

**First Period Architecture**  
**In Newbury and Salem, Massachusetts**

Vernacular Architecture Forum Tour

May 17, 1992.



**The Spencer-Pierce-Little House, Newbury**

## **First Period Architecture in Newbury and Salem, Massachusetts**

May 17, 1992

Led by Abbott Lowell Cummings  
and Anne Grady

9:30 AM	Leave Portsmouth
11:15 AM	Arrive at the Spencer-Pierce-Little Farm, Newbury
	Introductory remarks on the south side of the house by Abbott Lowell Cummings and Mary Beaudry, archaeologist.
12:35 AM	Box lunches available
1:35 AM to 1:00 PM	Tour members may eat lunch and examine the house, barn and archaeological sites in whatever sequence they wish. Tour leaders, archaeologists, building conservators and representatives of SPNEA will be stationed inside and outside the house to answer questions and give directions. All parts of the house, except the tenant farmer's house and the chamber in the wooden wing will be open for inspection. There is an archaeology exhibit in the first floor of the west wing.
2:00 PM	Buses leave for Salem
2:30 PM	Arrive at the Gedney House, Salem
	The tour group will split in two. Half will accompany Abbott Lowell Cummings on a tour of the Gedney House, while the other half takes a short bus tour of Salem led by Dean Lahikainen of the Essex Institute, visiting such sites as Chestnut Street, and the exteriors of the Pickering House and the Witch House.
3:10 PM	The two groups will switch.
3:00 PM	Bus/es leave for Logan Airport
3:00 PM	Bus/es arrive at Logan Airport
3:00 PM	Bus arrives at South Station, Boston

## **First Period Architecture in Newbury and Salem, Massachusetts**

The two houses to be visited, the stone-and-brick Spencer-Pierce-Little House and the timber-framed Eleazer Gedney House, are examples of what is known in New England as First Period Architecture. The term defines the architecture of the 17th and early 18th century that exhibited exposed and decorated structural carpentry, and that derived, or evolved, from English post-medieval architecture transferred to New England by settlers.

The two houses are interpreted at the moment by their owner, SPNEA, as “study houses.” Both are unfurnished and include areas where later finish materials have been removed to permit examination of the of underlying structural and architectural features. The two houses, both expensive houses in their day, provide an opportunity to compare masonry and timber frame construction and to study certain decorative practices of the period.

### **Spencer-Pierce-Little Farm**

Ca. 1675-1700

Little's Lane

Newbury, MA

Owner: SPNEA

The Spencer-Pierce-Little House, a stone house of cruciform plan with a porch and gable ends of brick, and exterior walls laid up in lime mortar, was built in a single building campaign ca. 1675-1700. It is the only stone house of the 17th century in New England to survive with its exterior walls intact. Its only rival, the Henry Whitfield House of Guilford, CT, was extensively reconstructed in the twentieth century. The provincial Mannerist details of the projecting porch are unique in New England, and along with the size, complex plan and costly masonry construction, reveal the ambitious character of the original house.

The house is situated in the midst of 231 acres of open land bordering the Merrimack River and Plum Island sound. The land has been farmed continuously since the seventeenth century. In recognition of that agricultural heritage, the name of the original grantee of the land in 1635, John Spencer, whose agents farmed the property before the present house was built, continues to be associated with the property.

Recent chemical testing has determined that the limestone discovered in Newbury in 1697 is not the source of the lime used in the mortar of the exterior walls of the Spencer-Pierce-Little House. Because the lime is not of the post-1697 variety, and because there is little other evidence for dating a monument like this house (since no comparable examples exist), we are thrown back to the documents as a source for the construction date of the house. Records indicate a broad potential time span.

Daniel Pierce, Sr., a blacksmith from Ipswich in Essex County, England, purchased the property in 1651 for 500 pounds. Thereafter, Pierce prospered, engaging in malting, livestock raising and farming in addition to blacksmithing. By the time of Pierce's death in 1677, the property had risen in value to 1200 pounds and was described in the inventory of the estate as, "A Farme about two hundred and thirty acres of upland and meadow with housing, barns and orchard." This extraordinary jump in value of 700 pounds during Pierce, Sr.,'s ownership could indicate that the stone house was built during his lifetime.

Daniel Pierce, Jr., inherited the property from his father as an entailed estate. Known as Colonel Daniel as an officer in the militia, Daniel, Jr., was even more prosperous and prominent than his father. He appears to have engaged in a number of mercantile pursuits, and he achieved a leadership position in the Massachusetts Bay colony as a member of the powerful Governor's Council from 1693 his death in 1704. Daniel Pierce, Jr.,'s will of 1701, in which he gives his widow leave to occupy portions of the "stonehouse", is the first concrete documentary reference to the present house.

