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NOTES ON THE JOHN BERRY HOUSE FIRST CROWN POINT ROAD STRAFFORD, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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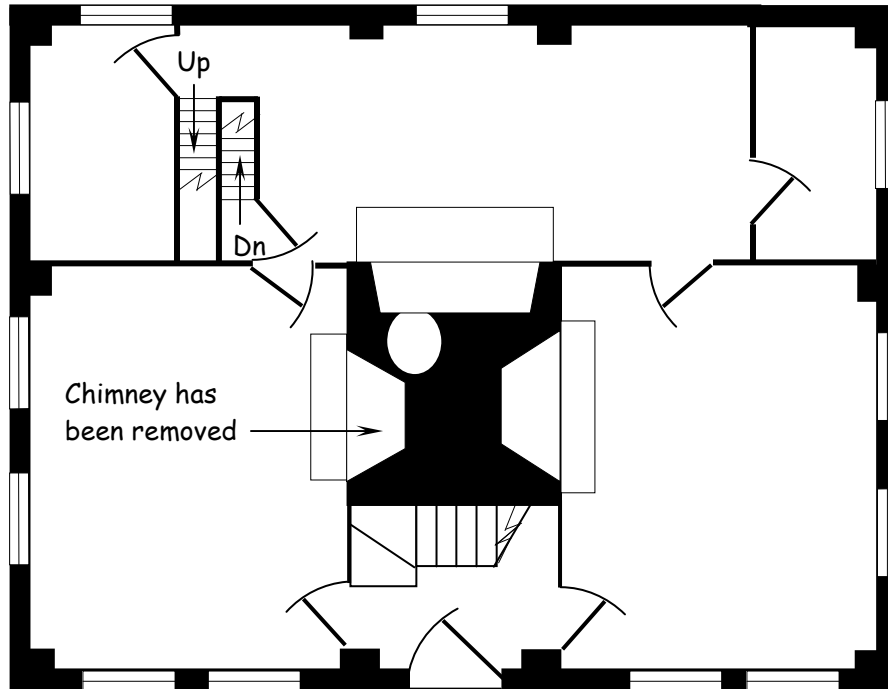
This house was inspected on the evening of April 3, 2000, in preparation for a joint meeting of the Strafford and Barrington Historical Societies on the subject of dating old houses. Present at the inspection were Kenneth Berry, who lived in the house during the early-to-mid 1940s, and current owners Arvid and Elizabeth Carlson, whose family bought the property from Alberton Berry in 1954. The purpose of the inspection was to ascertain the date of construction of the house as closely as possible.

Summary: The John Berry House is a center-chimney, two story, two-room-deep dwelling. The house has had its original chimney removed and replaced by stove and furnace chimneys, but retains much of its original and later interior woodwork. The house is an example of a type of large dwelling that began to be common during the early 1700s near the seacoast. Despite its traditional plan and appearance, the Berry House appears to date from 1830 or later. It is remarkable as a conservative embodiment of a vernacular eighteenth-century house plan as late as the early Greek revival period.

Description: The John Berry House stands on First Crown Point road at the southwest corner of its intersection with Cross Road, which leads to Second Crown Point Road. The house is next to the Crown Point Fire Station and is across the road from the site of the Stephen Young House, which was destroyed in an accidental blast on December 4, 1884 and gave the name of "Dynamite Corner" to this intersection.

The Berry House stands with its northeastern gable end facing First Crown Point Road and its façade facing southeast. The house retains the floor plan of the type of two-room-deep center-chimney dwelling that began to be popular for large New Hampshire farmhouses during the early 1700s. The general plan of the house is typical of the type, with each floor having a large room on each side of the former central chimney, and with three rooms arranged across the rear of the house behind the plane of the rear face of the

former chimney. A winding staircase ascends from the front entry to the second floor in front of the former chimney, and a second staircase ascends from cellar to attic at the rear of the house. Neither staircase dates from the period of construction of the house.



