

CLOCK MADE BY JONATHAN FISHER WHILE LIVING IN DEDHAM,
MASSACHUSETTS, LATER BUILT INTO THE WOODWORK
OF HIS HOUSE IN BLUE HILL, MAINE

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The House the Parson Built

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THE student of New England architectural history will find that only on rare occasions do enough contemporary documents survive to give a complete picture of the construction of a house from beginning to end. More often than not, such documents will refer to the grander houses of an era—those substantial homes whose owners ordered expensive materials and kept elaborate ledgers. The less articulate New England farmer—for whom writing, other than the keeping of his farm accounts, was a painful chore—has left little or no record of how he built his dwelling. Did he rely entirely upon tradition? How much formal thought did he give to the design? How much of the construction work did he do himself; for how much did he rely upon specialized skills?

Answers to these questions are important, especially as they apply to the simpler houses, and we are fortunate in having a surprisingly large number of documents which record in detail the construction of the house in Blue Hill,

Maine, designed and built by the Reverend Jonathan Fisher, the town's first minister. While Mr. Fisher was by no means an inarticulate farmer, and while certain elements in the plan and such ingenious features as the built-in clock immediately suggest an individualistic approach to the problems of design, the house, nevertheless, is both simple and compact. Yet Mr. Fisher's account of the construction, being the record of a man who was at one and the same time a clergyman, scholar, gifted artist, naturalist, surveyor—one of early Maine's most colorful figures, marks this house for special consideration. The documentation is largely in the form of day-by-day journal entries, but these are interestingly amplified through a series of drawings by Mr. Fisher which are floor plans and details for framing and trim. Here one can see how the design of the house took form in the imaginative mind of its builder, and the precise way in which the design became reality.

Born in New Braintree, Massachusetts, on October 7, 1768, Jonathan



FIG. 1. THE REVEREND JONATHAN FISHER, BLUE HILL, MAINE,
SELF-PORTRAIT, 1824

Fisher was only a small child when his family moved to West Hampton in the spring of 1773. "My father's house," he wrote later, "was but a cottage containing one room, and built of hewn logs, with a stone chimney. With food we were well provided, and generally had a competency of clothing, tho sometimes we were in rags, and one winter, myself, and my brothers and sisters were without shoes, and our bare feet were daily accustomed to the snow."¹ A few years later, "between the years of ten and fifteen of my age," he continues, "I began to exhibit some traces of mechanical genius; and a turn for mathematics; spending my leisure time in making buttons, brooches, windmills, snares, traps, purling sticks and the like . . . sometimes drawing with a pin on a smooth board, and sometimes on a slate, which led the way afterward to a small measure of proficiency in sketching and painting. . . ."²

Like so many other young men of the period, destined eventually for the ministry, he put in a stint of teaching, and on December 20, 1787, trekked forty-six miles on foot from Holden to Dedham where he engaged to teach a school at eight dollars a month with board. From 1788 until his graduation in 1792 with the degree of Bachelor of Arts, he was enrolled at Harvard College, after which he took courses in divinity, and on June 22, 1794, preached for the first time in Blue Hill where he remained through the summer. He returned to Blue Hill the following year in July, 1795, and here he lived as pastor for forty-one years and then as retired min-

ister until his death on September 22, 1847.

According to time-honored custom, the first order of business for the new minister was his "settlement" arranged with the town. This included an allotment of land made in accordance with Massachusetts law. The Provincial Legislature in 1762 had granted twelve townships beyond the Penobscot River, requiring that four sections of each be set aside for special purposes—one to benefit Harvard College, a second to support the church, a third to support a school, and a fourth for the use of the settled minister. The parsonage lot, thus sequestered, was allotted to Jonathan Fisher in 1796 by vote of Town and Church (being one), and it remained in the hands of his descendants for five generations until its acquisition in 1954 by the Jonathan Fisher Memorial, Inc.

