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NOTES ON THE REVEREND JOHN CAVERLY HOUSE
ROUTE 202A
STRAFFORD, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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JULY 18, 2000

The following notes are based upon a brief inspection of the Rev. John Caverly House on the afternoon of July 18, 2000. Present were owner Jennifer Shone, and Kenneth A. Berry of the Strafford Historical Society. The purpose of the inspection was to provide preliminary information on the date and stylistic features of the house.

Summary: The Caverly House is one of the largest and best-finished federal-era houses in Strafford. Stylistic evidence dates the house after 1800 and before 1830, with a date around 1820, shortly after Caverly's first marriage, as a likely time of construction. Although the property was used as a summer home and as a children's camp from the 1940s through the 1960s, the house shows relatively few signs of major remodeling, and still retains most of its federal-style interior features. The house exhibits fine craftsmanship and detailing throughout.

History: According to *A History of Strafford, New Hampshire* (1971; revised 1995; pp. 127-8), "the Rev. John Caverly, affectionately called elder John, was born in Strafford, August 23, 1789, the son of Lieutenant John and Betsy (Boody) Caverly. He married first in 1819 Nancy French, born September 9, 1795, daughter of Joseph French of New Durham. She died January 22, 1855 and he married second Clara Kimball of Rochester. He died March 23, 1863. ¶In 1827, Rev. John Caverly was ordained at Center Strafford, although he had been preaching before that at Bow Lake. ¶He was a man of many activities; a hard working farmer and a good businessman. He owned a large and prosperous farm where Charles Abry now lives [1970]. Much real estate was bought and sold by him. He was a trustee of Strafford Seminary for twelve years. He had charge of the interests of the Cocheco Manufacturing Company [in Strafford] for many years. He

was such a busy man that it has been said he must have thought up his sermons while at work. . . ."

The unusual size and ambitious detailing of the Caverly House seems to attest to John Caverly's enterprise and prosperity (see below, **Description**). The house is large enough for two families, and is equipped with two cooking fireplaces. Assuming that the dwelling never served as a public house or tavern, this double cooking arrangement may suggest that two generations shared the house, with a separate kitchen for each. The Strafford history indicates that John and Nancy Caverly had eight children, of whom at least two died young. This was not an unusually large family for the early 1800s, and does not necessarily explain the duplicate arrangements of the house.

The house underwent some alterations while used as a summer home in the early twentieth century. It formerly had a broad porch extending across its front, as well as the surviving porch on its north end. At the center of the front porch was a porte-cochere that extended over a driveway, allowing passengers to disembark from vehicles under the shelter of a roof.

The house retains a few internal alterations that also date from the early twentieth century. The two front first-story rooms have fireplace fronts built from pressed bricks, with some bricks under the projecting shelves set in sawtooth pattern. This style of fireplace was common in the early years of the twentieth century, and is often associated with bungalow architecture. These fireplaces retain their original brick backs and parts of their original cheeks.

The house also has a few closet partitions and other features fashioned from beaded ceiling board, another material that was especially common in the early twentieth century. Some of the floors on the first story have been covered with narrow maple flooring, again suggesting a remodeling in the early years of the century. Until fairly recently, all windows in the house, except those on the rear elevation, had two-over-one sashes, which again are characteristic of the early 1900s. These have been replaced by nine-over-six sashes that replicate the original glazing arrangement. Another alteration has been the removal of the partition that once separated the rear center stairhall from the southern kitchen, enlarging the kitchen. The same remodeling seems to have seen the removal of a rear service stairway that ascended in the area now occupied by a second-floor bathroom.

Description: The Caverly House is a large, two-story house of the type called a "double" house in the eighteenth century. A double house has two chimneys and a central stairhall, rather than the central chimney of the more common "single" house. While any double house may easily be arranged for occupancy by two families, it is unusual to find such a house with the near-perfect symmetry of floor plan that is seen in the Caverly House. Both rear fireplaces on the first floor are cooking fireplaces with ovens and ash pits at the right of the fireplace. Each end of the house originally had an entrance door opening into the space between the outside of the chimney and the end wall

of the house. Both chimneys have small, high storage cupboards placed against the inner sides of the stacks within passageways between the front and rear rooms.

