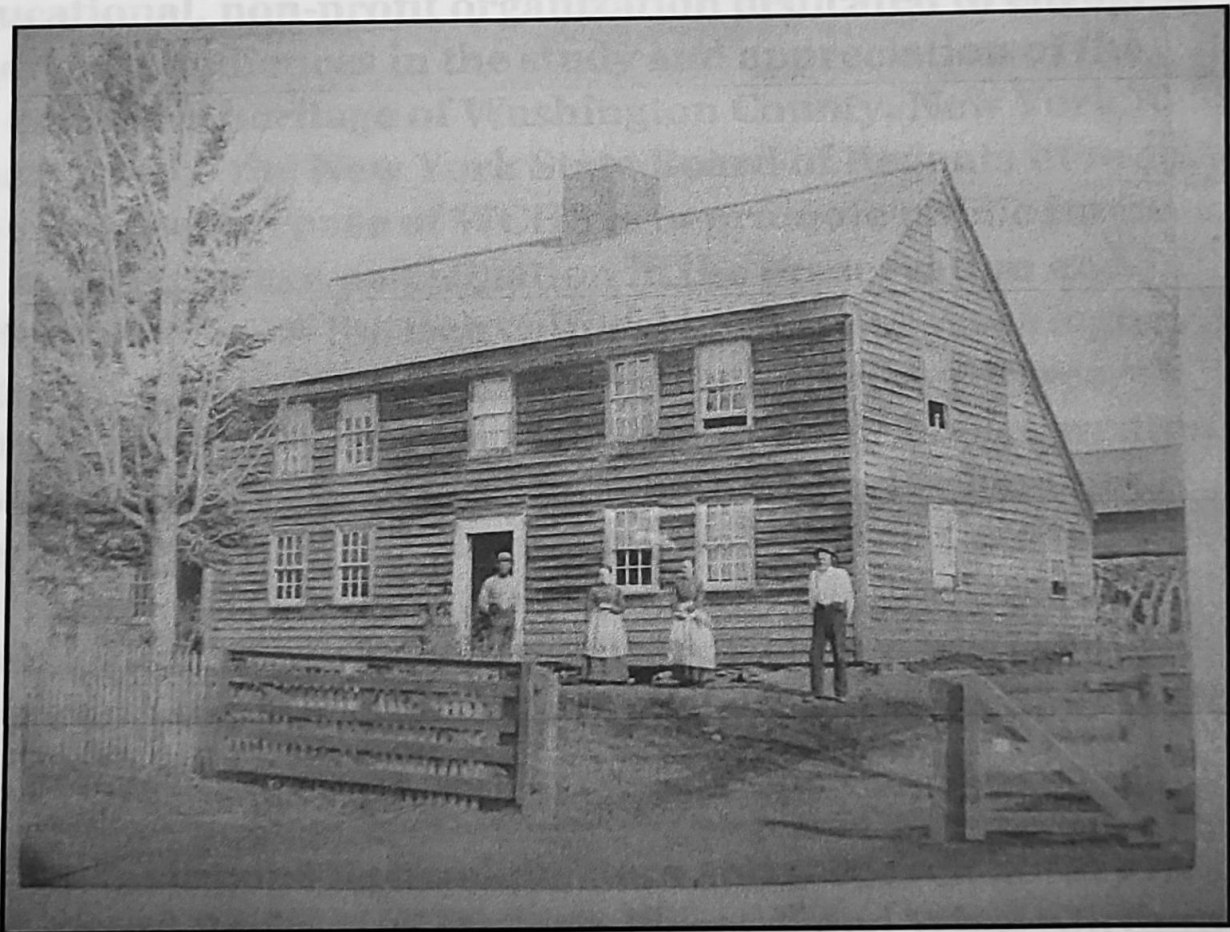


A TOUR OF FOUR HISTORIC WASHINGTON COUNTY HOUSES

**Erected in the period between the end of the Revolution
and 1800**



Wilson House, Hebron

**A PROGRAM OF THE WASHINGTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY,
FORT EDWARD, NEW YORK**

MAY 2015

ABOUT THE WASHINGTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Washington County Historical Society ("WCHS") is an educational, non-profit organization dedicated to engaging diverse audiences in the study and appreciation of the collective heritage of Washington County, New York. Chartered by the New York State Board of Regents in 1940, the principal purpose of WCHS is to promote public interest and encourage participation in the preservation and interpretation of the rich cultural heritage of Washington County. The organization maintains a Heritage Research Library, an important regional repository for books, written documents, genealogical information, and ephemera; encourages new scholarship on Washington County by means of its Annual Journal and by supporting the publication of books; and sponsors lectures, workshops, tours and social events that are scheduled throughout the year.

WCHS maintains its headquarters and research library in the National Register of Historic Places-listed Wing-Northup House in Fort Edward, which was built for entrepreneur Daniel Wood Wing ca. 1815. This Federal-style house is located on the west side of U.S. Route 4, about 15 minutes from Exit 17 of The Northway and adjacent to the Fort Edward Yacht Basin on the Hudson River.

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INTRODUCTION by William E. Krattinger

Washington County's settlement by a diverse range of ethnic and cultural groups— among them New Englanders, Dutch, Germans, Scots and Scotch-Irish, and Quakers— established the character of its early domestic architecture. While many of the region's first settlers erected temporary log or crude frame dwellings to reside in while they established a foothold on New York's forbidding northern frontier, the conclusion of the Revolution ushered in a period of stability, at which time more permanent houses began to replace the first pioneer structures. These newer buildings in large measure reflected the influence of two distinctive cultural areas, those being the New England and New World Dutch cultural hearths; this influence included the manner in which houses were framed, how space was arranged in terms of floor plan, and the how they were heated. Houses with massive central chimney stacks, around which interior space was organized, were a traditional New England type, and typically one or two stories