2003

Mott House: Chapter 13 of Collecting Houses by Anne W. Baker

Anne W. Baker

The Mott House

See ending

Located in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, I first saw the house in 1970—part of it anyway. I was driving to Newport when I happened to look over my right shoulder and noticed a house at the far end of a field. Camouflaged by maple trees and thick underbrush, all I could see was a crooked roof top and fat chimney—just enough to nudge my curiosity. However, a dribble of smoke coming out of the chimney, and fresh tracks by the mail box, told me somebody still lived there. I could be patient. Time would give me permission to trespass.

Two years later, driving by the site on a September afternoon, I noticed that a sign, **Land for Sale**—three large words painted in bright red letters —had been posted at the entrance. I backed up and turned in. A farm lane, its edges harnessed by a tottering stone wall, targeted the way. Tendrils of bittersweet and bull briars spilling into the lane guided me to the end, and through a gateway. I stopped my car and stared. A house stared back.

Few shingles were left on the roof, the windows smashed and the front door punched in. There was no doubt the house was old. But how old? I studied its front for clues. It looked as if it was trying to follow the

architectural rules for New England's Georgian period 1725-75—two stories, center chimney, gable roof, five windows across the second floor and four across the first, with a door in the middle — except that the south end of the roof pitched down like a visor and the windows wandered across its face as if they had lost their way. But its cock-eyed charm had a flirtatious appeal that made my blood rush. I couldn't wait to go in.

Picking my way through a garden of briars, wild honeysuckle, and weeds, I reached the battered opening where the front door had been.

"If anybody is in here let me know and I'll leave," I yelled.

Silence.

I shrugged my shoulders, stepped over the threshold and into a small hall. Splintered wood lay on the floor and the air smelled of old wetness. In front of me was a narrow stairway and on either side a doorway. One led north and the other south. I turned south and looked into a room that was two steps lower then the hall I was standing in—a level change seldom seen in an old house. Intrigued, I descended the steps. The floor was littered with automobile engines, fenders, batteries, oil cans, and tools. Kicking some cans aside to make room to walk, I skidded on some grease, collided into a stack of tires, and dropped my flashlight. Catching my breath, I picked up my light, switched it on, and shined it around the room.

A magnificent summer beam reached across the ceiling, from one end to the other. The massive oak timbers that framed the top of the room were tenoned into fat corner posts. Two walls were vertically paneled in feathered edged boards with shadow molding carved on their surface and another wall had a boarded up fireplace. Through a hole in the ceiling plaster, I could even see dressed joists and hand-planed ceiling boards. Shivering with

excitement I closed my eyes then opened them, half expecting that the room might have vanished. But it was still there.

I was even more thrilled when I noticed the elaborate decoration on the summer beam. Instead of the common beveled-edge chamfer it had a cyma recta molding cut into its edges—a complicated molding that would have required three different types of hand planes. I reached up and ran my fingers over its smooth rounded curves. I knew that to decorate the edges of a summer beam was instinctive for the builders of 17th century timber-framed houses, but this builder had taken precious time to embellish it with the finest details.


CYMA RECTA
Cross section

Anxious to look at the rest of the house, I retraced my steps to the front hall and the north side. A chilling breeze intruding through the glassless windows followed me as I went from room to room. But their were no details as ancient as the south section. There was no summer beam, no paneling. The posts were cased, and the walls plastered,

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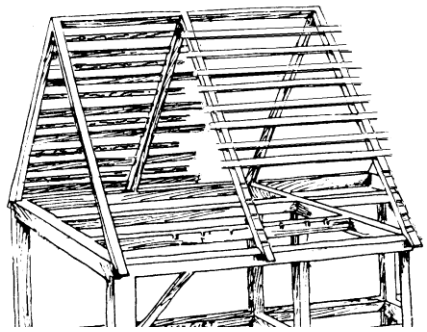
Long shadows cast their late day message across the floor. I'd forgotten that we had switched from daylight savings to standard time. It would be dark sooner then I expected. Bob and the children would wonder where I was. But I wasn't about to leave before looking at the second floor, the attic and the cellar.

The hurried pace of my footsteps followed me up a back stairway and through the rooms in the north section. All that remained of a yesterday was peeling wallpaper, crumbling plaster, and the sound of broken glass under my feet. But I gasped when I entered the room over the south section. It was an architectural gem that matched the room below.

Thrilled to find a second story to the ancient south end, I headed for the hall where I had seen the ladder that led to the attic. I climbed up and pushed open a hatch. Clicking on my flashlight I directed the light into the darkness. Its beam, lazy with the dust I had raised, tripped over a tinker-toy jumble of timbers. I crawled in, stood up and as I mentally sorted out the chaos I realized I was surrounded by roof rafters—rafters too low to get under, rafters holding up rafters, and rafters scarfed into rafters—thick-piled years of rooflines that told me that all the bare rooms I'd walked through had stories to tell.

But the most peculiar set of rafters were located over the south end of the attic. Not only was the angle of their pitch opposite to that of the other rafters but they were connected by closely spaced horizontal purlins that were let into cutouts in the backs of the rafters. I was stunned. This was a construction method that was used to attach thatch to a roof in the 1600s. But why was it here?



Section of 17th century purlined roof.

I felt disoriented. I turned and looked at all the other roof lines. Which roof was over what section of the house? Obviously they had something to do with additions, but why, when a house was being enlarged, would a person leave the previous rafters in place when they were no longer supporting the roof? My head was throbbing and I still hadn't seen the cellar.

