



NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

State of New Hampshire, Department of Cultural Affairs
19 Pillsbury Street, Box 2043, Concord, NH 03302-2043

603-271-3443
603-271-3558

FAX 603-271-3433 Voice/TDD RELAY ACCESS 1-800-735-2964

**REPORT ON HORSE SHEDS
PETERBOROUGH UNITARIAN CHURCH
Peterborough, New Hampshire**

**James L. Garvin
State Architectural Historian
23 January 1996**

This report is based upon an inspection of the horse sheds belonging to the Peterborough Unitarian Church, made in the afternoon of January 22, 1996. Also present at the inspection were church members Richard Johnson and Thomas Mansfield. The purpose of the inspection was to assess the condition, date, and historical importance of the sheds, and to make recommendations to the church as to the future disposition of the structures.

Summary: The horse sheds of the Peterborough Unitarian Church were built in 1905 to replace deteriorated predecessors on the same site. They represent an uncommon architectural type in New Hampshire; as village (distinguished from rural) sheds, they are especially rare, if not unique. The sheds remain in good structural condition, though they will soon need routine maintenance in the form of new roof shingles and paint. Their continued preservation by the church would be a contribution to the history of the church, of Peterborough, and of New Hampshire.

Description and History: The existing sheds are a surviving component of a larger assemblage of horse sheds that once stood near the Unitarian Church building on church property. Until 1924, others stood directly behind the church building on land now partly covered by the parish house.

The present sheds date from 1905, though map evidence suggests that they closely replicate others that stood on precisely the same site in the nineteenth century. These earlier structures were probably built at about the time of first occupancy of the property by the church in 1826. A concise written history of the structures is given in *A Brief Historical Sketch of the First Church in Peterborough, 1752-1952* (pages 12-13):

In 1882, a committee was appointed to study the improvement of the horse sheds. The original sheds had been built and owned by individual members of the parish. They often failed, however, to take proper care of them, and thus some of the sheds had fallen into a state of dilapidation. Since the sheds were individually owned but situated on church land, it was difficult for the Pew Owners Congregational Meeting House

Association [then the owners of the church land and building], which owned the land, to make the owners of the sheds maintain them in proper condition. Finally the association instructed the Standing Committee of the Church to remove the sheds that were in a dilapidated or dangerous condition.

Moreover the association voted to allow only church members to own sheds on church property. This matter of reparation and care of the horse sheds appears repeatedly on the records. It is of interest because today [1953], seventy years later, the care and maintenance of the horse sheds is a problem which still demands attention from year to year. It was finally settled, however, by a vote in 1885, that "all who occupy sheds and do not belong to the Society or who contribute less than five dollars per year to 'preaching,' be charged five dollars per year 'ground rent.'" In May, 1905, it was voted to tear down the sheds and rebuild them,--the Society hereafter to own them and to rent them to its members. This was done and the new sheds were built at a cost of \$550.95.

An inspection of several of the existing stalls tends to confirm that the present sheds were fully rebuilt in 1905. All the framing of the sheds is circular-sawn, and the sheathing boards that separate the stalls are nailed with a combination of cut and wire nails, a mixture common in the early years of this century. Evidence suggests that the sliding doors of the stalls were added in the 1920s. Many of the doors are fabricated from vertical matched and beaded boards of the type called "ceiling board," a form of sheathing that was especially popular for many uses in the early part of the twentieth century. The stall at the extreme southern end of the row, closest to Main Street, is fully sheathed on the interior with ceiling board in the manner of many early-twentieth-century automobile garages.

Further light on the history of the horse sheds is offered by the attached fire insurance maps, compiled by the Sanborn Insurance Company. The earliest of these maps, dating from 1884, shows the row of sheds to be about 130 feet long, occupying virtually the same site as do the present sheds. Opposite to those sheds, and facing them, is another set of sheds about ninety feet in length. Backing up to the ninety-foot sheds and facing easterly was another, shorter structure of apparently the same type. The dashed lines at the fronts of these respective structures indicate that they were then open, without doors, on their outward-facing sides, like most horse sheds that survive elsewhere today.

Even as early as 1884, part of the rear or western side of the still-standing set of sheds was abutted by the rear wall of a large, two-story, hip-roofed stable building on the adjacent property. This stable belonged to what was then called Tucker's Hotel or Tavern. The stable was replaced before 1924 by an automobile garage, but throughout the period covered by the Sanborn maps there was always an abutting structure adjacent to the rear wall of the southernmost eighty or eighty-five feet of the sheds. This accounts for the varying pitch of the rear roof slope of the row as we see it today.

The Sanborn map of 1904, the year before the Society voted to tear down and rebuild the sheds, seems to indicate that the pair of stalls at the extreme southern end (next to a carriage house and Odd Fellows' Hall) was partitioned off from the remainder and fitted with closing doors. As seen today, these stalls remain different in finish from more northerly ones, and were probably used for a different purpose, or owned by people with different ideas or needs, even before the rebuilding. The next available map, dating from 1911, shows no visible change from 1904 and suggests that at that time all the stalls except the two southernmost ones remained open on the front.

A dramatic change seems to have occurred in 1924. There are two Sanborn maps for that year, both dated in May. The first shows the horse sheds as before, except that a partition is indicated about halfway down the row. There is still a single set of horse sheds, about sixty feet long, directly behind the church.

The second map of 1924 shows that the present parish hall behind the church had been constructed in place of a former chapel of 1880. Construction of the parish house necessitated removal of the set of sheds directly behind the church building. This second map of 1924 shows the horse sheds fully enclosed with front doors. Significantly, the words "Horse Sheds" from the earlier map of 1924 have been replaced by the words, "16 Cars."

It is largely in this condition, enclosed with sliding doors for automobile storage, that we see the sheds today. Removal in the 1960s of the adjacent automobile storage building on the tavern property to the west, and of the Odd Fellows' Hall on the south, necessitated repairs to the rear roof of part of the sheds. Probably at the same time, the southern end wall was covered with Texture-111 siding, a form of weather-resistant grooved plywood. Today, the sheds are more free-standing and exposed to view than they have been since the Sanborn insurance map of 1884 was drawn, and perhaps are more visible than ever before.

