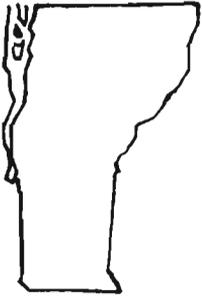


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This famous architect built a meetinghouse
and three private houses in Windsor before he left
for Boston in 1802 . . .

Asher Benjamin as an Architect in Windsor, Vermont

By JOHN QUINAN

IN August of 1802 the architect Asher Benjamin wrote from Boston to Gideon Granger, the Postmaster General of the United States, seeking aid in obtaining a commission for a marine hospital in that city. Benjamin's letter identifies by name and location most of his first eight commissions — a rare and unusual document in American architectural history which enables us to trace his path northward from Hartford, Connecticut, to Windsor, Vermont. Benjamin wrote, in part:

“Sir, I have since I left Suffield Conn. built the following houses, Viz. Samuel Hinckley, Northampton, William Coleman's Greenfield, Luke Baldwin's Esq., Brookfield, and a Meeting House and three other large houses in Windsor, Vermont, The Academy at Deerfield.¹

Most of these commissions have not fared very well. The Deerfield Academy building (Memorial Hall, 1798-1799) was altered sufficiently during the nineteenth century to obscure much of its original character. The Baldwin and Hinckley houses (both c. 1796) were demolished early in the twentieth century and are lost to us, and it seems that the William Coleman house in Greenfield (1797) (Fig. 6) is the sole survivor of Benjamin's first decade of practice. But what of the four unnamed buildings in Windsor? Are they identifiable? Do they still stand in Windsor? Have they any special interest or significance?

The four Windsor buildings are identifiable despite the fact that the three houses have been demolished and the meetinghouse has been altered

1. Gallatin Papers, New York Historical Society. This letter is reproduced in full in Florence Thompson Howe's "More About Asher Benjamin." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, XIII, No. 3, October, 1954, p. 16.

