitionists faced violence and legal penalties; and safe houses operated in great secrecy. It was during this evolutionary stage of the abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad that Joseph Brewster built the 1832 Merchant's House – and included a hidden passageway.

Joseph Brewster (1787-1851) – a fervent abolitionist deeply involved in anti-slavery networks and activities – designed and built the Merchant's House as his private residence. Brewster included a hidden passageway concealed beneath a built-in chest of drawers in the construction of his home. The narrow shaft, which descends from the second floor to the ground floor, has no known domestic or structural purpose, other than to harbor fugitives from slavery.

The following sections provide a description of our historical, biographical, and architectural research to date:

- I. Historical context: abolition in a pro-slavery New York City, 1820s–1830s**
- II. Joseph Brewster's commitment to abolition: evidenced in his religious life, family networks, and business activities**
- III. The 1832 Merchant's House: Brewster's home features a “completely atypical” built-in hidden passageway; architectural analysis and institutional archives point to its connection to the Underground Railroad.**

Appendices

- *The Secret Passageway in the 1832 Merchant's House: A Historical Assessment*,
Patrick W. Ciccone, Co-author, *Bricks & Brownstone: The New York Rowhouse*
(December 2025).
- *FIELD REPORT: Merchant's House Museum | On-site Investigation of West Wall Hidden Vertical Passageway*, Jan Hird Pokorny Associates (June 20, 2025).

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I. Historical Context: Abolition in a Pro-Slavery New York City, 1820s–1830s

“Before 1835, abolitionism in New York was a moral whisper — few dared act beyond words.”

— David Ruggles: A Radical Black Abolitionist and the Underground Railroad in New York City, by George Hodges (2010)

The late-1820s and early 1830s were turbulent times for the abolitionist movement. In 1827, after 30 years of “gradual emancipation,” New York State officially abolished slavery, but New York City remained deeply entwined with the slave economy. Cotton was king, and merchants, insurers, financiers, manufacturers, and shipping firms all profited. The City remained firmly – and conveniently – pro-slavery.

Moreover, assisting freedom seekers was still a federal crime under the 1793 Fugitive Slave Act. Slave catchers operated openly, and free Black New Yorkers were at constant risk of kidnapping and sale into Southern slavery. Both Black and white abolitionists faced intimidation and mob violence; few dared to openly voice their anti-slavery beliefs.

In these early years, anti-slavery work in New York was largely clandestine – and fragmented. Free Black New Yorkers led the most active efforts, forming church-based networks, mutual aid societies, and informal safe houses. White supporters, including Evangelical social reformers, contributed mainly through moral advocacy, fundraising, and legal defense.

A major shift began in 1833 with the founding of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the first national organization to call for “immediate emancipation” with full civil rights. Headquartered in New York, it marked the beginning of an organized white abolitionist movement in the United States.

In 1835, David Ruggles established the New York Committee of Vigilance, the city’s first group dedicated to protecting free Black residents and assisting fugitives. This development marks a critical turning point to an increasingly coordinated Underground Railroad network.

II. Joseph Brewster was a fervent abolitionist. His commitment to abolition is evidenced in all aspects of his life: religion, family, and business.

A Religious Conversion in the 1820s Led to Brewster's Social Activism

- In the 1820s, only a few years before building the Merchant's House, Brewster underwent a profound religious conversion and became an active evangelical. It was a period of powerful religious revival, as the Second Great Awakening swept the country, fueling social reform movements. Evangelical Christians established organizations to address moral issues such as alcohol consumption, slavery, and women's rights. By the 1830s, the abolitionist movement eclipsed all others as slavery was considered both a moral outrage and an obstacle in spreading the gospel.
- Brewster's evangelicalism was spurred, in part, by the teachings of **Charles G. Finney**, a controversial revivalist and evangelist, who preached abolition, education for African Americans and women, and other social reforms. According to Pulitzer Prize winning historians Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace in *Gotham*, **Brewster "was an idealistic and determined Finneyite."**
- That Brewster's conversion took place shortly before building the Merchant's House is significant. Period sources indicate he met with other evangelicals, including fellow elders at his churches (see below), on a daily basis to discuss social reform in the period while he was building his home on Fourth Street.

Brewster Played a Prominent Role in Founding and Leading Three Anti-Slavery Churches.

