



The Alden Kindred of America, Inc. · Alden House Historic Site

This short history of the Alden property was written by Curator James W. Baker, and is a revised version of that published in *Alden House History: A Work in Progress* (Duxbury, 2006).

Construction of the Present Alden House

We do know that the older house excavated in 1960 did not burn down as was once thought, but was demolished and the cellar hole filled in, probably to prevent people or livestock falling into it by accident. What we do not know is when this occurred. This problem is of particular interest since the historical cachet of the existing house has long benefited from the assumption that John and Priscilla actually resided here before John's death in 1687. We have no idea when Priscilla died, other than it was after 1650 when she is mentioned as still living by Gov. Bradford, and before 1687, as John does not mention or provide for her in his directions for the division of his property among their heirs.

The dimensions of the earlier Duxbury foundation suggested to Robbins that the building could conceivably have been moved from the original site and attached to the back or north side of the present house. For many years this assumption was accepted, but it has now been disputed by architectural historian Will Gwilliam, who made a thorough survey of the building (2002-2005) and discovered that the north side was not an independent freestanding structure. Instead, evidence points to the present Alden house's southeast section—the “Great Room” and the “Master Chamber” above it—constituting the original house, to which the westerly and northerly sections were added later by Colonel John Alden (1681-1739).

There are several traditions concerning the construction of the present Alden house. The earliest is that Colonel John Alden built it at the beginning of the 18th century. Another tradition credits Jonathan Alden with building the house in 1653. As he was only 21 at the time and did not marry until 1672, this is highly improbable. The tradition stating that Colonel John Alden, who owned the property from 1703 to 1739, built the house was cited by Duxbury historian Justin Winsor in 1849 and confirmed by both Mary Ann Alden (Judah's daughter) and Aunt Polly Alden in the 1870s. Recent archaeological and dendrochronological surveys suggest that the house is a very late 17th century or early 18th century structure. Neither study found any firm evidence of 17th century construction, but the location of the earliest dated rafters is suggestive. The earliest dated timbers (except perhaps for a sill under the “Buttery”) are the principle rafters on the west side of the house, which date from 1701 and 1711. This would appear to indicate that that section was added circa 1711, which suggests that the older easterly end was built before Colonel John Alden inherited the property, and almost certainly before his father died in 1697. The property was in



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legal limbo between 1697 and 1703 when Colonel John inherited it at age about 22, so no construction is likely then. The house and land was worth £309 in 1697. When Colonel John died in 1739, the estate was worth £2,684, of which the original farm was valued at £2,000. Part of this considerable increase could be accounted for by his having substantially added to the original two-room structure Will Gwilliam describes. Colonel John was married in 1709, so enlarging the old house two years later is quite plausible. The significant enlargement may have passed into local memory as his having entirely built the existing house. Taking all of the evidence into consideration—family lore, archaeology and dendrochronological dating—it would appear that the core of the present house was built by Jonathan Alden, probably before the death of his father John, perhaps around the time of his marriage in 1672 when he needed a home for his new family. We may have to relinquish the idea of Priscilla ever having lived in the existing Alden House, although it is certainly located upon the family property. Today, the Alden House, with its two and a half acres of land, has the distinction of being the unique instance of still belonging to the same family to which it was originally issued in the land division of 1627.

John and Priscilla Alden raised ten children on their farm in Duxbury: Elizabeth Alden Pabodie, Capt. John Alden, Joseph Alden, Sarah Alden Standish, Jonathan Alden, Ruth Alden Bass, Rebecca Alden, Mary Alden, Priscilla Alden, and David Alden. The soil was good and it became a successful farm. John Alden's home is also where colonial officials met from time to time in the 1650s, suggesting that perhaps it was by then larger than the original little 10 ½ by 38 foot structure found by Robbins. After John died in 1687, his son Jonathan inherited the property. Jonathan died at age 65 in 1697, and Rev. Ichabod Wiswall delivered a graveside eulogy while the local militia company, in which Jonathan was a Captain, gave him a last salute. Graveside services were uncommon in New England at this time—the Pilgrims did not approve of such things and early funerals were conducted silently. Perhaps, as Ms Wentworth speculates, the honor was offered because Mr. Wiswall was married to Jonathan's niece, Priscilla Paybodie.

