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## PART I: DESCRIPTION AND SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The earliest section of the Parsons House is a two-and-a-half story frame of center-chimney type, probably erected in the decade of 1725-35. This original house was greatly expanded and the interior entirely remodeled in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries. The first house survives entombed within these later additions and remodelings, and can be examined at points only through the process of excavation.

The original house was probably typical in general design to those built by the more prosperous Connecticut Valley townsmen of the early eighteenth century. Stylistically, it belonged to Massachusetts' First Period of domestic architecture, which lasted considerably longer in the Connecticut Valley - perhaps as late as the 1750s - than it did at Massachusetts Bay. The house's characteristic First Period details included casement windows, probably diamond-paned; chamfered summer beams and exposed ceiling joists; exterior siding which abuts at the corners; moulded horizontal sheathing in the kitchen; and a single-pile plan to which a lean-to was later added. Only one detail demonstrates a knowledge of the emerging Georgian decoration: plaster walls with moulded chair rail and baseboard in the "parlor".

The changes which transformed Nathaniel Parson's house into the present building occurred in at least three separate remodeling campaigns or "builds" i.e.:

1. The discrete addition of a kitchen lean-to, sometime later in the eighteenth century. This did little to change the appearance of the earlier section.
2. A more comprehensive remodeling of the entire house, which may have begun in the last decade of the eighteenth century and certainly extended into the early nineteenth. A second floor was placed on the lean-to, the roof was expanded accordingly, and the exterior was entirely re-sided. The interior was also plastered (most rooms for the first time). This work took place gradually, perhaps over the course of decades, and likely constituted a number of discrete campaigns (e.g. 2A, 2B, etc.) whose length and timing we were unable to explain with any certainty.
3. The addition of the ell, east wing, and west wing. The ell and east wing are contemporary. Their chronological relationship to the west wing cannot be determined through physical evidence. All of these additions were completed by about 1830.

While the constant remodeling of houses was almost the rule in 18th and 19th century New England, the Parsons House preserves this record of change to an unusual degree, and this is its chief importance in the architectural and cultural history of the region. A multitude of early finish materials remain layered within its wall cavities, much of it susceptible to exposure and exhibition, as demonstrated by the illustrations which follow.

The most important discoveries made during the present investigation - those which should prove most valuable to a larger understanding of domestic architecture in this period - have mostly to do with finish materials. While neither the frame nor plan of the house present any real surprises, the original interior and exterior finishing schemes clearly do. The house has not so much overturned existing assumptions, however, as provided unusually clear evidence about matters we know fairly

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little about, compared to framing and the development of floorplans in the same period. The more interesting findings can be summarized as follows:

Variety in the application of exterior siding materials, and the imitation of weatherboarding on the facade. The exterior of the first house was sided from the beginning with three different materials, all of which remain at least partially intact under the present weatherboarding. The two gable ends were covered with relatively thin and narrow weatherboards, very similar in intent and appearance to modern clapboards. The rear elevation was flush-boarded: wide 1" boards laid in a single plane. The material on the facade was a compromise between the two: flush boards grooved horizontally in imitation of thin weatherboarding. The first two materials are rather conventional in this period but the last has been documented on only two other 18th century houses, both in the Connecticut Valley.

A pentice. An even more unusual exterior detail are two mortises above the front door, which seem to describe an early hood or pentice, of which we have very few documented examples in New England. The physical evidence demonstrates its existence but does not describe its appearance.

Variety in the application of interior finish; An early use of plaster and moulded woodwork. The interior finishing plan of the first house is also intriguing. Of the two first floor rooms, the eastern room, or kitchen, was sheathed with moulded horizontal boards, while the walls of the western room were covered with an early form of plaster. These plaster walls also incorporated a baseboard and thin chair rail, early manifestations of what would soon become the standard Georgian room finish. The up-to-date wall finish in the western room co-existed, however, with banks of diamond-paned casements and a chamfered summer-beam. The two chambers stood unfinished until at least the 1790s.

Interior finish was clearly used at this early date to establish a spacial hierarchy of parlor, kitchen, and chambers. The lack of finish in the chambers adds to the growing evidence that many 18th century rooms stood without interior walls until the Federal period, only a single layer of weatherboarding, in this instance, protecting the room from the elements.

