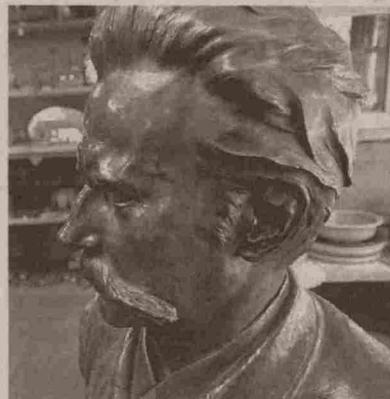


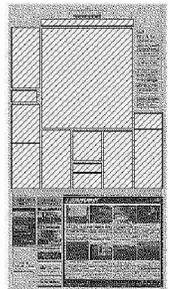
AMERICAN JOURNEYS

Up New Hampshire's Antique Alley



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LORI DUFF FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

AMERICAN ORIGINALS Top, Paul Charchaflian of Lexington, Mass., at Parker-French in Northwood, N.H., a shop in Antique Alley, a 20-mile stretch of road. Above, from left, fine china, a bronze bust and silver tableware at the shop.



*The variety is large
and devotees say the
prices are right.*

By MICHAEL CARLTON

“WE sell the good, the bad, the ugly, the great and the grand,” Barbara Callioras, a diminutive woman with a long gray ponytail, said as she stood among her wares at Lee Circle Antiques and Collectibles in Lee, N.H., at the eastern end of New Hampshire’s Antique Alley.

Pointing out an 1875 French automaton — a birdcage, basically, with two animated singing canaries — priced at \$5,500, she said, “This is in excellent condition and well worth the price.”

“Then there’s this,” she added, indicating a shelf of pottery that was, to put it kindly, amazingly unattractive. “Everyone has his own taste,” she observed. “If a customer loves it, I can love it too.”

That’s pretty much the spirit of Antique Alley, a 20-mile stretch of two-lane road with more than two dozen antiques and collectibles shops, some of them cooperative stores representing scores of dealers. The Antique Alley Association, which provides advertising and public relations, says that more than 500 dealers sell there on any given day. The Alley runs from Lee west to a bit beyond Epsom, taking up a chunk of Route 4, the traditional main road from Portsmouth to the state capital at Concord.

Route 4 passes through rural countryside typical of New Hampshire, with small farms belted by aging stone walls, hay being cut and dairy cows grazing.

Antique Alley wins a following among serious collectors and leisure-time browsers for its rich supplies of early American art, furniture, farm tools, sea glass, books, yellow ware pottery, textiles, ironstone, china and glassware. Its loyalists also praise its prices, enhanced in their attractiveness by New Hampshire’s lack of a sales tax.

Visitors are a convivial, low-key group — middle-aged couples looking to replace a beloved broken ironstone platter, starry-eyed young couples with kids in tow hoping to furnish their first homes with solid bargains, elderly people hoping to recapture the past. The shops are in buildings with rough wooden floors betraying their origins as

farmhouses and barns, sheep shelters and churning rooms. They are easily enjoyed at your leisure, and they’re hard to miss — some have been painted Crayola colors like fuchsia, canary yellow and bluebird blue.

If you’d like to shop on foot, strolling on old city streets shaded by trees glowing red and orange at this time of year, head to the village of Northwood, where a rich selection of stores is tightly clustered. Shopping the entire Alley requires popping into and out of your car, but there are plenty of places to park. Most local people trace the beginning of Antique Alley to the opening of a small shop in 1976 by Sumner and Muriel Parker, a Northwood couple who decided to sell soft ice cream and curios (mostly moccasins) to travelers passing by. When they added a few collectibles and antiques, they quickly found that the profit was considerably higher in old furniture than in ice cream. Other entrepreneurs soon opened shops, and then came cooperatives.

