

SUFFOLK RESOLVES HOUSE.

(Report by Arthur H. Tucker June 1924.)

For the average man, who will stop a minute when passing the old house on Adams Street, Milton, which has long been called the "Suffolk Resolves House" there are many things to note regarding the building itself, which awake the curiosity, and the desire to know something of the life story of the old house, and the changes and alterations, if any, which it has experienced since first it became a useful shelter for human activity.

To such a man, standing on the side walk, and looking, for instance, at the south side upper windows which face the next building on the south, it is plain that there is a difference in those four windows.

They all have the heavy solid frames which were the usual construction one hundred and fifty years ago, and show at the four corners the big pins which held the ponderous things together. But some of the frames have sills with plain edges. Some frames extend up to and intersect with the cornice, others are shorter and are kept below the cornice. Some of these four windows have sashes with fifteen lights, others with twenty-four lights, and still others with twelve lights. Some of the windows are very thin, less than one inch, others are thicker. Some of the glass is very poor quality, full of wavy places, and irregular surfaces, especially that in the two fifteen light windows next the rear of the house.

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It will also be noticed that all the clapboards near these four windows are of hand split wood, cut from clear straight grain heart of the native pine, which in the early days was used for that purpose, and that the ends of these clapboards are made to lap over each other, forming a sort of splice, through which water or wind cannot find its way.

But on closer inspection it appears that the clapboards in one space (between the two windows next the rear) are different from any of the others, in that the lower edges are ornamented by a rounded bead about one-half inch in width. This feature does not occur elsewhere on the building.

On passing around the rear of the house it is noticed that the other two windows of the upper story (one on back and one on north) are the same size as the fifteen light ones on the south, and that these four windows comprise all the windows in that one room. Looking again from the sidewalk at the two south side upper windows next to the Adams Street front, it will be seen on close scrutiny that the upper glass in these two windows extends about six inches above the plastered ceiling of the room within. This is not very noticeable from the outside, as the wood visible through the window glass has purposely been painted black to conceal it from observation, but it can be seen even from the outside that the window shades are hung about six inches below the tops of the windows.

This extraordinary proceeding on the part of the builder in those days, in having the windows so much too big for the room that a pocket had to be provided above the ceiling to accommodate the

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extra size, is more easily seen on the inside of the house than from the sidewalk, and it occurs only in these two south side windows, and the two next to them around the corner on the Adams Street front.

There is one other unusual thing which may be noticed when looking at the roof of the house, from the opposite side of Adams street. The house has the low pitched hip roof very commonly seen in the old houses of the early period, but this roof is not symmetrical. The south end is much steeper than the north. The rafters are three feet shorter. The hips at the north are placed at the 45° angle which is the usual and proper place for them. On the south hip, however, the top end of the hip rafter is three feet from where it belongs, making much steeper pitch on that south slope of the roof, which runs back over the all part of the house.

The average man by this time has begun to question whether any house having these peculiarities, could ever have been constructed as one complete house, and at any one time, or whether he sees a building which has experienced very radical physical alterations.

Passing within the main hall which extends from front to rear of the house, with its broad stairs and hand fluted balusters, there opens upon the left or north side, on both first and second stories, a spacious room more than seventeen feet square, each room having four windows and a fireplace. Notice that these rooms, and hall, and little hall chamber, all have thin hand made doors, each having six panels. On the south side of the hall, the two rooms on the street floor, and the two south chambers over them have doors, in general much the same

The hallway of the second floor opens in this north hall and

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type, but having only four panels.

There are two doors in the main hall, just inside the front door, one passing to the room on the north side through a partition which is built not much over three inches in thickness, as was usual in the colonial house. The other door passing to the room on the south side through a partition built quite differently, as much as seven or eight inches in thickness, the reason for which will be seen later.

The south half of the house consists of four rooms two below and two above (see plans) separated on each floor by the huge chimney six feet wide, each of the four rooms having a fireplace. The little hall, between rooms on each floor, has its little winding staircases tucked in against the chimney, giving passage from street floor to second floor, and up again to the attic, and downward also to cellar, in the way so commonly used in entrance halls of the small houses of New England, in the eighteenth century.

In this little south hallway there is a window which seems to have been placed there as an alteration at some time. The plastering is patched in, all the way up and down the side casing, and a big patch as wide as the window and extending below it to the floor, evidently was done at a much later date than the old hard plaster alongside. This is the place where it naturally would be expected to see an entrance doorway, coming in to this little hall with its crooked narrow stairs

front, and its doors leading at right and left into the main rooms on either side. The ceilings of the first floor rooms in this south half are

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about seven inches lower than those in the main front hall and large north room, so that in passing through the door on the second floor from the main hall to the south chamber a step of seven or eight inches is provided in that door way, and the ceiling of this south chamber is pulled down half a foot over the top of all its windows as was before observed from the exterior of the house.

