



THE MONOGRAPH SERIES

RECORDS OF EARLY AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE
AS SOURCE MATERIAL

EDITED BY RUSSELL F. WHITEHEAD, A.I.A.

VOLUME XXI

MONOGRAPH TWO

Rhode Island Houses along the Blackstone River Valley

BY FRANK CHOUTEAU BROWN

Research and Measured Drawings by the Author

Photographs by Arthur C. Haskell

Among the several famous people identified with the early history of Rhode Island; and especially with the rather little known history of that section located in its northeastern corner, are Samuel Newman and William Blackstone—or Blaxton, as he himself preferred to spell his name.

About the latter individual have clustered many legends; although most of those best known are told in connection with his occupancy of the land that is now comprised in the down-town business section of Boston; or with the area of its famous "Boston Common." From any knowledge of these tales, it would appear that William Blackstone must have been both an interesting and unusual man; albeit very likely somewhat independent in his thought and perhaps eccentric in his manners, and possibly a better friend if living somewhat removed than when a next-door neighbor—or even as a "neighbor," living at the somewhat remote distances that were then the custom, rather than the exception, in this new land!

It is at any rate quite certain that, before the advent of Governor Winthrop and his companions, in 1630, upon the shores of Massachusetts Bay, Blackstone was a still earlier settler upon the eminence now known as "Beacon Hill," in what was the peninsula then called "Shawmut," meaning a spring of water. He was probably quite justly entitled to be called the "first white settler" of the land he occupied, within the area of the now populous and important city of Boston, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Exactly how or when he arrived there is not quite so

certain. Yet of the several theories that have been advanced, not the least improbable is the suggestion that he may have been among the group of early colonists that Robert Gorges, son of the better known Ferdinando Gorges (a well known English gentleman, despite his Spanish sounding name, generally more popularly connected with certain early settlements in the region of the Kennebecs, now in the State of Maine), established at Weymouth, on Massachusetts Bay, under a patent issued in 1623.

In England, Mr. Blackstone had been born in 1595; had become a clergyman of the Established Church; and a graduate of Emanuel College at Cambridge, with the degree of A.B. in 1617.

And, inasmuch as he had removed from his pleasant home in England because of the increasing presence of his adjoining "neighbors," it may quite well have been that, in the wider and more open spaces of the new environment, he may have found a more perfect seclusion for his contemplation of the beauties of nature and the study of his dearly beloved library of "bookes," in the comparatively isolated and rarified heights of the "trimontaine" upon the then narrow tip of the natural peninsula that is now outspread into the city of Boston; but was then only connected with the mainland by the narrow isthmus whose original meanderings are still indicated by the windings of Washington Street, as it extends from down-town Boston to the heights of Roxbury.

At any rate, there he was, living in a small wooden hut—within the area now bounded by Beacon, Wal-

[17]



Doorway (Measured drawings, page 20)

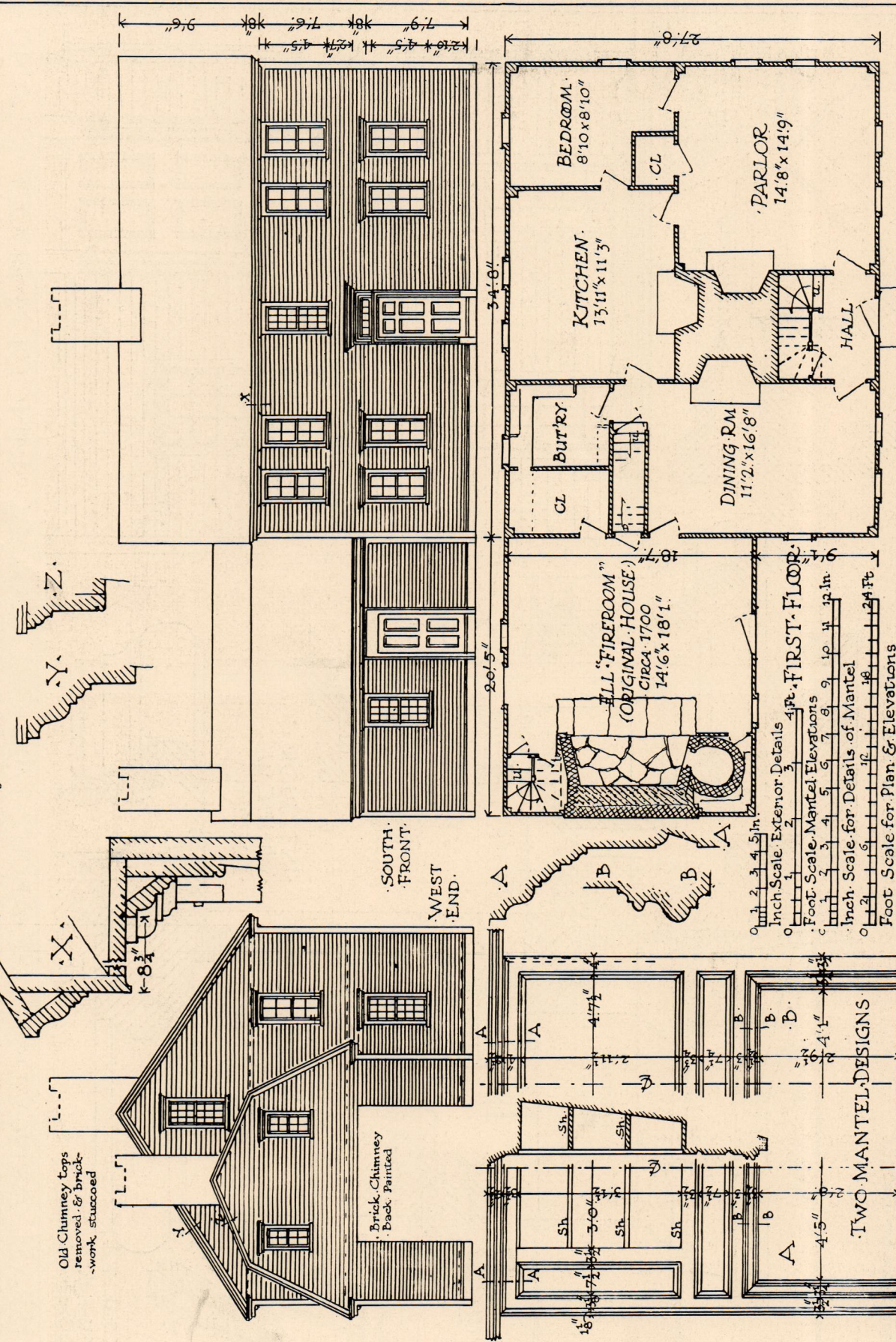
ISRAEL ARNOLD HOUSE—1790—LINCOLN, RHODE ISLAND



