

HOW OLD IS MY HOUSE

It is a question often asked by the possessor of an older house. This is a small attempt to help find the answer to that question. It is intended for purely local application, though it refers to types of houses that were built over a wide area of New England and elsewhere.

In the beginning Cummington and Plainfield were planned and fairly well settled before the commencement of the Revolution. A few people. Perhaps half a dozen individuals, dared to wilderness before the planning stage, which was late 1762, to be exact.

Unlike many hill towns, this settlement was planned and fairly well settled with committees for the layout of the town and roads and other like matters, therefore those who really intended to live here and bought the land and came in. There were 30 "proprietors" among whom all the land was apportioned, and from whom it was bought by individual settlers. The first settlers were given seven years to meet the full conditions of settlement. They usually built small houses. It was mostly after that time that the larger houses were built, by either the first settler, or those to whom it was sold.

The site of the first house built has been claimed with some right by all three sister townships, Cummington, Plainfield and Hawley. By the latter because it was included in the town as it was settled; by the first because it was included in the land it supposed it owned; and the second because it stood on land that was annexed and is now within the present boundaries of Plainfield.

Of the early houses that remain to this day, the terms of settlement set their dimensions. They must be 18 feet by 24 feet, and be 7 feet from floor to eaves. They had a fireplace and chimney either on one side or in the middle, thus providing two fireplaces, one in each room of a two-room house. These houses had a loft or attic, which was used for the storage and for sleeping by the older children of the family. Few if any of these houses still remain. Those that do are probably not now dwelling houses, but some other building of a farm homestead such as a shed. An easy way to identify them is by their measurements - as above. The oldest houses had no brick in their fireplace, but the house with an entire stone chimney - unless it is modern - is very rare. These also, necessarily made by the individual's own hands, were made of logs, squared and notched at the ends, with the broadaxe. So that they would fit closely together. They were the log cabin type, though the more careful construction. There were substantial if crude houses and lingered long.

Anyone wishing to have a better idea of these homes may see the house in the courtyard behind Wiggins Tavern and the Hotel Northampton in the latter city, or the '1753 house' standing on the Williamstown common. The latter are what is called a "pole house" and is of a somewhat different construction, but perhaps more easily built. As its description says, such a house could be built with three tools - an axe, and auger and a froe - and no nails! Of this type of house there are in town no visitable remains. Those that were abandoned and finally fell, left nothing to show where they stood except two long parallel humps on the ground to show there the original foundations logs were laid. The stone



Old House



Old House - 1753

on the fireplace were usually employed elsewhere, perhaps to build the fireplace if a more ambitious dwelling. The ruins of such early fireplaces naturally show no remains of any brick for they were built before bricks were made in this locality. Some years ago indication of such a house was reported found on West Hill in Plainfield. A few flat stones and some lines of walls also indicate the site of the first know house in Plainfield. While it is not yet known when the house was built, its presence is verified in 1769 by undeniable authority, namely Ira Allen, later Governor of Vermont, and the brother of the famous Ethan, in the second volume of his autobiography, beginning on page one! A small-house-turned ell can be easily identified by its central chimney, and its central door and evenly spaces windows on the one side and by the two closely spaced middle windows on the other. The roof also generally comes down to the top of the windows and door. Sometimes a large chimney foundation can be found below the floor. Using the little house as an ell seems to be a very satisfactory plan, because there are several houses in this area that have such a plan.

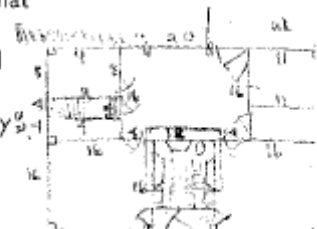
The larger homes were built after the Revolution, when things were more settled politically, and the men were home from the War, and felt the need for expansion, or to build houses for married children. Many houses built during these years are still standing in both towns. There are a score, or two dozen of them in Plainfield. There are a goodly number also in Cummington though most of them are outlying, for the Village was not extensively settled until later. Some of these houses were of the shape called "salt box," though this rightly indicates a house that's rear roof is longer and more slanting, coming closer to the ground, than the front roof. Most of the old houses in the two towns are not built that way.