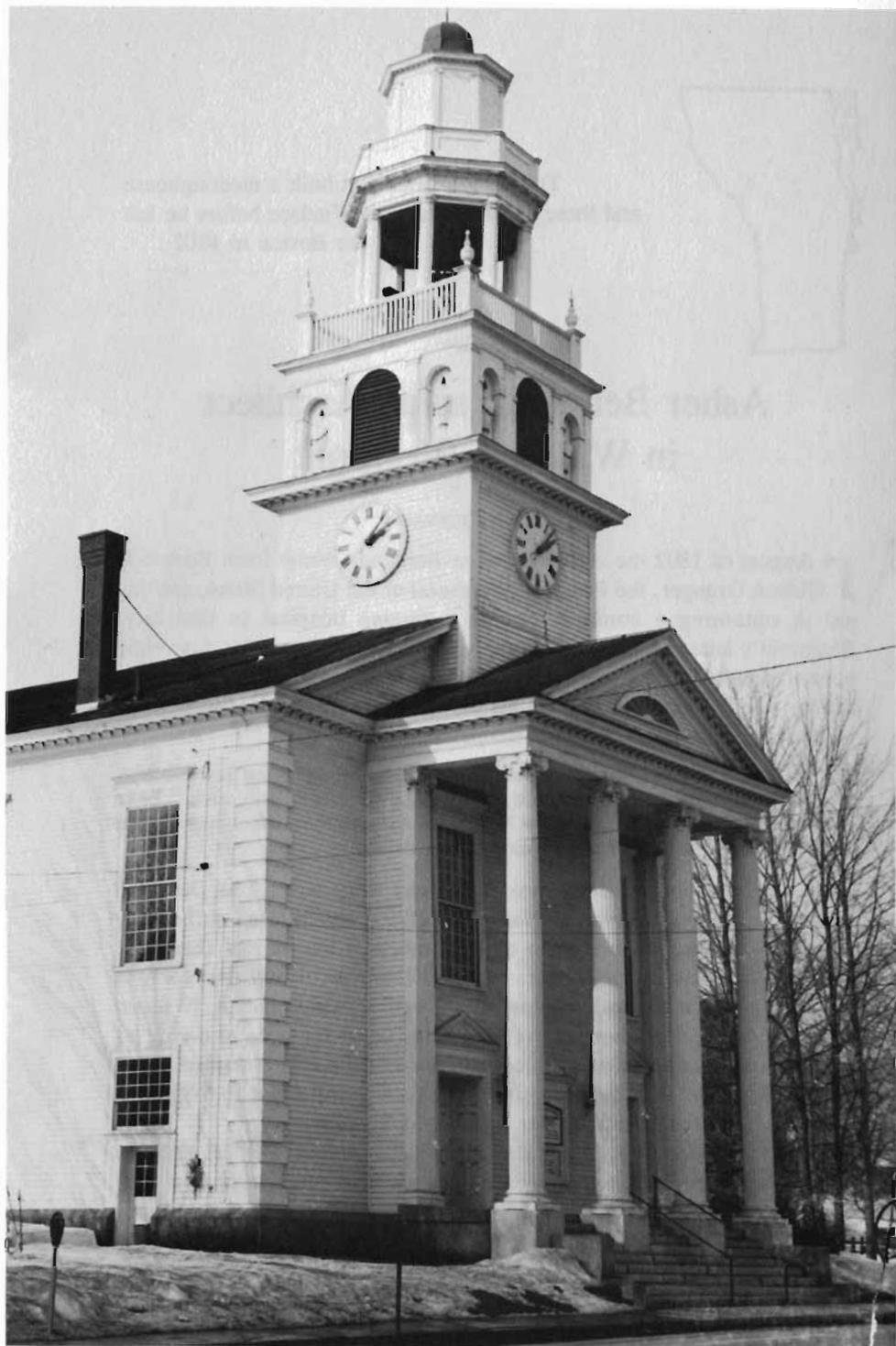


Figure 1: "Old South" Meetinghouse, Windsor, c1799-1800. (Photo: Author)

