

# Architectural Change in Colonial Rhode Island: The Mott House as a Case Study<sup>1</sup>

DELL UPTON

The history of vernacular architecture in early New England was a history of local, then regional, synthesis. In the seventeenth century, New England's builders transformed a heterogeneous collection of provincial English building types and technologies into several relatively homogeneous local American architectures, still firmly based in English traditions but imitating no one of them nor each other exactly.<sup>2</sup> These intensely local forms were gradually supplanted by regional ones in the eighteenth century. Nowhere is this process of synthesis and replacement more evident than in Rhode Island. There a local tradition based on plank framing, a principal-rafter-and-purlin roof structure and a single-cell additive plan flourished briefly in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, only to give way to a New England-wide system characterized most strikingly by the familiar double-pile, central chimney mass with a five-bay, symmetrical facade. This article will illuminate that change by examining a single building in the context of Rhode Island vernacular architecture between the middle of the seventeenth and the middle of the eighteenth centuries.

The Mott House (fig. 1) was located on a 100-acre tract of land on the west shore of Aquidneck Island in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. The original 130-acre holding assembled by Adam Mott, Sr. and his descendants between 1640 and the final division of the Portsmouth town lands in 1713/4 remained in family hands until 1895 and was undivided until 1909, when the U.S. Navy purchased thirty peripheral acres from the southern edge of the farm.<sup>3</sup>

In 1973, the house was moved from its

site.<sup>4</sup> Once the successive strata of the fabric had been removed, it became clear that the history of the house was more complex than was at first apparent. The earliest surviving portion of the building, dating from the third or fourth quarter of the seventeenth century, was possibly the oldest timber-framed structure standing in Rhode Island, but the house had achieved its final form in two further builds in the early and mid eighteenth century, and also through innumerable minor alterations which continued until it was abandoned in 1969. Systematic disassembly provided a rare opportunity to study this structural complexity.

## I

The Motts came to Portsmouth at the time of its establishment in 1638 and were freemen of the town and colony from the beginning. The town was founded by out-cast Massachusetts Bay merchants who hoped to see it become a thriving port, but a splinter group usurped that role for Newport. Portsmouth thereupon sank into a quiet agricultural existence which persisted through the remainder of the seventeenth century. In this insular atmosphere, the Motts evolved from a family unable to care for its patriarch (who became a town

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Dell Upton is architectural historian for the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission and has taught at Brown University and George Washington University. He recently completed his Ph.D. thesis on the early vernacular architecture of southeastern Virginia for the American Civilization program at Brown University, and has published articles and reviews in *Folklore Forum*, *APT Bulletin*, *AIA Journal*, *Southern Exposure*, and other journals.



FIG. 1. THE MOTT HOUSE FROM THE EAST, 1973. The two south windows (left) mark the seventeenth-century section. (Photograph by Jan Armor.)

charge), to one whose head served as a representative to the colonial legislature.<sup>5</sup>

Adam Mott, Sr. (d. 1661) probably built a house on his new farm in 1640, the year that he received a grant from the town, subject to the customary stipulation that a dwelling be built on it within one year.<sup>6</sup> During the next half century Jacob Mott I (1635-1711/2) built a single-room, story-and-a-half structure about sixteen feet square adjacent to the original house, possibly for the use of one of his sons (fig. 2).<sup>7</sup>

This small building was demolished in the early eighteenth century and replaced by a two-story structure, but enough evidence remained to suggest its form and to indicate that it had been a stone ender, a distinctive Rhode Island house type with a projecting end chimney similar to those found on the extant Clemence-Irons and Thomas Fenner houses.<sup>8</sup>

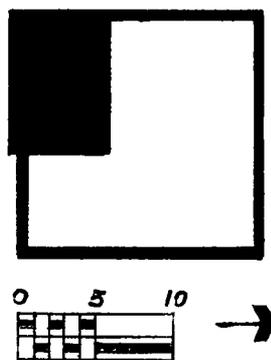


FIG. 2. FIRST STAGE OF THE MOTT HOUSE, BEFORE CA. 1680. This tiny house was demolished in the early eighteenth century, but enough evidence remained to determine its size and the location of its chimney. Here and in figures 3 and 6 only those door and fireplace openings for which evidence survived in 1973 have been indicated, and all window openings have been omitted. (Drawing by author.)

A large addition, the earliest surviving part of the house, was built about 1680 (fig. 3). It was a two-story building framed with studs. Like its predecessor, it originally had a single large room in each story, and an enormous stone end chimney. At first there was a second-story jetty, or overhang, twenty-one inches deep on the east end. This was an unusual but not unknown feature in early New England. In most jettied houses, the overhangs were on a long side, or on both a long side and the gable ends.<sup>9</sup> Significant portions of the original roof framing of this 1680 section were intact in 1973 (fig. 4).

There had been four principal-rafter trusses, with thirteen closely spaced purlins (members lying in the plane of the roof and connecting the trusses) let into channels in the backs of the rafters. The apex of the one complete truss had been uncoupled and the rafters declined from their original 52-degree pitch to the lesser 49-degree pitch of the south slope of an eighteenth-century roof that they then supported. Other pieces also helped to support the newer roof.<sup>10</sup> Inside, each room was decorated with vertical sheathing and had elaborate moldings along the leading edges of the exposed structural members in the ceiling (fig. 5).<sup>11</sup> A winder stair, supported on the chimney, ascended in the southwest corner of the chimney bay of the new house.

