



## NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

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### NATHANIEL FOYE HOUSE FOYE'S CORNER RYE, NEW HAMPSHIRE

JAMES L. GARVIN  
FEBRUARY 23, 2003  
APRIL 2, 2003

This report was compiled from memory following a brief inspection of the Nathaniel Foye House on the afternoon of February 21, 2003, with a second visit on April 2, 2003, to verify details. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the date of construction, evolution, and significant features of the dwelling, which has been acquired by the New Hampshire Department of Transportation. Also present at the inspection were Joyce McKay and other personnel from the Department of Transportation; Linda Ray Wilson of the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources; and Frank Whittemore, independent consultant. Mr. Michael Cavaretta, until recently the owner of the property, joined the meeting briefly.

**Summary:** The Nathaniel Foye House appears to have been built about 1822. This date has traditionally been given for its construction after research by the Every Other Tuesday Club of Rye during the bicentennial of the American Revolution. The house retains the framing layout and floor plan of a two-room-deep center-chimney dwelling, a building type that has been identified as having reached a fairly full evolutionary development in the New Hampshire coastal region by the 1720s.<sup>1</sup> Despite its traditional form, at least a century old when the dwelling was built, the Foye House exhibits characteristic federal-style woodwork throughout. Its interior joiner's work displays greater elaboration on the first story than on the second. The house thus documents the persistence of what had become a vernacular house form in coastal New Hampshire over a time period that spanned at least two architectural styles, the Georgian and the federal. The house also reveals evidence of having been partially remodeled circa 1860, apparently at the time the rear ell was added (or possibly enlarged from one story to two).

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<sup>1</sup> National Register nomination, Benjamin James House, Hampton (Rockingham County), New Hampshire.

Except for the addition of hardwood flooring in some front rooms, and modern utilities in kitchen and bathrooms, the building has not been greatly altered since the 1860 period.

**Description:** The Nathaniel Foye House is a framed dwelling with a central entrance and a center chimney, constructed over a fully excavated basement. The main house measures 37'-0" in width by 26'-6" in depth, and is approximately 15'-0" between joints (from sills to wall plates). The house has a gable roof. Intersecting the rear (west) elevation is a two-story gable-roofed ell that is positioned with its north wall offset to extend a few feet beyond the north (side) wall of the main house. There is no basement beneath this wing. The exterior appearance of the house is recorded in photographs attached to an inventory form that was completed in June, 1998, by Elizabeth Hostutler.<sup>2</sup>

The cellar is fully excavated beneath the house. Its walls are constructed of native fieldstone, which is a hard material displaying angular, faceted surfaces. The walls are well mortared in lime-sand mortar, which may have been applied as bedding mortar rather than simply as interior pointing. The house does not have hammered granite underpinning above grade. Rather, large stones with true natural faces were selected and laid at grade as underpinning for the sills, with their faces exposed and with their irregular depths extending into the cellar area. The stones are arranged to provide four basement windows in the front (east) elevation of the house, but the basement has no other window openings. An areaway covered by a bulkhead is located on the rear (western) wall of the cellar, near the southwest corner of the house.

In the center of the basement is a vaulted brick chimney base, with the axis of the vault running north-and-south, or parallel to the front elevation of the dwelling. The two heavy brick piers of the vaulted base are supported on stone footings placed below the earthen floor of the cellar. The area under the vault is divided into two chambers by a central brick partition, apparently added later. A brick chimney, formerly serving a forced-hot-air furnace and now connected to a forced-hot-water boiler, extends from the cellar floor through the crown of the vault near its southern end, penetrating the inner hearth of the fireplace on the south front room. This fireplace has been bricked up so that its flue serves the two furnaces. The vault and chimney stack are built of well-burned bricks laid in lime-sand mortar to a point about two feet above the first floor. From that elevation, underburned or salmon bricks, laid in clay mortar, are employed for the remainder of the chimney stack up to a point just beneath the roof of the house.

The forehearth of the kitchen fireplace, on the western side of the chimney, rests upon a crudely corbeled mass of brickwork that projects from the western chimney pier. This brick corbel is supported by a series of wooden struts that extend diagonally upward from the side pier of the chimney base to a timber hearth trimmer. The mass of masonry has apparently begun to fail and has been reinforced by modern 2" by 4" struts and a sheet of plywood. The crudeness of this corbeled support contrasts with the workmanlike execution of the vault and the piers, and suggests that the corbel replaced an original trimmer arch that failed. Yet the corbel appears old, and the brick kitchen forehearth is well polished by age, so the present arrangement has been in place for many decades.

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<sup>2</sup> On file at the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources, Concord, New Hampshire.

Most visible framing members of the house are hewn and smoothed with an adze. The remaining original joists of the first floor were hewn to a rectangular cross-section rather than being left round as sleepers. After softening from dry rot, most original joists have been “sistered” by the application of modern two-inch joists on each of their sides. All joists beneath the southern rooms of the house have been replaced by modern machine-planed square members that have been inserted beneath the original sub-flooring.

