

An Early Well House, Sturbridge, Massachusetts

By JOHN OBED CURTIS

DESPITE the ravages of time, fire, and urban renewal, enough early houses have survived until comparatively recent time for students and antiquarians to develop a fairly comprehensive picture of stylistic trends and construction techniques. But what of the accessory buildings that served the human needs of the former occupants of the surviving houses? What of the sheds, smoke-houses, privies, and well houses? The refinements of an advancing civilization have eliminated the need for such outbuildings and the natural consequence has been the gradual elimination of the buildings themselves.

Contemporary accounts of diarists and travelers usually afford little attention to the mundane matter of purely utilitarian buildings. Therefore, when such a building comes to light, it is of considerable interest to the serious historic house enthusiast.

The well house standing on the Alpheus Wight Farm on Main Street in Sturbridge is such a building, for it dates from the closing years of the eighteenth century. A search of the Sturbridge Town Records establishes only that there was an Alpheus Wight paying taxes on this farm as early as 1792. There is no breakdown as to house, barn or outbuildings. Regrettably, the structure is no longer

standing on its original foundation, and the original well curbs, if still present, are incorporated in a poured concrete slab. Though not on its original foundation, it is quite assuredly on its original site, for Mr. Alpheus Wight who is now in his ninety-second year, cannot remember it having ever been moved. The well, which Mr. Wight judges to be approximately 30' in depth, is neatly stoned with field stone and is still open and useable.

Originally the building was framed with chestnut timbers. Of these, the rafters, plates and the major portions of the corner posts remain. The sills have been replaced at a comparatively recent date for they are 6" x 6" circular-sawn oak. The lower extremities of the four corner posts have also been replaced at various times with lengths of pine and oak. The over-all length of the posts is 74 $\frac{1}{4}$ " from sill to plate. The mortise joints at the plate remain; the lower ones have been lost due to replacement of the sills. The chestnut plates are 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ " and are mortised at the corners. There are four chestnut rafter units, three in the building proper and one framing the overhang. (See photo.) These are 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 3" and mortise into the top of the north and south plates. The over-all height of the building is 105" from ground to peak of roof and the ground plan is 50" square.

The hoisting mechanism for raising the bucket is typically eighteenth century in its manner of construction. The wheel which holds the rope is made in oak seg-

EDITORIAL NOTE: The author, who helped during the 1959-1960 season in the installation of the Society's architectural museum, is now Curator of Architecture at Old Sturbridge Village.

ments with applied flanges of pine to keep the rope aligned as it is wound onto the drum. The outside diameter of these flanges is 30". The shaft on which the wheel is mounted is an oak timber hewn to eight sides. It tapers to a round section at the ends and is bound with narrow ($\frac{3}{8}$ " wide) wrought-iron bands. This style of shafting appears in the plates of the Diderot Encyclopedia and in the 1795 book on millwrighting by Oliver Evans. The shaft ends are let into the inner faces of the north and south plates. At the north plate it simply seats in a socket, while at the south plate, means are provided for its removal by a short length of oak which is nailed to the underside of the plate and closes the gain which receives the shaft. The nails used for this are hand wrought and appear to have never been disturbed. At the shaft end opposite the wheel is affixed a broad leather strap ($3\frac{3}{8}$ " wide by almost $\frac{3}{16}$ " thick) which carries the counterweight to ease the lifting of a full bucket. This weight is a good-sized field stone, drilled through and fastened by a wrought-iron yoke to the belt. Innumerable tacks embedded in the shaft testify to many replacements of the leather belt through the years.

