Private Lives from Public Artifacts: The Architectural Heritage of Kings County Planters

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A study of the style of house constructed in Horton Township, Kings County, from 1760 to 1820 indicates a dramatic change from a simple rustic style which was easily adapted to changing needs to a sophisticated style which was rigid and stressed formality. This change in style paralleled a change in the focus of the society from the welfare of the community to the welfare of the family and the individual. This trend was demonstrated not only in the style and construction of the building but also in the changing use of interior space. Both dwellings and their extensions reflected this trend. What follows is a small part of a larger study which attempts to use surviving houses as a means of expanding our knowledge of the way of life of the Planters. The conclusions presented here are tentative and are subject to revision in the light of further research. The paper has several other limitations. First, it is unlikely that every style of house built during the period is represented by extant buildings. During the last 200 years many buildings have either been destroyed by fire or demolished. Some have been renovated; a few have been restored. In addition, it is difficult to determine the exact year of house construction. Deeds with their vague boundary references deal only with the transfer of land. Houses were rarely mentioned. Nevertheless, these houses are significant examples of Planter material culture.

Buildings have been recognized by historians as legitimate research material for more than sixty years. F. Frederick Kelly described houses as "human documents" and used them as resources in this early twentieth-century study of New England culture.[1] James Deetz regarded material culture as the "most objective source of information" and "most immediate" because it could be experienced directly.[2] In my research, I am indebted to scholarship on colonial New England material culture in general and Connecticut architecture in particular in my efforts to locate the antecedents of Horton houses. Also a valuable resource is the general chronology of Nova Scotia house styles which was developed by the Nova Scotia Department of Culture, Recreation and Fitness.[3] This document identifies

1 F. Frederick Kelly, *Connecticut's Old Houses — A Handbook and Guide* (Strougton, 1963), 34.

2 James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: The Archaeology of Early American Life* (Garden City, 1977), 160.

3 *A Nova Scotian's Guide to Built Heritage: Architectural Styles, 1604-1930* (Halifax, 1985).

house styles and their periods of popularity. A few deeds, most of them found in the Kings County Registry of Deeds, mention dwellings. Wills and inventories of former owners often give specific information about the transfer of land with the dwelling and list its contents. Family histories supply invaluable information about its members.

Horton Township was one of four, known as the Minas Basin Townships, which were laid out along the south shore of the Bay of Fundy. A share averaged 500 acres and included town lot, dykeland, marshland and upland. Ownership of specific sections of land was determined by drawing lots. The amount of land an individual received varied from 250 to 2000 acres.[4] The majority of the settlers who laid claim to land arrived in Horton from Connecticut during the 1760s.

For this paper I selected four houses constructed in Horton between 1760 and 1820 either by the original grantees or their descendants. Each of these houses has a contribution to make to our understanding of the Planter way of life as it evolved during this period. Two of the houses are basically vernacular in style. This term implies that each was built using local materials by local craftsmen who combined tradition, individuality and utility to produce a graceful house. Form followed foundation and tradition in buildings constructed to provide living, working and sleeping quarters for the family. Built close to the ground, the house was generally asymmetrical and was freely adapted to meet changing needs. Individuality of the builder or owner was revealed in the pitch of the roof, the length of the roof and the location of the hearth. Exterior and interior decorative touches were minimal. Because its functions were to heat the house and to cook the meals, the massive chimney was the focal point of the interior. It was located in a large room or hall with a low ceiling. In this "great" room cooking, eating, entertaining and business dealings took place. The hall was the common shared space for family and visitors while the loft served as one large sleeping chamber.

The first house to be considered, the Calkin house (Figure 1), is located on its original foundations three miles south-west of the Horton town plot. It was built prior to 1768. The house, constructed of wood, has one storey and five bays including a central doorway on the facade. The asymmetrical bays are an external indication that the entire present structure is not original. This theory is supported by a study of the interior in general and the cellar in particular. In the cellar there is a marked difference in the type of stone used. Irregular fieldstone extends along the west end wall and approximately halfway down the north and south walls. The north wall abruptly changes to finished stone. There is a large stone chimney base along the west wall and a double wall along the south wall to the stairs

4 Arthur Wentworth Hamilton Eaton, *The History of Kings County* (1910, reprint Belleville, 1972), 86.

Figure 1: Calkin House, near Grand Pré.

leading outside. This area may have been an Acadian cellar. The original chimney has been removed at the first and second storey levels. Because several renovations have been made to the first storey, it is difficult to determine the original use of the interior space. Although the hearth was removed, the base of the chimney which is centrally located along the west wall indicates the existence at one time of one large open room on the ground floor. A staircase, now boarded in, led from the hall to the left. One interior wall is much thicker than the others and further supports the theory that the west section of the house is the elder.

