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REPORT ON THE GARDNER TOWLE HOUSE 194 WADLEIGH FALLS ROAD LEE, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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JULY 1, 2010**

This report is based on a brief inspection of the Gardner Towle House on the afternoon of June 28, 2010. The purposes of the inspection were to evaluate the integrity and significance of the house, to establish a more accurate date for the main house and ell, to evaluate the property for inclusion in the New Hampshire State Register of Historic Places following damage by fire on April 23, 2010, and to secure interior photographs of the house for potential use with a State Register nomination.

Summary: Physical evidence suggests that the front portion of the Gardner Towle House was constructed between 1825 and 1830, and that the ell or wing of the house is an eighteenth-century dwelling that was attached to the new front portion as a kitchen and service wing, being fully remodeled on its interior at the same time. Pending further research, it may be assumed that the complex was constructed by Col. Gardner Towle (1791-1880), who had attained prominence in Lee and was serving in the New Hampshire House of Representatives at the period when the house was constructed.¹ The house incorporates physical attributes of a tavern, including two kitchen fireplaces and a third-floor ballroom, but it is not yet known whether it was constructed for use as a public house or was simply an ambitious private dwelling. After Col. Towle had moved to Exeter, the property was purchased in 1867 by Dr. Isaiah Edgerly, a botanical physician from Strafford.² The property was later owned by a number of others, yet the house retains strong architectural integrity for the period of its construction. Its main losses of integrity occurred in the 1980s during ownership of the property by Peter Anderson, who removed ceiling plaster in some rooms, and in April 2010 during efforts to extinguish a fire set

¹ For information on Gardner Towle, see William Haslet Jones, *Philip Towle, Hampton, New Hampshire: His English Origins and Some American Descendants*, pp. 59-60; and Towle's obituary notice, *Independent Statesman* (Concord, N. H.), June 10, 1880.

² *New Hampshire Statesman* (Concord, N. H.), September 6, 1867, "New Hampshire Items."

by an arsonist. The house is an excellent example of a three-story dwelling of the late federal period.



Date: Because the interior joiner's work of the three story house is conservative in nature, and because woodwork of a similar nature was added throughout the two-story wing, estimating the date of assembly of the two structural units into the present dwelling has depended partly upon evidence seen in the basement. The basement walls are coherent throughout the perimeter of the fully excavated cellar. The stones of the basement walls are consistently split, and were set with their split sides facing inward. A number of these stones reveal marks that show their method of splitting, and this evidence points to a date shortly before 1830 for the assembly of the two house frames into a single dwelling.

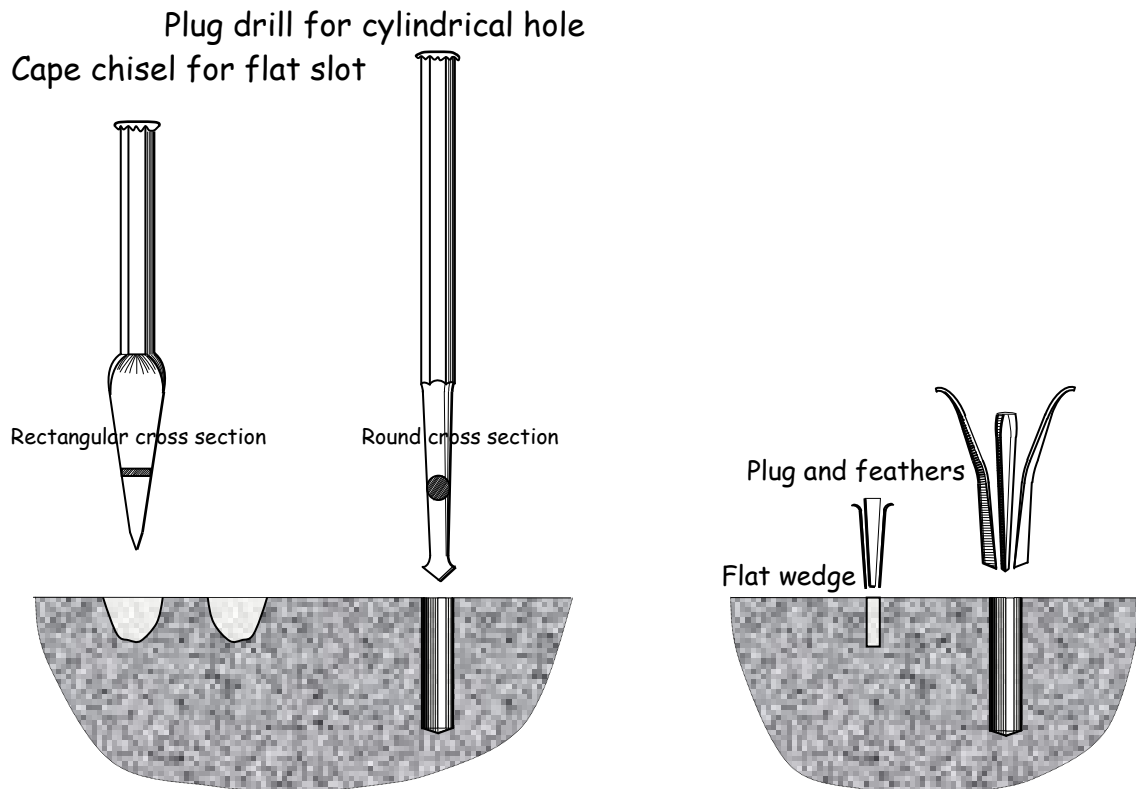
By about 1800, stonecutters in many parts of New England had perfected the basic techniques of finishing and shaping granite. These craftsmen were not only able to split large slabs and posts from boulders, but had also learned to use hammers and chisels to shape the stone to a wide variety of forms, including steps, thresholds, curbs, lintels, columns, watering troughs, and rainwater basins.