The use of grass as a binder in the early plaster. The plaster in the western first-floor room is bound together by short pieces of grass rather than animal hair. Examining the mix microscopically also revealed small amounts of dyed blue and red fiber. The plaster itself seems to have some amount of soil content, although it was not subjected to laboratory analysis.

Selectivity in the application of paint over interior woodwork; The use of water-soluble paints over interior woodwork. Water-soluble or distemper paints have been found on woodwork and interior walls in some 17th century houses. Evidence is only now gathering, however, of their continued and extensive use as woodwork paints in the 18th century, a period when oil paints were thought to be ubiquitous over all materials save plaster. The Parsons House provides unusually clear evidence of this. The board walls and ceiling joists of the kitchen are still covered with water-soluble paint in two colors - white and yellow - and distemper paint was later used over the same features in the lean-to kitchen even later in the century. On the other side of the hall, the woodwork in the Georgian parlor, despite its progressive character, was left unpainted, while the plaster walls were covered with white paint.

The remodeling of the house in the late 18th-early 19th century, while conventional in most aspects, also provides some insights which can aid broader scholarship:

The incremental nature of the remodeling. Incremental work on large remodeling projects may have been the rule in the 18th and early 19th centuries, certainly far more than in later periods. A major upgrading of the interior and exterior of the Parsons House began before 1800, but was likely not completed until between 1815 and 1825. In the case of plastering the interior, the varieties in the types of lath nail used from space to space least suggest that the work was done a room or two at a time, and over a long period. This evidence belies the notion that remodelings occurred suddenly, and can be crisply dated. Indeed, the process may have been continuous at the Parson House for a rather long period.

The recovery of early nineteenth century decorative finishes. We recovered a number of decorative wall and woodwork finishes dating to the first quarter of the 19th century in the course of performing excavation work. These include three wallpaper patterns, each matched to its corresponding woodwork color, two distemper wall paints, and the fragment of a now-destroyed overmantel painting also executed in distempers. Over a dozen early woodwork colors have also been documented, including a kitchen floor paint.