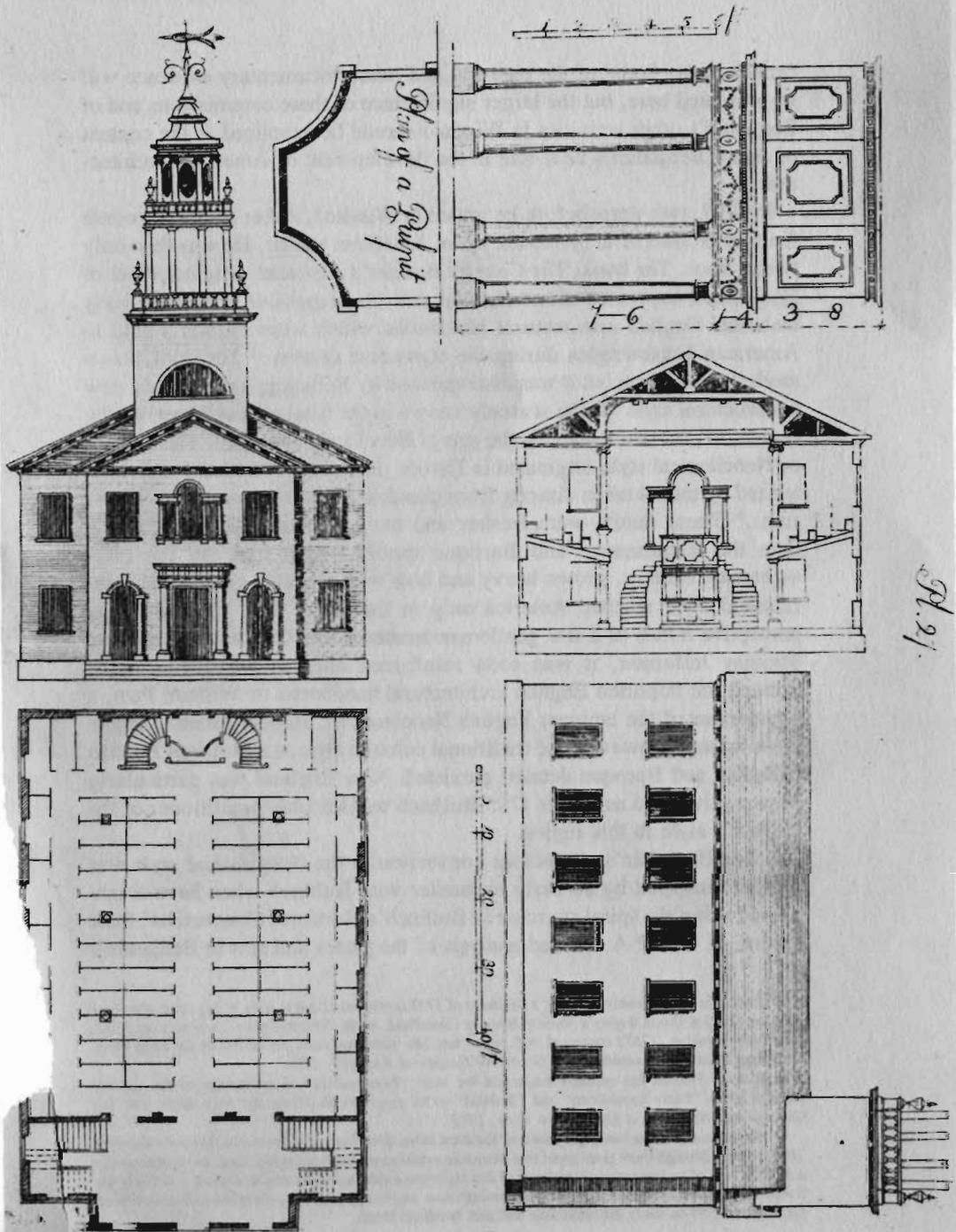


Figure 2: "Design for a Meeting House" Plate 27 from Asher Benjamin's *The Country Builder's Assistant*, Boston, 1798 (second edition)

considerably. Some of the pictorial and other documentary evidence will be presented here, but the larger significance of these commissions and of Benjamin's other activities in Windsor should be examined in the context of Asher Benjamin's vital role in the development of American architecture.

In 1797, two years before he settled in Windsor, Asher Benjamin wrote the first architectural handbook by an American author. He was then only twenty-four. The book, *The Country Builder's Assistant*, originated out of Benjamin's expressed dissatisfaction with the expensive and excessively elaborate English architectural handbooks which were regularly sold to American housewrights during the eighteenth century.² The book was a modest publication but it was distinguished by Benjamin's choice of a new architectural style — one scarcely known in the Connecticut River Valley region, or, for that matter, in the rest of New England as well. The Federal or Neoclassical style originated in Europe during the 1750s and is characterized by motifs taken directly from classical Roman frescoes, reliefs and ruins.³ These motifs were fresher and more archaeologically authentic than the Renaissance and Baroque motifs which had, by the mid-eighteenth century, grown heavy and lush with repeated usage. The Neoclassical style reached America only in the late 1780s. Carried in the perceptive minds of a few gentleman-amateurs like Charles Bulfinch and Thomas Jefferson, it was soon reinforced and further disseminated through the imported English architectural handbooks of William Pain, a popularizer of the eminent English Neoclassicist, Robert Adam. Despite these inroads, however, the traditional colonial style, a mixture of English Palladian and Baroque details, persisted. New England was particularly conservative, and as late as 1795 Bulfinch was the only practitioner of the "Adam" style in this region.

Asher Benjamin's precocious conversion to the Neoclassical style was partially inspired by an early encounter with Bulfinch when he was employed to build a spiral staircase in Bulfinch's Hartford, Connecticut, State House, in 1795.⁴ A detailed analysis of the plates and text in Benjamin's

2. Benjamin's *The Country Builder's Assistant* of 1797 contained 62 pages with 30 engraved plates and sold for \$2.00 at David Ripley's Variety Store in Greenfield, while William Pain's *The Practical House Carpenter* (London, 1787) contained 162 pages and 146 plates and sold for \$4.50 in the same store, according to an advertisement in the *Greenfield Gazette* of August 5, 1805.