Between 1826 and his death in 1851, Brewster served as an elder of three abolitionist churches. As an elder, he was integral in their creation, shaping the doctrine and goals of the church, including selecting ministers sympathetic to the cause.

Bleecker Street Presbyterian Church

- Brewster served as an elder at **Bleecker Street Presbyterian Church**, from its founding in 1826 until 1834. The church was located at 65 Bleecker Street, at the corner of today's Lafayette Street, and just three blocks from his home on East 4th Street. Led by the **vocal abolitionist Rev. Matthias Bruen**, the church was a center for anti-slavery activism.

Brainerd Presbyterian Church

- In 1835, Brewster sold his home on East 4th Street when he was called to become an elder of the newly formed **Brainerd Presbyterian Church**, on Rivington Street, where he purchased several lots. The Brainerd Church was built on the three central lots, and Brewster built houses on the others. He lived in one, to be close to the congregation, and rented another to **Jonathan Levitt**, another congregant and fellow abolitionist. None of these buildings survive, so it is unknown whether any featured hidden passageways.

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- The Brainerd Church was integrated, with records that did not differentiate between Black and white congregants, unlike other parishes of the period. Of significance, **in 1836, Brewster approved the construction of a false floor in the church** during his tenure as President of the Board of Trustees (1835-1851).
 - The false floor was located “in the pews occupied by the Sabbath School children in the Gallery,” an upper area of the church building.
- The **Rev. Asa Dodge Smith**, selected to lead Brainerd, was well known for his abolitionist beliefs.
- **Rev. Smith delivered Brewster’s funeral sermon.** The eulogy described Brewster in great length as well-known in his community as a generous, caring person to whom one could go for help, financial or practical – in spite of his own personal circumstances. *“It was affecting, at the funeral, to see with what emotion some of the poorer members of the church took their last look at that countenance, by the kindly radiance of which they had so often been cheered and comforted.”*

14th Street Presbyterian Church

- Brewster was also a founding elder at the **14th Street Presbyterian Church**, also led by Rev. Smith, which opened just before Brewster’s death, in 1851.
- Brewster’s fellow elders of the 14th Street Church include known abolitionists **David L. Dodge** and **William E. Dodge**.

Brewster’s Family Members Were Active Abolitionists.

Joseph Brewster’s wife and her extended family, along with Brewster’s uncle and several cousins were all active in anti-slavery work and in assisting freedom seekers.

- Joseph Brewster’s wife, **Susanna Merrit Brewster**, came from an abolitionist family. Her cousin, William Hamilton Merritt, was a founding member of the **Refugee Slaves Friends’ Society** in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. Just 12 miles from the US border, St. Catharines was a final terminus of the Underground Railroad for freedom seekers (including **Harriet Tubman**, who lived and worked for the cause there for 10 years, in the 1850s).
- Brewster’s cousin, **Dr. John Milton Brewster**, aided freedom seekers from his home in Pittsfield, MA, from 1840-1860. His home is part of the **National Underground Railroad Network of Freedom**, and declared a verifiable Underground Railroad site. Freedom seekers often traveled through the Berkshires on their way to St. Catharine’s, Canada.
- **Judge Henry Brewster**, Brewster’s uncle, was vice president of the **New York State Anti-Slavery Society**, founded in 1835.
- **Henry Brewster Stanton**, Brewster’s second cousin, was a founding member of the **New York State Anti-Slavery Society** in 1835 and known for his work in the anti-slavery press and as a powerful orator. Stanton’s wife, **Elizabeth Cady Stanton**, was also a prominent abolitionist. She later became a leading figure in the women’s rights movement, recognizing the connection between the two struggles.

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- **Beriah Green**, Brewster's cousin, served as president of the **radical Oneida Institute** (active from 1827-1843) in Whitesboro, NY, the first fully integrated college. Green was committed to immediate abolition. Brewster had no children, but many family members attended the Oneida Institute alongside African American and Native American students.

Brewster Was a Leader within Abolitionist and Social Reform Circles

New York City was a small, interconnected world in the 1820s and 1830s. Brewster had regular dealings, both in his professional and personal life, with the City's leading anti-slavery activists and **social reformers**. He is routinely mentioned in period sources as a highly respected individual whom others in his circle sought out for advice, or assistance. The individuals and organizations highlighted below offer a sampling of Brewster's widespread dealings.