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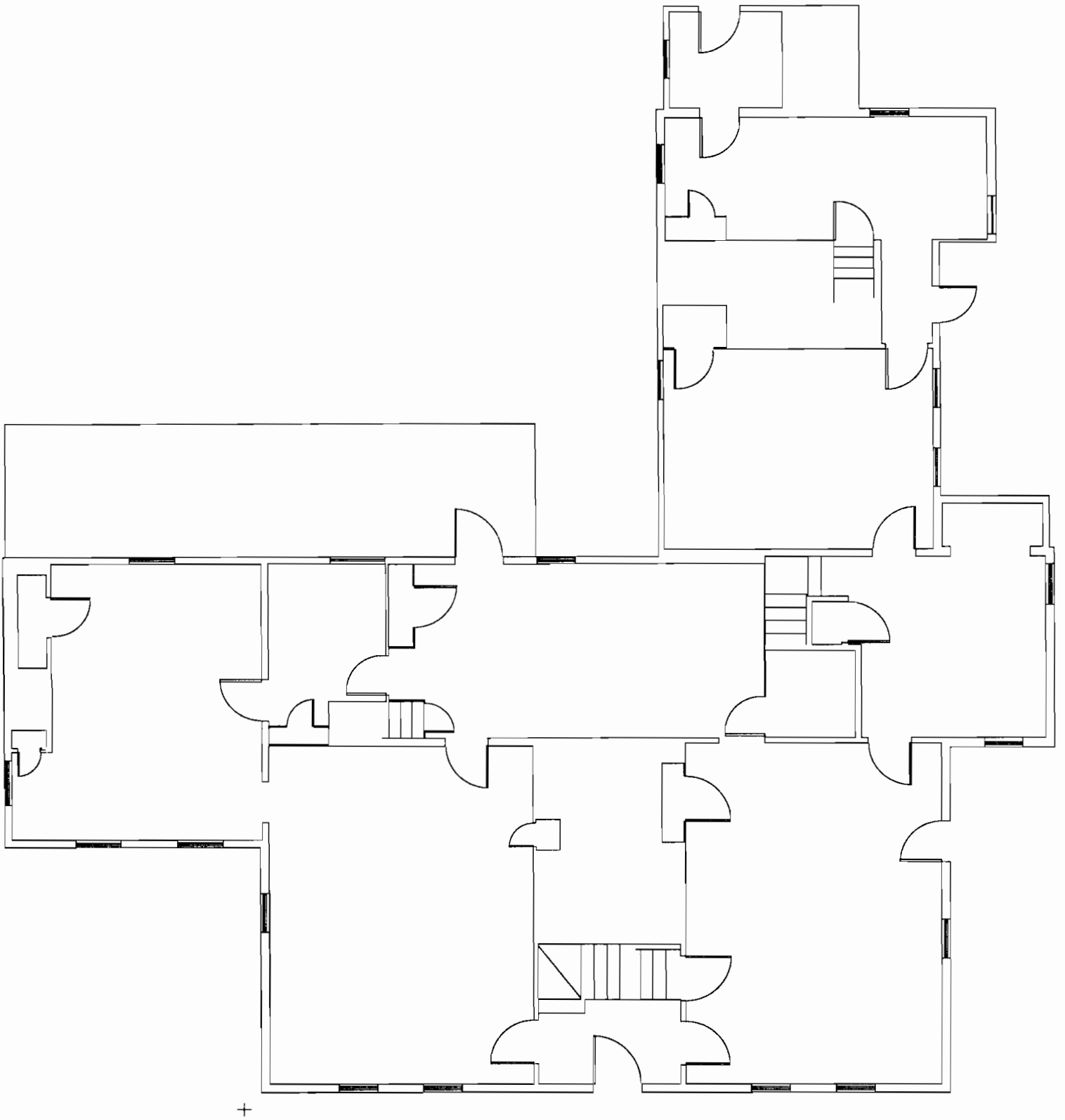
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