

Stephen Tyng Mather House
19 Stephen Mather Road
Darien
Fairfield County
Connecticut

HABS No. CONN-289

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
801 19th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. CONN-289

STEPHEN TYNG MATHER HOUSE
(Originally Deacon Joseph Mather House)

Location: 19 Stephen Mather Road (northwest corner of Stephen Mather and Brookside Roads), Darien, Fairfield County, Connecticut.

Present Owner: Bertha Mather McPherson (Mrs. Edward R. McPherson, Jr.).

Present Occupant: Mr. and Mrs. Edward R. McPherson, Jr.

Present Use: Dwelling.

Statement of Significance: Built as a typical Connecticut farm house of the later eighteenth century by Revolutionary War hero Deacon Joseph Mather, the house has remained in the Mather family and contains many original fittings and furnishings. It is especially noteworthy for having been the summer home from 1907 to 1930 of Stephen Tyng Mather, 1867-1930, the founder of the National Park Service and its first Director from 1917 to 1929. The house was declared a Registered National Historic Landmark in 1964.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: The following is a chain of title to the land on which the structure was built. Reference is to [Bertha Mather McPherson], The Story of the Mather Homestead, [n.p., privately printed, 1953], a leaflet based on Mather family records.

1778 Homestead was erected on land inherited by Deacon Joseph Mather from his mother, Hannah Bell Mather, a descendant of Francis Bell, one of the early settlers of Stamford, Connecticut.

1840 Joseph Mather died, leaving the house, then valued at \$500, to his widow, Sarah Scott Mather, for her lifetime with the proviso that his two unmarried daughters, Rana and Phoebe Mather, inherit the property after their mother's death.

STEPHEN TYNG MATHER HOUSE
HABS No. CONN-289 (Page 2)

1843 Sarah Scott Mather died. Rana and Phoebe Mather inherited the house jointly.

1880 Rana Mather died, leaving Phoebe Mather as sole owner.

1886 Phoebe Mather died, bequeathing house to her niece, Ann Elizabeth Lockwood, daughter of Betsy Mather Lockwood, widowed sister of Rana and Phoebe Mather.

1887 Ann Elizabeth Lockwood sold house and twelve acres for \$1,000 to her first cousin, Joseph Wakeman Mather, grandson of Deacon Joseph Mather.

1905 Joseph Wakeman Mather died, bequeathing the homestead and twenty-two acres, then valued at \$1,300, equally to his sole surviving child, Stephen Tyng Mather, and his niece, Bertha Mather, daughter of his brother Henry.

1906 Stephen Tyng Mather bought his cousin Bertha Mather's half-interest and became sole owner.

1930 Stephen Tyng Mather died on January 22, 1930, bequeathing the property to his daughter, Bertha Mather McPherson (Mrs. Edward R. McPherson, Jr.), the present owner.

2. Date of erection: 1778. "Deacon Joseph and his wife Sarah Scott, with their oldest child, Hannah, took possession of their new dwelling on July 2, 3, or 4, 1778." (McPherson, Story, op. cit.).
3. Architect: Not known. House is vernacular structure in local traditional style. Thomas Harlan Ellett, architect, designed additions made in 1927.
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: None known prior to 1927 additions.
5. Alterations and additions: Prior to 1906 long unfinished room at rear of chimney on second floor was divided into two corner chambers with a short passage and bathroom between them. In 1906 exterior clapboards were replaced by green-stained shingles, and an open one-story porch was built across front (south) wall of house.

STEPHEN TYNG MATHER HOUSE
HABS No. CONN-289 (Page 3)

In 1915 various alterations were made. Front porch was removed, and heavy pedimented portico was substituted at front entrance. One-story screened porch was built at northwest corner, extending west. Bed room west of kitchen was opened into new porch, and paired windows were set in west wall of kitchen. Access to new porch was from southwest room. Another window was added to north wall of kitchen, recessed north porch was widened a few feet toward west, and small northwest pantry was converted to lavatory. West window of former pantry was moved to north wall. No alterations were made in 1915 on second floor.