The house was constructed of local stone, both glacially deposited and indigenous, laid in random rubble. Windows on the facade and west end of the house were originally under the brick arches of which traces are still visible beneath the 19th century parings on the facade (cover). The brick porch, evidently open to the weather originally on the first level, was the chief focus of decorative treatment on the exterior. Molded bricks in a variety of shapes were used to embellish the niche over the entrance and the arched openings. The arches on the west side of the facade and the west end, thought to have been the more formal parlor side of the house, are similarly decorated with quarter round-molded bricks. Portions of the arch and adjoining west wall as they appeared ca. 1800 when the wall was enclosed by the wooden addition may be examined inside the house. The thick coating of whitewash seen on the west wall may reflect the original treatment of the exterior where

the whitewash may have been intended to disguise the roughness of the stonework and give the brick the appearance of dressed stone. Fenestration was altered in the 18th and 19th centuries in conjunction with architectural updatings of the interior. Otherwise, the walls and the buttressed chimney of the north ell, retain their original stonework in place.

The lobby-entry plan with central chimney and rear ell is essentially the same today as it was originally (Figures 1-4), except for the addition of several partitions in the east and north chambers.

The floors and roof of the Spencer-Pierce-Little House are timber framed, with major framing beams and joists set in mortar in pockets in the exterior walls. Summer beams were exposed originally and are decorated with quarter-round chamfers and several types of stops, of which the conical stop with double fillet above in the room to the west of the central chimney is the most distinctive. Rare in this country, the stop has precedents in the Hampshire/Wiltshire County region of England, which provided many of the original settlers of Newbury. With the exception of the stair halls, the ceilings of all rooms were plastered originally below the joists.