Doorway (Measured drawings, page 6)

ELEAZER ARNOLD HOUSE, LINCOLN, RHODE ISLAND

Measured November 18 1934. & Drawn January 13-14 1935 by Frank Chouteau Brown A. I. A. Boston

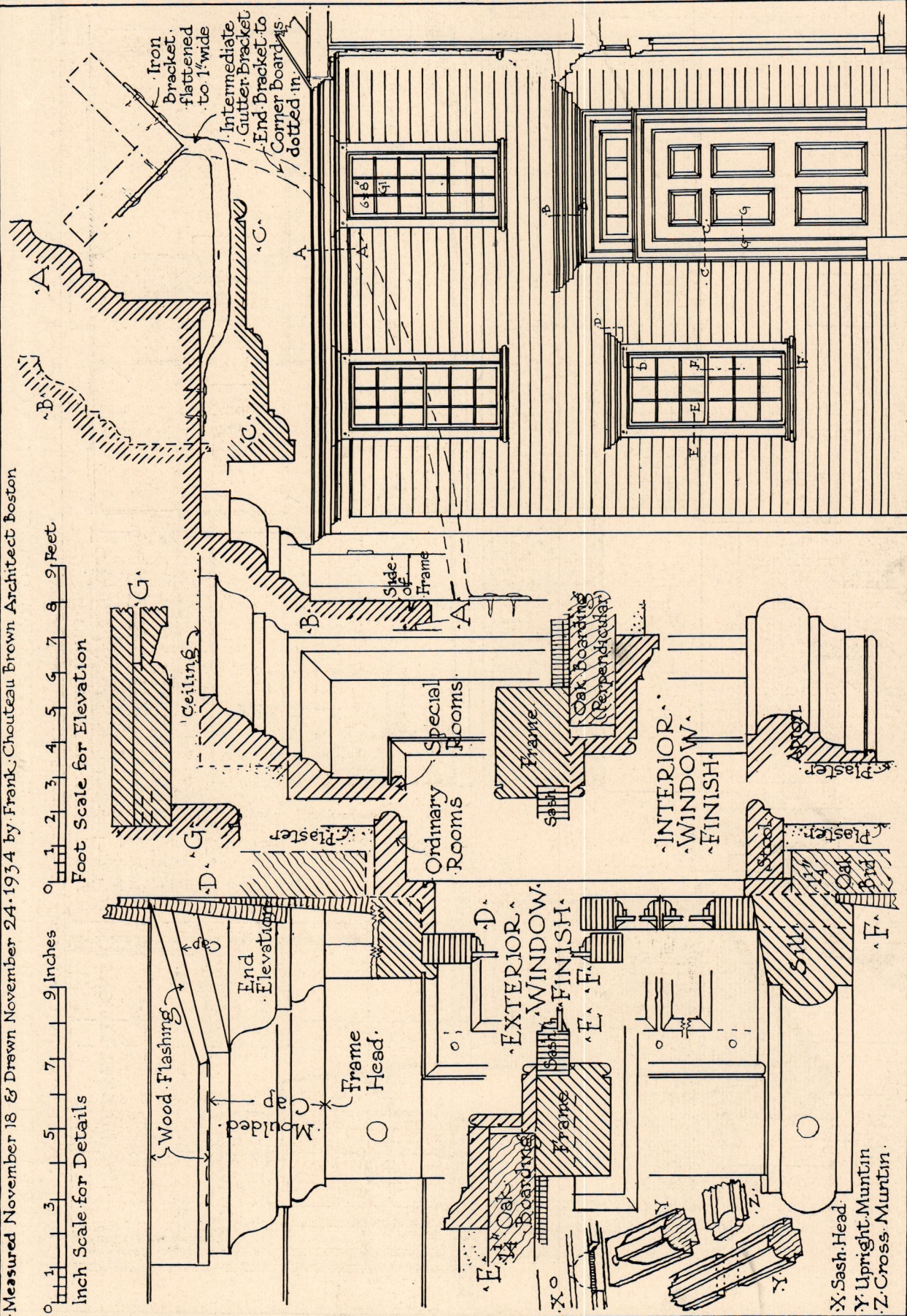


ISRAEL ARNOLD HOUSE ABOUT 1790 GREAT ROAD LINCOLN RHODE ISLAND
GAMBREL ELL ORIGINAL ONE ROOM HOUSE PORTION WAS BUILT BEFORE 1700

Measured November 18 & Drawn November 24-1934 by Frank Chouteau Brown Architect Boston