The Parkers retired in 1986, but their first shop still stands, renamed Parker-French. Its current owners, Richard Bojko and John Mullen, are passionate about keeping the Alley’s focus on American antiques, having gone so far, they said, as to buy a nearby building (now Parker-French West) to prevent its becoming a flea market or craft shop. For their own business, Mr. Bojko said, “we have two rules: no reproductions and no crafts.” Their inventory includes displays from 130 dealers, they said.

Their sentiments about authenticity were echoed by Fern Eldridge, who began her antiques business, Fern Eldridge & Friends, in Northwood in 1985 and now, at the age of 80, is still there every day. “I wanted a real antique shop,” she said as she stood in the handsome barn where she sells some of the area’s finest early American pieces. “I’ve avoided the Beanie Babies route.”

Few shops along Antique Alley specialize in one genre; that’s what transforms a visit there into an exhilarating treasure hunt. In a single shop you may find hundreds of farm tools in one room, elegant handmade New England furniture in another, and first-edition books and old cast-iron skillet in a third. Some of the larger shops offer thousands of items. In one, the four-level Town Pump in Northwood, I found everything from a Victorian salt dish for \$2 to a Hepplewhite chest for \$2,595. Like Parker-French and several others, the store is a group shop, showing the offerings of dozens of sellers.

Some shops are as tightly packed as overstuffed closets. Others are spacious and easily navigated. Almost any one of them may have the prize you're hankering for, whether it's a vintage duck decoy or an 1800s Shaker chair.

Dealers from all over the country prowl Antique Alley, along with the casual browsers and lots of homeowners working on furnishing their living rooms. Mr. Bojko said the shoppers in Parker-French have included Martha Stewart and Sheryl Crow. In Antique Alley parking lots, you'll see license plates from several nearby states — especially Massachusetts (the Alley draws the Boston crowd).

I asked Matthew Mead, a Concord resident and editor at large for Country Home magazine, to guide me on a trip to the alley. Mr. Mead, who has worked as a photo stylist for companies like Pottery Barn, L. L. Bean and Waterford Crystal and has written several books on home decoration and collecting, has foraged there for years. It has "the country's best and most reasonably priced collections of early American antiques and collectibles," he told me as he picked through a box full of green glass bottles at Lee Circle Antiques. "It is really a treasure trove of great items at good prices."

He has some simple advice for novices shopping Antique Alley: Come carrying cash to get the best prices: some owners will bargain. Look for small defects. Compare prices of similar items in different shops. And if you fall desperately in love with something, take it to the counter and ask to have it held for you. "I've seen things I wanted walk right off the counter with someone else before I could make a final decision," Mr. Mead told me.

In addition to Lee Circle, some of Mr. Mead's favorite shops are Parker-French, Town Pump and two more in Northwood: R. S. Butler's and Sleigh Bell Antiques.

My own favorite shop is Northwood Old Books, for purely personal reasons.

On my trip with Mr. Mead, we stopped there and I found a copy of the December 1976 issue of National Geographic, which included some photographs I took of tall ships leaving Bermuda for New York in honor of America's Bicentennial. I had misplaced my only copy, but amid the tiny rooms in this shop, smelling of old paper and leather, I located my replacement.

Antique Alley's weak point is restaurants: fast-food chains dominate. For a more interesting meal, drive to Dover and pick up a picnic at Tuttle's Red Barn farm stand, where you can choose international fare like pâté and sushi or buy New England products including jam, cheeses, produce, even hard cider.

Tuttle's also offers soups, sandwiches, salads and desserts, and the Tuttle family claims that its spread is the oldest family-owned farm in America, established in 1632. They have the deeds to prove it, right from the first royal grant. The farm is always passed along to the eldest son; Generation II is now in charge.

The many dining choices in Portsmouth include Pesce Blue, for seafood and Italian dishes, and Portsmouth Brewery, for a burger or steak with beer. And on almost any highway near the coast, you should be able to find a roadside stand offering the region's most prized snack: lobster rolls.



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