The parsonage lot represented only a portion of the settlement. The Town of Blue Hill, comprising then some sixty families, also promised initially to provide its pastor with a yearly salary of \$200 in cash, "a barn 40 by 30 feet, 13 feet and a half stod," fifteen cords of hardwood, and five acres of land cleared annually for ten years.³

The first parsonage was not occupied by Jonathan Fisher and his young bride until the fall of 1797 when he recorded on November 2, "This day completes the first year of our marriage state. . . . Our conjugal felicity, through the grace of God, has been uninterrupted. This day we are removed into our own house. Though in an unfinished state, it is more comfortable than the habitation of

¹ Gaylord C. Hall, *Biographical Sketch of the Rev. Jonathan Fisher . . .* (New York, 1945), unpagged.

² *Ibid.*

³ Esther E. Wood, "Historic Maine Parsonage . . .," *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine* (Aug.-Sept., 1961).

many.”⁴ This first dwelling later became the ell of the present Jonathan Fisher House, and as such remained standing until 1896 when it was unfortunately torn down and replaced with the existing rear ell.

It is the main portion of the house on the parsonage lot, however, now more than one hundred and fifty years old, which is our principle concern. Among the earliest references to its construction in Jonathan Fisher’s diary is the formal entry on January 18, 1814, “Engaged Mr. J. Holt to frame my house for me next June. Engaged Mr. Savage to enclose the covering of my house, put on corner boards, window facings, & trimmings & water table, of the upright part, exclusive of porch & buttery & dress & lay 1000 clap boards by the last of Sept. 1814—for \$30 & his victualing.”⁵ Here at the very outset, then, we are told that the house was to be erected according to the traditional formula for mansion as well as farmhouse; namely, according to a division of labor by which the framing or rough carpentry was assigned to one specialist—generally a carpenter or housewright, and the more refined details of finish let out to another specialist altogether, normally a joiner. The contractual arrangement, therefore, is characteristic of nearly all such which can be found in early New England building documents of the period. The diary entries for the next few days, however, are somewhat more unusual. “Evening planned upon house,” recorded Mr. Fisher on January 19, the day following his notation about the contracts. On the

20th he “Planned a little,” and ten days later, on the 31st, he spent a “very cold & blustering” day “planning [new] addition to my house.” Again on February 3, he “spent most of the day planning my house,” and on the 4th continued “planning my house & taking off dimensions of timber.” While much of the progress of construction reported in the parson’s diary reveals a pattern which can be matched virtually item by item in other characteristic diary building accounts of the period, these several references to planning are less typical. Without belaboring the point, it may suffice to say that Mr. Fisher’s mechanical interests, his inquiring disposition, and a lively imagination led him to study more carefully than would seem to have been customary with the average rural builder the various problems associated with the building of his simple two-story hip-roofed house.

Among the drawings are three floor plans of which only one, “Plan of the Upright Part of a House,” is signed by Jonathan Fisher and dated at Blue Hill, February, 1814. It is the plan of the house as built, while the other two, obviously executed at about the same time, are preliminary studies or alternate schemes. Of these two preliminary plans, the more important is that which includes, coincidentally, the only known representation of the original house, shown in its relation as an ell attached to the newly added structure erected in 1814 (Fig. 2). From the drawing we learn that it must have covered more ground than the new building, though it was presumably of one-story construction and did not include the square buttery (shown at the far left of the plan in the junction formed by main house and

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ This and all subsequent diary entries are taken from a transcription of the original volumes at the Blue Hill Library, decoded by Edith Chase Weren.