Condition: The sheds appear to be in good structural condition. They retain the facade that was given them in the rebuilding of 1905: a series of regular elliptical arched openings with keystones bearing the stall numbers, and a deeply-projecting front eaves-line. Most of the sliding doors are built of vertical beaded ceiling board; some are built of random-width vertical boards. The north end of the row, facing the church office, is clapboarded; the south end, as mentioned above, is covered with modern Texture-111 siding.

As mentioned above, the rear slope of the roof of the sheds is somewhat irregular in pitch and alignment. This is largely due to the fact that the adjacent stable/automobile storage building, which served a long-lived tavern or hotel on Main Street, abutted and intersected a portion of the rear roof of the sheds. This part of the roof had to be rebuilt when the adjacent building was demolished in the 1960s.

The southern portion of this rear roof is framed with 2" by 4" studs and covered with plywood. The northern portion, which was not disturbed by the demolition of the adjacent building, has regularly-spaced rafters and horizontal roof sheathing boards. The rear roof slope is covered with heavy tarred felt or roll roofing, most of it coated with aluminum

roofing paint. Mr. Johnson reports that portions of this material are periodically damaged by box elder trees and other fast-growing plants on a strip of land below the retaining wall of the parking lot to the west, part of an abutting property.

The lower rear foundation wall of the sheds, where it could be observed, is built of mortared stone at the base, with a wall of concrete blocks above this. The front posts at the dividing partitions between the stalls rest on footings of split granite.

The front (eastern) slope of the roof is framed with regularly-spaced sawn rafters supported by a purlin at their midpoint, and is covered with horizontal roof sheathing boards. All framing and sheathing stock is circular sawn. Most of the boards of the partitions between stalls are machine-planed.

Although snow cover prevented an inspection of the roof shingles, Mr. Johnson reported that the asphalt shingles are in near-failing condition, suffering from age and casual vandalism. The present roof was probably installed in the 1960s when the adjacent buildings were removed, and asphalt shingles have a life expectancy of from twenty to thirty years.

The sheds are adequately painted, but to equal the high standard of upkeep of the adjacent church and parish house, they would benefit from repainting in the near future.

Suggestions for maintenance: Removal of the stable/garage that formerly abutted part of the rear wall of the horse sheds, and of the Odd Fellows' Hall that formerly screened their southern end, has exposed parts of the sheds that may never before have been visible. This exposure emphasizes the irregular nature of the rear (west) slope of the roof of the sheds and the inexpensive covering of this roof slope.

If the sheds are preserved, they will have to be re-roofed in the near future. If budgets permit, this re-roofing would provide an opportunity to cover the rear slope of the roof with a material of greater permanence and attractiveness than the present roll roofing. The rear slope is so steep that it could be covered with a roofing material or a wall cladding material, at the option of the church. It could, for example, be covered with asphalt shingles, with clapboards, with aluminum or vinyl siding, or with Texture-111 siding, depending upon price. While the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources does not ordinarily recommend synthetic materials like vinyl, aluminum, or plywood as a covering for a historic structure, in this case the problem is to provide inexpensive protection of a surface that may never have been intended to be exposed to view.

As an alternative, the present roll roofing could be maintained on the rear slope and the roof screened by vegetation. Perhaps the abutting property owner would permit the church to grub the strip of soil behind the sheds and plant the area with screening evergreens like cedar, yew, or hemlock. If everyone agrees that it would be undesirable to have trees behind the sheds, then perhaps shrubs like common lilac, Washington hawthorn, or autumn olive could be planted, or climbing vines like Boston ivy, euonymus fortunei, or honeysuckle could be allowed to cover the back of the building.

Historical significance: We learn from *A Brief Historical Sketch of the First Church in Peterborough* that the auditorium of the church was given its present appointments, especially in the pulpit area, in 1896. Other furnishings were installed there in 1903. The rebuilding of the horse sheds in 1905, then, was part of a series of progressive changes made at the turn of the century. Collectively, these changes improved the interior and exterior appearance of the church.

Today, the horse sheds represent both an asset and a responsibility for the Unitarian Church. From the standpoint of history and historic preservation, the sheds are a distinct asset, surviving as part of a larger group of sheds that once stood near the church building. Like the church itself, the sheds evoke the feeling and architecture of the nineteenth century.

The combination of meeting house (or church) and horse sheds was a characteristic architectural assemblage of the nineteenth century, yet is rarely seen today. The need to provide shelter for horses during prolonged church services was keenly felt and often provided for by one means or another. In most cases, the religious society or private individuals constructed the sheds, though in rare instances other methods were found to shelter the animals. The neighboring stable or barn of a local tavern sometimes offered shelter. In the hamlet of Bath Lower Village, and probably elsewhere, a nearby covered bridge was used as a shelter for horses during church services.

Some towns or churches that own horse sheds have undertaken preservation or restoration of these buildings in recent years. One notable instance occurred about ten years ago in Lyme, N.H., where an unusually long series of twenty-seven sheds stands adjacent to the Congregational Church. A local group, the "Lyme Horsesheds Restoration Committee," was formed with the goal of raising \$40,000 for extensive structural and cosmetic repairs to these structures. The sheds themselves were used in the fund-raising effort, becoming booths to house craft fairs and other events (see attached brochure).

Some years ago, Francestown, N.H., became concerned with preservation of horse sheds adjacent to its town hall. The town applied for and received a small grant from the State Historic Preservation Office in 1982 to employ Exeter architect John W. Merkle to study the buildings and develop a technical report making recommendations for stabilization and repair of the deteriorating structures. This work has since been accomplished.

Several other New Hampshire churches retain their horse sheds, and some of these sheds have been entered in the National Register of Historic Places along with the related church buildings. An informal survey of surviving horse sheds suggests that more survive in the Monadnock Region than anywhere else in the state. Among the surviving horse sheds in the region are those at Jaffrey Center, Rindge, Dublin, and North Wilmot. The striking curved horse sheds behind the meeting house in Hancock Village were built in 1895 to replace others that were removed from the town common at about that time.

Since most of these horse sheds are in a rural setting, few or none of them are actively used, or generate income for the church or municipality that owns them. The continuing demand for tenancy in the Peterborough horse sheds may be unique in New Hampshire.