The date of construction of the addition is unknown but its style indicates that it was prior to the end of the eighteenth century. The cellar is constructed of finished stone. The chimney located in the centre of the east wall has a unique triangular base and makes no contribution to the support of the structure. In most early houses the summer beam was placed through the chimney to give support to the frame. On the first floor, half of the east area was divided into two rooms, each with cornerposts, girts and a corner mantle. The antecedents of the triangular chimney and corner mantles are difficult to trace. They were not found in books dealing with New England or Connecticut hearths. Four houses built in Annapolis Royal dating from 1708 to 1763 and the Simeon Perkins House in Liverpool have this feature. The north-east room with its delicately moulded mantle was the "best" parlour and was opened only for special visitors. Although the south-east room was eventually converted into a kitchen, it was originally the second parlour. A central hallway which extends only half the width of the house leads from the present entrance

and contains a staircase to the second storey. The fact that the summer beam – the major support beam for the addition — is located approximately five feet from the chimney and ends above the front entrance with the supporting timbers beneath it and the fact that the staircase treads show little sign of wear indicate that the present entrance is a later renovation. The second storey of the addition includes four bedrooms. The north-east one still contains the original mantle. Prosperity encouraged modest decoration and allowed privacy. Family members no longer slept together in a loft but were divided according to sex and ages into separate rooms. When the east addition was made, the loft above the original common room was divided into two bedrooms. The walls of the north-east bedroom, the walls of the existing stairwell and the walls of the upper hall are panelled with wide vertical boards which have bevelled edges.

The Calkin house is one of the few examples of a gambrel roof extant in Horton. The style which was employed in Connecticut may have been copied from buildings in seventeenth-century England.[5] According to many writers the style became popular because it allowed houseowners to avoid tax on the full second storey. In a simple one storey house, the steeply pitched roof limited storage and sleeping accommodations in the loft. By raising the pitch, the gambrel roof increased the utilization of the loft either for more storage space and/or for increased headroom. The style also enabled the builders to increase the breadth of the span without raising a higher steeper roof. The dormers which provide light for the half storey were constructed as part of the addition. The saltbox roof over the small addition to the west wall was traditional in England and New England. It provided the owner with a maximum use of continuous interior space without a major adjustment to the roof. Its date of construction is unknown but it has a low ceiling and a cupboard utilizes simple original iron hardware.

Ownership of the land on which the building stands is difficult to trace. The earliest deed at the Registry of Deeds in Kentville for any piece of land in the county is dated 8 April 1766. According to the *Horton Township Partition Book* which summarized grants to each settler in 1760, Jeremiah Calkin, Sr., was granted one share which included two First Division Farm Lots. When he purchased land in 1768 from Daniel Hovey, the lot was described as "lying west of the dwelling of said Jeremiah Calkin."[6] Calkin arrived in 1765 from Lebanon, Connecticut, with his wife Mary and three

5 Martin Shaw Briggs, *Homes of the Pilgrim Fathers in England and America, 1620-1685* (New York, 1932), 81.

6 Registry of Deeds, Kentville, N.S. Book 1, 221.

Figure 2: Atwell House, Wolfville

young sons.[7] By 1784 there were nine children in the family.[8] Between 1764 and 1777 he acquired nine parcels of land. As a prospering farmer and father of six sons and three daughters, Calkin was able to make a substantial addition to his dwelling and renovations to the original structure. Although wood was readily available, a carpenter or joiner was probably hired for the fine detail on the mantles and panelling. The division of interior space into many small rooms and the presence of decorative work indicate that privacy and style were increasing in importance for those who could afford them.

The second house, the Atwell house (Figure 2), was built c. 1770, approximately seven miles west of Horton town plot and in the western section of Mud Creek, or Wolfville. The house, built of wood, has two storeys and a five bay facade. Like the Calkin house, this one has an asymmetrical five bay facade and a central entrance. Interior evidence also suggests that this house gradually evolved to its present shape and size. The western portion of the cellar is older and may be Acadian. Along the west wall is the base of an enormous stone chimney. Although renovations made in the late eighteenth century divided the first storey into several rooms, the location of this chimney in the basement suggests that the first storey originally contained one large room. Evidence indicates that at least one addition was made, possibly by Edward or Elisha DeWolf.