Jonathan's son John was still a minor in 1697. Jonathan's widow, Abigail (Hallett) Alden, managed the farm, and John had to wait until 1703 before he was given title by the Plymouth court. In the meantime, John's sister Sarah married Thomas Southworth and the couple was given about twenty-five acres on the northwest corner of the Alden farm. This was the first division out of the original grant. John, who would be made a Colonel in the Duxbury militia before his death, rose steadily in the service of his town as moderator of the town meeting, selectman and representative to the General Court of Massachusetts in Boston. He was successful as a farmer and as a businessman, becoming quite wealthy before his death at 59.



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The house Colonel John either built or inherited had at first just two rooms, with a chimneystack and fireplace on the westerly side. Like many Plymouth Colony farmhouses of the time, it faced south to take advantage of the winter sun. On the north side, there was probably a lean-to with a great sloping “saltbox” roof to buffer the northerly winter gales. The lean-to was used for storage and as a workshop. The lower room served a number of functions. It was kitchen, dining room, family room, and best chamber or bedroom all in one. The upper room was only a bedchamber, but guests might also be fed and entertained there as well, in the custom of the times.

Colonel John turned the little two-room house into a comfortable Georgian mansion between 1711 and 1733. The Great Room was made fashionable by doubling and plastering the walls on three sides, and installing fine wainscot paneling around the fireplace. The wide cooking hearth was made more suitable for a sitting room by being filled in at the sides. Older casement windows with diamond panes set in lead came were replaced with up-and-down sash windows. A crushed shell plaster ceiling was added to hide the second-floor’s boards and joists. The floor was lowered as far as it would go (between rather than above the sills) to obtain as much headroom as possible. A fine corner cupboard was added near the fireplace, a second built-in cupboard fitted into the hollow wall space on the east side of the room, and a solid chair rail installed to prevent furniture from damaging the plaster. It was customary at this time to keep all the tables and chairs around the periphery of the room and only bring them out into the room when they were used.

Opposite the original “Great Room” to the west, a second downstairs room was added to serve as a formal parlor or best room. It was finely paneled as well, and the beams and posts covered either by the doubled front wall or beaded-edge “boxes” over the rough framing timbers. Why only the south wall was doubled and not the west or north walls we do not know. Here, too, the floor is laid lower to adjust for height lost through the plaster ceiling. On the northerly side of the house where the lean-to used to be, a fine new kitchen with rooms above was built. A separate kitchen flue was added to the chimneystack, and a little general-purpose room partitioned off at the west side.

Upstairs the biggest bedchamber had its own fireplace (the only one above the ground floor). On the north side, the second-story addition was divided into two bedchambers with a long “workroom” between them for women’s projects such as spinning, weaving and fiber processing. Stairs went up to the garret and those down to the new kitchen were enclosed in a “staircase”, i.e., a walled in space closing off the “pair of stairs” as they were then called to keep the kitchen’s heat out of the room above. Above the new parlor a fine new (but unheated) chamber was built.



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The house and its contents that he left to his son Samuel testifies to Colonel John's comfortable lifestyle as an 18th century colonial gentleman. The inventory of his possessions taken at his death also provides clues to the arrangement of Colonel John's home. The best bed was in the "biggest lower room," the Great Room. The fashion of the day was to have the best bed in what we would think of as the family room. This allowed guests to admire what was usually the most costly piece of furniture in the house with its decorative curtain and tester. This also enabled the head of the family to enjoy the warmth of the great fireplace on retiring. The rest of the "bed furniture" was upstairs in the "chambers", rooms we call "bedrooms" today. The "biggest chamber" (the Master Chamber) is listed next, then the "biggest westerly chamber" or what is now known as Henry's Room, which contained the family loom. The bedstead and bedding in a little "northwest chamber" (now Aunt Polly's Room) was worth £11, but the equally small "northe[a]st chamber" only contained bedding without a bedstead, worth £2, 5 shillings.

