

House Stories – 5 Strong Street – The James Carey House



I just received the most remarkable e-mail from Malcolm Carnwath. He was a realtor for 21st Century here in Newburyport for many years and lived in this house until it was taken over by the current owners. He did what I feel every owner ought to do inside the Newburyport Historic District. Find out everything there is to know about your building. Not just the history but the architecture too. This way you understand what you are dealing with when you do maintenance or have to rehabilitate so it can be upgraded to 21st century living standards. If for example you live in a Greek Revival, you learn all about that style of architecture – then you are ready to tackle the house properly and can avoid the slash and burn techniques of the typical renovator.

Mr. Carnwath found out that his little tiny house was very special.

Historically, this house was built before 1823 by James Carey from land purchased from John Wood. It was sold shortly thereafter to a man named Gilman and then was owned for a considerable time during the Civil War years by a woman named Mehitable Hill.

It is one of the few vernacular Federals left in the country. It was so unusual that Bernie Herman, who was the head of the University of Delaware Historical Architectural Department talked about 5 Strong Street in detail when he gave an address at the firehouse in the 1990's. He was enthralled by the floor as well as the late federal detail of the house and Christian doors.

The thing most unusual about 5 Strong was that it had no window above the main entrance. Most half houses from that period had that. This particular house has a window with 6 / 9 lights around the corner of the house on its side. The construction of the house is post 'n' beam and the back addition is maybe one of the earliest balloon constructed additions possibly in the country. It has circular saw cuts. The circular saw blade wasn't invented until the 1820's by the Shakers.

This is an early vernacular federal period half house with a central hall and slightly off-centered chimney system with three working fireplaces and one simple wood stove in the upstairs back bedroom. The house appears to be transitioning from a federal or Adam style in the direction of a Greek revival. This is manifest by the slightly recessed front door and the small third bedroom to the rear of the main stairway upstairs. This smaller bedroom would in most Greek Revival homes be usually on the front of the house where the stairway banister ends. The banister is usually curved at the base and often has a curlicue-style newel post but in this house we still can see a Federal-style banister.

I hope that what I have relayed should establish the label, 'historically significant', enough that not just the Historical Commission should designate it such but the present owners understand the gem they possess and rehabilitate the home rather than demolish it.

If they can not be persuaded with reason, the NHC will put a demolition delay on it for a year and alas, in the next anniversary, another nail will be hammered into Newburyport's coffin.

Oh that we had a local historic district now!

-P. Preservationist

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