I went back to the first floor and found the entrance under the front hall stairs. The door screeched in protest, but finally opened. The smell

of mold, cobwebs and dampness filled my nostrils as it raced by me to reach the fresh air. I turned on my flashlight and followed its beam down the stone steps. Rusty tools, clay flower pots, tinted bottles, and broken crocks lay on the dirt floor. A collapsed butter tub lay in a niche in the stone foundation and leaning on sagging shelves were dusty jars of preserves— beans, tomatoes, corn— from long ago summers. Then, just when I was thinking how long it had been since anybody had been down here, I heard a scurrying noise and saw the tail of an animal disappear into a flower pot. That was enough to remind me it was time to go home. I hurried up the stairs and closed the door.

As I drove away, I looked back at the house and in an instant all the back roads I'd traveled vanished from my mind. Finally I had found the 17th century architectural features I'd been searching for. However, it was obvious by the house's condition that who ever owned it didn't realize how rare it was. What would happen to the house between now and the time it would take to find the owner and convince him of its importance? Then I remembered that in one room I had seen graffiti burned into the plaster, and bits of matches and candles on the floor.

Fire?

My hands grew sweaty and I felt the hair on the back of my neck stiffen.

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Bob gave me a welcome-home hug then stepped back and smiled. "You don't have to tell me, "he said. "I can see by your eyes and the dirt that you've been crawling through another old house."

By the time dinner was over and the children in bed I had explained to Bob everything I had seen, and the more I listened to myself the more

excited I felt. Tomorrow I had to find the name of the owner. But tomorrow was a long time coming. I couldn't sleep. The house seemed so defenseless. Would it be there tomorrow? Why had the owner abandoned it? Was he planning to let it stumble and fall until its life was only an outline of stones in the ground or would the house be fed to the jaws of a machine, its corners bitten away, its body twisted and chewed until all that remained were slivers on the ground?

In the morning my first call was to the Portsmouth Historical Society. Located in the same town as the house they would certainly know the name of the owner. A man with a stuffy voice answered the phone.

"Yes, we know about the house and the land. Its called the Mott Farm" he said.

He told me the owner was a man named Harry Hall, and that he was planning to sell the 100 acre site for commercial development.

"And the house?" I asked.

"It's going to be demolished."

I must have groaned because he assured me that the Historical Society had rescued all the doors, a mantle, and taken photographs. But when I asked him what were their plans for saving the rest of the house he seemed surprised.

"We don't have any plans to save the house," he said." What on earth would we do with it?"

Disappointed, I thanked him and hung up. Maybe I wasn't the first one to know about the house, but I think I was the first one who cared and I wasn't going to stand around and watch its demise. But who was Hall? Could I convince him the house needed to be saved or would he be one of those hard core Yankees who didn't care?

My index finger felt like a melting Popsicle as I dialed his telephone number. While the phone rang I rehearsed once more what I planned to say, but when a voice said, "The Honorable Harry Hall," the words vanished. Clearing my throat, I charged ahead anyway. I told him my name, told him my interest in old houses, told him I'd seen the Mott House, how special it was, and then I told him that if he was planning to demolish it I would be interested in buying and moving it off the property. And when I remembered that I'd forgotten to say, "in a neat and orderly manner," I said that also, then took a deep breath and waited. I could hear the scratch of a match and the fizz of a fresh cigarette as he inhaled. But he said nothing. Should I say it all over again? By now I had an image of a person with a professor's beard, sitting in a leather arm chair, dressed in a silk smoking jacket, his slippered foot impatiently tapping the floor, while his liver spotted hand held the receiver at arm's length hoping I had gone away. Then suddenly, in a authoritative voice, he said, "make me an offer." I hesitated. I had no idea what he might think it was worth. It would be crazy to offer him too much, but if I offered him too little he might hang up. I grabbed for a figure.

"Twenty five hundred," I said .

"Send me a letter with your intentions," he said.

He gave me his address; House of Representatives. Providence, Rhode Island, and hung up.

I snickered to myself—a house representative? Well, he certainly was that and I'd just made him an offer with money I didn't have. I gave myself a few moments to collect my thoughts. The name George Waterman flashed into my head. I jumped back on the phone.

"George," I said. You need to buy a house"

"OK," he said. "But tell me about it."

Words flew out of my mouth and five minutes later he had agreed. George was one of those rare people who loved everything old. He had a collection of antique furniture, cars, firearms, paintings and stored in a barn were three houses I'd dismantled for him.

George was under six feet and slightly stout in an old fashioned square muscled way. He had clipped gray hair, brown eyes, and cheeks the color of shrimp. I never saw him without a blazer, button-down shirt, a conservative tie, and a crease in his pants. Whenever I went to his house on business a bourbon would be plunged into my hand. I would be sipping it politely, or think I was, until I realized that when ever I wasn't looking he'd top it off. This made for lazy afternoons, pleasantly tipsy, sunk in chinz covered wing-chairs discussing old houses. George never said no to saving a threatened house. He wasn't an architectural historian, he just knew the importance of preserving our heritage.

The next day George met me at the Mott House. He was fascinated, and as excited as I was. He didn't know what he would do with another house, but if nobody else was going to save it he would. He wrote out a check for twenty five hundred dollars and handed it to me. I went to the bank, opened a Mott House account, deposited the check, went home, and wrote a letter to Mr. Hall confirming my offer; and even included a check for five hundred dollars to show I was serious.

A few days, a week, two weeks? I didn't know how long it would take Hall to get back to me or even if he would. To keep myself from jumping every time the phone rang or the mailman arrived I paid a visit to the Portsmouth Town Hall to find out all I could about the Mott family. I was directed to a book titled Early Records of the Town of Portsmouth. The book began in 1638,the year Portsmouth was founded, and contained the names of

the first land grantees(land granted with the provision that a house be built within a year.) In 1639 Adam Mott's name appeared as receiving 145 acres. Adam must have built a house that first year because by 1641 he had been made a freeman, which as a freeman he had the right to participate in the colonial government. But my instincts told me the first house he built would have been a simple one room shelter—not the same house that was there now.