The house stands over a fully excavated basement. The cellar walls are built from a combination of rounded fieldstones and split stones. At grade, the house is underpinned on all four sides by large slabs of split granite, the stones along the façade having been hammered to a true face. From within, it can be seen that these stones were split by flat wedges in large, V-shaped slots. The size and shape of these slots are unusual. While flat-wedge splitting usually employs slots of an inch or an inch and a half in width and depth, the slots used in quarrying the stones for the Caverly foundation are three or more inches wide. This probably denotes the localized work of some Strafford quarryman.

The two chimneys are supported on massive fieldstone piers with no openings or cavities under the chimneys. Most stones in these piers are naturally angular, but a few have been split with wedges. The splitting technology employed on those stones matches the technology employed on the underpinning stones, suggesting all the stone masonry of the cellar is of the same date and that the underpinning of the house, an expensive embellishment, is original rather than the product of a later remodeling.

The chimney stacks are laid in clay mortar, as may readily be seen in the attic. Each stack has four fireplaces. As noted above, the first-story fireplaces on the rear faces of the chimneys are both cooking fireplaces with ovens and ash pits at the right side of the hearths. The southernmost fireplace and its oven are bricked up. The northern fireplace is open, and has an iron crane. The cast iron door on the northern oven bears no lettering but is an ornate casting with a rotating half-fan vent in its lower center and with elaborate oak leaf and acorn designs above the vent. It is probably the product of a foundry in Portsmouth, Dover, or Newfields.

As noted above, the original fireplaces in the front first-story rooms have been altered by the addition of elaborate brick chimneypieces that project into the rooms beyond the face of the paneling above them. The style of these two chimneypieces suggests a date in the early twentieth century.

In the second story, a fireplace in the southeastern rear bedchamber is open and unaltered. This is a small, shallow fireplace of the "Rumford" design that was common during the early 1800s, before air-tight stoves began to supplant open fireplaces in the 1830s. This chamber fireplace has a smoke shelf at its throat, again characteristic of the small, efficient hearths of the early 1800s. It may be assumed that all the fireplaces of the house (except the cooking fireplaces) were originally of this Rumford design before they were closed up or altered.

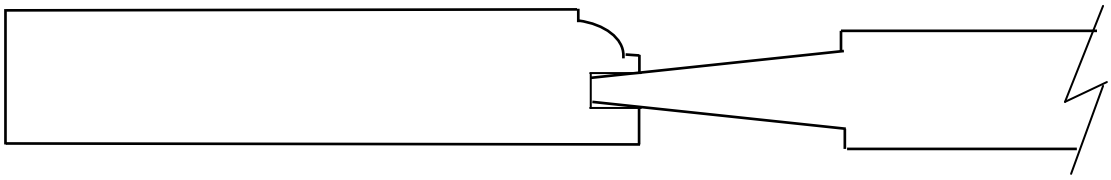
The frame of the house is massive and staunch. Ceiling plaster on the first story has been removed, revealing that the second floor joists are mostly heavy, hewn members, square in cross-section. Those in the southeastern quadrant of the house, by contrast, are mostly sawn. Removal of the original plaster has exposed the sides of some of the girts in the

framing of the walls, and pins or treenails projecting through these girts reveal that the outer frame is well braced with diagonal members.

The roof frame is large in scale but not unusual in design. The roof has a rafter-and-purlin frame, with six sets of hewn rafters supporting a number of longitudinal purlins, and with roof sheathing running from ridge to eaves. The feet of each set of rafters are framed into tie beams that extend through the entire depth of the house and form triangular trusses. Each set of rafters also has a sawn collar tie halfway up the height of the truss. Between the rafters and tie beams, a series of hewn joists extends through the depth of the house from the front and rear wall plates, running parallel to the tie beams beneath each set of rafters.

The rafters are numbered with Roman numerals near their apexes, with the lower numbers at the northern end of the house. The use of these numerals suggests that the entire house frame was designed according to the "scribe rule" method, in which each joint is unique and must be numbered for proper assembly of the frame upon its delivery to the house site. The "scribe rule" method of framing began to give way to the more standardized "square rule" method during the 1820s, suggesting that this house dates before about 1830.

