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REPORT ON THE DEACON JOHN BELL HOUSE
ELM AVENUE
ANTRIM, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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This report records a brief inspection of the Deacon John Bell House made on the afternoon of August 11, 1997. Present at the inspection were Linda Wilson and James Garvin of the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources. The purpose of the inspection was to note and describe original features of the little-altered house. The dwelling is now on the market, and its preservation depends on the actions of the eventual buyer. A future owner could remodel the house, possibly destroying features that have so far remained intact. This report is intended as a memorandum of the present condition of the dwelling.

Summary: The Deacon John Bell House is a brick-ended framed building that retains many original features. The structure is an excellent example of an early-nineteenth-century dwelling of the Antrim area. The house exhibits excellent local craftsmanship in its framing, its joinery, and its hardware. Some of its features, especially its hand-forged door latches and hinges, are highly unusual in a region where imported hardware tended to predominate by the early 1800s. The house is also the earliest known New Hampshire structure in which the square rule method of framing was employed.

History of the house: The Deacon John Bell House was built about 1800 by John Bell (1779-1864), who came to Antrim from Bedford, New Hampshire, in 1799. John's father, Joseph, was a blacksmith who often appears in the diary of Matthew Patten of Bedford. We do not yet know John Bell's trade, but he, too, could have been a blacksmith. In any case, the family's connection with smithing probably explains the presence in the house of the unusual hand-forged hardware described below.

According to Cochrane's *History of Antrim* (1880), and later sources based on Cochrane's information, Deacon Bell built his two-story house and lived in it for sixty-four years. Since Deacon Bell died in 1864, Cochrane's information places the date of construction at 1800, or just a year after the young man arrived in town. Bell married Margaret Brown of Antrim in 1801; in 1802, he was licensed to keep tavern in his house.

The Hillsborough County Map of 1858 shows "Dea. Bell" living in the house. By the time of Cochrane's writing, in 1880, a Mr. Conant owned the Bell House. When the Antrim map was drawn for the *Town and City Atlas of New Hampshire* in 1892, a G. F. Trask is shown living at that location. By 1967, when the Rev. Ralph Howard Tibbals published his *Genealogical Record, [of] Antrim, New Hampshire Families, 1877-1940*, the house was in the possession of W. Dewey Elliott.

In 1978, a Mary Doles of Phoenix, Arizona, wrote to Mr. Elliott about the history of the Bell House; a copy of the letter was provided to Historic Properties, the firm that is now offering the house for sale. Ms. Doles recapitulated the history of the house as given in the books by Cochrane and Tibbals, and added some further details concerning the chain of ownership of the property:

> John Bell moved to Antrim in 1799 and died October 5, 1864. Therefore, it would seem he built the house *before* marriage, in 1800. That leaves a gap of 24 years between John Bell and Myra Trask. Perhaps R. K. Conant bought it from John Bell's estate or inherited it. I haven't much on the family, so the name Conant means nothing to me. However, this same book [Tibbals] I quoted lists two children of John Bell who married, & apparently stayed, in Antrim[,] and Conant may be from one of those families. Their names are Mary (Bell) Christie (m. Josiah W. Christie) and Margaret (Bell) Wood (m. Deacon Samuel Wood). The John Bell who built the house was my 3 Gr. Grandfather & I've spent four years looking for him!
>
> I hope this will help you in the missing link(s) of ownership. No doubt the house is a local historical site, so I should think there would be a record somewhere.

Ms. Doles' letter seems to indicate that a Myra Trask bought the house in 1888. The letter also identifies the "Mr. Conant" mentioned by Cochrane as R. K. Conant.

Cochrane's history notes that John Bell was an elder in the Presbyterian Church in Antrim for forty years. The church initially occupied the old meeting house at Antrim Center. The meeting house stood on a road about two miles west of Bell's house. In 1826, the Presbyterian Church erected an imposing brick meeting house about a mile south of the old wooden building, but still some two miles west of Bell's house. Destroyed around 1896, the brick structure had an arcaded body that closely duplicated that of the Congregational Church still standing in Newport, New Hampshire. After the

new brick building was erected, the older wooden meeting house was neglected, and part of it was eventually incorporated in a town hall, later a Grange building. The road on which the old meeting house stood had already been abandoned by the time the Antrim map of 1892 was compiled, and today is merely a trail.

While these two Presbyterian meeting houses were the center of Deacon Bell's religious life, the physical center of his world was the small hamlet that developed around his dwelling. In addition to Bell's own house and a district schoolhouse that stood just north of it, the neighborhood contained a greater number of private homes than it now has. A second brick meeting house, the East Meeting House, stood a short distance south of Bell's house. Like the brick meeting house at the Center, the East Meeting House was erected in 1826. The East Meeting House was constructed as a nondenominational house, but its governance eventually become Congregational, then Baptist. The building was demolished in 1873, leaving only the nearby East Cemetery to mark its site.

