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MEMORANDUM OF AN INSPECTION ON THE JOHN ELWYN HOUSE ELWYN ROAD, PORTSMOUTH, N.H.

James L. Garvin inspected this house briefly on May 31, 1996. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the integrity of the building for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

The dwelling appears to date from about 1835. Despite the fact that the building has the size and proportions of an eighteenth-century story-and-a-half house, internal evidence tends to corroborate the statement of Charles W. Brewster, published in 1859, that the house was constructed by John Elwyn in the nineteenth century. While this statement appears in the 1859 edition of the *Rambles About Portsmouth* (First Series), the account may originally have appeared in an earlier newspaper column.

Brewster wrote:

The old house of the Langdons, in which lived Capt. Tobias Langdon, and in which his seven sons and two daughters were born, stood where the little farm house now stands: burnt about 1741. Gov. John Langdon [born 1739], then a babe, was, it is said, thrown out of a window upon a snow bank. The next house [on the site] was a good two-story dwelling, nothing at all antique, and in it lived and died his [Governor Langdon's] father and mother, John and Mary Langdon. Thomas Elwyn lived there a good deal, and even in the winters. He built a new summer kind of house at the western end of the old one. John Elwyn [the occupant in Brewster's period] pulled down the old portion, and let Chandler E. Potter haul to town the newer part, which now

stands on State Street and is occupied by Dr. E. B. Goodall. Mr. Elwyn then built the present little farm house on the old place, but with a larger and better cellar.

Writing his *Portsmouth . . . Historic and Picturesque* in 1902, Caleb Stevens Gurney supplied more specific dates than had Brewster:

The first house built on this farm was erected about 1650 by Henry Sherburne . . . and Tobias Langdon, who married a daughter of Mr. Sherburne, afterward came here to live. In about 1740 this house was destroyed by fire, and another one was then built on its site by John Langdon, father of the Governor John. This house remained until about 1840, when it was taken down and a large annex, used by the Langdons for parties and as entertainment rooms, was at that time moved to town and now forms the basis for one of the near-by houses westerly from the Baptist Vestry on State Street, but which one we are not able to determine. The present farmhouse, and the third to be erected on the same site, was built at the time the old one was taken down and the annex removed. The present owner of the farm [the Rev. Alfred Langdon Elwyn of Philadelphia] is a great-grandson of Governor Langdon, his grandmother having been the Governor's only child.

Although the house was considerably altered and embellished by John Elwyn Stone (1922-74), the last of the Elwyn line to occupy the property, an inspection tends to corroborate the date of "about 1840" given by Gurney, although the dwelling was decidedly old-fashioned in style and technology for that period.

The house has low eaves and a roof pitch characteristic of an eighteenth-century story-and-a-half dwelling. It was constructed with a central chimney for fireplaces in an age when fully-developed Greek Revival style dwellings with stove chimneys were becoming commonplace. The building's adherence to these older traditions may reflect the fact that John Elwyn was both an eccentric and an antiquarian who perhaps turned deliberately away from the modern conveniences his age.

The building stands over a full basement on a foundation of split and mortared stone, recalling Brewster's praise of the dwelling's "larger and better cellar" than its predecessor had had. This cellar extends beneath a wing that projects eastward from the main house.

The first floor is framed with a series of rounded tree boles or sleepers, hewn flat on their tops in the traditional manner.

Where exposed through “restoration” by John Elwyn Stone, the carcass of the house is also seen to be constructed of hewn members.

The roof structure is visible on the eastern end of the house where a second-story ceiling has been removed to create a bedchamber with a lofty ceiling that extends to the ridge. The roof frame is composed of common rafters, hewn to a square cross-section and placed some two feet on centers. Common rafter roofs of this type, sometimes of sawn rather than hewn members, were uncommon in eastern New Hampshire until the 1830s. The rafters in this roof are braced at about their mid-height by collar ties, which have been removed in the eastern half of the house in order to create an open space.

The central chimney is supported in the cellar on two piers of split and mortared stone. The brick stack rises from a platform of heavy timbers in a manner reminiscent of construction in the Portsmouth area during the early eighteenth century. These heavy timbers appear to be remnants of bridging joists (summer beams) salvaged from an older house; where exposed to view, their upper edges reveal a few notches for floor joists.

The chimney is characteristic of federal-period chimney stacks, having a kitchen fireplace on its rear (north) face, and fireplaces on each side to warm the two front rooms of the house. Although all fireplaces reveal evidence of rebuilding and some alteration, the kitchen fireplace has a crane, and an oven at its left side, and appears to represent the cooking arrangements preferred by its builder.