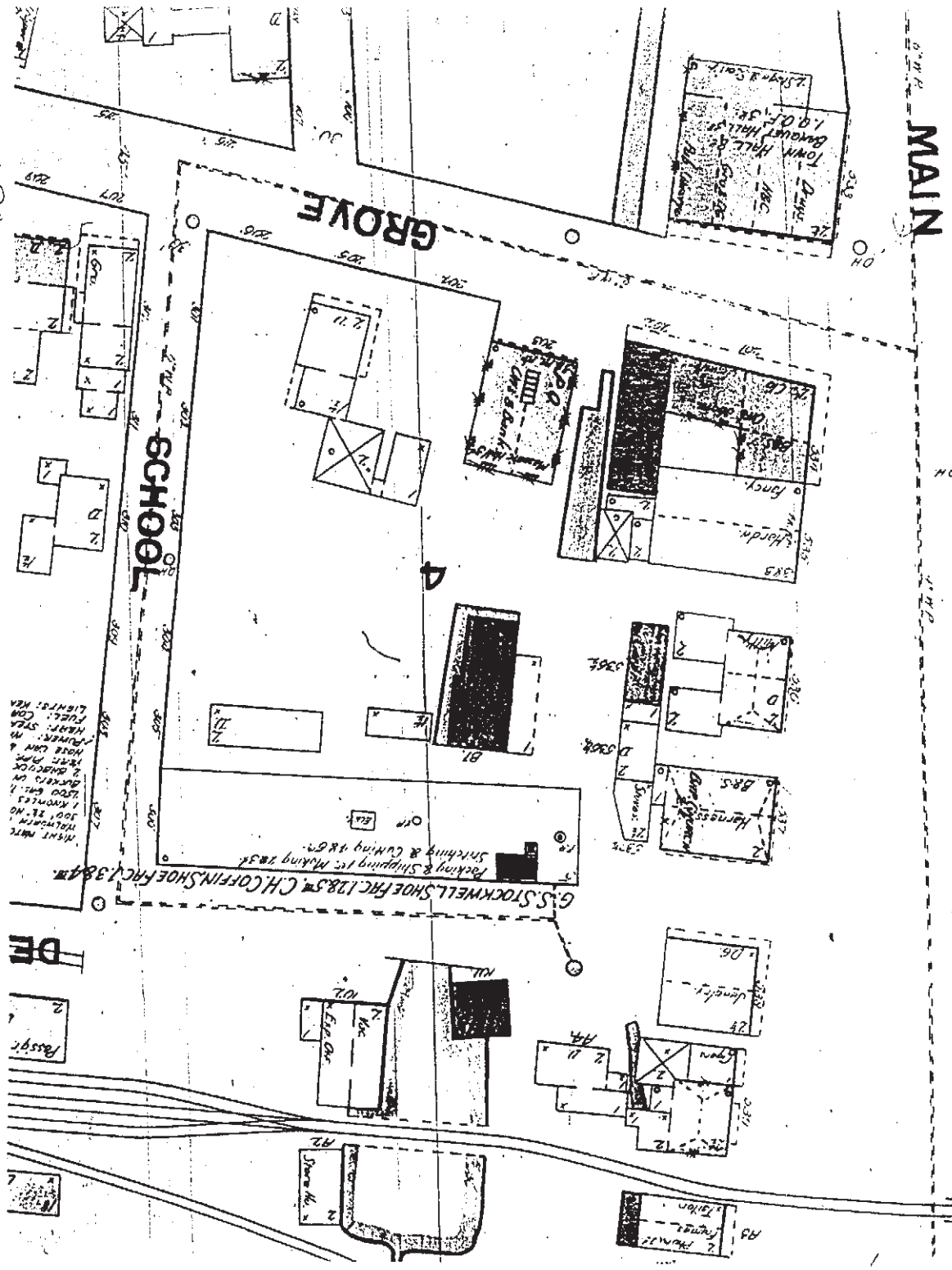
Many towns or churches have lost their horse sheds due to decay, arson, or other causes. In most cases, loss of such buildings in the twentieth century has spelled permanent disappearance due to the lack of demand for such shelters in the automobile age.

One exception to permanent disappearance occurred in Webster, N.H. The Old Meeting House Association maintains a historic meeting house and town hall that was moved to a new site to save it from destruction in a flood control project. This organization went to the expense of building replica horse sheds at the new site in 1972, extending them with several newer stalls in 1979. They use the sheds to protect and display historic vehicles and road equipment.

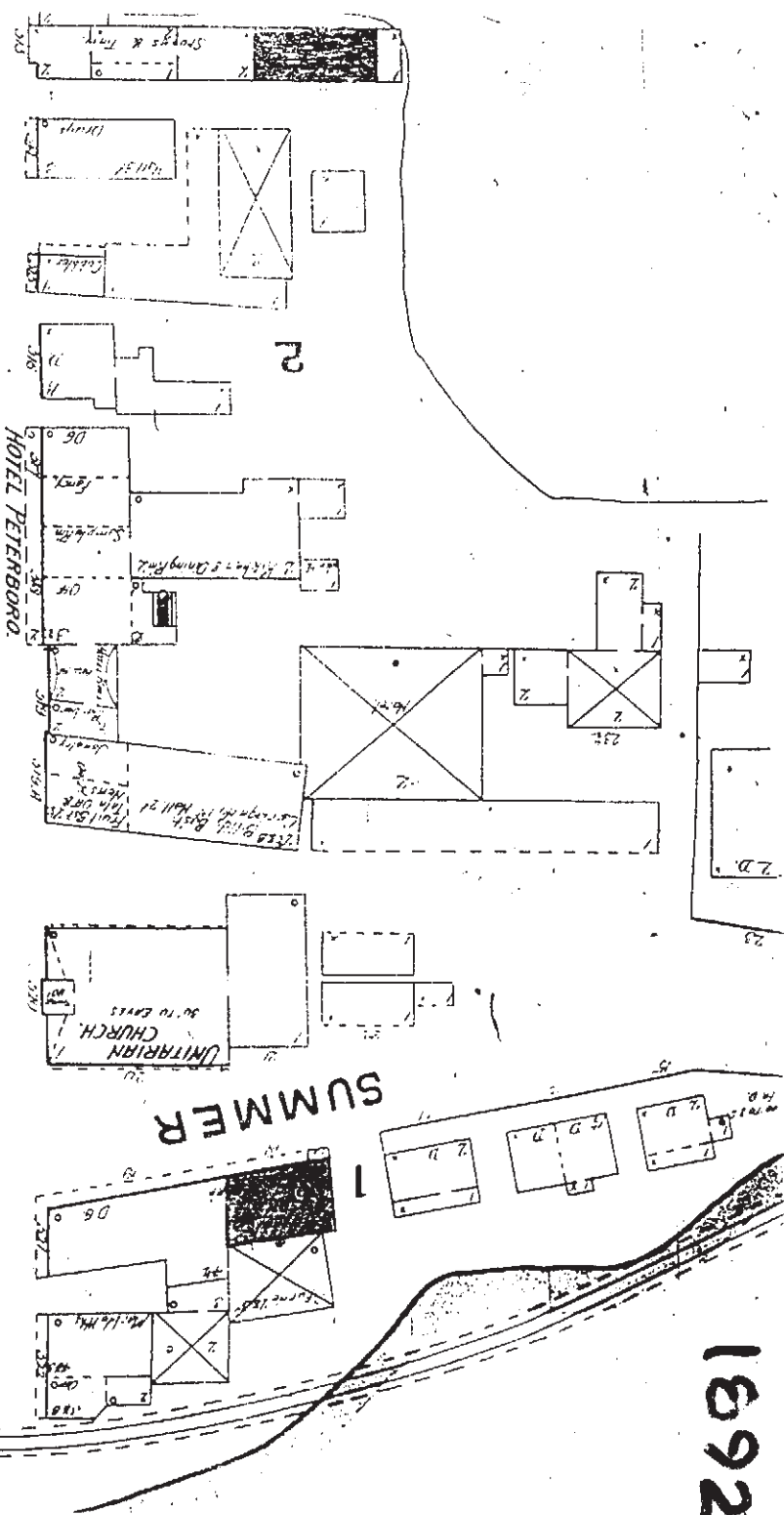
Given the rarity of such sheds in New Hampshire, it is clear that the Peterborough sheds are of considerable historical interest and significance. Although Peterborough is a relatively rural town, its small building lots and closely-spaced buildings give the village many of the characteristics of an urban place. The Peterborough horse sheds are therefore highly unusual, and probably unique, in New Hampshire because they are an urban form of shelter that was built on the boundary line of the church lot, virtually touching a former building on an adjacent property.

