LET'S RENOVATE, SAID THE COLONISTS

The saltbox shape resulted from early New England homeowners who were pressed for space and worried about winters. Sound familiar?

PHOTO COURTESY NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, ADAMS NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

AN 1849 PAINTING by G. Frankenstein shows the two saltbox houses where John and John Quincy Adams were born—John Quincy in the saltbox to the left, and John Adams in the one to the right.

Written by **BRUCE IRVING**

Capes contend, but for "house that says New England," the winner has to be the saltbox: hunkered down survivors, sloped backs to the north wind, redolent of woodsmoke and traditional colonial American values. And indeed, this type of house is specific to coastal New England, where the transition from "what we had in England" to "what we need over here" took place not too long after the first American houses went up.

It went something like this: Early colonists brought with them from England their model of solid middle-class housing—a timber-framed structure with two rooms on the first floor and two rooms on the second, with a massive central chimney running up between each pair. One downstairs room was called the parlor and contained the better furniture and the best bed, for the parents; the other downstairs room was the hall, a combination living room and kitchen. Upstairs were sleeping chambers and storage. Sooner or later, however, most colonists faced a dilemma known well to today's suburbanites. With rising fortunes and growing families (often a dozen or so people would be crowded into these early homes) came the desire for more living space.

Which way to expand? Most of the cooking was done in the hall fireplace, smack in the middle of things. With all that activity, it's easy to see that extending the working parts of the new American home took precedence over expanding the upstairs.

It can be argued that saltbox expansions were the simplest option. The house's side walls were extended, a flat roof attached to the main roof, and a back wall finished things off—four easy planes, no complex framing, no gabling, no new ridge lines, done in time to continue the planting. The addition seemed to simply lean against the older structure, and indeed saltboxes were often called "lean-tos," especially in Massachusetts.

Still, there was some subtlety involved. Simply continuing the rear roofline of a house with low eaves would not yield enough ceiling height in a rear addition; similarly, a steep roof pitch, if extended, would result in an addition not deep enough to merit the trouble. Thus it became common practice to change the roofline where the shed met the main house so that the rear rooms would have decent depth and ceiling heights. This two-pitch profile is how saltboxes earned the (primarily Connecticut) nickname "breakbacks." The resulting massing was strong, simple, and very much like the once-common salt container.

Into the new space went a fairly regimented trio of rooms: a large kitchen (sometimes called a "keeping room") in the center; a small bedroom on one end; and a buttery or dairy, usually located at the coolest, most northerly end, and sometimes half-submerged in the ground to keep things even cooler. The bedroom has had the name "borning room" attributed to it, though with a dozen people in the house, it most certainly was used by others besides delivering mothers—often grandmother or grandfather, since it was nice and warm next to the kitchen, with no stairs to climb. The kitchen demanded a fireplace, of course, and so to the central chimney was grafted a new rear flue. And there was usually a steep secondary stairway leading to a low-ceilinged attic.

Every prosperous household seemed to want a lean-to addition. The house that John Adams was born in was a saltbox; he evidently liked the arrangement enough to move into another saltbox, just 75 feet away, where his son John Quincy Adams was born. The whole package was such a success that the lean-to began to be built as an integral part of new houses. One of the earliest examples is the Whipple-Matthews house, c. 1680, on Bay Road in Hamilton, Massachusetts. It's still a private home, reports Butch Crosbie of the town's historical society. "We have three or four other saltboxes in town that are also private, which proves what a successful form it is."

Winning though the arrangement was, however, it could not withstand the greatest of all American forces: fashion. After the mid-1700s arrival of the Georgian style, the saltbox began to fall out of favor. Nowadays, few are built, and only by homeowners with a strict historical-replica agenda. "We do rear expansions differently now," says Boston-based architect Jeremiah Eck, "since stick framing allows for quick full-height additions to be put on, thus avoiding the nasty low-ceilinged lofts of saltboxes. And with our better insulation and heating systems, we don't have to turn a low slope to the cold north winds."

FOR MORE DETAILS SEE RESOURCES

But the arrangement of domestic spaces the old saltboxes introduced—kitchen, pantry, and a bit of extra space, all at the rear of the house—lives on. Just ask any architect or builder. ☗

SALTBOXES AMONG US

It's fascinating to visit a saltbox and imagine the domestic debates that took place there, so similar to those of today, but spoken in the English of 300 years ago. What did Mrs. Brackenbury of Charlestown say to her husband William in 1639 that led him to request permission of the authorities "to make a lean-to unto the outside end of the parlor"? One would guess something along the lines of "I'm sick of tripping over everyone as I'm cooking!"

There are a surprising number of saltbox house museums in and around Boston. And if, after visiting, you simply must have a saltbox of your own, Brian Cooper of Early New England Restorations in Stonington, Connecticut, can probably find you one. He recently dismantled a Connecticut saltbox, c. 1692, and reassembled the frame, original fetheredge sheathing, and wide plank flooring for a client in New Hampshire, at a cost $90,000; he estimates the new owner will spend another $800,000 to bring it into the 21st-century.

