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MONOGRAPH TWO

The Dwellings of Newbury Old Town

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Continuing further to trace the gradual development of our early domestic architecture in the Eastern settlements during the Seventeenth Century, we may turn to the older section of Newbury, Massachusetts, to provide some pertinent and definite illustrations. The early small two-room story-and-a-half cottage, with chimney at one end, was soon supplanted by the full two-story house with end chimney—as in the original portions of the Coffin and Swett dwellings at “Ould Newbury,” dating from about 1653 and 1670, respectively.

Both types were soon enlarged, by adding other rooms beyond the chimneys; or in some of the ways particularly described herewith—or they were supplanted by the larger plan, with central chimney and staircase against its southern face, with living “Hall” at one side, and the principal family sleeping chamber at the other. This obvious and simple arrangement was soon supplemented by the separate kitchen at the back of the chimney—usually in a leanto at the rear.

Next, one or both of the end spaces might be divided into two rooms—the rear ones upon the second floor being reached by another stairway in the “leanto”; and then the plans’ final amplification might be made by substituting end chimneys for the large central one, thus allowing the central hallway to extend through the house to reach the rear as well as the front rooms, upon both upper and lower floors.

Among these Newbury Old Town dwellings, the Jackman-Willett house itself illustrates the next step

beyond the original Riggs house at Riverdale, Cape Ann (pages 2 and 3 of the preceding Monograph), in the story-and-a-half cottage—now with three rooms upon the ground floor; while the Tristram Coffin house shows—although with a difference, itself almost unique!—the favorite method of adding a new and fully developed plan upon one end of the earlier southern-fronted cottage, leaving it to function as a kitchen ell, and establishing a new frontage to either east or west, toward a main highway. And, finally, the Swett-Ilsey grouping shows a more extensive arrangement of an early house extension, as in the Riggs dwelling, but here that process has been extended over a period of fully a hundred and fifty years, while at the same time changing the direction of growth—all as will more fully appear in detail in the accompanying text.

It was in 1634 that the Rev. Thomas Parker, of Newbury in Old England, arrived in New England with Nicholas Noyes, John Spencer and nearly an hundred other followers, on the “Mary and John.” They made their “landing” on the shores of the Quascacunquen, now the Parker, River; very near where the “Old Bay Road” from Ipswich to Newburyport now crosses that stream—and the earliest settlement was upon the northern bank, although in 1642 most of the settlers removed to more fertile land a few miles further northward, where each freeholder was given a “house lot of 4 akers,” in the area still known as “Newbury Old Town.” And here the

original Noyes home still stands, near the "Lower Green," although it has been so added to and changed—both within and without—that little remains to substantiate its early date (of about 1645 or '46) except its huge timbers and summers, themselves largely out of sight above the lowered plaster ceilings added in later years.

Along with the Spencer-Pierce house (illustrated on page 16 of the preceding chapter), now usually known as the Little House, nearby—but of an ancient character still apparent despite the changes and additions that were made some hundred or more years ago—it is probably the most ancient among the early dwellings of this old part of Newbury. But the latter's cross-shaped plan; its thick stone walls, and old kitchen chimney (at the end of what is the northern arm of the cross—the southern portion being the unusual brick gable or "Porch") make it unique among Massachusetts early house architecture—its nearest counterpart being probably the "Old Stone House" (1640) at Guilford, Conn. It, too, was probably built very near 1645 by either the original holder, John Spencer—or it may have been a few years later, by one Daniel Pierce, who bought the land of John Spencer's son in 1651.

Not only was the Coffin family prolific in the number of its human descendants, but also in its architectural products, as well. Tristram, the first of that name in the new world, was an old Royalist, who arrived in Haverhill, Massachusetts, from Brixton, Devonshire, in 1642, and first settled at Salisbury, near the mouth of the Merrimac. In December, 1647, he was granted the ferry privilege at "Newbury side," as well as keeping an "Ordinary," or Inn. But by 1653 the original part of the present Tristram Coffin structure, a two-story building with one room on the first floor and two on the second, with a chimney at its eastern end—now a part of the rear-most section of the house—was certainly in existence; as on March 2 of that year his son, Tristram, Jr., married Mrs. Somersby (née Judith Greenleaf) a widow, and was living there. It is even possible that this may have been a still earlier structure—belonging to the widow herself!