in height; center chimney houses continued to be erected into the first quarter of the nineteenth century in the region. The New World Dutch house, by contrast, was typically a linear story-and-a-half type dwelling, end-gabled like its New England counterparts, its form defined by the manner in which it was framed. There is ample evidence of its influence in Washington County. As for Scottish and Scotch-Irish influence on the region's architecture, it should be remembered that members of the these distinctive ethnic groups came to the region from previously settled areas, among them the Hudson Valley and northwestern Massachusetts, where exposure to these prevailing architectural traditions had already occurred. It bears noting that houses of the New England and New World Dutch types did not always exist in isolation, as evidenced by examples of

the "raised Cape," which although in large measure derived from New England models was nevertheless framed as a story-and-half dwelling, just as New World Dutch houses were. Clearly variation from established types was occurring in this area of mixed cultural influence, the result of a period of cultural interaction. The period in question, between the conclusion of the Revolution in 1783 and the dawn of the nineteenth century, witnessed the transformation of the architectural landscape from its primitive, pioneer character into a more ordered state.

Crisfield Johnson, who authored the history of Washington County published in 1878, noted the following about the region's houses:

At this period (say 1820) a large majority of the log houses of twenty years before had been replaced by small frame houses, generally unpainted, though on the by-roads many a log cabin sheltered a hearty family beneath its humble roof. The ordinary farm house of the period, of which some specimens still remain, was a square "story and a half" or two-story building, standing broadside to the road, with a "stack of chimneys" in the middle and a kitchen in the rear.

Generalizing about a subject as complex as the vernacular architecture of a large region is problematic, but Johnson's account nevertheless suggests the strong influence of New England-based traditions in this region, though not without Dutch influence as expressed in the "story and a half" form. Equally prevalent, however, and still conspicuous within the landscape, are houses of more typically New World Dutch form, these having a more rectangular plan and end-wall chimneys, and sometimes built with a rear lean-to. Houses of this type would have been prevalent along the Hudson River corridor of Easton, the farms of which were owned by families of Dutch and German heritage.