THE FAIRBANKS HOUSE
511 East Street, Dedham, MA; 781-326-1170; *fairbankshouse.org*
Thought to be the oldest standing timber frame building in North America, it was built c. 1637-1641 and was home to eight generations of the Fairbanks family, which still has annual reunions (open to all) at the house.

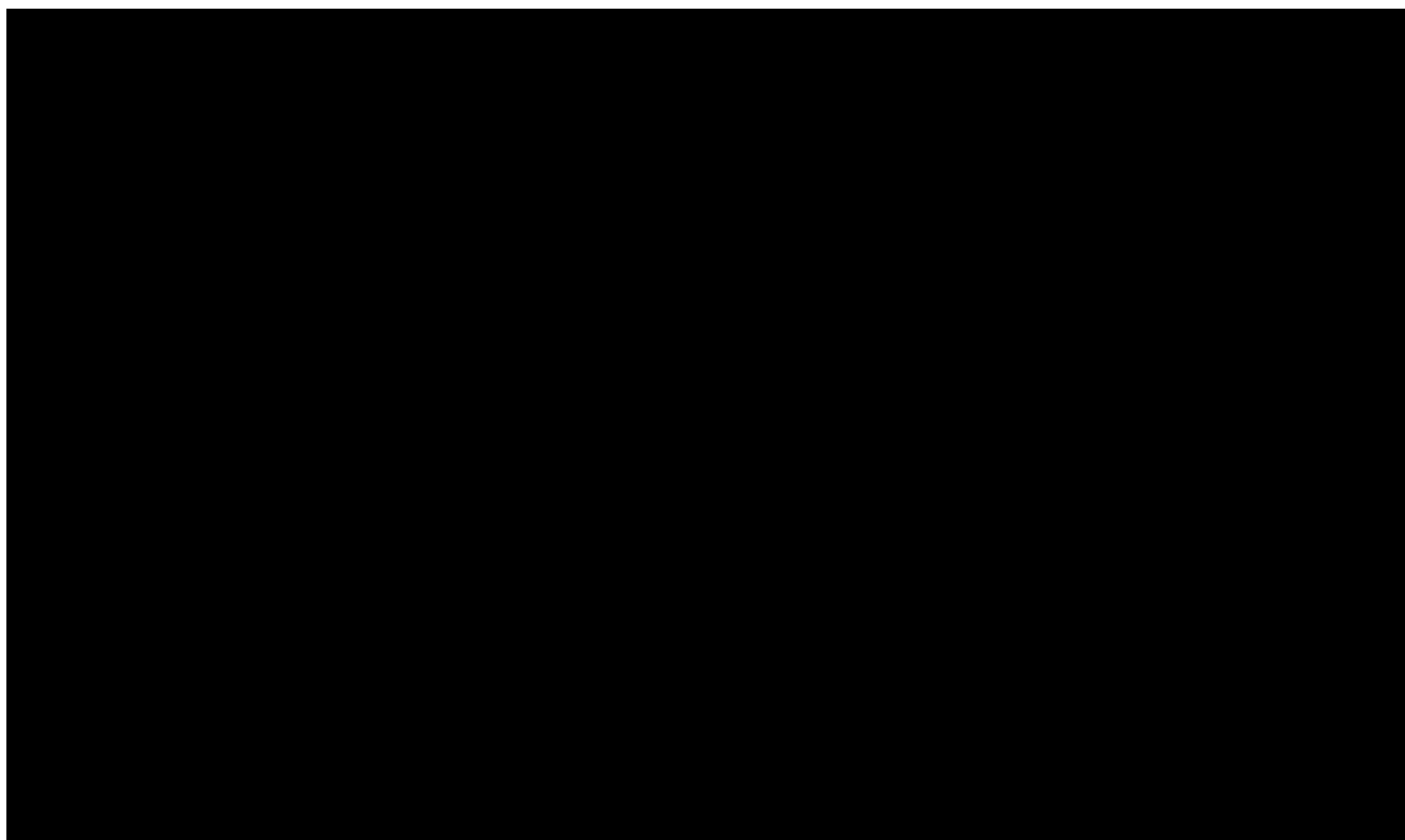
ADAMS NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
135 Adams Street, Quincy, MA; 617-770-1175; *nps.gov/adam/index.htm*
The birthplaces of 2nd U.S. President John Adams and 6th U.S. President John Quincy Adams, this national park was home to four generations of the Adams family.