I turned a page. Jacob, Adams son, inherited the land in 1661, the year his father died. But when I read that Jacob was married in 1678, a date that coincided with the 17th century features in the house, I suspected that this was the house Jacob had built for his bride. I was getting somewhere. But what about all the different roof lines I'd seen in the attic?
I read further and learned that the Mott family had a huge cast of characters There was Jacob I, II, III and IV, each succeeding the other in ownership of the same house, and each with at least seven children. It was easy to imagine the house growing bigger and bigger which could explain the reason for all the rooflines in the attic. The idea of matching each Jacob to his own roof was intriguing. I closed the book. Church records, vital records, probate records, wills and a title search would be the next places to look for more descriptions of the house and the Motts who had lived in it. But that would have to wait. By the end of the week Hall had accepted my proposal. However there was one stipulation—after we started work we would only have three weeks to get the house off the site.

Three weeks was out of the question. George hadn't decided where he would put it so it would have to be dismantled, and dismantling would require cautious attention to every detail, meticulous architectural drawings, and quantities of photographs. But just as important was the time needed to

get to know the house. I had a gut feeling that it was going to be architecturally significant and I didn't want to be rushed. I explained this to George and he assured me he would handle it. What he did I don't know. We were given an additional four weeks.

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I hired Dick Long to be the architect. No-way was I going to be stuck behind a drawing board and miss the excitement of unfolding the house's past. Next I hired Jan Armor, a photographer, to visually back-up the drawings. Knowing that the house would be properly documented I began to gather together my old house crew. Doug Keffer was busy working on another house so I called Steve Tyson, an 'old house' friend and co-worker who loved old houses as much as I did. I valued his experienced eyes and I wanted him as head of the crew. The first time I'd met him he was taking apart a two story 17th century house by himself. It was obvious that he knew exactly what he was doing and I couldn't resist asking him where he had gotten his experience. His reply "Right here. It's the first time I've ever done it."

I was surprised and delighted to meet somebody with an intuitive sense of what an old house was about and after that we often worked together. Fortunately for me Steve worked nights as a typesetter so his days were free to work on old houses. I can never remember seeing him without ink under his finger nails, and plaster dust in his beard – a thick red one that I dubbed his personal library. Whenever he scratched it I knew he was mulling over various reasons why something had happened — a beam cut too short, an empty mortise pocket, a boarded-over door, clapboards on an inside wall. Then he'd say, "I think I've got it," and go back to scratching until the glow in his eyes told me he was ready to elaborate. By the time he

was through his first tour of the house he was scratching away furiously. I would have feared for his beard if I had known the extent of architectural phenomena's yet to be discovered

On the surface however, the north section of the house, at least what we had seen so far, was pretty straight forward. Double posting, the different rooflines, window placements, interior walls and numerous other architectural details confirmed that it was a series of additions. When the 20th century building material—plywood and sheetrock —were removed, we would know for sure which addition belonged to what period and which roofline, but I could definitely feel the presence of Jacob I, II, III and IV leapfrogging over each other.

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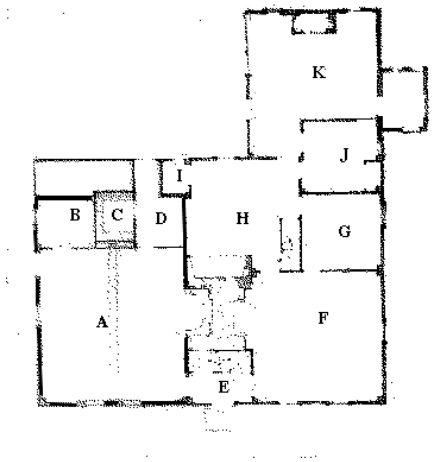
While Steve and I had been exploring the house our crew had been shoveling out the automobile junk on the first floor of the south end. Deciding what was worth saving and making numerous trips to the dump with the leftovers had taken them most of the day, but by quitting time the room looked like its original self, and I wouldn't have been surprised to see the ghosts of Jacob and his bride.



The architect, the photographer, the crew, Steve, and I, arrived early the next morning. While Dick was measuring; Jan taking pictures; the crew lettering the rooms; Steve and I went directly to the first floor of the south section. This was the birthplace of the house and the place we needed to investigate first if we were to understand how the Mott House grew up. Its summer beam, girts, posts, and

paneling were only its introductory act. There was a later plastered ceiling to remove, a partition—that didn't look as old as the rest of the room—to examine, and the fireplace to open up which is the place we would start: The location, size and construction of a fireplace can tell a lot about an old house.

We took off our jackets, and began to remove the bricks that sealed the fireplace opening. As Steve carefully knocked out each brick he handed them to me to stack. An hour later an immense brick fireplace with a cove back and recessed shelf had appeared. Even though my hands were bruised from the bricks I'd dropped on them, I couldn't stop punching Steve on his shoulder. His beard, now black as soot, made his white teeth look even whiter as he grinned back at me.

"But wait," Steve said, waving the beam of the flashlight above the brick walls," I think there's another fireplace behind this one."

The brick fireplace was definitely very early so I couldn't imagine why there would be another one behind it, but when I saw a large gap and stonework behind the bricks I knew he was right. I yelled for the architect and photographer. Before we could take anything more apart we had to record the fireplace we had already found.

Waiting for Dick and Jan to finish, Steve and I decided to remove the plaster on the wall next to the fireplace opening. When a big chunk fell down, I screamed "There it is." Hidden behind the plaster was the oak lintel and front face of a huge stone fireplace.

After the brick firebox had been recorded we removed the bricks. Behind them, as we had suspected, was a huge stone fireplace. Its ancient surface glistened with dampness. When I stepped in and whispered "welcome back," my breath, misting in the chill, curled above me, then

disappeared up the huge chimney stack as if a ghost had been freed. I looked up. The sky winked back. A gap in history had been closed.

