

General Walker House
Stratford, Connecticut

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District Of Connecticut

Historic American Buildings Survey
Harold H. Davis, District Officer
29 Whitney Ave., New Haven, Conn.

GENERAL WALKER HOUSE

Stratford, Fairfield County, Conn.

Owner: Sterling Bunnell, Main St., Stratford, Conn.

Date of Erection: 1690

Architect or Builder: General Joseph Walker

Present Condition: Good

Number of Stories: Two and one-half

Materials of Construction: Central chimney plan
Clapboard construction
Stone foundation and chimney
2 stories with leanto
Main stairs, panelled entrance hall

Other Existing Records: None

List of Photographs:

1. South-East Elevation
2. Detail of Fireplace - 2nd Floor
3. Rear Elevation
4. Entrance Hall Detail
5. South-West Walls of Dining Room

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In a few minutes walk of Stratford Center, an authority on Colonial houses says that he counted 38 of such interest as to merit careful restoration and improvement. The most important of these is the General Walker house, built about 1690 on land granted in that year to Zachariah Booth by the Town of Stratford.

The Booth land extended along what is now Main Street, westward from Tanners' Brook, which crosses the street near the building of the First National Stores. The house and land was sold in 1724 to Rev. Hezekiah Gold, who came to Stratford in 1722 as minister of the Congregational Church, and was given a homestead south of the Church, where Sterling Park now fronts on Main Street. He sold the Booth property in 1727 to Robert Walker, Sr. The deed, recorded in Vol. 3 of the Town Records, gives the south boundary as the land of Deacon Robert Walker, the boundary line being described as a brook.

Robert Walker 3rd, son of Deacon Robert Walker, was 22 years old in 1727, and probably the house was bought for his occupancy by his father. He was a graduate of Yale College (founded in 1701), and during his life was a lawyer, justice of the peace, member of the King's Council, Judge of the Superior Court, Colonel of Militia, and member of the Upper House of the Colonial Legislature. He lived till 1772, and his grave in the Congregational Burying Ground is marked by a sandstone table standing on four pedestals, with an inscription recording his distinguished career.

The house was occupied by the Walker family for many years. Major Robert Walker (4th) was born there in 1746 and lived till 1810. He too graduated at Yale College, became a lawyer, licensed surveyor of lands, justice of the peace, and judge of probate. As lieutenant in the Fifth Connecticut Regiment he marched to Ticonderoga in 1775, to Canada under General Wooster of Stratford in 1776, as captain in Col., Elenore's regiment to Fort Schuyler (or Stanwix), then as captain of the Stratford company in the Second Continental Artillery Regiment he served till 1781 and retired as Major. He was Town Clerk of Stratford from 1789 to 1804.

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His brother Joseph Walker, ten years younger, became the General Walker who served with distinction in the Colonial Army from 1777 until the end of the Revolutionary War. He was Assistant Adjutant General on the staff of Major-General Parsons, then Brigade Major of the First Connecticut Brigade, and after the war was appointed Major-General of the Connecticut Militia. He died in 1810, and like the other Walkers, was buried in the old Congregational Burying Ground.

Two other Colonial Generals are connected with the house. Major-General David Wooster, who was born at Oronoque in 1710, was a grandson of Deacon Robert Walker. He was all his life in military service. Experienced in the French and Indian War, he was appointed Major-General of the six Connecticut regiments ordered by the Colonial Legislature to be raised in April 1775, and later by the Continental Congress he was made a Brigadier-General of the Continental troops. In the next year he was made Major-General of the Continentals. He was killed leading the resistance to the British raid in Danbury in 1777. He was often at the home of his Walker cousins, the Major and the General. Also, General John Lamb, of New York, when the British captured that region in 1776, hired the Walker house and maintained his family there for five years. No doubt many a conference of officers was held there during the war.

This is the house which in recent years had fallen into such disrepair as to be hardly inhabitable, so that the owner, unable to undertake restoration, felt himself forced to sell the timbers and panelling for use in building a house in another town. The historic old building was saved for Stratford by taking it apart and rebuilding it on Elm Street, on a site which was part of the homestead of Solomon Plant, wheelwright, reputed to have built most of the spinning wheels used in Fairfield County during his lifetime.