Between approximately 1725 and 1730, the second Jacob Mott (1661-1736/7) undertook drastic alterations to the family house. A mature man when he inherited the farm in 1711 or 1712, he had to accommodate several of his eight children and probably his mother in the small building. Ultimately he demolished the original section of the house (fig. 2) and replaced it with a two-story, single-room ell, a formally up-to-date version of the earlier house to which it was attached, and built a kitchen lean-to at the rear of the new room (fig. 6).

Structurally this latest section was very different from the earlier portions of the house. Where they had been stud-framed,

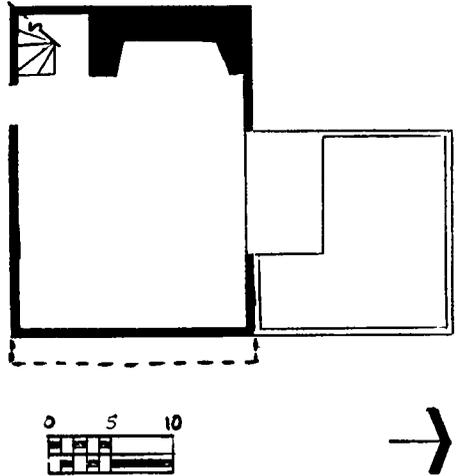


FIG. 3. THE MOTT HOUSE, CA. 1680. A large stone-end house (solid lines) has been added to the south of the original structure (hollow lines) and the principal entrance is now on its south side. Dotted line indicates location of jetty. (Drawing by author.)

that is, with the exterior and interior finish attached to light vertical members positioned at intervals between the major structural posts, the new wing was plank-framed (fig. 7). Closely set vertical planks about 1½ inches thick and 12 to 18 inches wide, and extending from top to bottom of the frame, were pegged at intervals to the major horizontal framing members. No studs were used, and the interior and exterior coverings were attached directly to the planks.

In the entrance of this newest section a stair with flat sawn balusters was installed. It was needed to replace the one in the chimney bay of the 1680 house, for, when he built his addition, Jacob Mott II made extensive changes to that section as well. He tore down the massive stone chimney at its west end and set off the chimney bay as a separate room. The other stone chimney base (belonging to the demolished original room) was reworked, its flues rerouted, and a replacement fireplace provided for the 1680 hall.<sup>12</sup> The stack was rebuilt in



FIG. 4. ROOF STRUCTURE OF THE MOTT HOUSE. Within the mid-eighteenth-century hipped roof, a complete 1680 truss with its thirteen purlin mortises (center) survives, along with a rafter from the 1725 addition (lower left). (Photograph by Jan Armor.)

brick from the second-floor level to allow for fireplaces in the upper chambers. A large brick kitchen fireplace in the new lean-to was attached to the older base. Finally, the jetty was removed and the new wing tied to the old by two twenty-one-inch-long, inch-and-a-half-thick iron spikes, driven through the adjacent posts of the two sections at second-story level.

The house stood in this form for only twenty or twenty-five years. The next owner, Jacob Mott III (1690-1781), enlarged it still further. He removed the kitchen lean-to and its adjacent open shed and put a two-story, full-length addition across the rear (fig. 8). A new roof with a hip at the south end covered the whole, and the new principal (east) facade took the five-opening, central-entry "Georgian" form

which distinguished much American domestic architecture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>13</sup> With the exception of minor alterations and the addition of a kitchen ell in the mid nineteenth century, no other changes were made to the Mott House until it was demolished.

## II

Few American houses have had so complex or so rapidly changing a history or have incorporated such varied plan forms and structural systems into one building. Yet on the surface of it there is little about the Mott House that seems surprising. With the exception of the plank frame every feature of the house can be identified as English vernacular building.<sup>14</sup>



FIG. 5. 1680 HALL. The molded summer beam and joists are visible at the top of the photograph. In the center is the central chimney, with the door to the 1725 entry at the right. (Photograph by Jan Armor.)

The earliest settlers in Rhode Island, like those elsewhere in the American colonies, brought with them a variety of local English building practices, all drawn from a single tradition. The most recent work on English vernacular architecture makes this unity clear. In most instances new forms tended to appear in all parts of England at about the same time. Regionalism owed less to geographical determinism or to prehistoric ethnic origins than to the coincidence of an available form with local social and economic conditions that permitted extensive building among the middling sorts of people at a given time in any one region.<sup>15</sup>

The seventeenth century was an era of great building activity in many parts of England, and areas which had formerly been too poor to support much substantial

housing experienced extensive campaigns of new building and the rebuilding of many older structures. At that time house forms like the three-unit (hall-parlor-service) dwelling, which had formerly been concentrated in the wealthier southeast of England, began to appear in numbers throughout the country. Even men who occupied one-room houses were frequently able to build fine ones.

In many ways, the transfer of British traditions to America can be thought of as part of this rebuilding: as an introduction of new forms into the outlying British provinces. But there were significant differences. The English settlers in New England were building entirely from memory, with only their knowledge of folk traditions in their home regions to guide them. The sub-

tle but powerful restraints which affect men building in physical proximity to old houses constructed in a traditional manner were relaxed in the New World. Elements from diverse British localities were re-shaped into a group of local American architectures not exactly like any in Europe. That is, English vernacular practices were selectively retained, deleted, and amalgamated in a process more radical than any involved in the contemporary English rebuilding. Many factors were at work to facilitate this Americanization, New Englandization, and Rhode Islandization of English peasant building, but it was the underlying conceptual unity of the apparently disparate English forms, the unity of "the formal laws which order all possible combinations of elements," that made this radical reworking possible.<sup>16</sup>