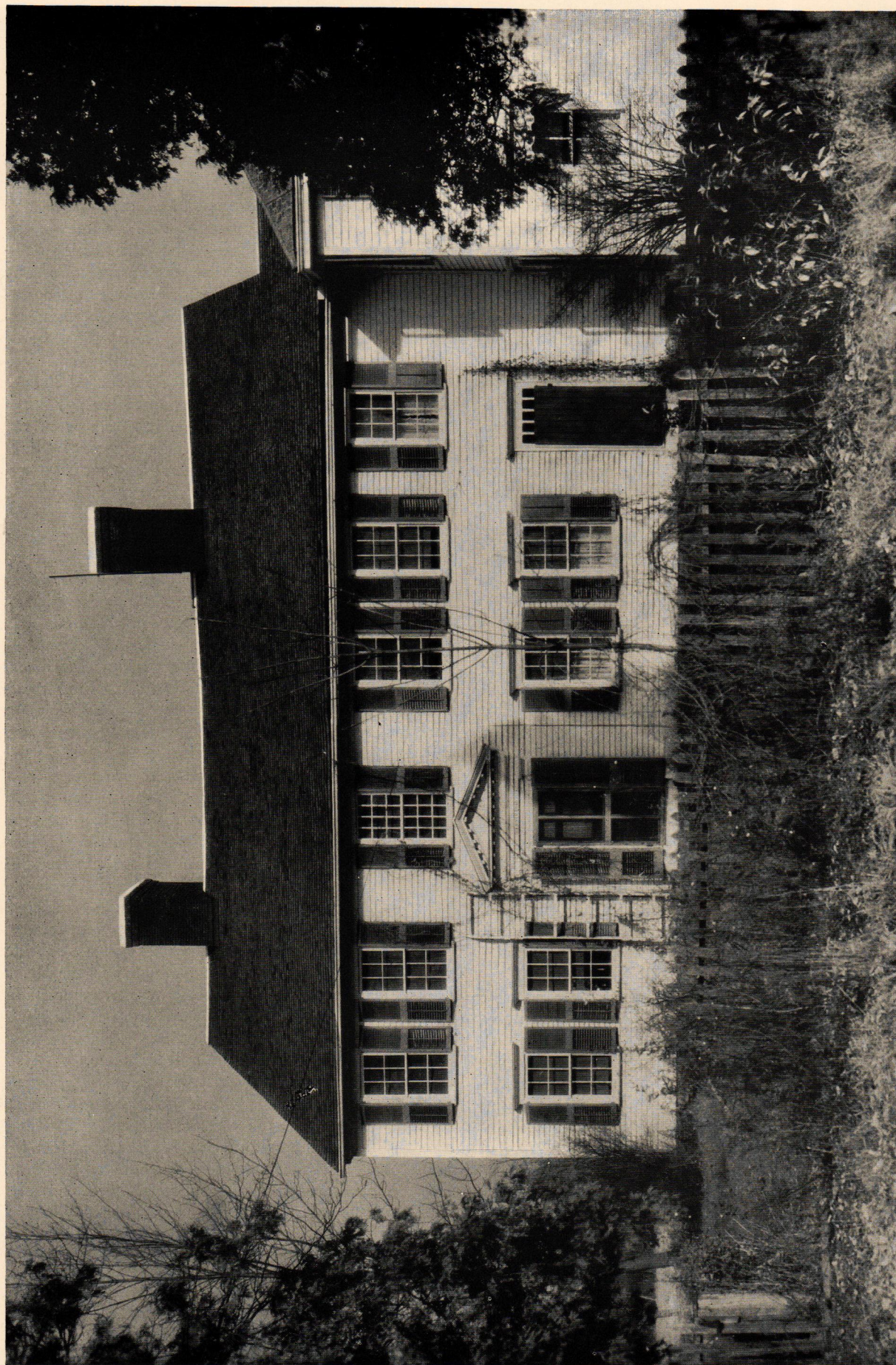
Inch Scale for Details
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Feet

Foot Scale for Elevation
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 Feet



X. Sash Head.
Y. Upright Muntin
Z. Cross Muntin.

ISRAEL ARNOLD HOUSE ABOUT 1790 GREAT ROAD LINCOLN RHODE ISLAND
SCALE DRAWING WINDOW & EXTERIOR DETAILS & DOORWAY OF MAIN HOUSE



THE SPAULDING HOUSE AT LINCOLN, RHODE ISLAND

[21]

nut, and Spruce Streets—beside a clear and sparkling spring, on the slopes of the "Trimount" at Shawmut—when, in 1630, Winthrop and his companions, having removed from Salem (then "Naumkeag") to another peninsula, upon the other side of the Charles River, also upon Boston Harbor; finding the water unpleasant and malignant, were glad to accept the Reverend Blackstone's invitation to cross to his side of the Charles, and settle upon the land remaining outside his farmstead, on what was then often referred to as "Blackstone's Neck" or "Blackstone Point."

But, as had happened before in his experience, he soon began to feel unduly crowded by his new neighbors; whose increasing numbers may well have begun to interfere with his desire for quiet and solitude; while it is also quite as likely that he may have become somewhat dissatisfied with their religious intolerance—religion being a matter upon which he was well known as having very decided and somewhat individual views of his own! At any rate, by 1633 it was apparent that causes of dissatisfaction had arisen; and despite the fact that it was in that year that they set off for his exclusive ownership "fifty acres of land near his house," he soon found that he could not continue to endure their crowding numbers!

It was this land, partly used by him at that time as an "orchard" (a word probably then employed in its old English sense, rather than in its narrower modern meaning) and pasture, that has now come down—in large part—to the inhabitants of Boston as their "Boston Common." It was first used, after Blackstone's departure in 1635, both as a cow pasture and as the town "Training Field"; while a small part of the original area was set apart as certain building sites—such as a portion east of the present Park Street, and south of its present Tremont Street boundary.

After another year of "neighborly existence," William Blackstone finally agreed to dispose of all his property rights in the peninsula to the inhabitants of Boston, on the payment by each and every householder, of at least six shillings (and some of them paid him a considerable amount more!).

