ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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REPORT ON THE UNION HOUSE TAVERN 1260 DARTMOUTH COLLEGE HIGHWAY HAVERHILL, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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MAY 22, 2013

Summary: This report is based on a brief inspection of the former Union House tavern, presently owned by Susan E. Brown, on the afternoon of May 21, 2013. The purpose of the inspection was to outline the origin and evolution of the house through a physical examination, responding to various statements that were made in Katharine Blaisdell's book, *Over the River and through the Years (Book Five)*, published in 1983. Present at the inspection were the property owner, Susan E. Brown; Mary Kate Ryan of the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources; and James L. Garvin.

Katharine Blaisdell's book, *Over the River and through the Years* (Book Five, pages 48-50) asserts that the Union House Tavern or Buck's Tavern was built in 1767, and that the house was originally "very small, consisting of the ground floor of just the present north front room, and a second story added then or later, perhaps when the other [south] front room downstairs was added." Blaisdell continues with the statement that Phineas Swan owned the property from 1790 to 1841, and that Phineas' son, Benjamin Swan, "greatly enlarged [the house], adding the back sections, changing the roof . . . and adding the portico and columns which now adorn the front." Blaisdell further notes that the Swan family sold the property to Lyman Buck, who continued to utilize the house as a tavern. Blaisdell illustrates both the tavern sign of Benjamin Swan, which bears the date "1836," and that of Lyman Buck, which has the date "1844." She dates the enlargement of the house and the reorientation of the roof to 1836 on the basis of the date that appears on the Benjamin Swan tavern sign.

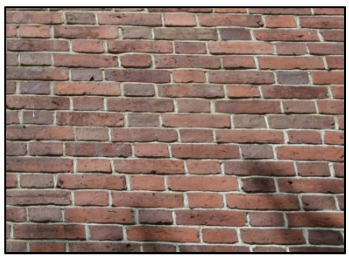
Physical inspection, coupled with comparison with other brick buildings at Haverhill Corner, demonstrates that the brick front section of the house was built circa 1815, and that the brick rear wing or ell was added circa 1835, providing a new kitchen and dining room on the first story and added bedchambers on the second story.

Description of the original house: The Union House Tavern is composed of two principal building elements, both constructed of brick, with wooden secondary structures, including a small barn, extending from the rear (eastern) end of the brick wing. A large framed "high-drive"

or bridge barn, with its principal doors facing east (away from the adjacent highway), stands north of the dwelling.

West and south elevations, Union House Tavern, Haverhill, New Hampshire, looking northeast.

The original house, a two-story brick dwelling that faces west toward the adjacent north-south "Dartmouth College Highway," has a five-bay façade and an arched central doorway that, in general form, duplicates the principal entrances of a number of other brick houses in Haverhill. The house stands over a fully excavated basement having walls of local fieldstone, with split granite underpinning at grade. As is typical of the period before 1830, the underpinning stones of the house were split with flat wedges inserted in narrow chiseled slots. Evidence of this technique is easily seen in the basement.



Flemish bond

The principal elevations of the Union House, those on the west and south sides of the building, are skilfully laid in Flemish bond. The secondary elevations, those on the north and east (rear), are laid in common or American bond. The house has a pedimented temple front, supported by four evenly-spaced and attenuated wooden Doric columns. The wood-framed pediment projects several feet beyond the brick front wall of the house, displaying a flush-boarded tympanum pierced by two attic windows.

Projecting from the rear (east) elevation of the main house is a long, two-story brick wing. Added to the main house either by Benjamin Swan or Lyman Buck, both of whom used the

property as a tavern, the wing may have replaced an earlier, and presumably smaller, kitchen ell. The wing stands over a fully excavated basement which, like that of the main house, has walls of local fieldstone; like the cellar walls of the main house, those of the wing have split granite underpinning at grade level, but these stones are hardly visible above grade on the exterior. They are split with flat wedges, which is usually regarded as a pre-1830 technique, and this raises a question about the actual date of the wing. Because the basement walls of the main house must support the weight of the brick walls above them, the original eastern basement wall was left intact when the wing was added. The wing was provided with an independent basement wall placed some five feet from that of the original house, and no attempt was made to connect the two cellars.