3. William Pierson has recently employed the term "Neoclassical" in preference to the vaguely political terms "Early Republican" and "Federal" in his *American Buildings and their Architects: The Colonial and Neoclassical Styles*, New York, 1970.

4. Benjamin referred to his employment in Hartford in his discussion of stairs in *The Builder's Guide* of 1838, p. 40. Although there is no proof that Benjamin actually met Bulfinch at Hartford, an awareness of a new style, and of an important practitioner of that style was implanted in Benjamin's mind. It is likely that Benjamin saw Bulfinch's nearby Pittsfield Meetinghouse, and that he may have travelled to Boston at some time before 1797 to study the numerous Bulfinch buildings there.

The Country Builder's Assistant indicates that he relied upon William Pain's *The Practical House Carpenter* as a model and a source.⁵ In spite of his remoteness from any major cities, Benjamin was in touch with two major exponents of the Neoclassical style only shortly after the termination of his apprenticeship at some time around 1794.⁶

The Country Builder's Assistant was the first of Benjamin's seven architectural books which were published in forty-five editions during his long career. His influence through these books was considerable, and today Benjamin is recognized primarily as a popularizer of architectural styles while his career as a prominent practicing architect has been given relatively little attention. These circumstances would seem to imply that Benjamin's architecture was mediocre, or worse, but that is not true. He was unusually well informed on the subject because of his interest in writing, and the restraints which writing for a broad and somewhat unsophisticated audience imposed upon his book designs make his commissioned work seem much freer and more expressive by comparison. His Windsor work will substantiate this claim.

Among the four Windsor buildings mentioned by Benjamin in his letter to Gideon Granger only one, the meetinghouse, Windsor's "Old South" Congregational church (Fig. 1) is still standing. Unfortunately several alterations now obscure the close similarities that once existed between his original design for "Old South" in 1799 and his very influential "Design for a Meeting House" Plate 27 (Fig. 2) from *The Country Builder's Assistant* of 1797. In both of these designs Asher Benjamin employed an innovative structure that had been developed by Charles Bulfinch in two commissions from 1790; the Congregational churches in Taunton and Pittsfield, Massachusetts (Fig. 3). Previous to 1790 New England meetinghouses were usually composed of two basic mass elements, a gable-roofed main hall and a belfry. Bulfinch added a two-story gabled appendage to his Pittsfield and Taunton facades which extended forward approximately six feet from the surface of the main hall facade and was wide enough to accommodate three separate entrance doorways or window bays. He then shifted the belfry support block forward so that a portion of the belfry rested on the lower gable of the new facade element — a complexity which enriched the traditional meetinghouse facade considerably.

5. A detailed study of Asher Benjamin's books was made by Abbott Lowell Cummings in "An Investigation of the Sources, Stylistic Evolution and Influence of Asher Benjamin's *Builder's Guides*," Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, 1951.

William Pain's *The Practical House Carpenter* was published in London in 1787, but an American edition was produced in Boston in 1798.

6. This approximate date is based upon Benjamin's (approximate) birth date and upon the usual termination of apprenticeship at age twenty-one.



Figure 3: Congregational Church, Pittsfield, Mass., Charles Bulfinch, Architect, 1790-1793. (Photo: J.E.A. Smith, The History of Pittsfield, 1734-1800, Boston, 1869, p. 444.)

