

## Three Centuries of the John Ball House

*Adapted by Sarah Chapin*

The John Ball House was built on the house lot bought by Thomas Dane in 1657 from Reverend Peter Bulkeley, a large landholder and the most influential man in early Concord. Bulkeley set out for this country after the Archbishop in England silenced him for his non-conformist ministry. He was then fifty years old, and from his comfortable English vicarage he seems to have anticipated his needs in the wilderness for a house and library [which was considerable] and a church. With him and his wife, when they set sail from England in May of 1635, was Thomas Dane, 32, a carpenter.

The short sides of Dane's rectangular house lot are bordered on the north and south by two of Concord's natural formations—the ridge and the mill brook which runs roughly parallel to each other from west to east through the town. They approach one another where the brook was dammed in the early years of the town to turn the gristmill. Here, the overflowing water formed a millpond whose northern edge came within one hundred fifty yards of the ridge. Between this ridge to the north and the brook some two hundred yards to the south, the town laid out a "Straite street" curving in consonance with the ridge along which the first house lots were granted. Concord fathers were proud of this road and referred to it as "the highway under the hill through the Towne." Early house lots ran from the ridge across the road and down to the brook where the barns were raised. MORE [LINK to remaining text]

Thomas Dane was not the first settler to build on the land he purchased in 1657. According to the deed, Rev. Bulkeley, ". . . sold to Thomas Dane, Carpenter of Concord, all that house, barns, and land which I bought of George Haywood <sup>1</sup>, together with the orchard also abutting on the Mill brook . . ." Dane may have altered the house or built another on this land which he owned until his death in 1675.

Dane left his “dwelling house, barns, and orchard” to his son, Joseph who probably sold it since by 1692 the land had passed out of the Dane family and had not yet become identified with the name of any new owner.

The first certain record of the property in the eighteenth century is in 1723 when William Clark sold it to John Ball [b. 1691]. The deed described the purchase as “. . . a tract of land near the meeting house . . . containing seven acres . . . six acres that are above the countrey road [Lexington Road] . . . and the other acre that lyes below the countrey road . . . with all the Buildings.” In 1761, Ball built a new house next to the old house and this new house, now the Concord Art Center.

Capt. Joseph Butler owned the John Ball house at the time of the revolution. The Provincial Congress met in the church across the street and ordered supplies to be brought from nearby town and stored in Concord. General Gage in Boston learned where the hiding places were and gave instructions to Lt. Col. Smith to lead an expedition to destroy the stores. Since Capt. Butler is named in these instructions, it is presumed that he stored goods in his house. The enormous cellar was undoubtedly handy for Butler’s purposes, but if it were too obvious a hiding place, he may have used the cave in the retaining wall behind the house. This cave was one of several built into the base of the ridge.

About 1810, the house was owned by Jonas Lee, a leader of the Democrats in the first years of the nation and several times elected to the Legislature. Lee built the addition on the east side of the house and during its construction he and his fourth wife quarreled over the position of the chimney.

Charles B. Davis subsequently occupied the house and kept a store [including the post office] next door. Thoreau mentions Davis in his Journals chiefly in connection with the great elm in front of Davis’ house. The tree was to be cut down because “Davis and the neighbors were much alarmed by the creaking in the late storms, for fear it would fall on their roofs. It stands two or three feet into Davis’s yard” <sup>3</sup> “Four men, cutting at once, began to fell the big elm at 10 A.M., went to dinner at 12, and got through at 2:30 P.M. They used a block and tackle with five balls, fastened to the base of a buttonwood, and drawn by a horse . . . “ [See 3.125] “The tree was so sound I think it might have lived fifty years longer; but Mrs. Davis said that she would not like to spend another such a week at the last before it was cut down.” [See 3.136] Afterwards, Thoreau wrote: “I have attended the felling and, so to speak, the funeral of this old citizen of the town . . . “ [See 3.130]. Someone quietly planted another elm in place of the old tree on the east side of the Art Center. [4]