The exterior walls of virtually all New Hampshire brick buildings of the first decades of the nineteenth century were laid in Flemish bond, a complex but strong bond that utilizes alternating headers and stretchers in each course and requires considerable precision in laying the bricks. Yet it was not uncommon for bricklayers to use the more easily laid common or "American" bond for the side or rear walls of early nineteenth-century structures. Common bond is a stretcher bond that employs a row of headers at intervals to tie the inner and outer wythes of the wall together. American bond was seldom employed for the more public elevations of buildings until the late 1820s. Locally, this transition is seen in the First Congregational Church building of 1827-28 at Haverhill Corner, which has a façade laid in common bond.

Left: north wall of added wing.

Right: north wall of original house.

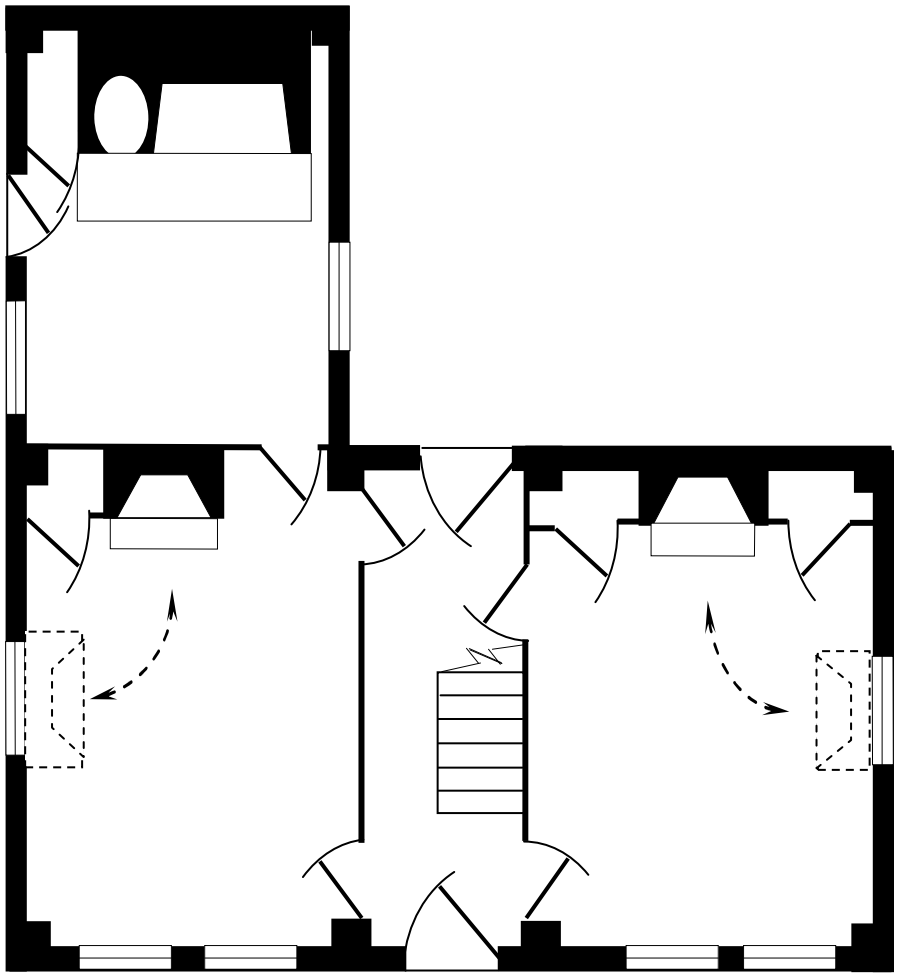
The original portion of the Union House is not alone in displaying Flemish bond on its more public sides and common bond elsewhere. At least two contemporary buildings at Haverhill Corner do the same: the Grafton Hotel and the Haverhill Academy building, both dating from circa 1815 and both attributed to local builder-architect Edmund Stevens. In the case of the Haverhill Academy building, the masons employed Flemish bond for the façade, but only to the height of the keystone of the arched opening on the second story. Above that elevation, well above eye level, they switched to common bond, with header courses occurring every eight to ten courses.

The bricks that were utilized in the original Union House measure about two inches high and average some 7¾ inches in length, like those of several contemporary brick buildings nearly at Haverhill Corner. The bricks used in the added wing, by contrast, are less than two inches in

height. As seen in the photograph above, these smaller bricks are not bonded with the brick courses of the original house.