The restoration was an interesting job. The house was built with a heavy frame of oak and chestnut. The south-end and east side were made with an overhang, formed by hewing away the wood of the corner posts below the level of the second floor, so that the posts stand on their small ends. The original clapboards were of ir-

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regular width, 8 to 10 inches, hand-planed on the weather side, and those on the street or west end only were beaded. This chimney was all of rough stones laid up in clay without other mortar. There were two large and two smaller fireplaces, all made with big timber lintels. There was a small wing at the northwest corner of the main house, which had a brick chimney with two small fireplaces placed diagonally, and may or may not have been built earlier than the main house. The lean-to at the north side was certainly a later addition, for some of the old clapboards were left below the lean-to roof. Two brick fireplaces, set diagonally, were built in this portion, and a stone addition to the main chimney was carried up to the top.

The house at first had plain plastered walls (on hand-split oak) and exposed timbers, some of them beaded on the visible corners. Later, the exposed timbers were plastered over, and the walls were panelled, apparently by Robert Walker 3rd about 1740. The large fireplaces were at that time bricked in to the smaller size then customary, and the chimney breasts were covered over by panelling, with moulding to frame the fireplace openings. The panelling in the two large rooms on the first floor formed false walls about 10 inches inside of the plastering thus providing for recessed window-openings with seats, and several shelved closets behind the panelling. Many years later, a moulded mantelpiece was added in the north room.

Few old houses have been recovered from such a dilapidated condition as this one had reached. The sills were gone, and the whole of the ground floor structure was rotted nearly to dust and supported by props. ~~The roof boards were nearly to dust and supported by props.~~ The roof boards were crumbling, but the rafters were still sound. The lean-to portion had been partly burned and patched up with modern lumber. The wing was mostly rotten, and quite beyond saving.

In the restoration, the panelling and all usable boards were carefully removed. The wooden pins were driven or bored out, the heavy timbers were taken apart and each was carefully looked over, patched if required and crannied. The frame was then re-erected just as it had been set up nearly 250 years ago. The original clapboards were saved by moving them in large sections attached to the old studs; and wrought nails were used in the necessary patching and

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and repairing. Felted lining was applied within all the side walls and under the ground and attic floors. All the old sash and frames, panelling and doors were then repaired and put back in place.

The chimney could not of course be rebuilt with only mud for mortar; besides, all the original fireplaces had been covered over and bricked in to smaller size. The chimney was therefore re-designed and built of brick in accordance with the requirements of today's building ordinances. The fireplaces now look just as they were when the Walkers lived in the house; and the chimney top is built of the original stones and to the original dimension. One room of the house had never been panelled, and in this room the original stone fireplace with its timber lintel was rebuilt. Further, one of the large fireplaces was rebuilt in a room in the basement.

The woodwork had been painted many times in the course of nearly a quarter of a century. By scraping, color after color was disclosed, and finally the original red coating appeared. This was accurately matched in restoring the halls and stairway. Several interesting shades of blue, gray and white were found, also the greenish hue of terra verde, an earth brought as ballast from Italy and then often used as pigment. The colors used in restoring the rooms are careful copies of original coats of paint.

As thus far described, the General Walker house represents a degree of comparative luxury in the Stratford of nearly 200 years ago. But modern needs have been provided for without in the least disturbing the ancient aspect of the old home. In the present lean-to portion there is a modern kitchen, bathrooms, and rooms for servants. Pipes for plumbing and furnace heat are all concealed. With gas, electricity, and basement playroom and garage, the house again represents comfort and even luxury; and it should stand long into the future as a memorial of the age when Indians roamed the woods and hardy pioneers cleared the land of forest trees and stores and founded the old families of Stratford.

It will be of interest to everyone who is interested in Colonial houses to note that the cost of restoration came out to not more than the cost of constructing a modern house of the same size and equipment. This shows that a Colonial house can be restored in its place to its original good

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condition and distinction, and modern improvements added, for much less than the cost of building a new house. It costs no more, in general, to do the thing right, than to do it wrong; and the value of the thing done right is much the greater.

The preservation of the historic General Walker house may be remembered as an item of the events marking the tercentenary of the State of Connecticut. In view of the interest attaching to the work, it would be less than fair to omit to mention the names of the Stratford workman who attacked with eager interest the transformation of the structure from its ruinous condition to its ancient state, and proved that Connecticut skill in handicraft is still preeminent. Donald Nicolson, who thoroughly learned the trade of carpentry in Scotland, was in charge of all the work. The chimney and other mason work was done by William R. McNeil; and the painting, which involved carefully matching old colors with modern pigments, by Stanley G. Fant. Missing hardware and metal parts were accurately forged like the originals by Ragnar F. Johnson. The excellence of the whole work must be largely credited to an architect famous for his many correct and artistic restorations of Colonial buildings, Frank Chouteau Brown of Boston.

Sources of Information: Carbon Copy of "The Restoration of the General Walker House"
(Author unknown)

Author: Unknown

Approved: *Harold H. Davis* June 23, 1959.