Two-Room-Deep House

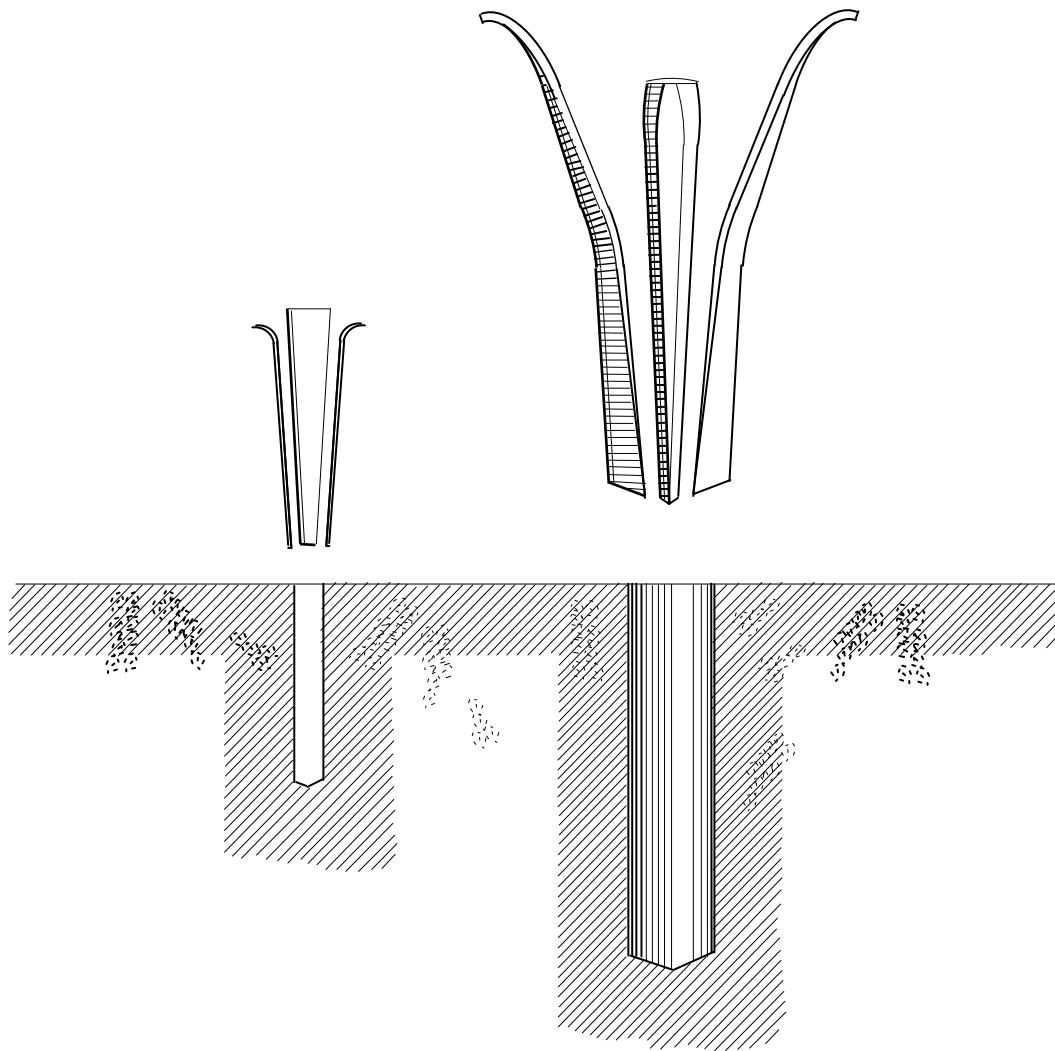
The house stands over a fully-excavated cellar. The cellar is built with split granite walls, laid with a plumb inner face. Many of the foundation stones display splitting marks, and virtually all of these marks reveal the use of plug drills and plugs and feathers, a granite splitting technique that became widespread around 1830. At grade, the house is underpinned with very large slabs of split granite, some of them eight or ten feet in length. Like the random rubble of the lower foundation walls, the underpinning stones were all split with plugs and feathers.