As noted above, the lesser elevations of the original house were laid in common bond. On these elevations, header courses are employed, on average, every seven to twelve courses, and utilize only headers, as seen in the photograph above. The walls of the wing also employ common bond. By contrast with the walls of the original house, however, those of the ell have header or bonding courses every eleven or twelve courses, and these courses employ alternating headers and stretchers instead of all headers.

The original dwelling had, and retains, a central entry or stairhall with a single room on each side of the entry on both the first and second stories. This is a common vernacular house plan, deriving from earlier hall-and-parlor houses that had central chimneys. With the central chimney replaced by smaller chimneys on the end walls of the house, or on the rear walls (as in the Union House), the space formerly occupied by the chimney became available for a deepened stairhall that could accommodate a single-run staircase having a degree of monumentality. In the case of the Union House, the staircase has simple square newel and angle posts, but has a well-fashioned handrail supported by square balusters placed diagonally on the treads.



Right: Floor plan of a typical hall-and-parlor house with a central stairhall, showing alternate locations for chimney placement. Such houses usually have a kitchen wing as shown here, often one story in height. The addition of the current two-story kitchen wing of the Union House may have required the removal of an earlier and smaller wing.

The interior joinery of the original portion of the Union House strongly expresses the Federal architectural style, with details, described below, that seem to reflect ideas that were presented in the second (1811) edition of Asher Benjamin's influential guidebook, *The American Builder's Companion*. Many of these details closely mirror similar features seen in the Grafton Hotel of 1815 at Haverhill Corner, a three-story, two-room-deep brick house that was erected as a public house close to the buildings that then served Grafton County government. Several other surviving taverns at Haverhill Corner, not studied in detail, may retain joinery that, if studied, would likewise broaden the architectural context of the Union House.

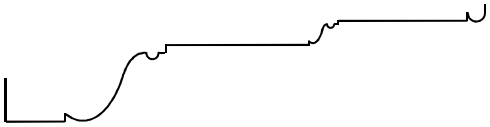
The sophisticated character of the joinery seen in the room to the left (north) of the front doorway reveals that this was regarded as the formal parlor of the house. The room has the most elaborate mantelpiece seen in the house, and displays door and window casings of complex design. The door leading from the stairhall to the parlor has four flat panels on both faces. This required more joiner's work than a door with raised panels on one side, but allowed the door to display a formal face when seen from either the parlor or the adjacent stairhall.

North parlor, Union House Tavern, Haverhill, New Hampshire. All doors in this room display flat panels and thus reflect a characteristic detail of the Federal style.

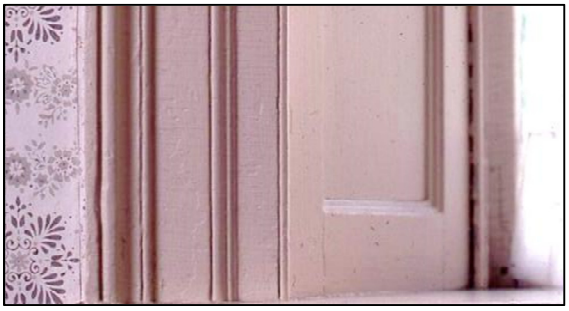
The mantelpiece in this room is marked by a pair of attenuated, flat pilasters that extend through the frieze and cornice on each side of the fireplace opening. This design appears to be from the same hand that fashioned two similar mantelpieces in the nearly Grafton Hotel (1815, shown below), one of several Haverhill buildings that have been attributed to local builder-architect Edmund Stevens.

Above: Details of two mantelpieces in the Grafton Hotel (c. 1815), Haverhill Corner

Like the parlor mantelpiece, the door and window casings in the parlor are related to examples in the Grafton Hotel at Haverhill Corner. In both buildings, these features have sophisticated profiles that make use of "Grecian" moldings that are based on conic sections (elipses or parabolas). Although Asher Benjamin illustrated such moldings in the first (1806) edition of *The American Builder's Companion*, he did not provide detailed instructions for obtaining these contours until the second (1811) edition. Under the influence of the second edition of Benjamin's book, it is likely that joiners who fashioned their own molding tools, or purchased such tools from professional plane-makers, were more intent on producing these complex moldings after 1811 than before.

