



"Knowing our past, guides our future."

GLASTONBURY'S RECORD NUMBER OF COLONIAL HOMES

by Jim Bennett and Henry von Wodtke

Mr. Bennett is Executive Director of the Historical Society and Mr. Von Wodtke is its President

Anyone familiar with Glastonbury knows of its many charming old houses. They provide variety and character. What you might not know is that Glastonbury has more genuine colonial houses--154 homes built before 1800--than any other town in the Connecticut and more than all but one other town in America. Four of Glastonbury's old homes date from the 1600s, unusually old for an American house.

Glastonbury has long been known for its large number of old homes. In 1961, Dr. Lee J. Whittles, who for decades had been studying Glastonbury's old houses, counted over 175 of them dating from before 1800. About 25 of these houses have since disappeared and more are threatened.

Other Towns

Colonial settlements in North America include the Dutch settlements primarily in New York State, English settlements along the east coast, French settlements running up the Mississippi River through the Great Lakes and into Canada, and Spanish settlements in Florida and the south west. Few early Dutch, French, or Spanish colonial houses still exist, although houses have been built in these styles since 1800. In contrast, there still are hundreds of genuine English colonial homes.

Today, the largest number of surviving English colonial structures are found in New England towns, where Marblehead, Massachusetts, with over 200 pre-1800 houses, has the most. Newport, Rhode Island, with over 300, has more than either Marblehead or Glastonbury, but it is a city. No Connecticut city has even 100. Other towns with significant numbers of pre-1800 houses include Guilford, Connecticut with 148 in 1982 and probably fewer now, and Wethersfield, Connecticut with about 120.

What can sometimes be confusing are the many reconstructed houses that we tend to know about because often they are open to the public. For instance, the Turner House in Salem, Massachusetts, best known as the House of the Seven Gables, is a spectacular house, but not an original. It is a reconstruction, almost exactly like the original. It includes some original elements and is rebuilt on the original site. Even Williamsburg, VA, a city known for colonial architecture, has fewer genuine colonial houses. Much of what you see there are reconstructions or relatively new structures built in a colonial style.

Why So Many of Glastonbury's Colonial Homes Survived

Glastonbury had an early start as an English settlement. Its first known real house (which has not survived) was built in 1645. Early Glastonbury was a colonial commercial center that experienced building booms in the late 17th century and again in the mid 18th century.

In colonial times, however, there were many towns with more houses than Glastonbury. Wethersfield (of which Glastonbury was originally a part), had more homes than Glastonbury throughout the colonial period. During the 1700s, both towns were important centers of commerce, but although Glastonbury prospered, colonial Wethersfield (and several other American towns) always had more commerce, people, and housing.

During the 1800s, Glastonbury continued to have some industry, but overall, it became a quiet, rural town, particularly from about the end of the American Civil War until World War II. Manufacturers began to use steam engines and, later, internal combustion engines and electric motors instead of the abundant water power once harnessed in Glastonbury. At the same time, shipbuilding and shipping, formerly profitable Glastonbury industries, nearly disappeared here.

The low level of commerce meant that, in Glastonbury, there was less need than in other communities to replace older structures with new ones. Hartford, which was also settled early, grew more commercially and evolved into a city. Old buildings were torn down to make way for new ones. In a few cities, other than Hartford, because urban houses existed in close proximity to each other, a single fire destroyed significant numbers of colonial houses.

In rural Glastonbury, people tended to make do with existing buildings. There usually was space for new buildings without tearing anything down or, if room was needed, existing buildings, particularly houses, were moved for use elsewhere.

According to Dr. Whittles, another reason that Glastonbury's oldest houses lasted so long is that they were framed with oak. As a result of all this, Glastonbury has a record number of old homes that help make the town what it now is, and with few exceptions, its houses, built as private dwellings, remain that today.

