

CELLAR HOLES

By Priscilla Allen

Cellar holes are an acquirement of older small towns. They are the visible results of the burning or falling in of an old house. They remain usually because there are no family members of the house holder left in town to have them filled or to rebuild on the foundations left exposed.

Of course, there are cellars under every permanent house, no matter when they were built. But digging cellars by hand with a shovel is a hard and lengthy job. Add to that finding and placing suitable stones to make a cellar wall and one does not make a cellar any larger than is necessary.

The first houses had no other means of heating than by fire places. In Plainfield and Cummington the first houses (except log ones) had to be 18 x 24 feet and the chimney had at least 2 and probably 3 fireplaces in them. This mean that there must be a large chimney base, solid earth with a good flat stones upon it. Many houses had a long rectangular cellar under one side of the house. The chimney base was made at one corner of the cellar, extending toward the center of the cellar. The rest of the house foundations went from the non-cellar side of the chimney base to mark a similar sized spot, coming back around the planned perimeter of the house to the back wall of the "cellar" which marked 1/3 of the size of the house, making the cellar 8' wide & 18' long. This was the shape and size of the cellars of the first frame houses and a cellar hole that size is an almost certain indication that the house that stood over it was built by 1800.

But as time went on, and life changed and became less of a struggle, more room was needed for preserving food, and other items. More cellar was dug and walled behind the chimney making an L-shaped cellar. But if the house-owner had much land (many outlying homesteads were of 100 acres or more), and earlier planted apple orchards matured, cider was then a locally prepared drink and the was stored in barrels, which meant a considerably larger cellar storage must be provided. Therefore, the cellar was made C-shaped by digging out and walling a continuation under the opposite side of the house. Also a bulkhead entrance may have been made in the new wall so that the cider barrels could more easily be rolled in over planks covering the necessary bulkhead steps.

As time went on more comforts and aids for the homemaker were invented and those who could, installed stoves, both the kitchen and parlor variety. That made it possible to change the arrangements of the house rooms but most people did not consider it necessary to remove the large chimney base, since it did help support the house.

With this lack of need of a large chimney base it gave the later houses the chance for a cellar hole that was open and the size and shape of the house that was built over it. So that an entirely rectangular cellar hole meant one of two things; either that the house was built after the use of stoves, or that someone at that time desired to get the extra room by removing the old original chimney base. A way to check is to look at changes in the stonework of the cellar wall to find any signs of demarcation. ,

Note. While you cannot usually ask a present householder if, you can see his cellar, you can look at his root and see if it still boast a great square central chimney.

Priscilla C Allen Date unknown. copied by Nancy Allen 2006

P.S. When going down old roads Mother and Arvilla would look lor orange lilies and old maple trees as well as stone walls and old bar ways .This would frequently indicate the presence of old cellar holes, and thus of buildings that once stood there. Nancy