

Wentworth-Gardner House
by Bruce E. Ingmire

Buildings of architectural significance, have been moved from sites in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. One gambrel parsonage on Pleasant Street was moved to Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts. The building pictured here almost suffered a similar fate but was saved in the 1920's by visionaries who wanted to preserve Portsmouth's riverfront treasure of historic buildings.

In the 1760's Portsmouth was the bustling seaport capitol of New Hampshire. Benning Wentworth was Royal Governor and his brother Mark Hunking Wentworth was the richest man in the colony. Elizabeth Rindge married Mark H. Wentworth's and they raised two sons Thomas and John in a Daniel Street mansion with gardens to Spring Hill. The homes of the oligarchy were situated on Daniel Street.

The neighborhood south of Daniel Street, Puddle Dock had been home to the Hunking and Wentworth families. After Samuel Wentworth who ran the Daniel Tavern died in 1690, his son John married Sarah Hunking and they ran the tavern for years. The site is near the Goodwin Mansion at Strawberry Banke, Inc. Benning and Mark Hunking Wentworth were Sarah and John's sons.

Mark H. and Elizabeth Wentworth built a home on waterfront property near Puddle Dock for their youngest son, Thomas Wentworth who graduated in 1758 from Harvard. After receiving his masters in June 28, 1761, Thomas married Ann Tasker of Marblehead on November 14, 1761. The new home had traditional proportions but high Georgian detail. There was no attempt to build in a style grander than the existing homes of the members of the oligarchy.

A strict classical style was used in window and door frames and the interior carving. The craftsman is thought to have been Ebenezer Dearing whose home was in the neighborhood. The facade had wooden boards cut to resemble

stone. This treatment called rustication was replaced in the Victorian era and restored about 1915. Rustication was expensive and implied the wealth and position of the owner. One Virginia planter used rustication on all four sides of his home, Mount Vernon. The name of the Virginian was George Washington.

Thomas Wentworth died in 1768. His own brother John Wentworth had become Royal Governor and rented a home from his brother-in-law, John Fisher. Thomas's home on Anne Street probably remained in the hands of the widow of Thomas, Ann Tasker Wentworth who married the Captain of The Beaver and settled in England where she raised Thomas Wentworth's children. By 1775 Royal Governor John Wentworth was also driven to England as a loyalist.

Thomas's parents Mark and Elizabeth remained in Portsmouth during the Revolution. Identified with the old guard, they weathered the change in politics. Elizabeth survived her husband and as Madam Mark H. Wentworth left her fortune to her grandchildren.

Thomas's home on Anne Street was purchased by William Gardner from Ichabod Nichols who moved to Salem, Massachusetts to build ships. Gardner, trained in business with Joshua Wentworth, cousin to Mark Hunking Wentworth, was an associate of patriot John Langdon. Gardner and Langdon served in the Revolution. Married three times, his third wife was Sarah Purcell, a Wentworth granddaughter.

Appointed Commissary, Gardner used his personal credit to purchase blankets for the troops in the Revolution but confusion about reimbursement caused his finances to suffer. In gratitude, George Washington appointed Gardner to a position as loan officer for the US. When President, Washington visited Portsmouth and called upon his secretary, Tobias Lear's mother Mary's who lived around the corner from Gardner's home. Washington was greeted at a huge Linden tree on the Gardner property. Gardner served as Treasurer of New

Hampshire until 1791. Gardner added an arch to the house with an entrance from the second story. The Gardner family kept the house for years and a Purcell sister lived in the house after the death of the Gardners. The arch was removed about 1858.

About 1910, with much of its grandeur in tact, the Wentworth-Gardner House was purchased by Wallace Nutting who idealized colonial New England. Portsmouth had never returned to business of the 1760's. There was no commercial boom that might have replaced historic colonial homes but the venerable wooden homes on their original sites were in disrepair. The Wentworth-Gardner's rustication had been replaced with weatherboard.

Portsmouth was a treasure of significant colonial New England architecture. Wallace Nutting restored the Wentworth-Gardner mansion during a revival of interest in the colonial period. The New York Metropolitan Museum of Art revealed plans to purchase the Wentworth-Gardner House, disassemble it, and move the entire building to Central Park. Local citizens came to the rescue of the manse, purchased it, and prevented it from becoming part of the Met's Americana exhibit. Later a Portsmouth profiteer, Cappy Stewart, sold the interior elements of the Wentworth's old Daniel Tavern at Puddle Dock for a museum display. The building remained but its heart was removed. Rumors circulated that the interior elements of the Wentworth-Gardner House would suffer the same fate.

The Wentworth-Gardner remains in the hands of the association that preserved the home. New Hampshire believed its building belonged on their historic sites. Local citizens stopped the tide that intended to remove Portsmouth's architectural gems. This strengthened the resolve of citizens to preserve its architectural heritage.

The Wentworth-Gardner House remains today one of several independent

museum houses in Portsmouth. The successful drive to save the building paved the way for preserving the Warner House and eventually the creation of Strawberry Bank, Inc, a colonial museum.



Brewster, Charles, Rambles, Two Series.

Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenæum, Portsmouth, N.H.