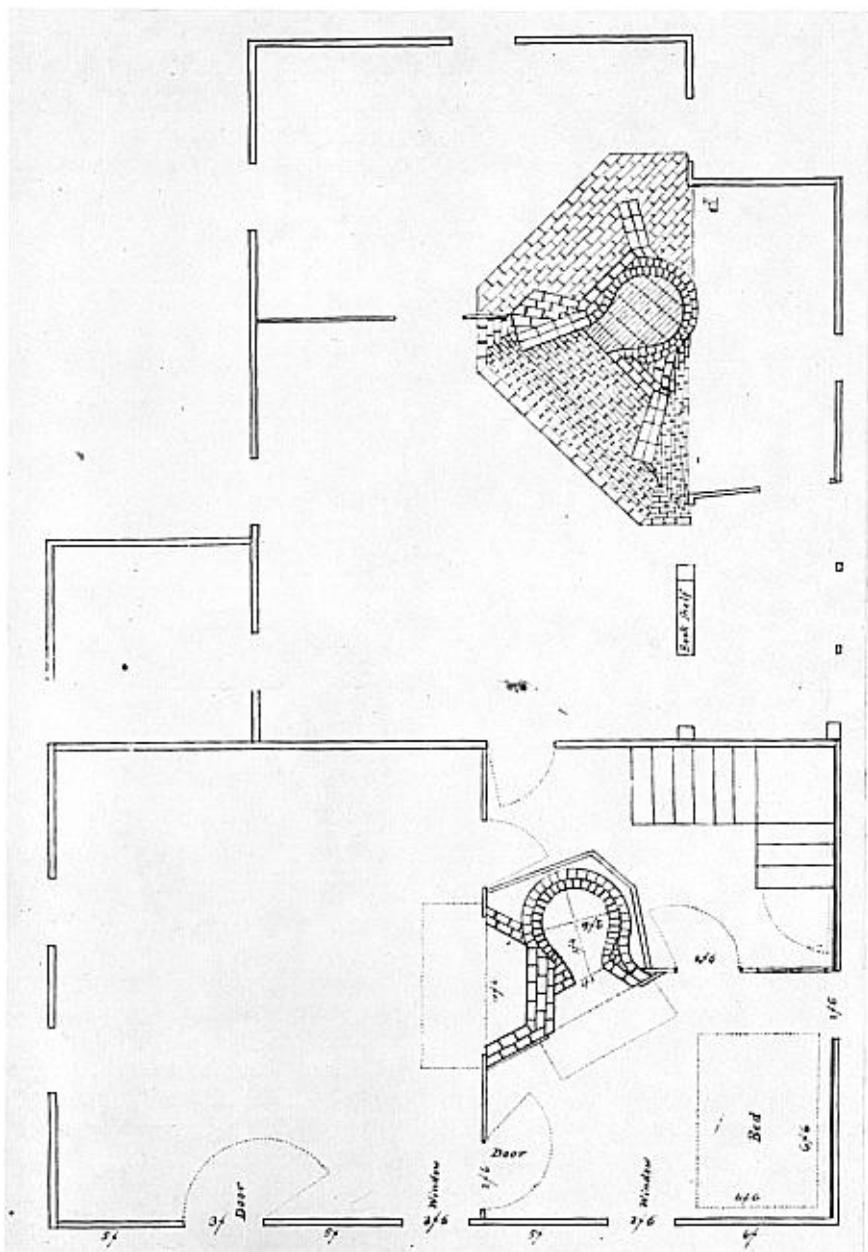


FIG. 2. FIRST (?) PRELIMINARY DRAWING BY JONATHAN FISHER FOR THE PLANNED ADDITION TO HIS HOUSE IN BLUE HILL, MAINE, 1814

ell) which was part of the 1814 enlargements.

In all of the floor plans Mr. Fisher shows little or no uncertainty concerning the important features of the design. He had apparently settled at the outset upon a scheme in which a large sitting room or parlor at one end of his addition was

front porch which does not appear in either of the preliminary drawings, but is present in the final plan; (2) the partition between the bedroom and rear passage which in both of the preliminary studies is placed in such a way as to leave the western window wholly within the bedroom, while in the final scheme, and

