## An Historic Fabric Report

On

# The Capt. Oliver Filley House, 1834

prepared for the Wintonbury Historical Society

by

John O. Curtis Antique House Advisory & Restoration Consulting September 1994

### The Captain Oliver Filley House, 1834, Bloomfield, CT

#### Exterior

The Capt. Oliver Filley House is a two story, ellshaped masonry house in the Greek Revival Style of the 1830s. The date 1834, within a panel, is nicely cut in the sandstone lintel above the front entry. The walls are laid up in faced rubble masonry of interestingly mixed colors and of rather predominantly small sized units. Finely tooled red Connecticut sandstone lintels and sills embellish the door and window apertures while quoining of the same material in irregular sizes dramatically defines the corners of the building.

Although there are three other known buildings of similar construction in Bloomfield, the masonry of the Filley House is, in the broader overall perspective of 19th Century New England domestic architecture, a considered rarity. It is in serious need of attention. The entire rear elevation and all sides near grade level are in particular need of repointing. Previous attempts at maintenance of mortar joints have generally been heavy handed and sloppy. Much of this repair work should be chiseled out and the interstices between masonry units repointed with lime mortar utilizing aggregate of a color and texture to match the original work. Local sand was undoubtedly used originally. Portland cement mortar is unacceptable. Experiments should be made until a good mortar match can be made with original jointing which survives near the gable peaks and in several other areas. Original mortar joints are characterized by the thinness and fineness of application.

The front door surround, with its typically Greek Revival corner blocks, is original as are the paneled reveals and the side and transom lights. The front door is later, dating perhaps from the period of most extensive alteration which would seem to be the Pinney tenancy. Original exterior window frames, decoratively beaded on their inner edges, survive in some window apertures on the second floor. These would be the historically correct examples to copy for restoration at other locations. Sixover-six double hung sash are certainly the correct configuration for the period of the building; there is some uncertainty as to the appropriateness of the muntin profile and a final decision should perhaps not be made until at least one window is carefully cleaned of obscuring paint. Sash weights, where present, should be examined to determine their age as an additional clue to originality of window units. Counter-weighted sash were just coming into use at this time, and the earliest examples of cast iron sash weights are usually square billets rather than the familiar sausage-shaped weights.

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If economics becomes a serious consideration, I would recommend retaining the existing sash wherever serviceable. They look right from the outside and may very well be original.

There is an unusual recessed entry in the front (south) elevation of the ell. It is defined by a relieving arch of red sandstone and supported by a single octagonal wooden column at its center while pilasters of similar design flank the opening. It has been partially closed in by a later matched board curtain wall to mask a poured cement stairway which descends to the cellar. Of especial interest is the curious and somewhat unattractive and unworkmanlike parging of the arch with mortar. Perhaps this feature was originally conceived as a brick recess or set-back which would be in distinct shadow and consequently would emphasize the arch. Such a recess would have undoubtedly caused snow/water problems with the wooden soffit of the entry and for that reason was probably filled in.

A significant amount of the original cornice, raking cornice, and cornice returns survives. Evident repairs have nicely restored deteriorated runs across the front of the building. Repairs have yet to be made at the south-west corner of the main building and at the gable peak of that same section. Examination of flaking paint on the original front entry trim confirms that the wooden trim elements of the building have always been painted white, the common color of choice during the years of the Greek Revival. This paint will, without question, be lead-based, and compliance with state regulations will necessitate removal of lead content paint from surfaces accessible to children. Lead paint removal should be extremely carefully supervised inorder to insure that no damage is done to original woodwork and moldings by careless, poorly trained or inept technicians.

Shutter pintles in wooden window frames confirm the former existence of wooden shutters, probably of the moveable louvre type which came into popularity with the Greek Revival. Careful examination of masonry on either side of the window openings, close to the bottom of the window, will locate the now mortared in holes which received the wrought iron shutter dogs which secured the shutters in an open position. The early 19th century was a period when louvered shutters were actually used as a climate control strategy, being usually closed during the summer months on the south and west sides of a dwelling. The shutters were probably painted green originally, although not necessarily the dark black/green which has become such a commonplace selection for shutters on old houses. Capt. Oliver Filley House, continued, Page 3.