But had it? Something bothered me. If the south end was originally a single bay house the location of the fireplace didn't seem right for the dimensions of the structure. The chimney should be at the gable end, not on the long side.

When I backed out to take a broader look I noticed that the wooden lintel that bridged the fireplace opening was off-center and too long. Then I noticed that the fireplace lintel had the same decorative chamfer as the summer beam. Had this lintel been reused from an earlier fireplace once part of this room.? It was reasonable to assume that nobody would bother to make a new oak lintel if they could reuse an existing one even if it was too long. But that meant the original chimney had been demolished, Why? Why take down a chimney? Did it happen when there was a need for more room? Certainly the location of the present chimney and its fireplaces had facilitated many add-ons. Suddenly it all became very clear. I called Steve to show him.

Steve, still ferreting about in the fireplace, poked his head out. "What's up ?" He asked.

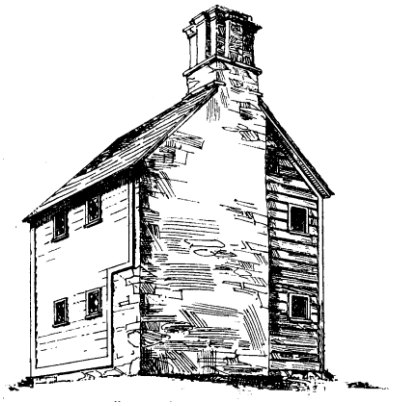
"As old as this fireplace might be, it isn't the original one for this room'" I said. "Look at that lintel - it doesn't fit the opening. And look at the molding. It's identical to the molding on the summer beam and means of course it was reused when the first chimney was demolished." I pointed to the partition at the end of the room.

"This house was originally a Rhode Island stone-ender," I announced, "and I bet the chimney was located behind that partition wall at the gable end."

"Whoa. Slow down." Steve said.

I waited while he scratched his beard. Then he shook his head.

"I knew you would try to turn this house into a stone ender," he said, "You always do that."



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He was right. I was always looking for a stone-ender, a type of house unique to 17th century Rhode Island, and now almost extinct. From the few still standing and the pictures I had seen, I had fallen in love with their fairy tale look. I even wondered if I might have lived in one in another life. I badly wanted this house to have been a stone-ender, even if its chimney was gone.

"It isn't a stone-ender," Steve said. "The construction of the fireplace matches the period of the frame and the oversized lintel was undoubtedly a measurement mistake."

My instinct felt otherwise

"We'll see," I said.

The following day we opened up the fireplace on the second floor of the south end, and again found a fireplace built over an earlier one. After cleaning up the debris the day was only half over leaving plenty of time to pull down the ceiling. While Steve gathered the crew, tools, shovels, buckets, and brooms I decided to see what was behind the wall next to the fireplace. I pried off a wall board, set it aside, stepped through the opening and into the space that surrounded the chimney. There were no doors into this area. Nobody had been in here since the chimney had been built more than 250 years ago, and when I found a mason's trowel and wood shavings

from a carpenter's plane a chill went up my spine as all the in-between years vanished.

But when I noticed clapboards nailed to the back of the wall where I had entered I yelled for Steve.

Steve was busy sifting the dirt from the ceiling the crew had pulled down. The 4" space between the ceiling and the floor above is a gathering place for things that fall through floor seams—nuts, seeds, wooden utensils, toys, buttons, coins, and all kinds of shiny objects that pack rats take back to their nests.

"Be careful where you walk," Steve said when I stepped back into the room. "We're finding amazing stuff," and he spat on a piece of glass, rubbed it on his sleeve, and held up a broken piece of diamond shaped window glass.

"You wouldn't believe how many broken bits of this quarrel glass have fallen out of the ceiling," he said

. "You mean like this," I said, holding up

a perfect diamond pane.

"Wow," Steve said, "where did you find that?"

"You were making so much damn noise that you couldn't hear me call. Come on, I'll show you something even more exciting," and he followed me through the opening.

"Turn around," I said and I switched on my flashlight.

"My god," Steve said, "17th century oak clapboards."

This wasn't the first time we had found clapboards on what once had been an exterior wall (in this case the north wall of the south section) but their story didn't stop there. The ends of the clapboards next to the chimney were cut at

an angle which showed they originally butted up against the roof of a small ell.

"An ell that had to be removed when this chimney replaced the earlier stone-end chimney at the gable end," I said.

" You might be right," Steve said,

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The next morning, after spending an hour helping our youngest child find her sneaker, it was mid-morning before I arrived at the house. Steve was on the second floor showing Jan the clapboards that we wanted photographed.

"Where have you been?" he said. "You're not going to believe what **I** discovered."

He grabbed my arm, spun me around , pointed to the chimney girt—the beam above the fireplace—and with his finger in the air traced its chamfer to the outside wall.

"And notice that the chamfer on the girt at the opposite corner also goes past the post," he said.

"I don't get it," I said

"See how the chamfer continues past the top of the corner post. And look at the corner post. It should be continuous from the first floor, but it's a whole separate stick that starts on this floor. Not only that but the girt between the posts has no chamfer."

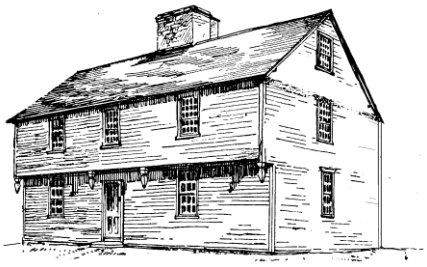
I knew a chamfer always stopped short of a post, that in a two story house the corner posts were one long timber from the ground floor up to the top of the second floor girt, and I also knew that the girt between the posts should have a chamfer like the other beams in the room,

"This is definitely weird," I said. "What do you think?"

