

Talk given 20 July 82, as one of
Summer Lecture Tour series

The John Paul Jones House

Tonight ~~evening~~ I'm going to talk about a house which is unusual in many ways --even in a city where unusual houses are, fortunately, fairly numerous. As you know, an old city ~~is~~ that has sat by the sea for ~~about~~ 350 years has many curious ~~and~~ tales to tell, and one of them involves the "star boarder."

Let me put it this way: Do you know of any other house in Portsmouth, or perhaps anywhere else in New England, that owes the fact that it still stands to ~~the fact that~~ ^{who} a man once stayed there -- fleetingly-- nearly two centuries ago?

Yet, such is the story of the John Paul Jones House, now the headquarters of the Portsmouth Historical Society and the home of its museum.

~~Thank you very much for your interest in the story.~~
However, let me say that I intend to discourse very little on John Paul Jones, the man known as the "Father of the American Navy." His career has been brilliantly covered by writers such as Samuel Eliot Morison and any attempt by me would be pretentious. It will be necessary to touch briefly on the reasons for John Paul Jones' residence in the house on two ^{different} occasions, but, in the main, I shall concern myself with the house itself.

Thanks to ~~my~~ the efforts of many researchers over the years, the story of the John Paul Jones House can be fairly well told. Among such searchers was Charles Hazlett, and he was probably ~~the~~ the author of one of the basic documents on the house. Another man, one who may be known to many of

you, is James Garvin, formerly closely associated with Strawberry Banke, Inc., and now curator for the New Hampshire Historical Society in Concord. Jim Garvin is a real student of housing construction, and, quite frankly, helped me with much of the technical material on the house. And, ~~honestly~~ ^{in good faith}, I have done a little research into the subject myself.

When you leave here, and go to visit the house which stands at State, ~~and~~ Middle and Porter Streets, I hope you will try to envision what the area must ~~have~~ ^{the land} have looked like early in the 18th Century. Believe it or not, where the house is sited ~~was in 1714~~ ^{was in 1714} was part of a 30-acre pasture belonging to a John Hunking. Hazlett says that in that year, Hunking mortgaged the pasture to George Jaffrey, on the condition that he and his wife be undisturbed in their occupancy during their lives. ~~That~~ ^{as} as described in the mortgage, the pasture was bounded on one side by the "highway leading to the Plains" what we know as Middle Street, and "the highway that leads to Islington or a Place called the Creek," as it still is.

The Hunking pasture, after the death of George Jaffrey, came into ~~his~~ the possession of his daughter, Ann, the wife of Capt. Nathaniel Peirce. Quite obviously, the Hunkings had never been able to redeem their mortgage, and it came into Jaffrey's possession by default, not an infrequent occurrence in those days. Ann Peirce and her husband wasted little time in cashing in on their inheritance; they began selling ~~as~~ ²⁷ pieces of the Hunking pasture.

One of the buyers was a man named Gregory Purcell, who received his first deed from the Peirces on Nov. 14, 1757. Exactly when Gregory Purcell came to Portsmouth isn't known, but he is on the tax rolls for 1754. So, apparently, he had been

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Or, if you are of a romantic bent, you can speculate that he met, wooed and won Sarah Wentworth, and, like so many of us in the years since, settled here because of that. Sarah Wentworth was a niece of Benning Wentworth, then the royal governor of New Hampshire, and the ruler of the Wentworth Dynasty. Purcell would have been hard put to have established better local connections than a marriage into the Wentworth tribe.

That first lot of land he bought from the Peirces, there were three transactions in all cost Gregory Purcell 425 pounds. The lot was described as "containing about one hundred foot square Bounded as follows vizt. Southerly by the highway ~~by~~ lately laid out -- now State Street-- from the Street by ~~the~~ the Dwelling House of John Mills to the Road or Highway leading out of Town Being an hundred & six ~~feet~~ foot on sd New Street from the Southwesterly corner of said Lott westerly by the said Highway leading out ~~from~~ of Town being one hundred foot on said highway northerly by our own land being 90 foot on the North line or side by our land and easterly by our land one hundred feet Till it comes to the New Street." Then, in May, 1758, Purcell acquired still another lot -- 60 feet wide by 80 feet in length. Sixty w feet of the lot ~~was~~ laid along side the road leading out of Town, called the Middle Road and on the north it was bounded by a "New Way ^v --Porter Street-- described as 20 feet wide, and it surely hasn't been widened any in the last 200 years. This road was described as running between the land bought by Purcell and land of Charles Treadwell, whose house was torn down some years ago to make way for a bowling alley and office block. Then in 1762, the final little gore of land was added. For this Purcell paid 12 pounds 10 shillings and it apparently gave him better access to his stable.