In the years just before 1830, a new granite splitting method was introduced. Each method of splitting granite leaves distinctive marks at the edge of the stone, and these marks reveal whether a given piece of granite was quarried or split before or after about 1830.

Prior to about 1830, the procedure for splitting granite entailed the cutting of a line of shallow slots in the face of the stone, using a tool called a cape chisel, struck with a heavy hammer. Small, flat steel wedges were placed between shims of sheet iron and driven into these slots, splitting the stone. The new splitting method of circa 1830 used a “plug drill,” which had a V-shaped point and was rotated slightly between each blow of the hammer, creating a round hole two or three inches deep.

Into this hole were placed a pair of half-round steel shims or “feathers,” and between these was driven a wedge or “plug” which exerted outward pressure and split the stone. The advantage of the “plug-and-feathers” method of splitting was the greater depth within the stone at which the wedges exerted their pressure, thus allowing larger pieces to be split more accurately

The new splitting technology seems to have spread rather rapidly through the granite quarrying centers of New England, although one is likely to find evidence of both old and new methods being used concurrently in stonework of the 1830s, especially in rural areas. The technique employed on a given stone can usually be seen on the split face, and provides some aid in dating granite masonry. The old, flat-wedge method is marked by a series of slot-like depressions which extend inward an inch or so from the edges of the split stone. The plug-and-feathers method leaves a row of rounded holes, two or three inches deep and usually about six inches apart.



The characteristic marks left on the split face of granite by the two methods of splitting are shown above, at the left. When the two types of mark are seen on the same stone, or on adjacent

stones in a wall, the date of circa 1830 is usually assigned to the masonry work. Both types of splitting evidence are seen in the basement walls of the Towle House, with plug drill marks predominating. This would normally lead to a conclusion that the dwelling as it stands was completed around 1830. In the case of Lee and vicinity, a slightly earlier date may be allowed. The earliest evidence of use of the plug drill and plugs and feathers yet seen in New Hampshire occurs in the walls of Mills No. 1 and 2 (1823-25) of the Newmarket Manufacturing Company complex, located just four miles from Wadleigh's Falls. It is clear from this evidence that stonecutters in the vicinity had adopted the plug drill some years before its use was commonplace elsewhere in New Hampshire.

Given the federal style of the details of the Towle house, revealing very little hint of the Greek Revival style that was to appear around 1830, we may estimate a date of shortly before 1830 for the creation of the dwelling as we see it.

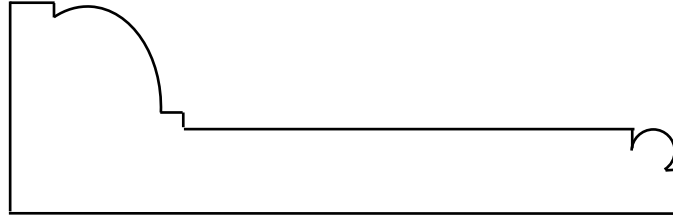
Architectural context: The front portion of the house is an unusual example of a one-room deep, central hall dwelling that exhibits a floor plan that became common in coastal New Hampshire in the early 1800s. One remarkable aspect of this house is its three-story plan. Houses of this type only rarely have a third story; most three-story houses in the New Hampshire seacoast, as well as the few that appear in inland parts of the state, are two rooms in depth. Four similar houses in Portsmouth, all predating the Towle House and built of brick, could have provided prototypes for the Towle House. They are the Morton-Benedict House (1811) on Middle Street; two houses with subordinate kitchen wings at 19 and 20 Atkinson Street; and a house at 74 Deer Street. The Atkinson Street houses were built after the fire of 1813, and the Deer Street house likewise bears the hallmarks of a somewhat later date than the Morton-Benedict House, but all predate the Towle House by a number of years.

Description: The Towle House is composed of two framed structural elements that were joined to create the existing complex and were placed over a fully-excavated, L-shaped cellar. The front portion of the house, a three-story dwelling with a chimney centered at each end and flanked by windows, faces northeasterly toward Wadleigh Falls Road. For the purposes of this report, the façade of the house will be assumed to face due east, and compass directions will be cited accordingly.

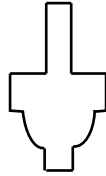
The three-story portion of the Towle House measures about 42 feet in width and 19 feet in depth. It is a framed dwelling with a frame of hewn timbers stiffened by sawn braces. The building stands on a foundation of split granite rubble with carefully hammered underpinning stones visible above grade. Where they are undamaged, the clapboards on this part of the dwelling are largely original; they are skived and overlapped at the ends. Damage that occurred during extinguishment of the fire reveals that most wall cavities of this part of the house are filled with brick nogging, with the bricks bedded in clay-sand mortar.