The Wilson house, ca. 1787, forms an excellent point-of-departure for our tour, given that it is a building that in construction, form and finish represents direct New England influence. This house type, colloquially referred to as a "salt box," was an established folk type there. It consisted of a two-story main block with a sloping rear roof—thus the name "salt box"—the frame being erected around the massive central chimney stack. It is in every way a vernacular house,

representative of the experiences of ordinary people, as opposed to a building of high style or conception. The Wilson house forms a strong contrast with the contemporaneous Martin-Fitch house in East Greenwich, ca. 1787. Conceived along more sophisticated terms, it was influenced by elite models and forms a regional expression of Georgian-period design. Here the center chimney is absent, its position in the house instead occupied by a broad central passage that extends from the front to rear; two internal chimney stacks serviced front and rear facing fireplaces in the first and second story chambers. The house's form—a large, nearly square block, two stories in height, with a hipped roof, symmetrical façade and central entrance—makes clear that its owners sought to affiliate themselves with the region's elite.

The McNish house, ca. 1794, is one of two nearly identical brick houses—the other, the Savage house, is located south of Salem on Route 22—that appear to be the work of a single master mason. In construction and form it largely reflects the influence of New England building traditions; however, brick houses with gambrel roofs were popular in the New World Dutch cultural hearth in the period preceding the Revolution, suggesting the possibility that the house's design was in part influenced by those models. As with the Martin-Fitch house the plan is predicated on a center hall, two-room deep configuration, though in this instance end-wall fireplaces were used. A large basement kitchen, accessible from grade, was made possible by the house's construction into a banked location; this room was described by historian Asa Fitch, Jr. as “the principal apartment of the abode.”

The ca. 1797 Blanchard-Williams house offers itself as a fitting conclusion to the tour, as its design bridges the transition between the older Georgian taste and newer Federal style which came into vogue after 1800. Like the Martin-Fitch house it employs a two-story block of generally square plan with a hipped roof, but is further distinguished by the use of a projecting center pavilion on the façade, within which the main entrance and a second-story Palladian window are located. The plan is again of a center-hall type, two rooms deep, with end-wall fireplaces. These features all equate it with established Georgian precedents. However the older paneled wall treatments and decorative devices that reflected

Georgian influence are absent, replaced by a different aesthetic popularly referred to as the Federal style. Its roots can be traced to the work of architect Robert Adam in England and the popularity of Roman-inspired architecture, thus it might be more accurately termed "Roman Neoclassicism." The so-called "Adam room," one of the house's two front parlors, offers itself as one of the county's most refined Federal-style spaces. The exterior finish work, which shares associations with the Dr. Jonathan Dorr house in Cambridge, is also an excellent representation of this new architectural taste, which remained popular until the advent of the Greek Revival style in the early 1830s.

The Wilson House, Chamberlin Mills Road, Hebron, ca. 1787



The Wilson house is one of Washington County's best remaining examples of a two-story center chimney house with rear lean-to—an example of the so-called "salt box" house that was built in great numbers in New England. It is one of a few variations of the center chimney dwelling type, among them the one-story Cape house and the story-and-a-half "raised Cape." All three of these variants were predicated on a related plan at first floor level, where space was disposed around three fireplaces, one of which served as the kitchen hearth. The latter was typically accommodated in a room at the rear of the plan, often flanked by a small pantry and bed chamber, though examples in which the kitchen occupies one of the two front rooms are not unknown. As with most examples of this type the principal staircase is located in the small entrance hall at the front of the plan, directly in front of the chimney stack. It is a house type that was built in eastern New York by New Englanders, many of whom came to this region from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island before the Revolution.

A number of features are worthy of note, among them the construction of the fireboxes with locally quarried stone, and not brick—which was not as readily available as it was in later eras—and the extensive use of wood paneling on the walls, a characteristic treatment in this era. The cooking hearth is conspicuous by virtue of its size, in comparison with the fireplaces in the front rooms, and the wrought-iron cooking crane and adjacent bake oven.