Post-Colonial Houses

Glastonbury's old structures include hundreds of houses built after the colonial period. When it comes to the numbers of these 19th and 20th century buildings, Glastonbury has a lot, but holds no record. More than 430 homes built in the 1800s still stand, giving Glastonbury over 580 houses that are over 100 years old, six of them over three centuries old. Every year, many homes built in the early 1900s reach the century mark, bringing to about 750, the total number of houses that are now over 100 years old. Each one that remains adds to Glastonbury's amazing treasure trove of old homes.

Signage

In appreciation of our heritage, homeowners frequently place signs on their houses giving historical information. Many of the signs that you see on Glastonbury homes have been purchased from Glastonbury's Historical Society. These signs are of two types; both are white with black lettering giving the date of construction and the name of the original owner. The older signs, sold during the 1930s, are in the shape of a house with a gambrel roof. The newer signs, sold beginning last year, are oval and often give the profession of the early owner.

Counting Houses

Our count of old houses in Glastonbury is based on Town and Historical Society records. However, because sometimes no record survives revealing exactly when an old structure was built, any large count of very old buildings involves some estimates about age. Also, many old houses present a challenge because they include additions that are either older or newer than the main building. In those situations, the date of the house is the earliest date for the primary structure, even when a lesser part of the building is much older. Thus, it is no easy matter to get an accurate count for Glastonbury.

Getting good counts for other communities is even more difficult, because often those with access to the best records have had no reason to make an accurate count. Our background information comes from reference books. House counts come from historical societies, both state and local, and from other institutions that do historical research.

Threats of Destruction

Since Glastonbury has become a thriving suburb, pressure has increased to tear down some of the old structures to make way for something new. In the last 40 years we have lost about 25 of our 18th century houses, four of them in the last six years. A few of these structures have been moved elsewhere, but most were destroyed.

Old buildings have been destroyed, sometimes for what seem like dubious reasons. For instance, the Town owned a small 19th century brick structure on Main Street that served first as its Hall of Records and later as its Police Station. In the 1970s, it was torn down to make way for the parking lot next to the Franklin Building on Main Street, where Daybreak Coffee is located today. There are many stories like this.

Not absolutely every old structure must be preserved, but once destroyed, an old building is gone forever. The Historical Society was founded in the 1930s as a successor to a committee formed to save the Gideon Welles House from destruction. The Society does its best to help continue preserving Glastonbury's unique heritage of old structures, as well as providing information so that they can be better appreciated.

The Society maintains and operates historic properties, including the Museum on Hubbard Green (1840), the Welles Chapman Tavern (1785), and the Welles Shipman Ward House (1755). On the Welles Shipman Ward property, the Society has reconstructed the historic Eastbury Barn (c 1790), an historic privy (c 1790), and is recreating other period buildings.

Most old structures in Glastonbury, however, were built as private homes and remain so today. Thus, the community relies on each private owner to preserve the part of its history that he or she has title to. Historic districts and designations help, but often the Society can do little more than encourage private owners to be good stewards of their historic properties. Fortunately, over the years, Glastonbury citizens generally have done extraordinarily well in preserving their old homes.

Descriptions of Glastonbury's Four Oldest Homes

The fact that Glastonbury has an extraordinary number of genuine colonial homes conveys nothing about the charm and variety of these old residences. To show something of the reality behind the impressive number, here are descriptions of the four oldest houses in Glastonbury. Each is over 300 years old and each is still used as a private residence, making these homes rare in America.

These houses are described here in the order that you would encounter them if you traveled south from Town Center.

2017 Main Street — The William Wickham House is sometimes called the house that turned a corner, because it has two front facades facing in different directions. This early colonial home was built in two sections--the first in 1685 and the second in 1717. The oldest part was built facing south on a trail from the Connecticut River in the salt-box style--with a roof that climbed steeply in front and sloped down long in back, making it look like the boxes once used to store salt.

When the Wickham's son John married and his wife moved in, an addition was built to provide more room. Main Street had been laid out in 1698, and the gambrel-roofed addition was built facing it, but with a long sloping salt-box roof to the back. At the same time, the south-facing roof on the older part of the building was changed to match the gambrel roof that faces Main street, but the long sloping salt-box roof facing north remained.