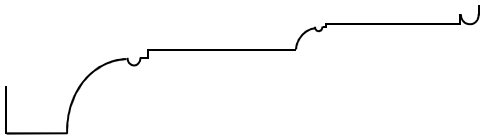


Parlor architrave (casing), Union House, Haverhill, N. H.



Architrave (window casing) with the same profile, Grafton Hotel (c. 1815), Haverhill Corner

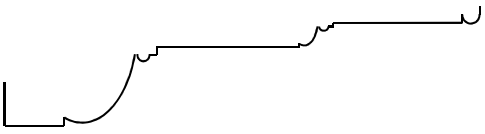
The stairhall of the Union House has casings that make consistent use of cove moldings, as seen below. This casing profile is also employed uniformly in the southern front room of the house, which apparently functioned as a sitting room and, at one point in its history, possibly as the barroom for the tavern.



Stairhall and sitting room architraves (casings), Union House Tavern, Haverhill, N. H.

South sitting room, Union House Tavern, Haverhill, New Hampshire.

As would be expected, the parlor chamber, the bedroom above the parlor, also displays fine joinery, in some respects more elaborate than that in the sitting room below. The casings in this chamber make use of ovolo or "thumb" moldings that exhibit a subtle Grecian profile. The same casing profile, without the backband molding, is employed for baseboards in this room.



Parlor chamber architrave (casing), Union House Tavern, Haverhill, N. H.

As with other details, this casing profile duplicates an example found in the Grafton Hotel at Haverhill Corner:

Grafton Hotel (c. 1815), showing the same profile used in the parlor chamber of the Union House Tavern for casings and baseboards.

The consistency of masonry and joinery among the Union House, the Grafton Hotel, and the Haverhill Academy building reveals that the Union House is approximately contemporary with the other two brick buildings, both constructed circa 1815, and that the Union House is the work of a local artisan, possibly to the then-active builder-architect Edmund Stevens. This consistency is also seen in characteristic features such as the front doorways of the three buildings. These elements clearly follow a common pattern despite the fact that the three buildings differ in scale and, in the case of the academy building (which was built for use both as a school and a courthouse) in function.

Left: Union House Tavern; Middle: Grafton Hotel; Right: Haverhill Academy (restored).

Description of the added wing and altered roof: The eastern wing of the Union House was reportedly added by tavernkeeper Benjamin Swan in 1836, although this understanding is apparently based on the date painted on Swan's surviving tavern sign rather than on any documentary record. It is impossible to know what sort of kitchen facilities served the original house, inasmuch as construction of the later wing would have destroyed any evidence of an earlier and presumably smaller wing.

The fireplace in the sitting room (the southwest first-floor room) of the original house retains gudgeons for a crane, but this fireplace is too small for normal cooking operations, especially if the original house served as a tavern before its enlargement. Because taverns functioned like modern restaurants or catering establishments, their kitchens had to be at least as capacious as those of private homes; it is not unusual to find two cooking fireplaces and two brick ovens in former tavern buildings. It seems likely that a crane was provided in the sitting room of the Union House simply for the convenience of having boiling water available, especially if this room served as the barroom of the tavern prior to its enlargement.

The added brick wing provided not only a large kitchen and an adjacent room that apparently served as a scullery, but also a dining room that is located between the old house and the new kitchen. The base of the kitchen chimney accommodates a large brick oven in the cellar, accessible from interior cellar stairs or, formerly, through an exterior bulkhead door. There is a well in the cellar of the wing, near the base of the chimney but not close to the supposed location of the scullery. Upstairs, the addition provided several bedchambers to supplement the two chambers in the original house.

As noted above, the added wing was built of bricks that do not match those employed in the original house. The bricks used for the wing have smaller face dimensions and display a different coloration from those used in the original house. Since Haverhill remained a center of brick manufacturing and brick architecture well into the nineteenth century, and since local masons generally employed bricks of uniform size in buldings constructed over a wide time period, it is puzzling that atypical bricks were chosen for the tavern wing.

Construction of the addition required the provision of a roof structure and a new attic above the addition. The ridge of the ell roof is high—probably well above the elevation of the ridge of the roof of the original house. Evidence in the brickwork of one of the original chimneys of the original house suggests that the old roof was low-pitched. The same evidence points to a gable roof, rather than a hipped roof, on the original house, and this in turn suggests that the original building would formerly have had brick gable ends, probably with a window in each gable.