"There used to be a jetty overhang at this end of the house."

"Of course," I exclaimed.

This was an electrifying discovery. A jetty, an extension that overhangs the first floor, is seldom found in 17th century Rhode Island architecture, and rarely at the gable end of a house instead of across the front as in Connecticut.



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Steve and I were dumbfounded by the extraordinary amount of 17th century information still in this house. If somebody had asked me what was for dinner menu I would had said 300 years of history. Dick was just as overwhelmed. For the previous two days he continually had to go back to his office to update his drawings. But now, with only a 19th century partition wall left to remove in the second floor south section, he decided to wait in case we discovered something more.

There were only six vertical boards to remove and we weren't expecting surprises, but when the partition boards were down and the area swept clean we discovered scorch marks on the top and center of the girt located directly above the partition wall on the first floor south section. This was important as they were the type of burn marks made by ashes that had fallen through the cracks of a fireplace hearth. The first real clue that the this house might have been a stone-ender. There was one way to prove it .

We picked up our tools, jumped over Dick's stretched out tape measure, and headed for the first floor. If the burn marks were from a second floor fireplace, the first floor fireplace would have to be behind the first floor partition. But finding an answer wasn't going to be that easy. There were three small rooms behind the wall. Before we could do anything each room would have to be measured, photographed, numbered, and dismantled. This process would have gone much faster if we hadn't found more surprises needing to be examined: the mark on the wall of an earlier stairway; a door that had been closed and plastered over; remnants of canvas painted with Turkish designs nailed over cracks; a powder horn with a wooden cap that had been carved in the shape of a scallop shell; a 3 foot long shingle with 18 inches to weather; and a flintlock pistol cocked and ready to shoot. Then there were three layers of floor boards to remove. But when the floors were up and all that was left were two large floor joists sitting in dirt, we had to admit that we had found no indication that there had ever been a stone-end chimney in this area.

After pulling out the joists and laying them on the floor, Steve noticed that they looked like they belonged together. He laid one on top of the other. They fitted perfectly and we could see that the two pieces were originally a single post that had been split in half lengthwise. Judging by the length, a tenon, and the location of a mortise it could be the post from the ell that the clapboards had butted up against.

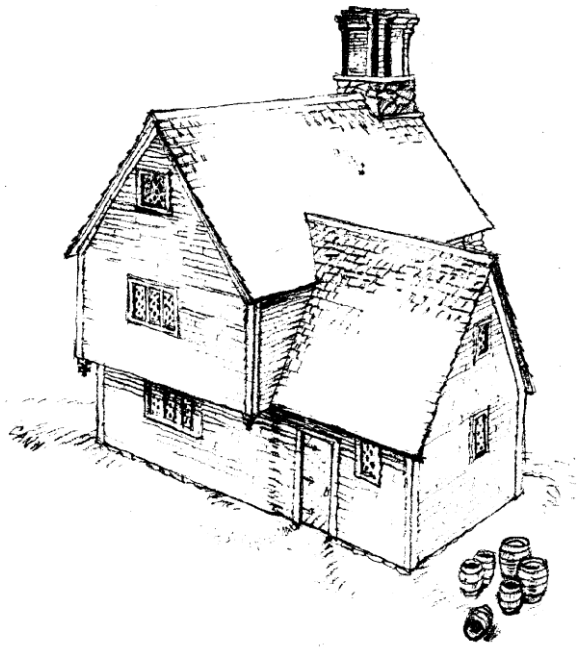
"And if the ell had been torn down to make way for the present chimney," I said, "why not reuse a post from the ell to make the joists to hold up a new floor over the hearth where the first chimney had been?"

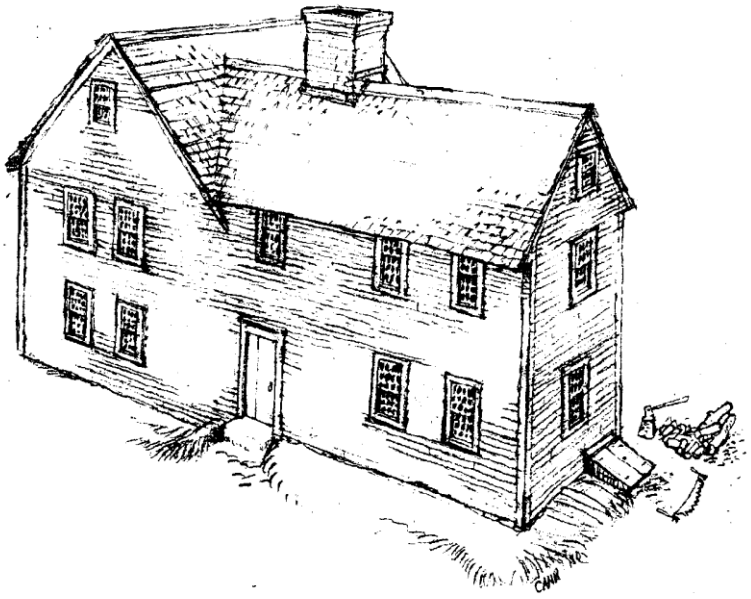
"We better see what's under the dirt," Steve said, grabbing a shovel.

The room was echoing with " look at this," " look at that," as we sifted the dirt and found pottery shards, two English coins, a brass buckle, a pewter spoon, an arrowhead, clay pipe stems, glass bottles, more bits of quarrel glass and the lead cames that held them in place. But when the shovel hit stone there was sudden quiet. Holding my breath I grabbed my whisk broom and began to sweep the area. Flat, smooth stones began to appear. After we had cleaned a 9 x 4 foot area of stone we knew we had found the fireplace hearth of a chimney.