Much of the regionalization process was the result of positive selection based on geographical and environmental factors. Stone building was possible only in Rhode Island and adjacent parts of Plymouth Colony and Connecticut because there were no suitable deposits of stone elsewhere in southern New England. Similarly, some minority practices in England tended to become dominant here because they were preadapted to the new environmental conditions, and appeared to serve their functions better than more conventional building practices did.<sup>17</sup> The use of lapped boards for covering buildings, for example, was occasionally found in England but it was early on perceived as the most convenient means of cladding surfaces in America. It was also a way of ridding the land of trees. Coming from a country where timber was becoming scarce, English settlers in North America first saw its forests, containing the "goodliest Woods," as a source of great potential wealth, and timber was one of the first products exported from each colony. Soon however unmixed enthusiasm for timber as a resource was tempered by the recognition

that trees were impediments to other uses of the land, especially agriculture. As early as 1622 one tract writer suggested that in America "wasting of Woods is an ease and benefit to the planter." Extensive use of lapped-board surfaces, both interior and exterior, a practice which appeared in the first decades of settlement in New England, Canada, and Virginia, was one manifestation of the lavish use of wood which was the Europeans' response both to the need for tightly built houses and to the mixed blessing of the North American forest.<sup>18</sup>

Some local English forms were probably employed only because many of the residents or the craftsmen of a particular settlement happened to have come from that area of England. The use of many small purlins let into the backs of the rafters is reminiscent of roofing traditions stemming from the north and west of England. Possibly its use in the Mott House and a few other seventeenth-century Rhode Island buildings could be traced to a group of carpenters from the north or west of England. But choices such as these remain of merely incidental interest unless they can be shown to be more than happenstance; it is their stability or alteration when challenged by other forms that is significant.

The Mott House, where the purlins were set at twelve-inch intervals, suggests that the English system of structural purlins let into the backs of the rafters was combined conceptually with the thatch-purlin idea. The latter were light poles spiked to the backs of rafters and used to tie on the bundles of reeds that comprised the thatch itself. The result of this meld was a useful way of fastening the long wooden shingles to create a tight roof.<sup>19</sup> But this roof, though tight, was not as cheap or as easy to frame as another kind which was later imported from eastern Massachusetts, whereupon multipurlined roofs ceased to be built.

The importation of this new roof framing

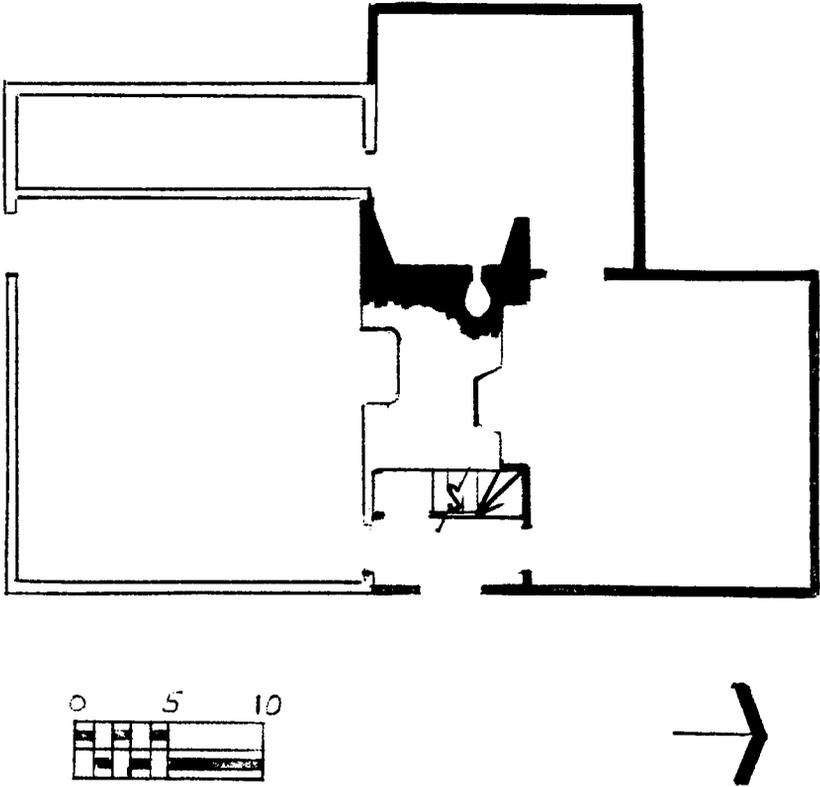


FIG. 6. JACOB MOTT II'S HOUSE, CA. 1725. The original dwelling (fig. 2) has been demolished and replaced by a new parlor and a kitchen leanto (both shown with solid walls). (Drawing by author.)

style illuminates another aspect of the creation of a local Rhode Island architecture. Local and regional environmental factors as well as circumstantial ones filtered English vernacular tradition, eliminating or downplaying certain aspects of it and emphasizing others. These shifted emphases and altered preferences were often reinforced by accidents of subsequent settlement patterns and regional economic development. The new contextual circumstances contributed to the generation of

new forms and often reduced the likelihood of the reemergence of the neglected ones. In the case of Rhode Island, initial settlement by Massachusetts and the use of building forms popular there gave way to other ties with neighboring Plymouth Colony.

This is evident in the roof and wall framing of the successive portions of the Mott House. The initial settlement of southern New England from Massachusetts Bay introduced into eastern Connecticut and

Rhode Island the building systems used in the earliest section of the Mott House. Subsequent connections with Plymouth Colony resulted in the introduction of different structural systems which were employed in later additions to the house. The former connection is evident in the multi-purlined roof, which was also familiar in Connecticut. But in the late seventeenth century the simpler system that then dominated eastern Massachusetts came to Rhode Island by way of Plymouth Colony. It consisted of principal rafters with three to five large through purlins (purlins that did not break at each rafter) set into channels in the backs of the rafters as in the Mott House roof.<sup>20</sup> Roofing boards running from ridge to eaves were nailed to the purlins, and the shingles to the boards. A roof with another insulating layer was thus achieved and at the same time the necessity of aligning and cutting 104 separate purlin mortises was eliminated.

