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The Pigeon House, Westford, Vermont

A Preservation Trust of Vermont

Technical Assistance Survey

The Pigeon House (named for its previous long term owners) is a mid 19th century village residence located next to the Westford Town Offices and facing west towards the Common across the road. The house is composed of two portions, but both built at the same time. The main house is a side-hall entry, temple fronted Greek Revival structure measuring 25 ft. wide by 28 ft. deep. A 25 x 20 ft. wing is appended to the south wall. The term side-hall refers to the layout of the interior and thus the placement of the front door and its sidelights at one corner of the gable facade rather than the middle. The rear of the house has a partially exposed full

height basement entry leading to an original plastered and finished space that appears to have been a below grade kitchen since it contains the remains of a brick bake oven and a brick wood stove with an iron cooking surface, attached to it. The fire door under the cooking surface is marked G.W. Iron Co. Brandon, Vermont.

The main house and wing are both 1 1/2 stories tall with a knee wall. The exterior is covered with white painted clapboards with a 3 1/2 inch exposure. There are pilasters about 10 inches wide at the corners and a double frieze and cornice. The Main House door and its sidelights are original while the wing door is a replacement but in its correct location. The roofing is nailed and screwed down galvanized, and green coated, metal, newer on the wing than the main house. The windows are almost all 6/6, and probably original , protected by wood and aluminum storms. There is one broken window pane on the wing and one sash changed to 2/2 on the rear.

The wing has a front porch in good condition. A newer deck on the back is in catastrophic condition due to its drainage being reversed by the sinking of the rear wall of the house. An open sided garage on the south is constructed with as little

material as you would ever dare build anything.

The house and wing are timber framed in the light weight style of the time meant to conceal the frame: 4 x 4 and 4 x 6 wall studs, 5 x 6 rafter plates and 4 x 4 rafters 30 inches o.c. The floor framing seen from the basement is heavier with 8 x9 carrying beams and 3 x 6 joists. All the timber appears to be hemlock, and vertically sawn. The date of the house is probably around 1850, although the inclusion of a bake oven and basement kitchen in a village home is unusual at this late date. The frame can be viewed in the undeveloped 2nd floor of the wing and appears very good.

The foundation is field stone lined with brick from top to bottom, with the exception of the middle back where a wood framed wall was exposed. The north foundation has been reinforced with concrete as have some other threatened sections, testifying to the poor drainage on the clay soil in this town. The floor of the basement is dirt with some concrete under the oil furnace and hot water heater. A large, newer brick and block chimney rises along the mid wall interior and serves the basement appliances plus wood stoves that until recently existed. The

chimney at the rear for the basement kitchen rose through the house, but has been mostly removed.

The interior retains it original beautiful stairway and balustrade, but the hallway wall has been removed making the front parlor larger. The interior windows in this parlor have paneled pediments over them and molded trim. The parlor has a refinished pine floor with cut nails and may be original. Other rooms have later hardwood strip flooring in maple, but mostly red oak. All the flooring is in good condition except whatever is under the kitchen vinyl by the sliding rear door. The second floor of the main house has been divided into several small rooms over time, also oak floored.

At certain points fiberglass insulation can be seen in the basement ceiling and house walls, but the completeness is unknown and perhaps can be discovered by asking the former occupants.

Other than along the rear wall, the house appears relatively square, plumb and well maintained. The kitchen, now in the wing, is new with new appliances but suffering from the sinking back wall and deck. There is one recent bathroom with a shower. Heat is by hot water running to

cast iron radiators, in addition to the provisions for wood stoves.

With the exception of the need for a major jacking and straightening project under the rear kitchen wall, this attractive house could be occupied immediately. There are many persons buying and living in worse dwellings all over the state.

The Pigeon House, Westford, Vermont: Maintenance Needs

1. Foundation and Drainage: The poor drainage of soil locally and the difficulty of arranging septic systems is responsible for the Town's interest in this property. The biggest problems the Pigeon House has are related to the foundation being pushed by ground movement, and a bad grading situation at rear that directs roof and ground runoff into the rear foundation. Nonetheless, and due to continued maintenance, the House remains quite square and plumb.

The most pressing problem in making the house habitable is the need to jack the rear of the house level for numerous feet around the junction of the main house and wing, including an area of the rear kitchen floor. This is centered on the declivity produced at the rear of the house to provide direct access to the basement door and kitchen. This ground feature dates from the earliest days of the house and undoubtedly once had better grading around it directing run off to the river valley right behind the house. Once this is done the foundation there can be rebuilt in stone or concrete, and either full height or with a timber sill and wooden wall as originally constructed. Either way you will want a door to enter the basement directly from outside, such as exists now. This foundation problem extends around the NE corner as well where even the newer concrete facing has broken and pushed inward, displacing the brick lining in the basement as well.