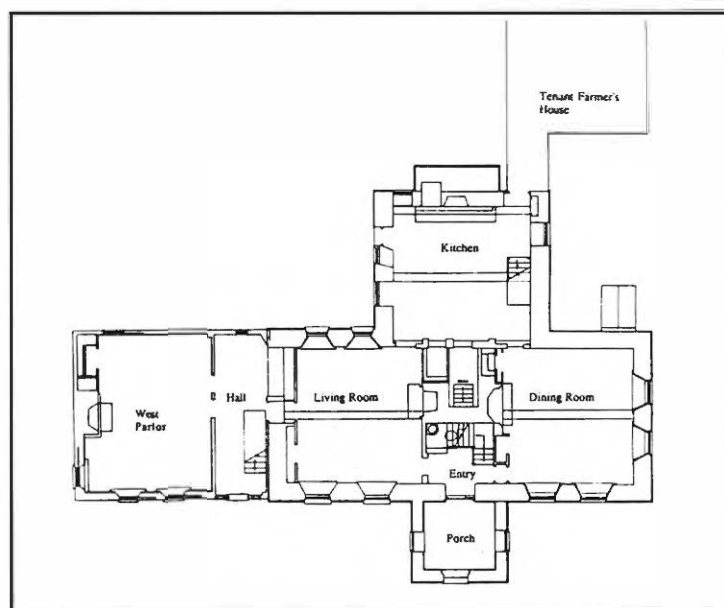


Figure 1. First Floor Plan

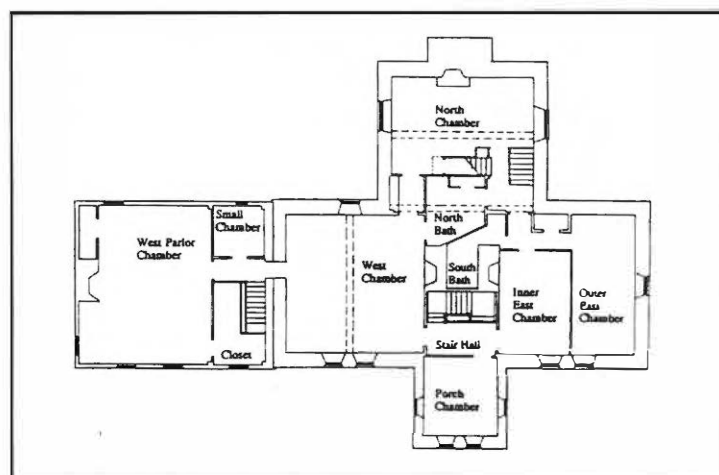


Figure 2. Second Floor Plan

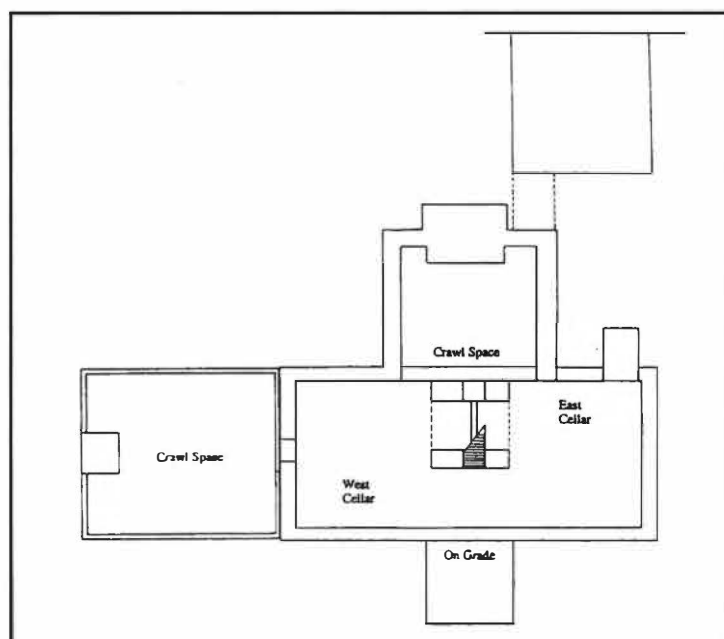


Figure 3. Cellar Plan

The fully-chamfered roof frame is of the principal rafter/common purlin type (Figure 5). The heavily-framed roof structure incorporates four purlins per slope, which are trenched, except at the central bay, where they are butted. Evidence indicates that there may have been an intermediate floor in the attic supported by joists framed between the collar beams to divide the space into an upper storage area and lower living space. The two central tie beams extend with squared ends beyond the slope of the main portion of the roof, indicating that the porch and rear ell structures were an integral part of the original construction.

The foundation of the original central chimney, supported by two broad brick arches, survives in the cellar, with possible evidence of the outline of the original hall fireplace. Above the cellar, the central chimney was torn

down in the late eighteenth century. Two smaller chimneys, serving shallower fireplaces, were built up on the sides of the original foundation, leaving a space between for stairs to the cellar and attic. The two stacks meet over an arch in the attic and exit the roof as a single stack. The chimney in the north wall of the ell retains important evidence of the original fireplace in the chamber. Here, the large fireplace with jambs edged with molded bricks like those used on the exterior and an unusual second floor oven can be examined, the wall having been stripped of later finish materials. Evidence of the original kitchen fireplace below has been obliterated by the current mid-nineteenth century fireplace installation, which includes a beehive oven and set kettle.