Opening the battered door with its hand wrought H hinges and hand made thumb latch, and passing up the winding stairs to the attic floor, the skeleton of the house is laid bare. Even those who have differed most widely in their opinions regarding the origin and history of this old house, will here agree, that between the century old cobwebs suspending themselves between the rafters, and the accumulation of materials stored in this attic, there is very little room left for the average man to squirm himself about with sufficient complacency to make observations.

The first observation that he should make, however, is that the south half of the house is, or was formerly, floored all over with a single thickness of wide boards. The second is that the north half was never floored over, and unless he uses great care one or both of his feet will certainly go through the thin hand split lathing of the ceiling into the room below. The difference in flooring only leads to the discovery of other differences in the two portions of the house.

The south half (and by this is meant that part south of, but including, the main hall) was uniformly built of hand hewn oak timbers, comprising a unit by itself, separate and distinct from the north half (meaning the main hall and the rooms opening off it to the

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north - see plans) which was uniformly built of mill sawed chestnut and oak timbers, somewhat larger in size.

The two hips at the north end of the house have their lower ends resting on short stout timbers secured in a substantial manner to the horizontal timbers running along the top of the walls to support the roof. These horizontal timbers are sometimes called the "plates", and those on the south portion of the house are set at a lower level, about four or five inches, than those of the north portion.

The south hip is not so well secured to the "plate", nor in the same manner, as those at the north end, and the inner end of the hip support is left unsecured. The same is true of the rafter next to the south hip on the Adams Street side.

The hand hewn "plate" of the south portion is not only some four or five inches below the mill sawed "plate" of the north portion, but at the point where the two "plates" meet on the Adams Street front, it shows that the two parts of the building are not one contemporaneous whole, but that the hand hewn frame of the south portion of the house was built first, and at some later period, an enlargement was made on its north side by adding the mill sawed frame structure, which includes the main hall and the two large north rooms.

The wall boarding still remains undisturbed on what was formerly the exterior wall of this older south portion of the house, where the newer portion was added on. This boarding is seen all the way across the building where the newer joins the older parts, and explains the thick partition which was noted in the halls below.

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It will also be noticed that something, or several things, have happened to the roof, since it was first built. The south hip rafter, and its opposite valley rafter on the rear, are of the later type sawn timber, cut in when the enlargement was made to the original house, and offer an explanation of the unusual angle of this hip. The difference in width between the old building (sixteen feet) and the newer addition (twenty-one feet) made it necessary to place the hip at a sharper angle than the usual 45° .

As a protection to the ceiling below, there have been laid down as a partial and temporary attic flooring, an old four panel door like those used in portions of the south half of the house, also some narrow panelled window shutters, such as were used in the old days as interior casement shutters. The four panel door can easily be accounted for, but where did those narrow panelled, white painted shutters, with their hand made H hinges, come from? Search thus far does not reveal any place of attachment for these hinges on the windows of the house. Will some more observing observer discover, and explain their origin and connection with this house?

Another queer thing in the attic cannot escape notice, and that is the winding top of the stairway, which is turned in such a way — that the top step comes under the low edge of the roof, where only about two feet in height is available. The first thought is that there must have been a third story here which was later removed and roof covered. But the frame of the building does not permit the approval of this theory, and one has to look on the floor below for an explanation for the ridiculous stairs. It will there be seen that the head room

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was very close, and in order to pass comfortably from the second floor downward, the attic stairs above had to be turned with winding steps to permit head room.

By the time the average man has taken all these observations home with him and thought them out a bit, he has probably framed up a life history of the house something as follows:

When this building was first used as a dwelling house, it had two finished stories, and an unfinished attic, and the size of the house on the ground floor was 16'-4" x 30'-2" consisting only of present south part of the house. The front door was on the present south side and entered the little stair hall, and this front door faced the street, or a street. There was a rear door and windows on the side opposite the front door, which were covered by the newer addition, built on at a later date.

The windows were all alike, and the only original ones remaining are the two upper story windows having fifteen lights, and located on the south side near back corner. These are the original frames and sash. The crooked wavy glass in those two windows is the original. All the clapboarding was of the beaded kind such as is now seen between these two windows. This little bit of clapboarding about two feet wide and five feet high and the two windows and their frames with the moulded sill, are the most ancient part of the old exterior. All the window sills were moulded ones like these two. There may have been a lean-to shed on that side of the house opposite to its front door. The window

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passings of the interior were made like those now seen in the present east room. This room may have had the brick baking oven, or the oven may have been in the room below, where an oven is seen today.