The entire original roof was removed when the new wing, with its higher roof, was added east of the original house. To support the broad gabled front of the new west-facing pediment, a boxlike framed timber structure was built above the eaves level of the old house. The front and rear posts of the new frame stand on the tops of the original front and rear brick walls. Intermediate posts rest on hidden supports below the attic floor—probably on original tie beams that served the former roof system. As seen below, posts and horizontal plates at the top of the new frame are connected by diagonal braces. The lateral plates act as purlins to support the midpoints of a series of widely spaced hewn common rafters that serve as the principal framing members of the new roof.

Added roof frame of the Union House Tavern, looking northeast, showing one post of the boxlike supporting framework of the broad roof.

Overhead joists, some now missing, indicate an unfulfilled intention to provide a floor, and perhaps a plastered ceiling, at the top of the added frame.

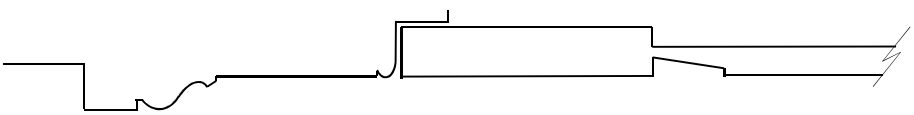
The boxlike supporting frame was employed only above the original house. It serves as a truss system to support the very long hewn rafters of the broad-gabled roof that covers the original building. The added wing, being narrower than the older house, is spanned by hewn rafters without support from below. As seen in the photograph below, the rear (east) face of the broad-gabled roof is clapboarded above the brick rear wall of the original house.

Also shown in this photograph are paint lines (see arrows) that apparently indicate the former presence of two roofs that once sheltered the upper walls of at least part of the southern wall of the wing. Since there is no indication that these roofs were flashed with lead where they intersected the brick wall of the original house, they may have been rather insubstantial in construction. The lower of these former roofs would have blocked the view, and most of the light, from the second-story windows of the ell. Possibly these roofs were associated with structures that preceded the brick wing and were removed when the existing wing was built, or possibly they mark the location of wooden leaders that once conducted rainwater from gutters at the eaves of the wing.

Rear (east) wall of the original Union House (left) and south wall of the added wing (right), looking northwest.

The interior of the wing is less coherent in style than the interior of the original house, and deserves more detailed study. Subordinate spaces in the wing contain several eighteenth-century doors with raised panels, and the kitchen includes a reused section of early raised-panel wainscoting on a stairway wall opposite the cooking fireplace. Possibly these elements were saved from an earlier building on the property.

One room in the wing is coherent and fashionable in its joinery. Standing between the kitchen and the rear wall of the original house, this room was apparently intended as the tavern dining room, and continues to serve as a dining room. This room displays joinery with characteristic Greek Revival details, as shown here:



Door and door casing in dining room, Union House Tavern, Haverhill

Dining room, looking east toward kitchen, Union House Tavern, Haverhill

The backband moldings of the door casings in the dining room, and the doors with unmolded stiles and rails, are characteristic of post-1830 joinery in the Greek Revival style. Nearly identical details appear in Asher Benjamin's book, *The Practical House Carpenter* (Boston, 1830), and would have been recognizable in the 1830s as modern in style. It appears that special care was taken to make this public room, essential to the operation of a good tavern, an example of a comfortable and stylish space for guests.

The north wall of the brick addition includes a flue for a chimney that has been dismantled to a point below the roof. Such flues are occasionally encountered in brick buildings of the 1820s and 1830s, and in many cases were apparently original. Air-tight iron stoves were being introduced at this period, and these flues were clearly intended for stoves. In the case of the long-disused flue in the Union House Tavern, the flue may have permitted the warming of the dining room and of one or more chambers on the second story, not served by fireplaces. On the first story, this flue is now within a modern bathroom. Further examination may disclose whether this bathroom was an original room, or whether its space was originally part of the dining room.

Similarly, there are many other unanswered or partly answered questions about this property. This building played an important role in Haverhill's history, and further study and examination of its fabric would certainly contribute valuable information about the house itself and about the community and region.