W. Purcell

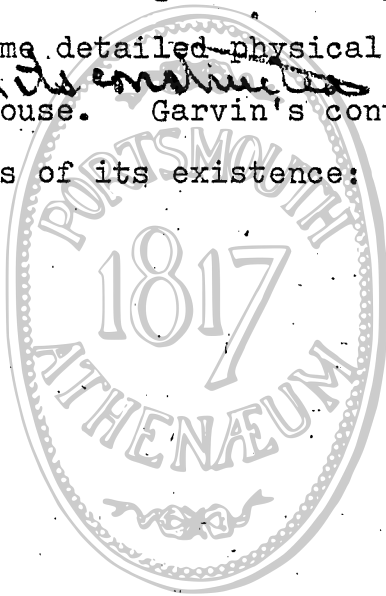
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Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

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When he built his house, Capt. ~~Ex~~ Purcell was enjoying a period of prosperity, if his tax assessments are any indication. And the probability is that ^{i in} 1758, when he paid a sizable increase in ~~his~~ ^{taxes} in property ~~tax rate~~, ^{that} as ~~the time~~ when the house was completed. ~~And quite frankly, I'm now going to take advantage of the skill and knowledge and able pen of Jim Garvin to share with you some detailed physical information about the John Paul Jones House. Garvin's contribution spans the more than two centuries of its existence:~~

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~~JOHN PAUL JONES HOUSE~~

The Jones House is one of the least altered of Portsmouth's gambrel-roofed houses of the mid-1700s. Once plentiful, such buildings have succumbed to alteration and demolition, so that very few remain in original condition. Among the similar houses that have been lost in recent decades have been the Meserve-Webster House on now-destroyed Vaughan Street and the Rev. Samuel Langdon House on Pleasant Street. The latter was disassembled and moved to Sturbridge Village, where it is used as an office building and is generally not open to visitors. Among other gambrel-roofed dwellings that have been so changed as to lose much of their original significance are the Rev. Noah Parker House, north of the Moffatt-Ladd House, and Stoodley's Tavern, which, though moved to Strawberry Banke in the mid-1960s, had already lost all its first-floor detailing to remodellings for restaurant use.

The Jones House, then, is doubly important as one of the dwindling number of gambrel-roofed houses to escape relatively unchanged. All such houses have been loosely attributed to the skill of a single legendary housewright: Hopestill March or Cheswell (the last name varies according to the account), a mulatto. ~~While~~ it is unlikely that one man framed the many such houses that once stood in Portsmouth, ³Jeremiah Libbey, another housewright, ~~having~~ built the long-lost Mark Hunking Wentworth House, described as another gambrel, on the site of the present City Hall ² Cheswell was undoubtedly one of the area's craftsmen who may be credited with some of these structures.

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The choice of a gambrel roof for the Jones House and others of its time was probably dictated largely by the preference of the owner. Of all the roof types used in Portsmouth in the mid-1700s, the gambrel offered the most commodious attic space, and therefore probably appealed to those with large families or several servants and yet without the means to build a three-story dwelling like the Moffatt-Ladd House. A gambrel roof could be placed above any house. Portsmouth had several examples of such dwellings which were only one room deep and had a central chimney; probably the last of these is the Oracle House on the corner of Marcy and Court Streets, originally ~~constructed~~ just behind the North Church. The most common type of house to be covered by the gambrel roof, however, was what eighteenth-century builders and homeowners called a "double" house. The "double" house had two chimneys instead of a single central stack, and was divided through the middle by a wide hallway. Such is the Jones House. Identical floorplans are found in other Portsmouth dwellings with different types of roofs, however. The Tobias Lear House, for example, has a similar plan but a steep hipped roof. The Thomas Bailey Aldrich Memorial has the same plan but a gable roof. The choice of roof, then, was purely a matter of taste and economics.