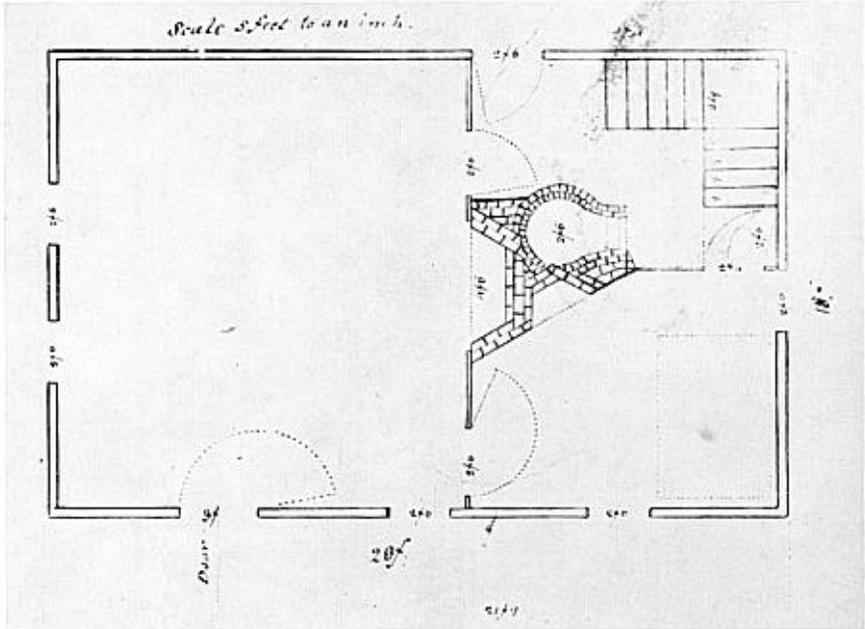


FIG. 3. SECOND (?) PRELIMINARY DRAWING BY JONATHAN FISHER FOR THE PLANNED ADDITION TO HIS HOUSE IN BLUE HILL, MAINE, 1814

to be balanced by two smaller areas, one a downstairs bedroom (in the continuing eighteenth-century tradition), and the other, behind it, a passage with stairs to the second story. The fenestration and basic arrangement of doorways also remains more or less constant in both the preliminary schemes and final plan. Mr. Fisher seems to have been concerned with only three relatively minor problems: (1) the matter of an enclosed

in the house as built, this partition somewhat awkwardly (or ingeniously, depending upon how one views the matter), bisects the window, providing light for both bedroom and passage; and finally (3), the chimney; it is tempting to assume that Fig. 2 represents Mr. Fisher's earliest plan-thinking with an oven opening directly and somewhat illogically from the bedroom fireplace, while its bulge was to be concealed by a

loosely ranging partition composed of at least three angular turns. Whether first or second in point of time, it can easily be demonstrated that the other of the preliminary schemes (Fig. 3) does represent a logical intermediate step between the chimney plan of Fig. 2 and that which was finally adopted. In Fig. 3 the masonry is not concealed, and that portion directly behind the oven is solidly bricked. As finally evolved and constructed, with the oven opening relocated to avoid an uncomfortable bulge in the rear passage, the masonry is concealed by a straight partition and the space behind the oven is left empty to receive the built-in clock (Fig. 4).

Of the remaining drawings, the majority appear to belong to the February, 1814 or final group, and are largely framing diagrams for the first and chamber floors (Fig. 5), walls (Fig. 6), roof (Fig. 7), and details of trim, in particular the front entrance (Figs. 8 and 9). The parson's mathematical bent is everywhere in evidence, and in such drawings as that of Fig. 9 he reveals a ready familiarity with the Classical orders as laid down by the English carpenters' guides of the period, and those published by the Connecticut-born Asher Benjamin, who, though a few years younger than Jonathan Fisher, was raised not far from West Hampton where Fisher spent part of his youth. By 1814 Benjamin had published three separate architectural handbooks which appeared in more than a single edition and circulated widely throughout New England.

The actual work of construction can be minutely observed in Mr. Fisher's daily diary entries where it is possible to see the house steadily take shape before one's eyes. On February 14 he went to

Mr. Holt "& got him to look out timber for me," while on the following day "with Mr. J. Holt went in to the woods & looked out & marked the principal part of the timbers for my house." A day later, on the 16th, he records that he "worked at cutting timber for my house—Br. H. with me & boys part of the day. Mr. Asa Clough with two yoke of oxen hauled timber for me." He worked also on the 18th doing his own cutting, and again on the 19th Mr. Clough hauled. On the morning of the 22nd "Mr. Clough finished hauling timber for me."