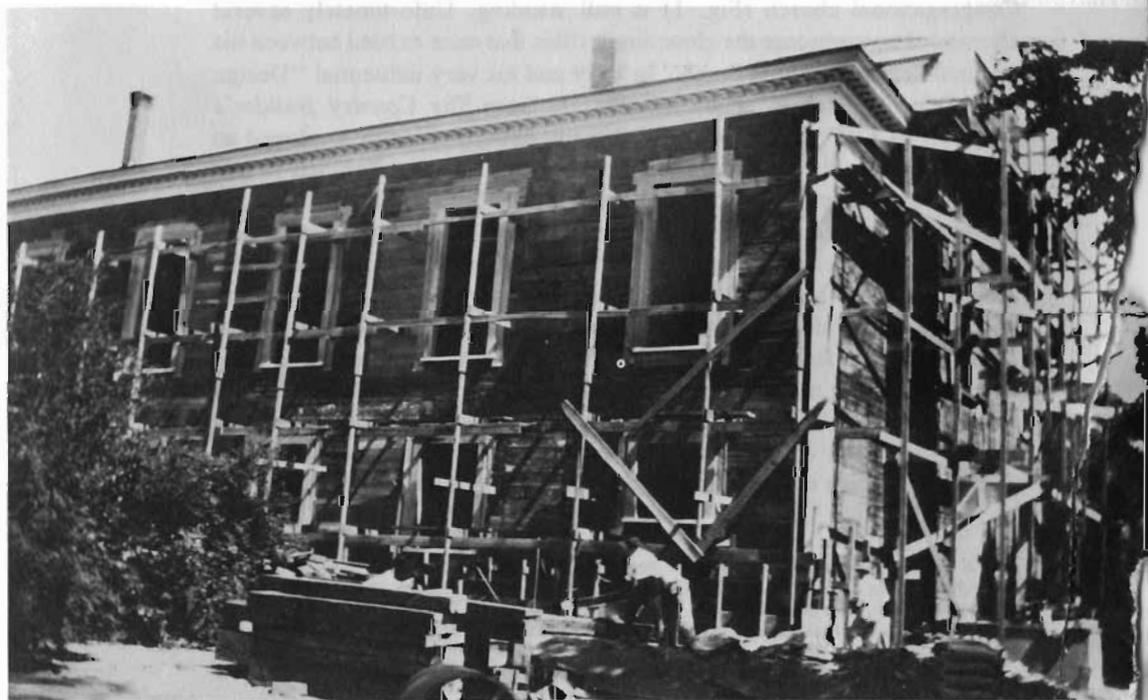


Figure 4: "Old South" Meetinghouse, Windsor, as seen during the 1922 restoration. (Photo: Courtesy of the "Old South" Church)



Figure 5: "Old South" Meetinghouse, Windsor, as seen before the 1922 restoration and after the alterations of the 1870s. (Photo: Courtesy of Katherine Conlin)



Figure 6: William Coleman's House, Greenfield, Mass., 1797. (Photo: Courtesy of the Historic American Buildings Survey)

Benjamin's 1797 book design, Plate 27, represents a popularization of the Bulfinch innovation, but it certainly was not a mere slavish imitation. In the lower portion of his design Benjamin's distribution of doors and windows is very methodical compared to Bulfinch's arrangement, but his belfry design is both more vertical and more refined. He rejected Bulfinch's three-staged solution (a block, an open bell tower and a cap roof) in favor of a telescoped tower of four carefully diminished stages, reminiscent of some of the London spires of James Gibbs and Christopher Wren. The dimensions throughout Benjamin's elevation are very carefully proportioned, a luxury more easily available to someone working exclusively on paper as Benjamin was in this instance. Nevertheless, the elevation is a handsome one, calculated to lie just within the capabilities of a country housewright. Benjamin's shrewd awareness of the limitations of his audience insured the popularity of *The Country Builder's Assistant*, and this explains, in part, the special popularity of the "Design for a Meeting House" (Plate 27) which is reflected in scores of meetinghouses all over New England.⁷

In view of the care and sensitivity with which Benjamin executed his 1797 design it is surprising that his own version of the design, Windsor's "Old South," is not among the most accomplished.⁸ Two major programs of alterations to the Windsor meetinghouse, one in the 1870s and another in 1922,⁹ have hidden the fundamental similarities between Benjamin's 1797 and 1799 designs. (Compare Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) Furthermore, they have obscured certain differences that are significant with regard to Asher Benjamin's development as an architect in that two year period in Windsor which immediately preceded his move to Boston.