If access can be had to C N Dyer's "History of Plainfield" an excellent description, with measurements, of this type of house can be found on pages 113 and 114. As Mr. Dyers, at about the time he wrote the history, had the settling of the Spearman estate in Plainfield, it is believed that these were the measurements of that house, which was the one built in 1792 by Rev. Moses Hallock and occupied by his as parsonage and school. It burned on August 10, 1916 and the present Plainfield school (Town Office) and Library stands approximately on the same site. The house was 32' by 40'.

One of the problems of the settlers was to provide a place for winter storage of food, what which in other places was called a "root cellar." In snow country, for convenience of entry, there were places under the floor of one of the main rooms in the house. They had to be sizable to hold enough food for a growing family. They were excavated first, of course, and wall with stone, which provided the foundations for one end wall of the house, and about a third of the length of the front and back walls. The fourth wall of the cellar was made by the chimney foundation plus a few more feet of wall. The cellar was just deep enough to let a person stand upright without hitting his head on the beams that supported the floor above. These cellars were usually, though not always, floored with flat stone. As this area has many ledges, these could be supplied without much difficulty. Hearthstones and door stones also came from local ledges, The rest of the house foundations were lines of stones, usually partially



1790 House



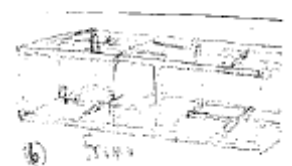
embedded in the ground, to support the remainder of the house frame, and also that of the shed or ell.

A good indication of a house's age is in the cellar. As it has been said, the oldest ones were small and rectangular, equaling about a third of the floor size of the house. The latter ones, from 1800, were often L shaped. Still later they were the shape of a square C, and then they were fully excavated, except in the case of a home that had two main fireplace foundations and two main chimneys. This also seems to have coincided with the producing of an orchard on the property and the addition of an outside cellar door, or bulkhead, for the admission of cider barrels.

Concerning the framing - in the cellar beside the beams supporting the outside walls of the house, there are two large ones in the middle parallel to each other, one either side of the chimney foundations, and supported by it. From each of these there is one beam connecting with the end beams of the house, these serve as the foundations of the walls of the house above. Then smaller beams were inserted between these main beams and the front and back beams of the house. The floor boards were long and wide and could be easily laid across on top of them. The secondary beams in an old cellar often show beech bark.

The main part of an old house can be identified from the outside by a central door with long windows (five or six panes) at each side. The front of the house will have two windows on each side of the door for each front room, though small houses would have one only. If they have the original frames they will be 12 over 12 windows, meaning four panes across and three down in each sash. If they are old, six panes over six, if they are "modernized," four over four. One gable end will show one window in the front half and two in the back half, and the other will have a narrow door, usually with five or six lights of glass in the frame over it, in place of the middle window. In the rear there will be two windows close together in the middle of the house. These are also usually smaller than the front ones. In most cases there will be an ell part or shed built out at right angles from the house between these windows and the end wall, and usually flush with it. This is often the older "little house." Whether this ell connects at its outer end with another shed or with the barn depends on location and other conditions.

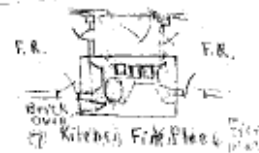
Inside an old house, in the corners of the rooms, except next to the fireplace, will be seen, exposed corners posts. These will also appear beside the two kitchen windows opposite the fireplace. These are the frames of the house, corresponding with the framing in the cellar. Houses of the type were built from the later Revolutionary period until about 1825 or 30, the first houses being smaller than the later ones. Another means of identifying these is by the roof line. The first ones (1780) were low-roofed, the eaves being at the top of the fronts windows and door, like a man's cap pulled down to his eyebrows. The larger, more heavily built houses had long windows at each side of the front door to light the entry. Later (1800) as styles changed the roofs were higher, the studding being taller, and there was wall space between the tops of the windows and the eaves, outside and the ceiling inside. The houses also tended to



