

The Thompson, Connecticut Bank

By JOHN OBED CURTIS

BY the opening years of the third decade of the nineteenth century the commercial development of northern Windham County was such that the need was felt for a bank to serve and augment the growing business of the area. John Warner Barber, writing in 1838, observed that "The village [of Thompson] . . . consists of about thirty well-built dwelling houses, four mercantile stores, one bank and a printing office."¹ Barber's discussion did not mention that even five years earlier Thompson's industry included cloth and shoe manufactories and that the surrounding communities were equally prosperous. Additionally, the town was favorably situated for business on the old Boston and Hartford Turnpike. Clearly there was a definite need for a bank in the neighborhood and appropriate steps were taken to bring about its creation.

On June 5, 1833, the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut passed an act to incorporate the Thompson Bank.² Provision for a board of directors was established stating that this body was not to exceed eleven members from which number the first president, Harvey Blashfield, was elected. The capital stock of the bank was fixed at one hundred thousand dollars which could be increased whenever the stockholders should so direct but could not exceed two hundred thousand dollars. This capital was divided into shares of one hundred dollars each. Only stockholders could serve on the board of directors, and of this group only the president received pay. Joseph B. Gay was the bank's first cashier.

Although the act of incorporation paved the way for the establishment of a bank in Central Village, within the Town of Thompson, it was apparently well over a year before construction work commenced on the building which was to house the banking office for nearly the balance of the century. That the bank must have carried on its business in some temporary quarters is probable but the actual location and duration of tenancy is not known. Not until January of 1834 is there a clear-cut documentary reference which indicates the progress of the recently incorporated bank. On the eighteenth of that month Humphrey Almy of Thompson did "give, grant, bargain, sell and confirm unto the said President, Directors and Company a certain lot of land situated in said Thompson . . . with a privilege around said premises to Build a Banking house and repair the same when necessary."³ He further bound himself and his heirs and assigns not to erect any building which would encroach on the intended banking house.

Due to the season of the year it may logically be assumed that construction work did not even then commence immediately. Again there is a regrettable gap in the documentation for the dates of construction and completion are unknown. However, we can be confident that it was finished and occupied sometime prior to August of 1835. In the fall of that year a Thompson merchant named H. W. Paine bought an advertisement in the local paper⁴ stating that:

One door west of the Thompson Bank may be found a good assortment of Ladies' Kid Slip-

pers, Gents' Pumps, Childrens' Shoes and Bootees of all kinds. Also, Good Blacking and Brushes—all of which will be sold cheap.

The advertisement was date lined August 12, 1835, suggesting that Paine may have been attempting to dispose of his stock of shoes and blacking for some little time and, of greater importance, that sometime during the relatively brief span of nineteen months the new banking edifice was completed. The building in which H. W. Paine did business survives today and indeed was once a store. It is the next building west of the bank site and architecturally predates the bank building by several years.

The banking house which the directors of the Thompson Bank caused to be built is a charming compact little Greek Temple measuring approximately 22 feet across the front and 28 feet deep. In plan it is prostyle-tetrastyle, which means simply that it has four columns across the front carrying a portico. It is fitting certainly that a prosperous and up-to-date community would select the then popular Greek Revival for its imposing bank, for the decades of the 1830's and 1840's were the heyday of the Greek architectural idiom and no New England town is without its public and domestic structures in the Greek mode. The original flat pediment of the bank, which will be replaced in the restoration at Sturbridge Village, is perhaps somewhat overpowering for so small a building, but it provides a pleasing example of back country interpretation of the classical style. Emphatically horizontal in its design, it is intended to give the building a feeling of solidarity and mass as befits a bank. The spacing of the central unit with its recessed shadow panel, flanked by similar but less tall units terminating

in capped box-like posts, repeats and complements the intercolumniation. The general over-all feeling of the original pediment is one of projecting and receding planes, contrived by the architect to make light and shadow work for him in decorating the building. Asher Benjamin, one of our foremost nineteenth-century New England architects, explains this technique at some length in the preface to his *Practice of Architecture* of 1833.