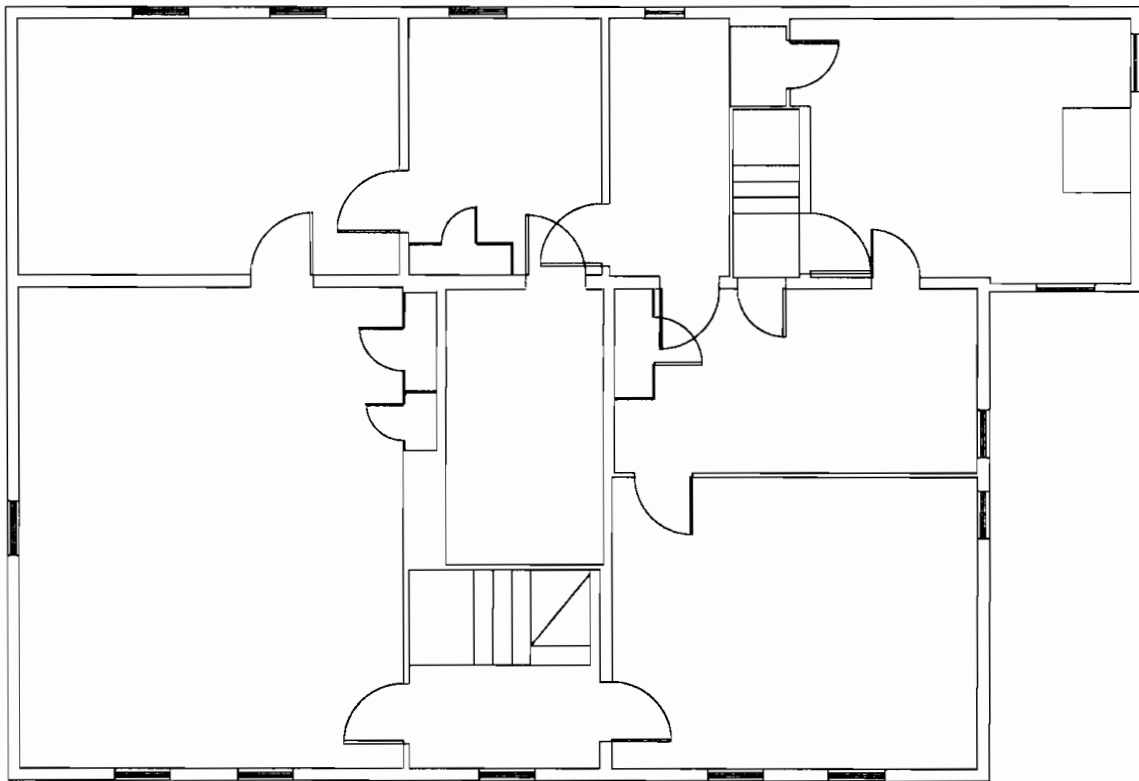
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FIRST FLOOR PLAN, (John Leeke)