Meanwhile, his father, Tristram Coffin, Sr., removed to Nantucket in 1659 or 60; and there the name of the family has been perpetuated on what is now the oldest house on the Island, the Jethro Coffin house, built about 1686.

The original house had faced south, as was usual, with its doorway in front of the chimney near its eastern corner. Tristram, Jr., died Feb. 4, 1704, aged 72 years, and in his will left his "dwelling house" to his son Nathaniel. About 1693 the frame of another building was moved up to within 13 or 14

feet of the easterly end of the older house, and what is the southeastern portion of the new front part of the dwelling was finished off, the old chimney rebuilt—or torn down and built anew—along with the intermediate portion necessary to connect the two sections. It is the fireplace in this chimney, and this room, that is shown in the measured drawing and accompanying photographs, though some of the finish may be of a still later date.

There seems to be some doubt whether the entire eastern front plan, as it appears now, was built at this time; or whether the central hallway and door in the middle of the street front, along with the rooms at the right or northern end of this new frontage were added at the time of the marriage of Nathaniel's son, Joseph, on July 15, 1725. In that event, the finish of the room shown here might have been renewed either then, or possibly shortly after Nathaniel's death, when 80 years old, on February 20, 1749.

Finally, either in 1725—or at some subsequent period before 1785—there was added a room at the back or northerly side of the original house to make a kitchen for the new front northerly portion; just as the rooms at the east and west of the oldest chimney were also in use as kitchens to serve the—at least!—three Coffin families that were simultaneously living in the old homestead!

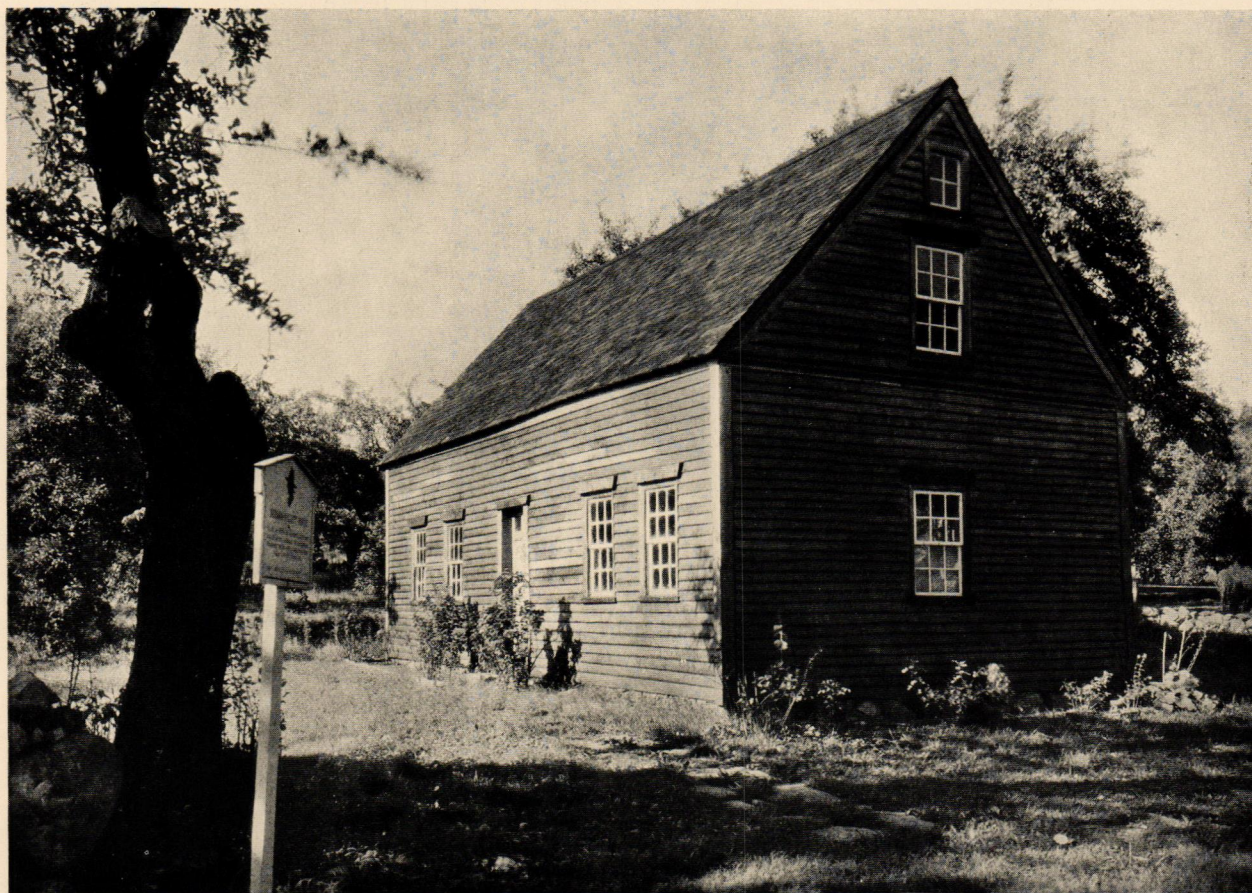
The girt shown a few feet in front of the fireplace, shown in the drawing on page 21, is paralleled by another exposed a few feet beyond the western side of the same chimney, showing the portions that were added to these two rooms when the chimney was rebuilt and the two sections connected; while a slight bend in the southern length of the present building suggests to the careful observer that something a little out of the usual had probably here taken place. It is this intermediate section that is unusual—almost unique—in the records of enlarging early Colonial dwellings! While another unique feature is to be found in the old "Buttery" contained within the front portion of the dwelling, which has remained undisturbed from its original upfitting for almost two hundred years.