A little over a month later we discover in the diary under date of March 26 another interesting example of Jonathan Fisher's mechanical ingenuity: "Spent most of the day at work on a machine for shaving shingles," he wrote. On the 29th he "spent the day working upon a shingle machine—after having prepared a model of part of it," and for the next three days his time seems to have been absorbed entirely by his "shingle-jack," as he calls it.

During the afternoon of April 14, he "went to invite hands to dig on my cellar," a project which was under way a few days later. In fact, two aspects of the work were now pushed forward simultaneously at a vigorous rate: there are continuing references to Steven Holt's "hewing timber" and Enoch Smith's "scoring" it, while one or another of the neighbors worked at digging the cellar, usually having the assistance of the parson's boys. On May 3 Mr. Fisher, "with help of Mr. Smith cut timber for my house. . . . Made posts, etc," while on the 4th, "R. H. Wood & E. Smith worked for me stoning cellar." The work of digging and stoning the cellar progressed handily, and on May 6,

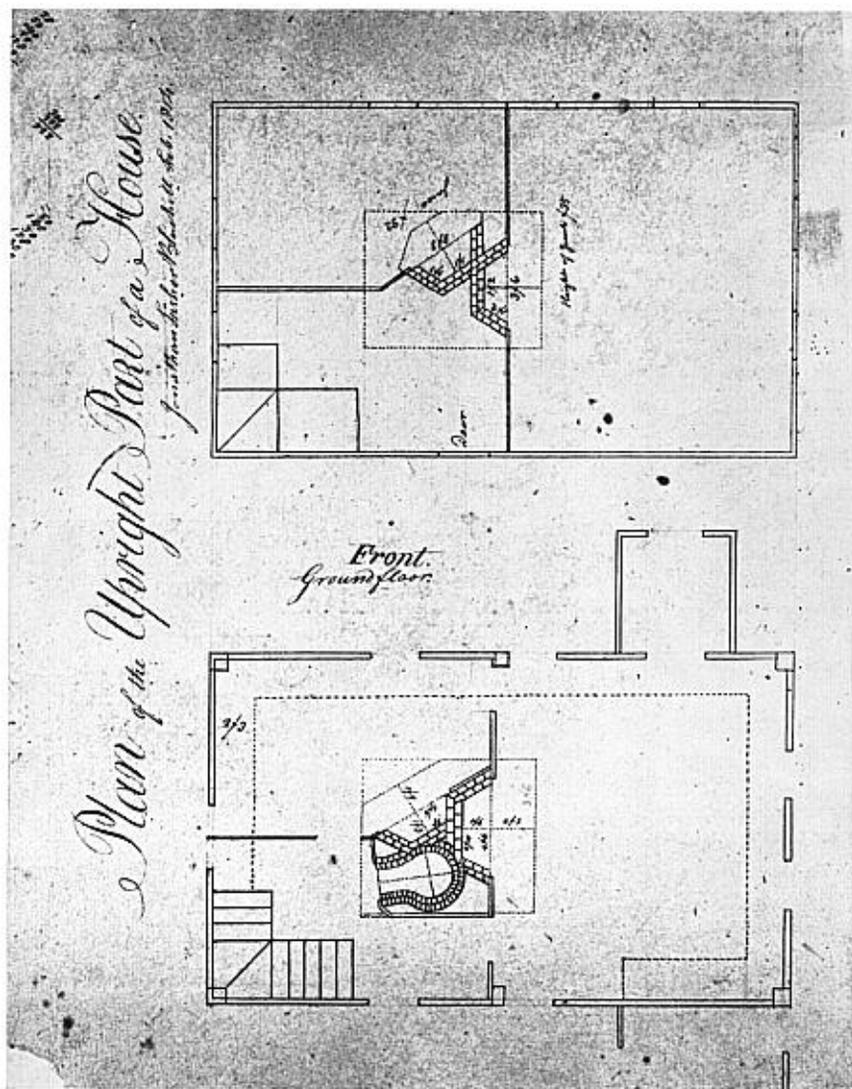


FIG. 4. FINAL DRAWING BY JONATHAN FISHER FOR THE FIRST AND SECOND STORIES OF THE PLANNED ADDITION TO HIS HOUSE IN BLUE HILL, MAINE, 1814