But we still didn't know if the outside of the chimney had been exposed, like a stone-ender, or enclosed inside the framing. I cleaned up the rest of the dirt and the pile of debris at the back of the hearth and when a one-foot-high wall of stones appeared. —the remains of an exterior wall of a Rhode Island stone ender—my heart jumped into my throat.
It didn't matter that the chimney was gone. I was happy imagining what it had looked like.

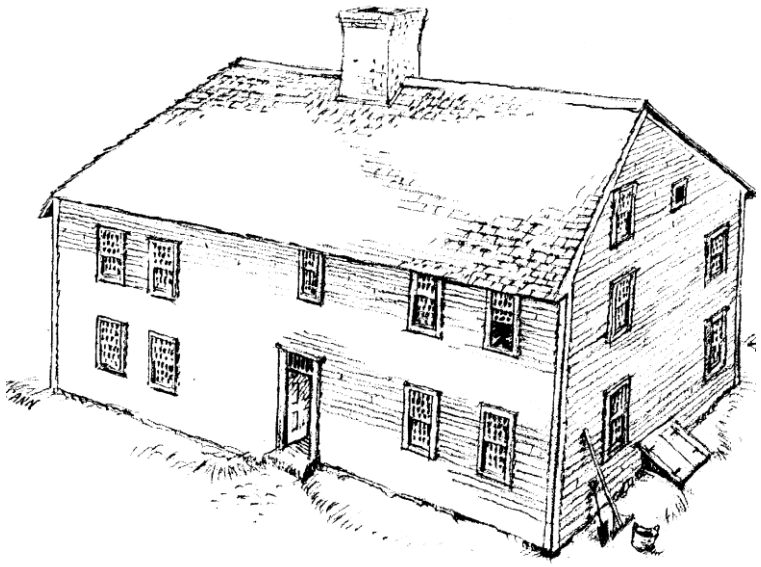
Now with proof that the south end had started out as a stone-ender I realized that the details we had wondered about— the purlined roof in the attic; the lintel that didn't fit the fireplace; the oak clapboards that outlined an ell; the jetty overhang; the partition walls; the burn marks; the artifacts—had been showing us the way back to the house that Jacob I had built, circa 1680.



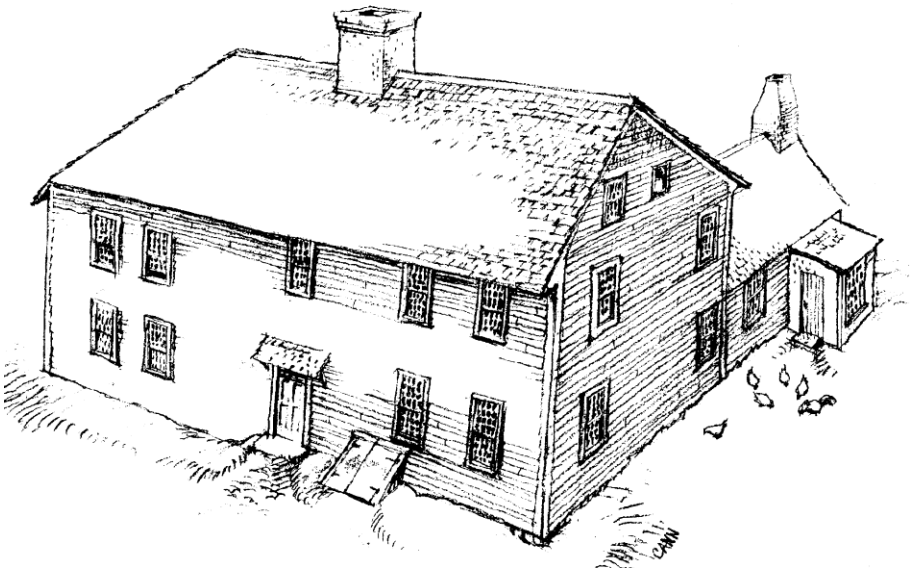


While Steve and I had been concentrating on the oldest section of the house the crew also had been making discoveries. Double posting, and 18th century pine clapboards found under plaster, outlined Jacob II addition—a two story one room deep structure—circa 1725. Jacob II had not only enlarged the house but had removed the ell, the end chimney, and the jetty overhang.

Another set of rafters were explained when Jacob III added rooms across the back and raised the roof. Circa 1732.



When Jacob IV inherited the house he added an ell for his 19th century kitchen and that's the way it remained until the day I found it.



"My God." George said when he saw the drawings. "Which phase of the house am I going to use?"

I had been so absorbed with all we had been discovering that I had forgotten that somebody would live in this house. I had even been thinking what a great study house for architectural students and historians. The thought of electricity, heating, insulation, bathrooms, and kitchens made me shiver. I told George he could be involved with an extremely important structure and before he decided anything we should ask some authorities in early New England architecture to take a look. Not only did he concur but he also agreed to pay for a night watchman. I hadn't forgotten about the candles and matches I'd seen. What a hell of a bonfire this place would make, and Halloween was only a week away.

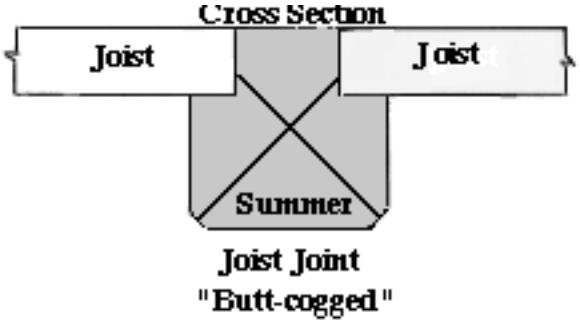
The following day I wrote a letter to Abbot Cummings, director of SPNEA (The Society of New England Antiquities); Richard Candee, architectural historian at Sturbridge Village; Henry Judd, specialist in early

American framing at the National Park Service; Antoinette Downing, director of The Rhode Island Preservation Commission, Orin Bullock and Irving Haynes, restoration architects; and James Deetz, an archeologist and professor of anthropology at Brown university. I explained that I was in the process of dismantling an exceptional 17th century house with 18 and 19th century additions, then described the house in detail. I told them that it was on land slated for development, but after discovering so much original material I wondered if it was wise to move it. However, I wrote, before I pursued the idea, I needed to know if the house was as architecturally significant as I thought.