The other most interesting local dwelling is the Swett-Ilsley House—now again a hostelry!—which represents the changing backgrounds of over a hundred and fifty years in its various additions, without—as it fortunately happens—any of the later additions much obscuring or changing the work that had gone before. Along with the Tristram Coffin House, it is now owned by the "Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities," and therefore its preservation is assured—barring only the unfortunate accident of fire—for many years yet to come.

The building now faces east, fronting closely on the

“Old Bay Road,” or High Street, only a few hundred feet beyond the more retired Coffin homestead. It has two front doorways, the one to the left admitting to the older portion. The two rooms on the first and second floors—at the left of and beyond this doorway—were the original house, then fronting south, with chimney at the west end and doorway and stairs to

old part and the addition. A new stairway was built against the eastern face of this chimney. The old west chimney was torn down; and a small corner fireplace built against the west side of the new chimney to heat the small room that occupied the space previously taken by chimney and staircase; and the ridgepole was changed to run from north to south instead of from



THE JACKMAN-WILLETT HOUSE—1696—NEWBURY OLD TOWN, MASSACHUSETTS

the south of it, in the southwest corner, with a slight front second-story overhang.

The ridgepole then ran from east to west; and this portion was built by Stephen Swett, at least as early as 1670. It may even have been several years older than that, as the chamfers on the timbers are very like those in the oldest part of the Coffin house. The frame shows where two and three mullion case-ment windows were set, one of these being about where the fireplace and chimney are now on the north side of the old “Hall.”

The next and most important change was made previous to 1700, probably between 1690 and 1695, when what is now the middle room was built at the north of the older house, with a chimney between the

east to west, as it had originally. The rear (west) “leanto” was built on, probably between 1756 and 1760, to provide a new kitchen back of the large “Hall,” with its enormous fireplace, one of the largest of the period now known in Massachusetts. And it is this room, or rather its south side with its unusual large fireplace, that is shown in detail in the measured drawing on page 27.

This middle room with its enormous fireplace has in its rear or western end a door and sashed opening that formerly connected with the serving “bar,” during that portion of the structure’s existence when it was in use as the Blue Anchor Tavern; this room then being the Tap Room, and the room in the leanto behind being the Kitchen—in substantiation of which

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