For all these reasons, both history and historic preservation in New Hampshire would be well served if the Unitarian Church chose to commit itself to the continued maintenance and use of the horse sheds. Preservation of the sheds would demonstrate the church's stewardship of its institutional heritage, would enrich Peterborough's sense of its own past, and would offer a continuing safeguard to an important example of New Hampshire's dwindling stock of these utilitarian but dramatic structures.

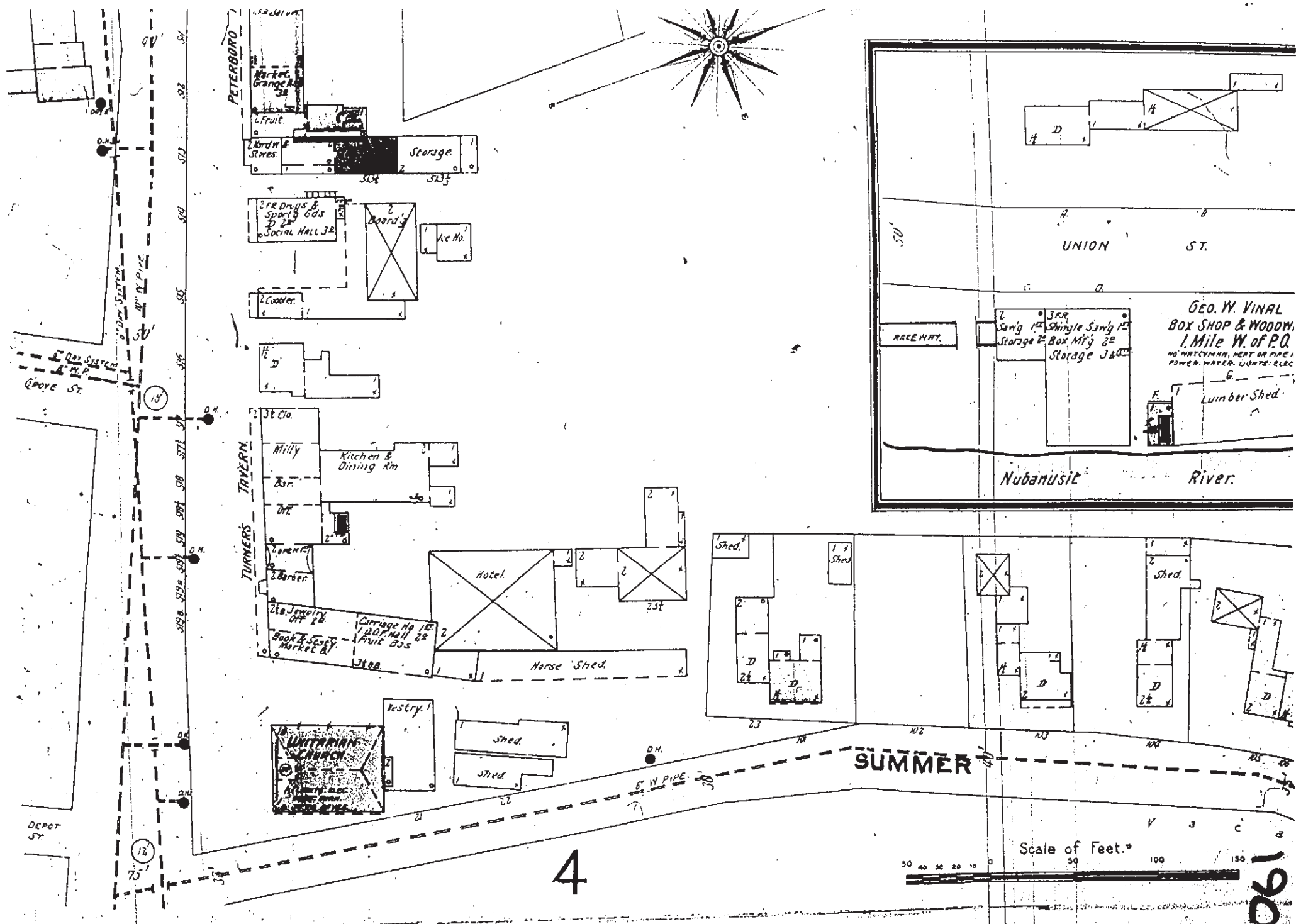
1892



MAIN

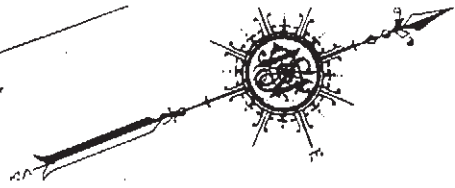


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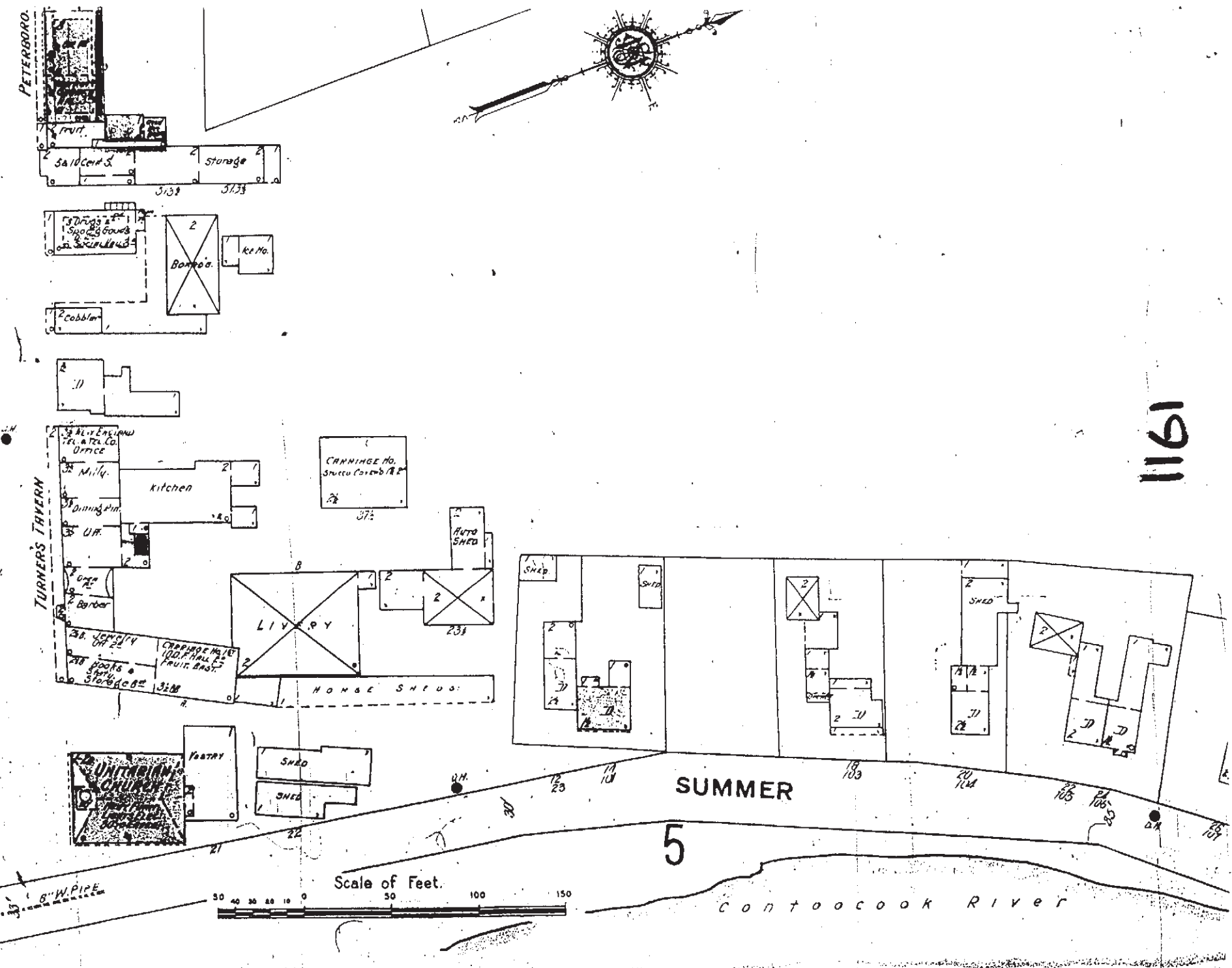


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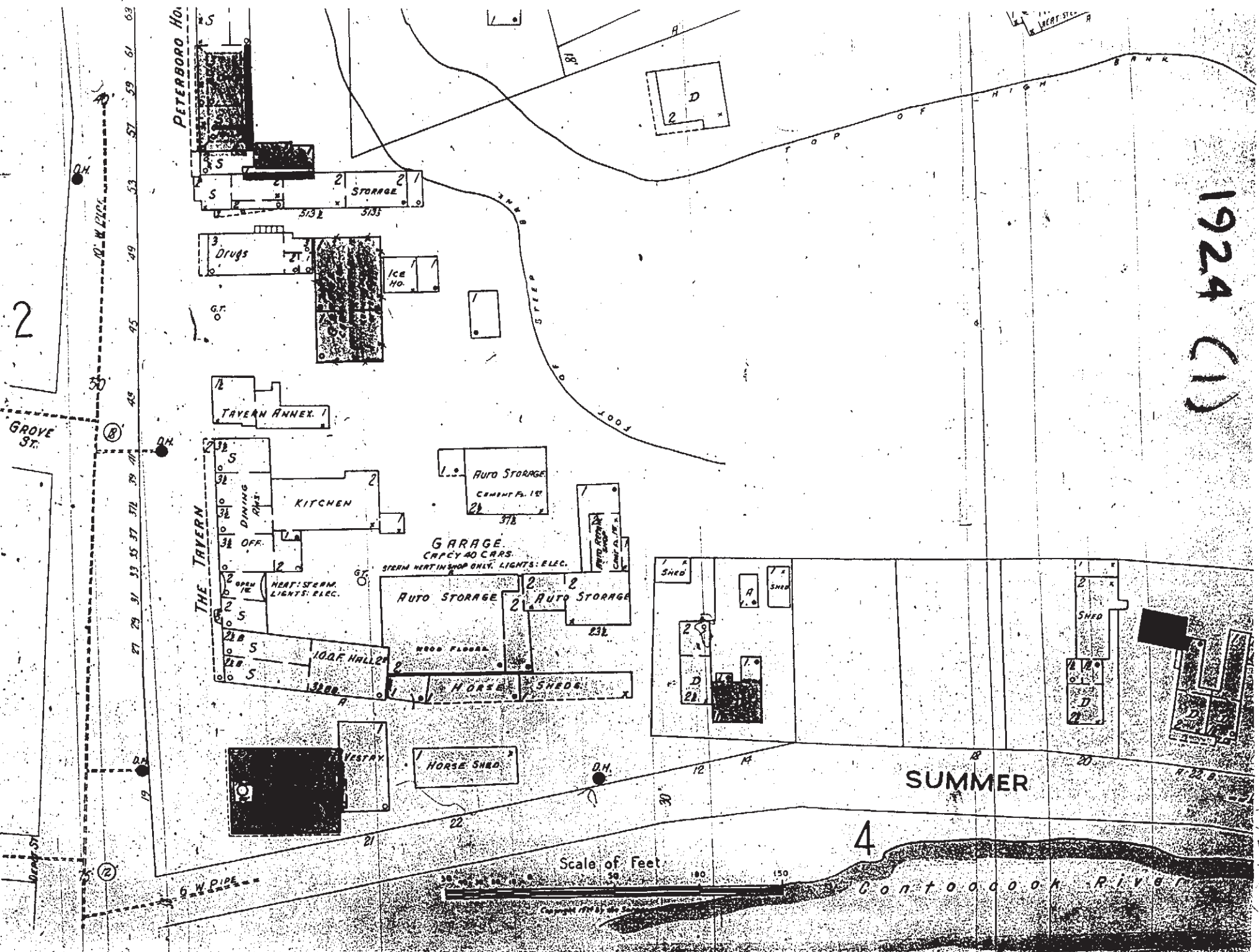
1904