SECOND FLOOR PLAN, (John Leeke)

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## The Original House, c. 1725-35

The core of the present house, two stories and one room deep, was probably erected in the decade of 1725-35. The lot was owned from 1709 to 1738 by Nathaniel Parsons, and the date of his second marriage - 1728 - accords well with a house of this type and character. Certain features of the house are too progressive to date to the earliest period of Nathaniel's ownership of the lot. The house must have been constructed before Parsons' death in 1738, as it was occupied by his widow until the 1750s.

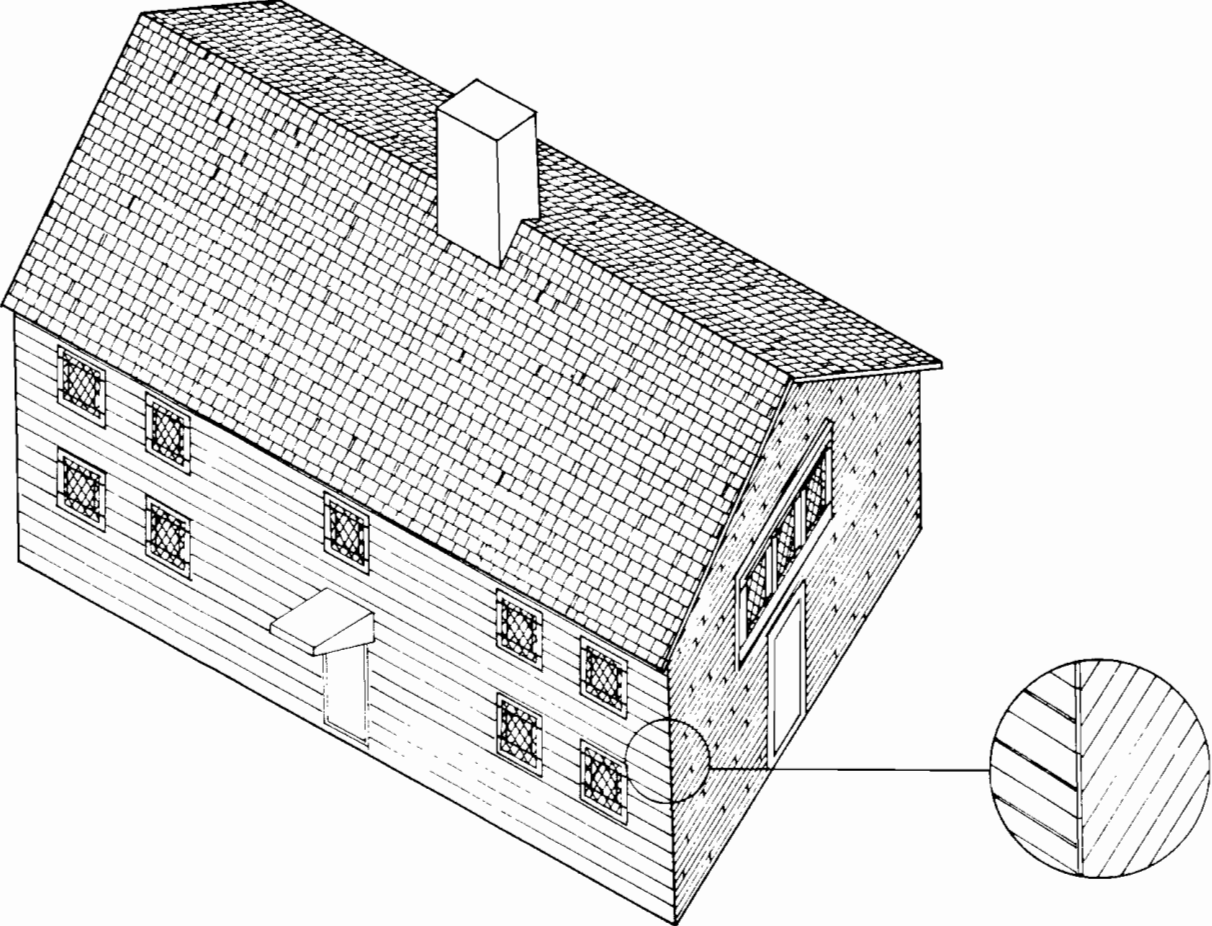
There may have been an earlier house on the same property, which this one replaced. The 1709 deed transferring the lot to Nathaniel (Judd MSS, Northampton Series, 1:36), describes it as "the housing and homelot" of the grantor. We found no physical evidence, however, that an older house had been incorporated into the present frame.