The framing of the earliest sections of the Mott House showed similar strong affinities for the building practices of Connecticut in its use of a studded frame downbraced from the posts to the sills in a manner resembling the framing of many Connecticut houses. This was in contrast to the vertical-planked, upbraced system of framing which was the predominant system of structural reinforcement in Plymouth Colony until the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> The closer ties with Plymouth Colony, from which much of Rhode Island was settled,<sup>22</sup> resulted in the introduction of plank framing into the northern Providence Plantations early in their history. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the use of plank framing extended southward and came to dominate Rhode Island.<sup>23</sup> Once again, expensive joinery was minimized and a continuous bracing system created by the use of the planks, which stiffened the frame from plate to sill, was introduced. In the instances of both roof and house framing, geographical and historical connections made available building

techniques which Rhode Island builders chose to adopt as solutions to problems of climate and labor conservation.

### III

Rhode Island's distinctive vernacular building tradition had as its structural basis these two new systems—the plank frame and the principal-rafter-and-purlin roof—and, when the Mott House was rebuilt by Jacob Mott II, both were used. Because Rhode Island builders continued to work in a version of the unified Anglo-American tradition, and because new craftsmen continued to emigrate from England throughout the seventeenth century, the architectural mixture was never stable.<sup>24</sup> Local preferences were only preferences and any new idea was subject to examination and acceptance or rejection. This is particularly evident with respect to house planning and design, the third element of the Rhode Island vernacular.

As a poor colony, early Rhode Island inclined toward small houses.<sup>25</sup> In devising them, however, the colony's settlers could draw upon a rich English strain of one-room dwellings. The evolutionary paradigm (from single-room to five-room-plan houses), formulated in the late nineteenth century by Norman Morrison Isham and propagated by other important students of early New England building like J. Frederick Kelly, is no longer accepted in its simplest form, but continues to obscure the existence of this English tradition in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England.<sup>26</sup> Common throughout England and Wales, as well as the American colonies, one-room-plan houses ranged from "inferior accommodations" through fine dwellings. Raymond Wood-Jones, in his study of the Banbury region of England, has drawn attention to the large number of well-built and architecturally sophisticated single-cell houses in his area. They seem not to have been poor people's residences or surviving fragments



FIG. 7. SHELL OF THE MOTT HOUSE FROM THE EAST. The 1680 section at the left is sheathed with horizontal boards nailed to its vertical studs. The surviving portions of its original roof are visible at the top. To the right is the plank-framed 1725 section. There are no studs under the vertical boards. (Photograph by Jan Armor.)

of larger buildings but the dwellings of middling people with limited spatial needs. This is also true of most of the surviving American examples. Like the Mott House they are skillfully constructed and often well appointed.<sup>27</sup>

These houses were not portions of larger buildings, intended for possible completion at a later time, as many eighteenth-century variants of the five-room-plan house truly were, but independent dwellings. They had their own rules for enlargement. An analysis of Rhode Island's single-cell houses (figs. 9, 10) illustrates this. At the Mott House, both of the early structures (figs. 2, 3) were stone enders, a version of the one-cell house peculiar to Rhode Island and especially prevalent in the northern part of the colony. "Stone enders"—so-called be-

cause of the frequent use of striking exposed stone end chimneys that exploited the colony's supplies of usable building stone—did not necessarily *have* stone ends or a one-room plan, but they were all variations of the single-cell concept.<sup>28</sup> When a Rhode Island stone ender was enlarged before c. 1725 (and occasionally afterward, as at the brick-ended Greene-Bowen House in Warwick), the expanded house normally had individual cells added to the far end or to the rear of the original, creating a house that was roughly square in plan, or one that was rectangular, and deeper than it was wide.<sup>29</sup> The resultant plan contradicts a suggested derivation of the single-cell dwelling from the larger two-room central-chimney house, with or without rear service rooms, which is often