The roof was a regular pitch roof having a gable and one attic window at each end. The gable at the present east end still remains. The other one was later removed when the house was enlarged. The outlines of four fireplaces are still seen, and they were the only method of warming the house. The big chimney came up through the center of the roof ridge. The attic was never finished off, but may have provided sleeping rooms, one at each end of the house. The frame of the house was all of hand hewn oak timber, no sawed timber. The interior plastering was of that peculiar hard strong texture, which gave a fairly smooth surface although put on in one coat, onto the irregular surface of hand split lathing.

The ceiling of the rooms were rather low. The doors were all four panel, and both doors and windows were all hand made, as also the nails, hinges and door latches. The period of construction of this original portion was probably somewhere in the first half of the eighteenth century.

Years passed, probably a good many years passed, and there came a time when the owner, or a new owner wanted a larger and more pretentious house. It took some study to work out a way to accomplish this. First the house was swung around at right angles, or moved here from elsewhere, thus bringing the gable end to face the street. In any event the old "front" of the house was made to stand at right angles

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to the new "front". The old rooms were not considered to be high enough for the much larger hall and new north parlor, so the rooms on the new first floor were made eight inches higher leaving the old ones as they were before, and providing a step where the new door was put through into the new second floor hall. The old windows were thought too small for the new cornice line rooms of the new position, so they were all taken out, five in all, leaving only three which came in the chamber which then became the back chamber. The windows in the rear chamber were not replaced at all as "licked" sashes, and therefore all four of them were left undisturbed. But the three windows in the south chamber and the one in the old hall were taken out, so as to have wider and higher ones, which would be the same as those put into the new part and reach up to the cornice in accordance with colonial design. This got the workmen into trouble on the second floor ceiling, because it brought the tops of the windows full five inches above the plastered ceiling. But someone was there who was ingenious enough to think up a solution which has never been heard of before or since, namely to construct a recessed space in the ceiling at each window, and these odd little pockets still remain. All the new window sashes were made with twenty four lights, and in passing it is interesting to note that of this second set of window sashes with which the house was fitted there are only two windows in which the sashes still remain. One is at the rear end of the main hall, the other is on the south side in the little stair hall. The reason that these two remain is, that years afterward, when the new twenty-four light windows had become old and out of date, and the owner replaced them with new twelve light windows, he left these two, one in

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each hall, as the fact that they were different from the newer ones was not conspicuous, either from the inside or the outside of the house. And so there are today, on the south side upper story, right along in a row, the three kinds of window sashes with which the old house has been equipped, at three different periods in its history.

When the addition was built the old beaded clapboards had to come off in order to get in the larger windows, and new clapboards with plain edges were put on all over the house, except in the little space on the south side, between the two original window frames which were left undisturbed.

The gable and next Adams Street had to be cut off, and the roof timbering patched up to provide for the construction of the new hipped roof.

All the new doors were made in six panels, instead of four panels with which the doors of the original house were provided. In cases where a room had some old and some new doors, the old four panel doors were taken off, and the new six paneled doors substituted. This happened in the two front corner rooms. The old four panel door now resting on the attic floor, may be one of these discarded doors.

There is some question whether the porch over the present front door was made new at the time of making this addition, or whether it stood formerly over the front door of the original house. If the clapboarding should be stripped off at the point where the original front door was, and the wall boarding there should show the exact imprint where this porch had been attached and removed, that

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question would be settled. In fact there are several questions which could be determined by a little exploration.

These observations regarding this interesting old house by no means exhaust all that might be found out about it. In fact what is written here is only a beginning, and must not be considered as final or beyond revision - as there are other unusual things noticeable, for each of which there is a reason, though that reason has not yet been found.

It is impossible at this time (May 1924) to make as thorough an examination in the attic or elsewhere, as is desirable, or would be possible if the building was not used to utmost capacity for storage purposes. Whenever the building is empty, a more complete examination should be made.

The first floor timbering as seen in the basement, is not interesting, as none of the original remains, all undoubtedly having become decayed before being replaced by the modern construction now visible there, which apparently was done during the middle of the nineteenth century.

The old brick chimneys each show in the cellar that the house was probably raised at some time, necessitating the insertion of several feet of newer brick work, which was built in to support the much older masonry of the chimneys above.