In 1927 major changes were made from designs by Thomas Harlan Ellett, architect. Original rear (north) one-story lean-to containing pantry, recessed porch, and lavatory was removed. Buttery east of kitchen was eliminated, and kitchen was converted to living room with ceiling beams exposed. Present front entrance portico of correct design for period of house replaced heavier 1915 portico. New west porch aligned with northwest corner of main block was built. Area originally occupied by bedroom west of kitchen was opened into new living room, and glazed double doors to west porch were installed. New rear entrance into former northwest bedroom was made in north wall at west corner. Two-story ell extending north approximately 39'-6" and approximately 17'-8" wide where it abuts northeast corner of main block was built to contain new kitchen, lavatory, two pantries, two back staircases, back porch, and maids' sitting room on first floor, full basement below, and three additional chambers and two bathrooms on second floor. North ell increased total area of house by approximately seventy-five percent. Exterior surface of main block was altered by replacement of 1906 shingles by white-painted cedar shingles to accord with new ell, and new nine-over-six-light sash was substituted for nineteenth-century two-over-two-light sash. Fieldstone well-head with wrought-iron pulley frame replaced roofed and latticed wooden well house built in 1906 over original well of 1778. Well originally had typical eighteenth-century well-sweep.

In 1936 an additional chamber and bathroom were built over west porch. A brick patio was laid in 1961 in angle formed by main block, west porch, and north ell.

STEPHEN TYNG MATHER HOUSE
HABS No. CONN-289 (Page 4)

6. Important old views: Photographs showing house c. 1879 and 1905 and alterations of 1906, 1915, 1927, and 1936 are in possession of present owner.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

Deacon Joseph Mather, for whom the house was built in 1778, was the son of the Reverend Doctor Moses Mather, for sixty years Pastor of the Congregational Church in Darien, and Hannah Bell Mather, a descendent of Francis Bell, one of the early settlers of Stamford, Connecticut. A homesite at the extreme edge of Darien remote from the King's Highway and Long Island Sound was chosen in the hope of avoiding Tory raids during the Revolution.

"This house, being on the outskirts of the settlement, was considered a safe repository by the neighbors for their silver and valuables. These were hidden down the well and also suspended by straps under the top of the highboy, still standing in the Homestead. But the house was discovered and one evening a band of Tories came, plundered the house and compelled Mrs. Mather, at the point of a bayonet, to prepare them a supper at the huge fireplace. They then ordered the Deacon to accompany them to Long Island Sound to prevent his giving the alarm to the Community until they were a safe distance away.

"The Deacon fought as a soldier in the Revolution on a number of occasions, following the custom of the period in returning to his farm between campaigns. He first entered service in 1775, was engaged in the siege and capture of St. John's in Canada and went on to Montreal. In 1776 he was a member of the militia guarding the coast along Stamford. He enlisted as a sergeant in the Coast Guard again in 1779 and in 1780 was appointed an Ensign in the Conn. Militia." (McPherson, Story, op. cit.).

In 1906 Stephen Tyng Mather, founder and first Director of the National Park Service, became sole owner. He used the house as his summer residence from 1907 until his death in January, 1930. His grandchildren are the sixth generation of the family to have lived in the house, which was declared a Registered National Historic Landmark in 1964.