It was probably in the following spring that he arose and, packing up his books, taking a considerable number of his favorite apples as seedlings, and buying himself a "stock of cowes," he started out in his "Canonical coate," over the then untraveled wilderness to the south, toward the headwaters of Narragansett Bay, to find for himself a new home, at some point where he could enjoy that "solitude," of which he had so long been in search, in a less known and populous portion of the country. This was more than a year before his friend Roger Williams was forced to fly from Salem, in the dead of winter; but Blackstone's pilgrimage, encumbered by his unusually weighty and bulky possessions, must have been a more leisurely and

pleasant journey; and it may have been on this very occasion that the legend of his riding his white bull or cow was evolved. Live stock—of any kind—were then rare, and horses very hard to obtain, so it was then the very general custom to make use of the slower but stronger cow as a beast of burden, much in demand where oxen or horses were not to be had.

It was so that he removed to a new home on the eastern bank of the Pawtucket—now the Blackstone—River; then a part of Plymouth Territory, or the "Old Colony"; as it was contained within the boundaries of Massachusetts, up to 1747; when Cumberland was at last set off to Rhode Island. The site of his dwelling has been very definitely established, from the old land records and other documents. As indication of his nature and desires, he named his new home "Study Hall," and built it only a few rods from the banks of the Pawtucket River, at the foot of a hill, near a brook called "Abbott's Run," in what is known as the "Attleboro Gore," about three miles above the City of Pawtucket, in the present town of Lonsdale.

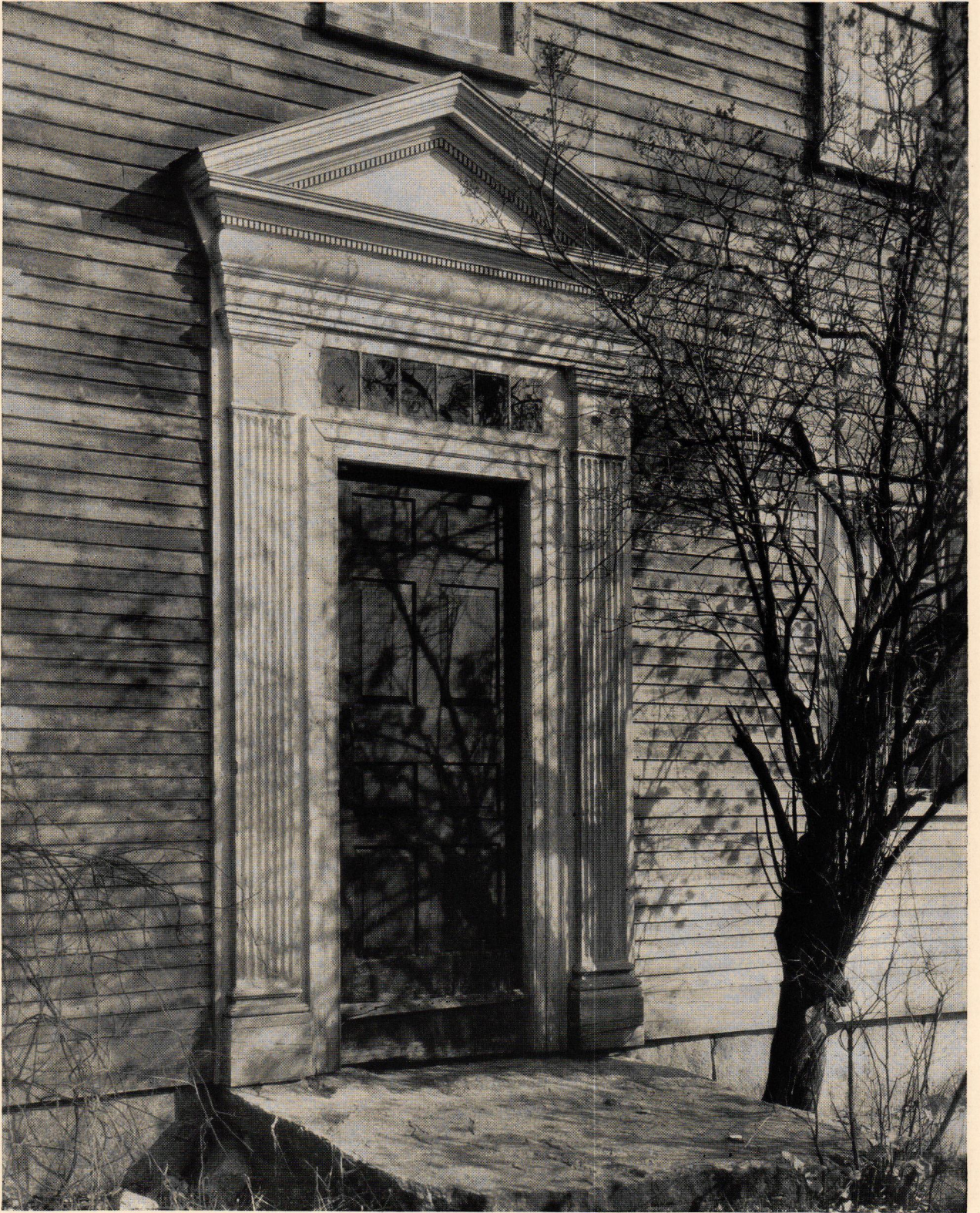
This was when William Blackstone was thirty-nine years old, and almost two years before Roger Williams left Salem to first settle in Seekonk, in 1636, from which he soon removed across the river to Providence. Yet even here Blackstone could not long maintain that complete isolation that he so much desired; for it appears from a record of a meeting held in December, 1650, that one of the earliest of still existing roads passed nearby his home. The vote, as inscribed upon the town records, reads "—to have a convenient way, 4 rods wide, to be made by Edward Smith, to be for the town's use, or any that shall have occasion to pass from town to Providence, or to Mr. Blackstone's." And the road laid out at that time still crosses the Blackstone River, at the old "Wading Place," opposite "Study Hall," and is now known as "the Mendon Road." It bounded Blackstone's "Study Hall" on the East and Northeast. But while the roadway remains, "Study Hall" itself has long disappeared, even some of the eminence having been partly leveled to provide room for a busy cotton mill on the banks of the River (the Hope Mill) near which is a marker, erected in 1889, and located only a few yards from Blackstone's grave and in line with it, the exact site being now under a nearby portion of the mill buildings.