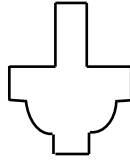
The roof system of the main house is composed of six sets of hewn rafters. The interior four sets are (or originally were) connected near their mid-heights by sawn collar ties. Most of the ties are let into the sides of the rafters with simple lapped joints, but one tie (Roman numeral III, just south of the chimney) is tenoned into its rafters. The roof frame has hewn purlins, a few of which have been trenched for use elsewhere and apparently were installed in the Foye House as second-hand material. The roof was slightly damaged by a fire that charred some areas immediately to the north of the chimney. In the same general area, a boarded-up opening for a former roof scuttle can be seen in the rear (western) slope of the roof a few feet to the north of the chimney. The southern end of the attic was partitioned off into a wood-sheathed chamber; the collar tie between the rafters here (Roman numeral IV) has been raised to the level of the uppermost purlins to provide unencumbered headroom in this chamber. The ceiling boards affixed to this raised collar tie were sawn on a reciprocating saw and attached with cut nails. The boards on the slanted ceilings and walls of the room were machine-planed and are likewise fastened with cut nails.

The remainder of the house frame is largely obscured by applied casings that cover structural members and by plaster over split-board or circular sawn lath, but the frame appears typical of the early nineteenth century. The posts protrude into the corners of their respective rooms except in the southeast front room on the first story. Here, the posts have been chiseled back to the planes of the wall plaster. This added labor may have been invested during a remodeling of about 1860, when the room was modernized with a mantelpiece in the Greek Revival style (see below, “Changes to the original design”).

The frame of the Foye House was laid out with four bents, each containing three wall posts: one at the front wall, one at the rear wall, and a prick post, placed about two-thirds of the way from the front to the rear wall. These posts define a dividing line between the front and rear ranges of rooms. The prick posts in the two bents at the center of the house are placed close to the chimney. Without removing floor or ceiling material, it is impossible to know whether the floor framing in the rear range of rooms is lighter in dimensions than that in the larger front range of rooms.

Where it remains unaltered, the joiner’s work of the Foye House represents a simple expression of the federal style. Although the house lacks the chip carving or repetitive applied ornamentation seen in most of the grander houses of Portsmouth, a few miles distant, the detailing is consistent throughout and largely reflects the influence of Asher Benjamin’s *The American Builder’s Companion* (1806 and later editions).

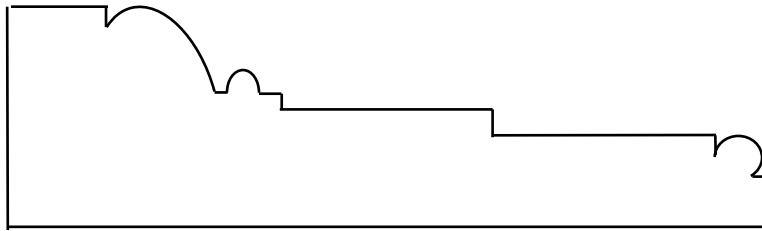
As seen in the doorway transom sash and in the remaining original window sashes on the second floor, the house originally exhibited the classic federal-style muntin profile:



(Drawings are not to scale.)

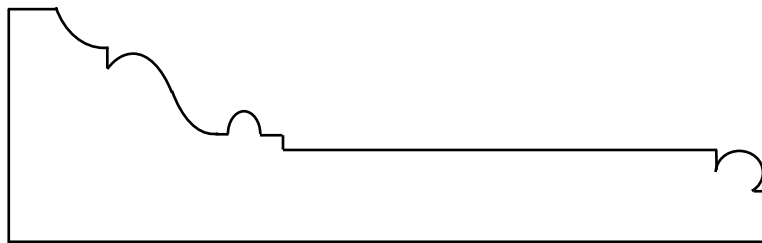
The dimensions of the first-story window openings and a surviving set of original sashes in the kitchen indicate that the first story windows were originally nine-over-six. Sashes on the second story and in the gables of the attic remain as six-over-six units. This disparity in window heights between first and second stories is characteristic of most rural, center-chimney dwellings in the coastal area and adjacent Rockingham and Strafford Counties. As noted below, most first-floor sashes have been replaced.

The original interior door and window casings of the house are either single or double architraves. The double architraves occur only in the front stairway entry and follow this pattern on both the first and second stories:

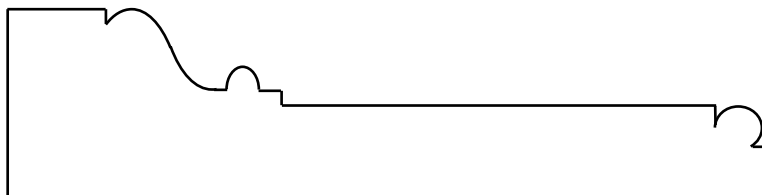


The original exterior window casings also share the backband profile shown above. Where undisturbed (as on the windows sheltered by the north porch), the exterior window casings retain pintles for louvered exterior blinds.