STEPHEN TYNG MATHER HOUSE
HABS No. CONN-289 (Page 5)

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources: Interview with Bertha Mather McPherson (Mrs. Edward R. McPherson, Jr.) on June 15, 1967, and subsequent correspondence. Plans drawn by Mrs. McPherson (who is a Registered Architect) showing original arrangement and later alterations. Photographs, 1879, 1905, 1906, 1915, 1927, and 1936 in possession of Mrs. McPherson.
2. Secondary and published sources: [Bertha Mather McPherson], The Story of the Mather Homestead, [n.p., privately printed, 1953], a leaflet based on Mather family records. Dumas Malone, ed., Dictionary of American Biography, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943, XII, pp. 398-9.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The structure is an excellent example of an eighteenth-century New England vernacular two-storied gabled wooden farm house of the central chimney type. It has been sympathetically and discreetly modernized and enlarged by the addition of a rear ell and a porch with chamber above. Original interior features have been preserved.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Approximately 50' (including west porch) x 70'-5" (including ell). Original portion measures approximately 34' across front x 30'-11" on side. Two stories, five-bay front.
2. Foundations: Fieldstone, random set in mortar.
3. Wall construction: Shingles (originally clapboards) over wooden sheathing. Painted white with light tan trim.
4. Framing: Heavy, mortised and tenoned post and girt system secured by treenails supports structure. Exterior walls are thin curtain walls, not bearing members. Ell has modern balloon framing.

STEPHEN TYNG MATHER HOUSE
HABS No. CONN-289 (Page 6)

5. Porches: Distyle pedimented portico with stone floor two risers above grade (1927) shelters front entrance in center of south wall. Screened porch inset at north-east angle of ell opens from pantry. Triple-arched screened porch opens toward north and south, extends west from northwest corner of original block, has arcade motif trim applied to horizontal flush sheathing, and enclosed second floor containing chamber and bathroom.
6. Chimneys: Large random ashlar fieldstone chimney measures approximately 9' x 6' at base and diminishes to approximately 3'-8" x 3'-8" below roof ridge, where masonry is altered to brick. Upper section of brick portion appears to be rebuilt, as size of brick alters. Below top, two courses project slightly. Top is capped by large flagstone slab with rectangular smoke vents below it on four sides. Chimney is constructed somewhat forward of ridge line to level of attic floor, where it is offset in curving profile to straddle center line of roof ridge. Modern brick chimney approximately 3' x 3' rises through ridge of ell roof.
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Front (south) doorway is flanked by pilasters (1927) responding to portico columns. Original (1778) five-paneled door (uppermost panel horizontal - a typical southern Connecticut pattern) is set under low rectangular four-light transom. North doorway (1927), two stone risers above grade, has molded architrave with pulvinated frieze and dentilled cornice. Six-paneled door is set within deep, paneled reveals. Service entrance at northeast corner of ell is through screened porch. West screened porch has three arched openings on north and south walls.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Windows on first and second floors of south and east walls of original block have nine-over-six-light double-hung sash (1927). All other sash is double-hung six-over-six-light. Window architraves of south wall have beaded inner edges and simply molded outer edges, flat unmolded sills and thin unmolded flat caps. No shutters.

STEPHEN TYNG MATHER HOUSE
HABS No. CONN-289 (Page 7)

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gabled roof, ridge parallel with front. Lower ell roof gabled, ridge at right angle with original block. Lower west wing roof gabled, ridge parallel with front. Wooden shingles throughout.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Boxed cornices project slightly, have flat soffits, and cyma recta molding incorporating gutters on original block and ell. West wing has hung metal gutters.
- c. Dormers: None.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: Shallow central entry gives access to stairs, dining room (formerly parlor) in southeast corner, and parlor in southwest corner (termed hall in eighteenth century and later used as dining room). Living room (formerly kitchen with buttery on east and small bedroom on west) spans north side of original block, except for north entrance (in area formerly occupied by west bedroom), which gives access to living room, parlor, and west porch. Ell contains kitchen, two pantries, maids' sitting room, back porch, and two back staircases.
 - b. Second floor: Main block has front hall and stairs, chambers in four corners, and passage and bathroom at rear of central chimney. Northwest chamber leads to modern chamber and bathroom over west porch. Ell has three chambers and two bathrooms.
 - c. Cellar and attic: Full cellar under main block and ell. Open unfinished attic above main block.
2. Stairways: Front stairway of eleven risers (four winders at bottom and two at top) ascends between paneled rear wall of south entry and central chimney. Cellar stairs, entered from east wall of parlor, are underneath. Attic stairs rise over front stairs. Back stairs, entered from passage in ell, rise between living room and lavatory in ell. Second back staircase, entered from passage between kitchen and maids' sitting room, has second set of cellar stairs underneath.