I had no credentials and after mailing the letters I wondered if anybody would reply, but within a week my calendar was filled with the dates of the expert's arrivals. .

Steve and I—anxious to show off the house— swept and cleaned then did it all over again. Richard Candee would be our first visitor, and when he arrived my heart pounded. I couldn't stop thinking how overwhelmed he would be. But he didn't faint. He didn't jump up and down. He didn't say this is unbelievable, amazing or wow. All he did was stroll around the room nonchalantly looking up and down. But when he stopped under the summer beam and reached up to touch the molding and then the joists I thought "Great," at last he's impressed.

Instead he said "Too bad. The joists ends are butt-and-cogg. After reading your description of the house I expected to find the soffit-tenon-with-diminished-



haunch."

I knew butt-and-cogg described the method used for letting a joist into a beam, but soffit-tenon-with-diminished-haunch sounded like words he'd made up. I repeated the words to myself so I wouldn't forget how to look them up when I got home.

There was such a word. After reading the description I understood why he wanted to examine the end of the joists. Joinery methods were one of the ways to determining when a house was built.

The book said that Soffit-tenon-with-diminished-haunch was used until the late 17th century. Butt and cogg more economical method —1 cut instead of 3— had become popular for joist joinery by the 1700s

Obviously Candee hoped the house was earlier than it was, but certainly when he got to the second floor and saw the oak clapboards, the burn marks in the girt, the evidence of a jetty overhang, he'd be impressed. Instead he nodded his head as if he had seen it all before, and I found myself questioning if the house was as special as I thought. But, when we got to the attic and he saw the roof with the purlins he grabbed his forehead, drew in his breath, and said, "Superior." The words I'd been waiting to hear.

"I like to look at everything in a house before commenting," he said, "And now that I have, I can tell you this house is not only an amazing find but a key document in the development of 17th century vernacular architecture."

The Mott House had spoken to him as it would to everybody else. Cummings, Judd , Haynes and Bullock reported that the Mott House was the finest example of unspoiled 17th century architecture in Rhode Island and confirmed that it should not be moved. Downing, although she didn't go past the front hall, agreed with what everybody else had said

But the most extraordinary visitor was Jim Deetz. As I watched him unwind his long-legged frame from his truck I knew I was going to like him. His wiry sideburns outlined a ruggedly handsome face, and instead of a suit and tie he was wearing a faded jean jacket , a cowboy hat, boots, and a leather belt with a large topaz and silver buckle.

"I've been looking forward to seeing this place," he said, as his rough hand took hold of mine and gave it a shake.

"Does all this acreage belong with the house?" he asked, as his eyes drifted from the house to the outbuildings, down a lane, and across the russet red huckleberry fields to the shore of Narragansett bay.

"Yes" I said. "In fact this is the original 140 acres that was granted to Adam Mott in 1639." I pointed to the south end of the house and told him it had been built around 1680 by Adam's son.

"Let's have a look," he said.

Jim's words, "superb, splendid, wonderful," followed me as I led him from room to room—words that included all the additions which surprised me as I hadn't thought of them as architecturally significant.

"You've got everything here," he said . "An original farm site, 300 years of habitation and a structure that holds a wealth of cultural and social information."

He explained that the construction of the south end— exposed and chamfered frame, end chimney, jetty overhang, studded walls, casement windows—shows that the builder, Jacob I, in 1680 still had strong ties to the post-medieval architecture of Old England while the first addition shows the builder, Jacob II, was responding to the architectural influences taking place in New England and particularly Rhode Island.

"He was becoming Americanized," Jim said and clarified his statement by pointing out that Jacob II had framed the walls of his addition with planks instead of studs, his windows were double hung instead of casement, and rather than leaving the timbers exposed he had cased the posts and hidden the summer, the girts and the joists under a plaster ceiling, just as his neighbors were doing.

"But that is only part of it," he said. and proceeded to explain that when Jacob II removed the jetty, replaced the end chimney with a center one, added 5 windows across the front, and moved the door to the middle, it wasn't only a change in style and details but a change from the old-world asymmetric tradition of building to the new world of symmetry, the hallmark of the Georgian period.

"Except," Jim said, "Jacob II didn't under stand the architectural rules for symmetry. He placed the sills for his addition one foot higher than the sills of the original house, a design mistake that would mean the windows on the front could never be symmetrical"

"That's why the front of the house looks so out of sync," I said

"Yes," Jim said. He explained that by the time Jacob III inherited the house the Georgian period would have been in full swing. Wanting his house to look like those in the center of town, he added rooms across the back and raised the roof so the peak would be parallel with the front.

"Poor Jacob," I said. "As hard as he tried to make his house look Georgian he was stuck with the two different levels. Then when he decided to raise the roof the old 17th century roof, at right angles to his new roof, would be in the way.

"Right," Jim said "He couldn't remove it as it was structurally part of the south end,"

The best Jacob III could do, Jim explained, was to hide the north slant of the 17th century roof under his new roof while hoping that the south slant mirrored the hip roofs that had become fashionable in next door Newport.

"And the neighbors would know he was one of them," I said.

"Yes, and that mattered to the Motts. Here's a good example," he said, as a he picked out a fragment of painted canvas from the basket of artifacts Holding it up he told me that at one time it was fashionable to cover a table with a Turkish carpet from the East, but the Motts probably couldn't afford the real thing so they used an imitation— canvas painted with an eastern design.