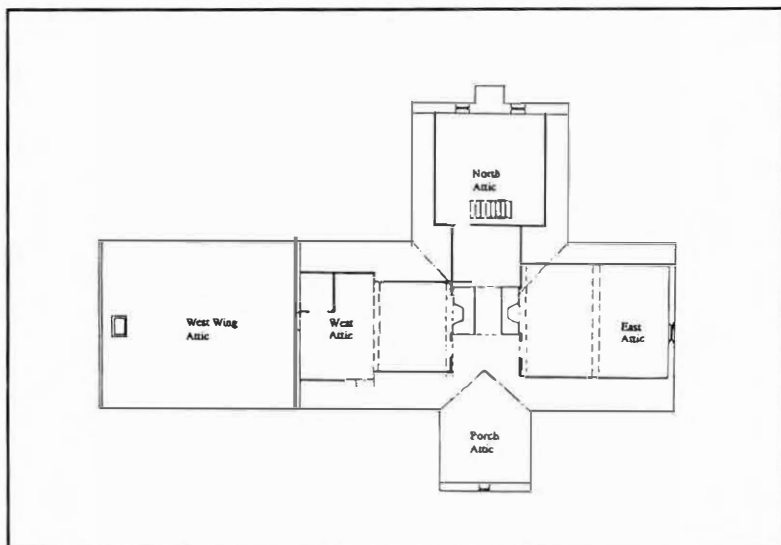


Figure 4. Attic Floor Plan

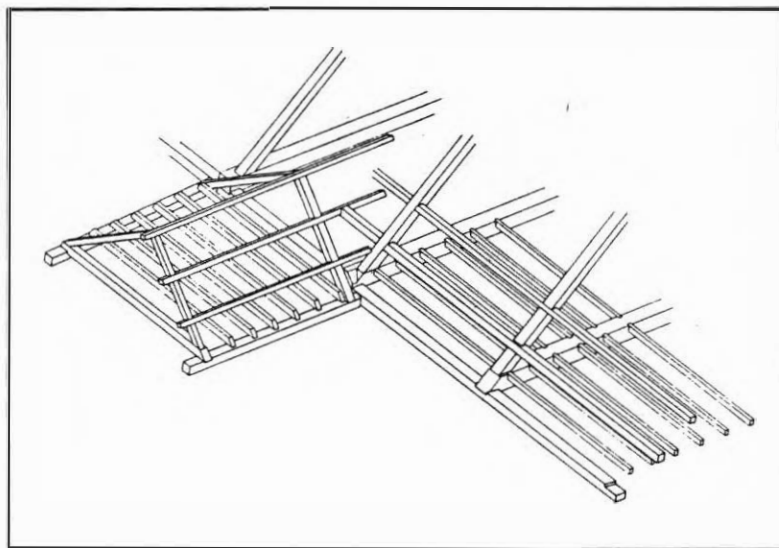


Figure 5. Isometric drawing of the framing of the southeast roof section

The masonry walls were originally covered on the interior with a thick coating of lime plaster, which survives behind later furred-in plaster walls. Other details of original finish materials, such as fireplace wall treatment or staircase are now lost.

The property continued to be inherited by the eldest male heir in the Pierce family until 1778, when the entailment of the estate was broken. The property then entered a period in which it served as a country seat for three successive prominent Newburyport merchants: Nathaniel Tracy (from 1778 to 1797), Offin Boardman (from 1797 to 1813), and John Pettingell and heirs (from 1813 to 1861).

The first remodellings, including the introduction of Georgian staircase trim, the casing of some beams and the enclosure of the porch, occurred during the Pierce ownership. The major remodeling, which included the furring-in of many of the walls, the rebuilding of the central chimney and the installation of much of the woodwork that survives today, was undertaken by Nathaniel Tracy, probably in the 1780s.

Circa 1800, Offin Boardman had the west wing and the attached tenant farmer's house built. At the time of death in 1812, the farm included an elaborate set of outbuildings and gardens which were meticulously depicted in a plan prepared when the property was auctioned (Figure 6). The great barn, the only farm building shown on the plan that remains today, which was restored in 1976 by SPNEA, had been a part of the complex since before 1778.

During the period from 1827 to 1861, tenant farmers operated the farm. It was at this time that occupants of the attic, probably farm hands, began to cover the unpainted sheathing of the walls with the rich collection of chalked graffiti we see today.

In 1861, Edward H. Little, a local farmer, purchased the farm that he had been renting for ten years. Little and his descendants respected the historic value of the property and made few changes to the house, other than the furring-in of the walls of the living room, the last room to remain with the original plaster-on-masonry walls exposed. Meanwhile the lore associated with the house as a garrison house and a place where gentry lived continued to expand as the house became an icon of the Colonial Revival movement.

Little descendants gave the property to SPNEA in 1986. The restoration, ongoing since 1986, has employed state-of-the-art building conservation techniques aimed fundamentally at returning the

