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REPORT ON THE BARD PLUMER FARM BUILDINGS N. H. ROUTE 16 MILTON, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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October 15, 1992

Re-typed with selected drawings from original field notes, May 6, 2013

Summary: The Bard Plumer Farm, occupied continuously by the Plumer family since before 1782, retains a remarkable set of domestic and agricultural buildings that are among the best of their kind and period in northern Strafford County. The buildings have architectural significance both for their stylistic features and their connected plan, are important documents in understanding and interpreting the agricultural history of their region, and represent the aspirations in scale, style, and taste of a family that combined farming with a number of other business enterprises and with civic leadership over several generations.

In themselves, the Plumer buildings are a remarkable embodiment of the life of a prosperous and intelligent rural family in eastern New Hampshire during the nineteenth century. In combination with the adjacent set of structures of the Plumer-Jones Farm, now owned and administered by the New Hampshire Farm Museum, Inc., the Plumer buildings provide one of the most dramatic and ambitious agricultural landscapes in New Hampshire or adjacent Maine.

While the two farms began as simple, story-and-a-half dwellings built by brothers on the principal road leading north from Rochester village, and while both remained until recent times in related families, the architectural evolution of the buildings proceeded along separate lines. The Jones Farm to the north adopted the configuration of a tavern-and-farm, and is a superb reflection of that combination of uses. The Plumer Farm to the south remained a prosperous private farm, and its buildings reflect the domestic form more fully than do those of the Jones Farm, incorporating detailing of a more elaborate fashion. Together, the two farms sum up nearly all the possibilities for prosperity and enterprise in eastern New Hampshire during the nineteenth century: farming on an ever-increasing scale, tavern-keeping, civic service, lumber manufacturing and sales, and connection by railroad with distant markets. All these themes are expressed and exemplified by buildings of varied form and detail, impressive scale, efficient layout, continuously-evolving architectural style, and integrity of construction and design.

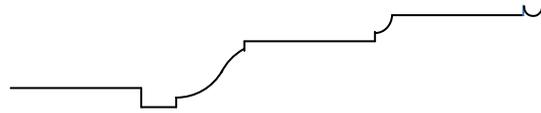
Evolution of the buildings: The following remarks are based on a brief inspection of the Plumer Farm buildings made on the morning of October 13, 1992. They provide a rough outline of the evolution of the farm for planning purposes, but will need to be refined and elaborated through further research in family papers and photographs, and in public records such as tax returns and lawsuits, and through careful gathering of family memories and traditions concerning the development of the farm.

The original house, the story-and-a-half “Cape Cod” dwelling that now forms the kitchen ell of the complex, was already standing by 1782 when it was conveyed, along with the lot on which it stood, by John Plumer to his son Beard (1754-1817). At about the same time, John Plumer conveyed an adjoining homestead to his son Joseph (1752-1821), starting the evolution of the two adjacent farms along a course that would span many generations of the two connected families and result in the development of two of New Hampshire’s most ambitious and best preserved farms.

It is impossible to know whether the existing early house was the first dwelling on the farm, or whether it was preceded by a humbler settler’s cabin. In any case, the early house has the framing and detailing of a dwelling dating from before 1800. Its western front room generally escaped alteration during remodelings that changed the style of the rest of the small house. This room has remarkably fine Georgian detailing that includes a fully paneled chimney wall with panels arranged in two vertical rows or ranges, four-panel Georgian doors hung on H-hinges with botching (leather washers beneath the nail heads), a double-cyma crown moulding, and a heavy chair rail set above flat-paneled wainscoting. The floors of this room are nailed with hand-forged clasp (finish) nails.



