

HISTORIC PROPERTIES REVIEW

Prepared for

**A Day With the Wentworths:
New Hampshire's *First First* Family**

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THE WENTWORTH HOUSES OF PORTSMOUTH AND THOSE WHO LIVED IN THEM

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Much of the best of Portsmouth's architectural legacy derives from the wealth and social ambition of the Wentworths, who for sixty years dominated the politics and mercantile life of New Hampshire's seaport. The first Wentworth to arrive in New Hampshire was Elder William Wentworth (1616-1697), who settled first in Exeter in 1638, then lived in Wells, Maine, and finally moved to that part of Dover that became Rollinsford. Unlike his descendants, Elder William Wentworth was a farmer, not a trader or political figure.

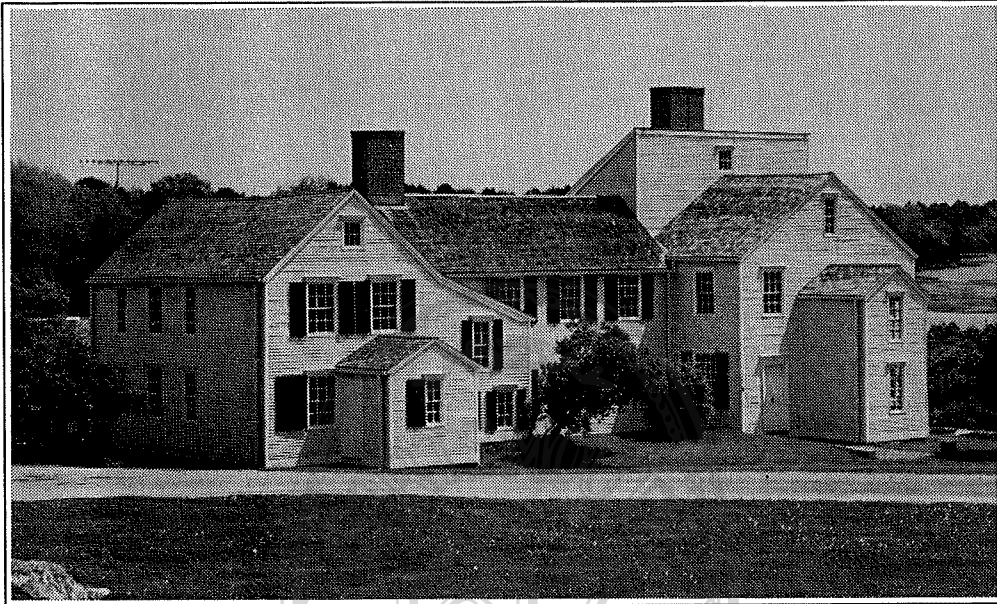
The impressive Portsmouth architectural legacy of the Wentworths began with a house that no longer stands: a large dwelling that was occupied by the first Wentworth to hold a royal appointment. The home of **Lieutenant-Governor John Wentworth** (1671-1730) stood on the south shore of "The Creek," in what is now the parking lot of Strawberry Banke Museum. Built between 1695 and 1701, Lieutenant-Governor Wentworth's house was remodeled around 1715 with the installation of finely-paneled woodwork and heavy moulded cornices. This house was disassembled in 1926, but two rooms were preserved and may be seen today at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and in Winterthur Museum in Delaware.

Lieutenant-Governor John Wentworth was a grandson of Elder William. Following his marriage in 1693 to Sarah Hunking, Wentworth was active as a sea captain. In 1711/12, he was appointed a member of the Provincial Council, beginning his political ascendancy and that of his descendants. He served as a justice of the Court of Common Pleas from 1713 to 1718, and in 1717 was commissioned Lieutenant-Governor of New Hampshire. At this period, New Hampshire and Massachusetts shared a governor, so Wentworth functioned as governor of the province during the governor's absence from Portsmouth, which was the greater part of the time. The extended absence of a governor placed Wentworth in full charge of New Hampshire from 1723 to 1728. Wentworth remained in office until his death in 1730.

Most of the surviving Wentworth houses were built or remodeled in the 1760s or early 1770s. They were preceded by another Wentworth house that no longer stands. This was the home of **Mark Hunking Wentworth** (1709-1785), which stood on Daniel Street at the corner of Chapel Street until it was demolished in 1855 to make room for a high school building. Built around 1740, this house was a large dwelling with a central stairhall and two chimneys. It must have been a prototype for the Wentworth-Gardner House and the Governor John Wentworth House.

Mark Hunking Wentworth was one of the richest merchants in the province. Wentworth gained the position of agent for masts and spars for the Royal Navy, a virtual monopoly that enriched him and gave him a number of powerful contacts in England.

The Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion

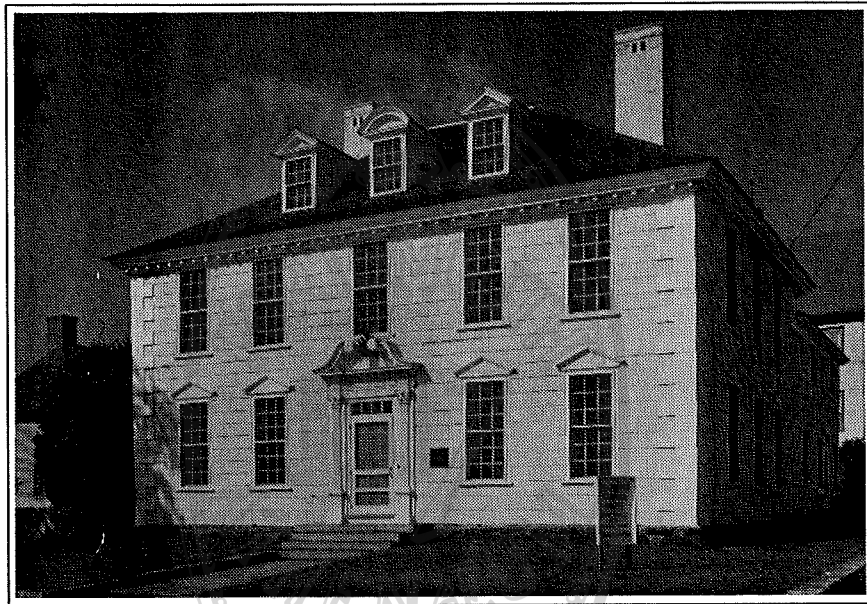


The largest and oddest of all the surviving Wentworth houses is this rambling dwelling at Little Harbor. From 1753 until his death, **Governor Benning Wentworth** (1696-1770) made this his home. From his appointment in 1741 as New Hampshire's first full royal governor, Benning Wentworth had rented the MacPheadris-Warner House, which still stands on Daniel Street in Portsmouth. For twelve years, Wentworth pleaded with the frugal Assembly to purchase the grand brick dwelling as a "province house," or governor's residence. Exasperated at the Assembly's refusal to buy the brick house, Wentworth moved to Little Harbor in 1753. At that time, the Little Harbor property technically belonged to Benning's son John (1720/21-1759).

Upon his son's premature death in 1759, Benning Wentworth inherited the Little Harbor estate. For the next five years, Wentworth kept a joiner or finish carpenter in his household, transforming whatever buildings were then on the property into the strange assemblage we see today. The present house is made up of four principal building units, at least three of which were once free-standing structures. The road to the house originally passed along the shore, and the most elegant wing, usually called the "Council Chamber," was the first-seen and most public part of the house. The carved mantelpiece in the parlor here is a local carver's copy from an engraved plate in William Kent's *The Designs of Inigo Jones* (London, 1727). British architect Kent had designed the original for Houghton Hall in Norfolk, home of British prime minister Sir Robert Walpole.

New Hampshire's first full royal governor, Benning Wentworth was a son of Lieutenant Governor John Wentworth. At first a successful merchant headquartered in Boston, Wentworth was threatened with bankruptcy by the refusal of Spanish authorities to honor large debts they owed him. Wentworth's appointment as governor gave him authority not only over present-day New Hampshire, but also over a vaguely-defined territory west of the Connecticut River. Wentworth chartered many townships in the "New Hampshire Grants" west of the river, starting with Bennington (which he named after himself), near the southwestern corner of present-day Vermont. Wentworth played a key role in the granting of much of western New Hampshire and of Vermont.

The Wentworth-Gardner House



This house was built about 1760 by Mark Hunking Wentworth, brother of Governor Benning Wentworth; popular legend states that the house was actually built by Wentworth's wife, Elizabeth Rindge Wentworth, as a wedding present for their son **Thomas Wentworth** (1739/40-1768).

The Wentworth-Gardner House is one of the best surviving examples of a New England house in the Georgian style. Its symmetrical facade is covered with grooved or "rusticated" wooden siding intended to resemble masonry. Its interior is highly classical. Pilasters flank the fireplaces in each room, and the second-story stairhall is lined with pilasters to suggest a colonnade. The staircase has three patterns of baluster, a style introduced by the immigrant English turner (lathe-worker) John Mills, who arrived from Bristol, England, about 1725. The house is filled with "enriched" or carved mouldings, and the carved capitals of the multitude of pilasters in the house suggest the hand of local carver Ebenezer Dearing (1730-1791).

a Small Hut with little comfortable apartments. On the one side .
... we look over the Town and down the River on to the
Boundless Atlantic Ocean, on the other we overlook a place for a
Garden Bounded, or rather separated from the fields, by a large
Sea Water pond which enlivens the usual Scene that is our only
entertainment here in the morning.

