

# The Province House, 1922

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EVERY year sees the destruction of a quantity of ancient buildings throughout New England, the least of which often seems so much better than anything our modern architects and builders are able to produce. One of these, so well known that its final disappearance caused much regret, was the brick Province House built by Peter Sergeant in 1679, and modified by the addition of a third story after it was acquired by the Province of Massachusetts as a home for the governor.

About twenty to twenty-five years ago [*i.e.*, about 1900] the writer, in company with Mr. Joseph Everett Chandler, made a thorough examination of everything visible in the old Province House and Mr. Chandler made floor plans and elevations which unfortunately have since disappeared. At that time the front or east wall and the north or chimney wall were standing intact and it was estimated that perhaps a third of the south wall then remained, while the rear or west wall had disappeared entirely. The easterly front showed a three story building with the usual arrangement of a central door and entry with a room on each side, four windows and a door across the ground floor, and five windows across the second and third. At the level of the ground floor was a pronounced water-table of molded brick and at the level of the second floor was a projecting string course of several rows of brick. The en-

trance to a theater which had at one time occupied the lower portion of the building was through the front basement wall.

The south wall was mostly hidden by buildings butted against it, but showed clearly that it suffered badly in the course of various alterations. The north wall, however, had come down practically intact and was almost wholly composed of an enormous stepped chimney of brick, projecting some four feet from the body of the house and divided at the first-floor level by a large arch. The whole northern face of this chimney was covered with clapboarding and was to be seen only from the narrow alleyway on which it abutted. (Fig. 1.) From within there were no fireplaces visible and the structure and contents of the chimney were largely a matter of guesswork. To be told that this was a true "Tudor" chimney, and one of the best of the very few standing in America, meant little to the writer or, so far as he has been able to ascertain, to anyone else of a generation ago.

The passing of twenty years brought many vicissitudes to the Province House and left it just so much the worse at the end. The entire interior, which dated from about the middle of the nineteenth century, was torn out up to the attic level where a lot of old trusses extending north and south were doubtless put in at the time the building was first used as a theater. Where a later theater was fitted, the approaches to the balcony and various minor rooms connected with its management necessitated numerous new holes

\* Portions of the following report were published in Mr. Appleton's Annual Report to the Society in 1923 (OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND, Serial No. 32).

and enlarged old ones in the east and south walls. The inner north wall was simply lathed and plastered to look like any modern theater interior and gave absolutely no indication of the chimney hidden behind it.

In May and June, 1922 the final destruction of what remained of the Province House was begun. As the work developed the true character of the chimney was revealed to the wondering eyes of modern American architects and antiquarians, practically none of whom had ever studied such a thing before or had even vaguely suspected that there was so much left of the old house built by Peter Sergeant. It was found that the Province House north wall consisted of two chimneys side by side and about six feet apart with a fireplace on three floor levels. These chimneys came together in the garret, and when firmly amalgamated were separated completely from the wall of the house preparatory to carrying six separate stacks, doubtless of handsome design.

This was a startling discovery in itself, but still more so was the fact that all six fireplaces were found in place and in at least as good condition as fireplaces of the seventeenth century are apt to be found hereabouts. The third-floor fireplaces were small affairs, as would befit rooms situated in that floor. The second-floor fireplaces were a revelation. That in the rear measured 5 feet 4 inches wide and 4 feet 6 inches high with a depth of 1 foot 9 inches. Rising from the hearth level and about a yard across the back was a herring-bone panel usually found in the fireplaces of the Bay Colony. The fireplace in the second story front room, contrary to all known New England precedence, exceeded in width those on the ground floor. It was 7 feet 6 inches wide, 4 feet 2 inches high and 2 feet deep with

a handsome herring-bone panel at the back. Evidently, this must have been the finest room of the house and later the Council Chamber of the colonial governors. So fine was this room that when at a later date the fireplace was diminished in size, making one of but 6 feet 2 inches wide, it must have still remained one of the most pretentious in New England, with jambs solidly covered with blue on white tiles and covering a space 1 foot 4 inches by 4 feet 2 inches on each jamb, and with an elaborate iron fireback between. The ground-floor fireplaces of the Peter Sergeant and Province House were by no means small. That in the rear being 4 feet 8 inches high by 5 feet 4 inches wide and 2 feet 3 inches deep; the fireplace in the front room being 5 feet 2 inches high by 7 feet 2 inches wide and 3 feet 9 inches deep.

There were other indications of the fine quality of this house. The ends of three of the four ground-floor beams were still in place, as well as two summer beams and one chimney girt. All of these sticks extended east and west, that is from the front to rear of the house, so that the ground-floor joists must have run north and south. The section of the largest of these summers was 1 foot 7 inches by 1 foot 9 inches.

As the work of demolition progressed, a wholly unprecedented quantity of molded brick of various shapes and sizes was disclosed. As this brick was out of place, it had evidently been used as filling material when the house was altered at different times. The nature and use of these brick were a matter of conjecture until the destruction of the gable wall in the southwest corner, where it was engaged with the wall of the adjoining house, showing the use to which at least part of this brick had been put. Here was enclosed a curved brick coping which

