



Antique House Advisory & Restoration Consulting

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Monday, March 24th, 2003

Mr. Ernest Sattler
37 Beech Hill Road,
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Dear Ernie,

It certainly was good to see you again after so many years and it was especially good to tour the Lt. Jacob Baldwin House with you. In more than forty years experience looking at old houses, I can recall only one other example that was so remarkably untouched. It is quite extraordinary that an 18th century dwelling could have survived more than two hundred years without the disruptive intrusion of central heat, indoor plumbing, or electricity.

Equally fascinating is the dichotomy of the building technology with its documented age. If you had not proven a 1796 date by the probate records, and were it not for the presence of the architecturally exceptional ballroom with the barrel-vaulted ceiling, I would without question attribute a mid-18th century date to the house. So many features speak to a construction date significantly earlier than 1796 and therefore emphatically attest to a profound persistence of tradition. Vertical plank sidewalls are a construction system usually associated with dwellings built before mid-18th century. A stone chimney base and stack are features more commonly seen in Connecticut contexts and then, generally seen no later than the third quarter of the 18th century. Fire boxes are deep and straight sided; certainly not the Rumford configuration that becomes so prevalent at the end of the 18th century. The cavernous kitchen fireplace, with its stone firebox, bake oven situated at the rear, and provision for lug poles to be suspended within the flu, is a throw-back to the early 18th century.

The presence of cased summer beams in both front first floor rooms is very "old-fashioned" and out-of-style for 1796. Equally as *rétardataire* are the smooth-planed and delicately chamfered ceiling joists and the smooth-planed sub-flooring visible overhead in the kitchen and the pantry and the downstairs bed-chamber which flank the kitchen. These speak to the persistence of a 17th century practice that carried over into the opening decades of the 18th century; but one would scarcely expect to see such careful finish work as late as 1796.

The paneled chimney walls and paneled wainscoting are nice and certainly better than average; not great Georgian paneling, but unquestionably as good as you would hope to see in a vernacular country house. By contrast, the extensive use of both vertical and horizontal feather-edged and decoratively beaded wide pine board sheathing in so many rooms is, again, a strong link with building and interior finishing practices of the mid-18th century.

(Over, Please)

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Two architectural features are particularly noteworthy. The barrel-vaulted ceiling of the small ballroom on the second floor is by no means unique, but it is certainly rare. I have seen such ceilings in only three other Massachusetts dwellings of the 1790-1810 period, and, surprisingly, in three or four one room school houses in Connecticut of roughly the same period. I understand that it was thought to promote improved acoustics in the school room. The ballroom is a very special space that would set the Baldwin House apart from most end-of-the-18th-century houses even if it were not for the many other previously noted features.

The other architectural feature, although now missing, is readily defined by the explicit physical evidence that does survive in the form of mortises in posts across the front frame of the house and the survival of a stone foundation which defines the footprint of the porch. Porches on 18th century houses are as rare as the proverbial hen's teeth, and for the Baldwin House to have had a porch across the front, with a wrap-around to shelter the coffin door in the end, is, in my experience, unique. I know of a house in Litchfield, CT which once had a porch on the end. I know of a ca.1715 house in Granby, CT which has a small porch outside the coffin door. I know of no Massachusetts example.

Architectural features aside, the known history of the Baldwin House, having been built by a Revolutionary War veteran, and having served as a Tavern, are but two compelling facts. The latter fact is perhaps borne out by evidence for shelves and a small enclosure in the corner of the S.E. front room. These details would seem to argue for the previous presence of a small Tap Room or Bar from which potables were dispensed. At least the physical dimensions and the shelving of the "back bar" survive to guide reconstruction if desired. The elevation would be, in part, conjectural, but there is good precedent available through study of other known examples.

I am impressed by the Baldwin House. It is unique in so many ways. I would very much like to see it restored and lived in. It is a wonderful historical asset to the community and I hope that some positive action can be taken before it is forever lost to a vandal's match or the ravages of the weather. I can readily understand why you are hopeful of protecting it in perpetuity under a legally binding preservation covenant. I would contact Richard Nylander at S.P.N.E.A. and see if he can provide advice and direction towards that end. Alternatively, you could direct an inquiry to the Massachusetts Historical Commission and/or the Massachusetts Bar Association. I think that the Bar Association maintains a directory of their membership and categorizes them by their respective specialities of law practice. That is probably the most direct source for helpful information. Again, thank you for the opportunity to see the Baldwin House!

With Best Regards,


John O. Curtis

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