Though only a "Small Hut" in comparison with Wentworth's never-completed
Wolfeborough house, the Portsmouth and Wolfeborough dwellings shared some features.
Both had imitation damask wallpaper and *papier-mâché* borders; these are preserved in
one room of the Portsmouth house. Both had marble mantelpieces, undoubtedly imported
from England, of which one remains in Portsmouth.

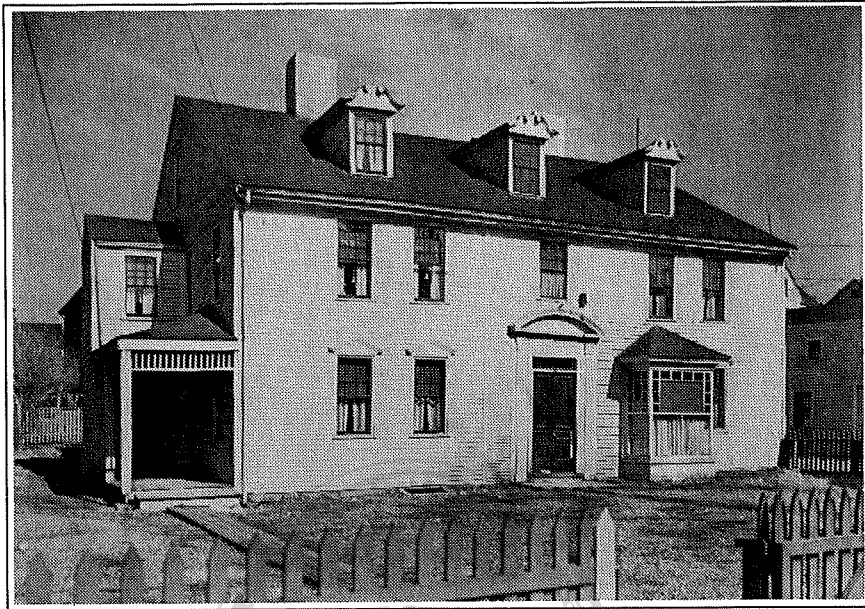
John Wentworth succeeded his uncle Benning as royal governor and surveyor of the
king's woods in 1767. Increasing age, illness, and political difficulties made it apparent
to the Crown that it was time to replace the elder governor, who had held office for the
unprecedented period of twenty-five years.

A graduate of Harvard College (Class of 1755), fresh from an extended trip to England,
John Wentworth entered upon his duties with an enthusiasm that earned him popular
acclaim and made him one of New Hampshire's best governors at any period. Wentworth
oversaw the building of new roads into the wilderness, encouraged the settlement of the
frontiers, chartered Dartmouth College, built the first lighthouse at Portsmouth Harbor,
and brought a team of English cartographers to make the first detailed maps of New
Hampshire. Like his uncle, he chartered many new towns.

Following the Revolution, the Loyalist Fishers continued as absentee owners of the John
Wentworth house until 1797. In 1810, the house was acquired by family antiquarian
Ebenezer Wentworth (1779-1860), merchant and cashier of the New Hampshire branch of
the United States Bank. Ebenezer Wentworth was a son of Governor John Wentworth's
cousin George, and devoted himself to preserving the house and its former gardens, and
to assembling a collection of family memorabilia. Wentworth acquired portraits of
Lieutenant-Governor John Wentworth, Benning Wentworth, Benning's son John, and
Governor John Wentworth. The three former portraits are now owned by the New
Hampshire Historical Society, the latter is owned by Dartmouth College.

Since 1911, the house has been the property of the Mark H. Wentworth Home, a health
care facility for chronically disabled patients.

The Joshua Wentworth House



Traditionally dated at about 1770, the Joshua Wentworth House is actually an assemblage of two independent, earlier house frames, one in front and one at the rear, covered by a single, newer roof. Together, the two frames create a large dwelling measuring about 40 by 46 feet.