7 Esther Clark Wright, *Planters and Pioneers* (Hantsport, 1982), 72.

8 Eaton, *History of Kings County*, 597.

In the basement of the additions is a massive vaulted chimney. The origins of this unique construction are unknown. On the first storey the end wall hearth in the original structure was relocated to the interior. The use of existing space was reorganized from a single common room to a north-west and a south-west room for use as parlours. A central hallway leads from the front to the rear of the house. Two new rooms were added to the first storey. The south-east room with its decorative mantle became the new dining-room. The north-east room with its large open hearth became the kitchen. Similarly the open loft of the original structure was converted into two bedrooms. A central hallway separated these rooms from more bedrooms over the addition. A later addition was made to the rear.

Because Elisha DeWolf was a prominent citizen, his activities were recorded extensively. He was High Sheriff of Kings from 1784 to 1789 and from 1818 to 1820. He was Assistant Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, Postmaster, Collector of Customs and Justice of the Peace.[9] He was a farmer, merchant and father of thirteen children. A large building was needed to house this family and to provide an office for this busy individual. DeWolf prospered and could afford the addition and renovations. The public offices which he held suggest that he would have a house appropriate to his position in the community.

This vernacular house developed according to the changing needs and increasing prosperity of the owner. On the facade, utility not symmetry was the primary concern. The side-lights at the front entrance are utilitarian and decorative, allowing sunlight through the hallway into the interior of the house. Small decorative details, including moulded mantles and bevelled edges, were incorporated into the interior when the additions were made. Gradually some houses began to combine vernacular with colonial or academic influences. (I prefer the term "academic" because it implies that the source of inspiration had changed from one in response to local ideas and traditions to one in reaction to international influences. The term "colonial" has vague generalized connotations.) This academic style was introduced, according to Abbot Lowell Cummings, when "functionalism was exchanged for expansive formality."[10] The elevated style resulted in a pretentious appearance. Function was subordinated to form. The house was built according to a definite plan in which form was the primary consideration. Builders were permitted variations in doors, windows and interior details. Harold Donaldson Eberlain characterized this style as "formality tempered with domesticity and common sense."[11]

9 Eaton, *History of Kings County*, 492-3.

10 Abbott Lowell Cummings, *Rural Household Inventories: Establishing the Names, Uses, and Furnishings of Rooms in the Colonial New England Home, 1675-1775* (Boston, 1964), xxii.

11 Harold Donaldson Eberlien, *Architecture of Colonial America* (Boston, 1927), 10.

Figure 3: Harris House, Town Plot

The front door opened into a long wide central hall. The house had two symmetrical interior chimneys each separating a front and rear room. Each of the rooms had a specialized function which included receiving formal company, entertaining informal company, and preparing and eating meals. The four rooms on the second storey which corresponded directly in size and shape to those below were bedrooms. Through the introduction of a central hallway and separate rooms for specific functions, the Planters were continuing to emphasize privacy, intimacy and isolation of family members and they were separating family members from visitors. Appearance triumphed over utility. Individuals no longer focused on their community but concentrated their attention on their families and themselves.

The third house, the Harris house (Figure 3), reflects the synthesis of the vernacular and academic styles. Although the two-storey building has been altered and renovated, there is evidence of the nature of the original wood structure built c. 1770. The original structure has a 18 by 14 foot basement. According to a former resident, the original kitchen and hearth were in the basement but today only the base of a large chimney is evident. The walls of the cellar which are built of stone and mortar have been renovated. The floor is dirt and rock. The original structure was a one storey dwelling with a three bay facade including two windows and a door. The present door on the south wall was the original front entrance. When the current owners purchased the house, the first floor of the original structure contained only one large room. The original staircase leads from

the original front door to the loft. Behind this is the staircase to the basement. Cornerposts and girts are evident in the interior of the first and second storeys.

The first addition lengthened the facade to include two additional bays and raised the roof to its present height. The second storey of the original was renovated to two bedrooms and the addition provided two additional bedrooms. The second addition built at right angles to the original building reveals academic influences. The north-east room was built over a cellar which is joined to the original cellar by a narrow tunnel. On the first storey there is a central hallway with a simple staircase leading to the second storey. The room on the south-east corner has its own small chimney but the mantle has been removed. In both rooms the corner posts and girts are evident. There is no indication of a summer beam. The decorative features for the entire structure are located on the first storey of the second addition. The mantle in the north-east parlour has fine classical mouldings. The vestibule with its sidelights and transom decorate the front entrance. The pretense of front corner posts and the bubbles and ripples in the old glass indicate that this vestibule, though not original to the second addition, was constructed within a few years of it. The second storey contains two bedrooms, one on either side of the central hallway. The third addition was made to the north-west corner of the second addition and along the eastern section of the north-east wall of the original building. In order to cover this new area without rebuilding the entire roof, the builder used a saltbox roof.