Once the housewright, whether Hopestill Cheswell, Jeremiah Libbey or someone else, had raised and boarded the frame of a dwelling like the Jones House, he stepped aside and gave way to other building craftsmen. The first of these was the mason (called simply a "bricklayer" in the 1700s). The two great stacks of chimneys that present such an imposing appearance when the Jones House is viewed from the street begin in the cellar, which in the eighteenth century would have been a damp, unheated

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place best suited for the storage of vegetables and cider. To prevent the bricks of the chimney from crumbling in such an environment, bricklayers of the 1700s and early 1800s commonly began their chimney foundations with fieldstone footings which were sunk well below the dirt floor. The stone, usually granite, was unaffected by the cold and dampness and prevented moisture from disintegrating the bricks above. Atop the fieldstone footings, bricklayers of the period of the Jones House and later were accustomed to building impressive arched or vaulted chimney bases; these not only saved brick, but also provided a convenient storage place beneath the chimney for foodstuffs. The chimney bricks in the vaulted bases and up to the level of the first floor were commonly laid in lime cement, obtained usually from Newbury, Massachusetts, Thomaston, Maine, or Providence, Rhode Island--lime being virtually unknown in marketable quantities elsewhere in New England. Above the first floor, where cellar dampness was no longer a problem, bricklayers in Portsmouth were accustomed to laying their bricks in a much cheaper cement: common clay. Find a place where you can see the side of a chimney in the Jones House, probe into the joints between the bricks, and clay dust will almost certainly fall out. Above the attic floor, however, bricklayers usually returned to lime mortar in order to resist the effects of rain and snow in the flues.

After the housewright and bricklayer had finished their contributions to a dwelling like the Jones House, the finish carpenter or "joiner" completed the woodwork. The joiner was the aristocrat of the woodworking trades, and in Portsmouth was usually as accustomed to working on ships as in houses. To the joiner may be credited the finish floors, the

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wainscoting and panelling, the doors and window sashes of eighteenth-century houses. He did most of his work with saws and planes, the latter varying according to their varied uses. Some planes were intended strictly for smoothing the rough boards as they came from the water-powered saws of the region. Others, with curved blades, were molding planes, fashioned specifically for the production of the dozens of moldings of various contours that make up room cornices, window sashes, door and window casings, baseboards, and even the borders around panels in a door. It is a mistake, though a frequent one, to assume that moldings were "carved;" they were planed with special tools except in a few grand houses like the Moffatt-Ladd and Wentworth-Gardner Houses, where planed moldings were further enriched with true carving, done with a knife.

One specialty which was often subdivided from that of the joiner was the building of staircases--especially the production of the balusters or "spindles." These were fashioned on a lathe by a "turner," who in a town like Portsmouth was often a specialist, distinct from the joiners. The turner who probably "invented" the Portsmouth balustrade with its three distinctive types of balusters was John Mills, who came originally from Bristol, England. Mills or his son Richard may have ^h fashioned the typical Portsmouth-type balustrade seen in the Jones House.

Documentation apparently does not survive to tell the identity of the joiners who finished the rooms of the Jones House. The detailing of the house, both inside and out, is similar to that of many other Portsmouth dwellings of the 1750s and 1760s, and we do know the identity of the leading local joiners of this period. The first was Samuel Hart,

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who built and lived in the Hart-Rice House, formerly on Deer Street and now in the middle of "The Hill" project. Hart was often employed by John Moffatt, especially for ship's joinery. He was a prosperous craftsman, sometimes serving as a selectman and owning two slaves. One of these ^{men,} ~~men~~ named Boston, was himself a skilled joiner and along with Hopestill Cheswell, represented the black community among the craftsmen of Portsmouth.

The second leading joiner of the period was Michael Whidden. Whidden's grandfather, John Drew, had superintended the bricklayers and had done the joiner's work on the Macphedris-Warner House of 1716. Whidden's father had also been a joiner, as was his son after him. Whidden has been best remembered by writers like Charles Brewster as the builder of the Portsmouth Assembly House on the former Vaughan Street, which Washington ^{described} described as one of the best he had seen in the United States. Whidden also finished the George Meserve (Meserve-Webster) House opposite the Assembly House, and this dwelling bore many similarities to the Jones House both in date, style, and detailing. Moreover, Whidden was the chief joiner of the Moffatt-Ladd and John Langdon Houses, so it is not unlikely that he completed the interior and exterior finish of the Jones House as well.