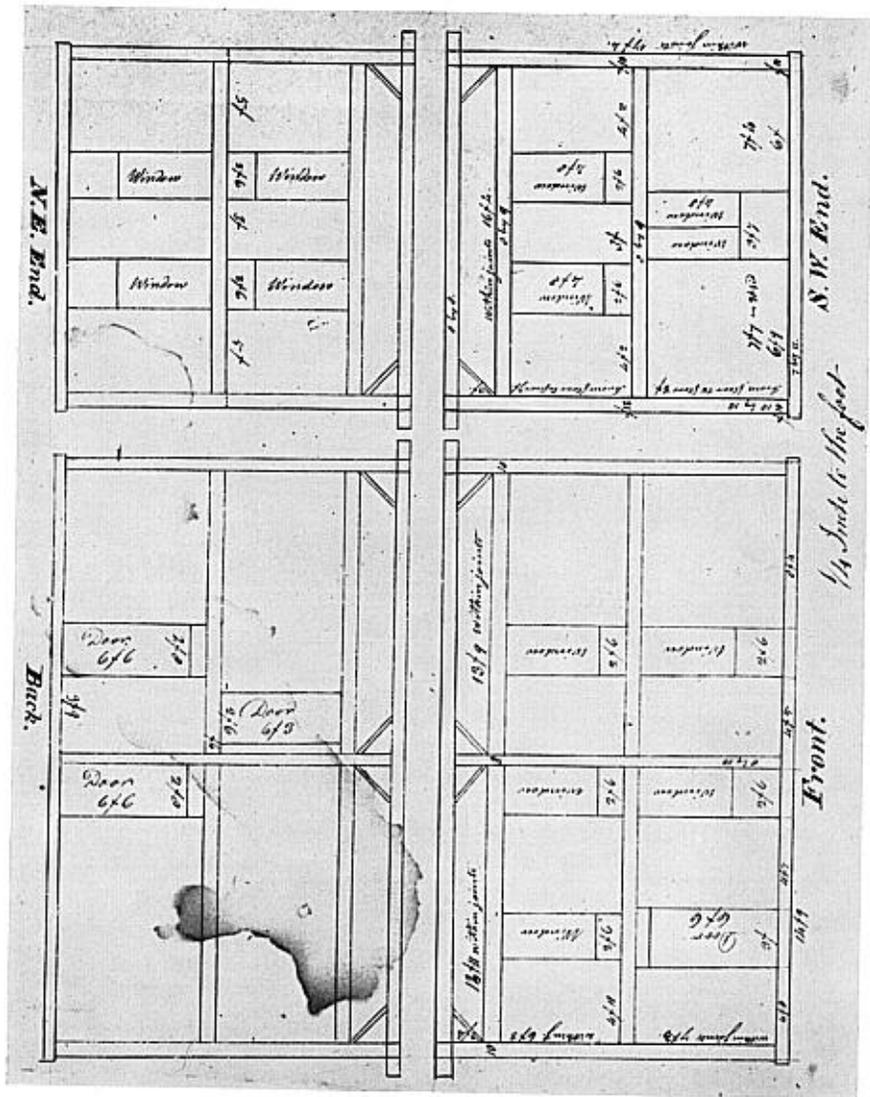


FIG. 6. DRAWING BY JONATHAN FISHER FOR THE WALL FRAMING OF THE PLANNED ADDITION TO HIS HOUSE IN BLUE HILL, MAINE, 1814

Mr. Fisher "worked with E. Smith & my boys upon the drain of my cellar—filling its cavity with the gravel of rotten rocks, covered with small stones & earth." On the 19th, he "finished drilling & blowed a large rock for cellar stones, with remarkable success." The next day he "Blowed" another rock, and on the 21st, "assisted in blowing a rock, drilled by my sons." May 24 was a busy day. "Holt & Smith worked A. M. at hewing. . . . Tended upon workmen & blowed a rock with good success. . . . P. M. Went to Mr. Phin Osgood's & several other places to invite hands to work on my cellar. . . . Spoke to Mr. R. Dodge to endeavor to engage 1000 spruce boards of Moses Carleton." And then on the 30th, he tackled still another mechanical project: "Began to work upon mitre saw," a device which he describes on the following day as a "circulating mitre saw."