Blackstone did not die until May 26, 1675; when he was eighty years old; and it would appear that in his later years he became less of a recluse than had been his former reputation. He frequently visited his friend, Roger Williams, who had come to live only about six miles from him; as well as another man well known in the early annals of Rhode Island, Richard Smith, at his fine old mansion at Wickford. On these visits it was Blackstone's custom to carry with him apples from his flourishing orchards (some of the trees



THE MOWRY SMITH HOUSE AT LINCOLN, RHODE ISLAND

[23]



Doorway
THE MOWRY SMITH HOUSE AT LINCOLN, RHODE ISLAND

[24]



Doorway
THE "HALFWAY" HOUSE AT ASHTON, RHODE ISLAND

[25]

he set out were living 140 years after!) to give to the children he knew along the roads, thus probably establishing the many excellent fruit trees for which the township of Cumberland and Lincoln are still famous!

And by this somewhat devious road, have we come again into the old township of Lincoln, for "Study Hall" and Lonsdale are within only a mile or two of the group of Arnold Houses, which stand only a little nearer to Saylesville than to Lonsdale, and about an equal distance from Central Falls, just north of the city of Pawtucket, with which place the story of the

both to the east and the west, run the old roads and modern highways, built up to bear its traffic and output; and still preserving access to many of the older settlements and isolated houses that have survived.

And backing them again, on the sloping uplands and hillsides of Cumberland and Lincoln townships, and along the less used dirt roads crossing the main highways, from east to west, may be found the simple, reserved dwellings and farmsteads, bringing down to our day their atmosphere of the middle and late Eighteenth Century life, as they have preserved its



THE "HALFWAY" HOUSE AT ASHTON, RHODE ISLAND

Reverend Samuel Newman is more closely connected, and so it may well be set aside to await the description of the origins of that township.

Meanwhile, it is this Blackstone River Valley, once for so long a time the natural boundary between the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the Providence Plantations in Rhode Island, that commands our attention. A valley that, once quiet and secluded, is now filled with close set and crowded mill buildings for its entire length, from Massachusetts to the Bay. And, paralleling its steep rising banks, upon the higher land

flavor over the long years that have elapsed between.

Besides the remaining examples showing the early type of "one-room house" that came into existence in Rhode Island during the Seventeenth Century; Lincoln township and its immediately adjoining areas still preserves a number of interesting dwellings of the later period, particularly those built during the middle and last part of the Eighteenth Century. One of the most unusual and picturesque examples is the Captain John Jenks House, which was shown on page 13 of Monograph One of Volume XXI. Captain Jenks

[26]

was of the fourth generation of the founders of Pawtucket, and the east end of the structure, built in 1770, was the workshop, which he left to serve in the Revolutionary War. The west end, with its unusual gambrel resting upon the ground, dates from 1800 and was used as the first schoolhouse in that region.

Of the group of Arnold Houses shown in that same issue, the Israel Arnold dwelling now stands with a newer portion, built some time before 1790, attached to the original one-room structure, which dates from about 1700. In many ways this newer part is typical,

While the exterior discloses as well the harmonious details of eaves, windows, and doorways; and makes the relation between the two portions much more definite and understandable, for those who may desire to make a special study of the character of this house; which, in its location, seems to possess a dignity and individuality all its own.