be a bit smaller in the plan, but the ceiling became higher. The front doors then had lights of glass in a window over the top instead of at the sides, and the frame over both was higher than that over the windows. The distance between the top of the door and the eaves gradually deepened. This feature is a good indication of the age of a house. Up to about 1800 the roof line was at the top of the windows, by 1810 it might be up a foot or so, by 1820 it was up from 1 to 2 or 3 feet. Around 1825 or 30 it was high enough to admit a row of small windows whose sills were even with the floor of the second story and whose tops came to the framing beam at the eaves. These windows were usually two panes deep - and that means the small, old-fashioned panes, with the addition of these windows the small ones at the gable ends, each side and above the chamber windows were no longer needed, and disappear from the scene.

In an old house that has been little changed there will be three fireplaces, (probably boarded up and papered over with wall papers) in the ground floor rooms. These will also probably have stove pipe holes in the chimney above them the procedure was to board up the fireplaces and install a stove for heating in its stead in later years. If the house has been modernized by the removal of the great chimney, and all its accompaniments of hearthstones and cupboards, there will be a rectangular place in the floor filled with narrower, smoother boards. This will be found on both front rooms and in the kitchen that in the kitchen being larger. Frequently the front entry was made into a hall that led into the kitchen and the stairs were removed from the end of the house and put in the hall, occupying some of the space that was obtained by the removal of the big chimney. With this plan there were usually two small chimneys built close to either inner corner of the front rooms and the foundation of the great chimney. Into one of them the kitchen stove pipe also led. Sometimes to save space, these chimneys did not go below the second floor—Trouble. From the outside this change can be easily recognized from the two regular sized chimneys close together at the peak of the roof - or perhaps there is only one. It is this change, of course, taking out the main prop and support of the house, that tends to weaken it, and later causes the roof line to sink somewhat toward the middle. In the area the house roofs were made large and smooth, there were no dormers on any of the early houses, these were some later innovations,

Inside of these houses, large and small, are principally as Mr. Dyer describes them. In an old house the best places to look for signs of age are in the attic and cellar, noting the size and condition of the chimney - attics and cellars are the least changed area of a house. The old chimneys were usually over three feet square at the roof, and many had swelling sides at the floor level there the flues of various fireplaces in the house led into it. These chimneys were usually made of local brick. The bricks were of a lighter color than modern brick, more porous, and often showed small stones in them and other imperfections. Their shapes were also a trifle longer and thinner than modern brick, but as chimneys have stood some 150 to 175-year, one need not worry about them particularly. The chimney in one of the oldest "untouched" houses in Plainfield is a marvel of construction, and contains literally hundreds of bricks. Concerning the bricks used in the old chimneys, and later in some foundations walls for the top that showed above the ground, they were of local manufacture. Probably the first



place of manufacture was on Meadowbrook in Plainfield. The brick yard lay some distance upstream from where Pleasant Street crossed it. As Plainfield and Cummington formed a single town until 1785, the bricks were made in the beginning in what was then Cummington. Bricks were made here at three or four separate times, but probably not after 1880. Whether they were made at any other places in Cummington is a matter of research. In this connection information can be obtained both ways. The time of opening the brick yard would indicate the time a brick house was built. Also, the known age of a brick house would indicate a time at which the yards were in operation. Two brick houses known to have stood in Plainfield have been destroyed. One stood near the brook east and north the Thatcher place (1 Pleasant Street). The other stood nearly on the site of William Carver's (2 S Central St), and its bricks now compose the foundations of the house.

The later change in the plan and construction of the house, and the location of the fireplaces, also made a change in the cellar. The L shaped cellar was used earlier under the single chimney-based houses. Later C shaped cellar was excavated, with usually a bulkhead and steps, as has been noted. This construction would indicate a more recent building than a cellar with none. Corner or supporting stones will be found for the frame sill, and also for the adjoining ell part or shed.