The southwestern corner of the foundation seems to reveal the former presence of a wide opening in the foundation wall. This has been partly closed with large granite slabs, similar to the underpinning stones of the house, leaving a relatively small bulkhead door near the corner of the side wall.

The former central chimney of the house was supported on a very large brick foundation, which remains intact below the first floor. This foundation is composed of a double brick vault, with its arches springing from three solid brick piers that run parallel to the ridgeline of the house. The vaults are expertly built, and are pierced with a series of small openings at their springlines to accommodate putlogs for wooden shelving within the two vaulted chambers.

The three piers stand on granite footings whose tops are visible above the grade of the cellar floor. Like all other split granite that is visible in the cellar, these footings were split with plugs and feathers.

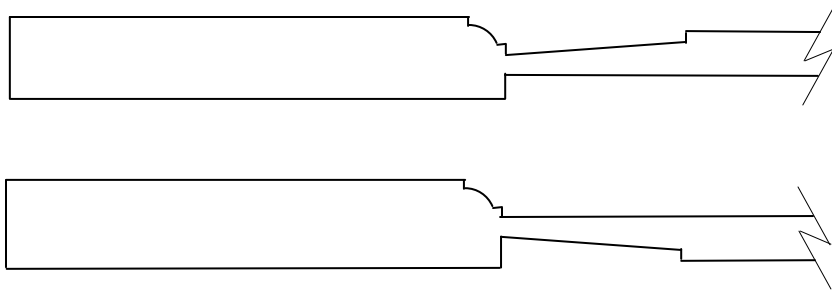
This pervasive splitting technology indicates that the house could not date much before 1830, and probably dates somewhat after 1830. Although Strafford had commercial granite quarries during the nineteenth century, it is unlikely that these quarries adopted the most advanced technology immediately after its introduction. Even the most advanced quarries were still splitting granite with flat wedges in slots during the 1820s, and evidence of the use of plug drills and plugs and feathers is rare until about 1830. Even then, both the older and newer splitting methods are often seen side-by-side.



Flat wedge splitting technique
1780s to circa 1830

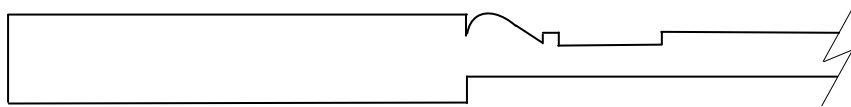
Plug and feather splitting technique
circa 1830 to the present

Woodwork seen throughout the upper floors of the house seems to confirm a construction date after 1830. Some of the doors in the house are traditional federal-style six-panel doors, with these profiles:

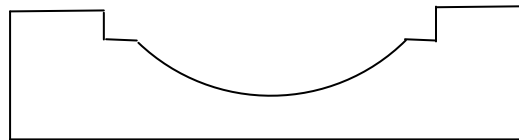


While doors of these styles generally went out of use after about 1830, their persistence into the decade of the 1830s would not be unexpected in a conservative, rural locale.

The more stylish rooms in the house, however, have six-panel doors that retain the federal-style panel arrangement but have a distinctly Greek revival profiles, as follows:

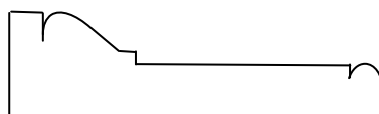


Some of the rooms that have doors of this pattern also have wide, symmetrical door and window casings with square corner blocks, again diagnostic of the Greek revival style. This casing profile appears to derive from Asher Benjamin's *The Practical House Carpenter* (Boston: 1830), a book that was very influential in introducing the Greek revival style throughout New England.



In a rural context, these features suggest a date somewhat later than 1830. Together with doors of the older, federal-style pattern, these modern casings suggests that the house was built in a conservative mode but was partly finished by a joiner, perhaps from nearby Rochester, who was conversant with the latest style.