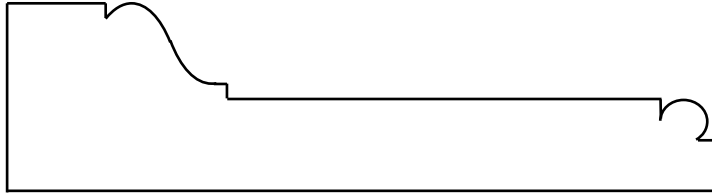
The door and window openings in the north parlor or northeast first-floor room of the house reveal a different and unusual pattern:



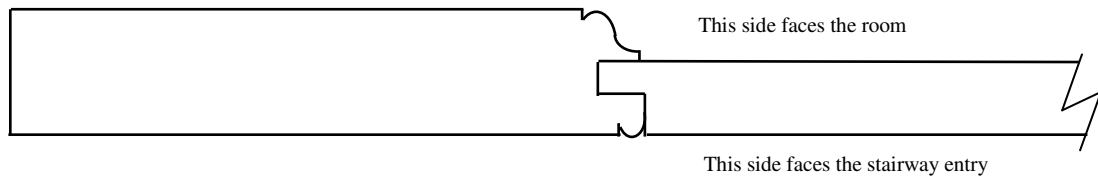
The casings in the south sitting room are slightly simpler in profile:



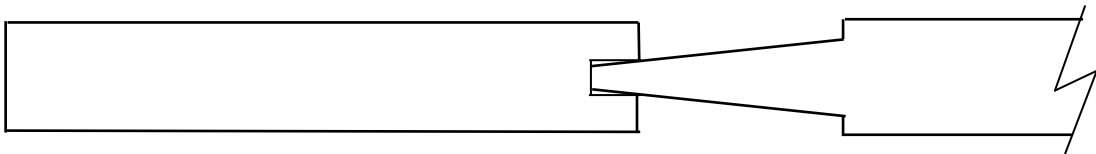
The original second-story casings, seen in the southeast bedchamber, are simpler still. (Those in the northeast bedchamber were replaced by plain square-edged casings, probably in the mid-1800s.)



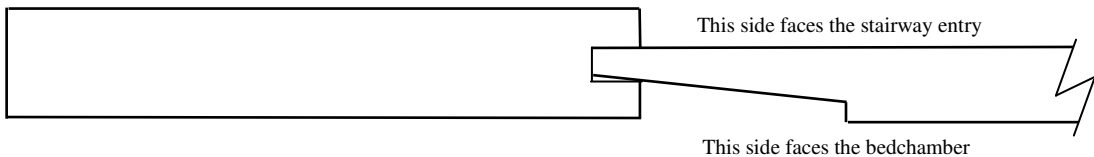
The original interior doors of the house were also simple but characteristic of the federal style. Doors on the first story follow the pattern shown below:



Doors on the second story are of two simpler patterns. Those in the northeast bedchamber have this profile:

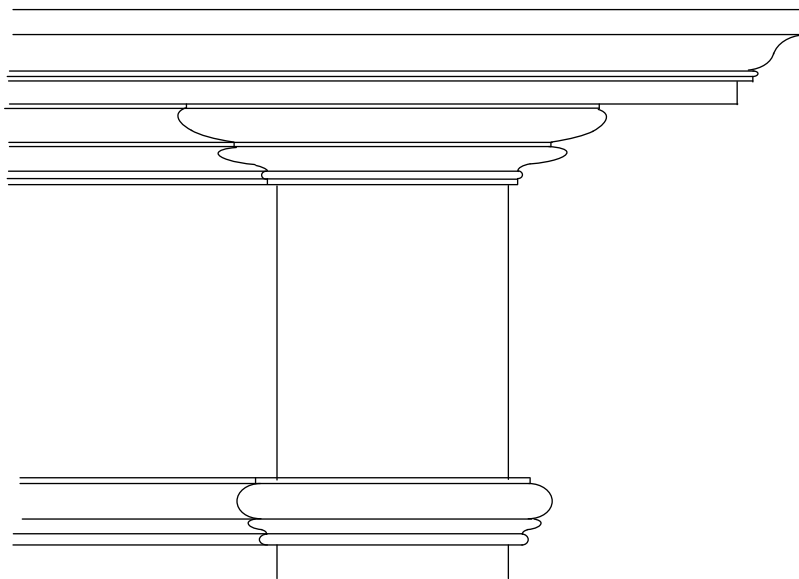
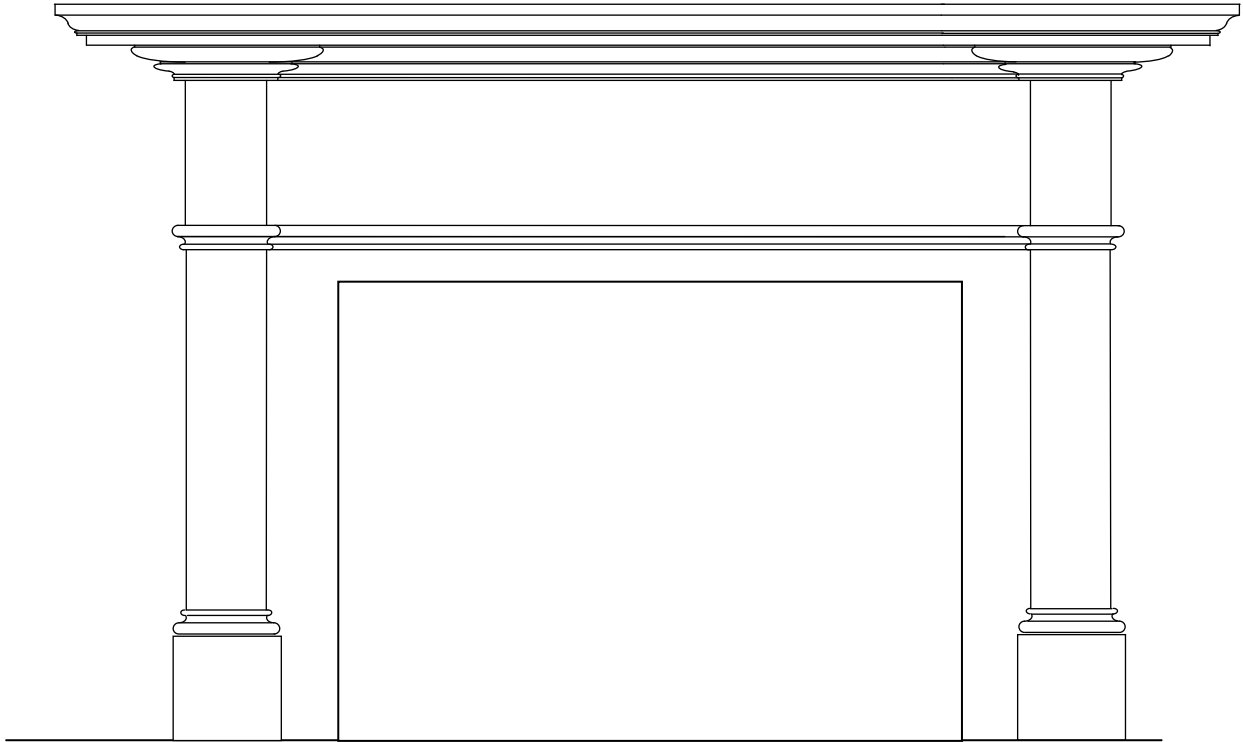


Those in the southeast bedchamber have raised panels on one face only:



The southeast front room on the first floor may have originally have functioned as the front sitting room of the Foye House, having slightly less elaborated joinery than the northeast front room. This room was remodeled around 1860 and has lost its original mantelpiece. The most elaborate original fireplace treatment to survive in the house today is found in the northeast front room, which apparently served as the more formal parlor. The fireplace in this room is larger than the average parlor fireplace and is equipped with an iron crane, showing that it was used as an adjunct to the kitchen

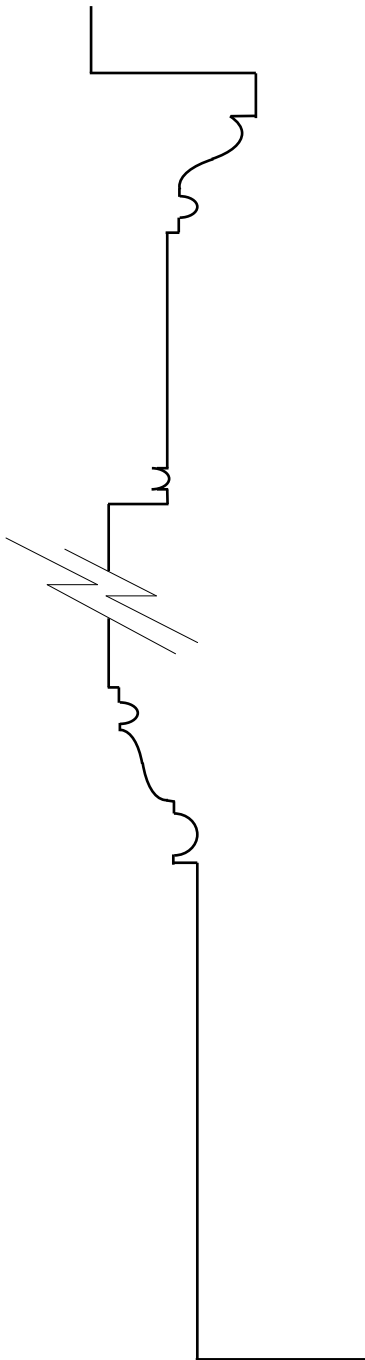
fireplace. Nevertheless, this fireplace is surrounded by a fully-developed federal style mantelpiece, as shown below:



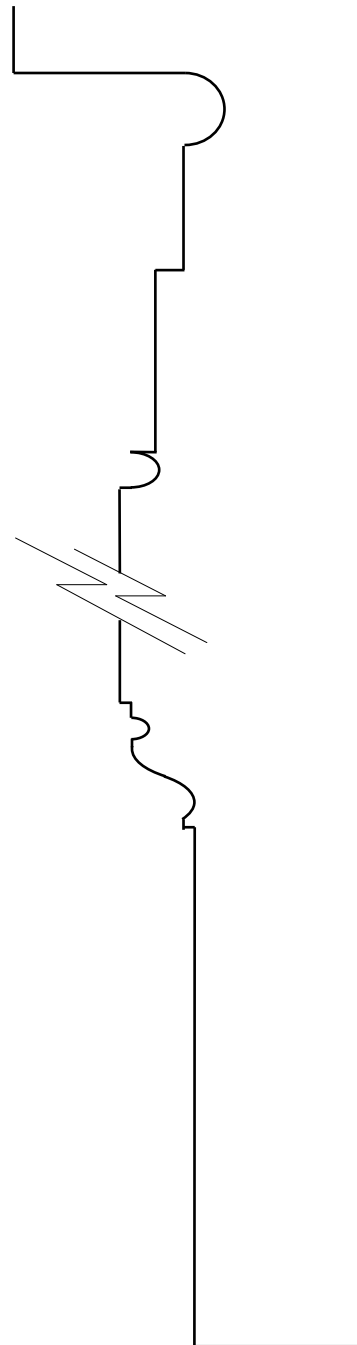
The front rooms on the first story have hardwood flooring applied over their original floors. Most other rooms in the house retain their original pine flooring, most of which has been sanded and refinished. All original flooring is nailed with small-headed cut nails.

The replacement of the chimneypiece in the southeast first floor room obscures the original character of this room. A comparison between the chair rail, baseboard, and door and window casings of this room with similar features in the northeast room suggests that this room was originally finished somewhat more simply than the northeast room. It may have served as a front sitting room rather than a parlor.

Chair rail and baseboard, northeast first-floor room



Chair rail and baseboard, southeast first-floor room



The front staircase of the house is a characteristic triple-run stair that ascends along the front face of the chimney and along two side walls of a lobby entry. The first and third runs of the stair have three risers; the middle run has six. There are no winders, and the two landings are rectangular. Newel and angle posts are square in section, as are the balusters. The handrail is ovoid in section. The stringer is decorated with simple quarter-circle brackets.

The house has two rear staircases that rise on each side of the central chimney. The staircase on the south is enclosed between sheathed partitions. That on the north has an open balustrade on the second floor, with a turned newel post that derives directly from Plate 19 of Asher Benjamin's *The American Builder's Companion* (1806, with later editions). An enclosed staircase leading to the attic ascends above this northern staircase.

Each of the first-story front rooms originally had a fireplace. As noted above, the fireplace of the southern front room has been bricked up to provide a flue for the furnaces, and its brick or tile forehearth has been removed. Each of the two front bedchambers likewise has a fireplace, the fireplace on the south being surmounted by a long recessed compartment without hinged doors. There is no fireplace visible on the rear of the chimney on the second story; this area is now occupied by modern bathrooms.

As is typical of two-room-deep center-chimney dwellings, the kitchen fireplace of the Foye House is placed at the rear of the central chimney on the first floor. The fireplace is wide, and is provided with an iron crane. To the right of the fireplace is the oven and ash pit. The brick faces of the fireplace and the oven area are painted, and appear to bear many layers of paint. The cast iron doors that are currently mounted on each opening are not original. The oven door bears the name of "The S. M. Howes Co., Boston." The door is held in place by iron wires that attach it to the lintel of the inner mouth of the oven. The current door has neither an air vent nor a damper for the oven flue, so the oven could be heated only with difficulty and would lose its heat quickly up the flue. The original oven door may have been a sheet iron stopper; there is a brick jamb at the inner oven door that could receive such a stopper. The ash pit door is inscribed "No. 1 Haymarket Sq Tile & Fireplace Co." There is no chute from the ash pit to an ash vault or box in the chimney base.

The kitchen fireplace lacks a mantelshelf, but has two closets, with hinged doors, placed well above the fireplace opening.

**Changes to the original design:** Apart from the addition of twentieth-century utilities, the principal changes to the original federal-style design of the Foye House appear to have occurred around 1860. These changes did not greatly change the character of the main house, but rather enlarged the dwelling and modernized certain features in the then-current Greek Revival style.

Most of the stylistic attributes of the new features seen in the main house are echoed in the two-story rear wing. This suggests that the wing was added to the main dwelling around 1860. The roof framing is in keeping with such a date of construction. It is

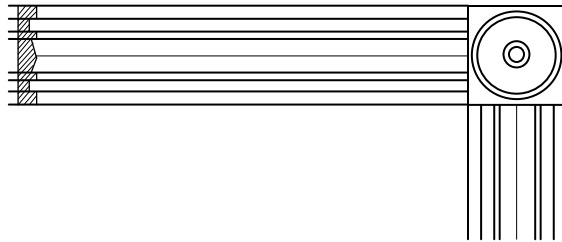


composed of common tie beams and rafters, placed about two feet on centers (not measured). The rafters are sawn on a reciprocating sawmill, and many have waney edges.