Whatever its construction dates, the house inherited in 1739 by Colonel John Alden's oldest son Samuel Alden had essentially the same configuration we see today, except for the kitchen ell. However, Samuel never took advantage of his legacy. He had gone to sea as a boy and become a prosperous merchant. He married an English girl, Edith Read, and settled down in Bitton, Gloucestershire, where he died in 1757. In his will Samuel bequeathed the Alden farm, which he had mortgaged to Joshua Loring of Duxbury in 1741, to his brother Briggs.

When Colonel John died, Briggs was only 16. His mother Hannah died the following year later, and with Samuel in England, administration of the estate was assigned by the Plymouth courts to Benjamin Loring (Joshua's brother) who had married Brigg's sister Anna. Like his father, Briggs became a community leader in Duxbury, acting as magistrate, selectman and representative to the General Court, and serving as a major (and later a colonel) in the local militia. In 1741 he married Mercy Wadsworth. In 1768, Joshua Loring discharged the mortgage and Briggs became the owner of the land on which he had been born and lived all his life.

During the Stamp Act crisis in 1765, Briggs was both chairman of the Town meeting and representative to the colonial government in Boston. When he asked the people of Duxbury whether they intended to accept the new tax law or would try to prevent it being imposed, the consensus was that Duxbury would refuse to comply with the despised tax. Briggs returned to Boston with detailed instructions on opposing the Stamp Act. In the years leading up to the American Revolution, many meetings of the town officials took place in the Great Room of the Alden house. When war was declared, Briggs was too old to lead the troops in the field, but four of his sons answered the "Minute Man" call in April, 1775: Judah (24) as 2nd lieutenant,



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Nathaniel (23) as sergeant, Samuel (18) as a private and young Amherst (16) as a fifer. Samuel was killed in 1778 during the Penobscot campaign and Nathaniel moved to Maine (where the Aldens had land) after the war, so that only Judah and Amherst returned to Duxbury.

Judah had served with great bravery during the war, rising to the rank of Major in the Continental Army and becoming “an intimate and confidential friend of Washington.” Examples of their correspondence that survive attest to the closeness of the relationship. Judah did not return to the old home when he came back to Duxbury, however. He built a new house for himself and his wife, Welthea (Wadsworth) on the southeast corner of the Alden property. Judah’s house is still on the corner of Tremont and Alden Streets and is today part of the Duxbury Arts Complex property.

Amherst inherited his old boyhood home when Briggs died in 1796—Judah having already received his share (and two additional meadows), while Nathaniel got title to Alden land he occupied in Maine. Ms Wentworth estimates that the farm was now about half the size it had been in Pilgrim John’s time with the 1701 Southworth parcel and Judah’s acreage were sectioned off. Amherst never married, but lived with his widowed mother and spinster sister Edith until he died in 1804 at 45.

With Amherst’s death, Major Judah Alden inherited the old house and the land associated with it, after all. Brigg’s widow Mercy and daughter Edith then occupied the old Alden House. Judah allowed two of his sons and their families to move into the house as well, perhaps after Mercy died in 1812. The elder son was John Alden (often called “John the Second” or “Storekeeper John” to differentiate him from the other Johns in the family line), who married Mary Winsor in 1811, and the younger was Briggs Alden II, who married Hannah James in 1817.

The Alden House was soon full of young voices. John and Mary (better known as “Aunt Polly”) had three children; John, Henry and Mary, while Briggs and Hannah had five who lived beyond infancy: William, Lydia, Judah, Samuel and Amherst. We assume that the two families shared the house in the same east-west division as subsequent generations did, and installed the partitions in the kitchen and the workroom. It was also most likely that the kitchen ell was added at this time after the old middle kitchen (the one we see today) was made into two dining rooms. There was a door from each dining room into the shared kitchen in the ell. The question of a divided inheritance was avoided when Briggs died before his father in 1840. When Judah passed on at the advanced age of 94 in 1845, John inherited the Alden house, while Brigg’s children received shares of the estate. Hannah had apparently moved to Plymouth where she died in 1850.