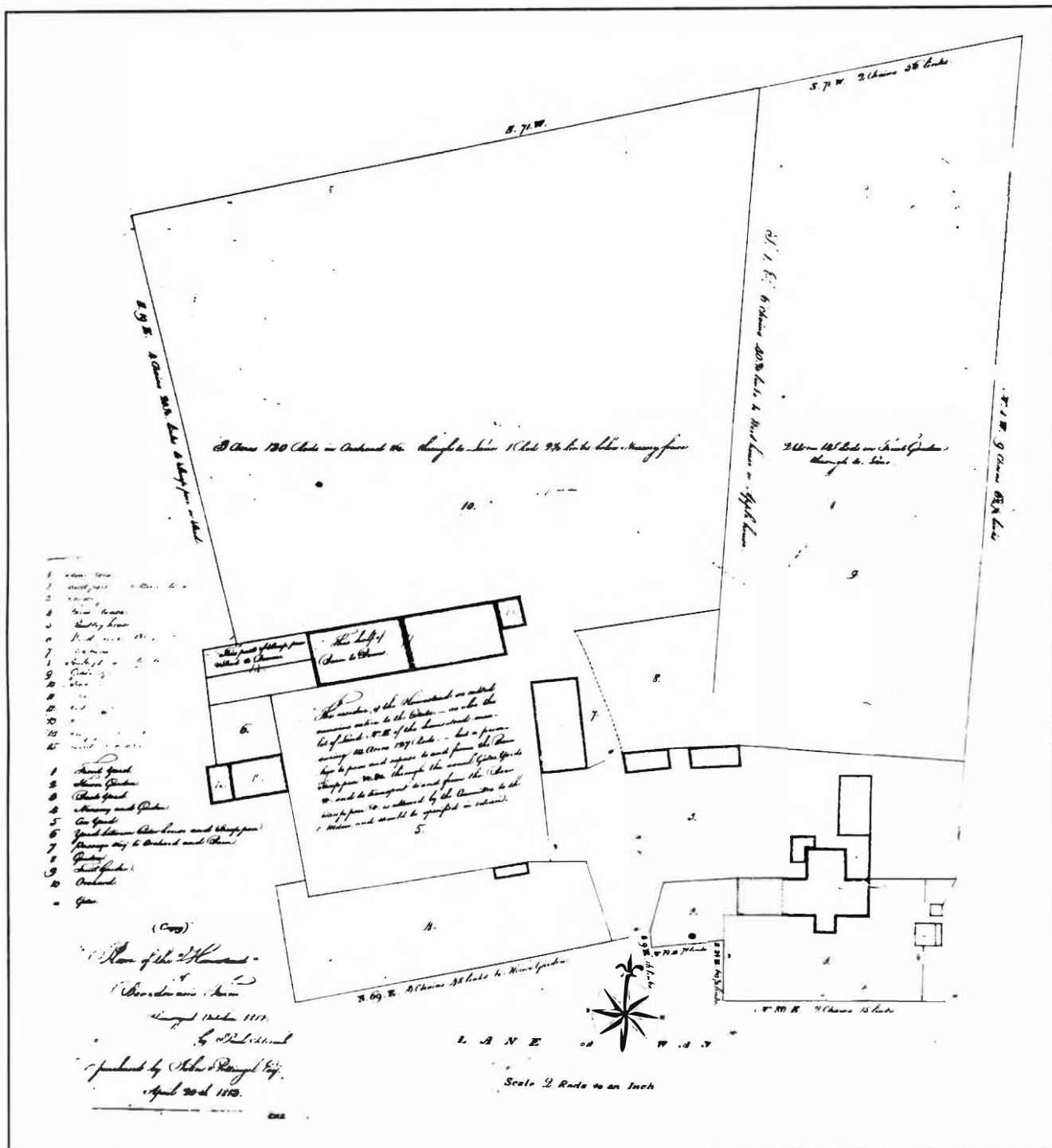


Figure 6. Plan of the "Homestead" of Boardman's Farm. Surveyed October 1812.

Buildings identified on the plan: 1) Stone House; 2) Wood part of Dwelling House; 3) Scullery; 4) Farm House; 5) Poultry House; 6) Wood House Old; 7) Hog House; 8) Poultry House in Garden; 9) Grainery; 10) Stable; 11) Barn; 12) Cider house; 13) Shed; 14) Sheep pen and Shed; 15) linter or Shed.

Landscape areas and features identified on the plan: 1) Front Yard; 2) Flower Garden; 3) Back Yard; 4) Nursery and Garden; 5) Cow Yard; 6) Yard between Cider house and Sheep pen; 7) Passage Way to Orchard and Barn; 8) Garden; 9) Fruit Garden; 10) Orchard; a) Gates.



building to a state of structural well-being. At the same time a full range of archaeological techniques have been employed to investigate the site and reveal the original character of the house, while preserving all vestiges of subsequent modification and architectural change. Archaeologists have revealed and examined privies, wells, cisterns, pavings and have recovered a rich collection of artifacts relating to the 18th and 19th centuries.

Source: Anne Grady, William Remsen, et al. "The Spencer-Pierce-Little House Historic Structure Report," Revised 1991. SPNEA

**Gedney House,**

Ca. 1665

21 High Street

Salem, MA

Owner: SPNEA

Gedney House is the quintessential study house. Built about 1665 and modified several times during succeeding centuries, it was purchased in 1962 for conversion into modern apartments. Interior finish materials were subsequently stripped and the structural frame exposed, at which point the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities acquired title. The society has maintained the structure as it appeared then for purposes of architectural study. Twentieth-century conservation measures by either the former owner or by SPNEA have been color-coded a dark green.

Eleazer Gedney, a shipwright, purchased the unimproved land here in April of 1664 close to the shore and the "buildplace" for his boats. He was married in June of 1665, and the original portion of the house, two stories with gabled attic to the left and a parlor with leanto roof to the right (Figure 7) was presumably erected about this time. Long-gone extensions at the rear (where some structural evidence survives) were probably original. They were surely in existence at the time of Eleazer's premature death in 1683 when an estate inventory mentions the hall, hall chamber, a garret, "parlour or lento" and "lento chambr," and "Kitchin, Loft over it & little leantoo." (The latter leanto was presumably in the rear.)

The frame of the hall, hall chamber and the roof structure, is expertly crafted and, together with some still extant bits of original finish trim, suggests an expensive house reflective, perhaps, of upward social mobility. (Eleazer's first wife was a sister of merchant John Turner who built the celebrated House of Seven Gables about the same time.)