Figure 4, a view of the Windsor meetinghouse taken during the 1922 restoration, indicates that the ill-proportioned Ionic portico and the quoins were added to the facade at that time. Neither the portico nor the quoins appear in Figure 5, a photograph made *before* the 1922 restoration but after the renovation of the 1870s.¹⁰ The older photograph also reveals a sequence of four paired windows spaced at wide intervals along the side wall of the Windsor meetinghouse, while today there are five windows at a narrower interval along those same walls. The pre-1922 spacing would

7. There are over seventy examples of the Bulfinch innovation in Edmund Sinnott's *Meetinghouse and Church in Early New England*, New York, 1963.

8. The most faithful replicas of the 1797 design were executed in Bennington, Vermont, by Lavius Fillmore (1805), and in Manchester, Massachusetts (1809), by an unknown builder who seems to have followed Benjamin's Plate 27 quite closely.

9. This information was taken from the church records with the kind permission of the Reverend Richard Luke.

10. This picture was made available by Miss Katherine Conlin, a historian and former Town Clerk of Windsor, who was very helpful in the preparation of this paper.

easily accommodate three additional windows, thus producing a seven-window sequence which would match the side elevation of Benjamin's 1797 book design exactly. Seven windows very likely did exist in the original structure as the four pictured in Figure 5 would not have admitted sufficient light into the main hall in the days before electricity.¹¹ Similar conclusions can be drawn about the entrance facade as well. In the 1922 photograph (Fig. 4), in which the clapboarding has been stripped from the building, a rectangular patch of fresh boards is visible just to the left of the new facade element, precisely where the lower left window is located on Benjamin's 1797 facade elevation.¹² The one-time presence of this window suggests that only a central entrance doorway and an accompanying Palladian window are lacking to complete the parallel between the 1797 and 1799 facades. Fortunately the belfry tower of the "Old South" meetinghouse has not been altered, as this is the locus of Asher Benjamin's surprising changes to his original 1797 design.

The belfry tower of the "Old South" meetinghouse has one more stage than its four-staged 1797 counterpart, and yet it is the same height, proportionally, above the main gable. Benjamin added a stage by attenuating the first stage, or support block and by dividing it horizontally into two segments with the addition of a wide cornice. As a result, the even diminution of the four stages of his 1797 belfry is disrupted and the Windsor tower, as a whole, is somewhat cramped. Why would Asher Benjamin willfully destroy the harmonic proportions of his original design? The answer lies in the nature of the second stage of the belfry tower — a passage that is conspicuously out of character with the rest of the design.

Each face of the second stage of the tower contains three arched openings enframed by Doric pilasters. The niches which flank the louvred central opening each contain tall classical urns draped with thin festoons — a favorite device of Bulfinch, Pain and Robert Adam which derives from ancient Roman reliefs. This motif is not unpleasant in appearance, but it is wholly out of context in a design (Fig. 2) that was originally devoid of any Neoclassical passages. Furthermore, this second stage has a pronounced horizontal emphasis that interrupts the steadily ascending design of the belfry in the 1797 book elevation. It is disconcerting to realize that Benjamin was capable of destroying the more sensitive aspects of a previously perfected design. It is a manifestation of his provincialism. He was not schooled in a firm academic tradition because none existed in America at that time. On the other hand, the Windsor belfry is a product of

11. The paired windows which appear in the pre-1922 photograph are of stained glass, which was common in the Victorian era. The expense of such windows would explain why the number of window openings was reduced from seven to four during the 1870s alterations.

12. This "fresh" patch of boards would date from the 1870s alterations. (Cf. figure 5).

Asher Benjamin's growing enthusiasm for the new Neoclassical style. He could scarcely contain his desire to display the elegant refinements of the Adamesque style, and this enthusiasm spilled over into two of the three houses designed by Benjamin during his two years in Windsor.