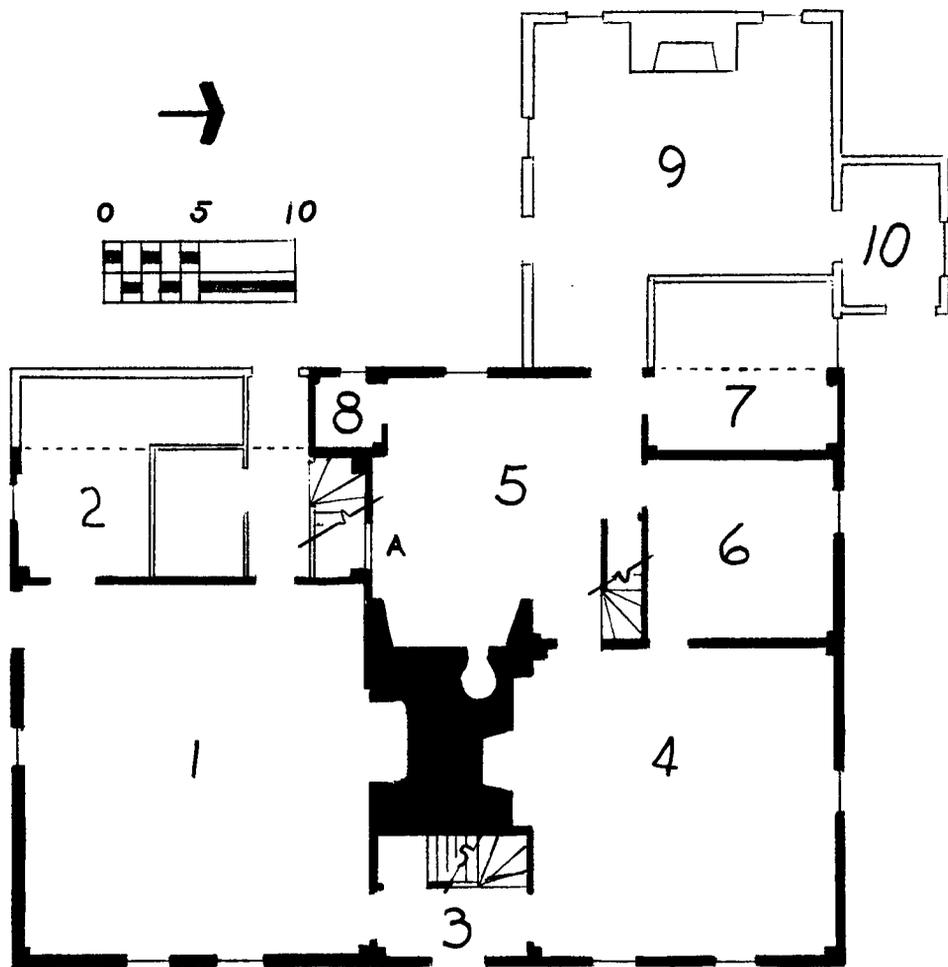


FIG. 8. THE MOTT HOUSE IN 1973. The solid black areas are seventeenth- and eighteenth-century work, and illustrate Jacob Mott III's mid-eighteenth-century house. The dotted lines show missing eighteenth-century walls, and the hollow lines are nineteenth- and twentieth-century additions. Areas are identified as follows: 1. 1680 hall (Jacob Mott II's "great lower room"); 2. chimney-bay room; 3. 1725 entry with sawn-baluster stair; 4. 1725 parlor; 5. mid-eighteenth-century kitchen ("A" indicates location of door from kitchen to chimney-bay room); 6. mid-eighteenth-century chamber; 7. mid-eighteenth-century pantry; 8. former entry, later closet; 9. mid-nineteenth-century kitchen; 10. porch. (Measured and drawn by author, checked against and supplemented by drawings by Richard Rice Long.)

associated with colonial New England. If the latter model were operant, one would expect an addition to be made at the chimney end of the house.

Built with plank frames and principal-rafter-and-purlin roofs, the single-cell

stone end house epitomized the process of localization that reached its peak in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These houses were distinctly Rhode Island products. When the no longer extant one-room ell and the 1680 section of the Mott

House were built, the localization process was well underway but it was not complete. The Rhode Island style, however, was the product of several coincident, disconnected patterns of continuous change, and, by the time the early eighteenth-century remodelling was undertaken, the colony was already beginning to lose its local architectural character.

Near the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century, novel planning ideas began to interest Rhode Island builders. They became available as the isolation of seventeenth-century agricultural life gave way before the town's efforts to expand its commercial ties and colonial and imperial attempts to centralize administration and economic control in Rhode Island and in North America, respectively.

Like other Rhode Island towns, Portsmouth was running out of land to fuel its agricultural expansion. Foreseeing the end of the common land supply, which came in 1713/4, the town turned outward for further economic development. Beginning in 1694 it initiated the first of a series of generally unsuccessful attempts to establish a trading center within the town to augment its growing trade in surplus livestock.<sup>30</sup>

At the colonial level efforts were made to draw together the localities which made up the tiny, contentious colony through the centralization of political control and through attempts to improve transportation within Rhode Island. Consolidation and greater political control were increasingly matters of imperial concern as well. Attempts to make Rhode Island and the other American colonies more sensitive to the needs of the empire met with varying degrees of success. But to whatever extent they fulfilled the Crown's purposes, they could only add to the forces which militated against the isolation of rural Rhode Islanders.<sup>31</sup>

Political and economic expansion did not simply expose to the citizens of Portsmouth and their neighbors their "lag"

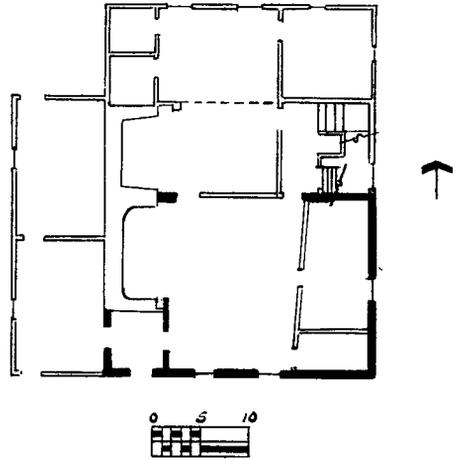


FIG. 9. A LOCAL-MODEL RHODE ISLAND HOUSE: THE GREENE-BOWEN HOUSE, WARWICK, RHODE ISLAND (EARLY MID EIGHTEENTH CENTURY). This additive house grew toward the rear. The original work is drawn in solid black; all else was added. The dotted line marks the division between the first and second eighteenth-century additions; the western section dates from the nineteenth century. (Measured and drawn by author, checked against drawings by Zane Anderson. Anderson's much more detailed drawing shows that this house is now far out of square.)

behind more cosmopolitan English and New English building styles. It opened to them as well many aspects of an Anglo-American vernacular architecture that was itself in upheaval. Aesthetically and technically, the changes that Isham and Brown called the "dilution" of English traditions in America were mirrored in England by the replacement of local architectural modes by national forms. To some modern observers these changes suggest the "death" of vernacular building and to others "confusion" and a "decline in the standards of carpentry."<sup>32</sup>