The building is covered by a low-pitched hipped roof with a deeply projecting cornice. The two chimneys of this portion of the house rise some twelve feet above the roof, emphasizing the verticality of the narrow, three-story end elevations of this component of the dwelling.

The front elevation of the house has five-bay fenestration with a Tuscan doorway centered on the façade. The exterior detailing of this portion of the house is composed of plain but well proportioned moldings that harmonize with the Tuscan detailing of the entrance. The exterior window casings exhibit this profile:



Window sashes are six-over-six on the first and second stories, and six-over-three on the third floor. With few exceptions (or where damaged), the sashes are original, and display a muntin profile that is characteristic of the period between about 1800 and about 1830:



Most exterior window casings on the three-story portion of the house retain iron pintles for exterior window blinds. Some blinds, apparently not original, remain in place on second and third story windows.

The frontispiece or front doorway of the house is a well proportioned Tuscan doorway with the simple moldings that are characteristic of that order. The pilasters that flank the six-panel door and its sidelights are attenuated and exhibit graceful entasis or diminution of width from bottom to top. The Tuscan enframingent encloses a pair of wide, three-light sidelights and a six-light transom sash, all exhibiting the same muntin profile that is seen on the regular window sashes of the house, as shown above. Together, these glazed features flood the stairhall with ample natural light.

The rear ell of the dwelling began its existence as a center-chimney house, measuring about 37 feet in width (east to west) and about 28 feet in depth. The chimney within this frame is laid in clay below the roof and rises through the center of the ridge of the roof. Evidence in the basement, discussed above, reveals that the foundation that supports both the three-story front section of the dwelling and the older rear section was constructed in a single building campaign, apparently dating from just before 1830. Whereas the three-story front section of the dwelling is underpinned with carefully hammered granite, the wing displays brick underpinning wherever the underpinning is visible.

Without further study, it is impossible to determine whether the older dwelling was moved to its present site to serve as the functional ell of the more elegant three-story structure, or always stood on or near its present site, but it seems likely that it was moved from another location and

reoriented to face south rather than toward the adjacent road. At that time, the original floor plan of the older dwelling was altered somewhat, the original chimney was apparently rebuilt to accommodate then-modern fireplaces, and the interior was provided with new joiner's work in the federal style, although in a more basic version of the style than is seen in the three-story section.

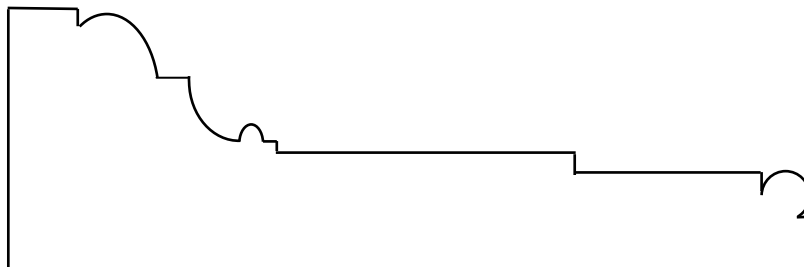
The fenestration of the rear ell is not as regular as that of the three-story portion of the dwelling. This may be partly due to makeshifts that were resorted to when the older house was adapted as a service unit for the complex, but certain changes to the fenestration, including the shifting of the original front door a short distance to the west, have occurred within recent years. It is apparent, too, that sections of the exterior walls of the two-story building have been disrupted for the installation of rigid board insulation from the outside of the building.

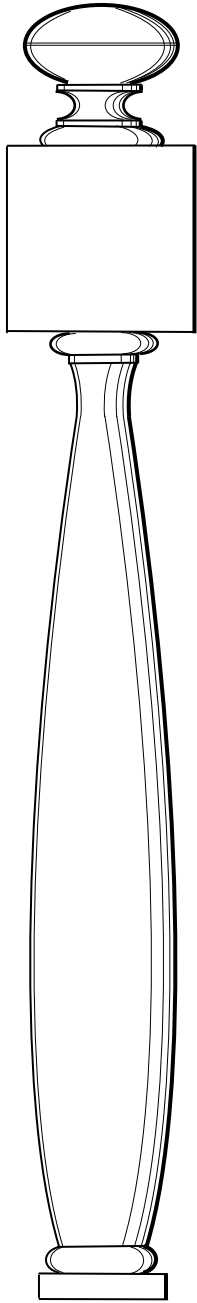
As noted above, the interiors of both the three-story building and the older ell display finish woodwork in the federal style of the early 1800s rather than the 1700s, indicating that the older house was modernized to serve the three-story portion and to harmonize with the style of its interior finish. The older section retains a few raised-panel doors dating from the 1700s; these were evidently retained in service during the remodeling, although visual evidence suggests that they were originally hung on H-hinges that were replaced by cast iron butts during the remodeling. Latches throughout the house are Norfolk thumb latches of a type usually dated around 1830.

The interior finish of the three-story dwelling is of a restrained federal style that utilizes a limited range of molding tools to create visually interesting architectural elements. One indication that this finish dates from around 1830 is provided by the newel and angle posts of the main stairway. Rather than being of a standard columnar profile, as seen in the earlier 1800s, these turnings exhibit a swelled shaft that may be recognized as diagnostic of the later federal period or the early Greek Revival period:

The balusters in this staircase are turned dowels.