Certain of the interior finish moldings, notably those of the window architraves, suggest Benjamin's *Practice of Architecture*⁵ as their source and this seems quite feasible for his works enjoyed a broad popularity throughout this area. Beyond that, there is little one can say regarding the inspiration for the building. The architect is unknown, but that he was both fallible and avant-garde in his structural concepts is affirmed by the building he designed. Every effort was directed towards producing a banking structure that would be substantial and as secure as the technology of the period could make it. One can imagine how pleased the directors must have been with his proposals to safeguard their depositors' funds. The bank is constructed of brick, four courses thick, and the windows are shielded by heavy wrought-iron shutters. The vault which stood in one corner was built of squared granite blocks stapled together by great iron pins bedded in lead plugs within the stones. The vault was capped by three massive flat stones above which was constructed a thick brick barrel arch, closed at both ends, which could have been intended only as an insulating dead-air void in case of fire. Further evidence that the threat of fire was prominent in the thinking of both architect and clients is the unusual use of

plaster between the sub and finish floors and above the attic floor. As a final protection, the roof was sheathed in tin plate, an almost unheard of expedient at the time.

To be sure, some important city buildings of the period boasted tinned roofs, but the expense of material and labor made such extravagance rare indeed in

to provide for sufficient ventilation in two critical areas; one the completely closed-in attic, and two, the partially excavated basement. As a result, the wooden structural members in both quarters suffered the ravages of dry rot and mold over the years. Despite these inherent flaws, the building has survived the years unlike the corporation it was built to serve.



SOUTH VIEW OF THOMPSON, CONNECTICUT, CENTRAL PART
(BANK IS FOURTH BUILDING FROM RIGHT)

John Warner Barber's *Connecticut Historical Collections* (New Haven, 1838).

the country. One may be sure that the roof was originally of tinned iron plate for during its dismantling, prior to the building's removal to Sturbridge, some small scraps of tin were found nailed to the few remaining original roof boards and a period builder's handbook lists cost estimates for a tin roof.⁶ Additionally, the very shallow pitch of the roof is inadequate to allow for satisfactory utilization of a slate or wood shingle roof.

In his zeal to design a tight, secure, and fireproof building, the architect neglected

Several town historians present a fairly sanguine account of the bank's progress through the century but the Connecticut office of the Comptrollers' Report for the late 1830's and early 1840's indicates that, like most banks of the period, the Thompson Bank saw its ups and downs especially during the panic of 1837. The three-year span covered by the reports shows that the total amount of liabilities and debts which stood at \$164,057.55 in 1837 was decreased to \$125,461.20 by 1840. Similarly, the stock of "Gold,

silver, & other coined metals belonging to the Bank in the banking house" amounted to a low of \$2,936.44 in 1837. By 1840 this had been increased to \$4,409.69. Obviously, 1837 was a bad year for the Thompson Bank, too. Per-

same report sheds additional light on the bank's building through its listing of "Real estate owned by the Bank, viz. Banking House, 1,912.42." Previous reports had entered the evaluation a mere seven dollars higher but had neglected to



THOMPSON BANK, BUILT ABOUT 1835

Photograph about 1938, courtesy of Old Sturbridge Village.

haps it is no coincidence that its second president, Judge John Nichols, resigned in 1837 and was succeeded by Talcott Crosby, who remained in charge until ill-health forced his resignation in 1865. The early years must have been difficult for even the Connecticut Bank Commissioners' report to the General Assembly in May of 1841 carefully stated that "This institution has also been unfortunate, having charged profit and loss up to 5th October 1839, \$17,560.12." This

specify that the amount represented the banking house.

The next major landmark in the history of the Thompson Bank was its reorganization on June 22, 1865, as the Thompson National Bank under the new National Banking Act of that year. Now the usual thing for a bank to have done at this time was to have renovated and modernized its physical plant in such a fashion as to reflect properly its newfound dignity as a nationally chartered

organization. Fortunately for the anti-quarian, this does not seem to have been the case with the Thompson Bank and it appears that with the exception of a distinctly Victorian swivel chair bought presumably for the president, little was done to alter the original fabric of the building. Whether this resulted from a continuation of modest financial circumstances or whether it merely indicates a stubborn conservatism we can never know, but the fact remains that the bank survived in its original state a turning point in bank history that left many of its contemporaries irrevocably altered in form and decoration.