The house was built for James Wilson (1747-1823), who came to Hebron from West Greenwich, Rhode Island in 1772; his grandfather, Robert Wilson (1674-1754), had come to New England from Ireland. Wilson and his wife, Martha Hopkins Wilson, settled on lot 18 of Campbell's patent. He served the patriot cause during the American Revolution, as a lieutenant and captain in the New York militia. Crisfield Johnson, writing in 1878, noted that "The frame house, which [Wilson] erected about 1787, is still standing, and occupied by his youngest son, James, Jr., who was born in it in the year 1797." The house was erected some fifteen years after the Wilson's settled in Hebron, and it might be presumed they resided in a log or a crude frame dwelling prior to the erection of this more commodious dwelling.

Many of the first permanent settlers of Hebron, which prior to its 1786 incorporation as a town was known as Black Creek, came from New England. These New Englanders largely settled in northern and eastern Hebron, while other areas of the town were settled by Scotch-Irish pioneers. Members of the Wilson and Hopkins families came from Rhode Island, the Rogers brothers—Thomas, Joshua and Clark—came from Massachusetts, while the Darrows came from Connecticut. The settlers of this area faced many challenges, among them land disputes associated with the larger Hampshire Grants conflict, which saw some area settlers driven from their homesteads by Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys, who had invested in these lands under New Hampshire title.

The Martin-Fitch House, Route 29, East Greenwich, ca. 1787



The Martin-Fitch House was a dwelling of ambitious design for this date and region. It features a high hipped roof as a principal design feature, punctuated by

dormers and two massive chimney stacks. The interior, laid out on a symmetrical two-room-deep plan, was not completely finished during the original building campaign and was instead completed ca. 1796-1812, during which time a second-floor ballroom was constructed to sustain a tavern function. The earliest finish work, of a late Georgian character, reflects the original 1780s period, while a subsequent layer of Federal-style work portrays the architectural tastes of the ensuing era. The house was built for Colonel Adam Martin and his son, Walter Martin, who came to New York from Stockbridge, Massachusetts after the Revolution. It was subsequently acquired by the Fitch family, which arrived from Vermont ca. 1780. In 1795 Asa Fitch, Sr. acquired the northern portion of the house—which lacked a kitchen—necessitating the construction of a small wing in which a medical office was additionally housed; this annex no longer remains. The part of Salem where the dwelling was erected, adjacent to the confluence of the Black Creek with the Battenkill, has long been known as Fitch's Point, and it was there that Washington County's first grist mill was established.

The house's most famous resident, Asa Fitch, Jr. (1809-1879), was the principal early historian of Washington County and additionally rose to prominence as New York State's first official entomologist. His interviews with local residents, who recounted their own earliest recollections, are invaluable to the modern-day researcher. Fitch, Jr. authored "A Historical, Topographical & Agricultural Survey of the County of Washington," published in 1848 and 1849 by the New York State Agricultural Society, an outstanding mid-nineteenth century synopsis of the geography, agricultural traditions, history and cultural complexion of Washington County and adjacent regions. He earned a degree in medicine from Rutgers Medical School in 1829, following his graduation from the Rensselaer School in Troy (present-day Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), and during the following decade was a professor there and also practiced medicine. By the late 1830s Fitch, Jr. left medicine to devote himself to the study of insects. It was also in this period that he returned to Fitch's Point, in consideration of his father's failing health, to manage the house and farm. Fitch, Jr. was responsible for collecting insects for the New York State Cabinet of Natural History between 1845 and ca. 1854 and was appointed as the New York State Entomologist in 1854, a position he maintained until 1870. He was the first person to be appointed to

such a post in the history of the United States. The small frame building behind the house served as his laboratory and it was there he spent countless hours in the pursuit of his professional endeavors.

Shortly after 1800 the Martin family migrated to the Black River region of Lewis County, New York, where it promoted the settlement of the township which came to bear their name. Walter Martin had acquired 8,000 acres of land in that region and worked vigorously to promote the settlement of those lands by encouraging families from Salem and Stockbridge to relocate there. He was a pivotal figure in the early history of Lewis County and there an impressive stone house remains, in Martinsburg, to chronicle the family's presence.