A few features survive to give some clues as to the form and character of the original "parlour or lento," but not its width as built. Evidence for this was eliminated when the "parlour or lento" was raised to a full two stories with framed overhang at the first story on the street (Figure 8). This change presumably dates to just before or just after November 1712, when Eleazer's daughter, Martha, was married. Martha and her husband, also a boatbuilder, inherited the property when Eleazer's widow died in 1716. The change is fully in keeping with "17th-century" or First Period building practices and cannot be much later. As a result, the

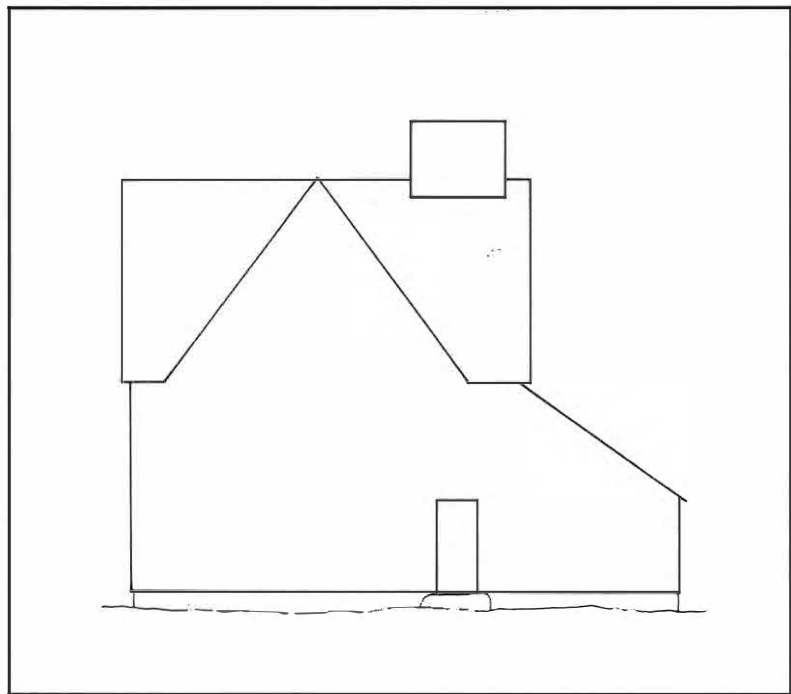


Figure 7. Diagram of the Gedney House, south elevation, ca. 1665

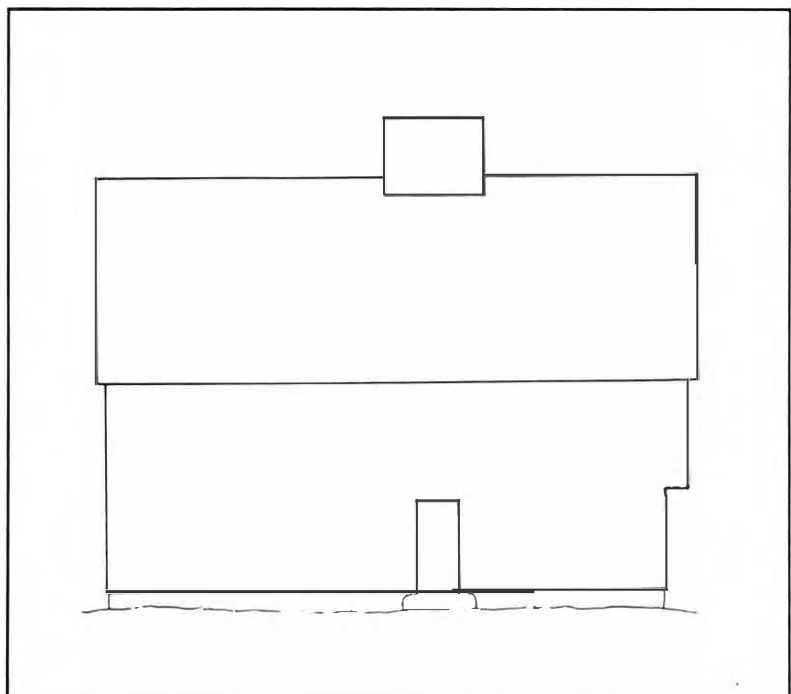


Figure 8. Diagram of the Gedney House, south elevation, ca. 1700

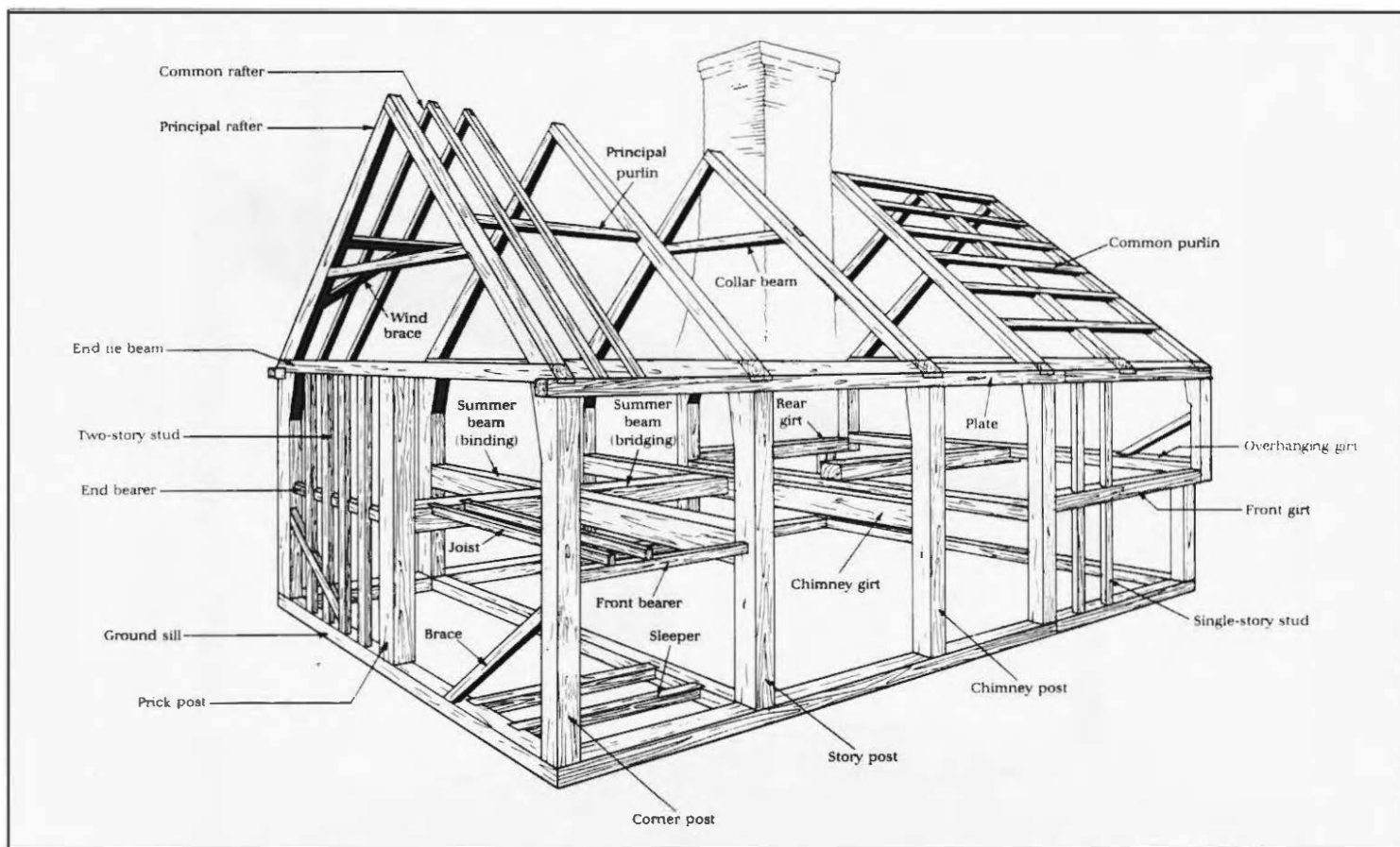


Figure 9. Gedney House, original frame of ca. 1665 and modifications of ca.1700 (at right), with identification of structural units.

present continuous roof frame includes the first-built principal and common rafters at the left and early 18th-century principal rafters and common purlins at the right (Figure 9).

Both the “parlour or lento”, as modified, and the hall chamber preserve important evidence of original paint finish. Recently subjected to laboratory analysis, this evidence not only enlarges our knowledge of chromatic interior decoration in the 17th century, but reveals an unsuspected degree of technical sophistication. In the hall chamber three successive color schemes can be identified, the earliest thought to be contemporary or near-contemporary with original construction. In the first scheme, portions of the frame only were picked out with several pigments which created an optical green (the original sheathing was left untreated altogether). In a second transformation, certain frame members were picked out with carbon black as a foil to other portions of the frame rendered white with gypsum (Figure 10). Finally, probably early in the 18th century, red and yellow ochre were used to create a two-tone picking out of the ceiling frame members.

