

Building 584 Main Street

by Doris Sherrow

On February 21, 1774, a housewright named **John Williams** began work for the construction of the house at 584 Main Street. He had been hired by 47-year-old **Ebenezer White**, a farmer and town official who lived at 582 Main Street. White tracked the construction process day by day in his journal, which is now at the **Connecticut Historical Society in Hartford**.

"Feby AD 1774, 21th [sic] Day Mr. Williams Began to work for me and made windo frame"

It was too cold, and possibly snowy, to do anything outdoors, so Williams continued to make "windo frame" until March. Then he began "sawing Sash Stuff," "Hewing Timber," and occasionally, "Dressing Clabord."

For five days in early March, **Ithamar Pelton** helped hew timber. Pelton lived at 613 Main Street, and had, in fact, enlarged that house from its very early one-over-one-room plan to a four-room colonial. He had married in 1767, and had four small children by 1774.

Around the same time, a **Mr. Cook**, likely someone from out of town, also appeared in White's notes. Initially he also dressed clapboard, but on the 12th of March, the weather must have gotten spring-like enough for him to begin "Diging Seller [cellar]." (White enjoyed his capital letters, though he often spelled phonetically. He was a bright, careful man, and I cannot get rid of the sense that accurate spelling was simply not the social requirement that it is today.)

To the extent that I could find vital statistics information on the sixteen men who worked on the house, I found that most were young, and John Williams, who worked consistently from February to November, was probably no exception. On March 25th, "Mr John Williams a child born he did very little work."

Cook worked on digging and "Stoning" the cellar, and later "Broke Stone," presumably for the cellar. Wherever Cook came from, he appears to have been a specialist in creating cellars. This cellar would have been a rectangular hole in the ground six-to-eight feet deep, lined with large, rough chunks of stone. Above ground-level, the stone would be near-perfect rectangular blocks.

On the first of April, 26-year-old **Eliakim Ufford**, who later built the brick colonial house at 1331 Portland-Cobalt Road, arrived and "Laid ye foundation of ye Chimny." This would have been rough-cut stone like the lower foundation. Ufford later started a brick-making business, using the clay from the Connecticut River bank at Jobs Landing, but at this time, he could only lay the stone. The job took him two days.

Williams continued to make sashes and hew timber, and Cook broke stones and also sometimes hewed timber till mid-April. Then White wrote, "April ye 18th Being Monday Will'ms Cook & David framing."

David was Ebenezer's son for whom the house was being built. He was only 19 years old. Apparently his father had begun the construction because David was smitten with **Mary Ann Stocking**, a girl from Upper Houses (it was not yet called Cromwell). Historical research has revealed that most colonial young couples were in or near their middle twenties when they married--they appear to have wanted to set themselves up independently. David and Mary Ann were quite young to be considering marriage. With Ebenezer's social status and financial success, college could even have been an option for young David — but he was desperately in love and wanted to get married. Or so I'm guessing.

So on Monday the 18th of April, David helped Williams and Cook frame the house. This meant putting together, on the ground, the rectangles of massive timber which would outline each side of the building. For the next couple weeks, all continued framing the house, though David missed May 2nd because he had militia training. On the third of May, even Ebenezer joined in, and the "4 Day of May we Raised the fraim in the afternoon" — they levered the individual sides up to form the block of the house!

Two days later, White, who had "agreed with Mr Cook for 2/ [2 shillings] a Day while Laying Stone," paid him 3 pounds, 2 shillings, 6 pence, and "Mr Cook set out for home." The cellar was formed, the frame stood upon it, and his work was done.

By mid-May, Williams, and occasionally, David began casing the outside of the frame, and on May 26th, they were "making schaffling [scaffolding] and prepareing [sic] ye Roof for Shingling." Two days later, he and **Peter Butler**, who lived in the vicinity of the intersection of Sage Hollow

and Meadow roads, were "Bording ye roof and began to Shingle." By June 4th, they had finished the roof.

Toward the end of June, another specialist came to work: "June ye 20 **Mr Gipson** & his apprentice **Sage** all this week building Chimney." While Portland had several Sages around, no Mr. Gipson lived in the immediate area. Many of the men who did specialty work came from other towns. Some migrated through the area looking for work, or perhaps the outgoing and widely traveled Ebenezer knew of skilled individuals and requested their labor. Gipson and Sage finished on the 28th, and White paid them "7 $\frac{3}{4}$ "-- presumably pounds.