"Three other large Houses in Windsor"

There is no documentation which specifically links Asher Benjamin's name to three Windsor houses but there are certain stylistic features which make such an attribution very plausible. The Fullerton, the Harriet Lane and the Hubbard houses were each built around 1800 when Benjamin is known to have lived in Windsor.¹³ They were clustered on either side of Main Street just to the north of the lot where the Windsor House now stands. Each house had the same four-square plan with a central hallway and a hipped roof, and two of the houses are known to have had spiral staircases — a Benjamin specialty in the late years of the eighteenth century. The three facades were organized similarly and photographs demonstrate that the details of the Fullerton and Lane houses were remarkably similar to those of Benjamin's William Coleman house in Greenfield (Fig. 6) (1797) which he cited in his letter to Gideon Granger.

The Hubbard House (Fig. 7) which stood immediately adjacent to the Windsor House lot is the most problematic of the three because it does not bear any of the characteristic Adamesque or Pain-derived Neoclassical passages favored by Benjamin at this time. Nevertheless, the principal doorway is almost an exact duplicate of the frontispiece of the Coleman house in Greenfield, and that particular combination of side-light lead pattern with a fully described, semi-circular fanlight is uniquely Benjamin's own.¹⁴ The window over-lintels of the Hubbard house, the pilasters and the frieze that they support are rendered in a scrupulously observed Doric style that points directly to the hand of the bookish Benjamin. Who else in New England was capable of this particular type of

13. The approximate dates of construction of these three houses were determined with the assistance of Katherine Conlin and the staff of the Windsor Public Library. According to Miss Conlin's notes from the Windsor Town Records the lot upon which the Hubbard house was constructed was sold to Stephen Conant by Caleb Tuttle in 1797. Two years later, in 1799, according to the Windsor Grand List, a house on this lot was assessed at \$900.00. The Harriet Lane house was built by Perez Jones, of New York city, in partnership with Caleb Tuttle, of Hartford, Connecticut, in 1800. (Apparently they were speculators. Tuttle also lived in Northampton, where Asher Benjamin built a house for Samuel Hincley c1796-1797.) The statement, "Allen Hayes' house, built by Perez Jones, in 1800," appears in a list of ancient Windsor houses compiled by Allen Wardner who came to Windsor in 1800, at the age of fourteen, and lived there until his death in 1877. He supplied the list to Horace Everett who published it in the *Vermont Journal*, Vol. XXVLL, No. 4, January 25, 1873. Mr. Wardner's list also corroborates the date of the Hubbard house: "I.W. Hubbard's house, built before 1800, by S. Conant" and fixes the Fullerton house as well: "Judge J. Hubbard's, by self, in 1800" (Judge Jonathan Hatch Hubbard's only child, Marie E., married Thomas S. Fullerton, and the house eventually acquired his surname.).

14. Bulfinch and McIntire, the only other designers worthy of the title of architect at this early date in New England, each preferred elliptical fanlights or smaller segmental arches for their frontispieces.

design in 1799?

An attribution of the Harriet Lane and Fullerton houses (Fig. 8) to Asher Benjamin is based upon his employment of a highly idiosyncratic system of pilasters on these facades which match the pilastering of the Coleman house in Greenfield almost exactly. He used four Ionic pilasters to divide each of the facades into five window bays, and in a naive effort to extend the pilasters upwards across two full stories, Benjamin ignored the canonical 1:8 ratio of width to height in the pilasters,¹⁵ which would have insured a semblance of load-bearing solidity in the orders, and he stretched them to the unusual height of thirteen diameters so that they resemble moldings rather than classical orders. The second story windows on each of these three facades are placed so high that the upper lintels extend above the Ionic capitals into the portion of the facade that would normally (in classical practice) be traversed by a full entablature, i.e., that horizontal element in the mock structure that is "supported" by the Ionic order. Benjamin omitted an entablature altogether and substituted in its place, on each facade, an impost block which he decorated with a rosette. (This unprecedented use of the orders may have been inspired by the interrupted entablatures employed by Charles Bulfinch on several facades from the 1790s.)¹⁶