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In addition to the old home, two barns, outbuildings and about twenty acres of land surrounding it (worth \$1,633), John inherited a lifetime interest in a store Judah built next to his house in 1784. This was the first general store in Duxbury, and as Judah had no vocation as a retailer, John began tending the store for his father in 1799 when he was 14. He found this a congenial occupation and although there had been some thought of sending him to Harvard, John went on to spend some time at sea as “Captain John” before becoming “Storekeeper John.” He was 61 by the time his father died, and continued to work in the store (then owned by his sister Lucia), walking across the fields from his house to the corner of Tremont Street clad in an old plaid cloak and carrying a needle-work purse for the day’s receipts. He retired in ill health and closed the store when he was 80. Storekeeper John died in 1871, the year the Cohasset and Duxbury Railway laid its tracks along the north side of the Alden house (not that there was any connection between John’s passing and the trains, as they did not begin running until after his death).

Aunt Polly, Captain Jack and Henry

Storekeeper John left the Alden house and its twenty acres to his wife, Mary “Aunt Polly” Alden. The land to the west went to John’s sisters Lucia and Mary Ann, while the greater part of the old Alden farm east of the house was acquired by Capt. David Cushman, who married John’s daughter Mary. The old couple had shared the house with their younger son Henry P. Alden and his family—his wife Sarah Ann (Woodward) and their four children, Lucia, Nellie, Cora and Henry B. Presumably the senior Aldens occupied the older (and larger) eastern side of the house and Henry’s family lived in the westerly half. John and Polly’s oldest son John—Capt. Jack—had gone to sea like many Duxbury boys, but unlike his father he continued as a mariner for fifty years, serving as mate on many vessels owned by the Hemenway brothers of Boston, including the *Magellan*, the *Independence*, the *Loo Choo* and the *John Wells*. He got his title “Captain” from running a packet boat called the *Traveller* with regular service between Duxbury and Boston, but as he said later, “The railroad knocked the packeting business all to pieces.” Jack had married, but as he was away at sea much of the time, his wife Mary (Brewster) Alden and their children lived with her parents, apparently on St George Street. Jack became a widower in 1869, and at some point thereafter moved back into the family home.

Henry’s wife died before Jack “swallowed the anchor” and retired to the old family home in Duxbury. For about ten years the two old men lived in the Alden house with their mother, Aunt Polly, and perhaps some of Henry’s children. Polly gave up the bedroom (the Master Chamber) she had shared with her husband and moved into the small “northwest chamber” on Henry’s side of the house, turning the easterly side of the dwelling over to Capt. Jack.



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During her lifetime, Aunt Polly had seen a number of changes in the way life was lived in southeastern Massachusetts. She and her sister-in-law Hannah were instrumental in closing up the old fireplace in what she referred to as the “middle kitchen” and installing an iron cooking stove in the ell. When she was newly married, women and girls still spent much of their time spinning and weaving in backrooms like the long workroom above the kitchen in the Alden house. By the time she was an old woman, few people spun thread or yarn or made their own butter any longer. Candles and betty lamps had been superseded by kerosene lanterns, and stoves were replacing fireplaces for both cooking and heating. Polly had both a kitchen stove and an “airtight” parlor stove for heat.

When Aunt Polly died in 1882 at age 93, she left her each of her sons half of the remaining Alden house and land. She seems to have known that they would not get along because she was very specific in what each would receive. Henry inherited half the house, the entire ell and all the land around the house, while Jack got half of the house and land west of the railroad tracks, and a woodlot as well. He also had the right to pass over Henry’s property in specified ways:

I give to my son, John Alden, that part of my real estate lying on the westerly side of, and adjoining to the Duxbury and Cohasset Railroad, also my 7 acre wood lot, be there more or less, for his own use and disposal. I also give to my son, in consideration that he make no claim on my estate for any services rendered in my lifetime, the easterly half of the house in which I now live and to his heirs after his decease so long as the house shall stand; also the easterly half of the wood shed, also the privilege of using water from the well, also the right to pass to and fro from the house, shed and well, the usually travelled way, and to and from the street by the roadway.