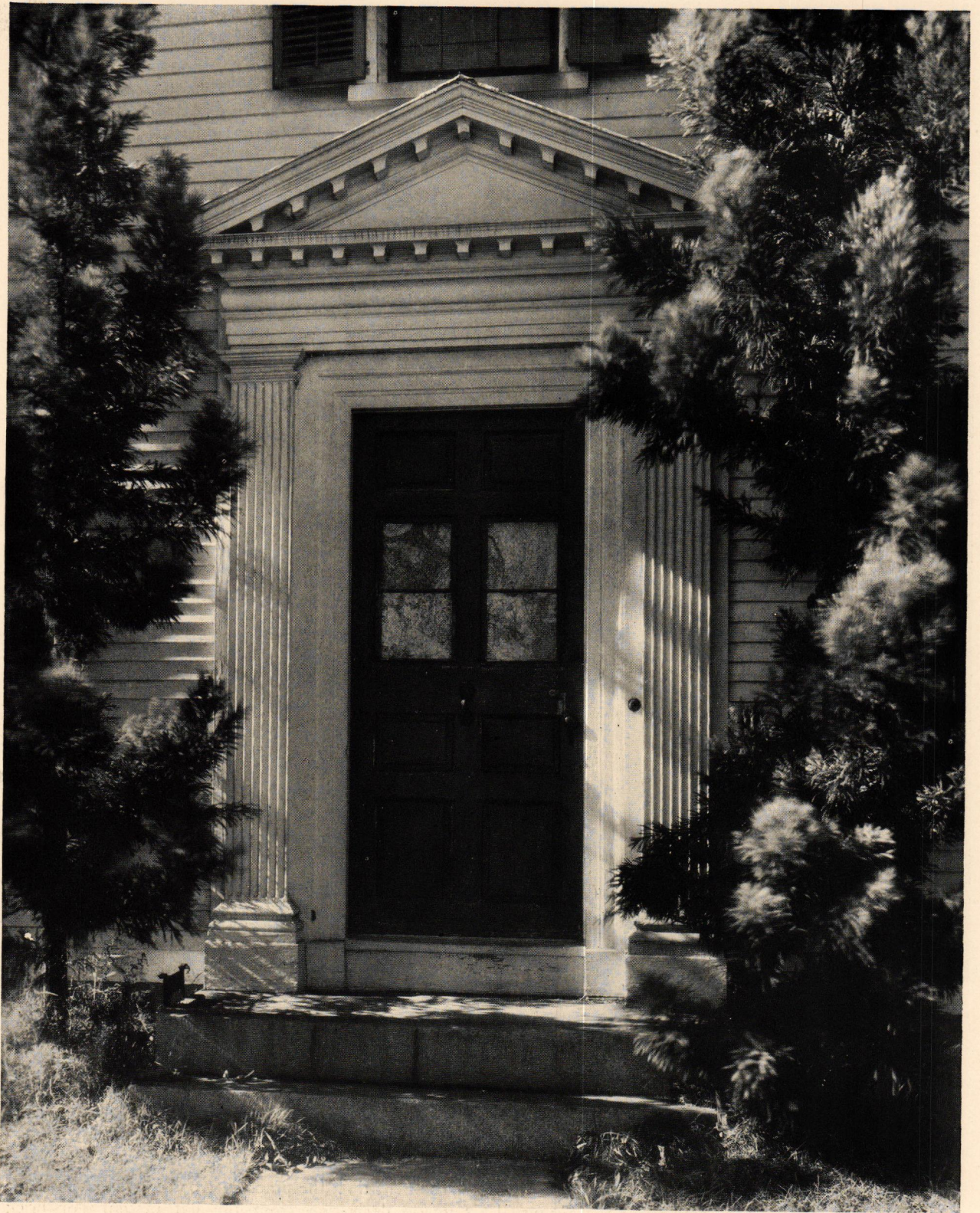
The group of Arnold Houses that was shown in Monograph One of Volume XXI located just beyond the Quaker Meeting House, a very short distance from Smithfield Avenue, in that part of the town of Lin-