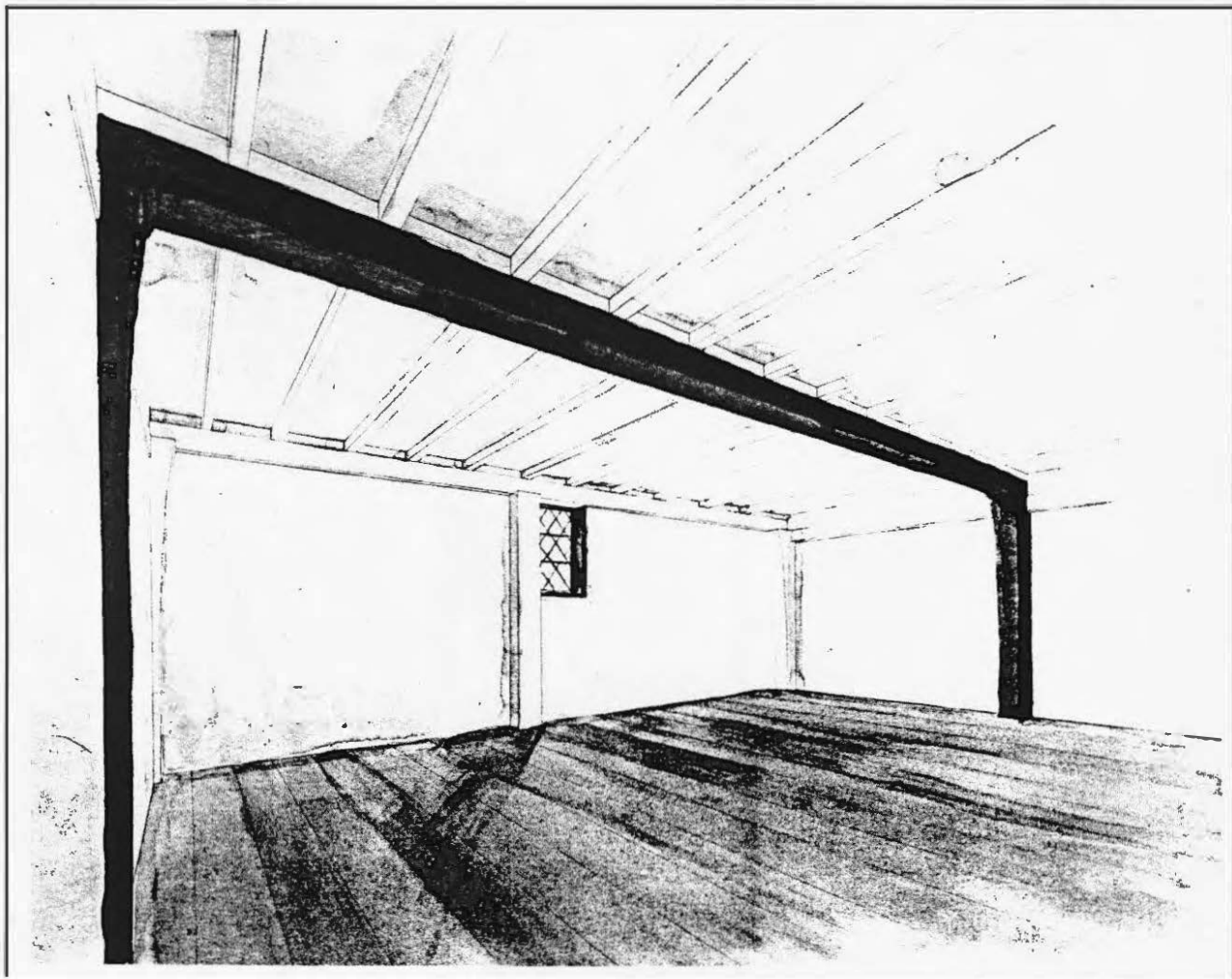


Figure 10. Gedney House, Hall chamber with late 17th century color scheme drawn in.

In both stories the underlying ephemeral paint evidence was preserved by the introduction, apparently before the middle of the 18th century, of lath and plaster ceilings, beam casings, and panelled walls. The last (and most extensive) structural changes followed about 1800, judging from the character of the work, whereby a wholly new two-story leanto at the rear with separate chimney replaced whatever had preceded it. At this time also the framed overhang along the street was furred out and a basement kitchen introduced. The original chimney in the main house had been replaced, probably also about 1800, with a smaller stack, most of which was removed shortly before SPNEA acquired the house in 1967.

Source: Abbott Lowell Cummings, *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay 1625-1725* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1979).

**Illustration credits:**

**Cover:** Drawn by Lance Kasparian; **Figures 1-4:** Drawn by C. T. Mundy, modified by W. C. S. Remsen; **Figure 5:** Drawn by Bruce Blanchard; Courtesy SPNEA Conservation Center.

**Figure 6:** Courtesy SPNEA Archives.

**Figures 7,8,9 and 10:** Reproduced from Abbott Lowell Cummings, *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay 1625-1725*, pages 34, 53, 195 respectively.