The Motts' reworked early eighteenth-century house reflected this fluid situation. In the seventeenth century, the house was designed from the clear, single-cell additive model. The 1725 Mott House (fig. 6) repre-

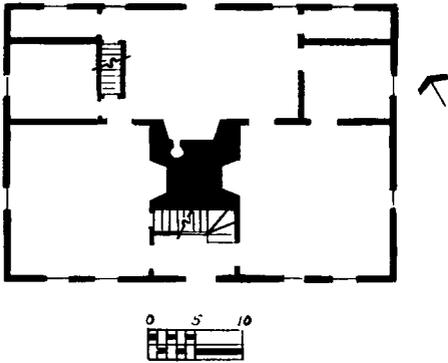


FIG. 10. A REGIONAL-MODEL RHODE ISLAND HOUSE: HOUSE AT USQUEPAUG, RHODE ISLAND (LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY). This is a very regular version of the "five-room-plan" model that Jacob Mott III used. Compare especially the juxtaposition of chamber and pantry or buttery in the northwest and northeast corners of this house with the northwest corner of Jacob Mott III's house in figure 8. (Drawing by author.)

sented an intriguing mixture of old and new models. Jacob Mott II's new house was still recognizably part of the Rhode Island vernacular tradition. It was plank framed and it had the eastern Massachusetts roof. It held a cluster of square cells, but with a difference: they were grouped around a central stack. Mott was adding the old cells in a new way. He might, after all, have extended the 1680 chimney and added to the house in the manner of the earlier Eleazar Arnold or the contemporary Greene-Bowen houses. Instead, a great amount of work was devoted to demolishing the great end chimney and reworking the smaller one in order to group the rooms clumsily around a central stack.

We can understand this strange house best by thinking of it as a human product. Vernacular builders worked out of a locally sensitive yet unitary Anglo-American tradition, but it was nevertheless a varied one, and they carried only part of it. Further-

more, they carried it in their heads. Changes influenced by economic or environmental considerations were ultimately matters of reasoning and choice from among several alternatives. The builder learned from his teachers not specific models or prototypes but abstract concepts of design and construction. These were susceptible to being taken apart and put back together again in new ways, of being deleted selectively or of being combined with ideas from other sources. The result was a building which was neither the unique product of an individual's utilitarian ingenuity nor a tract-house copy of a single model.<sup>33</sup>

Accustomed to the additive Rhode Island way of doing things, Jacob Mott II was attracted to the central-chimney, double-pile idea newly available to him. He didn't completely understand how it worked, though. Consequently he built a house which was the result of a mental effort to combine two separate ways of expanding from one room. His old additive local model called for the formation of a square cluster with the chimneys arranged around the periphery. The new regional one set forward a primary file of rooms with secondary rooms behind them and the whole was clustered around a single central chimney. Jacob Mott II was familiar with the visual effect of the new model but not with the interrelation of spaces which it enclosed. His transformed house was massed in a novel way, but the spaces were the old familiar units. The local ways were still strong in his mind.<sup>34</sup>

When Jacob Mott III disposed of the house according to his father's will he was left with the northeast parlor, the chamber above it, and a lean-to kitchen. It is not surprising that he should build. What he built showed the extent to which the new ideas had penetrated Portsmouth. If styles are a basis for "group awareness and identity,"<sup>35</sup> then in his redesigned house Jacob Mott III affirmed his allegiance to the broader Anglo-American community and

his understanding of its characteristic architectural expressions.

By the time he rebuilt the house the symmetrical, five-opening Georgian facade had transformed the central-chimney house elsewhere in New England into the familiar five-room-plan, two-story building which marks the landscape of the region today (fig. 8).<sup>36</sup> It reached Rhode Island in force only at mid century and most of the earlier houses which now have that appearance were reworked in the middle of the eighteenth century. Jacob Mott III was well aware of this new fashion and he went to great lengths to make his new house reflect it. But he was not a rich man, and it appears as though he did most of the work himself. The craftsmanship is crude, and it betrays an inexperienced hand. The roof is haphazardly rigged. No two joints in the frame are alike. Everything is hacked and patched. Yet in the end he had created a more or less stylish and modern house. It had five bays of openings, a central chimney and even a hipped roof. Mott reshaped his Rhode Island vernacular house to accommodate the novel plan and fashionable facade of the eighteenth-century New England Georgian house.

Late seventeenth-century Rhode Islanders fashioned from English vernacular building a local architecture which, though varied, centered around plank framing, a principal-rafter-and-through-purlin roof, and an additive planning system. This vernacular architecture characterized the

highly localized world that the Motts of the fifty years after 1675 inhabited. Though provincial in the most restricted sense, their seventeenth-century house was architecturally a fine one, well built, well designed, and handsomely decorated. But the local moment was a brief one. The eighteenth-century Motts lived in a transitional era when the distinctive Rhode Island modes were gradually replaced by a New England version of the Renaissance houses of Anglo-America. The more restricted system ultimately succumbed to the regional one and the small houses which formed the core of the seventeenth-century Rhode Island vernacular were replaced in the eighteenth-century builder's repertoire by partial or one-story "Cape Cod" versions of the New England Georgian house. For the Motts, the final change occurred between the 1720s, when Jacob Mott II rebuilt his house, and the middle of the eighteenth century, when the third Jacob Mott made his alterations.