The joiner's work in the stairhall, like that elsewhere in the house, attains impressive visual complexity with fairly simple means. As noted above, the joiner who executed the woodwork throughout the house appears to have had a fairly limited array of molding tools, yet employed those tools in an imaginative way to produce details that are characteristic of the federal style. The door casings in the stairhall, in the adjacent north parlor, and on the second floor, for example, have unusual backband moldings that were produced by combining a characteristic federal period cove and bead (used elsewhere, as in the first-floor mantelpieces) with an ovolo molding to create an interesting profile:

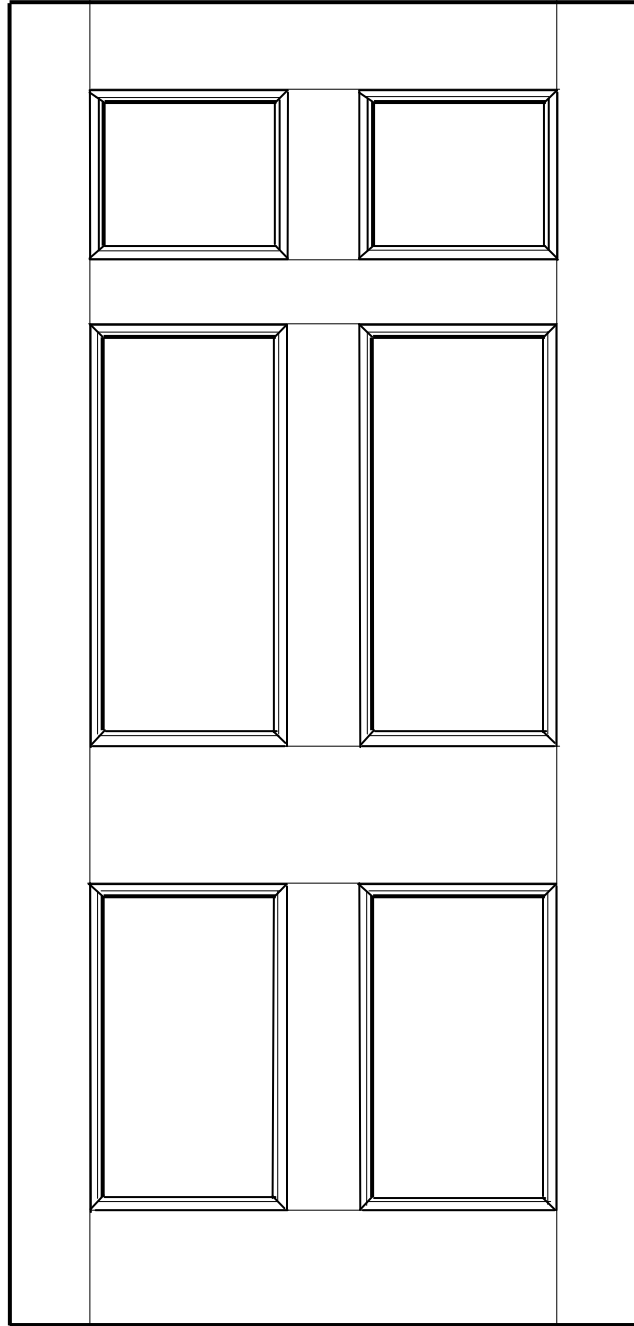




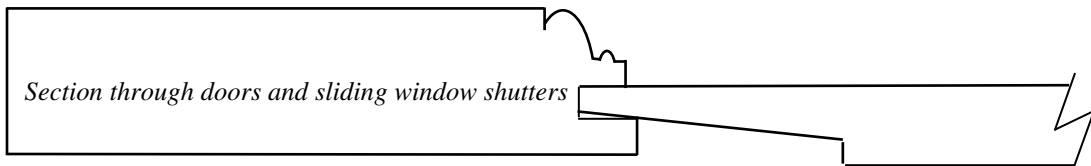
By contrast, the door and window casings in the southern parlor employ a more traditional ogee backband, suggesting that the joiner who finished the house had a tool to make this contour but chose not to use that tool except in this single room:



The house has doors of a standard federal period panel arrangement and cross section in the three-story section. Sliding window shutters on the first floor display the same profile:



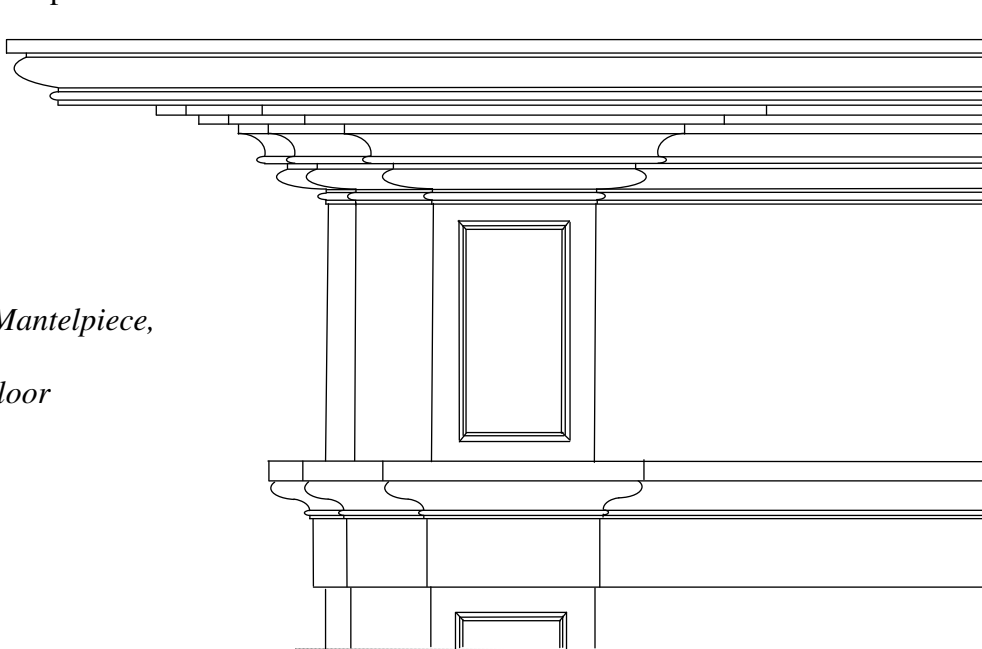
Section through doors and sliding window shutters



The joiner who finished the three-story house conveyed the idea of complexity and variety in his architectural elements. This variety is illustrated by the chimneypieces on the first and second stories. The two mantelpieces on the first floor have flat-paneled pilasters flanking the fireplace openings. This style of chimneypiece was first illustrated by Asher Benjamin in his *The Country Builder's Assistant* of 1797 and later editions (Plate 20), and his *The American Builder's Companion* of 1806 and later editions (Plate 28). This general method of fashioning a mantelpiece remained common until about 1830, when simpler designs in the Greek Revival style began to predominate. The two mantelpieces on the second floor are nearly identical to one another in most respects. Both have board pilasters, rather than flat-paneled pilasters, to support their mantelshelves. Yet the pilasters in the northern chamber are reeded, while those in the south chamber are flat. This simple difference creates a very different overall appearance in the two mantelpieces.