John Williams and **David White** commenced "Shingling about ye Chimney" after it was finished, then Williams busied himself making doors for perhaps a week. The standard colonial house had at least two exterior doors, probably six interior doors on the first floor, and several more upstairs.

On the afternoon of July 6th, Williams began "Claboarding ye front" of the house. He progressed to the south end of the house, then "began to put in ye windo fraimes ye front side."

During the week of July 18th, construction came to a halt. Even Williams stopped building: "J:W all this week reaping wheat..." All week long, no one built anything--there was wheat to gather. **Samuel** and **David Bates**, two young men who lived in my house at the time, were also enlisted to bring in the wheat. Three years later, Samuel would die in the Revolution.

The following week, Williams resumed clapboarding. On Saturday July 30th he was clapboarding part of the day "... and ye remainder putting on ye cove." This was probably a decorative entry porch shielding the front door; if so, it no longer remains.

Williams was clapboarding the back of the house by August 3rd, then "making windo fraim & soffits," "Laying parler floor," and finally "Laying north Bedroom floor & ye petition [partition] between that floor & ye parler." In late August, he moved on to "Framing ye Sashes," "Triming ye Sashes [and] fixing ym [them] in ye fraimes," then "Seting Glass."

In his journal, White wrote the date and each man's work, Monday through Saturday. Then on Sunday, he wrote "B" rather than the number, and usually nothing beside it--working on the sabbath would be a sin. On the September 4th however, White did choose to write something: "this Day News came yt Boston was fired on by ye Soldgers & Shippin"--the Revolution was beginning.

On September 6th, **Joseph Raney** came to work on the house. Thus far, I have not been able to find anything on Raney, but there is a good chance that he came from Upper Houses (Cromwell)--not only did White have many contacts in the county, but his daughter-in-law-to-be came from that area, where there were many Raney's. (And Rannys.)

Raney worked along with Williams to do framing and casing on the interior. They also began to lay flooring and build stairs, both from the first to the second floor, and from the second to the attic. A **Mr. Savage**, and a **Mr. Hall** with **Eben Hall** (probably his son) also began to work on the floors. 19-year-old Eber Stocking, who lived in the house at the corner of Cornwall Street and Rose Hill Road, joined the group, "Laying Chamber Floor" and then the "garret floor."

On October 1st, Raney began work on the "bowfat"--a built-in cabinet with a door or doors and molding--which took him about a week to complete. John Williams continued to work on windows and walls. At this point, White seems to have had about three men working on the house at any given time, always Williams, and usually Joseph Raney and **Eber Stocking**.

On the 22nd of October, Joseph Raney worked "on Stares Went home at night." When White specified that someone "went home," that seems to have meant that they were not a local.

John Williams and Eber Stocking labored on, hanging doors, trimming doors, making "Seller Door," "making bow fat doors" until the 5th of November. Then suddenly White wrote only the numbers, "B" for Sunday, November 6th, and 7 through 15, with no notations beside them. He resumed on November 16th, saying "Eliakim Ufford Come here to work on Lathing."

Ufford seems to have finished the house, with only a day or two from Williams "making Book Shelves putin in Lock &c" and two others, who did lathing. Ufford worked on lathing till the 6th of December, when he "finishd [sic] last one [at] nite." On the 8th and half of the 9th he "whitewashd Dwelling house," and that was the end.

Ebenezer omitted one incident from this diary: on the 23rd of November his brother Stephen, only 43 years old, died. Ebenezer's only notes for that day are: "23 E:U [Eliakim Ufford] Dito [working on lathing] Elisha Hale splitting Lath." The following day, the day they almost certainly

would have buried Stephen, he wrote only, "this is Thanksgiving Day." It is tempting to think that perhaps Stephen was suffering from illness or injury during the blank days of the diary, and that Ebenezer was too wrapped up in fetching a doctor, or tending Stephen's five children, or helping take care of him, to be able to think about the house construction. But there is no mention of the death, or of the funeral.

On December 29th, 1774, David, who had turned 20 on the 7th of September, married Mary Ann Stocking, and they must have taken up residence in their beautiful new house.