The relatively young Rhode Island tradition was a strong one; it did not collapse in the face of the Georgian challenge. But like all traditions it was created in a specific context and it was subject to constant revision, piecemeal alteration, and outright rejection in the face of changing circumstances. Through these means a seventeenth-century Rhode Island house became an eighteenth-century New England one.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Stephen Tyson, who supervised the disassembly of the Mott House, for his contribution to the interpretation of the physical evidence. In addition, helpful criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper were offered by Mary Beaudry, Cary Carson, Edward Chappell, Susan Geib, Stephen Tyson, John Vlach, Camille Wells, and especially by Fraser Neiman.

2. Anthony N.B. Garvan has described this process in Connecticut (*Architecture and Town Planning in Colonial Connecticut* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951]) and James Deetz has constructed a model of the regionalization of Plymouth Colony ceramics in "Ceramics from Plymouth, 1635-1835: The Archaeological Evidence" (*Ceramics in America*, Ian M.G. Quimby, ed. [Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973].) See also Norman Morrison Isham and Albert F. Brown, *Early Rhode Island Houses: An Historical and Architectural Study* (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1895), pp. 13, 15.

3. Dell Upton, "Mott Farm Land Title," MS., Plimoth Plantation, Plymouth, Mass., 1973. A minor exception to this statement was the sale of a peripheral six-acre parcel as a mill site in 1813. The Motts bought it back in 1864.

4. The structure was dismantled part by part, after each portion was first numbered and recorded in drawings and photographs. (Most of the measured drawings were made by Richard Rice Long and the photographs were taken by Jan Armor.) This nine-week process allowed for careful scrutiny of the building in a manner akin to the archaeologist's method.

5. Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 40; John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, in New England*, 10 vols. (Providence: A.C. Greene and brother, 1856-1865), 1:300; 4:67; Sydney V. James, *Colonial Rhode Island—A History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), pp. 25-6; Librarian of the Rhode Island Historical Society, ed., *The Early Records of the Town of Portsmouth* (Providence: E.C. Freeman and Sons, 1901), pp. 58, 66. "Ould John Mott" was boarded at the houses of several townspeople until 1652, when an effort was made to send him to Bermuda where the climate was milder. Nothing seems to have come of this plan.

6. Town of Portsmouth to Adam Mott, Sr., Feb. 10, 1639/40, Portsmouth Town Records, I (1639-1700): 15, Office of the Town Clerk, Portsmouth, R.I. The stone cellar to the north of the standing house, excavated by Marley Brown in 1973-74, may have been that first house. No portion of the surviving Mott House was built that early.

7. The Jacob Motts are numbered in chronological order.

8. Antoinette F. Downing, *Early Homes of Rhode Island* (Richmond, Va.: Garrett and Massie, 1937), pp. 4, 6, 26, 29-31; Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Rhode Island Architecture* (1939; reprint ed., Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), pp. 9-10; Isham and Brown, *Early Rhode Island Houses*, pp. 31-5.

9. Norman Morrison Isham and Albert F. Brown, *Early Connecticut Houses: An Historical and Architectural Study* (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1900), pp. 18, 29, 31; Norman Morrison Isham, *Early American Houses* (1928; reprint ed., Watkins Glen, N.Y.: American Life Foundation, 1968), pl. 9.

10. One entire truss, most of the second, and parts of a third survived. The absence of the fourth, the twenty-one-inch difference between the east bay and the other, longer structural bays, and the obvious rebuilding of the east wall were among the clues to the former existence of a jetty.

11. Cyma (S-shaped) moldings were used on the first floor and ovolo (quarter-round) ones on the second.

12. This fireplace was reduced in size by the insertion of two successive brick fireboxes, one inside the other, during the course of the following century. Ultimately the opening was closed altogether and a stove pipe was fitted into the flue.

13. For a discussion of the Georgian facade see Henry Glassie, "Eighteenth-Century Cultural Process in Delaware Valley Folk Building," *Winterthur Portfolio* 7 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), pp. 35-8.

14. The origins of plank framing are not certain. For discussions of the issue see Richard Candee, "Documentary History of Plymouth Colony Architecture, 1620-1700," *Old-Time New England* 59 (1969): 39-45; Ernest Allen Connally, "The Cape Cod House: An Introductory Study," *Journal of the Society of Architectural History*