A few older features seen on the first floor of the wing suggest that this story of the structure could be older, possibly dating from construction of the main house. Further investigation will be necessary to determine whether the wing originated as a one-story structure that was later raised to two stories, or whether it was constructed entirely as we see it today.

The period around 1860 coincides with the apparent transfer of the house from its builder, Nathaniel G. Foye (1798-1873) to one of his sons, Orion Leavitt Foye (1824-1903), who had married in 1852 and had certainly taken over operation of the farm by the time of the 1870 census.<sup>3</sup> Orion's parents, Nathaniel Foye and Martha L. Dow Foye (1799-1885), very likely continued to occupy the house alongside their son. After Nathaniel's death in 1873, Martha Foye probably continued to live there until her death twelve years later. If so, the provision of two independent rear staircases, extending from the cellar to the second floor, may suggest the division of the house for semi-independent occupancy by two generations. The widowed Martha Foye did not sell the house (or perhaps her window's portion of her husband's estate) to Orion Foye until 1883, two years before her death. At that point, Martha Foye and two of her daughters, Sophia and Ellen, sold their residual interests in the estate to Orion Foye for \$100.<sup>4</sup>

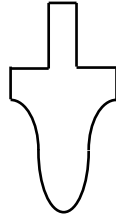
Among the changes that occurred to the main dwelling during the 1860 period were the addition of a new front doorway enframingent in the Greek Revival style. This feature remains on the building, and is composed of wide, symmetrically moulded side and top casings with corner blocks embellished with circular bosses:



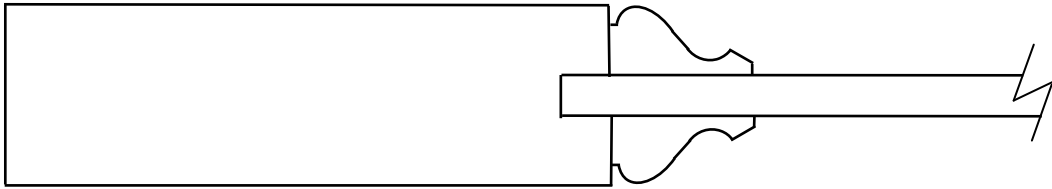
Apparently at the same time, most of the original nine-over-six window sashes of the first floor of the house were replaced by six-over-six sashes with larger panes of glass. The more modern muntin profile of the first-story sashes in the main house are echoed in those of the ell, suggesting that the addition of the wing and the modernization of some features in the main house were carried out together. The newer sashes bear the thin muntins that appeared in the late 1840s and persisted until about 1900:

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Hostutler, inventory form for the Nathaniel Foye House, June 1998. On file at the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources, Concord, New Hampshire.

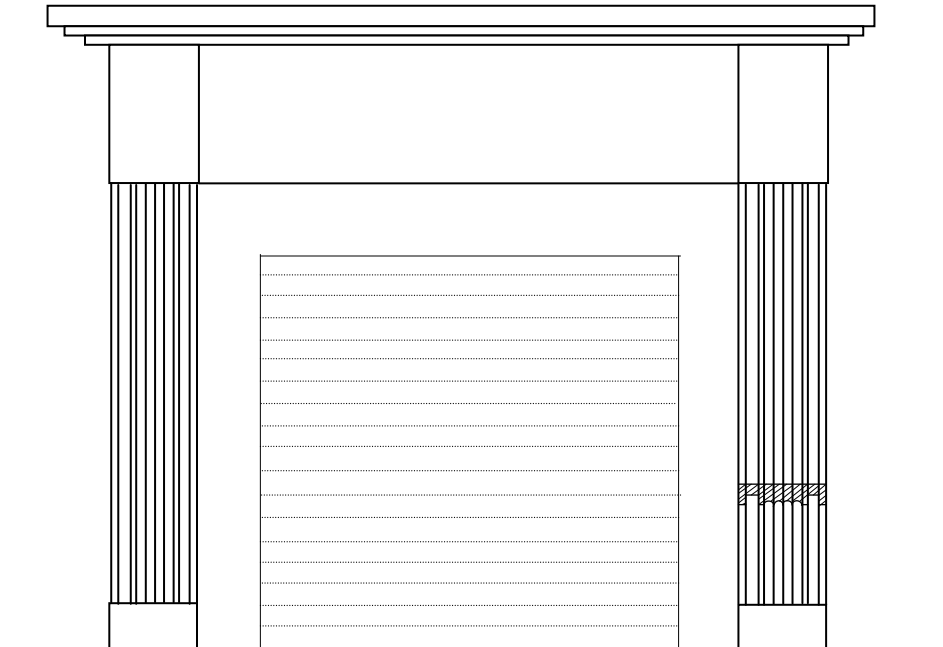
<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Hostutler, inventory form for the Nathaniel Foye House, June 1998. On file at the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources.



