Some New England Staircases—1670-1770

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When the first Colonial dwellings began to attain the dignity of a full second story, with rooms of useable height, the temporary ladder-like arrangement that had previously served to reach the upper floor changed to a more permanent and a more ornamental feature in the American home. Sometimes it ran directly between partitions of wide board sheathing or plaster or, starting with a quarter wind at the bottom, it went steeply upward to the low chambers overhead. Or it reversed this process, starting straight up from beside the Kitchen in the “linter” (or “lean-to”), attaining the floor above with a quarter turn to right or left, as the case might be.

When the location against the front of a large chimney serving two end rooms, and possibly also a third at the rear, became common, the latter stair plan was soon changed to a flight of three runs—as in the Waters House at Marblehead—with either landings or winders at the corner angles, depending upon the height to be gained and the width of the chimney itself. Usually the chimney was spacious enough to permit of the landing (as in the Salmon Falls staircase), thus making the stairs easier to take by means of the brief “breather” at the turn, breaking up the steepness of the runs, generally of three to five risers each. And this remained the favorite stair arrangement, until the chimneys were removed to the outer end walls or placed midway between a pair of end rooms, when the Hall might be run entirely through the house from front to back, with a long straight flight of stairs, sometimes with a turn at top or bottom.

The staircase of the old-time New England house is always one of its most attractive adjuncts. No matter how simple, its proportions are almost invariably good and it is generally regarded as a most attractive feature of the early Colonial structure. Even the cruder and most primitive examples are today accepted as interesting exhibits of the inherent feeling of their builders for the design appropriate to its environment and the method of construction that was most perfectly adapted to express the materials available.

In the earliest existing houses, where the stairs are still to be seen in something approaching their original condition, built perhaps during the last half of the Seventeenth Century, the staircases usually had no baluster of any kind. It was then customary to extend the simple boarded face of the partition under the stair run up to the height of a low rail or to the level of the second story floor above, thus stiffening the stair construction and simplifying the problem of protecting the stair edge.

When the boarding—usually at that time some variation of the feather-edge pattern—did not extend up to the second floor timbering, it sometimes stopped at a height of two feet to thirty inches above the step rise, and was capped with a narrow moulded crown strip, with a small bedmoulding upon the face, or upon both sides. Or it might merely extend from
the first floor to the stair stringer and a single piece of
hand railing carried between simple rough posts at top
and bottom, with the space below left open—as was
probably the original condition of the Dr. Peaslee
stairway in the brick Garrison House at Rock Village,
Massachusetts, dating from 1675.

Of course, at that time, the entire stair construction
was suspended from two “butresses” or “raised
stringers,” one on each side of the steps, into which
the risers and treads were housed. These supports
were usually about 10 by 2 inches, and there were no
intermediate “stringers” used between, as supports,
as is the modern custom. Often this stairway was
left in its open and undecorated simplicity, as in the
example from the Dennison House (shown in the
February Monograph, 1933) at Annisquam; where
the work was carried out in pine, fashioned after the
earlier oak staircases, of which there are several ex-
amples dating from about 1675. Again, with this
form of design, and either one or two sloping rails
pinned at each end into the upright posts at landing
and floor levels, this treatment served as a sort of
structural “truss,” obviously stiffening the carriage
of the stairs, and suspending each flight from end to end,
even with a turn or landing in between.

Most early staircases were so cramped that they
were perforce carried around angles in the plan with
a series of steps, making what is known as a “wind,”
rather than the pleasanter and easier “landing”—as
in the King Hooper, Waters, rear Warner Stairs,
and other numerous examples. And the angles of
these winding steps are very generally not at the usual
22 1/2, 30 or 45 degree, so regularly employed in
modern stairbuilding, but some slight variation of
these angles, the stair winders being usually “worked”
or “handled” around the post, in the manner that ap-
pears in the plan of the Dennison staircase, and others
here indicated.

Another detail characteristic of the early staircases
is the informal variance of the height of the rail above
tread and gallery level, being often higher than is the
modern custom and, occasionally, much lower, while
in those instances (as in the Wentworth Mansion at
Salmon Falls) where the rail on each run of the
flight is a handworked ramp made in one piece of
material, it shows considerable extremes of height, as
appears in the varied lengths of the balusters.

The old rule-of-thumb proportioning of stair-rise
and tread dimension—that twice the rise added to
the width of tread should equal 25 inches (or, at
least, come within the extremes of 24 to 26 inches)—
has been pretty consistently adhered to in all old work.

The turned baluster was probably introduced
some time between 1675 and 1700. At first
wide-spaced and roughly turned or “whittled”
out of soft wood (as in the Peaslee stairs at Rock
Village) it was often—as there—inserted under
older existing rails. Its turns gradually became more ornate and elaborate—as in the Salmon Falls

Mansion House, where a baluster pattern very ad-
vanced and delicate for its period, with an informal
irregularity of turning that naively bespeaks its prob-
obable original date—until we reach the perfection of
obtained in the fine mahogany and workmanship of the
spacious front stairs of the famed Jeremiah Lee
Mansion at Marblehead, with its majestic width of seven
feet!

It seems impossible that this fine workmanship was
achieved by the inventive artisan, from a simple turn-
ning lathe. Yet the elaborate and delicately moulded
posts and balusters of the Lee Mansion must have been
achieved in 1768 with a common lathe, foot or water-
powered. With this simple implement, geared to a
slow even turning, a skilled workman could mark
out these twists and spirals with the edge of his chisel,
grooving them as deeply as he dared: and then, with
their regularity once established, he could complete
the grooving by hand, and finish off the twist at top
or bottom by carving—as was always necessary, even
with the most improved machines for this work, of
which the earliest known in New England was not
developed before 1860 or 65.

Or notice the skill and perfection of thoroughness
with which the Dillaway House stairway has been
worked out. This perfection may be contrasted with
the Short House stairs, done in the advanced, compara-
atively rich and populous settlement of Newbury,
and made for a far wealthier man than the simple parson
who built the Dillaway House across the street from
his Church on Eliot Square in Roxbury. For the
Short House balusters, as magnified in their shadows
on the wall, betray almost the extremes of variation,
in their turnings and patterns, of any of the examples
illustrated in this collection.

Some of these same variations are to be found in
the earlier famed Warner House at Portsmouth, built
between 1718 and 1722, at a cost of 10,000 pounds
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examples are to be found in the earlier famed Warner House at Portsmouth, built
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by one Capt. MacPhister. But here probably other
elements must be taken into account. Only the rear
staircase now seems plausibly harmonious with its
period. The front flight has been subjected to exten-

The Lee Mansion front stairs, with double twisted
newel, three differently designed balusters on each
tread, and its mahogany rail ramped at the stair well
angles as well as at the landings, is among the most
elaborate stair designs of the period. It also shows the
characteristic wall dado, its cap following out the
ramps and cases of the stair rail, but at a height some
ten inches above the latter, that appears in all the
best examples. Finally it also exhibits the boxed-in
undercarriage, paneled upon the back face, that shows
under the second run, extending from the landing to the
second floor level.
WEST WINDOW & WALL ON STAIRCASE LANDING
JEREMIAH LEE MANSION 1768 MARBLEHEAD MASS

[72]
JEREMIAH LEE MANSION—1768—MARBLEHEAD, MASSACHUSETTS

(Measured Drawings Shown on Pages 72, 74, and 75)
"OLD TARR HOMESTEAD"—6 SOUTH STREET, ROCKPORT, MASSACHUSETTS

Monograph Six—Volume XIX—"Cape Ann Cottages"

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