The map of the town plot confirms that William Welch, an original grantee, sold three town lots, including this parcel of land, in 1770 to James Harris (from New London, Connecticut, in 1768).[12] Harris arrived with his wife Anne and two children. By 1779 they had seven children.[13] While still living in Connecticut, Harris purchased one and a half shares of land in 1766 from Cornelius Rich, an original grantee living in Middleton, Connecticut.[14] Harris acquired twenty parcels of land between 1766 and 1817.

Prosperity and a large family prompted Harris to make additions to his house. The division of the rooms and the decorative mantle indicate an appreciation for privacy and design. This increasing popularity of design is also exemplified in the symmetry of the second addition, its cornices and the lintels above the windows. Here the second addition varies from the other two houses not only in style but in motivation. The original structure and the first addition faced south to King Street, the major east-west road

12 Wright, *Planters and Pioneers*, 150.

13 Eaton, *History of Kings County*, 691.

14 Registry of Deeds, I: 158.

Figure 4: DeWolf House, Wolfville

in the town plot. The house was located very close to the road. The second addition was constructed at right angles to the existing structure and moved the main entrance from the south to the east wall. For reasons currently unknown, King Street was diverted south of this property. External factors therefore were significant in an alteration to the house.

The fourth house, the DeWolf house (Figure 4), reflects entirely academic influences. A number of factors must be considered in studying this house. Extensive renovations were made in the 1890s and 1960s. A massive oak staircase built in the 1890s altered significantly the interior of the house. In the 1960s the exterior was covered with vinyl siding and the floors and ceilings were lined with insulation. In spite of these changes, the academic style is visible. The house is located about five miles west of the Horton town plot in the east end of Wolfville. The structure is constructed of wood and has two storeys. The facade with its three bays and central entrance and the inset chimneys are symmetrical. The original floor plan has been generally maintained. A wide central hallway with a high ceiling leads from the front entrance to the rear of the house. To the right of the entrance are a parlour and a dining room which share a common chimney. To the left of the entrance is one room, the best parlour, with its decorative mantle. South of this room is the oak staircase. The bedrooms on the second storey correspond to the rooms below. On the second storey, the wide central hallway extends from the front to the rear of the house. The attic which was once a loft with windows under the gable has also been renovated. With the academic style, an addition to the facade would

disrupt the balance and proportion of the design. Therefore, the addition to this house which includes a large kitchen and several bedrooms was made to the rear.

This parcel of land, on which the house was built, was purchased through a series of transactions between 1809 and 1817 by Stephen DeWolf, a member of a local wealthy family.[15] DeWolf was born in 1779 when his father owned the Atwell house. In 1802 he married Harriet Ruggles, a descendant of the Loyalists and a resident of Annapolis County.[16] He built his house between 1809 and 1817. DeWolf was described in deeds as a farmer and a merchant. Ten children were born between 1802 and 1824.[17]

This house illustrates another roof style. The truncated or flat roof, usually built on Georgian houses, were frequently enclosed with a railing and were described as "the widow's walk." It has been suggested that barrels were located on these roofs to collect rain water. Colonial houses in New England did not utilize truncated gable roofs. The DeWolf house is the earliest recorded example of this architectural style in Wolfville. Perhaps it was incorporated into the design of this house in recognition of the Loyalist sympathies of Mrs. DeWolf's family and of the British influences in Halifax as reflected in the Georgian buildings with their truncated gable roofs.

The style of the house projects balance, symmetry and proportion which were characteristic of the academic style. This indicates a dissatisfaction with the locally conceived style and a sense that any foreign style was superior to the native or local one. Form, sophistication and privacy were now valued above function, utility and openess. In early nineteenth-century Horton the academic style was appropriate for a member of a prosperous family and his Loyalist bride.

The houses which can be studied today either through extant buildings or photographs are only representative of the buildings which exist today and not of those which existed 200 years ago. The first buildings were merely shelters which protected the immigrants from the climate while they established their farms. After one or two years they built more permanent structures which were based on utility and tradition and which reflected the carpenter's response to the new locality. The vernacular buildings provided economical living, working, entertaining and sleeping space. The plain style using unadorned wood was acceptable practice. The settlers, living in an unknown land, were fearful and lacked self-confidence. Unable to rely on their own resources, they depended upon

15 Registry of Deeds, 6/132, 6/147, 6/301, 7/242.

16 Eaton, *History of Kings County*, 635.

17 Eaton, *History of Kings County*, 635-6.

family, neighbours and friends. Some work, such as the raising of a building, was done co-operatively. The large hall in the early homes reflected the importance of hospitality, fellowship, stability and security.