The salt-box roof is typical of English colonial structures. However, the gambrel roof, used in several early Glastonbury homes, is more typical of Dutch style colonial houses than of English structures. The gambrel roof with dormers probably was used here because it adds space and light on the second floor, and the style had already been used for the Reverend Steven's house to the south along Main Street.

1808 Main Street — The Timothy Stevens House was built for the Reverend Timothy Stevens as one of the inducements to encourage him to settle here so that "Glassenbury," as it was to be called, could become an independent town. Ministers were in short supply. The townsmen offered to the Reverend Stevens an annual wage of 60 pounds, 150 acres of the Town's still undivided land, and six acres with a "suitable House." This is that house, a gambrel-roofed structure. It probably was built in 1693 and has an unusually early brick foundation. It was described at the time as a "girt dwelling" with a "good Stack of Chimnies in it." A "girt" building is a frame structure built using a technique today called post and beam construction.

The Reverend Stevens was given the choice of a 20-foot long house or, if he furnished the nails, glass, and iron-work himself, a 40-foot long house. He chose the larger structure. The house still stands in its original location on Main Street. What is now Morgan Drive follows a 17th century cart road that led eastward to woodlots. The original Timothy Stevens House is the south-facing, white structure. As Dr. Whittles observed, in 17th century Glastonbury, all houses faced south so that the sunlight would help heat them.

1224 Main Street — The Bedford, Massachusetts House was moved from that town to this Glastonbury site in 1974. This dark brown stained house, with its massive central brick chimney, has leaded casement windows with diamond shaped lights. The house was built in 1682, but the chimney and windows were reconstructed when the house was moved here. Originally this house almost certainly had lead casement windows like those you see now, but typically, these were later replaced by sash windows. Because old leaded casement windows do not last for centuries, today the best place to see an original is in a museum. The Museum on the Green displays the remains of a leaded window from a Glastonbury home.

With its steep pitched roof and central chimney, this is a typical English colonial house built in what experts call the English post-medieval style. During the late 1600s, this was the most popular style for houses in England's American colonies, with variations typical for houses built in the south that differ somewhat from those built in the north. The wood paneling in the parlor and in one of the bedrooms of this house is thought to date from about 1740.

The largest of the outbuildings, the two-story structure with the massive field stone chimney, dates from the 1705 and was moved here from Chestnut Hill Road in Colchester, Connecticut, where it had been part of a tavern. Many buildings have been moved within Glastonbury. The buildings on this property are among the few old structures moved here from other towns. Also, a few of Glastonbury's old structures have been moved to other communities.

14 Tryon Street — The John Hollister House, according to Dr. Whittles, was built in 1649. It has long been recognized as the oldest surviving house in Glastonbury and one of the five oldest in the state. It originally stood almost directly on the bank of the Connecticut River, and was built in the English post-medieval style. In its original location, the spring freshets regularly flooded the house, so in 1721, according to Dr. Whittles, it was moved to its present location away from the flood water, giving it the advantage of the lovely spot by Roaring Brook.

Architecturally, the house is a two-story "lean-to" with overhangs. It is a post and beam structure made of hand-hewn beams and uniquely carved brackets. It has a center chimney. Originally, it had only four rooms--two on the first floor and two on the second, with the second floor overhanging in front, all typical of the English post-medieval style. The lean-to in the rear of the building, which houses a keeping room, was added around 1830, according to Dr. Whittles. It gives the house its salt box silhouette. There has been controversy about just what part of the house was moved from the original site and just when that happened, but all agree that this is basically a 17th century house and the oldest one to survive in Glastonbury.

Lieutenant John Hollister had a home in what is now Old Wethersfield as well as this house built on his farmland on the east side of the River. Subsequently, some of his descendents made this the ancestral home for many generations of the Hollister family.

Conclusion

Largely as the result of historic circumstances, Glastonbury today has more homes dating from the colonial period than any other Connecticut town. This is remarkable when you realize that, during the colonial era itself, although Glastonbury thrived, there never was a time when Glastonbury had the more houses than any other town in the state.