The McNish House, County Route 30, Salem, ca. 1794



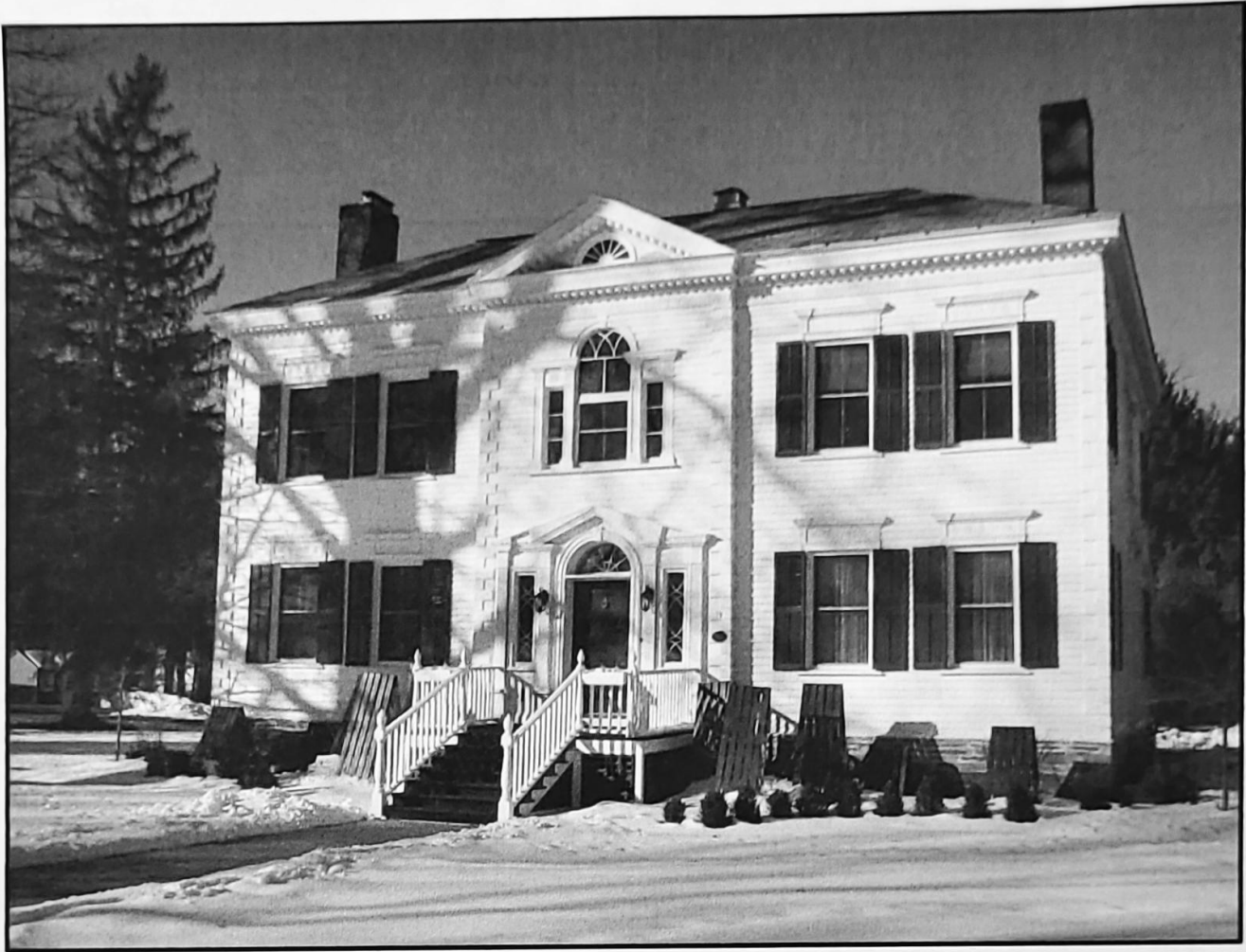
The Alexander McNish house, a one-story building built with walls of hand-moulded brick, is distinguished by its Flemish bond brickwork and gambrel roof.