Left: Chair rail (not to scale)



Right: Window casings (not to scale)

The only evidence of updating in this room appears to date from the early 1800s, at about the time that the two-story Federal-style dwelling was added to the eastern end of the original dwelling and became the principal house in the complex. At that time, the original window sashes in the Cape Cod house were changed to newer 9-over-6 sashes with narrow muntins, the fireplace was reduced in size, and a well-detailed Federal-style mantelshelf was applied across the face of the lower panel above the fireplace. Since some of the moulding profiles of this mantelshelf resemble those used when the two-story front house underwent some remodeling,

perhaps around 1830 (see below), the mantelshelf may well postdate the addition of the front dwelling.

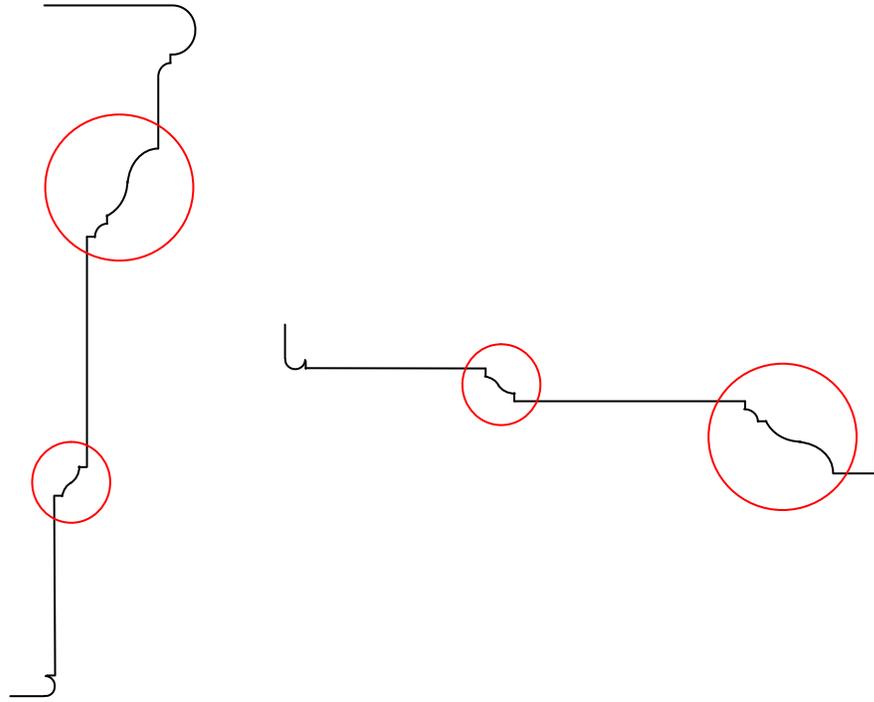
Other areas of the original Cape Cod house were thoroughly changed at later times. These changes will be described below, in chronological order. The southwest parlor in the Cape Cod house, however, remains as an important document of the architectural style of the years before 1800 in northern Strafford County. All of its remaining features, including the evolution of its paint treatments (which include painted graining on all doors), are of great significance in understanding the ambitions and taste of the Plumer family from the earliest years, and in understanding the architectural treatments that were available to an ambitious farmer in the region before 1800.

The next major step in the evolution of the property probably occurred around 1810. At this time, an ambitious, two-story structure was added at right angles to the eastern end of the Cape Cod house, becoming the main dwelling and relegating the earlier house to use as a kitchen wing. This two-story unit is of the type today called an “I-house;” it is one room deep on each floor, with a central hallway. This was a popular house form in coastal New Hampshire in the early 1800s, often with its chimneys located at the center of each end wall, as here.

The exterior of the two-story house remains virtually unchanged except for the addition of a later front doorway. The house retains its original exterior cornice (which has a coved crown moulding and a half-round bed moulding, its original clapboards with lapped (skived) ends and three-inch exposure to the weather, and its original exterior window casings and 9-over-6 sashes. This unit presents its five-bay façade toward the highway, displaying tall proportions and fine detailing that proclaimed the Plumer Farm to be the home of a prospering and style-conscious family. The adjacent Jones Farm never acquired such an element; the tavern addition to that complex, added about the same time, is asymmetrical in its design (in order to accommodate public rooms) and lacks the elaborate Federal-style detail of the house to the south.