Despite the fact that there seems to have been quite a little sickness in the Fisher family during this period, that the British invaded the area in 1814, and that Jonathan Fisher was obliged to sandwich in the work upon his house between the regular farm chores and pastoral duties, there was steady progress: the cellar work was nearing completion, and on June 6 Mr. Fisher "put together timber for the sills of my house. Made pins, etc." On the 8th, "Mr. Holt & Steven Holt & Mr. H. worked for me at framing," while the "boys" and others worked on the cellar; "gave directions myself & worked on frame," he noted. After a brisk two weeks' work of framing, the sills were laid, and on the 21st we find a long entry marking one of the most significant events in early house construction: "A day of care & business—Mr. Holt, Steven & Mr. Smith worked A. M. on frame. Worked myself strip-

ping old house [of clapboards] & drawing nails. About 100 hands collected & assisted me in raising my house, with plank sides, which went up well, & no person was materially hurt. After raising partook of a bountiful supper & after supper had pleasant singing. Blessed be God for the variety & abundance of his mercies."

The next day the porch was framed, and on the 24th Mr. Fisher "shaved shingles." Early in July, he "worked on ledges splitting stone" which had to be hauled down, and much of this stone, it appears, was used for the "cellar bottom." For the next three or four weeks, with the normal summer's work at its peak, Mr. Fisher busied himself off and on with shaving shingles. He was tinkering, too, as he had time, with his mitre box which he finished "to good satisfaction" on August 9. The next three days he worked on a "Cornish plane," the stock of which he finished on the 12th, and then, the same day, "went to the head of the bay. Got plane irons made—ground them—"

During the second half of August, he worked on the buttery which he was "clapboarding & shingling" on the 23rd, and on the 29th, he tells us, "Mr. Savage began to work on my house," a clear indication that the work by this time was ready for details of finish. Throughout September, most of the entries have to do with Mr. Fisher's own work on his "Lutheran window," the one single dormer in the rear roof, and the various jobs of finishing performed by Mr. Savage. Thus, stagings were erected on September 5, while "Mr. Savage planed clapboards." On the 8th, the parson "finished Lutheran window. Got hinges made & hung the sash." On the 9th, he "worked at boarding the roof of my

house—Mr. S. on covering.” Mr. Savage continued to work at covering the next few days, while Mr. Fisher made window frames, including a frame for the Lutheran window whose sash was already in place. An entry on the 20th, “boys cut sticks & got birch bark,” refers probably to flashing the cracks of the roof boarding, a not unusual custom for the period.

As September wore on, Mr. Savage planed clapboards and weather boards, while Jonathan Fisher shingled. With the beginning of October, and with more than a hint of fall in the air, Mr. Fisher “laid several boards of under floor” on the 3rd, while Mr. Savage “began to put on water table & corner boards.” The parson worked occasionally on window frames during October, fitted them, “assisted Mr. S. some & shingled some,” and on the 14th, “put boards in my garret to dry corn.” On the 18th and 19th, he was “fitting” timbers for the cellar stairs, and on the 20th and 21st, “worked out cornice for my porch” and “worked out plancer & began faces.” The term plancer, referring to the soffit of the cornice, is seldom to be heard today, while “faces” is a corruption of the classical fascia, that flat band which serves as a division in either an Ionic or Corinthian architrave. Both of these details required skill in execution, and the fascia in particular, a distinctive feature of the house as it stands today, will be mentioned later.

The board covering of the porch was finished by October 25, and Mr. Fisher worked that day shingling one side of it. He finished shingling the porch on the 28th and “fitted on saddle boards & stop waters,” while Mr. Savage clapboarded.