While technically a one-story house, additional levels of finished space are contained in the house's basement and within the gambrel. The McNish house is one of two houses in this immediate area— the other being the Judge Savage house located south of Salem on Route 22— of largely identical design. The McNish house was at one time the centerpiece of a large working farm, which in the mid-nineteenth century was described by Asa Fitch in relation to Washington County's sheep industry. Alexander McNish (1754-1827), for whom the house was built, came to America with his family as part of a large Scotch-Irish contingent which settled in Salem prior to the Revolution, as did his future wife, Sarah McCoy. McNish was a veteran of the Revolution, having served at the Battle of Saratoga and as a member of a local scouting party. The McNish family commenced sheep farming in the years immediately following the war, and Alexander McNish is credited as among the first to introduce the Merino species to the region. As tradition maintains, these Merino bucks were considered so valuable that they were quartered in an area set aside in the basement their first winter in Salem. The McNish family maintained ownership of the house and associated farm land until 1927, when Darley McNish, the last member of the family, willed it to the Evergreen Cemetery Association. Though no longer associated with the large tract of land that sustained the McNish family's agricultural and husbandry pursuits in the nineteenth century, the McNish house is nevertheless a distinguished example of Georgian-inspired vernacular domestic architecture in the Salem area.

While the McNish house shares visual similarities with brick dwellings built in predominately Dutch areas of the Upper Hudson Valley prior to the Revolution, it is nevertheless a building which is "English" in construction and detail. The dwelling was built with a load-bearing brick structural system, as opposed to the traditional composite system used by the Dutch in the Hudson Valley, whereby a timber-frame structure was encased with a non-load-bearing brick veneer. The best regional example of this composite Dutch system is the house built for Johannes Knickerbocker III, outside of Schaghticoke, ca. 1780; though conceived to emulate Georgian models it was nevertheless built in this traditional Dutch manner. The McNish house is likewise a single-story in height, as opposed to the story-and-half type favored by the Dutch, another aspect which

distinguishes it from New World Dutch examples. The gambrel roof, often erroneously considered of Dutch derivation but instead one borrowed from English architecture, is not framed in the New World Dutch manner, but was instead built with a purlin plate and common rafter system associated with New England timber-framing traditions. New England gambrels are typically characterized by having upper and lower slopes of similar length, as is the case with the McNish house; the New World Dutch gambrel, by contrast, is often of a "high breaking" type, with a shorter upper slope and much longer lower slope. The use of the gambrel roof was expressive of the popularity of this feature in a larger regional context spanning the last quarter of the eighteenth century and into the early nineteenth century. Originally of English derivation, it was adopted with great frequency by the Hudson Valley Dutch in the eighteenth century, particularly before the Revolution.