From 1849 until the end of the Civil War, Sam Staples, “Sam,” as he was universally called, owned the house. Thoreau found Sam “. . . quick, clear, downright, and on the whole a good fellow, especially good to treat with rougher and slower men than himself, always meaning well.” [5];

Sam married Lucinda Wesson, daughter of Thomas Wesson, local tavern keeper and owner of the Middlesex Hotel who disapproved of both town ministers because they preached temperance, and refused to let his daughter be married to Sam by either of them. Instead, he got Ralph Waldo Emerson to perform the ceremony in the hotel.

In the late 1860s, the house, and the one next door, were owned by the Joel Walcott family. A son, Charles, married here in 1868 and Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote his brother: “In your Ball House young Walcott was married day before yesterday with the good wishes of all the town.”

Edward Emerson wrote in *Memoirs of Members of the Social Circle in Concord* [Fourth Series] “The newly married pair began their housekeeping in the large old-fashioned house on the ‘Great Road’ to Boston . . . The house, though low-studded, was very well built and homelike, snugly placed under the hill at the east corner of the Common. It had one drawback, its vis-à-vis was the ‘Yellow Block’ since removed, a tenement house well stocked with humanity of a humble class, not especially disorderly, however, and with much worthy leaven in the lump—also many children.” [6]

Charles Walcott became a lawyer and head of the Massachusetts Board of Arbitration. Under his direction it is said that this body “won official praise in Europe” and became a model for the national board in Washington. He resided all his life in Concord. He authored *Concord in the Colonial Period*,

In 1923, the Concord Art Association, formed in 1917 by Elizabeth Wentworth Roberts (EWR) [1871-1927], moved into the John Ball House, which EWR had bought and converted into three small galleries on the first floor, a fourth gallery which encompassed all of the second floor and which was sky-lit, and a curator’s apartment. The house, which stands in the center of Concord on Lexington Road was named the Concord Art Center and opened for the Association’s Seventh Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture.

Instead of commenting on the show itself as it had while the Association’s exhibits were at the Town House, this year the newspapers wrote mainly about the colonial

house that the Association had acquired. Despite the changes [including steel reinforcement] a critic wrote: “The first impression is one of surprise for the house built in 1750 seems to have been unaltered in line, and one wonders where the pictures have been hung. The house is of special interest. It now appears as it did when built except for an addition in the 1810’s to the east side. Since the addition is recessed it does not spoil the line of the original plan of the house.”

The building, termed a “colonial mansion” is essentially a large, square house with a central chimney opening into a fireplace in each room. Originally, it was a two-family house with east and west halves. A front door and vestibule existed in 1825 when Lafayette came to visit the North Bridge in Concord. In this vestibule with its “tiny panes of glass, of curious blue and rose tints,” a Concord girl waited before going across the street to the First Parish Church to present a bouquet of flowers to the French general. [8]

In making over the Ball House, the low-ceilinged downstairs rooms were unchanged and “the slightly old woodwork has been carefully preserved . . . so have the doors with their hand-wrought hinges. In unifying the upstairs into one large gallery, the central chimney was removed though the outside chimneystack remains. The attic, eliminated when the second floor gallery was installed, had been a large hall of fine proportions. In 1802 this hall was used for the meeting place of the Masonic Lodge. In altering this part of the building, painted beams of curious design came to light.”[9]

Behind the paneling to the right of the fireplace in one of the downstairs rooms is a “secret chamber,” supposed to have been used for ‘the Underground Railway,’ a previous history of the Art Center reads. “The entrance was formerly from above, through a trap door, but when the room was discovered, in 1916, some workers found it by accident while making an opening in the huge chimney. A cannon ball, a powder horn, a three-pronged fork, and some candle snuffers were in it.”

It was characteristic of Miss Roberts to hire a woman, Miss Lois Lilley Howe [(1864-1964)], as the architect to carry out the remodeling of the Ball House.