Thompson, like many little towns throughout New England, suffered economic reversals in the latter decades of the nineteenth century as the commerce of the area gradually centralized in the larger communities. By the 1890's Putnam, to the south, had supplanted Thompson in importance and as a result the bank on March 28, 1893, moved there and changed its name from the Thompson National Bank of Thompson to the Thompson National Bank of Putnam. Again misfortune dogged the organization and finally resulted in a voluntary liquidation of the bank on April 24, 1899. The bank was gone. It had served the area for almost sixty-six years. Its building remained and would continue to serve Thompson for another seventy years.

On November 15, 1893, the Thompson National Bank, by John Kingsbury, president, and Charles Arnold, cashier, had sold for \$1,000 to the Town of Thompson "a certain tract or parcel of land lying and being situated in the center village of said Thompson Together with the Building thereon . . . and is the premises The Thompson National Bank has used and occupied."⁸

Local tradition has it that at this time the Town held an auction and the various furnishings of the building were dispersed. This may well be true for several items have come down to us through the kindness of townspeople who have learned of Old Sturbridge Village's restoration project. It is known that the bank then became a repository for town records and papers and enjoyed the dignity of occasional use as a courthouse. Regrettably, public stewardship of the building was not what it should have been and only a minimum of maintenance was expended on the old bank. This, coupled with the flaws inherent in the structural design, made the building particularly susceptible to the onslaught of the 1938 hurricane which toppled the spire from the mid-nineteenth-century Congregational Church next door. The bank building lost its pediment and sustained severe water damage through the deterioration of the old tin roof. Consequently, it must be through old photographs and the John Warner Barber views that the original pediment will be reproduced. Again repair and maintenance seems to have been minimal for further and more thorough repairs were necessary by the late 1940's.

The postwar period is by far the darkest in the history of the little bank building since it was in 1948 that the Town of Thompson sold the building to the Connecticut Council of Boy Scouts for one dollar to be used as a meeting hall for the local troop. The new tenants, needing adequate space for their weekly meetings, and having no use for the substantial vault built into the southwest corner of the single room, understandably removed it. The stones were split apart and again split to serve as pavement in a neighboring driveway. The archway which had suggested a separation between the "lobby" and the sanctum of the office was

torn out and its loss was masked by the expedient of installing a ceiling well below the original which, by 1948, had probably lost most of its original plaster through water damage. The impressive vault lock and key were saved and have been subsequently returned to the building but the vault doors, similarly salvaged, found their way to a scrap-metal yard in Worcester, Massachusetts, several years later. Whatever furnishings may have survived the dispersal in the 1890's and the long period of public use were cast out to make room. A monolithic stone fireplace was constructed on the site of the vault and the chimney location was shifted to serve it. Fluorescent lights were installed. In this state the building continued to serve the town until it was acquired in June of 1963 by Old Sturbridge Village and subsequently removed to Sturbridge for restoration as an early nineteenth-century bank in the museum village.

This account of the history of the Thompson Bank has been brief and at times the continuity tenuous. One cannot help but wonder how much of the documentary material like the bank itself has suffered the attrition of time. A discussion of the bank with a long-time Thompson resident prompted him to recall a brief exchange with some inmates of the town farm who had been entrusted with the task of cleaning out the building just prior to its sale to the Scouts. When asked what they had been taking to the town dump in bushel baskets they replied: "Oh, just a lot of old papers and pictures and stuff." Whether this was a great or small loss we shall, of course, never know but the existing bits of documentation coupled with the architectural evidence of the building present a resumé of the bank's past adequate for its restoration and continued usefulness in a new guise as a three-dimensional document of New England history.

NOTES

¹ John Warner Barber, *Connecticut Historical Collections* (New Haven, 1838), p. 441.

² *Public Statute Laws of the State of Connecticut, passed at the session of the General Assembly, in 1833* (Hartford, 1833), pp. 483-488.

³ Town Records, Thompson, Connecticut. Vol. 13, p. 117.

⁴ *Windham County Gazette*, Thompson, Connecticut, October 12, 1835.

⁵ Asher Benjamin, *Practice of Architecture*

(Boston: Carter, Hendee & Co.), 1833, pp. 82-83, Plate XXXVIII.

⁶ James Gallier, *American Builder's General Price Book and Estimator* (New York, 1833), p. 49.

⁷ *Report of the Bank Commissioners to the General Assembly, May Session, 1841* (Hartford, 1841), pp. 34-35.

⁸ *Town Records of Thompson, Connecticut*, Vol. 27, p. 591.