- Brewster and prominent philanthropist and staunch abolitionist **Arthur Tappan** founded the **New York Tract Society** in 1827, and the **New York Magdalen Society** in 1830, two organizations dedicated to social reform.
- In 1833, Tappan was one of the founders – with **William Lloyd Garrison** – of the **American Anti-Slavery Society**. A radical abolitionist, Garrison was the founder and editor of the *Liberator*, in 1831, a weekly abolitionist newspaper. In 1834, anti-abolition riots broke out in New York City; Tappan's home and businesses were burned to the ground.
- Brewster had real estate dealings with well-known abolitionist **Minthorne Tompkins** and Tompkins' cousin, business partner, and fellow abolitionist **William J. Staples**. Together, Tompkins and Staples established the Stapleton neighborhood on the North Shore of Staten Island, known for being a site on the Underground Railroad. Brewster was involved in the land transactions creating this neighborhood, but research has yet to reveal the full scope of his involvement.
- Brewster signed **anti-slavery petitions to Congress** in the 1830s, along with fellow members of the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen, including **Charles Starr, Joseph Hoxie, and Daniel Fenshaw**.
- Brewster also donated generously during the 1820s to missionary organizations such as the **American Home Missionary Society**, with the aim to spread the gospel of abolition to Ohio and other yet-to-be-states in "the West." Brewster personally funded an as-yet unknown missionary.

III. The 1832 Merchant's House Features a "Completely Atypical" Built-in Hidden Passageway; Institutional Archives Point to the Underground Railroad.

In 1832, Brewster built his home on East 4th Street in the then-fashionable Bond Street area. His design for the 4 ½ story brick-and-marble rowhouse closely mirrored the architecture of the period – other than his inclusion of a hidden passageway.



Above: The passageway is accessed by removing the bottom-right drawer of the built-in storage between the two main bedrooms on the 2nd floor. The passageway hallway extends down past the first floor parlor level to the ground floor basement level.

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The Hidden Passageway Is Considered “Completely Atypical,” a Design Not Found in Other Homes of the Period.

Research confirms that the enclosed vertical passageway is anomalous for an 1832 townhouse – serving no structural or conventional domestic purpose. While void spaces are not uncommon in 19th century homes, this particular void space is inconsistent with other houses. Especially notable is the unusual thickness of the wall containing the pocket door on the parlor floor level – an extravagant waste of floor space, but of sufficient size to shelter a human being. No other period parlors compare.

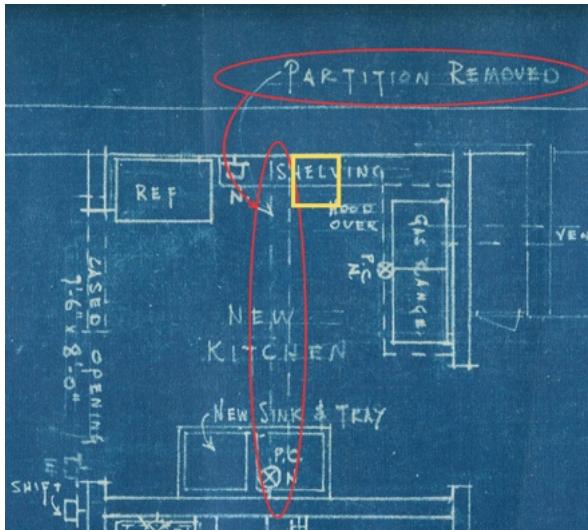
According to architectural historian Patrick W. Ciccone, co-author with Charles Lockwood of *Bricks and Brownstone: The New York Rowhouse*: “***Thus, and most critically, the hidden passageway in the Merchants’ House is a sui generis architectural feature that is completely atypical of the generic row house of the 1830s. No other houses of this era have a similar concealed passageway; it is not a feature of any normal row house plan.***

I see no other conclusion that is plausible except the most astonishing one: that this passageway, which survives largely intact on the second floor and parlor level, was intended as a space to hide freedom-seekers in the early days of the Underground Railroad in New York City. The full architectural report is attached: “*The Secret Passageway in the 1832 Merchant’s House: A Historical Assessment*” (December 2025).