The interiors of the two-story house are uniformly impressive in every room. The southern room on the first floor, entered directly from the Cape Cod house, has a mantelpiece with a bold coved crown moulding and a fluted frieze. The end returns of the mantelshelf, which would have extended around the corners of the projecting mass of the chimney stack, have been removed.

The doors of this room have six raised panels arranged with the smaller panels at the top, in typical Federal-period fashion; the panels are bordered by delicate ogee (S-curved) mouldings. The door and window casings of the room are “double;” they have two surfaces separated by delicate ogee mouldings, with well-detailed backband mouldings. The room retains two-part sliding window shutters that run on rails at the level of the meeting rails of the sashes; due to frequent painting of this room, the shutters have become “painted into” their pockets. The chair rail of the room, which lies above a flat wooden dado, has a profile that nearly matches those of the door and window casings, thus providing visual harmony throughout the room.

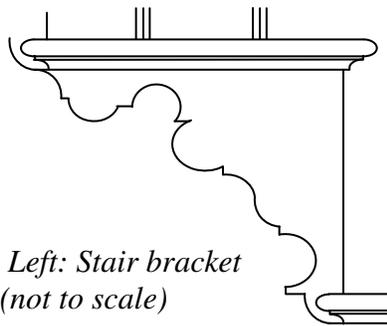


Left: Sitting room chair rail

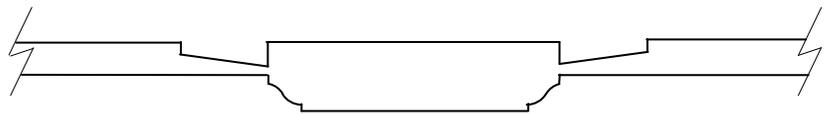
Right: Sitting room door and window casings (not to scale)

This room was probably used as the sitting room, or every-day parlor, of the house. It has a greater accumulation of paint, and greater evidence of change, than does the more formal parlor at the north end of the first story. Among the changes that have occurred here is the addition of a cast iron fire frame in the fireplace, probably in the 1830s. Installation of this feature required the bricking-up of the fireplace so that the fire could be brought forward for greater radiation of heat. Installation of the fire frame may coincide with the closing of the fireplace in the room above the sitting room (see below).

The entry or stairhall of the two-story house has an impressive staircase with a well-moulded handrail, square balusters set diagonally, an exceedingly elaborate and imaginative sawn bracket on the stringer, and a fully paneled enclosure beneath the stairs. The only obvious alteration to the first-floor entry has been the removal of a former partition that enclosed a small room just inside a second door leading from the Cape Cod house.



*Left: Stair bracket
(not to scale)*



*Right: Cross-section of paneling under staircase
(not to scale)*

The north room or formal parlor at the north end of the two-story house remains little changed. It has the most elaborate detailing of any room in the house, easily comparable to features seen in fine seacoast houses of the early 1800s. Like the sitting room on the opposite side of the stairhall, the parlor has six-panel doors of the Federal style, 9-over-6 window sashes, and well-detailed double door and window casings that are echoed in the profile of the room's chair rail. The parlor retains its two-part sliding window shutters in operable condition and with early or original paint color. The dado of this room is plaster rather than wood as in the sitting room; it was probably intended to be covered with the same wallpaper used on the walls above the chair rail.



Parlor door and window casings; chair rail has same profile with added cap

The mantelpiece in this room is dramatic and inventive in design. Its cornice is a bold cove moulding set atop a series of smaller mouldings that provide interesting shadow effects. Below the cornice is a frieze that is decorated with a large fret dentil set above a series of lozenge or diamond ornaments placed end-to-end. Unlike the mantelpiece in the sitting room, that of the parlor is only the width of the projecting chimney breast and does not return around the sides of the latter.