1161



1924 (1)



2

4

Scale of Feet

SUMMER

Contoocook River

PETERBORO HO.

W. PIPE

GROVE ST.

THE TAVERN

VESTAY

HORSE SHED

AUTO STORAGE

AUTO STORAGE

GARAGE

AUTO STORAGE

TAVERN ANNEX 1

DRUGS

ICE HO.

STORAGE

STEEP

FOOT

TOP OF HIGH BANK

W. PIPE

63
61
59
57
53
49
45
41
37
33
29
25
21
17
13
9
5

D

SHED

SHED

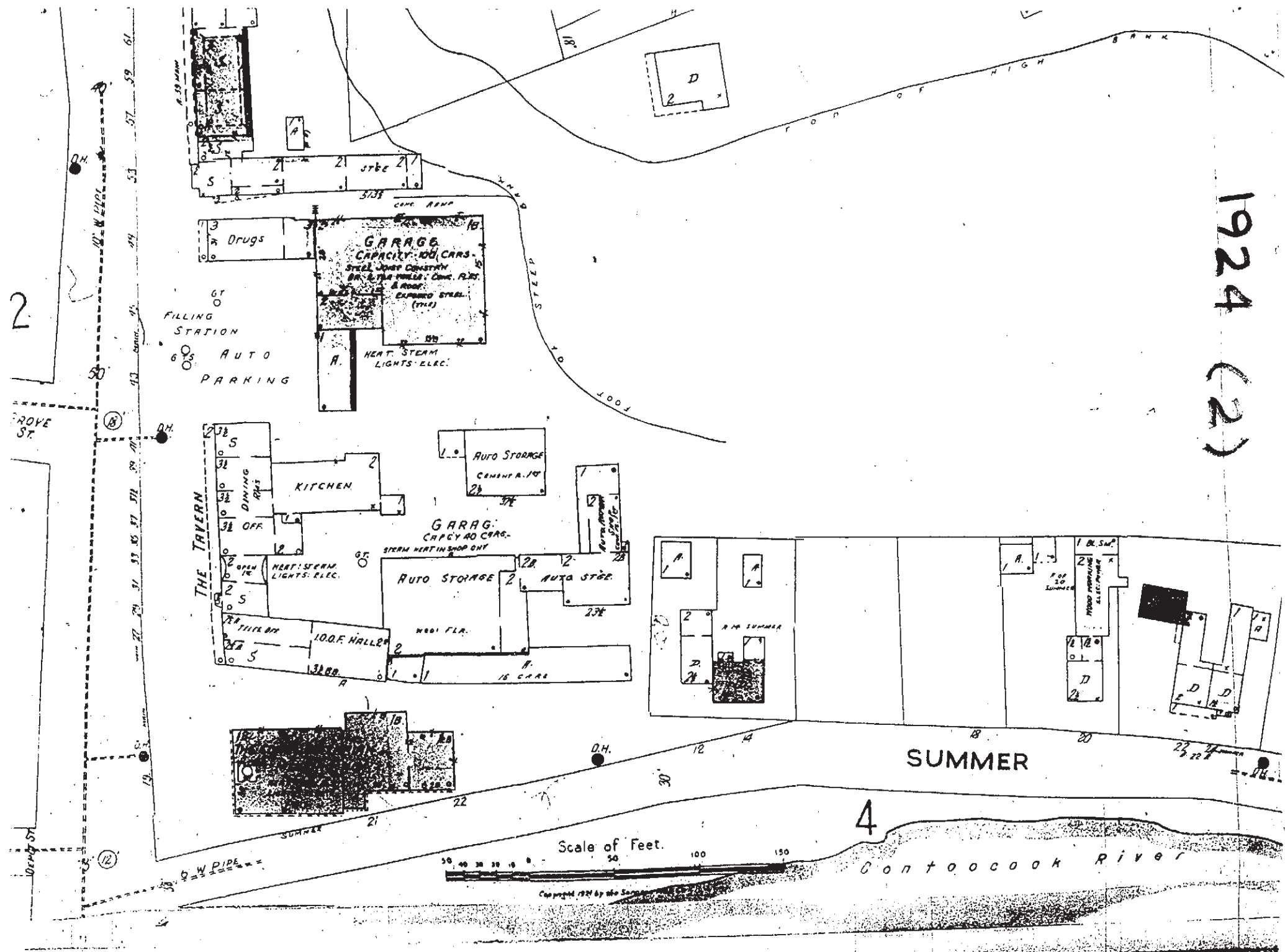
SHED

SHED
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W. PIPE

Copyright 1924 by the State

1924 (2)



2

4

Scale of Feet.

Contoocook River

SUMMER

THE TAVERN

GARAGE
CAPACITY 100 CARS.

GARAGE
CAPCY 40 CARS.

DINING ROOM

KITCHEN

AUTO STORAGE

AUTO STORAGE

AUTO STGE.