Certain changes have occurred to the rooms of the Jones House since its completion. The style of the 1750s and 1760s called for panelled fireplace walls, sometimes with pilasters (flat grooved boards) flanking the fireplaces. Such are seen in some rooms of the Jones House. The style of the mid-1700s did not normally call for mantelshelves, except in grand rooms like the Council Chamber of Benning Wentworth in his house at Little

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Harbor. The Jones House now has several mantelshelves. These were added long after the house was built, being superimposed over the original panelling. At least one of them derives directly from a book published about 1830, giving some idea of the ambitions of later owners of the house to modernize their home at intervals.

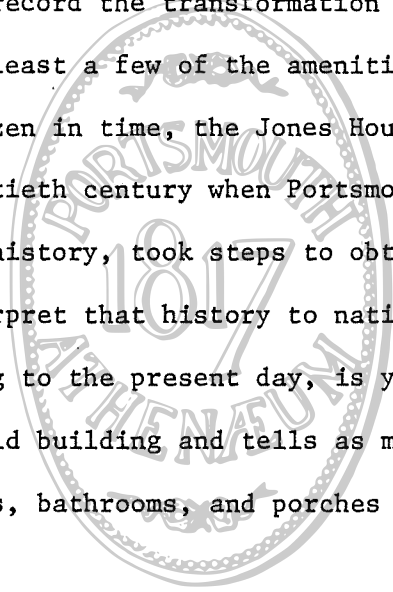
Exterior changes occurred as well. Some may remember (or recall from photographs) the open semi-octagonal two-story porch on the east end of the house, adjacent to the Rockingham property line and overlooking the front garden and State Street. With its fanciful design, this vine-covered appendage appears to have been added in the 1870s or 1880s. It has been removed, and its removal probably signals the removal of such other amenities of the Victorian era as bathrooms and kitchens, which gave way to the need of the Portsmouth Historical Society to have a house that harked back as much as possible to the era of John Paul Jones. In a way, it's too bad that these traces of the last generations to care for the house (the Lord and May families) have been swept away in a search for architectural and historical purity. Their story was part of the human drama incorporated within the fabric of the building, hardly less interesting in its way than the romances of the 1770s.

In summary, then, the Jones House is an excellent example of Portsmouth's gambrel-roofed middle-sized dwellings of the mid-1700s. Well cared for by its owners over the generations, the house has come down to the present with more than a usual amount of original detailing, and this has been lovingly preserved by those who have focussed their attention on the early history of the house. The building also shows changes made by a number of subsequent generations of owners, and many of these (like the mantelpieces of various

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periods) have fortunately been preserved to suggest the changes in taste and economics that played upon the minds of owners of the house through the generations. While most of the alterations of the last private individuals to own the house (in the period of Ralph May's birth and boyhood) have largely been erased, there is fortunately at least some photographic documentation to record the transformation of an eighteenth-century home into one with at least a few of the amenities of the late nineteenth century. Now frozen in time, the Jones House further records the period in the early twentieth century when Portsmouth, fully conscious of its long and complex history, took steps to obtain a building in which to preserve and interpret that history to natives and visitors alike. This period, continuing to the present day, is yet another era that has left its mark on the old building and tells as much about our own day as the added mantelpieces, bathrooms, and porches told about theirs.



All I can say is that I'm extremely ~~few~~ fortunate to have a friend like Jim Garvin, a man who will take time from a busy schedule to dash off a six-page sketch of that caliber.

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But we have to go with the trials and tribulations of Sarah Purcell. Her husband, the dashing Capt. Gregory, died in 1776, leaving her with a son and a daughter, Young Gregory was only six when his father died. The good captain's financial status is still open to doubt. The inventory of his estate set a value of 2,075 pounds, but 1,400 pounds of that was in real estate -- the house valued at 1,200 and his shop "near Puddle Dock," appraised at 200. The inventory listed every item in both the house and shop. Because her ~~inheritance~~ inheritance was largely in real estate, reason may be found ~~of~~ the Widow Purcell taking in a boarder or two. It could even be that John Paul Jones was the only paying guest, indeed the "star boarder." And there is good reason that this could be so. Jones was no ordinary sojourner -- he was already a man of ~~at~~ note in the Continental Navy. John Langdon's shipyard on Langdon (Badger's Island) Island had already turned out a ~~Continental~~ Continental vessel -- the RALEIGH. Then Congress entrusted to his care the construction of the Continental ~~vessel~~ vessel RANGER. Assigned to command her, after some hassling among rank-conscious naval officers -- oh, yes, it existed even way back when -- Jones was ~~assigned~~ ^{Came} to RANGER, ~~He came~~ ^{Came} to Portsmouth to supervise her construction. He was housed at the Widow Purcell's, yet, records show he spent many nights on board RANGER, knowing her vulnerability to sneak raid ^{by} daring British vessels. Jones went to sea, late in 1777, and I won't get into the arguments over the quilting party which saw the