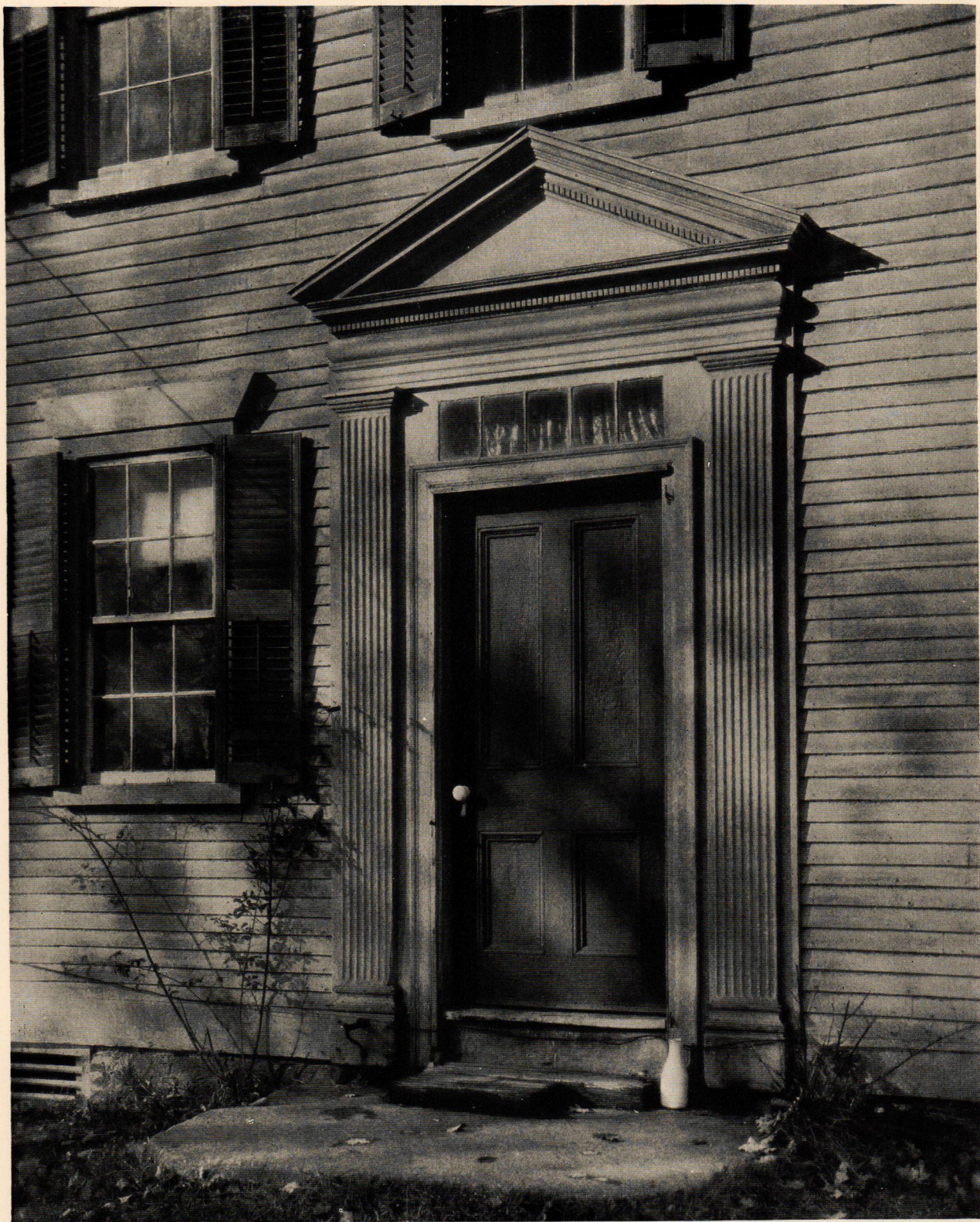
MATHURIN BALLOU HOUSE AT SAYLESVILLE, RHODE ISLAND

in its finish, as well as its plan, of other houses in the vicinity dating from about the same time. This is especially true of some of the interior details such as the mantels and window trim. The same sections and treatment of the inside trim may be found in houses in Cumberland and Attleboro; in Smithfield, Gloucester, and Cranston. And for that reason it has been chosen to serve as the subject of the measured drawing in this issue. It thus supplements the more unusual and earlier treatments of the "stone chimney houses" to which the previous number was more fully devoted.

coln that is nearest to North Providence, known as Saylesville. The Mathurin Ballou house, shown in this issue, is in the same settlement; and may be taken as characteristic of the simplest type of country dwelling of the Eighteenth Century still to be found in that region. Its simplicity extends even to the extreme of giving the principal entrance doorway no more embellishment than the practical wood lintel that in shape suggests derivation from the flat masonry or brick arch found in many Colonial structures. As a matter of fact, this cap is a very practical solution of the



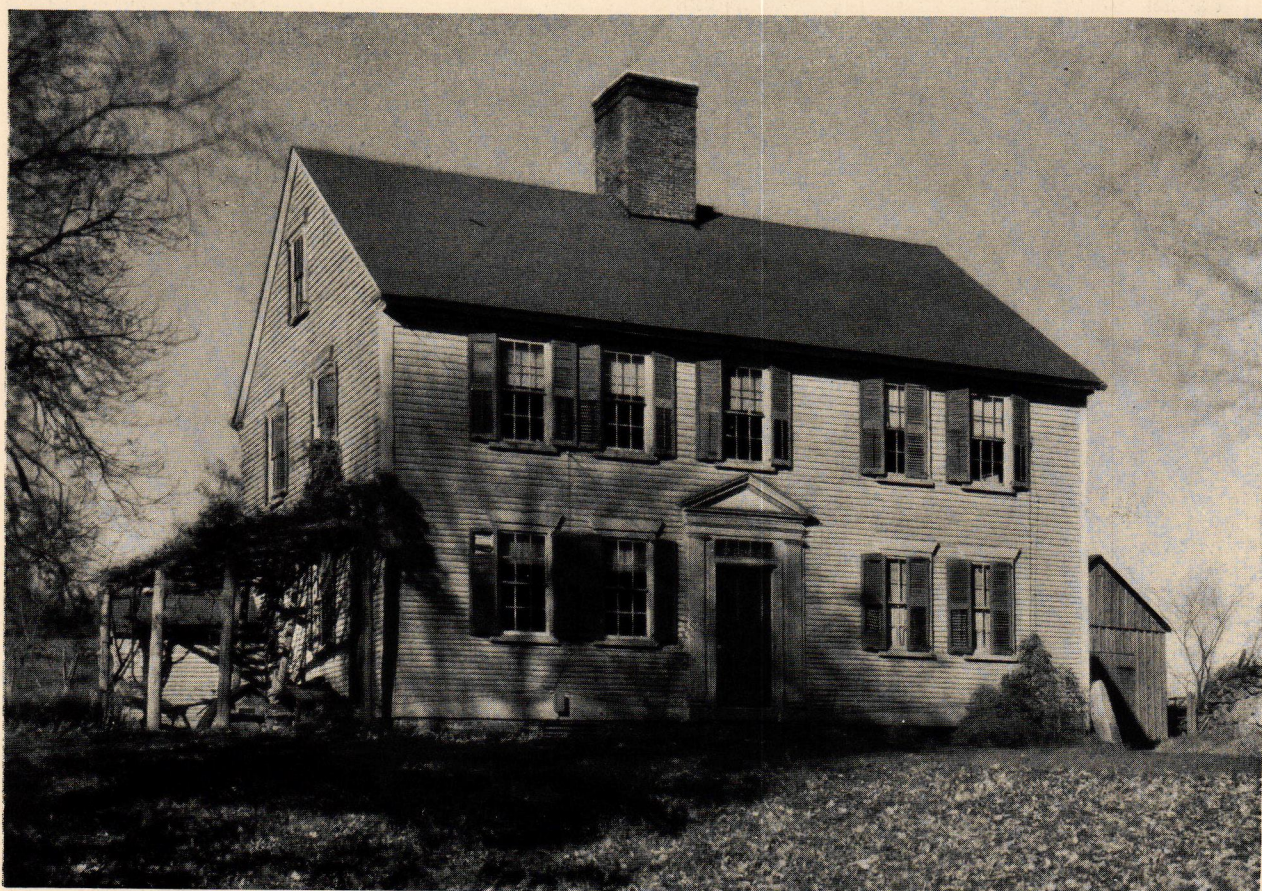
Doorway
THE FISK HOUSE AT CUMBERLAND HILL, RHODE ISLAND
[28]



Doorway
THE ALDRICH HOUSE AT LIMEROCK, RHODE ISLAND
[29]

flashing problem, and is found in use over a large area in this portion of New England. It is made from a heavy piece of timber—often of hard wood—overhanging the delicately molded enframing of the opening below, and placed against the face of the frame boarding. The top is sloped and the grain runs horizontally; so that, combined with the eight to ten inches height of the member, it is about as fine a weather protection as could be effected from locally available material at that time. The irregular spacing of the windows is also usual in these districts, where

capped with the same wood “lintel” pattern; but the doorway is one of the favorite and more elaborate designs, which will be found upon a number of other dwellings, all over this northeastern Rhode Island section. It shows the arch contained within an open pediment; and the classical details of the pilastered order are here worked out with a care and harmony evidencing both knowledge and skill on the part of the designer or builder. The pilaster is boldly projected, the Renaissance Doric detail of triglyph and capital well worked out; but the cornice is of a more elabo-



THE ALDRICH HOUSE AT LIMEROCK, RHODE ISLAND

apparently their arrangement was determined exclusively by considerations of practical use on the interior and in the plan.