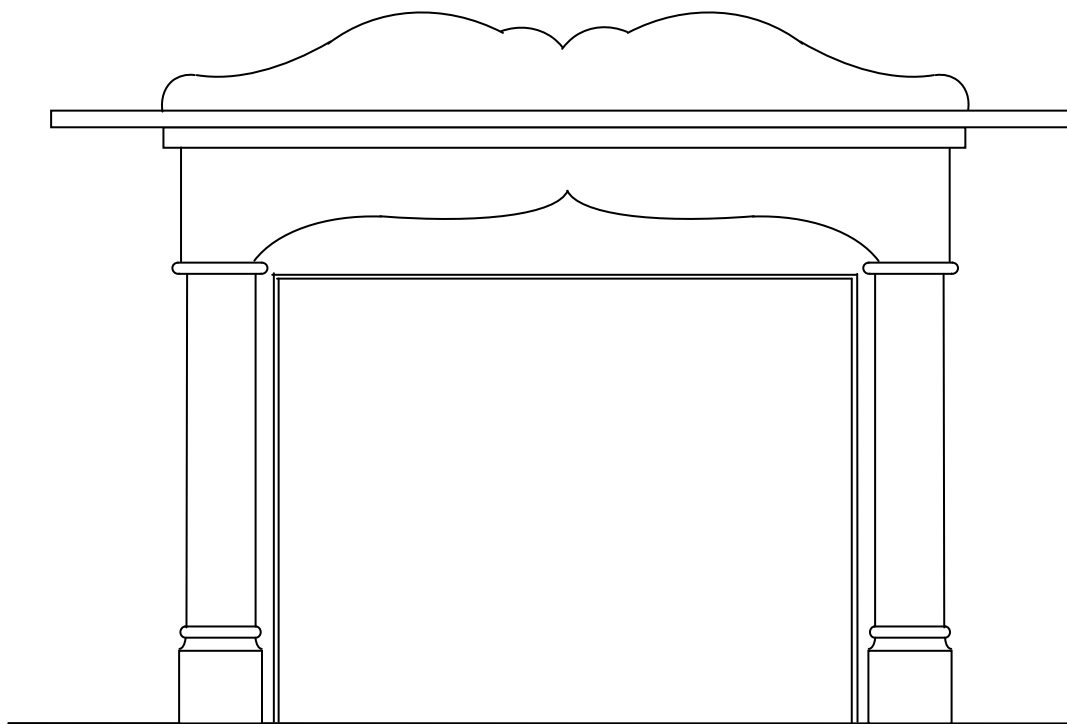
Modern doors were installed in the wing, and a few of the same pattern were placed in the original house. These doors conform to a pattern that was commonplace from the mid-nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. Such doors are often found to have been the products of mechanized shops, of which at least one was operating in Portsmouth by the 1860 period. Such doors have this characteristic cross-section:



Apparently at the same time that these changes were made, two of the original mantelpieces in the house were removed and replaced by modern mantelpieces. One, installed in the first-floor front room that may have been the original sitting room of the dwelling, is strongly Greek Revival in character:



A second mantelpiece, installed in the north bedchamber, is less Grecian in character. Although made of wood, this feature reflects some of the curved elements seen in contemporary marble or marbled soapstone or slate chimneypieces:



The last of the Foye family to own the farmstead was Morris C. Foye, Sr. Morris Foye, who established himself in Portsmouth as a store owner, sold the property in 1914. The property was thereupon used as a summer home until James J. Cavaretta purchased it in 1927. The Cavaretta family continued to own the house and adjacent lands until the house was separated from contiguous property and acquired by the New Hampshire Department of Transportation in conjunction with highway improvements at Foye's Corner in 2003.<sup>5</sup>

**Significance:** The Foye House was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places in July 1998 under Criterion C, on the basis of its architecture. The reviewer found that “the c. 1822 dwelling is significant as ‘one of the most enduring house types in New Hampshire, the 5X2 bay, center entry, center chimney, 2½ story, wood-frame house,’ and its importance is reinforced by its prominent placement on a knoll at a historic intersection.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed history of property transfers, see Elizabeth Hostutler, inventory form for the Nathaniel Foye House, June 1998. On file at the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources.

<sup>6</sup> Determination of Eligibility form, July 8, 1998 (transcribed February 29, 2000). On file at the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources.

This determination is based upon an initial identification of the Foye House as a building type that embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction. The current investigation of the house confirms that identification. The Foye House embodies the distinctive characteristics of a vernacular dwelling type that became a dominant urban and rural house form in southeastern New Hampshire during the 1720s, and remained dominant for a full century. As noted above, this house type may be described as a two-story, two-room-deep, center-chimney dwelling.

The earliest house that has thus far been identified as embodying the framing characteristics of this vernacular house form is the Benjamin James House in Hampton, some eight miles from the Foye House. In 2001, the James House was dated to 1723 by dendrochronology. Dating from almost exactly a century later, the Foye House marks the approximate end of the center-chimney tradition. By the 1830s, a few years after the Foye House was built, heating and cooking by open fireplaces began to be replaced by heating and cooking by airtight iron stoves. At that point, construction of large and complex central chimneys ceased, and the carpentry traditions that had accompanied the use of such chimneys began to evolve into newer and less complex framing methods.