STEPHEN TYNG MATHER HOUSE
HABS No. CONN-289 (Page 8)

3. Flooring: Modern wide-boarded oak flooring in living room (originally kitchen) dates from 1927. Southeast and southwest rooms and front entry have wide-boarded oak flooring taken from c. 1720 house in South Coventry, Connecticut and installed in 1957. Southwest chamber on second floor has original wide-boarded tulip wood (whitewood) floor. Upper hall and southwest chamber have original wide-boarded oak flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Ceilings are plastered. Living room ceiling, originally plastered below girts and joists, is now plastered between them, exposing structure. Chimney wall of dining room has original full paneling. Other three walls are plastered, have no chair rails. North wall of front entry has original full paneling. Sections of south wall flanking front door are plastered and papered. Parlor has fully paneled chimney wall. Paneling is designed to conform with period of house and was installed new in 1927. Other three walls are plastered, have chair rails. Living room chimney wall has vertical wide-boarded sheathing with beaded edges. East wall has built in bookcases with paneled cupboard doors below (1949). Other two walls are plastered. Southwest and southeast chambers have original fully paneled chimney walls. Other walls are plastered, have chair rails.
5. Doorways and doors: Original doors on first floor are six-paneled, two center panels almost square. Some second-floor doors are four-paneled (one original), and others are batten doors (three original).
6. Decorative features and trim: Original cupboard in southeast corner of dining room has arch-headed glazed upper door with heavy muntins, molded architrave, and dentil cornice. Cupboard in northwest corner of parlor has paneled doors, molded cornice.
7. Notable hardware: Original interior doors have wrought iron strap hinges and thumb latches. Front door has original strap hinges and new brass box lock. Living room fireplace has wrought iron crane and trammels.
8. Lighting: Electric lamps, but no electric sconces or electric chandeliers are used in principal rooms of original block. Some antique brass candle sconces are used.

STEPHEN TYNG MATHER HOUSE
HABS No. CONN-289 (Page 9)

9. Heating: Modern oil-fired central heating with base-board radiators in two downstairs front rooms and conventional radiators in other rooms. Dining room fireplace has brick hearth, exposed stone jambs. Parlor fireplace has square tile hearth, exposed stone jambs. Large living room fireplace has flagstone outer hearth, brick inner hearth, exposed stonework, and beehive oven at rear left. All three fireplaces are widely splayed. There were no fireplaces in original chambers. One chamber in new ell has fireplace.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: House lies northwest of intersection of Stephen Mather and Brookside Roads and faces south toward Stephen Mather Road, in an open area of widely separated country residences and farmland.
2. Enclosures: Wooden fences of open palings above skirting board has square gate posts approximately 3' high, is painted white, and runs 200' or so along each road. Fence lines are continued by stone walls.
3. Outbuildings: Wooden two-story barn with three-car garage attached was built in 1929 and lies northwest of house. One-story wooden guest house with two-car garage attached was built in 1965 and lies north of house. There is also a wooden potting shed remaining from a greenhouse erected northwest of house by Stephen Tyng Mather in 1915 and razed in 1965.
4. Walks: Walk from front gate to south entrance and west porch is flagstone. Walk from house to guest house is slate. Gravel drive runs from Brookside Road between house and guest house to barn and exits on Stephen Mather Road.
5. Landscaping: Property includes approximately fifty acres. Ground between house and fence is informally planted in lawn, large trees, low shrubs, and, next to house, ground cover. Periphery of brick patio in northwest angle of house is planted with shrubs. Beyond west wing is formal sunken garden.

Prepared by Denys Peter Myers
Architectural Historian
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