Paris Green, utilized today principally as an insecticide, was introduced as a vibrant green paint pigment during the Greek Revival years.

It was often coated with a protective varnish glaze which enhanced its optical qualities but could not prevent ultimate degradation by the ultra-violet rays of the sun. This gradually turned the grass-green pigment dark and it is very probably such altered evidence that has mis-guided paint color selection by antiquarians for the last several decades. A final note on exterior paint color selection. Carefully examine the outside surfaces of the original or old sash for signs of black paint on glazing and on the wooden parts. The practice of painting the glazing, i.e., the putty, black, which had originated late in the 18th century to visually diminish the mass of the sash muntins, had, by the years of the Greek Revival, expanded to the occasional painting of the entire window sash black. This was done to completely eliminate the sash as visible architectural elements and, in so doing, more accurately allude to the unglazed and gaping apertures of the masonry temples that were the prototypes for the Greek Revival. A rather fascinating touch and one certainly appropriate to a Greek Revival structure that is constructed from masonry.

Two of the three chimneys which appear in the rendering based upon the 1885 photograph have been rebuilt. They appear to have been laid up using obviously modern brick, Portland cement mortar, and with mortar joints overly thick. If the large chimney stack which most likely once served the kitchen fireplace and bake oven is to be rebuilt, effort should be made to obtain appropriate brick at least for that portion which shows above the roofline, and to specify that the mason use proper lime mortar and draw his joints fine. The color and texture of the new asphalt shingle roof make it a sensible and successful substitution for the original wooden shingle roof.

It is not surprising that the rear elevation of the ell appears to have been less well finished than the other more readily visible sides of the building. Original window frames do not appear to have survived. The curious second floor doorway once evidently provided independent access to servants' or hired mans' living quarters. The character of the stonework surrounding this opening suggests that it is, indeed, an original feature.

Finally, the orientation of the house, especially that of the principal entrance in the East elevation of the main building, can only be satisfactorily rationalized by seeing the ca. 1885 photograph or the rendering developed from it.

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The porch along the east side is certainly designed and built in the idiom of the Greek Revival and its replacement is vital to an historically accurate restoration of the building's exterior. Some creative engineering work will have to produce a roofing system for this flat-roofed porch that will effectively handle snow-load and roof run-off from the main roof. Oliver Filley's solution was quite probably, and certainly quite appropriately, a standing-seam tin roof. Since the roof surface will be visible from second floor windows, the interests of architectural interpretation argue for a roof that will not appear dramatically different from such a standing seam system.

#### Interior - First Floor, Main House

The principal features of the front entry/stair hall are the frontispiece and the stairway. The former is essentially all original and untouched. The surrounding architrave and back-band molding are mainstream Greek Revival as is the basic composition of side-lights and flat transom light. Only the door itself appears to be a later intrusion. Design of a Greek Revival style front door might feature either a series of horizontal flat panels or a pair of long vertical flat panels, set within stiles and rails, and trimmed out with mitered mouldings of a profile to match the existing back-band moulding. Determination of a guiding restoration philosophy may ultimately argue for retention of the later front door, as well as the later stairway, as the door makes an important statement about expenditure of remodeling funds on the most visible features.

The narrow, blind-nailed hardwood flooring in this entry is not original and quite probably dates from the period of extensive renovation that the building underwent in the 1850s-60s. Examination of radiator steam line holes through floors in other rooms suggests that the original floorboards may be intact beneath the narrow oak. I would expect to find native New England hard yellow pine floor boards, perhaps of random width but generally in a four to six inch width range, and face-nailed with square-head cut nails, rather than blind nailed. This commentary about flooring pertains to all other spaces throughout the house and will not be repeated room by room. Do not permit the use of a power sander on antique floors. It will destroy them and remove nail heads causing chronic looseness of flooring. Since retention of the existing mid-19th century stairway is almost an economic imperative, it may be wise to keep the narrow hardwood floor, which is consistent in age and character with it, in the entry.