When the Franklin stoves came into use, it generally was planned for, it was no longer necessary to leave or make such heavy foundations for the chimney, and the cellar under the main house was then fully excavated, thus providing for more storage than of just "root." By then, with the advent of the kitchen stove, and the preservation of food by canning, which was beginning to come into vogue, the housewife needed more space to store the products of her skill, - and don't forget those cider barrels!

But this is a consideration of the older house, and in order to have some division or stepping stopping place, the halfway mark of the last century (1800's) seems a good boundary. Not that a house 120 years old is young - far from it! By that time there were more individualities in style, plan and construction, in use and in tastes. Also after a cellar was fully excavated, with no special foundations to tell where the chimney was, there may rightly tell its age, so that it is time to find that by means of written records.

Sometimes a cellar was made below the ell, but usually there was only a crawl space. This is also found under some of the older houses, for experience taught the householders that window openings were needed in the cellar wall for ventilating purposes. Therefore the houses were raised above the ground sufficiently for openings under the houses and for windows in the cellar to be constructed, - witness the Church and Town Hall in Plainfield.

The kitchen was a room with doors for walls. As one faced the fireplace, there would be at one side of it the door into the front room. Then in the side wall, turning clockwise, there would be the door to the side hall, then the door to the cellar stairs followed by the door to the pantry. In the back wall there would be the door to the shed or ell. In the other side wall there would be usually, two doors to two small bedrooms, and in the fireplace wall again, there would be a door, to the other front room. One can understand where there



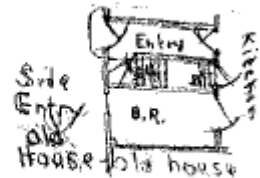
were but two kitchen windows, and there usually of smaller size than the front windows. Windows of bedrooms and pantry were also of smaller size, though not always.

The stairs of the old houses have been described by Mr. Dyer, but some think them narrow and steep beyond description. They needed to come through the attic floor at a place where the person mounting them would not hit his head on the roof beams, and yet leave place for a room in the gable and beside them. Therefore they were steep, with narrow treads, and instead of a landing at the turn, the stairs were fan-shaped, allowing for turn and rise at the same time in the manner of a circular stair. There were enclosed as well, helping to confine the heat below - or above therefore nothing very large or bulky could be carried up them. (That is why a loom was often erected in the attic for weaving and was never removed). The cellar stair went down under these with a landing against the wall and sometimes steps on either side.

In the attic there were later often two windows of regular size in the gable ends, rather close together, but often lighting two separate rooms side by side. This dividing of the gable bedchamber would not be done until a bedroom fireplace was a thing of the past. Most of the old houses had fireplaces in one or two attic chambers, according to whether they were large enough to take up the full space between the gable wall and the great chimney. Some houses, of course, had no fireplaces above the attic.

The smaller house of this type, which were often town houses as opposed to the farm houses, had only an open attic above the stairs and consequently needed only one window at either gable end to light. Both these houses had fireplaces and the larger ones which Mr. Dyer describes, and which had three small (4 paned) square windows in either gable and to light the attic outside and over the chambers, are easily identifiable in their original condition. From the outside they are known by these afore said small windows and by the fact that the roof end is flush with the end wall of the house, and is finished by narrow moldings. The histories of barns do not come within this consideration, but a roof flush with the gable ends indicated the same type of construction was employed in earlier houses. This type of construction was continued in the barns for a longer time than in the house. Also, if the barn on the property is so constructed and the house is not, it indicated much change in the house, or a second building entirely.