The statement of significance for the James House in Hampton might answer for a description of the Foye House of a century later:

The [frame of the] James House is composed of four bents, which are assemblages of posts, girts at the second story level, and tie beams at the roof level. Each bent is a structural frame that runs through the depth of the house from front to back. Two of the bents define the end walls of the house. The two inner bents define the chimney bay at the center of the structure.

Each bent has three posts: one in the plane of the front wall (façade) of the house; one in the plane of the rear wall; and a third, called a prick post, defining a plane that runs just behind the rear face of the original central chimney. The prick posts mark the transition from the front rooms of the house to the rear rooms, and help to support partitions that separate front rooms from rear rooms. . . .

The tops of the posts in each of the four bents of the frame are linked together in two directions. Each bent is connected to adjacent bents by three wall plates. One [plate] lies at the top of the front wall of the house, and one at the top of the rear wall. A third wall plate, which might be called a chimney or medial plate, connects the tops of the prick posts and runs through the length of the house just behind the chimney stack. The tops of the posts are connected through the depth of the house by tie beams, which rest upon the wall plates and are secured to the plates by lapped dovetail joints cut into the upper surfaces of the plates and the lower surfaces of the ties. The tie beams link the front and rear wall planes [*sic*: plates] of the building and provide support for the feet of the

rafters, resisting the tendency of the rafters to spread outward under wind and snow loading. . . .

The house has six sets of rafters, four of which are supported by the four bents of the house. Intermediate tie beams, not supported by the four bents, span the depth of the house halfway between the end walls and the chimney bents, supporting the feet of an additional two sets of rafters. . . .<sup>7</sup>

The consistency between the frames of the James and Foye houses, separated by eight miles but by a full century in time, establishes the center-chimney dwelling, framed with three-post bents, as an enduring vernacular building form in southeastern New Hampshire.

The Foye House has added significance as an index of the rural interpretation of the federal style in a community that was close to one of the great New England centers of the style, yet was isolated from that center by lack of highway connections. Downtown Portsmouth, one of the centers of development of the federal style in northern New England, lies just four miles from Foye's Corner in Rye. When the Foye House was built about 1822, Portsmouth boasted many commercial and residential structures that were among the most sophisticated examples of the federal style in New England, and was home to a number of experienced joiners, carvers, and builder-architects who were adept at designing and finishing structures of architectural elegance. At the time, however, Rye was a farming community, with little of the capital or the cultural connections that typified Portsmouth. Although close to Portsmouth, Rye was isolated from its larger neighbor. The highway from Portsmouth to part of Rye, Lafayette Road (today's U.S. Route 1), did not pass near Foye's Corner or even Rye Center, but skirted the most populous sections of the rural community as it struck a direct route toward Newburyport.

The road that today connects Foye's Corner with Portsmouth and makes the traffic at the Foye House so congested, did not exist until 1850. In that year, a number of parties in Portsmouth and Rye proposed a bridge across Sagamore Creek, connecting with a new road to be laid out from Rye Center to Foye's corner.

The work of construction was watched with much interest by Portsmouth and Rye citizens, who looked upon the project as one of mutual convenience, bringing the towns of Rye and Portsmouth into more neighborly relations and opening up a much shorter route to the seashore, greatly to the developing of the business of summer hotels, which at this date was in a primeval state. Our [Portsmouth] merchants felt the impetus of increased trade and some encouragement to house builders was noticed along the new route to and beyond the Sagamore. The road to Foye's Corner was being built and the town of Rye voted \$500.00 towards the cost, and to this sum was added the amount of another \$500.00 contributed by citizens of Rye. . . . A section of the new road leading to Foye's

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Mausolf with James L. Garvin, National Register nomination, Benjamin James House, Hampton, New Hampshire. On file at the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources.

Corner, which on account of some controversy had been called “the disputed territory,” was somewhat delayed in building, but on Sept. 24<sup>th</sup> [1850] at 2:30 p.m. the contract for the work was auctioned at a public sale, the conditions requiring that it should be completed within one month. The bridge was passable for teams during the last week in September, 1850, and one of the first to cross it was His Honorable Mayor Abner Greenleaf, who rode in “a rustic vehicle with heavy wheels, drawn by such animals as the ancient Egyptians used to garland and worship. . . .”

The building of Sagamore bridge opened up a much shorter route to Rye and its seashore than by that, via Lafayette road, East Rye, in the days of a century ago, and before the construction of the Sagamore bridge, was far away unless one made a passage by boat across the creek. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Since the Foye House was a relatively isolated farmhouse from its construction in the 1820s until commerce and traffic began to flow past its door in 1850, the house stands as a significant example of the rural interpretation of the federal style. Architecturally conservative, the house combines the framing and floor plans of a century before its construction with a very basic expression of the style that was current when the house was built. The Foye House is therefore significant as an index to the adoption and employment of the federal style in a rural locale and within the context of a vernacular house type.

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<sup>8</sup> *Portsmouth Journal*, September 28, 1910, “Just Sixty Years Ago.” The garbled syntax of the last sentence is original to the newspaper article.