As fears diminished and self-confidence grew, people began to compete. The principle element in this competition — the insatiable hunger for land — was always present but had been generally dormant. The race to acquire more land developed for several reasons. First, the amount of land granted varied from person to person. According to Debra McNabb, land was granted according to the individual's "ability to cultivate."[18] This was determined by the age of the head of the family and the size of the family. Grants varied in size from 250 acres to 2000 acres.[19] Secondly, there was a limited amount of good farmland available in the township. And thirdly, there was no limit to how much an individual could own. Most of the Connecticut emigrants were attracted to Nova Scotia by free fertile farmland and each one accumulated as much as possible. By 1764, all the shares were distributed. Land trade became one of the few profit-making ventures in Horton.[20] Therefore people competed for the available land not in the interest of the community but in the interest of their families and themselves.

This is one indication of a general changing trend in the philosophy of North America at the time. According to Robert Blair St. George, through the seventeenth century, New England became less God-centered and more man-centered.[21] When the Planters arrived in Nova Scotia they felt themselves to be in an unknown and precarious situation and therefore they reverted to their traditional philosophy which was community-and God-centered. The effect of the vernacular style of architecture on the individual was to reinforce in his mind the proximity of God and Nature. The use of natural materials and the construction of the house close to the ground reflected the sense of man working on equal terms with Nature. The low ceilings and large hall emphasised the importance of community, stability and security for the occupant of the house and the visitor. People bundled together in the loft for warmth and assurance. Additions as shown in the Calkin and Atwell houses and in the first addition to the Harris house were fully incorporated into the original structure. Although asymmetrical facades were the result, the buildings maintained their integrity.

18 Debra Anne McNabb, "Land and Families in Horton Township, N.S., 1760-1830," M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1986, 15.

19 McNabb, "Land and Families," 16.

20 McNabb, "Land and Families," 51.

21 Robert Blair St. George, "'Set thine house in order': The Domestication of the Yeomanry in Seventeenth Century New England," *Common Places — Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, ed. Dell Upton and John Michael Valch (Athens, GA., 1986), 353.

As the individual gained confidence and achieved a measure of success, he saw the universe as increasingly man-centered. He was prompted to express his prosperity and sophistication through the style of his house. While one prosperous homeowner might have been content to enlarge his house, divide it into small rooms, and add a few decorative touches, another homeowner might decide that the traditional utilitarian style was inadequate in expressing his individuality and status. He would copy or borrow from the academic style which older members of the community remembered from Connecticut. The effect of the academic style on the visitor or the family member would be to reinforce the concept of man's supremacy over nature. This reflected in the significant elevation of the house above the ground and in efforts to disguise wood as marble. The high ceilings and the central hallway gave the individual increased freedom of movement. In times of prosperity, the individual in such a house would enjoy a sense of intimacy, speciality and contentment. In times of depression, however, the house would cause him to feel alone, fearful and isolated.

The homeowner was also able to show his control of his world by influencing the activities of his family and guests through the manipulation of the interior space of his house. This produced a paradox. While man thought he was expressing his individuality and his control through the use of academic style, he was being restrained by the formality which he had chosen. Although some individuality was permitted expression in the design of mantles, doorways and windows, the academic style demanded both symmetry in design and floor plan as well as the rigid specific utilization of interior space. According to St. George, "Houses that had been open social containers became private enclaves, individual shrines to perceived wealth, in which rooms grew increasingly function-specific."[22]

The academic style which influenced the Planters was generally the style used by the upper and well-to-do classes of New England in the 1750s and 1760s. These people had undergone a transformation from an open adaptive society to a closed formalized society. New England architecture reflected this metamorphosis. According to McNabb: "Communities that once had been eglatarian, homogeneous and open were stratified, differentiated and closed."[23] Prosperous Planters in Horton experienced a similar transformation and also reflected it in their buildings.

My research to date leads me to believe that our understanding of the way of life in Horton Township from 1760 to 1820 which changed from an open adaptive society to a private formal society can be enlarged and extended through the study of the architecture of the house of that period.

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22 St. George, "'Set Thine House in Order,'" 361.

23 McNabb, "Land and Families," 17.

Houses are a primary source which the historian can analyze in order to understand the motives of the owner for constructing a particular style. That style also reflected a way of life and influenced the people who live in the house and those who visited it.

History is the study of humanity. In order to examine and understand this species, the study of homes — where people are born, sheltered and nursed; where they play, eat and sleep; and where they procreate, raise their young and finally rest before the grave — the study of homes is an essential pursuit for the historian who is eager to understand the human species in general and individuals in particular.