I also give to my son John the furniture and moveables in the easterly front room and chamber over the same, including my air tight and cooking stoves.

I give to my son, Henry Alden, the remainder of my real estate lying on the easterly side and adjacent to the Duxbury and Cohasset Railroad, and the westerly half of the house and all the ell part, and the westerly half of the wood shed thereon (the land subject to the rights of son John as before mentioned), also the furniture and moveables in bed room below and old bureau in middle kitchen. (Edward S. Alden. Alden Homestead. Boston, MA: Alden Kindred of America, 1932, p. 17)

After their mother died, the two brothers apparently stayed on their own sides of the partitions dividing the east and west side of the house. For five years until Capt. Jack died in 1887, they sulked in their retreats, only having to deal with each other if Henry needed to use the front stairs or Jack the ell kitchen. Both he and Henry served in the Civil War in the 18th Regiment,



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Massachusetts Infantry, Company E, so they had small pensions to live on. Capt. Jack reshingled his half of the roof (while Henry did not) and decorated his upstairs bedroom (the eastern half of the old workroom) with paint and wallpaper. Henry also had access to his ell through a low door leading from the house to the garret above the kitchen, and could climb down at the far end into the pantry.

Romance of the Homestead: John W. Alden and John T. Alden

Capt. Jack sold his half of the house (in which he continued to live until his death) in 1883 to his younger son Frank Alden, who mortgaged it for \$100 in 1885. After Jack's brother Henry died in 1891, the latter's son Henry B. Alden inherited the westerly half of the house. However, the family member who was most interested in the old house and all it stood for was Capt. Jack's oldest son, John Winsor Alden. John W., who had been a drummer boy in the Civil War, married Sylvia Burgess in 1866 and they had nine (surviving) children. After his father died, he rented the east side of the house from his brother Frank, and in 1892, he bought his cousin Henry's side for \$700. He took out a mortgage on the west side for \$100 in 1894, and in 1896, he purchased Frank's eastern half.

Unfortunately, John W. didn't own the old Alden house for long. He did not have the resources to pay off the mortgages. His mortgage, as well as the one Frank had taken out earlier, had been transferred to a John Tolman Alden of St. Louis, Missouri. Right after John W. acquired Frank's half of the house, title passed to John T. Alden, who apparently made a verbal agreement with John W. Alden that he and his family could continue to live in the old house. John T. Alden, with his brother Walter, was a wealthy manufacturer of fruit vinegar. John T. had learned of the house and, being fascinated with the Alden story, had undertaken to buy and preserve it. Photographs of the decaying house in the 1880s show that something had to be done if the house was not to be lost altogether. Happily the frame and foundation were solid even as the shingles, shutters and other elements rotted away.

John W. and John T. were not the only ones who treasured the Alden family homestead. In 1883, Charles L. Alden, a young Massachusetts business man saw the house in photographs by Augustus Alden of Boston taken in 1880 and went to Duxbury to see if he could acquire the property. He offered the brothers \$1,200, but when it was discovered that Capt. Jack might receive a slightly greater share, Henry balked:



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... the two brothers, John and Henry, were at sword's points and would not sign any deed for fear one would get some advantage over the other. [Augustus] went down and tried to mutually arrange matters. John [Capt. Jack] was all right, but set as the everlasting hills, a regular Alden. Did you ever know an Alden to give up a good thing? Henry was ugly and sneaky. We found it was useless and gave up. (letter from A. Alden to J. T. Alden, July 16, 1896)

Apparently John T. Alden had dreams of turning the house into a museum filled with heirlooms under the management of John W. Alden, but this never materialized. He lost much of his fortune and his health shortly thereafter and by 1907 was no longer capable of doing anything for the Alden house. In November of that year, the newly formed Alden Kindred of America (organized in 1901 and legally incorporated in 1906) was able to buy the property from Mr. Alden's representative and guardian, Gordon Southworth, for \$300.