Bell built his house before most of the buildings in the nearby hamlet had been constructed. Cochrane asserts that Bell was licensed to keep a public house in 1802. Research has so far failed to reveal whether the road on which the house stands, now called Elm Avenue, had any special importance as a transportation route in 1800. The Second New Hampshire Turnpike opened in 1801 along an alignment that is roughly parallel to Elm Avenue and only a little over a mile to the east. Elm Avenue could, therefore, have served as a "shunpike" after 1801, attracting travelers who wanted to avoid toll gates on the turnpike. Such an increase in traffic could have offered the rationale for Deacon Bell's opening his house as a tavern.

Description: The Deacon John Bell House is a two-story, federal-style dwelling with a one-story kitchen wing extending at right angles from the rear wall of the main block. The main house faces east, toward Elm Avenue; the road curves around the north side of the property, providing access to an English barn that stands northwest of the dwelling. Both the house and ell are wood-framed, but the main house has brick end walls that appear to be eight inches thick and are buttressed by heavy brick chimneys within.

Brick-ended framed houses dating from the early 1800s are especially prevalent in Hillsborough County, New Hampshire. Both Antrim and most surrounding towns retain many examples of the type. Brick-ended houses were always more substantial than ordinary framed houses and were relatively rare even in the region where they are most often seen.

The overall form of the Bell House is that of a two-story, five-bay federal-style dwelling. The house has a low-pitched hipped roof, with end chimneys that are integrated with the brick wall. Each brick end wall has two windows on each floor, flanking a chimney that rises through the center of the wall. The rear (western) wall of the house has only one window, a second-story window in the southern bedchamber, looking out upon the southern slope of the low kitchen wing.

The rear ell of the house incorporates a kitchen, a dining room, a rear entry and a northern room that may once have served as a pantry or sink room. The attic above has never been plastered or subdivided into rooms.

The main house stands upon a perimeter **foundation** composed of a footing trench filled with stones that support split granite underpinning blocks above grade. This underpinning is continuous around the visible perimeter of the main block except at the front door. There, a large stone doorstep was evidently removed, revealing a rough stone wall with several openings in the stonework.

There is no cellar under the main house; there appears to be a shallow crawl space, perhaps eighteen to twenty-four inches deep, beneath the main rooms.

The kitchen wing has a full cellar with walls of dry-laid fieldstone. On the north side of this basement is a large stone foundation for a former kitchen chimney. In front of this base is a small brick foundation for a newer chimney that rises through the roof of the wing slightly closer to the ridge than did the original fireplace chimney. A cellar door, covered by a wooden bulkhead, opens out to the north dooryard to the west of the chimney foundation.

The **frame** of the main house can be seen only from the attic of the kitchen wing and from its own attic. This frame has two peculiarities.

A hall post that is exposed in the rear wall of the main house reveals depressed seats for the feet of diagonal braces, suggesting that the entire frame was laid out by the "square rule" method of framing rather than by the older "scribe rule" method. Generally, the use of the square rule, in which seats for the joints are recessed below the surfaces of the timbers, is not seen before the 1820s. Since the dwelling dates from about 1800, as mentioned above, this use of the square rule is the earliest yet identified in New Hampshire.

A second peculiarity of the frame is the placement of a massive horizontal tie beam between the kingposts in the attic. These posts rise to support a ridgepole in the usual manner. A short distance below the ridge, however, a heavy hewn timber is tenoned into the kingposts near their tops. This tie stiffens the posts, much like the longitudinal ties that connect kingposts in a meeting house roof frame. Most federal-period houses with low-pitched hipped roofs, by contrast, have kingposts that are braced only by the hip rafters that intersect them and by the rigidity of the remainder of the roof membrane.

Except for this unusual feature, the frame of the roof of the main house is a typical rafter-and-purlin frame.

The carcass of the main house appears to have posts only at the walls of the stairhall. These protrude into the interior of the house. At the outer corners of the dwelling, no such posts are visible. The outer ends of the girts, joists, and other horizontal members of

the frame appear to be supported by the brick walls at the ends of the house rather than by posts and girts placed just inside those walls.

Since few brick-ended houses have been available for study, the Bell House offers a valuable beginning for a systematic structural analysis of the building type.

The frame of the wing appears to have three bents. The attic frame has three rafter couples, with the middle couple at the midpoint of the frame. The heavy rafters support two purlins and the ridgepole.