The joiner's work or finished woodwork of the house is uniformly of the federal style that characterized the period between about 1800 and about 1830. Most doors are six-panel doors with cross sections like the following:

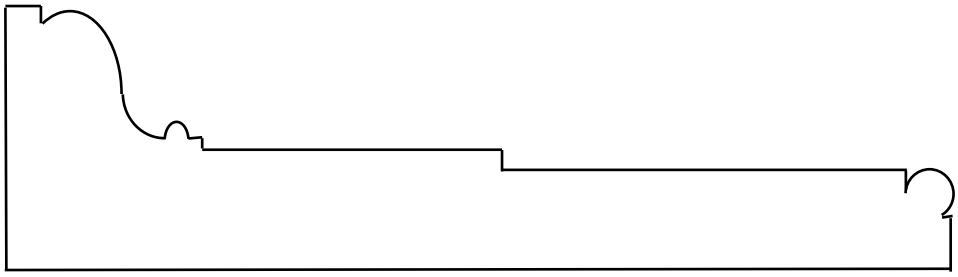


These doors are characteristic of the federal era, although more urbane examples normally have flat panels rather than the raised panels seen in the Caverly House.

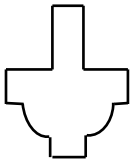
Other paneling seen throughout the house, including that of the cupboard doors, has a matching cross-section.

It should be noted that a few areas of paneling, notably the square panels that flank the cupboard door above the northern kitchen fireplace, may have been altered. Rather, these units may be re-used sliding window shutters. Such shutters, commonly found in the finer houses of the federal period, fit into pockets in the walls and slide out on rails and restraining grooves to cover the insides of the sashes for warmth and privacy. Such shutters may have existed in the Caverly house before most of the original window sashes were replaced in the early twentieth century.

The finer rooms of the house, mostly in the front, have architraves, or door and window casings, that are comparable in date and elaboration to the six-panel doors. Their cross-section is as follows:



Although most of the original window sashes were replaced early in the twentieth century, and have now been restored to nine-over-six configuration, some original sashes remain in the rear elevation of the house. The transom sash above the front doorway is also original. The muntin profile of these sashes is shown below:



Although the Caverly House is typical of the "double" house of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in most respects, it is unusual, as noted above, in having two cooking fireplaces. The house is also unusual in another respect. Most double houses take advantage of the wide space between their two chimneys by utilizing the space at the center of the house for a wide stairhall that often extends through the entire depth of the building. A staircase ascending to the second story is typically placed along the right of the left side wall of this hallway. This arrangement offers the architectural advantage of an imposing entry, coupled with the opportunity to display a staircase with dramatic geometry. Such double houses are fairly commonplace in coastal New Hampshire.

In the Caverly House, by contrast, the front and the rear of the hallway bay are separated from one another. In the front half, a compact triple-run staircase, typical of those found in center-chimney houses, rises to the second story. In the rear half, between the two kitchens, it appears that a utilitarian service staircase ascended to the second floor, although remodelings have removed both this feature and the partition that once separated the rear hallway from the southern kitchen.

The front staircase remains largely intact. It is unusual in having two flights or "runs" of stairs ascending from its upper landing. The front run, as in most triple-run staircases, extends from the upper landing to the upper hall at the front of the house. A second run ascends from the same landing toward the center of the house. Evidence in the plaster walls of the upper hallway shows that this run originally terminated at a partition, which

presumably had a door opening onto the stairs. This partition has been removed, opening the entire upper hallway bay (except for the portion occupied by a bathroom at the rear of the house) into a single open area receiving natural light from the window above the front doorway of the house.

The original plan of the staircase is highly unusual in a double house, and, like the doubled kitchen arrangements, suggests an original family situation calling for a unique architectural response.

The maple newel and angle posts of the front staircase are unusual in their design. They are simple members that rise as unadorned shafts of slightly convex profile from low bases, which are ornamented with ring turnings. The posts have simple, rounded caps that merge with handrails of similar profile. Balusters are round dowels.

In general, this staircase design suggests a period somewhat later than the apparent date of the house, seeming to reflect the aesthetics associated with buildings dating from the 1830s or 1840s. It may be, however, that the staircase is simply a country joiner's somewhat unorthodox attempt to replicate simple newel posts that are comparable to those seen in some seacoast buildings of the early 1800s.

Date of the House: Most diagnostic features of the Caverly House suggest a date of construction around 1820. Although most architectural features fall into a rather wide stylistic range that could extend from about 1800 to about 1830, a few construction features of the building seem to narrow the period of construction to a date somewhat before 1830.