Because this room long served as the best parlor and was therefore lightly used, it retains its original finish with little wear or damage. Its mouldings are especially crisp, since there has been very little build-up of paint on the woodwork. The room is preserved with remarkably little change.

The room above, which might be called the parlor chamber, also survives with little change except for the reduction of the rear window from 9-over-6 sashes to 6-over-6, presumably due to damage from the raised roof of the milk room at the rear (north) of the adjacent Cape Cod house. The parlor chamber has a coved mantelpiece similar to those below, finely-detailed door and window casings and matching chair rail, and remarkably little paint accumulation on the woodwork. The windows have no shutters except for the window that lights a closet to the left of the fireplace; this has a full-length sliding shutter which retains its priming coat of paint and has never received a second coat.

One of the earliest changes to the two-story house occurred within the first decade or two after its construction. Perhaps around 1820 or 1830, the south bedroom, over the sitting room, was divided into two rooms. This was accomplished by blocking up its fireplace and running a partition through the center of the room, from the chimney to the hall wall. Considerable care was taken in this alteration, with a new chair rail on each side of the new partition that closely resembles (though it does not match) the original chair rail that ran around the perimeter of the

original chamber. A second doorway was added toward the front of the upper entry wall to give access to the front bed chamber. This has a casing that differs from others in the two-story house, but has mouldings similar to those used on the Federal-style mantelpiece that has been added above the fireplace of the parlor of the original Cape Cod house. When the bedroom was divided into two rooms, a closet was constructed inside the southern end wall, adjacent to the chimney stack. The door to this closet has a casing that matches the new door cut into this room, and the closet is lighted by a window in the southern end of the house.

The next apparent change to the Plumer Farm was the installation of a new front doorway to the two-story house. Probably dating from the 1830s, this is the first feature of the complex to reflect the newly fashionable Greek Revival style. This doorway closely resembles the one added to the tavern portion of the Levi Jones Farm next door at the same period. Both doorways reflect an attempt by the owners of the neighboring farms to keep up with current fashion; at least two nearby Plumer farmhouses were built in this general period with the overall proportions of Greek Revival Cape Cod houses.

This new front doorway was destined to inspire a series of subsequent alterations to other portions of the complex, including the installation of a similar but simpler side doorway to the original Cape Cod house. Yet the new front door appears to stand alone in date; none of its features are duplicated in other Greek Revival style changes to the assemblage of buildings.

The front doorway is distinctive for its well-detailed but deliberately heavy exterior features, for the virtually flat mouldings around its door and sidelight panels, and for the flat, angular muntins of its sidelights.

A few years later, probably in the 1840s or 1850s, extensive changes transformed the original Cape Cod house to the rear of the two-story dwelling. First, the roof of the original house was lifted intact about two feet above its original height. This was accomplished by cutting the tenons at the feet of the rafters, jacking the entire roof structure up, and inserting a new, circular-sawn plate supported by short, doubled timbers beneath the feet of the raised rafters.

The purpose of this change was to give the old house the newly-fashionable proportions of a "raised Cape," with a high eaves line that permitted the front (south) of the house to receive a heavy Greek Revival entablature consisting of a series of horizontal boards. Evidence of the lifting of the roof can easily be seen in the attic of the house, but traces of the change are also revealed in joints to the corner boards on the front of the dwelling. In the rear (north) of the house, the raising of the roof permitted the installation of a four-light sash at the attic floor level, echoed by two similar windows at the attic floor level of the woodshed west of the original Cape Cod house, and reminiscent of the series of windows at the attic floor level of the front of the woodshed of the Levi Jones Farm.

A second major change that appears to have occurred at this time was the complete underpinning of the entire complex, including the original house and the two-story house, with split granite stones. These underpinning stones are uniformly split using plugs-and-feathers, a technology that superseded the older splitting by flat wedges about 1830.