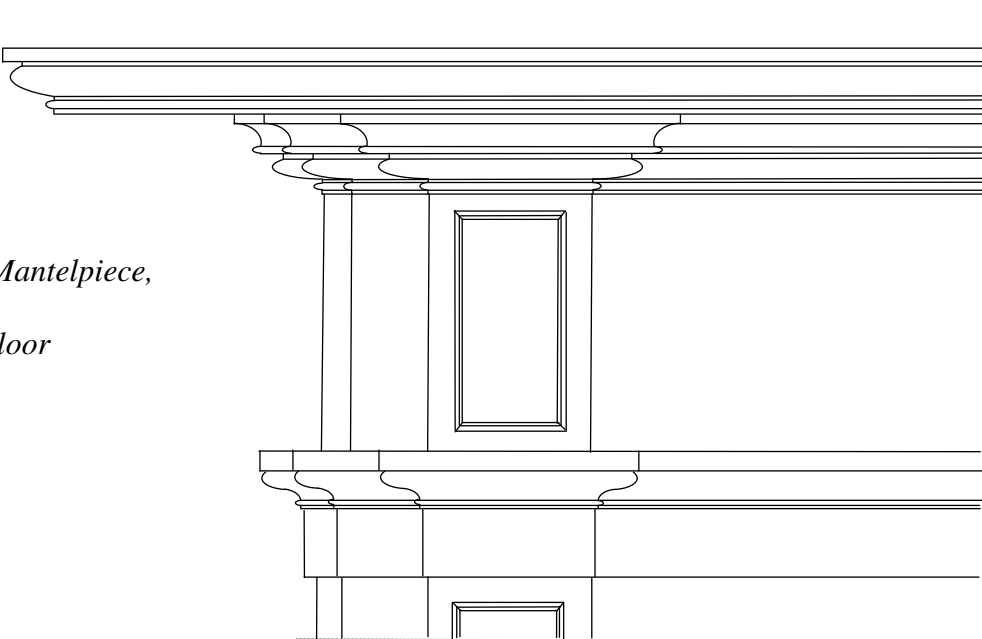
North Mantelpiece,

First Floor

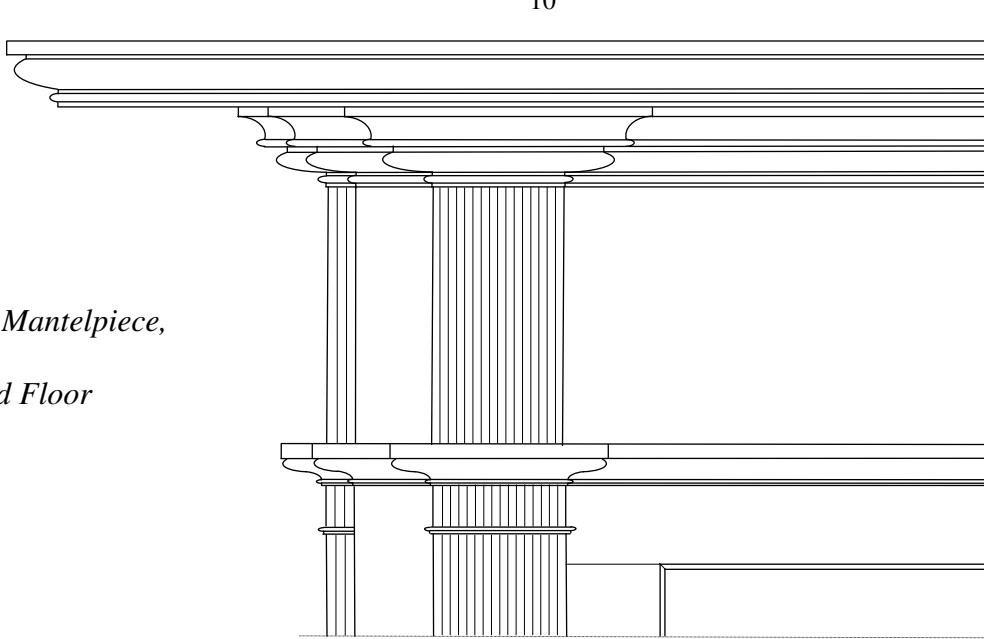


South Mantelpiece,

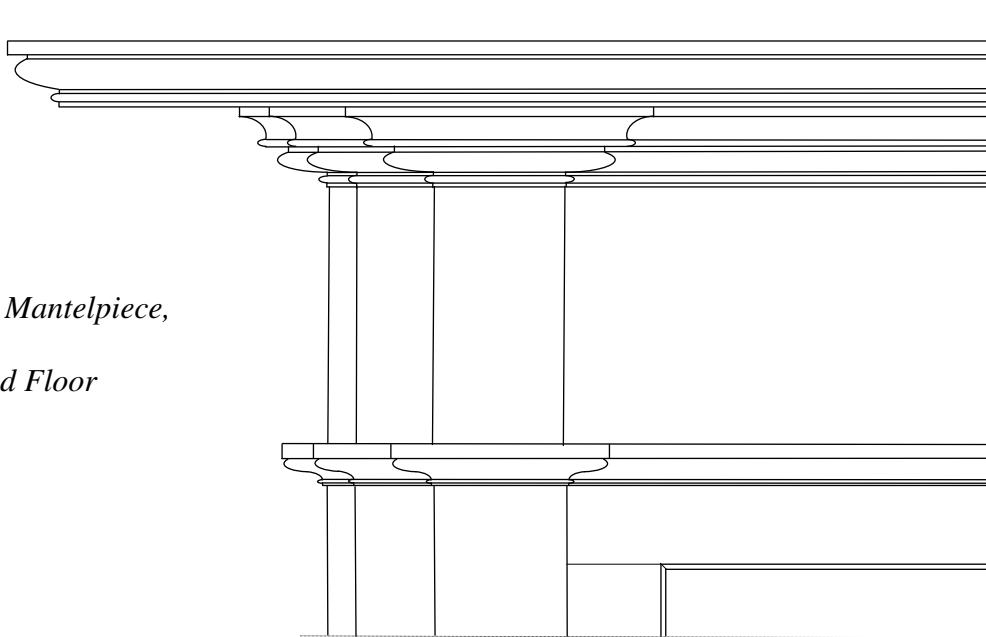
First Floor



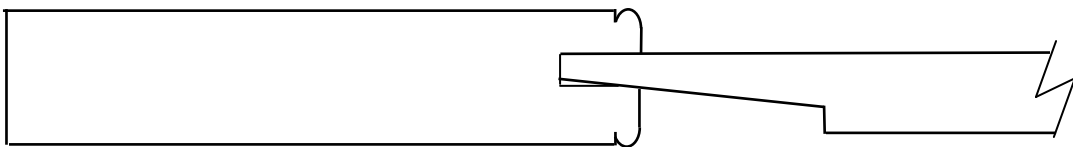
*North Mantelpiece,
Second Floor*



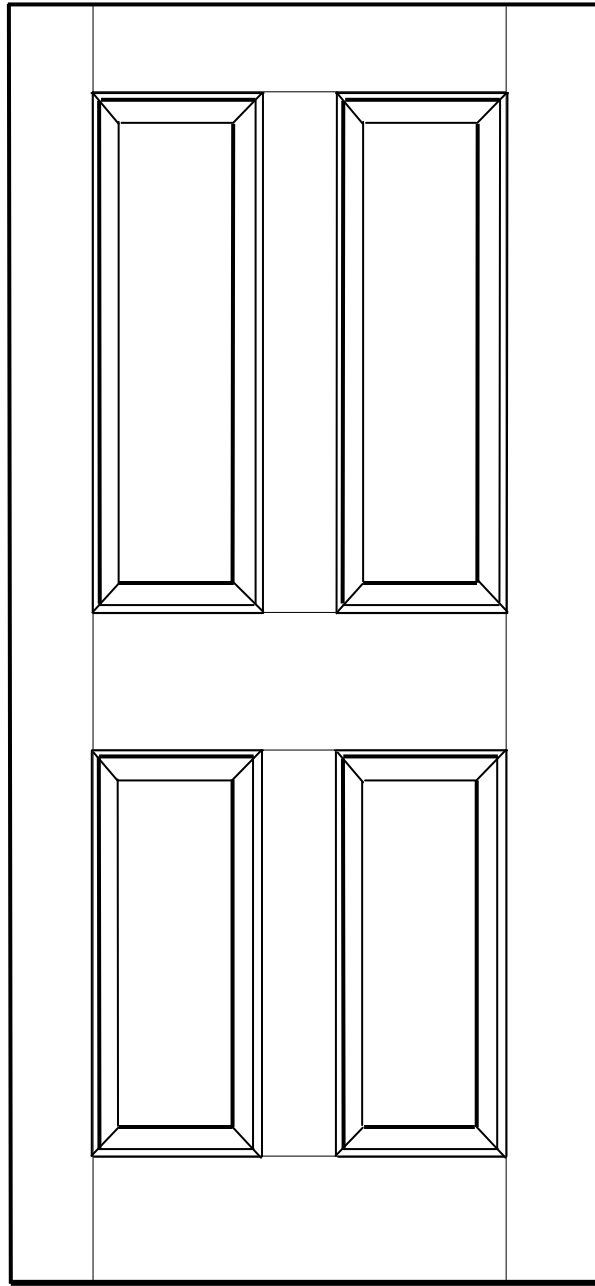
*South Mantelpiece,
Second Floor*



By contrast with the elaborated form of federal style door seen in the three-story section of the dwelling, the older house has a few examples of the simplest form of federal style door. These doors have four panels, each surrounded with a simple, thin bead instead of an elaborated molding:



The older house also retains a few eighteenth-century four-panel doors with raised panels:



Section through four-panel 18th-century doors



These older doors were apparently retained from the center-chimney dwelling when it was remodeled. There are hung with cast iron butts rather than H hinges, but nail marks from former H hinges appear to be visible as irregularities in the paint on the doors.

It appears that the central chimney of the older house was largely if not completely rebuilt when that house became an appendage to the three-story unit. The central chimney has two cooking fireplaces with ovens: one on the basement, facing west, and one directly above it in the westerly room of the older house. Both have ovens to the left of the cooking hearths, and these ovens are equipped with separate flues. The basement oven has a hinged, cast iron door with fans or paterae that reflect the style of the later federal period; the oven on the first floor has a sheet iron stopper, reflecting an older method of retaining heat in the oven after firing.

There is an extensive larder or pantry behind the base of the chimney in the basement, largely filled with tiers of hand-planed wooden shelves for food storage. Food storage on this scale strengthens the possibility that this house served as a public house or tavern.

Other fireplaces in the central chimney heat first- and second-story rooms on the eastern side of the older house; the second floor room on the west (now partly subdivided by a modern partition) appears to have been left unheated.

The likelihood that this chimney was rebuilt in the period around 1830 is strengthened by the fact that its fireplaces are shallow, with strongly splayed cheeks. This is a federal-period fireplace design, commonly called the "Rumford fireplace" after Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, its proponent. The fireboxes of these fireplaces differ from the deeper, squarer designs of the eighteenth century, and radiate heat more efficiently into the room, economizing on firewood consumption.