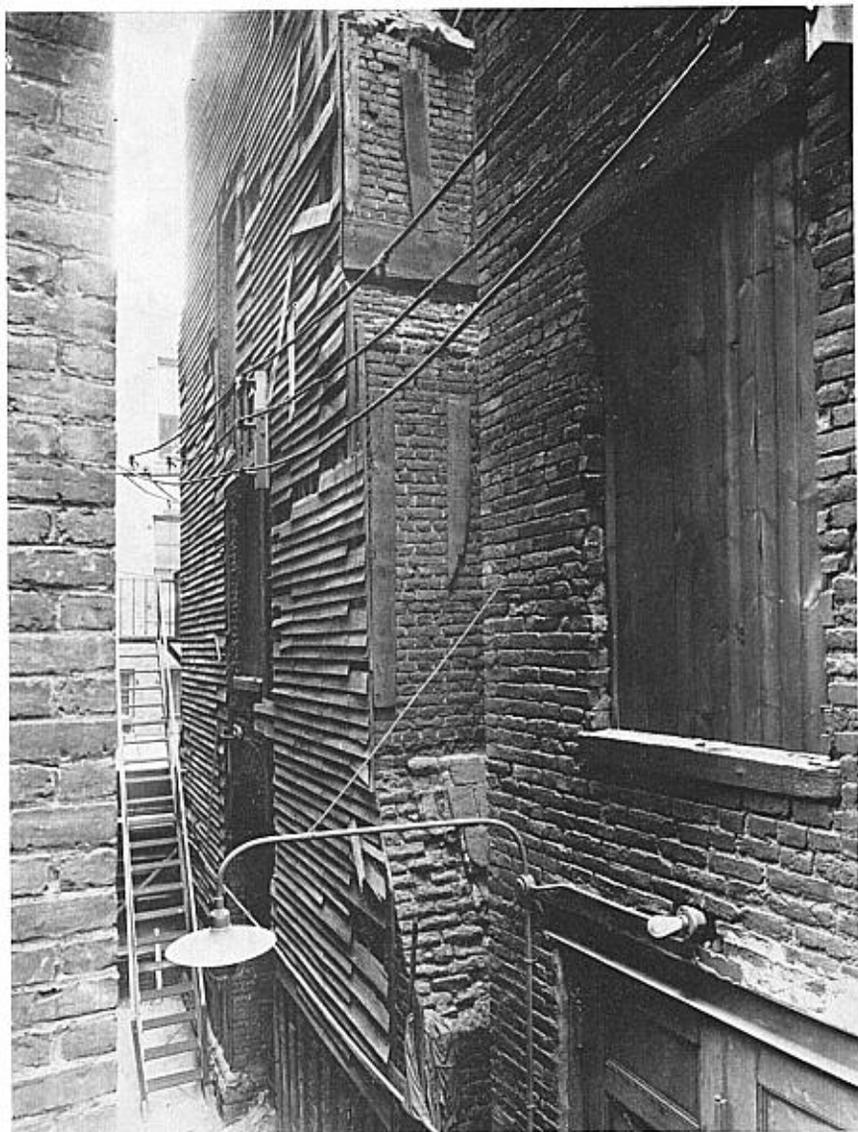


FIG. I. NORTH WALL VIEWED FROM THE WEST  
Photograph from the Society's collection, 1920.



FIG. 2. DETAIL OF FIREPLACE, FIRST FLOOR REAR ROOM  
Photograph from the Society's collection, 1922.

masked the straight line of the gable and the edge of this coping was formed of three varieties of molded brick. So far as the writer knows, nothing like this has been found elsewhere in New England and the only surviving example of such a curved brick coping for a gable end in America is at Bacon's Castle, Surry County, Virginia.

The other and much more elaborate molded brick may have come from a cornice at the level of the third-story floor on which probably rested smaller versions of such curved brick copings, and which masked the straight lines of the dormer fronts. Doubtless other molded bricks, and many of them enough for each flue, were used in the chimney tops, which were very likely destroyed in 1728. There is every reason to believe that at one point, namely around the window openings, molded brick was plentifully used. One such window opening in the south wall was found intact in part, at least, but seen only at night time by the wreckers. From their accounts it was evidently something unique in New England history, but its reconstruction must ever remain a matter of guess work. That this is not, fortunately, the case with the elaborate curved coping of the south gable is due to the fact that Mr. Philip L. Spalding, then Director of the Museum of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, happened along when its destruction was only in part completed. He immediately recognized the value of the discovery. A photographer of the *Boston Post* was fortunately present and was able to picture this coping, while the Society's draftsman, Mr. Thomas T. Waterman, arrived just in the nick of time to measure and draw the discovery. (Fig. 3.)

With the assistance of all the evidence uncovered during the demolition of the

building, we are able to say without fear of contradiction that Peter Sergeant's house was one of the most remarkable of which we have record in America. It was one of the finest houses in Boston and for that reason was selected as the governor's residence in 1715/16. Except in size, it must have been as satisfactory in its own way to a visiting Englishman of quality as a home in England. This gives us still another indication of the relative importance of Boston, a town of such culture as to rank second only to London as a publishing center in the British Dominions at that time.

It may well be asked how the destruction of such a house could be tolerated and why was its preservation not taken in hand and carried through to success. The answer is twofold. In the first place, no one appreciated the importance of what remained of the Province House. Except for those of the water table, the molded brick were all hidden in the walls where they had been used for filling. The existence of the fireplaces was surmised by few persons, if any, and the fact that they had come down practically uninjured was known to none. Even the north chimney, with its beautiful English bond, was practically invisible in a narrow alleyway and its surface was covered by clapboards. Moreover, the rounded coping was wholly unknown and the splendor of the house in every detail was unsurmised. However, there is no question but that the saving of what was left would have been undertaken except for the prohibitive cost involved. The house stood on some of the most valuable land in Boston, the entire lot, including much that could have been dispensed with, being assessed for \$1,800,000 and worth considerably more. The building was doomed from the moment the contract for the new building was signed.



FIG. 3. DETAIL OF SOUTH GABLE, SHOWING THE CURVE OF THE ORIGINAL COPING  
Photograph from the Society's collection, 1922.