Other door and window casings in the house have a more conservative profile, but one that still expresses the early Greek revival style:



The original cast iron oven door from the former central chimney was re-used as a clean-out door for the single-flue chimney that serves the furnace. This stack rests on the northeastern edge of the original vaulted chimney base, and the clean-out is accessible in a large first-floor closet in the void that was created by the removal of the central chimney. The oven door is decorated with several half fans that were commonly used in cast iron oven doors during the 1830s; the door compares, for example, with two that remain in the Bailey Parker House (c. 1830) in Pembroke, New Hampshire. Again, this remnant of the central chimney suggests that the Berry House was constructed in the 1830s.

Other potential diagnostic features are inaccessible. The roof framing, for example, is covered with drywall that was installed when the attic of the house was converted to finished rooms. It would be interesting to learn whether the house retains the traditional, conservative rafter-and-purlin roof frame, or if its builders adopted the incoming roof frame of common rafters.

Most of the attic floor joists have been exposed by the removal of ceiling lath and plaster on the second story of the house. These are hewn to a rectangular cross-section, and are not diagnostic of any particular date.

All of these features combine to suggest that the John Berry House was built during the 1830s, but that in its general plan it looked back to the familiar central-chimney dwelling of the 1700s. It appears that Strafford still retained carpenters who were adept at framing houses in a familiar, vernacular pattern, and that many Strafford residents favored dwellings that looked backward to a proven and comfortable design. The joiners who finished some of these houses, on the other hand, were apparently familiar with the incoming Greek revival style and employed Grecian details in houses that outwardly betrayed no acknowledgment of the Greek revival, or even of the federal style of the earlier 1800s. This insight is important in assigning dates to houses of the area on the basis of form and style.

The same conservatism may be exemplified in the Caverno House, on Route 202A, near Bow Lake Village and Spruce Ponds. This is a center-chimney dwelling with a hipped roof and a distinct appearance of dating from the federal era, between about 1800 and 1830. Roger Leighton joined in our inspection of the Caverno House. Our examination of the house was brief, and was restricted to the wing (which may be an earlier Cape Cod house dating from the 1700s) and to the cellar. The single room in the main house that was visible to us had been remodeled so thoroughly that we could see no datable features.

Despite the limits of our inspection, we noted that the underpinning of the house was split with the same post-1830 plug and feather technology described above in the Berry House. While this could indicate that the Caverno House had been underpinned with split stone after its construction, it is equally possible, given Strafford's architectural conservatism, that the Caverno House actually dates from after 1830. Like the John Berry House, the Caverno House may represent the retention of an older architectural style—in this case, one generally prevalent between 1800 and 1830—into the era after

1830. A more thorough inspection of the Caverno House could clarify its date of construction.

While the John Berry House retains many of its original interior features, the house underwent an evident remodeling sometime around 1900. This remodeling included replacement of the original front balustrade with turned newel and angle posts of a machine-made design. The same period saw the replacement of all window sashes in the house. The current owners have understood that the remodelings resulted from a fire, but they could have been dictated simply by fashion or by changing family needs. It is possible that the central chimney was removed during the same remodeling.

The John Berry House is significant as a datable example of an eighteenth-century house type that was built at least thirty years after that type began to disappear from much of the New Hampshire landscape. By the time the Berry House was constructed, the Strafford region had seen the advent and decline of the federal style, which is well exemplified in the nearby Caverly House on the Province Road, near Bow Lake Village, and by the Caverno House, described briefly above. The region had also seen the arrival of the Greek revival style, which is well represented by the Crown Point Free Will Baptist meeting house of 1835. This church building and the John Berry House may actually date from the same period, despite the stylish appearance of the meeting house and the conservative appearance of the dwelling.

It is always important to document the advent of a new style or fashion. Pioneering examples are benchmarks by which we may date the arrival of new ideas. Less attention is traditionally given to documenting the retention of older fashions. The Berry House is a remarkable example of architectural conservatism: a building that returned to eighteenth-century forms and ideas despite the arrival and pervasiveness of the federal style, and even in the face of the arrival of the still newer Greek revival style. The Berry House is a physical reflection of the society in which it was built—a society that was aware of the newest fashion, yet was clearly comfortable, at the private level, in continuing to nurture architectural forms that had proven their usefulness to past generations.