FILLING STATION

AUTO PARKING

PROVE ST.

W PIPE

S.W. PIPE

Copyright 1924 by the Surveyor General of New Hampshire

On that sad day, Lyme will have lost forever one more tangible part of her proud and colorful past.

The Future

The sheds can still be repaired, but the need is urgent and the cost will be considerable. Here is what we know at this point.

When the sheds were built, there was open space between the back walls and the hill behind them. Over the decades, 170 years-worth of leaves have fallen in this cavity and been left to decay; the rains and snows have brought soil down the hillside and packed it up against the back wall of the sheds. Some gratuitous memorabilia — cigarette packages and candy wrappers, soft drink bottles and, yes, a few beer cans — have all found their way in here, and as far as anyone around can remember, nobody around has ever tried to clean them out.

In effect, the whole hillside has slid down a bit, and now rests against the backs of the sheds in one soggy, sodden, relentless moist mass. The timbers and planks that have been fighting to hold back the constant moisture are about to give up the ghost.

The situation calls for digging that debris out from behind the sheds along their entire length. That won't be easy, and it won't come free of charge. Then, once that's done, we'll need to dig down a little deeper, to build a slanted trench and fill it with crushed rock, to provide a natural runoff for any future rains, floods or other moisture that comes along, to keep it off of the back of the sheds.

Once these steps have been taken, two possible next steps are being considered to reconstruct the damaged walls, mostly at the base of the back. The first plan calls for replacing the back walls up to the tethering rail with pressure-treated lumber. They didn't have it in 1810, and the walls still lasted up til now. So replacing the decaying boards with pressure-treated lumber, once the drainage problem has been solved, might be expected to keep the sheds safe from the New Hampshire elements for as long as any of us who can read this are still around.

The second proposal would last — quite literally — indefinitely. The proposal is to replace the entire lower section of the back wall with a dry rock wall — an unmortared stone wall of closely set, carefully chosen stones.

Such walls are objects of great admiration everywhere in New England.

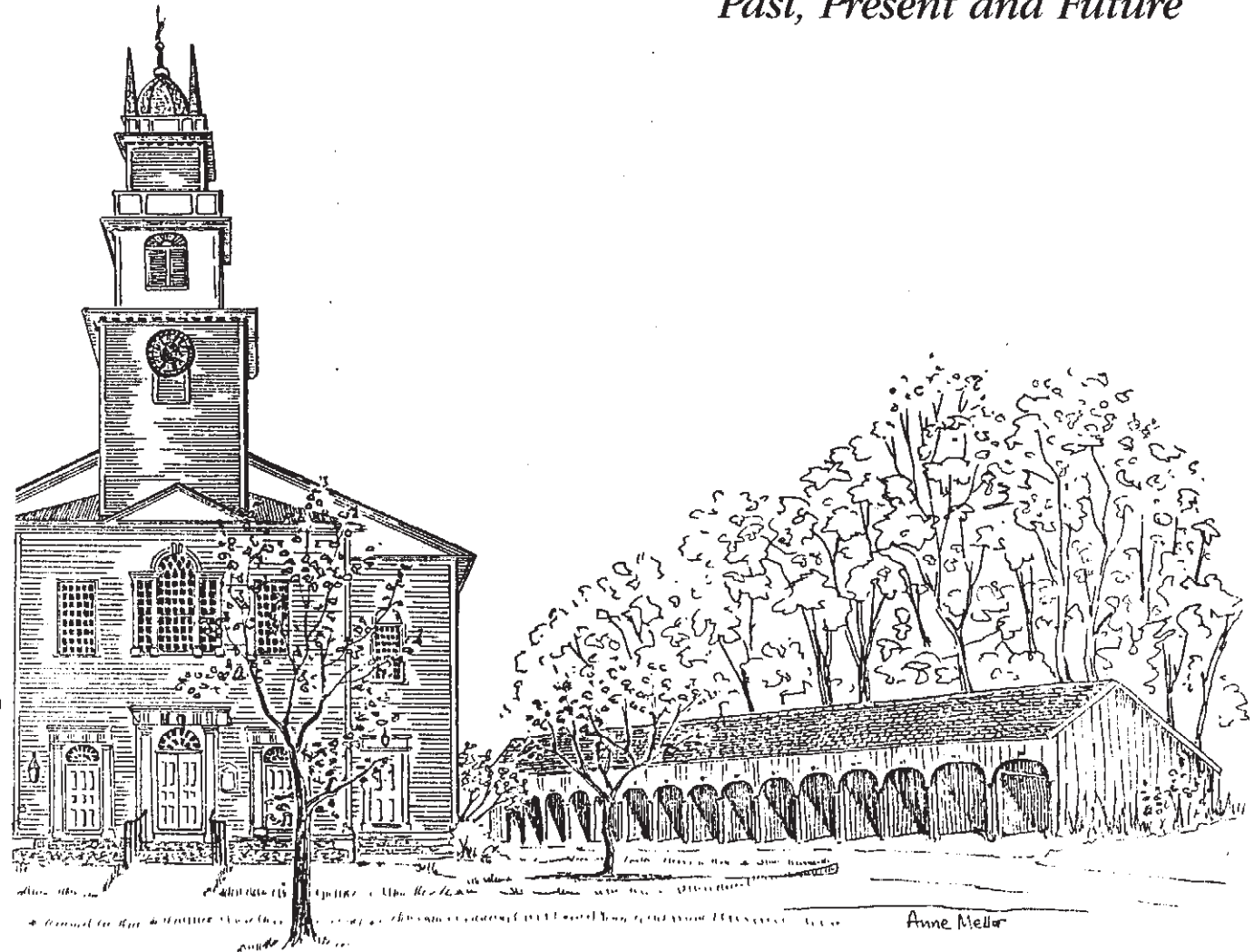
The only problem is — the money.

Think about it. Do we really want to stand here and see Lyme lose her unique and lovely landmark?

It's our Lyme. They're our horse sheds. It's our decision.

LYME'S HISTORIC HORSE SHEDS

Past, Present and Future



Lyme Horsesheds Restoration Committee

P.O. Box 154,
Lyme, New Hampshire 03768

The church and the horse sheds were built at the same time, by a father-and-son team. According to those who remembered it and talked about it and others who wrote it down, this is about the way it all happened.