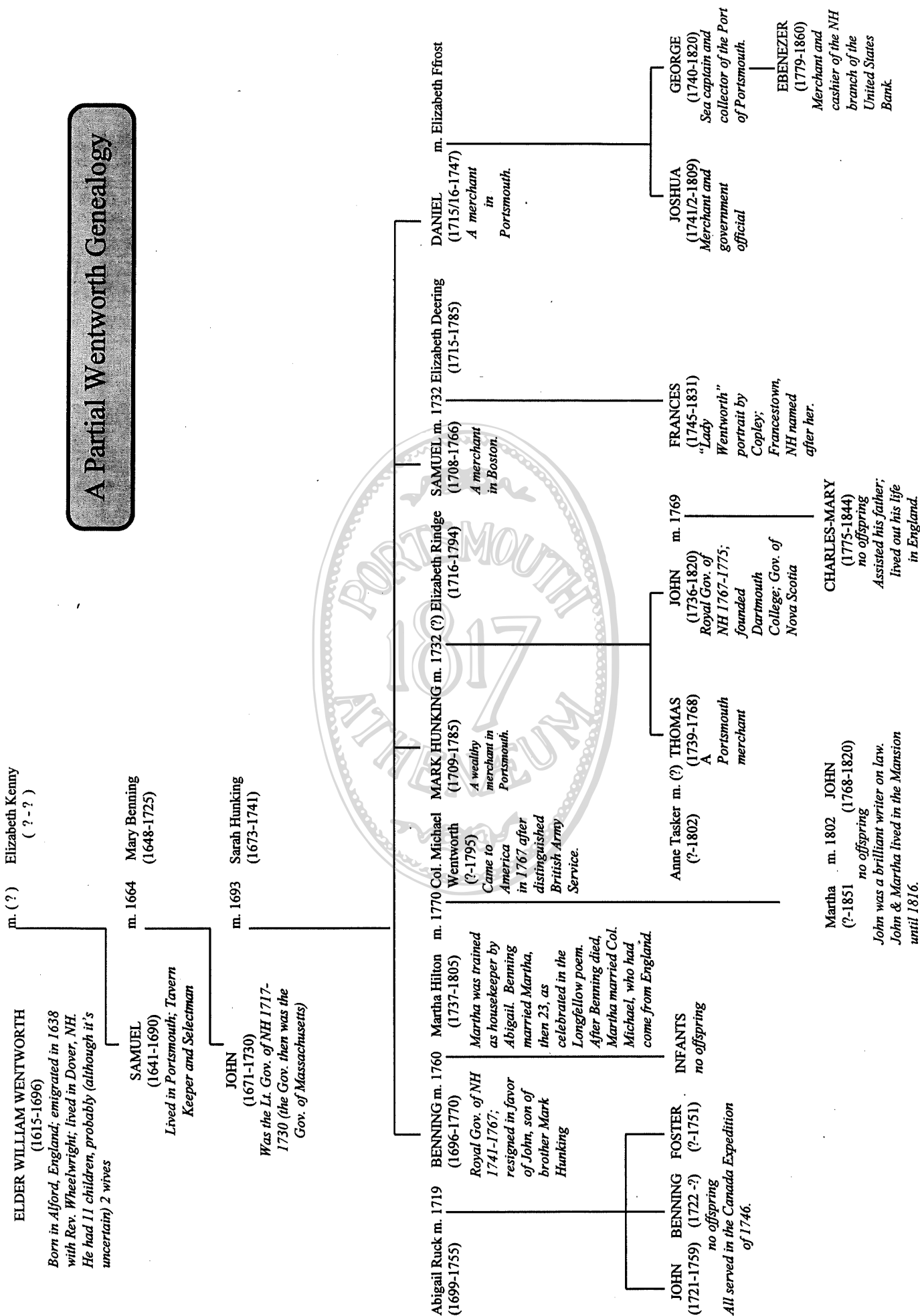
This was the house of **Joshua Wentworth** (1741/2-1809), a first cousin of Governor John Wentworth. Wentworth was a merchant, and among his documented dealings was the shipping of a prefabricated building to the Caribbean island of Grenada, where Hugh Hall Wentworth, another cousin, was royal governor. Joshua Wentworth was active in the American cause during the Revolution, serving as Commissary and Naval Agent in Portsmouth and receiving a commission as colonel in the First Regiment of New Hampshire militia in 1776. After the Revolution, Wentworth served in the New Hampshire House of Representatives and the State Senate. In 1791, he was appointed "Supervisor for the United States in the District of New Hampshire" by George Washington.

Apart from its creation from two independent structural frames (much like the Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion), the Joshua Wentworth House is unusual in having interior woodwork that was evidently intended for another building. The scale of some of the mantelpieces is too large for the modest-sized rooms of the house, and some of the paneled wainscoting was clearly meant for longer rooms. Those who remodeled the house around 1770 were clearly attempting to use second-hand woodwork to impart a high degree of grandeur to a rather small house. It is not known whether the borrowed woodwork was salvaged from another building, or simply never delivered to its intended customer and then purchased by Wentworth. In any case, details of the house are quite academic, some of them adapted from plates in Batty Langley's popular architectural guidebook, *The City and Country Builder's and Workman's Treasury of Designs* (London, 1740).

The Joshua Wentworth House originally stood in the North End of Portsmouth, where it was threatened with demolition in an urban renewal project. In June, 1973, the house was moved from its original site to Strawberry Banke for preservation. To avoid the difficulties posed by narrow streets, and the expense of relocating electrical and telephone wires, the house was moved to a barge and floated downriver with the help of tugboats.



A Partial Wentworth Genealogy





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