On-Site Investigation and Institutional Archives Confirm the Passageway Originally Ended on the Ground Floor Basement Level.

In the 1930s, a modern kitchen was installed in the original pantry. A physical examination of the passageway, as conducted by Michael Devonshire, Jan Hird Pokorny Associates, indicates that the passageway – which today ends at the ceiling of the Ground Floor Basement Level – originally extended below, to the Ground Floor Level. The full report is attached: *FIELD REPORT: Merchant’s House Museum / On-site Investigation of West Wall Hidden Vertical Passageway, Jan Hird Pokorny Associates, June 20, 2025*.

This finding is further supported in documentation in the museum’s Institutional Archives. Blueprints from the 1930s indicate a “partition” was removed during installation of the modern kitchen, immediately below the passage. In addition, in 1974, photographs in the modern kitchen (below) show marks on the west wall consistent with the location of this partition in the original pantry. Both these pieces of archival evidence point to the passageway continuing into the original pantry.



Left: 1936 blueprint showing “partition removed.” The location of the passageway is marked in yellow.

Right: 1974 photograph showing mark consistent with location of the partition.

Research has debunked any other possible uses of the passageway.

The Museum’s Institutional Archives and Oral Histories Support the House’s Role in the Underground Railroad.

Joseph Brewster lived at 29 East 4th Street for only three years. Since opening as a museum in 1936, the Merchant’s House has told the story of the Tredwell family, who lived in the house for almost 100 years. The Tredwells were not abolitionists, so until the recent research into Joseph Brewster’s abolitionist activism came to light, the use of the hidden passageway as a site on the Underground Railroad was pure speculation.

Throughout the 20th century, newspaper articles about the house reference the hidden passageway – and connect it to the Underground Railroad. The earliest known written record is from George Chapman, the museum’s founder, in a July 6, 1936, *New York World Telegram* article: Chapman believed “***that the secret passageway was planned to hide runaway slaves. [...] He remarked the other day, ‘I believe this was the purpose of that hidden shaft.’***” In subsequent decades, it was echoed many times in the media, including a 1964 episode of *America!* hosted by Jack Douglas covering historic sites in Greenwich Village.

In Conclusion

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Given New York City's firm pro-slavery stance; Joseph Brewster's extensive abolitionist activities; the 1832 house's "completely atypical" hidden passageway serving no domestic or structural purpose; and documented institutional evidence, the most plausible explanation is that the passageway was constructed to be a site on the Underground Railroad and intended to harbor freedom seekers.

Whether or not Brewster had the opportunity to use this passageway to aid self-emancipators remains unconfirmed, in part due to the lack of documentary evidence given the extreme danger people involved in the Underground Railroad faced. Brewster's residence in the house was also brief, only three years. Nonetheless, when considered along with Brewster's abolitionist activism, the existence of the hidden passageway provides compelling evidence of the house's intended role as a stop on the Underground Railroad. The Merchant's House as a site of resistance in the fight against slavery greatly enhances the house's historical significance.

December 2025

The Secret Passageway in the 1832 Merchant's House

A Historical Assessment

By Patrick W. Ciccone

Co-author, *Bricks and Brownstone: The New York Row House*

The 1832 Merchant's House hidden passageway has been known since the house became a museum in the 1930s. The passageway, accessed via a concealed opening beneath the built-in drawers in the pass-through between the second-floor bedrooms, has no analogue in any other house of the period. Newly discovered information establishes that the original owner and builder of the Merchant's House, Joseph Brewster, was active in New York's abolition movement and that he was involved in the creation of at least one other hidden hiding space in another building in Manhattan in the 1830s. Considered together, the unique nature of the secret space and Brewster's role in New York's abolition movement point to the conclusion that the passageway was intended for use as a space to harbor freedom-seeking enslaved people as part of the Underground Railroad network.

In the 1830s, Brewster (1787-1851) was a wealthy hatter with two Broadway stores, and had sufficient means to construct row house mansions, for himself and on speculation. In 1832, Brewster built two residences on East Fourth Street, number 29 and 31. Based on decades-earlier research, the Museum believed Brewster was merely acting as a speculative builder who happened to occupy one of the houses (#29) until he sold it, which he did, three years later, in 1835, to the Tredwell family.