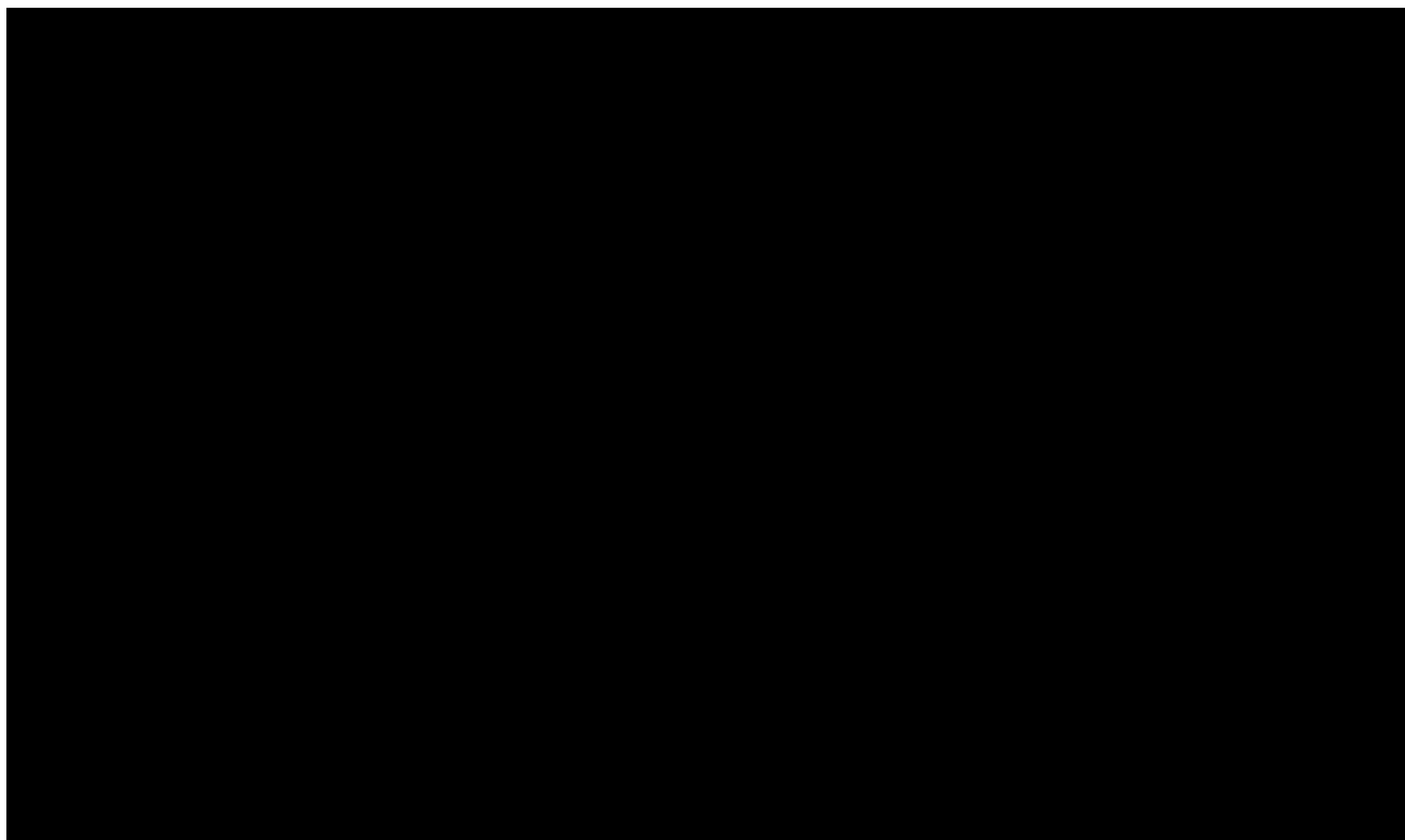
PIERCE HOUSE
24 Oakton Avenue, Dorchester, MA; 617-227-3956; *historicnewengland.org/visit/homes/pierce.htm*
Built in 1683, this First Period house is a stone's throw from the bustle of modern Boston. Ten generations of the Pierce family lived here, and each expanded and adapted the house to meet new needs.

COOPER-FROST-AUSTIN HOUSE
21 Linnaean Street, Cambridge; 617-227-3956; *historicnewengland.org/visit/homes/cooper.htm*
The oldest dwelling in Cambridge, this was built as a "half house" (only one room wide) in about 1681. Recent dendrochronology (tree-ring dating) suggests that it may beat out the Whipple-Matthews house as the first American house built with an integral lean-to.

BOARDMAN HOUSE
17 Howard Street, Saugus, MA; 617-227-3956; *historicnewengland.org/visit/homes/boardman.htm*
Built in 1687, this National Historic Landmark shows its English roots in its overhanging garrison, or "jetty." Original 17th-century oak clapboards, protected by the later lean-to addition, can be seen in the attic.

REBECCA NURSE HOMESTEAD
149 Pine Street, Danvers, MA; 978-774-8799; *rebeccanurse.org/index.htm*
Sited on 25 acres of fields and woods, this saltbox has a very sad past. On March 19, 1692, girls from the nearby village of Salem named frail, 71-year-old Rebecca Nurse as practicing witchcraft; four days later, constables arrested her and took her from her beloved homestead. Even though she was at first found innocent, she was eventually hanged.





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