The exterior was sided with four slightly different materials: wide flush boards on the facade scored horizontally to resemble weatherboards, weatherboarding on the gable ends, and unscored flush boards on the rear. All of these survive under later coverings.

Some details in the illustration are partly conjectural. The size and locations of only six window openings have been verified (not all of which are on the sides illustrated), but these suggest a regular fenestration pattern. The evidence for leaded, diamond-paned casements, as opposed to the transitional, wooden, square-paned type - is entirely documentary. Local historian Sylvester Judd noted c. 1832 that "the house 50 years ago had diamond windows." Wooden casements or sash were new window types in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, and may have been relatively slow in reaching the Connecticut Valley.

We know very little about the appearance of the pentice or hood above the front door, only the tenons of which survive. Similar hoods found on other early Connecticut Valley houses seem to have been relatively plain and practical.



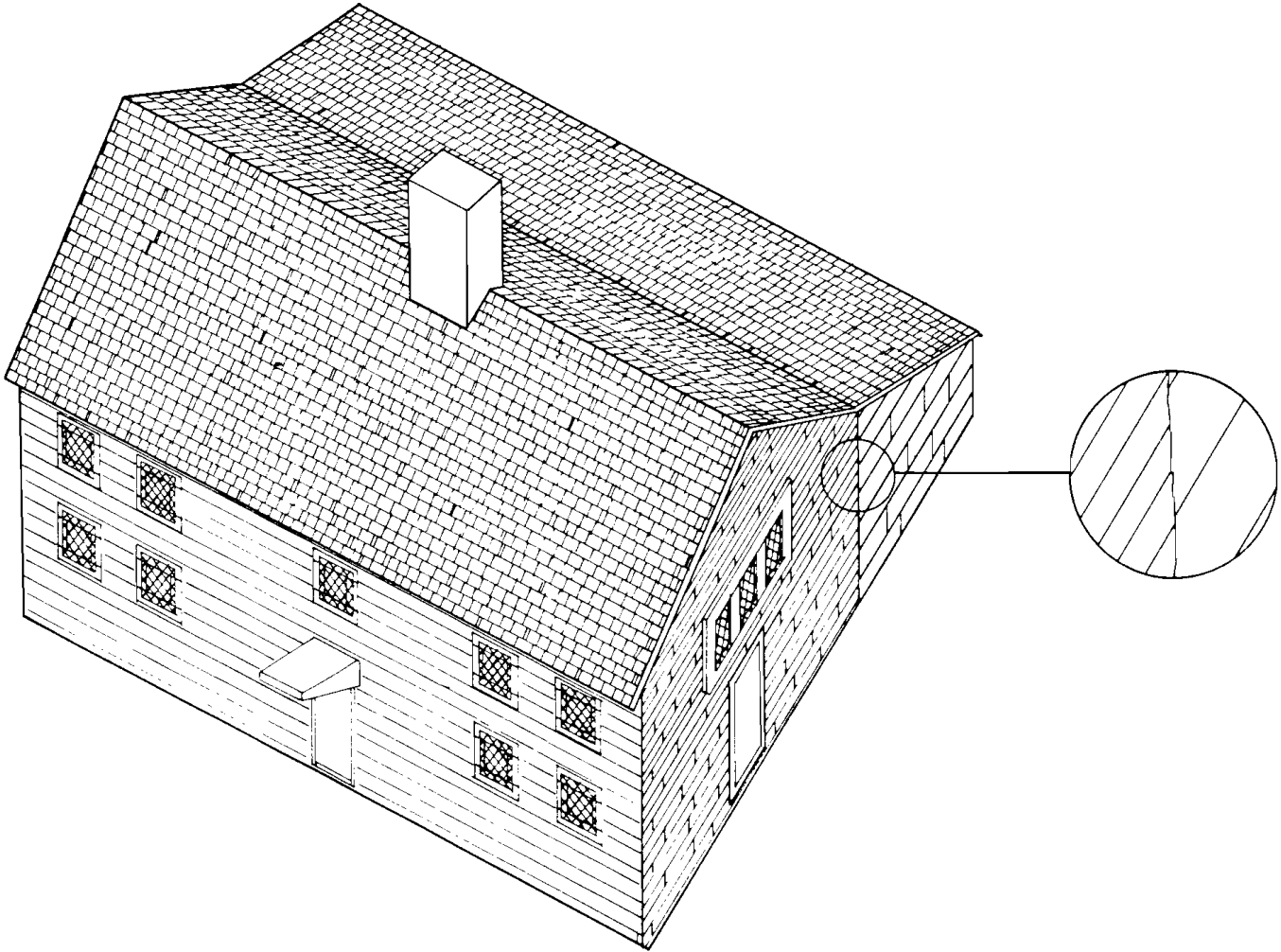


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## Addition of the Lean-To, Mid-Eighteenth Century

We can not precisely date the lean-to on the basis of physical evidence. The house was owned jointly by two Parsons heirs from the 1750s until 1785, and roughly east/west division of the house between two families might explain the need for two kitchens. It is just as possible, however, that Nathaniel's widow took in a tenant or boarders, a situation which might have required a second kitchen. The original kitchen continued to serve as such until c. 1800, when it was made into a parlor.

The lean-to was sided with wide rough boards, rather than clapboards, weatherboards, or planed-board siding.



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## Expansion to a Double-Pile House, c. 1795-1815