Owing to the fact that the addition on the north has not been altered since built, except for the obvious alterations for business purposes in recent years, that addition is not nearly so interesting as the original south portion, which gives evidence of having a still

earlier chapter in history.

Turning back farther into the past to determine what was the nature of the older portion of the building before it became a dwelling, and whether or not it had any existence prior to that time, the evidence is concealed in large measure by the plastering which now covers all the walls and ceilings. If the frame work of the exterior walls and second floor timbering could be seen, it would not be hard to discover what sort of a building it was before it became the present dwelling. What little can now be seen, however, indicates that changes were made, changes sufficiently marked to demonstrate that the building was something else before it became the dwelling house.

There are several things so far discovered which indicate the adaptation of a building erected for some other purpose, and conversion into a dwelling.

First the upright oak post, about eight inches square which is partly cut off at the second floor level near the top of the stairs. This post is plainly seen in the hall floor and supports a horizontal girt on either side. The position of the post is not the logical or proper one, unless there was a reason for it not now evident, such, for instance as the putting in of a large exterior doorway on the first floor, which would necessitate crowding the post over three or four feet from the point where it would naturally be placed, that is, under the cross girders of the upper floor.

It seems highly improbable, provided the stairway and chimney were contemplated in the erection of the frame, that a post would be

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placed where this one is.

Second, the chimney and stairway occupy a large part of the space between the two cross girders in the attic floor. These girders have mortises (or "gains") opposite each other all the way along on each girder, to receive floor joist, and a floor to cover the entire space now taken by the chimney and stairs. It looks as though there must have been such a floor there, which was taken out in part, when altering the building into a dwelling, and a new joist put in, in another place, next the stairway, to prepare for this construction of chimney and stairs.

Third, the change in the height and spread of the roof, which at one time had no projecting cornice and came close down to the floor boards at the eaves.

The story of what happened, so far as the evidence now available indicates, is this:-

The original building was 16'-4" x 30'-8" in size having two stories and a low attic. There was no chimney, and it was therefore not a dwelling house. There was no overhanging eave, just a plain weather board flat on the wall to take the roof shingles. Probably no gutter. Possibly a large door on what is now the south side.

Later the building was made into a dwelling house. The roof was lifted bodily, and the tenons at the bottom ends of the rafters were fitted into new mortises in a new set of heavy cross timbers, which were laid across on top of the attic floor, with their ends projecting on either side of the building. Not only was the roof lifted about eight

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inches, but it was also spread and made about eight inches wider on each side of the house, thus causing the ridge to flatten down a corresponding amount, and partially tearing apart the joints of the rafters where they were mortised together at the ridge. This change was a curious one, because by introducing these new long cross timbers, and setting the rafters onto them, the roof as a whole is left without any attachment to the frame below. It is simply resting on the attic floor, with nothing to hold it there but its own weight. Before the change, the rafters were secured by oak pins driven through the mortises of the floor timbers, which were halved and dovetailed to the plates.

This change to the roof appears to have been done at a different, and much earlier time, than the other change which came with the addition on the north with its hip roof. The timbers which were introduced across the floor were mostly hand hewn, and the workmanship is better than much of that where the hip roof came on later. The object of raising and spreading the roof was to make possible a cornice on the eaves of the house.

After the roof had been raised, the chimney was built, and the stairs were put in tight against it, the house plastered and finished off, with the small fifteen light windows, and it was ready to occupy as a dwelling.

Some of the changes in the roof frame are very interesting, and partly because of the absolute clearness of the record which they now give, regarding the two distinct alterations, the last of which occurred a century and a half ago, and the earlier one perhaps fifty years farther back. All of the original attic floor timbers have today

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the mortises which originally received the lower ends of the rafters. One of these mortises still has the pin in place which held the tenon of the rafter, and even a portion of the tenon, which the pin held so firmly that it was broken off when the roof was raised. On these original floor timbers, and covering them in some instances, now rest the newer cross beams, put in to support the roof at the time it was raised, and these cross beams have the same kind of mortises as the original timbers, and carry the roof today in the same way. But later when the addition at the north was added and the roof hipped at its front end, some of these rafters had to come out thus leaving empty mortises in this second set of timbers. So there is the mute but unmistakable testimony of the two empty mortises, one in the timber below, almost hidden by the timber above, in which the second still remains, and each as perfect as when first wrought out from the tough oak. Each in turn served a useful and necessary purpose for many a decade, but since the house assumed its present hipped roof, neither has had any useful occupation.

Further investigation might solve the mystery of the wide boards in the floor next the fireplaces, and show the location of the original brick baking oven and kitchen. There is yet much to be learned from the old house, three distinct chapters in whose history are here outlined.