Jim had been showing me a whole new way to look at a house, and by the time we had finished the tour the Motts had become real people instead of rooflines, additions and a basket of artifacts,

"I suspect that you know this house and site are extremely important," Jim said as we walked back to his truck. "To find a 1639 allotment of land and a 300 year old house passed down in the same family with all its changes intact is unique in Colonial America. Not just the house but the entire site needs to be studied." And he talked excitedly about core samples, test pits, looking for cellar holes, privies, wells, plus researching deeds, wills, probate and church records. "But first while the house is still on site it is critical to investigate the soil under the first floor," he said. "That way we can study how the artifacts relate to the standing structure and hence the life ways of those that lived in the house."

George seldom visited the house. He lived an hour away, and preferred getting updates by phone. When I called to tell him about Jim's visit he was fascinated and definitely wanted archaeological research in the

house before it was taken down. But Jim wasn't free until January, well past our agreed upon time to have the house out of there. George wrote a letter to Hall to ask for an extension and included an article the local newspaper had written titled, 300 Years of History Found in One House. Hall couldn't say no. He admitted to George that he had no plans to do anything with the site for another year. .

A year!

The words that I had been hearing reeled around in my head.: *it's too important to move; should be kept on the site; a key document of the social and cultural changes that took place in New England.* Now we wondered: Could we keep the house on the site? Could it be used as a architectural museum/study center? Could we raise enough money to buy the land?

The experts who had seen the house said "Yes," and agreed to help.

But what about George? His expenses—the purchase, the architect, the photographer, the watchman, the crew and Steve and myself— already exceeded $20,000 and he still didn't have his house. Would he be willing, now, to give it up?

George continued to amaze me. "If the Mott House is that important," he said, " it should belong to people not an individual.

It helped that we had discovered that Mary Mott, the mother of Major General Nathanael Greene, Revolutionary war hero, was also George's ancestress, and that George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, had preached in the house in the late1600s.

Steve was excited. He felt as strongly as I did that we were involved with something rare and unique. "But how are you going to buy the land?" he asked.

"Meetings," I said. And we boarded up the windows and doors.

The first step had been accomplished. The next step was how to raise the $500.000 that Hall was asking for the property, and how to convince the public the importance of saving the house.

The meetings began. Antoinette Downing would do the necessary paper work to get the site on the National Registry, then explore various ways to keep the house on the site. The experts would solicit organizations. I would solicit individuals. Letters were written, phone calls made, newspaper articles written. The interest grew. But Downing, who had taken charge, kept turning potential sources down, for there always seemed to be another and better option for land acquisition. When one didn't come through she said she knew of another. The house had become a counter in a chess game, a simple pawn. Months went by, and the only person who accomplished anything was Jim Deetz who managed to get a grant that would pay for a summer dig around the perimeter of the house.

George was losing interest. After 6 months there was still no plan for a way to preserve the Mott House on site.

"So many people are involved in this," he said. "But nobody has come through. I can't really wait forever." He declared August to be the deadline.

I agreed. I was frustrated by all the complex dealings and worried about the house itself: open to the weather, it had been stripped of shingles, plaster, lath; all the things that help a building stay dry and standing. I had an ominous feeling that if something wasn't decided soon it might collapse.

All it took was hearing ideas about yet another scheme and another year to develop it, to make me phone George. " I'm calling the crew back." I announced. We're taking the Mott House down."

None of us had been in a position to take care of it where it was. Steve and I were sad, but we knew dismantling the house was the next best thing for its future. Anyway it still had things to show us. As it came down we were able to examine, measure and record all its joinery methods, details that otherwise would never have been revealed.

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The trailer holding the house followed me as I led it to George's place. Its pilgrimage over, we gently unloaded its parts into his barn. George planned to re-assemble it within a year. But one year, then two, and then a third went by until finally one day George called. "I'm selling my place in Rhode Island and moving to Vermont. I can't use the house. Can you sell it?

I found a prospective buyer and brought him to see the disassembled Mott House. But when I opened up the barn where it was stored, a stifling smell of decay pushed by me. The doors and the windows of the barn had been closed for three years, and the building, unable to breath, had suffocated. I bent down and touched the summer beam, the backbone of the house. It crumbled in my hand.

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Thirty years later the stone walls, fields of goldenrod, winding lanes and gnarled fruit trees have been replaced by checkerboard lots and houses that looked like they were just unwrapped. Came out of a box. Do the owners ever wonder why they find

I have often wondered about the people who now live on the grave of the Mott Farm. What do they think when they find an occasional artifact — a rusted hinge, an axe head, a horse shoe, an iron lock, a pipe stem.—while digging a hole in the garden .

In its own way, the Mott House lives on: in drawings; in photographs; in text; in memories; and in the ground.

And when I walked down the cellar steps I walked on stones that had been smoothed by generations. I heard the hinges moan when I pushed opened the cellar door. I smelled the peculiar, dark odor of mold, cobwebs and dampness as it rushed by me in search of fresh air. I found little niches carved into the stone foundation and wondered what they were used for. I touched the rusty tools, clay pots, and empty croocks that lay on the dirt floor
and when I found shelves of preserves with faded labels I imagined long ago summers.
See above page 197

The only reminder of what was is an

I have often wondered what a resident thinks while digging a hole in the garden.and finding an artifacewhen they find an artifact —a rusted hinge, an axe head, a horse shoe, an iron lock, a pipe stem.— while digging a hole in the garden.

Was the Mott House the last of its kind? For awhile I thought so, but not anymore. The more I look the more I discover and the more I learn.

planting

Going back into the past to explore architectural history gives our present a richer, more resonant meaning.

that look like had b Although my involvement with the Mott House happened earlier than some of the before the particular houses I have written about I wanted to save its story for last as it had a way of speaking to me like no other house had or ever has since.

een just unwrapped and