This construction indication means that the roof was made in a special way. In the attic, the roof, if it has not been covered by succeeding householders, show a framing to correspond with that of the house. That is, there will be beams along the floor of the attic at eaves, others half way from there to the peak of the roof, and a central one at the peak. Into these, about six feet apart, are joined smaller beams, perpendicular to the others, to frame the roof and to hold it together. These, in turn, are separated by small 6 foot beams. The long beams are usually square hewn but the short ones are half round and may still have bark on them. In that case it is the smooth gray beech bark, or scaly brown hemlock bark. Of course, also the bark may have fallen off, showing, under the hemlock bark, the small trail and holes of worms. Householder, so not be alarmed, that is normal, - only when there is evidence of powdering do



you need to worry. The actual roof boards, with this construction, will lie up and down, usually a single board from peak to eaves, though there are sometimes two, joined at the middle beam. More than one old house owes its present continuance to this construction. It is known that one in Plainfield was saved by a strong man with presence of mind and part of a spinning wheel, who pried up the end boards, when the roof caught fire, and prevented the wall catching. Thank you Harry.

The houses of the bona fide settlers were all framed dwellings, for that was the stipulation, that is why, in the early records, there is so much said concerning the location of saw mills the settlers needed them to saw the planks and boards with which to build their houses. The larger timbers were of course hand hewn from trees that grew on the land, in Plainfield it is known that a large beech forest covered most of the eastern plateaus, - again courtesy of Ira Allen. Several small portions of the forest still remains four are still easily visible. That is why beech timbers mean age, here.

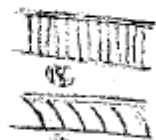
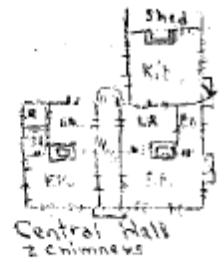
The slant or "pitch" of a roof may make it possible to identify the work of a certain man by. Frequently a carpenter had his own idea of the best roof pitch and built all his houses accordingly. An angle at the peak of the roof is the one to consider. An angle of about 90 degrees was used for a long time. Later it was made less sharper and that was carried in some cases to an extreme degree in later years, witness the "lightening Splitter" in Buckland. If a roof has too slight a pitch would not easily shed snow in winter, and with all the shoveling a man usually has to do, he would be foolish to increase it by making his roof so flat that he would have to shovel that off too.

Sometimes, in an effort to "modernize" it, a house was raised bodily from its foundations and a completely new lower story was built in. This was done in two neighboring houses in Plainfield, one still shows in the roof shape of the square hole where the great chimney originally passed; the whole now filled with modern bearding and the roof covered with a modern surface, but the single gable window in each remains, and through a small room has been built around one, the great attic is open yet.

By the 1830's the houses, which had any pretensions to modern style and the following of European trends, were of two full stories with a central hall and rooms with fireplaces on either side thereof, and the kitchen placed in an ell, as people felt that it should be. If one could choose and in most places' one could, the house ideally faced south with the ell kitchen on the north side. This then had its own fireplace and chimney, also on the north, with the shed for wood, and probably a connection to the barn, beyond it, and the east and west ventilation for more coolness in summer.

Boards and timbers in the old house, which were sawn and not hewn, show straight lines across them, made by the teeth of the great up-and-down saws of the early mills. Timbers that were sawn by man power, in a saw pit, are probably scarce in this area. The marks of the saw would most likely be at a slight angle across the timber, but straight and not in a curve, and the distance between them would be apt to be uneven. Anyone who discovers such a timber in his house would surely find a prize.

Most saw mills in this area had converted from straight to circular saws by



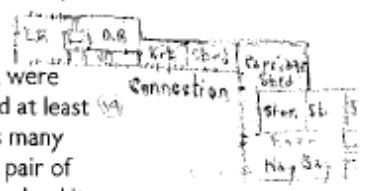
Saw marks

about 1875 or 1880s, and of course a circular saw leaves curved marks on a timber that it cuts there are fairly easy to identify, and can thus divide the "sheep from the goats" when one seeks to tell an old timber from a modern one in a house that has had a few changes made in its interior. Many of the early houses were wainscoted with some very nice paneling. Later wainscoting was done with sheathing material or wide boards that were beaded on one edge, and used lengthwise, as in the Plainfield Church which was built in 1846.