The Blanchard-Williams House, East Broadway, Salem, ca. 1797

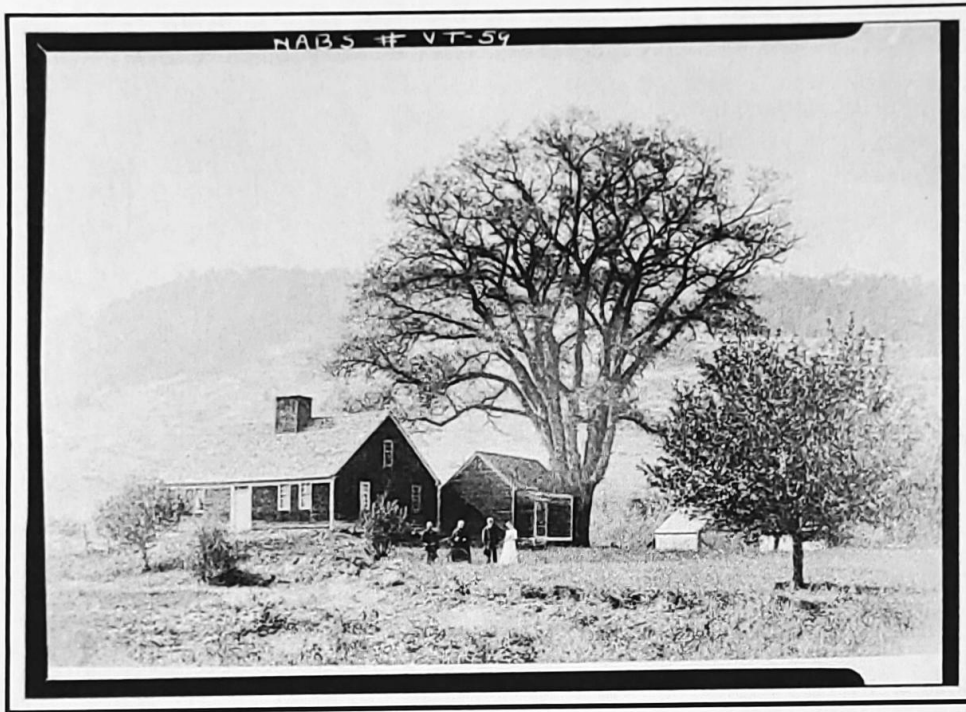


The Blanchard-Williams House was one of Washington County's premier private homes at the time of its erection. Approximately a half-century after its completion, at the time of the 1855 New York census, it was still appraised as one of Salem's two most valuable houses—and it was ascribed a value equal to that of the village's two brick hotels. Traditional accounts indicate that the house was erected by General John Williams (1752-1806), among the more prominent figures in Washington County in his time, as a wedding present for his daughter, Maria, who married Anthony J. Blanchard, a lawyer of French Huguenot lineage. While a date of ca. 1790 has been ascribed to the house previously, this date appears erroneous, particularly since it does not appear Maria Williams and Anthony Blanchard wed until 1795. The house was likely still under construction late in 1797, at which time Blanchard informed General Williams, then in

Philadelphia with Congress, that the couple “expect[ed] to move and in six or eight days.

The form of the Blanchard-Williams house was developed from sophisticated precedents rooted in eighteenth century Georgian design. Unlike the high hipped roof of the Martin-Fitch house, the house has what is termed a hipped gambrel roof, having both an upper and lower slope. The façade is skillfully proportioned, the central entrance bay being placed within a projecting pavilion with a Palladian window at second-story level. The exterior is, like the Jonathan Dorr house in Cambridge, a showcase of the finish carpenter’s, or joiners, skills; the various motifs and mouldings exhibit the clear influence of the Federal style, the popularity of which grew rapidly following the publication of Asher Benjamin’s 1797 *County Builder’s Assistant*. The interior is equally splendid, and includes the so-called “Adam room,” among the best remaining representations of the Federal style in Washington County.

A VISUAL GLOSSARY OF SOME TYPICAL VERNAUCLAR DOMESTIC FORMS



ABOVE: a one-story New England Cape house with woodshed, Windsor County, Vermont;
 BELOW:
 a story-and-a-half house with rear lean-to, Salem area, a type with clear New World Dutch precedents





ABOVE: a "raised Cape," Hebron area; BELOW, a variant of the center-chimney type composed of a story-and-a-half frame with rear-lean-to and built with a center chimney; Fort Ann vicinity





ABOVE: a settlement-era log house, Orange County; BELOW, settlement-era frame house, Bemis Heights, Saratoga County





ABOVE, a New World Dutch house in the Stockade, Schenectady; note the high-breaking gambrel roof and the distinctive story-and-a-half form; BELOW, Cape house, Suffolk County.



COLOPHON

This pamphlet was published in 2015 as an accompaniment to the WCHS-sponsored "A Tour of Four Historic Washington County Houses," a tour and fundraiser conducted on May 30, 2015. The information contained herein was largely researched and written by William E. Krattinger, a WCHS trustee and employee of New York State's Division for Historic Preservation.

THANKS

The WCHS would like to thank the owners of these four historic houses for graciously allowing access as part of this tour. Additional thanks are due to those whose efforts were responsible for planning and coordination of the event.