Capt. Oliver Filley House, continued Page 5.

The doorways leading from the entry into the two parlors originally displayed trim moulding to match that of the surviving architrave around the front door. They no longer do. They were modernized in the middle of the 19th century. Although they are plain, their width is in keeping with the taste of the time. Since there is such a definite consistency to nearly all of the trim woodwork in the first floor spaces, a compelling argument may be made to retain and interpret these manifestations of continuity of habitation as demonstrated by changes in style and taste. Recognition and acceptance of the extent of architectural change in these first floor spaces as a positive situation will help to guide some basic and important building use and interpretive decisions.

The robust turned newel post, the balustrade with its turned balusters, and the general configuration of the stairway with gracefully curved soffit, is very much in keeping with the taste of mid-19th century. The baseboard which runs up the stairway is contemporary with the balustrade and other finish work. Examination of the exterior west wall shows that two original windows appear to have been filled in as a consequence of a major change in the stair configuration. It is doubtful if the original stair design could be determined and reconstructed and, moreover, could the project budget accommodate it? Additionally, the present stair has the mantle of more than a hundred years upon it, and any so-called "restoration" would be brand new.

The parlor to the left of the front entrance (the south parlor) also has narrow hardwood flooring and a contemporary baseboard which is applied on top of the flooring. The window trim and mantelpiece are not original and are consistent in character and age with the later work in the front entry and the stairway. Recently installed chipboard ceiling panels may obscure possible evidence for a plaster centerpiece or a run-in-place plaster room cornice. Ornamental plaster work was not uncommon in many houses of the 1830 to 1860 period. The window sash in this room have knife-edge profile muntins, are double-hung with a parting bead, and are counter-weighted. As previously noted, the weighted sash system was gaining popularity in the 1830s and these may be original, or they may date from the period of later renovation. The wide boards which comprise the broadly splayed reveals of the window apertures are probably original and should be carefully studied for paint color layering and sequence since, if they are original, they will provide a "control" for matching paint color sequences on other woodwork in the room against.

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In this fashion, some fairly confident determination of original features may be made. The door into this parlor from the front entry is a factory made door dating from the 1850-60 period of change.

The parlor to the right of the entry hall (the north parlor) is consistent in most instances of interior finish woodwork with the other parlor. The same narrow blind-nailed hardwood floor covers what may be the original floor. These narrow hardwood floors appear to be in essentially sound condition and thoughtful consideration should be given to their retention. Unlike the original flooring, which is probably face-nailed hard pine, these floors could be cosmetically improved by conventional power sanding and made quite presentable. If the decision is made to retain the 1850s woodwork in these several rooms, then the narrower flooring is quite acceptable.

The fireplace in this parlor is guite shallow. Introduction of the Rumford principal in fireplace design in the late 18th century influenced subsequent configuration of fireboxes. In brief, shallower fireplaces with widely splayed jambs more efficiently put the heat out into the room than did the deep and cavernous fireplaces of the 18th century. It is interesting that the jambs of this parlor fireplace appear to be single pieces of stone, an echo of the Connecticut preference for stone fireplaces during the 18th century. The brick smoke panel at the rear may be infill, covering an earlier and perhaps burnt-out fireplace back. A single crane pintle is in place in the left jamb. This, too, is an interesting persistence of a practice more common to the preceding century ... provision of a small wrought iron crane to suspend a teakettle in the parlor fireplace.

Interior - Second Floor, Main House

The matched board curtain wall at the head of the stairs is a late accretion and should be removed. The window trim around the window in the second floor stair hall is all original, including the jambs, the architrave, the sill and the bib beneath it. The sash may be later but, if it is structurally sound, budget considerations may argue for retaining the sash. They are the correct number of lights and look just fine from outside. The baseboard in the second floor stair hall is later and is applied on top of the narrow hardwood flooring.