When repairs or alterations are made inside a house, it is a quick indication of its age to note the type of lath uncovered in the process. A modern lath is cut in individual sticks, and nailed to the studding individually. Old time laths were made of this board, nailed along one side of the studding or plank wall split irregularly with a hatchet, spread open and nailed to hold it so, the process continued through the board's width, then another nailed below it and the process continued. The irregular slashing held the plaster tightly. This method was used in this area until about 1850. The ash tree was frequently used because of its grain, the result was called "ash split work."



Plaster, also, can indicate the age of a house. That used early reported to have goat hair in it. It hardened to almost a rocklike consistency, and is slightly grey in coloring, and was spread a little thinner than the modern type. Later plaster was more crumbly and did not hold as well, it also was a whiter tone, a professional plasterer would be able to give a more educated opinion concerning it. Another thing that may appear in an old house, which had pretensions to style in later years, is stenciling. In Plainfield, three old houses are known to have it to recent years. One still retains some of it in a closet, at least another may still have it under wall paper, the third was destroyed about 1950, though some pattern was traced and the colors noted. In this respect, Cummington is more fortunate. There are houses with more original stenciling yet on their wall. The Kingman Tavern repaired and redecorated this year, (1970), has wonderful stenciling, copied from old houses, to show what this work was like and what it did for the interior of a house. Two of the houses in Plainfield were apparently stenciled about 1840 or earlier, and the other probably at a later date as the colors and style were quite different.



Those who came here as settlers, both the earlier and the later ones, were farmers first and artisans afterward. Even the minister was a farmer, and at least grew food for his family and the farm animals. He may not have kept as many cows as his neighbor, but he had enough to provide for his family, and a pair of steers for the farm work. Of course these needed a barn and in New England it was a toss-up between having the convenience of a barn attached to the house by means of a connecting shed, of having the barn perhaps across the road where one had to shovel through snow in the winter to reach it, but where, in case of fire, the house or the barn might be saved. As we learn that the first recorded fire in Plainfield lost the owner all that he had, it would appear that the choice was often for the connection it saved a great deal of time and effort, and one took his chance on fire anyway.

One of the surest ways to date an old house is to find out more about it by simple research. This can best be done by going to the Registry of Deed or of Probate, for Hampshire County in Northampton and trace back the ownership

of a house until the original owner, or builder, can be found. To use the Probate records, something of the history of the families known to have owned the house, must be known to the researcher. In these two towns we are fortunate to have the original map. There are also several photostatic copies made of the lay out of the original lots. The name of the owners of each tract of land is a matter of record, so that with names of the owners and the lots numbers to go by, one can with care and persistence, trace from either and toward the middle to find the year and builder of one's house. Of course this is true for any house whatever the age. One who delves in this type of research will find it interesting, though sometimes frustrating, to pursue. The early deeds also list the occupation of seller and buyer - whatever yeoman (farmer) or cordwainer (shoemaker) etc. In this way it has been learned who were the early carpenter and builders, the ones responsible for the planning and framing of the early homes.

In considering the signs of a home's age, one of the best and surest has been ignored. Many a builder or owner, proud of his handiwork or the achievement at last of cherished dream, has put initials or date where they can be seen, or at least discovered with a little searching. A roof beam, or board, where the light would fall upon it is a favorite place for an inscription. Sometimes these were made with the carpenter's tools, and are therefore somewhat difficult of interpretation. Frequently there will be a dated brick in the fireplace or chimney where it is visible. Once in a while a name or initials were written on the outside planks or beams of the attic chamber with white chalk or white paint. This might indicate only the date that the chamber was constructed, but if that was a later time, the house could be construed to be older by a few years.

Sometimes the date of the house construction was passed down in the family, one in Plainfield was built "the year Uncle Lishy was born." As Elisha's birth was duly entered in the Town records that was not a difficult puzzle. In this case indicated the construction of a larger, more modern house, as the family was known to have been living on the property several years previously.

There are many things that can indicate the age of an old house, there are other means that have not been noted here and the greatest pleasure is in making your own discovery.

P. C. Allen, Plainfield, Mass. 1970