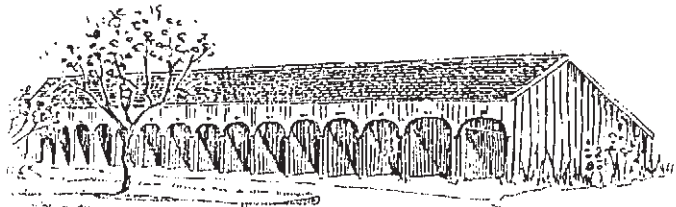
The Past

On June 27, 1808, the people of Lyme held a Town Meeting to "establish a method of building a house of worship in the said town." In deliberate, non-sense fashion, they voted that the building was to be 60 feet long, 45 feet wide and was to have 84 pews on the ground floor — pews which were to be sold at public auction to raise the money to build the church. (Apparently, the good people of Lyme must have felt that if God could create the whole world in seven days, they ought to be able to take care of a single church in an afternoon.)

Days later, the fund-raising auction was held, and Pew Number 1 was promptly secured by Dr. Cyrus Hamilton for the sum of \$212. Spirited bidding for the remaining pews followed, as the town's wealthiest and most successful citizens vied with each other for the conspicuous locations appropriate to their station in society. By the end of the second day, all 84 pews had been sold and a total of \$4488 was in hand to go toward the actual building of the church.

From the moment the building was proposed, 25-year-old John Thompson, Jr., knew that he must be the man to build it. His own great, great, great, great grandfather had been one of the two builders of the first church in the Plimoth Colony; and he embraced the family tradition that to build a proper church was the finest offering a man could make to his country and his God. But it was not until more than a year later that the meeting to hear bids from those who wished to undertake the building was to be actually held. Instead, there followed a long series of meetings at which various committees were appointed, plans enlarged and new (and usually more expensive) ideas for the church were embraced. The building, it was thus agreed, was to be finished by November 1, 1811. It was to be built "faithfully and well . . . at as reasonable a cost as possible . . . according to the order and stile of the church at Dartmouth College."

At last, on the afternoon of October 1, 1809, the Master-builders assembled at another public meeting to voice their bids to do the work at hand. Though some stayed in the auction long enough to venture quite unrealistically low bids (because of the prestige connected with the project), none was as determined as young John Thompson, Jr.; his bid of \$5455 to complete the entire job was the lowest and the last, and the church was his.



While his son was building the main church, John Thompson, Sr., an affable and gregarious man, had developed a scheme of his own: to build some 50 horse sheds near the church on town land, and to sell the sheds to individual Lyme families, to provide shelter for their horses whenever they drove down to town. They would be there for church on Sundays, surely, but the sheds could be useful to them at other times during the week as well. Thompson the elder found many ready buyers. He also found critics, and plenty of controversy. How dare he, they demanded, sell those sheds and pocket the proceeds when the buyer could not own the very land they stood on? Though the deeds be registered at the County Courthouse way up in Haverhill, there was something suspicious about this arrangement. Therefore, its promoter must also be suspect.

Actually, the records indicate that John Thompson, Sr., was completely above board in his venture. In fact, the town voted on December 4, 1810, that "Capt. Tomson had a right . . . to erect horse sheds on the common land." Yet despite this official support and formal recognition that nothing devious was going on, rumors, rancor and spiteful charges continued to dog the entire venture almost from its beginnings.

Young John, Jr., was having problems of his own. Having agreed to complete the building in two years, pride forced him to struggle to finish it in a year and a half instead. To accomplish this, he had to hire many extra workmen — adding unplanned costs to an already impossibly low bid figure. There was surely no hope of any kind of advance payment before completion — but his workers had to be paid *now*. He had counted on the proceeds from his family's lumber business to defray these ongoing expenses, but in the depression that preceded the War of 1812, the price of lumber tumbled drastically, and the money he had counted on simply was not there.

He was in debt to everyone by the time his building was complete, and by the time he was paid the \$5455 he was owed for doing a proper job, the money was by no means enough to cover his obligations. And although many people owed him money, none of them had it to pay him. He, however, seemed to be expected to pay in full, on the spot. The community and his creditors quickly forgot what he had done for them and turned against him.

The effect on his spirits was as ruinous as the effect on his fortunes. A few years after his proud new church was completed, John Thompson, Jr., turned his back on it and left the town in bitterness, never again to return. His parents, dismayed at his "disgrace" as well as their own problems, hid themselves at home on the River Road and died within a few weeks of each other — some say, of broken hearts.

In addition to the line of 27 sheds we see today, there once were two other shorter ones. There was a line of "white horse sheds" that stretched back, running east and west at a 90-degree angle to the southernmost shed. Then, a line of 12 or so "red horse sheds" ran more or less parallel to the existing line of 27, behind what was then a red brick school-house and what is now the white clapboard Lyme House.

It is interesting to note, as an earlier observer has pointed out, that these sheds were built for horses, not for carriages. Carriages, perhaps, were thought to be possessions, things; but horses were God's creatures, horses were friends. In those times, when a family went to church it was for at least four or five hours. It only made sense that a horse might need shelter during so long a wait, in our windy New England falls, chilly New England springs and driving New England winters. The fact that the church itself was unheated (it was thought to border on blasphemy to be *too* comfortable in church!) did not detract from the fact that the human contingent at least had a roof over its heads; surely, their faithful horses deserved as much as this!

The Present

Today's remaining sheds stand as they were built and where they were built, more than 170 years ago. The color, as far as we know, is the same as the original one. Though some efforts have been made over the years to patch them up and fix occasional damage, you see them pretty much as they have always been.

The names over the doors are the same ones you may find in the old cemetery across the road. They are names of families which did indeed own a shed, though not necessarily the exact one on which the names appear. Some years ago, there was a general agreement to give the sheds as gifts to the church. The church has in its possession 24 transfer deeds signed by the owners of that time. Three sheds, then, may still be privately owned. This being the case, the names on the sheds were deliberately scrambled, to help shield the identity of the few private owners who chose not to give their sheds to the church.

But if we look closely beyond the charm of antiquity and tradition of the old sheds we can also see the attrition of time. The names of the families may stay forever in the old cemetery, but it could be only a question of time before they are gone from the sheds: the sheds themselves are in danger of destruction. Close inspection will reveal that the back walls, especially the bottom sections below the heavy rail to which the horses once were tethered, are in an advanced stage of decay. Left unrepaired for much longer, and the sheds will surely come tumbling down.