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The trim moulding around the door casing which leads from the second floor hall in to the south Parlor Chamber bears close scrutiny. It looks deceptively like surviving original Greek Revival mouldings...the back-band around the trim of the front entrance, for example, but it actually is a shallow cyma curve in section and is a later (ca.1850s) decorative element.

The South Parlor Chamber (the room above the south parlor) appears to retain original finish woodwork on all windows. There should be good opportunities for study of original paint colors in this room. The narrow hardwood flooring is of course later but it seems probable that the original flooring may survive in place beneath it. The present baseboard is a later replacement of the original, installed when the hardwood flooring was put down. The flat board which is applied at breast height around the room should be removed. It is not an original feature. What evidence may there be beneath the fiberboard ceiling tiles? Was the Filley House sufficiently elaborate to have boasted ornamental plaster ceiling center-pieces or rosettes, or a run-in-place room cornice? Occasionally principal "public" rooms on the first floor were elaborated in this fashion and the detail either omitted from the "private" rooms of the second floor or the decoration was diminished in scope. Obviously, the existing crown molding cornice in this room is contemporary with the tile ceiling.

The single greatest architectural loss in this parlor chamber is that of the chimney breast. While the chimney survives in place, the elaboration of the fireplace mantle piece has been removed. Opening of this sealed fireplace should be done carefully, with an eye towards determining whether or not it was an actual fireplace or alternatively a chimney breast pierced by a ceramic thimble which accommodated a chamber stove. The decade of the 1830s saw a major increase in the availability and popularity of stoves which were, of course, far more efficient and cleaner than fireplaces. The tradition of the mantle shelf and decorative fireplace surround as a visual focal point for a room persisted well after stoves superseded open fireplaces. The surviving late-Federal-early-Greek Revival mantelpiece in the adjacent north Parlor Chamber would serve as a suitable model for the design of a replacement for the south Parlor Chamber. Scale a fireplace surround, frieze, and mantel shelf to suit the chimney breast and then return the mantel shelf back along the sides of the projecting chimney breast to die against the wall.

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Since so much original interior finish woodwork survives in this room that this chamber is a logical candidate for restoration to its earliest appearance. Removal of the blind-nailed narrow hardwood flooring may uncover original floorboards. If study of the chimney breast confirms that it did indeed serve a stove, then look carefully on the original flooring in front of the chimney breast for the pattern of tacks which held down the protective sheet tin beneath the stove. There should also be tell-tale signs of wear, perhaps best discernible with a strong raking light across the surface of the floor, in the vicinity of the stove.

Examination of original flooring for tack holes around the perimeter of the room might also provide clues as to furnishings practices. Woven in-grain carpeting was popular at this time and it generally was installed wall-to-wall, and was tacked down. Woven straw matting was popular for summer use and it, too, was sometimes tacked down.

The North Parlor Chamber has been diminished in size by the construction of a curtain wall running north-south. This changes the original floorplan by creating a passageway to provide access to the rear of the building and to the second floor spaces of the ell. This wall, and the two factory-made doors set into it, is clearly of later construction and should be removed to return the room to its original configuration.

The windows in the west wall of this room retain their original and correct trim which matches the trim of the single window in the east wall of the present passageway. There is a small but very important section of original baseboard surviving just at the left of the fireplace surround. This should serve as a pattern for restoration of the rest of the baseboard in this room. Another section of original beaded baseboard survives along the east wall of the present passageway.

The fireplace surround and mantle is "late Federal style", a borderline feature which might be considered somewhat retardetaire for 1834, but certainly not inconsistent with vernacular or country practice. The backband molding of the fireplace surround matches the trim of the windows in this room. Was this now sealed fireplace once an actual working fireplace or was it merely the design focal point for the chamber with a receptacle for a stove flue? The closet door to the left of the chimneypiece is an original and unaltered feature. It should be carefully studied for paint evidence and for clues as to original latch hardware. The hinges are original and correct.