As shown by the brief biographical sketch that follows, Gardner Towle attained prominence in Lee, being entrusted with several public offices. He was undoubtedly wealthy by local standards, and the three-story addition to the older house proclaimed that wealth. Much more could be learned about his life from research in deeds and perhaps in court records. He owned a water privilege at the falls, and the details of his use of that water power might well be determined with further research. His house had all the physical attributes of a tavern, and it would be important to try to discover if it was ever licensed as a public house.

Despite the current gaps in our knowledge, it is clear that the Gardner Towle House is a highly important element in the architectural legacy of Lee and the Lamprey River watershed. The building deserves every effort at its preservation and interpretation as a monument of local history.

SOME NOTES ON GARDNER TOWLE (1791-1880)

Because the physical evidence cited above identifies Gardner Towle as the person who built the three-story portion of the dwelling and brought the property to the form in which we see it today, the following facts are appended to this report as further context for the house.

Gardner Towle was born on March 3, 1791, in Epping, New Hampshire, the son of Levi Towle.³ In 1809 or 1810, Towle married Elizabeth (Betsy) Fogg (born December 3, 1794) in Newbury, Massachusetts.⁴ The Towles at first lived in Epping; their first child, Elizabeth, was born there on October 10, 1811.⁵ They had moved to Lee by 1814 when their second child, Mary Ann, was born in that town on January 2, 1814. They may have settled in the older house that eventually became the ell or wing of the Gardner Towle House. A publication of 1916 asserts that

The Esquire Steele house is what was known later as the Gardner Towle house. It was probably built soon after the close of the Revolutionary war by Esq. Steele, who was a prominent and wealthy man in his time. Mr. Towle was also a prominent citizen of Lee for a number of years. In the latter part of his life he lived in Exeter.⁶

This implies that the Towles purchased and lived in the older Steele House before Elizabeth Towle's birth in Lee in 1814. The physical evidence cited in this report indicates that the three-story house was built circa 1830 and that the older house was remodeled at that time. If the older Steele House and the Gardner Towle House are in fact the same property, the 1916 publication provides the identity of the older house and offers an approximate date for its construction. As noted in this report, the thoroughness of the remodeling of circa 1830 makes it difficult to date the frame and other remaining features of the older house from physical evidence alone.