Where unaltered, doors and other paneled work in the house have square-edged stiles and rails and a square shoulder (rather than a feather-edge) on the fields of the panels. This style of paneling is characteristic of the Greek Revival period, appearing about 1830 and continuing for several decades.

Several doors in the house retain Norfolk thumb latches, common from the 1830s, and the door to the southwestern front room, perhaps originally the parlor, appears to have a Carpenter latch (not inspected closely), a style of rim lock patented in 1830.

Integrity: The Elwyn House was greatly altered during “restoration” carried out during the 1960s by John Elwyn Stone. In general, ceiling plaster was removed to expose hewn framing members, woodwork was stripped of paint, new conveniences of every type were added throughout the house, and reproduction features, like a mantelpiece added to the fireplace in the southwestern parlor, were poorly designed and constructed, having little resemblance to historic work of any era. As mentioned, part of the second story was opened to the ridge by removal of collar ties from each set of rafters; here, a “loft” surrounded by a modern balustrade was installed around part of the upper zone of the room.

To summarize: the Elwyn House has lost integrity for its apparent construction date of circa 1835 and for every historical period thereafter.

The house is accompanied by two barns. One, nearest Elwyn Road, is now converted to a meeting place and has been completely reconfigured on the interior; it has lost integrity as a barn. The second, not inspected closely, has been adapted as a workshop at the basement level and as a vehicle storage area above. While this structure appears to retain greater integrity than the other barn, it no longer expresses an agricultural function.

A second dwelling on the property, the so-called Rosemary Cottage, was moved to the site about 1969 from its original location on Chapel Street in Portsmouth. The building would be ineligible for the National Register as a moved structure; in addition, the manner of its moving and re-erection appears to have deprived the building of any architectural integrity it may have possessed on its original site. Due to limitations of time, I did not inspect the Rosemary Cottage on May 31.

The farmstead itself is but a remnant of the historic Elwyn Farm of the nineteenth century, though it could approximate the size of the eighteenth-century Langdon Farm. The bequest of John Elwyn Stone conveyed to the State of New Hampshire a tract of land lying between Sagamore Creek on the north and Elwyn Road on the south. This tract encompasses about 180 acres, and the land includes the Langdon-Elwyn family cemetery, many early stone walls, and a fresh-water spring that once supplied neighbors along the creek (who came by boat to fill water containers), and now provides fresh water for horticultural uses on the property.

According to John Albee, writing in *New Castle, Historic and Picturesque* in 1884, the Elwyn Farm then contained 700 acres. The New Hampshire atlas of 1892 shows “A[lfred]. L[angdon]. Elwyn” not only in possession of the land and buildings between the creek and Elwyn Road, but also of land south of Elwyn Road and east of Lafayette Road. This other portion of the Elwyn Farm is today the site of a suburban housing development called Elwyn Park, constructed in stages beginning in the 1950s.

Pending deed research to trace the evolution of the Langdon and Elwyn land holdings, it appears that the land associated with the Elwyn house no longer retains integrity of boundaries for 1835 and later, the period of the dwelling itself. In addition to the loss of the lands south of Elwyn Road, the property has also been diminished by the conveyance in the 1960s of a parcel of land (measuring 300 by 600 feet) on Lafayette Road to Christ Church for a church building and rectory, and by the conveyance of a parcel adjacent to the Elwyn House into private ownership.

While the lands between the Elwyn House and the creek were traditionally kept open as hayfields and salt marsh, John Elwyn Stone established a plantation of pine trees on some portions of this land in the early 1970s, prior to his death. These trees remain, and have altered the appearance of the landscape, though not the topography, near the house.

Upon acquisition of the Elwyn Farm by bequest after the death of John Elwyn Stone in 1974, the State of New Hampshire, acting through the Division of Forests and Lands, established the Urban Forestry Center on the property. Changes that accompanied the

establishment of the Forestry Center included adaptation of a barn for a conference center (mentioned above), alterations to the Elwyn House for use as administrative offices, and adaptation of the Rosemary Cottage as a classroom building. These changes were accompanied by alterations in the landscape, including construction of a new access road that enters the property west of the Elwyn House and circles behind the house and barns to provide parking in the rear of the buildings. Development of the Urban Forestry Center has also included establishment of a trail system north and east of the buildings, to the farthest limits of the property. The files of the Department of Resources and Economic Development will contain further documentation of changes to the property by the State of New Hampshire.