Although the ell has the general appearance of a small "Cape Cod" house, the design of its frame argues against the structure's having been a free-standing building. The frame is laid out without a chimney bay, and the original chimney did not pierce the ridge, but rather lay on the rear (north) slope behind the ridge. The frame of the kitchen wing therefore lacks the characteristics of a free-standing house frame.

The wing appears to have been built at the same time as the main house, which has no provision for cooking. It may be supposed that the kitchen wing had a large cooking fireplace and brick oven, possibly with a cauldron or set kettle, in the area just behind the present stove chimney.

The **brick end walls** of the main house are laid in common bond, with ten or eleven stretcher courses between header courses. These walls are probably eight inches thick, although there could be an extra withe of backing bricks on their inside faces. The brick walls are well laid, and in generally good condition; that on the north shows some cracking from frost jacking of the foundation stones. The brick walls have been painted white to match the color of the clapboarded walls of the house, but the white paint has largely weathered away.

Use of the common bond is unusual in brick walls built in the early 1800s. At that time, the usual bond for important brick walls was the Flemish bond, a much more intricate arrangement calling for alternating headers and stretchers in each course. If it was employed at all in the early 1800s, the common bond was usually relegated to side or rear walls not seen from a public right-of-way. Use of the common bond on principal walls became more common by 1830.

Use of the less costly common bond on the end walls of the Bell House at a time before that bond was generally accepted for first-class work may explain the fact that these walls were covered with paint rather than being expressed as brick walls.

Another brick-ended house stands near the Goodell factories in Antrim Village, the principal manufacturing center of the township. The end walls of this second dwelling are laid in Flemish bond. It would be useful to research the date of this house to learn whether it is earlier than the Bell House, or whether bricklayers in Antrim employed different bonds for brick end walls at about the same period.

The southern **chimney** of the main house has lost much of its mortar above the roof and the top of the chimney has partly fallen in. This chimney retains two fireplaces. The opposite chimney, on the north end of the main house, remains intact, but has had its fireplaces sealed up. As noted earlier, the original kitchen chimney has been dismantled and supplanted by a single-flue stove chimney.

The **windows** of both the main house and the kitchen wing are entirely filled with turn-of-the-century two-over-two sashes. There is one six-light sash in the western gable wall of the kitchen attic, but this, too, is a modern unit. There are a number of federal-style sashes stored in the barn, but we did not measure these to see if they fit the window openings of the house.

The windows in the brick end walls of the house are recessed behind the planes of the brick walls. They have ogee backband mouldings at the juncture of their frames and the openings in the brickwork, rather than the cylindrical staff mouldings that became more common at a later period.

Although the sashes were renewed throughout the dwelling at the turn of the twentieth century, the window frames and exterior casings were for the most part left unaltered. Most of the exterior casings retain their original ogee backband mouldings. The four first-story windows on the front (east), however, have been lowered and perhaps reduced in size, and their exterior casings are simple, square-edged stock.

Typically, such lowering of first-story windows occurred when a porch was added to a house; lowering of the windows allowed more light to enter the rooms beneath the porch ceiling. Visible evidence of the former presence of a front porch on the Bell House is not obvious; the horizontal cornice of the front doorway appears intact and the clapboards below the second-story windows appear relatively undisturbed. Despite this lack of obvious evidence, however, the disappearance of the original stone doorstep from the front door and the construction of a rectangular retaining wall in front of the house suggest the former presence of an added porch. Such a porch would probably have been added around the turn of the twentieth century, at the same time that the window sashes were changed.

The front doorway of the house is a well-executed Tuscan frontispiece. The design of this feature may be based upon Plate 3 of Asher Benjamin's *The Country Builder's Assistant* (1797, with later editions).

The present front door of the house is a turn-of-the-century unit with a square glass window in its upper half. It appears that the original door was lower, and that it had a transom sash above it. The height of the original top frame of the door is indicated by a patch, or a remnant of the frame, in the right-hand side frame of the doorway opening.

The original **interior joiner's work** or woodwork remains intact in the stairhall of the main house and in the rooms on the south side of the stairhall. In the kitchen wing and

the north side of the main house, the original detailing has been replaced during remodelings.

Where they survive, the original doors of the house are striking not only for their joinery and their hardware, but also for their relatively small accumulation of paint and their resulting crisp appearance. As seen in the south parlor, the parlor chamber above, and the stairhall, the original doors are six-panel units, with the small panels at the top in an arrangement that is characteristic of the federal period. Unlike many federal-style doors, these units have raised fields in their panels; each panel is surrounded by a delicate Grecian ovolo moulding with fillet.

The parlor mantelpiece is simply designed, with pilasters surrounded by ogee mouldings to create the impression of sunken, flat panels. The design may have been suggested by Plate 20 of Benjamin's *The Country Builder's Assistant*.