Gardner and Elizabeth Towle had the following children:⁷

Elizabeth, born October 10, 1811
 Mary Ann, born January 2, 1814
 Franklin G., born August 6, 1817
 George P., born October 2, 1819
 John F., born April 21, 1822

³ William Haslet Jones, *Philip Towle, Hampton, New Hampshire: His English Origins and Some American Descendants* (Westminster, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc.), pp.59-60.

⁴ Two different dates for the Towle-Fogg marriage are given. Jones, in *Philip Towle*, gives the marriage date as September 7, 1809, at Newbury, Massachusetts. A needlework family record apparently wrought by a Towle daughter gives the date January 4, 1810 (Northeast Auctions, *Annual Summer Americana Auction, July 31-August 2, 2009*, Lot #436).

⁵ Family record.

⁶ *Old Home Week, Lee, New Hampshire, August 23, 1916: Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of Settlement of the Territory, One Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of Incorporation of the Town*, p. 45.

⁷ Family record; William Haslet Jones, *Philip Towle*.

Levi G., born September 12, 1824
 Sarah Josephine, born October 3, 1827

Gardner Towle attained some prominence in Lee. He was elected to the New Hampshire House of Representatives in 1823, 1825, and 1832-3.⁸ He was appointed colonel in the 25th Regiment of militia in 1831, and used that title until his death.⁹ He was appointed postmaster of Wadleigh's Falls (a political appointment) in 1837.¹⁰

Towle's first wife, Elizabeth, died after giving birth to Sarah Josephine Towle in October 1827.¹¹ Towle married, second, Hannah Duncan Ela of Portsmouth, on May 12, 1831. She was born, probably in Portsmouth, on April 4, 1802, the daughter of Joseph Ela and Sarah Emerson Ela.¹² Gardner and Hannah Towle had the following children

Hamilton Ela, born June 24, 1833
 Henry Richard, born March 11, 1839¹³

:

Hamilton Ela Towle became an eminent civil engineer in Boston, specializing in the design of naval facilities and railroads.¹⁴

Gardner Towle himself became interested in promoting railroads. In July 1845, he was appointed to a committee representing Lee's interest in the proposed construction of the Portsmouth and Concord Railroad. In November 1845, Towle was chosen a member of the board of managers of that new corporation.¹⁵

Lee's 1916 Old Home Week publication states that Towle lived in Exeter "in the latter part of his life." He was living in Exeter by November, 1866, when he offered land on Prospect Hill to the local Episcopal parish for a new church.¹⁶

In September, 1867, Dr. Isaiah Edgerly and Son, makers of botanic medicines from Strafford, purchased the former Gardener Towle House and the water privilege that belonged to the property. Their mill for grinding and preparing botanic medicines at

⁸ *Laws of New Hampshire, Vol. 9, Second Constitutional Period, 1821-1828* (Concord, N. H.: Evans Printing Co., 1921), pp. 171, 383; *Ibid.*, Vol. 10, 1829-1835 (Concord, N. H.: Evans Printing Co., 1922), p.288.

⁹ *Dover Gazette and Strafford Advertiser* (Dover, N. H.), July 12, 1831, "Executive Appointments, June 1831."

¹⁰ *New-Hampshire Statesman and State Journal* (Concord, N. H.), May 20, 1837.

¹¹ Lulu B. Walker, Martha B. Walker, Mae E. Burpee, "Burial Places in the Town of Lee, N. H., Including Old Parish Cemetery on Mast Road & Town Cemetery on Lee Hill, N. H.," 1938 (New Hampshire Historical Society), p. 57 (records for Wadleigh's Falls Cemeteries). Elizabeth Towle died in 1827, exact date unspecified.

¹² David Hough Ela, *Genealogy of the Ela Family: Descendants of Israel Ela, of Haverhill, Massachusetts* (Manchester, Conn.: Elwood S. Ela, 1896), p. 15.

¹³ William Haslet Jones, *Philip Towle*, p.60. This source mistakenly identifies Hamilton Ela Towle as a child of the deceased Elizabeth Towle.

¹⁴ James Forrest, ed., *Minutes of Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers; With Other Selected and Abstracted Papers*, Vol. 67 (London: by the Institution, 1882), pp. 411-13; *Old Home Week, Lee, New Hampshire, August 23, 1916*, p. 45; David Hough Ela, *Genealogy of the Ela Family*, p. 15.

¹⁵ *Dover Gazette and Strafford Advertiser* (Dover, N. H.), August 2, 1846; *New-Hampshire Statesman and State Journal* (Concord, N. H.), November 7, 1845; Robert M. Lindsell, *The Rail Lines of Northern New England* (Pepperell, Mass.: Branch Line Press, 2000), pp. 127-29.

¹⁶ *New-Hampshire Statesman* (Concord, N. H.), November 9, 1866.

Edgerly's Falls in Strafford had burned the preceding January.¹⁷ As shown by stenciled lettering on walls in the Gardner Towle House, Edgerly prepared and marketed "pure cassia" among other medicines.

Gardner Towle died in Exeter on May 27, 1880, aged 89 years, 2 months, and 24 days. His widow, Hannah, died in New Jersey on June 6, 1889.¹⁸

¹⁷ *New-Hampshire Statesman* (Concord, N. H.), September 6, 1867, "New Hampshire Items."

¹⁸ David Hough Ela, *Genealogy of the Ela Family*, p. 15.