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making of the first American flag. The late Ralph May, born in the JPJ House, and former president of the Portsmouth Historical Society, gave the quilting party ^{story} small credit, and argued that if it happened, it didn't happen in the Purcell House.

Whatever! John Paul Jones went to sea and underwent a long series of heroic adventures. Suffice to say he didn't return to Portsmouth until 1781, when he came to take to command of the new nation's first ship of the line, the 74-gun AMERICA, being built at Langdon's -where else? The doughty captain received many severe blows during his short life, but few more brutal than having AMERICA snatched away from him. Two months before AMERICA's launch, the grateful new nation gave her to France to replace a French vessel destroyed by lightning in Boston harbor.

Capt. Jones had ~~returned to Portsmouth~~ again sheltered himself under Madam Purcell's friendly roof. Again, because of the danger of British raids, it's hard to guess how much time Jones actually spent in the house. Even if his evenings had been spent in pleasant dalliance with Madam Purcell, his thoughts would have been mostly on the vessel that the Congressional politicians were about to take away from him.

Sarah Purcell lived on in her home ~~for another twenty years~~ until 1783 after the disappointed ~~Capt. Jones left Portsmouth~~ Then she sold the house and the grounds to Woodbury Langdon, the brother of John. Woodbury Langdon already ~~xxx~~ owned the property next door, on which the Rockingham now sits. ~~The widow Purcell died in 1789, at the age of 48, and if the inventory of her estate~~

Langdon paid Sarah Purcell 1,060 pounds for the property. Her husband, it will be remembered, had paid 1137 pounds for the land alone. However, it would ~~be~~ fiscal experts to work out the longs and shorts in the deal because Gregory Purcell's transactions were in the old colonial bills of credit whereas his widow was dealing in money lawful in the new United States.

Charles ~~Hazlett~~ Hazlett believed that Widow Purcell had a lot of financial trouble and the sale of the house was the only solution. She died in 1789, and the inventory of her estate gives some substance to ~~Hazlett~~ Hazlett's belief. It totaled only 31 pounds. It's possible, of course, that she had disposed of some property to her daughter Margaret before her death. Margaret was the beneficiary of whatever she had, Gregory Junior having died ~~in~~ the previous year.

The Purcell-Langdon House began passing through the hands of various owners. Henry Sherburne Langdon owned it for a while, then sold to his brother John, known as John Langdon, Jr., although a nephew and not son to Gov. John Langdon. The highly acquisitive Ladd Family acquired it from the Langdons.

In 1826, it was bought by Samuel Lord, one of the shrewdest businessmen ever to operate in Portsmouth and the founder of institutions ~~of institutions~~ like the Portsmouth Savings Bank and the First National Bank. Lord lived there for half a century, leaving the property his daughter, Mrs. Horace Morison. The property again ~~changed~~ changed owners several times, and ~~we~~ won't burden you with all the title work. Suffice to say that it at last came into the possession of the Granite State Fire Insurance Co., which wanted the site for a new office building. The house was to be stripped of its paneling, mantles and so forth by the late Charles H. "Cappy" Stewart

hand then razed. Stewart had earned certain fame in the town in following his first profession, the master of a waterfront brothel. But he also was a master collector of antiques and the interiors of old Portsmouth houses.

And it ^{was} then that the influence of John Paul Jones came to bear --more ~~ka~~ than 125 years after his death.

It was ~~was~~ by invoking the almost sacred name of John Paul Jones that Woodbury Langdon, grandson of the first Woodbury, was able to stir Portsmouth residents out of some of their usual lethargy. The Portsmouth Historical Society, your host tonight, had been founded in 1919, and the membership, with the largesse of Woodbury Langdon, was able to buy the house. Granite State set up shop across the street in the ~~xxxx~~ building now occupied by the Central Baptist Church.

Today the Historical Society continues to maintain the John Paul Jones House, and with it one of the most complete historical museums in the city.