- rians, 19 (1960): 53; Walter R. Nelson, "Some Examples of Plank House Construction and Their Origin," *Pioneer America*, I, no. 2 (1969): 18-29.
15. Eric Mercer, *English Vernacular Houses: A Study of Traditional Farmhouses and Cottages* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1975).
16. Marc Gaboriau, "Structural Anthropology and History," in *Introduction to Structuralism*, Michael Lane, ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1970), p. 160.
17. The concept of preadaptation is derived from Milton B. Newton, "Cultural Preadaptation and the Upland South," in *Man and Cultural Heritage: Papers in Honor of Fred B. Kniffen*, ed. H.J. Walker and W.G. Haag (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University School of Geoscience, 1974).
18. Cecil A. Hewett, "Some East Anglican Prototypes of Early Timber Houses in America," *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 3 (1969): 110-11; Dell Upton, "Board Roofing in Tidewater Virginia," *APT Bulletin*, 8, no. 4 (1976): 37-9; George Percy, *Observations Gathered out of A Discourse of the Plantation of the Southern Colony in Virginia by the English, 1606*, ed. David B. Quinn (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), p. 19; Edward Waterhouse, *A Declaration of the State of the Colony and Affaires of Virginia* (London, 1622), quoted in Carl Bridenbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen 1590-1642* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 101. Charles Carroll has considered the implications of the abundance of timber in *The Timber Economy of Puritan New England* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1973).
19. Mercer, *English Vernacular Houses*, pp. 111-12. These purlins may also relate to the laths used to hang slates and tiles. Writers in the seventeenth century tended to think of shingles as substitutes for tiles. The author of *A Perfect Description of Virginia* (1649), for instance, described houses there as "covered with Shingell for Tyle." (Peter Force, ed., *Tracts and Other Papers Relating to the Origin, Settlement and Progress of the Colonies in North America*, 4 vols. [Washington, D.C.: Peter Force, 1836-1846], 2, no. 8: 7.)
20. J. Frederick Kelly, *Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1924), pp. 10, 47, 48; Hitchcock, *Rhode Island Architecture*, p. 9; John Hutchins Cady, "The Thomas Clemence House (ca. 1680), 38 George Waterman Road, Johnston, R.I.," *Old-Time New England*, 39 (1948): 17-24.
21. Isham and Brown, *Early Connecticut Houses*, pp. 5, 25. There are many surviving downbraced (tension-braced) houses in eastern Connecticut and southwestern Rhode Island, although the norm there, as elsewhere in New England, was the upbraced (arch-braced) frame. (Isham and Brown, *Early Connecticut Houses*, p. 215; Isham, *Early American Houses*, pp. 24-5.) The English regional distribution of the two styles is treated in J.T. Smith, "Timber-Framed Building in England: Its Development and Regional Differences," *Archaeological Journal*, 122 (1965): 146-49 and figs. 8-10; Mercer, *English Vernacular Houses*, pp. 120-21.
22. John Demos, "Families in Colonial Bristol, Rhode Island: An Exercise in Historical Demography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 25 (1968): 40-57.
23. Isham and Brown, *Early Connecticut Houses*, p. 248; idem, *Early Rhode Island Houses*, p. 79. Plank framing was never universal. The Eleazar Arnold House at Lincoln, R.I., and the Greene-Bowen House at Warwick, R.I., are both stud-framed buildings, although the last addition to the latter had planked walls. (Russell Hawes Kettell, "Repair and Restoration of Eleazar Arnold's Splendid Mansion," *Old-Time New England*, 43 [1952]: 29-35.)
24. Hewett, "East Anglican Prototypes," pp. 100-1.
25. James, *Colonial Rhode Island*, pp. 25-6.
26. Isham and Brown, *Early Rhode Island Houses*, ch. 2 and fig. 1; idem, *Early Connecticut Houses*, p. 6; Kelly, *Early Domestic Architecture*, ch. 2.
27. For examples see Mercer, *English Vernacular Houses*, pp. 28-33; Peter Smith, *Houses of the Welsh Countryside: A Study in Historical Geography* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1975), pp. 175-76, 456; J.T. Smith, "The Development of the English Peasant House to the late Seventeenth Century: The Evidence of Buildings," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 3d ser., 33 (1970): fig. 5d; Isham, *Early American Houses*, p. 4; Raymond B. Wood-Jones, *Traditional Domestic Architecture of the Banbury Region* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1963), p. 165 and ch. 8.
28. The similarity of so many of the English regional houses to the Rhode Island ones is significant, for the stone-end house is a striking example of the creation of a regional house type from elements of a unified British tradition. It is a mistake to try to find a single local English model; the Rhode Island houses were one expression of a pan-British tradition of single-cell, end-chimney houses made of local materials.
29. The expansion of single-cell houses in this manner is also typical of other areas, e.g.,

Virginia, where the rear lean-to was the most common form of extension.

30. Upton, "Mott Farm Land Title," pp. 3-4, 9; James, *Colonial Rhode Island*, p. 259; Joanne Bowen, "Probate Inventories: An Evaluation from the Perspective of Zooarchaeology and Agricultural History at Mott Farm," *Historical Archaeology*, 9 (1975): 14-5.

31. James, *Colonial Rhode Island*, p. 167; Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934-1938), 4: chs. 3-6, 11.

32. Isham and Brown, *Early Connecticut Houses*, p. 32; M.W. Barley, *The English Farmhouse and Cottage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), pp. 268-69; Cecil A. Hewett, "Seventeenth-Century Carpentry in Essex," *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 5 (1971): 77.

33. My thinking here has been shaped by James Deetz's analysis of the structure of artifacts in *Invitation to Archaeology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History Press, 1967) and by Henry Glassie's pioneering explorations of the mind of the traditional builder, especially in his "Structure and Function, Folklore and the Artifact," *Semiotica*, 7 (1973): 313-51, and *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975); cf. Gaboriau, "Structural Anthropology," p. 160.

34. His house was used in a customary manner

as well. At his death in 1736/7 Jacob Mott II left the use of "my great lower room where I now dwell" and "the Southernmost bed room and Porch Chamber" to his three daughters until they were married. This indicated that, in the traditional style, Jacob Mott was still sleeping on the first floor of his house, a habit which was as slowly broken in America as it was in England. (Will of Jacob Mott II, dated Mar. 5, 1729/30 and proved March 1736/7, Portsmouth Town Council Records, III: 182; Barley p. 192.)

35. Stylistic elements function "by providing a symbolically diverse yet pervasive artifactual environment, promoting group solidarity and serving as the basis for group awareness and identity," according to Lewis R. Binford. ("Archaeology as Anthropology," *American Antiquity* 28 (1962), reprinted in *Man's Imprint from the Past: Readings in the Methods of Archaeology*, ed. James Deetz (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), p. 253. What this means is simply that people speak the language of those with whom they wish to communicate.

36. Isham and Brown, *Early Connecticut Houses*, p. 33; idem, *Early Rhode Island Houses*, p. 15; Henry Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), pp. 124-25; Glassie, "Eighteenth-Century Cultural Process," p. 37.