The main highway turns to the right just beyond Saylesville, toward Lonsdale and the crossing of the Blackstone River at the location of William Blackstone's old dwelling of "Study Hall." The traveler is now on the old Mendon Road, which runs along the higher land and parallels the river along its Eastern side. "Halfway House" at Ashton, is a bit more sophisticated solution of the local dwelling design. The house is deeper and more pretentious, the windows are

rate type, avoiding the heavy overhang and soffit treatment of the regular Roman precedent, and substituting a heavy running dentil-fret of a carefully adapted scale instead. This example is among the most successful of this particular type, despite the unfortunate emphasis by means of the strongly contrasted two-color scheme, that has been arbitrarily applied over its detail and which considerably obscures its architectural merits.

This doorway is one of several that also display the substitution of an applied pattern over a plain wooden face within the arched head of the nominal opening—

[30]

in this case employing an unusual heart-shaped motif that has been very ingeniously adapted to meet the outlines of the arched design. In the several examples of this treatment seen, it was hardly obvious that it had been later substituted for any earlier glass top-light; but rather, as in this particular example, it seemed to have been the original method employed by the builder to carry out his design, and suggest its desired treatment, even if the use of glass was prevented by the toplight arch extending up above the location of the second floor in the dwelling's façade.

Farther to the North, along this same Mendon Road, is Cumberland Hill; a small settlement with several old dwellings, one of stone, that are in no case of exceptional architectural merit, despite their local interest. Here the old Fisk House may be taken as fairly representative of another local variant of the favorite dwelling type. Again the structure is a large one, even deeper in plan than the last example, as a matter of fact—while the windows have the "lintel" treatment, used under the cornice across the front (where, as a matter of fact, this protection is hardly needed and therefore rather rarely found). The first story and end windows have a much thinner wood window-head flashing, such as is more often met with over a wider New England area. The entrance is again typical—but this time of another favorite local design. Again the details are very closely derived from Classical Roman precedent, employing the regular Renaissance bracket in the entablature, with a fat curved section to the frieze. The necking of the capital is rather too narrow—a fault often found in similar designs in this vicinity, by the way—and the pilaster bases are here intact; the pilasters themselves being of more modest and conventional projection. The door suffers from the substitution of glass in two of its former eight panels.

Undoubtedly the tower on this house would be challenged as original by any stranger visiting the locality; but the local claim to its authenticity is generally voiced. The example here shown is said to have been formerly of two more stories high; and it is also claimed that there were originally towers upon at least two other old houses nearby, that have now been taken down; the legend being that they were originally used as outlooks for the French troop outposts, at the time when they were in Garrison in this part of Rhode Island!

Another example of this same house design type appears in the Mowry Smith house, where the "lintel" window cap again is used. In this place the end doorway was originally near the front corner of the house; where the clapboards are obviously new, even in the photograph; and where may still be seen the large doorstone of the old entranceway. The front door design is a less conventional expression of the Fisk House type, with a glass toplight introduced above the door

frame architrave, and the capital necking extended to correspond with it in height! A bit of local naïveté obviously to be attributed to the carpenter-builder—who was probably copying some imperfectly remembered doorway. The Mowry Smith House is located in a remote portion of the township, upon a road that shortly after passing this farmhouse goes on to lose itself in a rocky, barren hill country.

One of the most picturesque and beautiful portions of Lincoln township is in that section known as "Lime rock." Limerock lies to the east of the Louisquisset Pike, the principal thoroughfare from Providence to Worcester and Woonsocket, between that roadway and the Blackstone River.

Shortly after leaving Lonsdale, this road passes the old Spaulding House, a rather later and more elaborate dwelling, of extra length—even after ignoring the more palpably modern addition at its southern end. The rear of the house overlooks a meadow extending to the Blackstone River, and it lies in a pleasantly quiet and retired location, that should make it an ideal summer retreat for some harried business man. Unfortunately the house has suffered much, both from neglect and "modernization," at the hands of several owners. The window caps are molded, and the doorway is similar to the last two houses mentioned, although the door has again had glass substituted for some of its original wood panels, and has been given a pair of blind doors that somewhat conceal its pilaster framing.

To anyone interested in the old industries of the region, by turning off the River road in front of this house and climbing a winding dirt roadway for a short three-quarters mile, he will be rewarded by coming out upon a hilltop where the road passes between a deep cut quarry at his left and huge stacks of cordwood and a group of lime kilns at his right. Here he may see lime still being wood-burned after the old tried-and-true fashion—now almost extinct!

By continuing along this winding rock-and-cedar-bounded road, the traveler may turn to the left and return toward Providence by the Arnold Houses; or, by turning north, he will soon come to the cluster of old structures making up the ancient village of Limerock. Here may be found the old Mowry Tavern, a portion dating back to 1684; and a brick Masonic Lodge building—while climbing up to a row of more modern houses overlooking the valley—and passing by another example of stone chimney-end house—may be found a group of newer dwellings, including one charmingly planned and scaled house with an unusual Greek feeling. Or, turning about and going in the opposite direction, toward the west, one will pass the Aldrich house—again of the usual local type, but with pilasters at the doorway that have omitted the necking and necking molding altogether.



Doorway
 THE "HALFWAY" HOUSE AT SMITHFIELD, RHODE ISLAND
 [32]