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This door should also serve as the pattern for replacing missing doors on the second floor. The door may have originally been fitted with a Norfolk type latch or, since it is only a closet, maybe just a turned mushroom knob and a twist button to secure it shut. Careful removal of paint layers will uncover the evidence.

Like floors elsewhere in the Filley House, the narrow blind nailed hardwood flooring in this room is not original. The original floor boards may survive intact beneath it. As noted previously, sufficient portions of the original baseboard survive to provide a good pattern for replacement of the present baseboard which is installed on top of the later flooring.

The ceiling in this room is comprised of modern composition tiles applied on firring strips nailed to the original up-and-down sawn oak or chestnut joists. Vertically sawn dimensioned framing stock is consistent with the age of the building; by contrast, compare these joists with the circular-sawn pine joists visible in some areas of the cellar which are apparent replacements. Inorder for a finished plaster on split-lath ceiling to be at the proper height from the floor in this room, the split lath must have been nailed on to cheek boards fastened to the sides of the joists. This period construction technique should become evident when the later tiles and firring are removed and the sides of the joists can be examined for a nailing pattern.

Despite the loss of its original ceiling, and the construction of the partition through it, this room has survived with the greatest extent of original fabric intact. This room, and the adjacent South Parlor Chamber, are the two logical candidates for restoration to the earliest period while the two parlors on the first floor logically argue to be treated as mid-19th century spaces.

Interior - Ell, First and Second Floors

Both first and second floors of the ell have undergone extensive alteration. Floorplans have been changed. Original doors have been replaced. Window and door trim have been replaced. Original floors are covered by narrow blind-nailed hardwood and only through removal of later curtain walls and this later flooring could the original partition placement be determined. Is such an undertaking worth it? Rooms within the ell were originally service areas or quarters for servants. These were spaces of secondary importance and could not be expected to display woodwork and finish details comparable to those lavished on the principal rooms in the main part of the house.

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Since the projected use of the ell may be as a service wing housing resident caretaker, offices, and library for the Society, then there seems very little to be gained in attempting a restoration of original floorplan and appearance. If, during the course of renovation, some interesting architectural details or features come to light, then a decision should be made at that time as to whether or not to incorporate such features into the renovated spaces.

Certainly, careful documentation should be made of all phases of the work in the ell just as in the main house. Such documentation should include field notes, drawings, and annotated black and white photographs of good quality. Oldfashioned, professionally processed black and white photographs are far preferable over color due to their relative permanence. Color photographs fade.

A final thought regarding the critical issue of handicapped accessibility. Most public funds will now come with that string attached and conscientious stewardship of an historical structure is all too often at odds with the mandate for handicapped access. Why not consider re-opening that second floor door on the back of the ell and providing a small lift inside a reconstructed wooden enclosure ? We know that such a wooden enclosure existed originally. This would make good use as well as interpretive sense of that doorway and would provide unobtrusive access to the second floor.

The Capt. Oliver Filley House is an architecturally and historically important building. It is certainly National Register calibre and steps should be implemented to place it in nomination through the Connecticut Historical Commission.

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to examine and comment upon this unusual house and hope that I may be of continuing assistance as the project moves forward.

Respectfully Submitted, John O. Curtis

### APPENDICES

- A. Reproduction "Antique" Restoration Brick Sources
- B. Restoration Artisans Stone and Brick Masons
- C. Reproduction Historic Windows Sources
- D. Storm Windows for Historic Houses Sources
- E. Reproduction and Custom-Made Window Shutters
- F. Window Shutter Hardware Sources
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- H. Custom-Made Reproduction Doors Sources
- . Paint Analysis Architectural Conservation
- J. Paint Removers and Strippers Sources
- K. Historic & Quality Restoration Paints and Brushes

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