During November, both Mr. Fisher and Mr. Savage worked hard and fast at shingling, clapboarding, and finishing

window frames, Mr. Fisher having, on the 15th, to go “in to the woods” to get more “shingling stuff.” With what must have been both pride and relief, he recorded on the 19th that “Mr. S. finished his job on my house amounting to \$32.” The parson spent November 26 “shingling upon new house & nearly finished,” and on the 29th, “began to take down stagings.” On the last day of that month, with winter just around the corner, he “finished taking down stagings & boarded up several windows.”

Until this point, it will be noticed, there had been no mention in the diary of the chimney. Customarily the early house was raised and closed in before the chimney was constructed. And so it was with Jonathan Fisher’s new house. When, with winter just beginning to break up, the work of construction was resumed, the first house building reference in Mr. Fisher’s diary on March 2, 1815, tells us that he “assisted in unloading a thousand bricks given me by Mr. Faulkner.” On March 20, he helped unload another gift of bricks, but actual work upon the chimney did not begin until July. In the meantime, during the latter part of June, he had laid the chamber floor, and then on the 30th, “with help of Joshua Wood & team got 3 casks of lime from the head of the Bay & two loads of sand from Mr. Peter’s cove.” On July 4, he “made preparations for building chimney. Made a door frame for an arch. . . . Mr. R. H. Wood, Joshua & Johnson Wood worked on foundation of chimney.” This arch in the chimney foundation has remained sound to the present day, and it is interesting to note that on the 5th Mr. Fisher made a “door frame & shelves,” presumably for the closet enclosed within the arch.

Work on the chimney proceeded

through the next few days at the capable hands of the Woods, and on the 7th, the "Arch [was] finished James [jambs] begun." On the following day, the 8th, the Woods had got the chimney "up to [the] mantlepice" while Mr. Fisher tended to the fireplace fittings: "had oven mouth irons made at Mr. Ray's," he tells us.

On July 16 of that year, he "worked most of the day on a kitchen cupboard. Fitted the glass & hung the door for the face of my clock." In the meantime, he had thoughtfully recorded a detail which throws considerable light on a persistent question raised by the restorationist and student of early New England architecture, namely, for those houses of the peri-



FIG. 10. JONATHAN FISHER HOUSE, BLUE HILL, MAINE, 1814

Photo by Ward Snow, 1955.

While work on the chimney went forward during July, Mr. Fisher was working on the "cheese room" where he had the floor laid by the end of the month. By now the major portion of the work had been accomplished, but the details of completion often seem to have lagged for a surprisingly long time in the more remote houses of rural New England. Thus we find that not until April, 1817, did Mr. Fisher lay his garret floor.

od finished without gutters, as this one was, apparently, none being mentioned in the diary, how was the shedding of roof water handled? Here is one answer, at least, when, on June 16, 1817, Mr. Fisher tells us that he "looked out flat stones to put under the eaves of my house."

Finally, and particularly interesting in light of Mr. Fisher's artistic talents, he records quite simply and without elabora-

tion on May 28, 1818: "worked myself at painting on house." Again, on June 11, he "worked at painting my house," and there are similar telegraphic entries on the 12th, 15th, 17th, 18th, and 19th.

Thus concludes the record of construction for the Jonathan Fisher House. While typical in many respects of the normal course of house building during the early nineteenth century, the account is far more circumstantial than many and leaves very little to the imagination. Looking at the house as a whole, one is impressed most of all, perhaps, with its form. Basically, the two-story rectangular mass and shallow hipped roof mark the house as early Federal in style, yet visually Mr. Fisher has, through his fenestration, created the impression of a structure which more nearly approaches

the square. And of even greater significance, the wide fascia of severely plain matched boards is hardly Federal at all. One is more quickly reminded of the characteristic Greek Revival entablature. These two conditions, therefore, unite in giving the house a forward-looking appearance, foreshadowing the Greek classical style which flourished in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The building must have seemed quite "modern" to Mr. Fisher's Blue Hill parishioners. Given the man himself, however, with the extraordinary range of his interests, his lively imagination, and above all, the amount of thought which he devoted to his "new" house in 1814, one could scarcely have expected a conventional outcome.