When you uncover the entire rear basement wall, some of which is concealed with styrofoam insulation, you may find the entire rear wall needs some jacking. This is suggested not only by the kitchen floor but also the

depression of the floor in the small room at the rear of the wing. This will improve the leveling of the floors throughout the house, where the medial wall appears slightly higher than the front or rear walls.

This straightening of the back wall will render the house more habitable, but will only be a temporary solution until the rear yard is excavated to a new grade profile directing runoff away. At the same time the entire house should have perimeter drainage installed to allow other parts of the basement walls to be straightened with some hope of them staying that way, including the displacement of foundation and wooden wall around the front doorway, which is not of recent origin. The slope dropping off to the river immediately behind the house allows plenty of opportunity to run drainage to daylight.

A gutter along the rear eaves may also help with the water infiltration problems.

2. Framing: Rebuilding the rear center wall will involve removing the wooden deck which is failing, and has too high a relationship to the rear sill and floor. Once the deck is gone one can not only rebuild below, but also find out whether the main floor sill has been rotted by

splash up and infiltration by the deck and sliding glass doorway. In all cases, once jacked level, repair any sills and walls with solid softwood timber, which may involve supporting some kitchen floor joists on jacks temporarily. Once everything is straight and re-graded the deck can be rebuilt if desired along with outdoor stairs.

Out of plumbness in the lower part of the main house walls around the front door strikes me as an old and hopefully stable problem. If you lift with a jack on the main house SW corner post (first removing some of the pilaster boarding), you will be able to dismantle the falling brick at the bottom of the basement stairs and hopefully see the condition of the sill joint at that corner.

3. Basement Support Columns:

This doesn't appear to be an emergency, but you would be wise to replace the 3 steel lally columns in the basement with wood 6x6 timbers. The steel columns tend to have small bearing areas and eventually punch into the wooden beams they are supporting. There is some mildew on the carrying beams overhead in the basement but appears very superficial and may come from

the house not being occupied in recent times.

Other wooden post and partition walls have their wooden bottoms in the dirt and will eventually slowly rot that way. Jacking may lift hem out of the dirt, or cut them shorter and sit them on stones or solid concrete block rising a few inches above the dirt floor.

4. Brick Front Steps: Both sets of brick front steps need to be relaid in mortar or replaced.

5. Roofing: The roofing doesn't appear to be leaking but is very old, particularly on the Main House. Within 10 years you will need to change it to standing seam galvanized or color coated metal.

6. Exterior Trim and Finish: The main area in need of work is the rear wall around the new sliding glass doors and window, where clapboards were removed and never replaced. Right above there is evidence of cornice and soft damage under the metal valley. Also the area under the styrofoam insulation on the back wall probably needs re-clapboarding and trim work (see photo of missing parts of the

corner pilaster base), including the rebuilt portion if done in wood.

The basement kitchen area probably had a window in the pre-electric age, though the need is not so pressing now.

7. Windows: The windows are old but appear well preserved due to the storm sash. There is at least one broken pane in a wing gable sash. If any window replacements are contemplated, the 6/6 pattern should be maintained.

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Pigeon House, Westford, Vt.

Cost Estimates:

1. Foundation and Drainage: Jack the rear wall of the house level and rebuild the foundation and missing middle section full height wall as needed.
   Excavate for perimeter drainage around the entire structure and rebuild the NE basement wall while excavating. Install drainage. Examine the foundation under the Main House door.
   Regrade the entire rear yard so that it drains away from the house.
   Cost: $80-90000

2. Framing: If you choose not to construct a full height masonry foundation you will need to lay a timber sill and frame a wall where it previously and originally existed at the middle rear.
   Also, the rear main sill of the house may be rotted at the glass doors and to either side beyond. Repair this in solid timber while supporting the floor joists and the wall on jacks
   Cost: $35-50000

3. Basement support columns: Replace the steel lally columns with timber on stone or concrete block and lift or cut any other wood framing out of and above the dirt floor.

Cost: $4-5000

4. Brick Front Steps: Rebuild two sets of brick front steps.

Cost: $2-3000

5. Roofing: New standing seam metal on the entire house: approx. 2000 sq.ft. Not an emergency.

Cost: $30,000

6. Exterior Trim and Finish: Trim and clapboard replacement on the rear upper and lower walls.

Cost: $7-9000

7. Windows: Repair a broken pane. Replacement of historic sash with custom made 6/6 sash of the same size might cost $2000 per opening , installed and trimmed authentically.