The north and east sides of the building are sheathed completely, while the south and west sides are sheathed from ground level to a height of $35\frac{1}{2}$ ". The openings on these two sides are $40\frac{1}{2}$ " to the top of the arch. New England weather dictated the placement of the openings; the closed sides shield the well against the nor'easter and the south and west placement of the openings receive the long afternoon sun as well as allow the user access on the lee side of the building. All the sheathing boards are 50" long and

cover in one stretch the sides of the structure. They vary considerably in width; the widest being 22" to 25" and show up-and-down saw marks on their inner unpainted surfaces. The exterior surfaces of these original boards show considerable erosion and are painted white at present. The east wall is the only one in which the sheathing is half lapped, perhaps as an extra weather seal, and here the wall is presumably a replacement in its entirety. Replacement it may be, but certainly an old one for the nails are squareheaded cut nails of the early nineteenth-century type. These east wallboards are considerably narrower (10"-15") than the originals in the other three walls. There are two boards in the north wall showing circular saw marks on their inner surfaces which are obviously the most recent replacements. They are secured by common wire nails. The earliest sheathing examples are $1\frac{1}{16}$ " strong in thickness and boast wrought nails. All weather boarding is pine.

The "spout," projecting $13\frac{1}{2}$ " out from the north side of the building, is either a comparatively recent addition or is entirely a replacement. All nails in it are round wire common nails, and the boards are of a conventional thickness. This spout provided a means for emptying the filled bucket inside the well house; the water would then run down the spout and into a second bucket outside—a clever device to eliminate the need for lifting the heavy full bucket over the waist-high well house wall.

There is one original or very early molding in situ along the eaves on the north side of the building. It is a very shallow triangle in section, with the shortest side tucked up under the overhang of the roof. It is not, as first suspected, a clap-

board laid upside down. It is 3" high. The comparable molding along the eaves on the south side is missing.

The verge boards are put on with wrought nails except where repairs have been made on the west gable end. Here wire nails have been used. The roof is now covered with slate-asphalt shingles



WELL HOUSE, ALPHEUS WIGHT FARM,
STURBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS
(SOUTH SIDE)

Photograph by the author.

laid on over wooden shingles. The visible butt ends of the wooden shingles prove them to be modern. It is quite possible that the roofers are original due to their discoloration and the great number of nails run through them.

From such a simply conceived building as this little well house it is difficult to draw many conclusions as to date of the building based on stylistic detail. However, there are certain factors which should serve to substantiate a late eight-

eenth-century date. Among these are the complete absence of any architectural detail suggesting the Greek Revival school of the early nineteenth century. The single molding under the north eave is not a Greek Revival profile. There is no horizontal fascia board at either of the gable ends which would complete a classical tympanum. The verge boards continue past the sides of the building in following the line of the overhang. These stylistic elements together with the structural details all point to construction predating the 1820-1845 period.

A further rather interesting design element is the shape of the two openings in the west and south sides providing access to the well proper. This form, roughly a square surmounted by a half circle, is one which appears in several contexts during the eighteenth century. It is a familiar shape for tall clock faces and grave markers. It also appears in more sophisticated examples of feather-edged paneling particularly in the Connecticut River Valley area and into Connecticut.

All in all, the building is in an excellent state of preservation and all members appear to be sound. There is considerable evidence of repair and replacement, but all assuredly valid, for the building shows no sign of radical change in its original form or fabric. The remaining original elements are certainly conclusive evidence to date it possibly very early nineteenth, but more likely late eighteenth century as the applied metal date on the west gable end would hopefully suggest.

An interesting footnote to this discussion of an early well house is the following letter received from Mrs. Foster Stearns of Exeter, New Hampshire, who, as a girl of six to twelve, used to spend summers on the Wight Farm in Sturbridge. In part she says:

“That farm hadn’t changed in any detail, I do believe, since before the Civil War. Uncle Abner, Alpheus’ father, was a wounded veteran, and still carried on as before as long as he lived. . . .

“ . . . in one corner of the kitchen there was a big tank coming about up to one’s waist, where water was stored, and a big trout caught by Alpheus was kept in it, presumably to keep the water sweet. I can’t tell you how the supply was kept up, but perhaps he could remember. Outside by the back door, there was a rain water

barrel. The well, under a little gable roof, was not far away in the yard (maybe this well water filled the tank) and it was on a slight mound and banked up high enough so that ‘toddlers couldn’t topple’ at all easily.

“There was a soapstone sink in the kitchen with no drain, which had to be filled and emptied by hand three times a day or so, and carefully swabbed out. Also, built on the back of the wood burning kitchen stove, was a tank always full of hot water.”