The style of the most elaborate six-panel doors and paneling, shown in cross-section on page 4, is distinctly of the federal era (1800-1830), both in the arrangement of the panels and in the profile of the mouldings that surround the panels. These are rather conservative doors, retaining the raised panels of the earlier Georgian era; in more urbane joinery, the faces of the doors would have flat panels instead of the beveled-edge panels seen in the Caverly House. This retention of the raised panel feature of an older era is often seen in country joinery, but less often in coastal buildings.

As noted above, the window muntin profile of the surviving original sashes also falls into the period from about 1800 to about 1830.

Wherever it has survived, the hardware of the house indicates a date after 1800. All nails that we observed are of the cut type, not the earlier hand-forged type. Cut nails were made by machines that were developed in the 1790s, but such nails were not generally introduced in country locales until after 1800.

The original door thumb latches of the house are of the Norfolk type, mostly made in England but widely imported into the United States during the early 1800s. Many of the original latches of the house were replaced by mortise locks in the early twentieth century, but several examples of the original hardware survive.

None of the stylistic or technological features just mentioned narrow the date of construction of the house very closely; all of these features can be observed in buildings constructed between about 1800 and about 1830. Other technological elements, however, suggest a likely construction date in the 1820 period.

First, the frame of the house appears to have been laid out using the scribe rule method, as noted earlier. This method uses Roman numerals to identify matching mortises and tenons, all of which are uniquely paired and cannot be interchanged. The scribe rule method of framing began to give way during the 1820s to the more standardized square rule layout method, in which members of similar function can be interchanged. Square rule frames do not have the inscribed numerals seen in the Caverly House. Thus, the house frame suggests a date before the mid-1820s.

Similarly, a change in granite splitting technology took place throughout most of New England around 1830. As noted above, the underpinning stones and some of the chimney pier stones of the Caverly House were split using flat wedges in elongated slots that had been chiseled into the face of the stone. This technique was introduced into New England from Scotland during the late 1700s, becoming more widespread as new quarries were opened up in various locales.

Around 1830, however (and a bit earlier in the major quarrying centers), a new technique of splitting granite was introduced. Whereas the older method relied on chiseled slots and flat wedges, the newer technique employed a "plug drill" that was rotated after every blow of the hammer, creating a round hole in the stone. Into this hole were inserted "plugs and feathers," or wedges with specially-shaped, rounded shims that fitted the cylindrical hole of the plug drill. Introduction of the plug drill and the plug-and-feather method of wedging allowed stone to be split with greater control and in larger slabs.

As noted above, there is no sign of the newer splitting technology in the stonework of the Caverly House. All the split stone in the dwelling appears to have been quarried using the method that rapidly disappeared by about 1830. By contrast, the underpinning of the later barn that stands south of the house clearly shows the use of the plug drill.

Thus, the house frame and its granite underpinning suggest a date before 1830. Since John and Nancy Caverly were married in 1819, it seems likely that the house was constructed sometime after that year. This suggests a date in the 1820 period. Unless further documentation or physical evidence can be found, it seems that this will be the best approximation of the date of the house we can achieve.

Later alterations: Among the changes that can be perceived in the house, not mentioned earlier, are the following:

The mantelpiece in the northwest front bedchamber was remodeled during the Greek Revival era with a plain, heavy shelf. This style is characteristic of the mid 1800s. Since the Rev. John Caverly died in 1863, it is possible that this remodeling or modernizing

took place after his death. It is also possible that the fireplaces in the lower front rooms, now remodeled with brick chimneypieces, had also been changed during the mid-1800s. Addition of the brick chimneypieces may have obliterated evidence of a more widespread remodeling of some of the principal rooms in the house around the mid-nineteenth century.

Doorways leading into the front bedchambers from the rear portion of the central stairhall have been closed up. It appears that each of the front bedchambers had two doors leading from the central corridor, one from the front stairhall and a second door from the rear stairhall. Presumably, these doors were sealed up after the partition between front and rear halls was removed.

The house also had pressed metal ceilings added to some rooms. Remnants of metal ceiling sheets are seen in the attic, and a toilet room next to the southern chimney still has a metal ceiling. Pressed metal ceilings were popular from the 1880s through the early twentieth century.