Pigeon House, Westford, Vt.: front

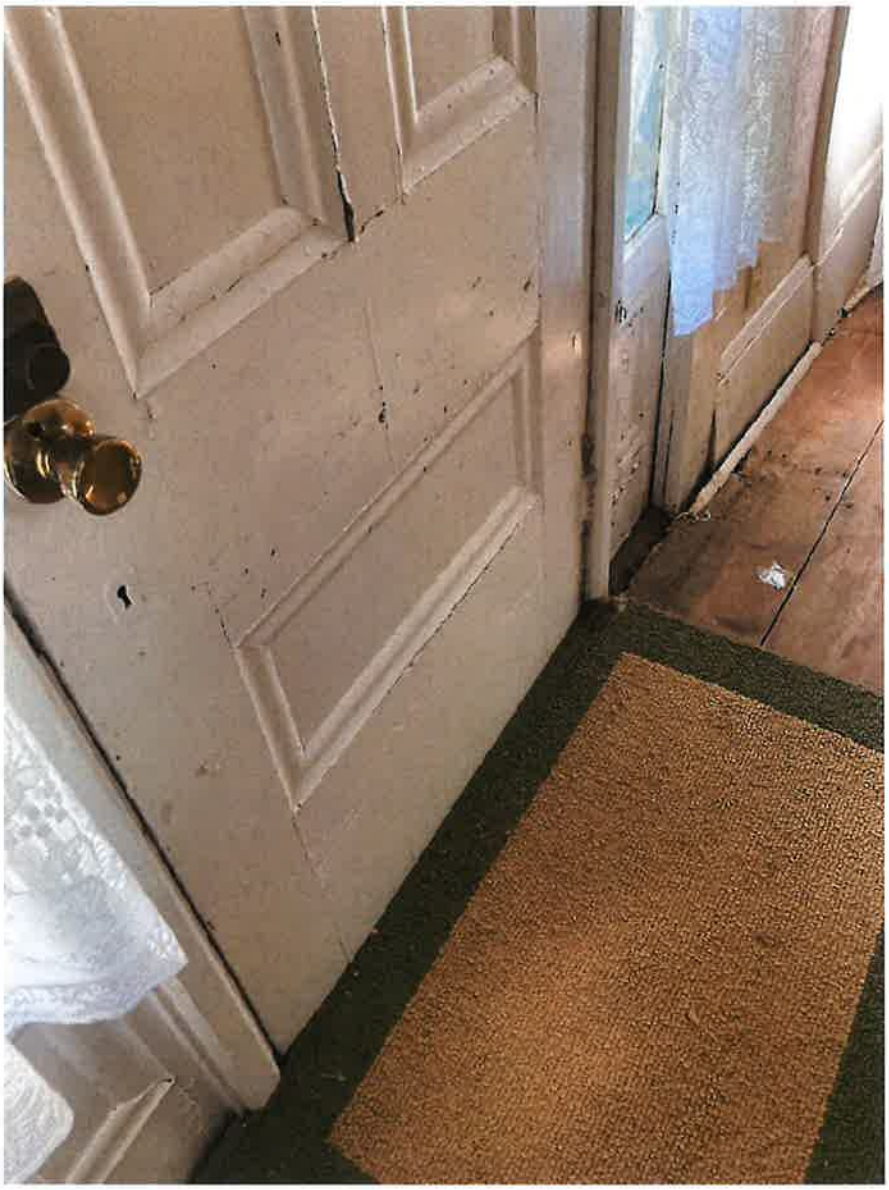
Pigeon House, Westford, Vt. Rear wall with failing deck and failed basement wall.

Pigeon House, NW corner with front wall slightly bowed

Pigeon House: failed rear wooden basement wall

Pigeon House: original staircase and balustrade

Pigeon House: Parlor window trim



Pigeon House: old problem at front door sill and foundation.

Pigeon House: Newer kitchen in Wing

Pigeon House: Westford, Vt. Kitchen floor dropping at failed rear wall

Pigeon House: Remains of bake oven in the basement

Pigeon House: Brick with cast iron cook surface and fire door adjacent to the bake oven in basement

Pigeon House: Fire door of basement stove

Pigeon House: Basement utilities.

Pigeon House : timber framing and insulation as seen the attic of the Wing

Pigeon House, Westford, Vt. : foundation problems under the front main door at SW corner of Main House

Pigeon House, Westford, Vt. NE corner at rear with deteriorating trim and siding