The interior casings in the parlor have simple quirked ogee backband mouldings that impart a simple but elegant enframement to each opening. These mouldings, together with the other backband profiles described below, are illustrated in Plate 1 of Benjamin's *The Country Builder's Assistant.*

The parlor has plastered walls and a plastered dado. The baseboard is a simple board with a delicate bead in its upper edge, while the chair rail is composed of a projecting board with a central bead or astragal in its edge. This is set above a shallow, vertical board with a beaded lower edge that reflects the bead on the baseboard below.

All original doors have **hand-forged hardware**, which could be the work of a local blacksmith, perhaps Deacon Bell himself if he followed that trade. The deacon's father, blacksmith Joseph Bell of Bedford, could also have supplied the hardware.

The doors are hung on short strap hinges and pintles, a remarkable exception to the usual tendency to hang such doors on H or HL hinges or, by the early 1800s, on imported cast iron butt hinges. The hinges are beautifully forged; those in the parlor have spear-shaped terminals, which most others have heart-shaped terminals. The hinges have three punched holes, and are attached to the doors with cut nails whose heads are aligned with the main axis of the hinges.

Original door latches are Suffolk-style thumb latches with rounded cusps; the catches of these latches have twisted horizontal iron braces that strengthen the catches and prevent one's clothes from catching on the projecting hooks.

The **staircase** of the house is supported on two sawn stringers, with an additional sawn timber placed beneath the center of the treads from top to bottom. The staircase rises along the north wall of the hallway in a single run. Since there is no cellar under the main house, the area under the stairs is employed as a closet rather than offering a descending stairway. The north and west walls of this closet, and the horizontal ceiling, are plastered, but the soffit of the staircase is left exposed. The closet wall is composed

of beaded vertical sheathing, and the closet door is a board-and-batten door with three battens, not a paneled door like others opening into the stairhall.

The balustrade has square balusters and a square newel post and angle posts; the latter have simple beveled caps above a Grecian ovolo moulding. The handrail of the balustrade has a rather heavy rounded cap and a delicate bead at is base.

The joiner's work of the **parlor chamber** is slightly more elaborate than that of the parlor. The doors match those in the room below, but their casings have a more complex backband that combines a quirked ogee moulding with a bead and fillet. The room is surrounded with unusually low wainscoting composed of horizontal boards, beaded at their joints and set above a projecting baseboard that has a delicately beaded upper edge. The mantelpiece is similar to that in the parlor below, but has flat-paneled projections at each end of the frieze, above the flat-paneled pilasters.

The studding and lath of the western wall of the parlor chamber are exposed to view in the attic above the kitchen. The lath is split-board lath, characteristic of federal-period plastering.

The **two northern rooms** of the main house have been remodeled. Their fireplaces have been sealed, stovepipe thimbles have been fitted into the faces of the chimneys, mantelpieces have been removed, hearths have been removed from the floors, and all door and window casings are square-edged boards rather than the more elaborate architraves described in the parlor and parlor chamber. Doors in these rooms are simple, flat-paneled units with square-edged stiles and rails, hung on iron butt hinges with spire finials that are characteristic of the late nineteenth century.

The floors of these two rooms have also been replaced with machine-planed boards nailed with wire nails. Each room has a long closet extending across its western wall; the closet walls are set about two feet inside the rear (western) wall of the main house.

It is not clear why these rooms were thoroughly finished or refinished around the turn of the twentieth century. Perhaps the northern rooms of the house were never finished when the dwelling was built, or possibly a fire damaged the interiors of both rooms.

Significance of the house: The Deacon John Bell House documents the arrival of the federal style in the Antrim area around 1800. The house illustrates the importance of Asher Benjamin's *The Country Builder's Assistant* both in the introduction of quirked moulding profiles and in the composition of such character-defining architectural features as mantelpieces and exterior doorways.

The house is also significant as a dated example of the brick-ended dwelling, an important house type in Hillsborough and Cheshire Counties. The building displays an unusually early use of the common bond. Further study of the house should reveal the characteristics of its frame and the interrelationship between the frame and the brick end walls.

The carpenter who framed the house appears to have employed the square rule rather than the older scribe rule. The Deacon Bell House is presently the earliest known example of this framing method in New Hampshire.

The house is unusual in retaining very fine hand-forged hardware at a period when factory-made hardware was commonplace; this hardware may well be the work of a member of the Bell family.

Finally, the house is an attractive, well-preserved and little-altered dwelling in a prominent location. Standing within a small hamlet, and placed in a commanding position on the curve of a road, the house is a landmark in its town and region.