A proliferation of new digital research resources has allowed the Museum to uncover critical facts about Joseph Brewster's life and his fervent abolitionist beliefs and actions. Brewster was deeply enmeshed—by marriage and in his religious, social, and business networks—in the vanishingly small world of white abolitionists in New York City and the Northeast. In the 1830s, this was an extreme rarity among white New Yorkers, whose sympathies remained largely pro-slavery, even after its abolition in New York State in 1827.

Brewster was the elder of three abolitionist churches in New York from 1826 until his death. From the new research, it is clear that he sold 29 East Fourth Street in 1835 due to the formation of an integrated abolitionist church, Brainard Presbyterian, on Rivington Street, where he had been called to be a founding elder. He was instrumental in the building of the Brainard church—including, in 1836, the approval of a false floor beneath the pews, as recorded in its minutes—and moved into one of two residences he constructed adjacent to the church.

Given these new discoveries about Brewster's life as a committed abolitionist, any nonstandard features of the Merchant's House must bear special scrutiny. And Brewster, as its owner and builder, had the ability to shape its design and construction for his own use—thus such features can be directly attributed to Brewster's hand.

The secret passageway is located beneath a built-in chest of drawers in the pass-through hallway between the front and rear bedrooms on the second floor. To access its entrance, the drawers must be removed. The passageway has a ladder from the second floor to the double-parlor floor below, and originally to a pantry on the ground floor level. In the 1930s, a modern kitchen was installed in the pantry on the ground floor. On the parlor floor, the passageway creates a floor-to-ceiling box into which the left pocket door leaf recesses; this rectangle is mirrored in symmetry on the right side of the floor, but has no access point.

No rational architectural explanation exists for the secret opening and concealed space. Indeed, on the parlor floor level, the amount of space needed for the passageway box uses valuable floor space that pocket doors between the front and rear parlors would typically save; the parlor plans of the nearby Samuel Skidmore Tredwell House on the same block (one of the rare surviving full set of architectural plans of the era) show parlor floor pocket doors recessing into a space not much deeper than a normal wall.

Thus, the hidden passageway in the Merchant's House is a *sui generis* architectural feature that is completely atypical of the generic row house of the 1830s. No other houses of this era have a similar concealed passageway; it is not a feature of any normal row house plan.

Considering all the evidence together, I see no other plausible conclusion except the most astonishing one: that this passageway, which survives largely intact on the second floor and parlor level, was intended as a space to hide freedom-seekers in the early days of the Underground Railroad in New York City.

The Merchant's House Museum is an exterior and interior New York City Landmark and National Historic Landmark—and thus is already one of the city's most important historic buildings. However, given how few physical traces of the Underground Railroad survive anywhere in the U.S., the existence and integrity of this space give the house additional magnitudes of incalculable historic significance.

December 2025

FIELD REPORT: Merchant's House Museum On-site Investigation of West Wall Hidden Vertical Passageway Jan Hird Pokorny Associates, Inc.

20 June, 2025

Background

In an effort to determine the connection that a hidden vertical enclosed passageway secreted along the west wall of the 1832 Merchant's House Museum (MHM) may have had with the Underground Railroad, an on-site investigation was undertaken on 7 August, 2024.

Appropriate precautions were taken during the investigation to protect any possible historic artifacts or other surface evidence within the passageway.

Observations

The passageway descends from the 2nd floor bedroom level, past the 1st floor parlor level, to the ground floor level (originally a pantry, now a modern kitchen installed in the 1930s).

The entrance to the passageway is secreted in the floor under a set of built-in drawers located in the pass-through hallway between the front and rear bedrooms on the second floor of the House. The pass-through and built-ins (**Photo 1**) are original to the construction of the House, in 1832. While pass-throughs with built-ins were common features in similar houses of the period, the existence of hidden passageways that descend into the bowels of the House, all carefully hidden from view, is highly unusual. The high level of preservation of the original historic fabric in the Merchant's House makes the House remarkable. An identical pass-through with built-ins, located immediately above, on the third floor, provides a comparison to the 2nd floor pass-through. The built-ins on the third floor have no access to a hidden passageway.

An opening in the floor underneath the built-in drawers and covered with a hatch provides access to the passageway. The opening cannot be seen without completely removing the bottom drawer. The bottom drawer has additional wear and repairs compared with the other drawers, indicating heavier use. This is particularly noticeable when comparing the second-floor built-ins to the identical built-ins on the floor above, which do not show the same level of use on the lower drawer.