A third major change at this time was the rebuilding of most or all of the chimney of the old Cape Cod house. The new chimney includes a large cooking fireplace that faces the eastern front room of the old house, and a brick oven with cast iron door and a set-kettle (cauldron) in the rear or northern face of the chimney. Thus, the rear room of the original Cape Cod house and the eastern front room of the house were converted to serve the purposes of a kitchen together, probably providing a greatly increased cooking capacity than had existed in whatever kitchen had existed in the eighteenth-century dwelling.

In conjunction with the rebuilding of the central chimney of the original house, the upper stack was disassembled and rebuilt. Evidence that is clearly visible in the attic shows that the original chimney bricks were laid in clay. During rebuilding, many of these bricks were salvaged and re-laid in lime mortar. The chimney height would, of course, have been raised at this time to accommodate the raised roof of the house.

In recent times, due to a series of chimney fires and the resulting cracking and deterioration of the chimney, this chimney has again been rebuilt from a point about two feet below the ridge. Nevertheless, the lower zone of the chimney retains some cracks, and the chimney is now probably unsafe for use with wood fires.

A further change resulting from this remodeling was the installation of a second Greek Revival entrance door in place of the original entrance of the Cape Cod house. While of the same general style as the front door added some years earlier to the two-story house, this second entrance door has heavier and simpler detail, and sidelight muntins of a Gothic profile. This muntin profile is echoed in the four-light sash beneath the raised eaves of the rear of the house, and by the muntins of a window in the west gable end of the Cape Cod house, overlooking the roof of the adjacent woodshed. This suggests that the old attic of the original house was brought into fuller use at this period.

It is clear from evidence below the stairs of the original house that the original entry had raised paneling exposed to view on the left, adjacent to the parlor. It seems likely that there was originally no stairway in this entry; access to the attic may have been gained elsewhere, perhaps above the rear stairs that presently lead down to the cellar. The present front staircase of the Cape Cod house probably dates from the installation of the new doorway in the 1840s or 1850s.

The present detailing of the room to the right of this doorway appears to date from the same remodeling. While the window casings of this room appear older, the door casings, doors, and the long mantelpiece around and above the cooking fireplace all appear to have their origins in the major conversion of the original house.

The raising of the roof of the original house provided an opportunity for the installation of bedchambers on the second floor. While the widespread use of loose and roll insulation has made it difficult to date the evolution of the two bedchambers that now exist in the attic, all present evidence suggests that these rooms date from the same major remodeling of the small dwelling.

These rooms depend on the front dormer windows for sufficient light to be useful chambers. The present dormers appear to date from the late 1800s. It seems likely that other, smaller dormers were installed in the 1840s or 1850s to light these rooms, and that these, in turn, were supplanted by the present large dormers, with their paired windows, in the latter years of the century.

Further investigation of the evolution of these second-floor bedrooms should eventually be undertaken. Living members of the Plumer family may be able to shed some light on the later changes to these rooms. These changes appear to be contemporary with the construction of the large cattle and hay barn at the western end of the complex.

The evolution of the woodshed connected to the western end of the original house is difficult to trace due to the utilitarian nature and rudimentary detailing of the structure. The frame of the woodshed combines hewn and up-and-down-sawn timbers (some second hand) with circular-sawn sheathing. Present window sashes have the same narrow, late nineteenth-century muntins seen in the bedroom dormers of the Cape Cod house. Pending further information, we may surmise that the shed is an early nineteenth-century structure that underwent remodeling when the Cape Cod house was remodeled, and again underwent some updating when the barn to its west was built.

The large barn at the western end of the complex has a circular-sawn frame and a combination of up-and-down-sawn and circular-sawn sheathing. The structure appears to date from the late 1800s, from about the same time that the window sashes were enlarged in the dormers of the Cape Cod house and renewed in the woodshed. Members of the Plumer family may be able to provide an exact date for the construction of this barn; that information, in turn, could help to date other changes to the complex.

An older barn stood until recently behind (to the west of) the present barn.