The Fullerton House has none of the renowned restraint which characterizes the architecture of Bulfinch and of Samuel McIntire at this time.¹⁷ The idiosyncratically decorated facade of the Fullerton house features a standard triangular pediment supported by attached Ionic columns. However, the pediment is elevated upon heavy blocks, and the contours of the triangle are interrupted by the insertion of a pentagonal panel. Benjamin's attempt to join the frontispiece to the Palladian window on the second story also defies classical precedent. The columns on the upper story are not aligned precisely above those of the lower story even though the original function of the orders absolutely dictates such an arrangement. Similarly, the frontispiece motif, which is derived from the classical temple front, has been made to accommodate a superstructure perched uncomfortably upon the slanted sides of the gable. Every available flat surface of the two story central motif has been decorated with round and oval rosettes, festoons and a kylix, and these are rendered in an extremely low relief style

15. In the *Ten Books on Architecture*, Vitruvius, the ancient Roman architect, illustrates versions of the Ionic order from various classical temples which range between eight and ten diameters in height. Benjamin recommended ten diameters in his *American Builder's Companion* of 1806.

16. Cf. Harold Kirker's *The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch*, Cambridge, Mass., 1969, pp. 77, 137, 161 and 171.

17. The Harriet Lane house is known only through a photograph of a portion of the facade (not worth reproducing here) in which the familiar Benjamin motif of a tall Ionic pilaster topped by an impost block and rosette can be seen. A former resident of the Lane house, Freda Atwood, found photographs of the chimneypiece and moldings of the Fullerton house to be similar to those in the Lane house.





Above:

Figure 8: The Fullerton House, Windsor, c1799-1800. (Photo: Courtesy of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities)

Left:

Figure 7: The Hubbard House, Windsor, c1799. (Photo: Courtesy of the Historic American Buildings Survey)

that suggests sources of inspiration in the two-dimensional engraved plates of William Pain's handbooks.

Taken as a whole, the facade composition is unique and inventive, but it is marred by Benjamin's incomplete comprehension of the principles of classical architecture, and by his failure to establish a reasonable proportional relationship between such crucial decorative elements as the colossal Ionic pilasters and the small Ionic columns which enframe the frontispiece.

The shortcomings of Benjamin's early architecture are not surprising in view of the absence of any sound academic training in the region where he was apprenticed, and in consideration of his remoteness from sources of constructive criticism. However, evidence suggests that Benjamin was aware of these problems during his stay in Windsor, as the following advertisement testifies:

To young Carpenters, Joiners, and all others concerned in the Art of Building, The Subscriber intends to open a School of Architecture at his house in Windsor (Vt.) the 20th of February next at which will be taught the *Five Orders of Architecture*, the proportions of Doors, Windows and Chimney-pieces, the construction of Stairs, with their ramp and twist rails, the method of framing timbers, length and backing of hip rafters, the tracing of groins to angle brackets, circular soffits in circular walls; Plans, Elevations and Sections of houses, with all their Ornaments. The Art of drawing Plans and elevations, or any other figure perspectively will also be taught if required by

Asher Benjamin
December 28, 1801¹⁸

It seems very unlikely that the architectural school ever materialized since Benjamin departed for Boston at some time before August of 1802, the date of the letter to Gideon Granger, written from Boston, but after February 1802, when the school advertisement last appeared in the *Windsor Gazette*. In a sense Windsor was too small to contain either Benjamin or his architectural school. Once settled in Boston Benjamin burst into a flurry of activity in which he designed seven major public buildings in twelve years, speculated in land, played an active part in the formation and leadership of the Associated Housewright's Society, operated a paint store and produced either a new handbook or a revised edition every two and one half years on the average.

The specialness of Benjamin's Windsor architecture lies in the freedom from the dictates of European classicism and the resulting personal qualities that exist in it. New England is full of such designs, but only rarely have such a collection of buildings been seen together from the hand of one of the most energetic and bookish of our early nineteenth century architects.

18. *Windsor Gazette*, December 28, 1801.