Once the drawer is removed, a wooden hatch (which is consistent with the floor wood species) with a wood handle covers the opening (**Photo 2**), likely constructed from wood left over from installation of the adjacent floors or from elsewhere in the house. This lid can be placed with its handle facing up or down, and fits tightly in a designated position due to a wood flange affixed

to the floor, edged on three sides with one-inch beveled pieces of wood. A fourth segment of wood was found loose nearby.

The wood flange also shows reuse – the edges are made of different materials and lengths than other boards used for floors in the house. It may be possible to identify the sources of these pieces by matching wood grains and cuts to other boards used in the house.

The opening to the passageway and the vertical enclosed space are approx. 2' x 2' and barely passable for a contemporary grown man or woman (**Photo 3**). The passageway descends from the 2nd floor (bedroom) level, past the 1st floor (parlor) level, to the ground floor (basement) level (originally a pantry, now a modern kitchen installed in the 1930s). A ladder extends along the north wall of the passageway, from the second floor (bedroom) level down to the first floor (parlor) level (**Photo 4**).

There are no floorboards at the base of the passageway, and the existing floorboards around the passageway do not show evidence of modification (**Photo 5**), indicating that the passageway extended to the ground floor (basement) level below. This is further supported by the fact that the last of the ladder rungs within the passageway ends very close to the parlor level floor, indicating that the ladder likely continued past the parlor level, to additional rungs that traverse down to the ground floor level.

Features within the enclosed vertical space include:

- on the west face, the brick masonry party wall
- at the north and south faces, reciprocally-sawn wood framing, indicating the wood was cut and the framing installed pre-1860s.
- All wood framing was joined by cut nails, further supporting installation prior to the 1860s.
- Wall finishes (wood lath and early plaster keys) are original to the 1832 construction.
- The ladder rungs connect directly into the backside of the walls containing the pocket doors, evidence that the walls were constructed before the ladder.

Further analysis might include examining the types of wood in comparison to the wood opening of the passageway, as well as the connection points, nails, and placement of the ladder rungs.

I have conferred with members of Merchant's House Museum staff to ascertain whether occupants of the House harbored abolitionist sympathies. I was informed that the individual who constructed the House and lived there initially, Joseph Brewster, was a well-documented, ardent abolitionist. I was similarly informed that Mr. Brewster built three houses adjacent to the racially integrated Brainerd Presbyterian Church on Rivington Street, of which he was a founding elder, in 1834, and for which he approved construction of a false floor. Thus, Mr. Brewster, a known and dedicated abolitionist, was involved with at least two structures that include otherwise unexplained construction elements and at least one hidden passageway nestled beneath the bottom drawer of built-in furnishings situated in a pass-through corridor between two upper-floor bedrooms.

Conclusion

It is well documented that many self-emancipators used New York City, where slavery was illegal, as a contact point as they continued their efforts to find refuge in the Northeastern United States.

Given the history of the building and the individual involved in its design and construction, abolitionist Joseph Brewster, I am reasonably certain that the passageway was likely created for the purpose of secreting freedom seekers from the pre-Civil War South as a place of temporary refuge, or perhaps as an additional passage to the now-altered ground floor level.

Sincerely,



Michael Devonshire, Principal
JHPA, Inc.

PHOTOGRAPHS 1 to 5



Above: **Photo 1.** The passageway is accessed by removing the bottom-right drawer of the built-in storage between the two main bedrooms on the 2nd floor.



Photo 2. Left: Lifting the handle provides access to the passageway, approximately 2' x 2'. Right: After entry, the handle closed the hatch from inside. Note the candle wax drippings left by those traversing the passageway.



Above: **Photo 3.** Michael Devonshire, Jan Hird Pokorny Associates, climbs into the approx. 2' by 2" passageway and descends to the ground floor level.



Above: **Photo 4.** The passageway has a built-in ladder from the 2nd floor (bedroom) level down to the 1st floor (parlor) level



Above: **Photo 5.** The base of the passageway has no floorboards. Parlor level floorboards adjacent to the passageway are of uneven lengths, as pictured, indicating they were not cut away at a later date.