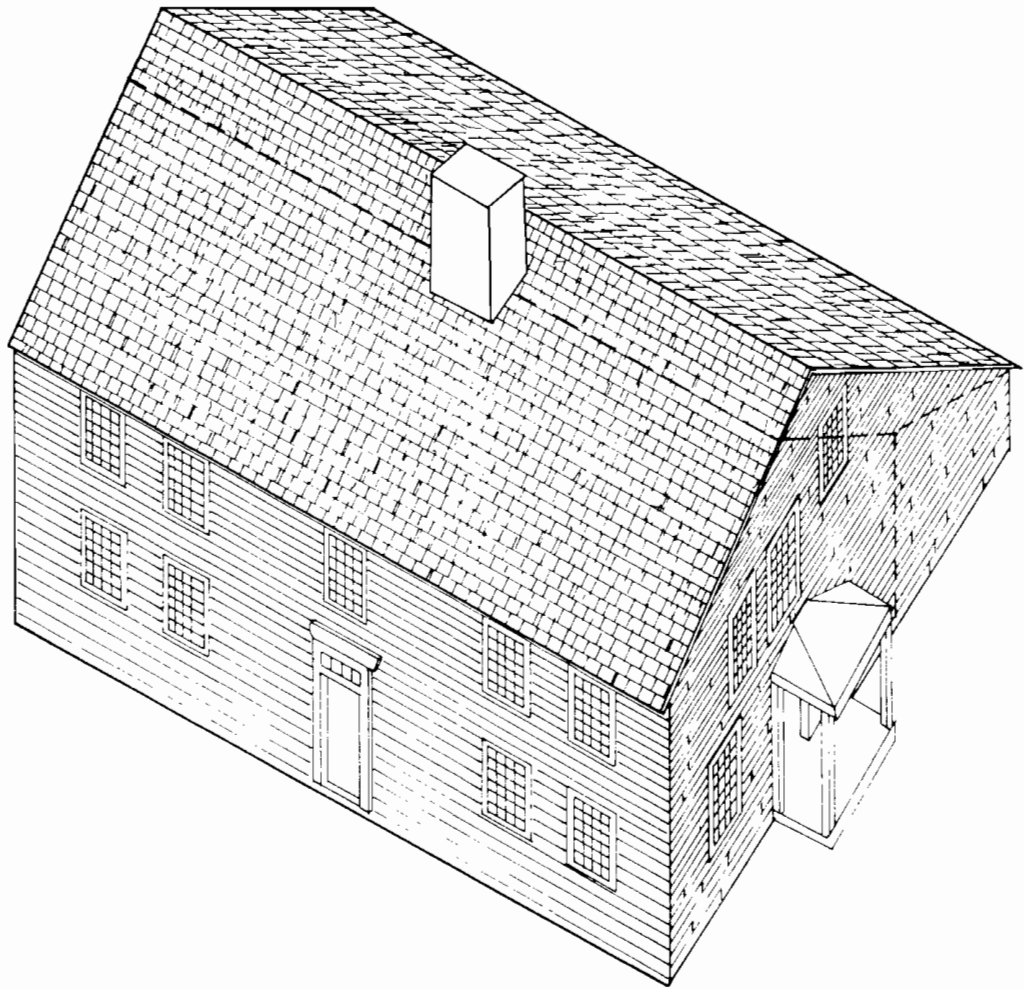
A second floor was added to the lean-to in the later eighteenth century, requiring that the old roof be replaced with one of almost twice its girth. This completed the transformation of the original house from "single-pile" (one room deep) to "double-pile" (two rooms deep) on both stories, and gave the main section its present form.

This project was part of a grander scheme which also included a major interior/exterior remodeling. The present weatherboards were nailed over the by-now deteriorated original siding, and the old casements were replaced with hung sash. The simple door surround with flat arch had a vaguely Federal-style feeling, but the spirit of the upgrading was far more practical than stylistic. The old house was too small and no longer weather-tight.

The upgrading was just as thorough on the interior. We know that the downstairs rooms and parlor chamber were plastered about this time because nearly all of the original window openings were altered and their surrounds re-used as lath. All of these rooms received plaster ceilings, more ornamental woodwork, and new doors. Room 112, the only plastered room in the old house, had much of its original plaster replaced or covered with new woodwork, including a fairly elaborate paneled wall of a transitional Late Georgian - Federal type, with bolection moulding. The present front hall staircase may date from the same period.

The dating of these major changes to 1795-1815 depends largely on nail evidence. The siding is attached with wrought nails, whereas all of the split-board lath and most - but not all - of the interior woodwork is fastened with an early form of cut nail. The first fifteen years of the nineteenth century are the primary transition period between these nail types.

The form of the new roof frame, particularly the pegged, hexagonal ridge pole, is also typical of the last quarter of the eighteenth or very early nineteenth centuries.



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### **Addition of the Ell and East Wing, c. 1815-30**

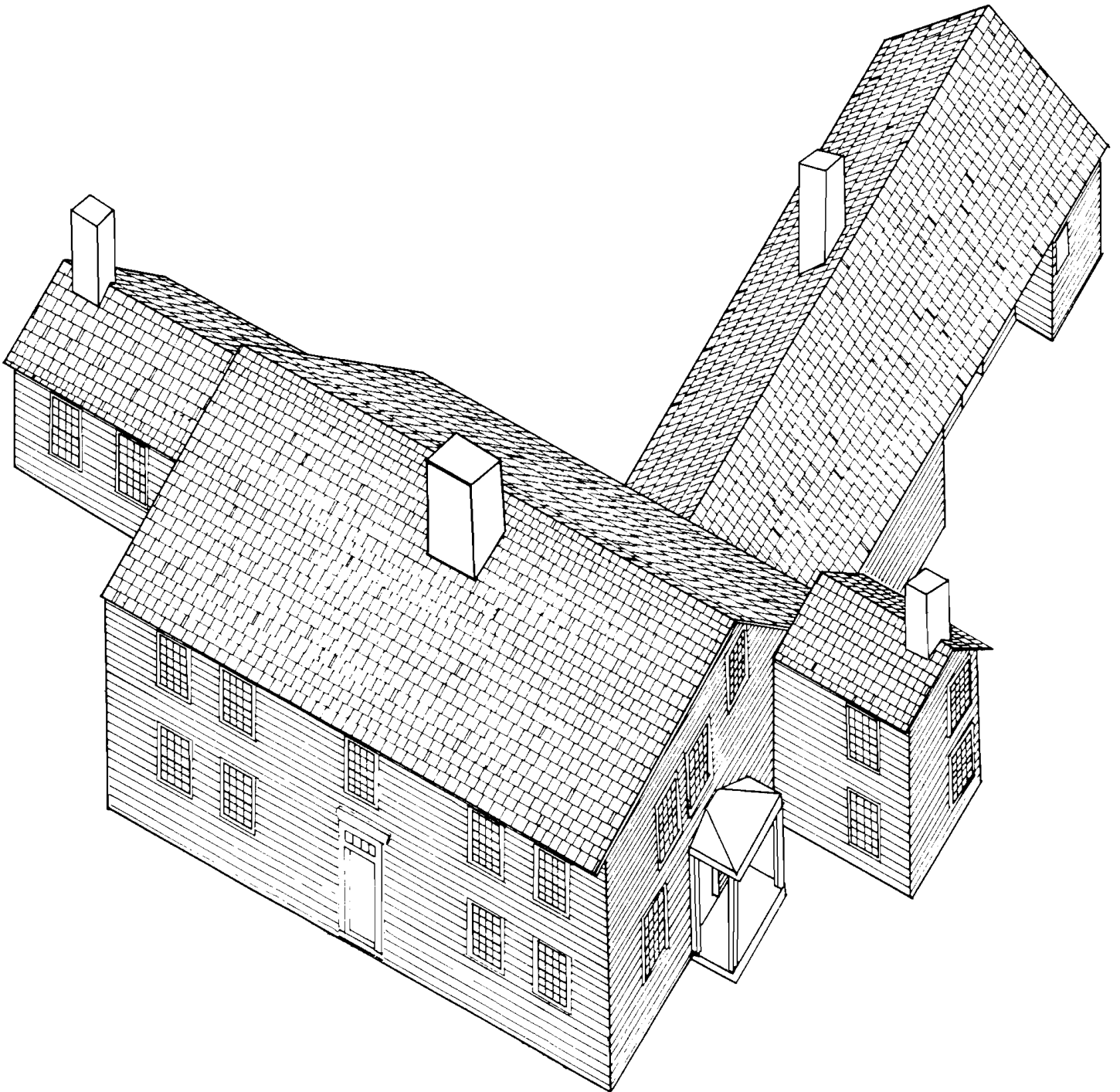
The ell and east wing appear to be contemporary, and to post-date the remodelling of the main section. The physical evidence does not allow the interval to be described with any certainty, but the work was completed by 1830.

The ell provided the house with a summer kitchen, while the east wing created a dining room (?) at the end of the lean-to, and a second floor room which could have been a parlor, office, or chamber.

We know that these additions occurred after the main section was remodelled because two doors connecting the main house and the east wing were added after the older rooms had been plastered (see rooms 102 and 202).

### **Addition of the West Wing, c. 1815-30**

We are uncertain whether the west wing is contemporary with the eastern additions. It was clearly added after the main section was remodelled, as it covers a section of the weatherboarding on the house's west wall. The wing encloses a single room with Federal-style woodwork, perhaps a parlor or office.



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## The Front Porch and Other Twentieth Century Changes

A front porch with turned balusters was added to the facade in the early 20th century. This had been replaced, by the 1940s, with a similar porch of squared columns. The later porch was removed by the 1970s.

The 2/2 windows in the photographs likely date to the early 20th century, and may be contemporary with the new porch. These began to be replaced with multi-paned windows in the later 1970s (bottom photo), a process completed by the later 1980s.





DES - 5



DES - 6

