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A Mark Upon the Land

The Life and Work of Charles D. Lawrence,
A Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fairfield, Maine, Builder

By EARLE G. SHETTLEWORTH, JR.

FAIRFIELD Center and the hill-sides that surround it are dotted with simple white farmhouses. All of them have stood for more than a century, and in that time they seem to have become a part of the land. Their basic, forthright designs reflect the people who first lived in them and suggest the work of a native builder named Charles D. Lawrence. Myth would have us believe that, like Topsy, the houses of Fairfield Center just grew. Their builder created them intuitively without a thought of sketching a plan or referring to a book. Yet the discovery of Lawrence's architectural drawings combined with research on his life has proved this to be false.

Charles D. Lawrence was born in Fairfield on April 16, 1819,¹ the first child of Henry and Rose Lawrence. Four more children were to follow: Elihu in 1821, Hannah B. in 1824, Al-

bion P. in 1831 and Alfred E. in 1835.² The world that Charles D. Lawrence entered was that of early nineteenth-century rural New England. In 1820 the total population of Fairfield was 1,609. Like nearly 500 other men living there, Lawrence's father was engaged in farming.³

Of Lawrence's early years one can only conjecture. When he was old enough, he probably helped on the farm, went to one of the town's schools and attended Methodist services on Sunday with his family in a home or the meeting-house. Why he became a carpenter-builder, and how he received his training are mysteries. As was often the practice, he may have been apprenticed in the trade in his early teens. The number of houses built in Lawrence's area at this time appears to be limited. It is doubtful that he would have found work very far beyond the radius of a few miles, because

almost every community possessed at least one man who had a knowledge of building. Therefore, learning his occupation was probably a sporadic experience, with farming filling in the gaps between jobs.

was remains unknown because the church records have been lost. Yet with his Methodist ties he could well have helped in its construction, although the assignment of designing it may have gone to an older builder.



FIG. 1. ASA HOLBROOK HOUSE, MIDDLE ROAD, FAIRFIELD, MAINE,
BUILT BETWEEN 1842 AND 1847 BY CHARLES D. LAWRENCE

Photo courtesy of James Katz.

One structure in this period deserves consideration. At the crossroads in Fairfield Center, a new meetinghouse was erected in 1837. Although it was a union building in which any denomination could hold a share, the Methodists made up a good proportion of the membership, and the church ultimately became theirs. What Lawrence's role in its building

It is interesting to note that in the nearby town of Norridgewock in the same year, the now destroyed Congregational meetinghouse was remodeled, and a simple gothic-influenced tower almost identical to Fairfield Center's was added. Again no records have survived to tell us who was responsible for this.

In the decade of the 1840's, Law-

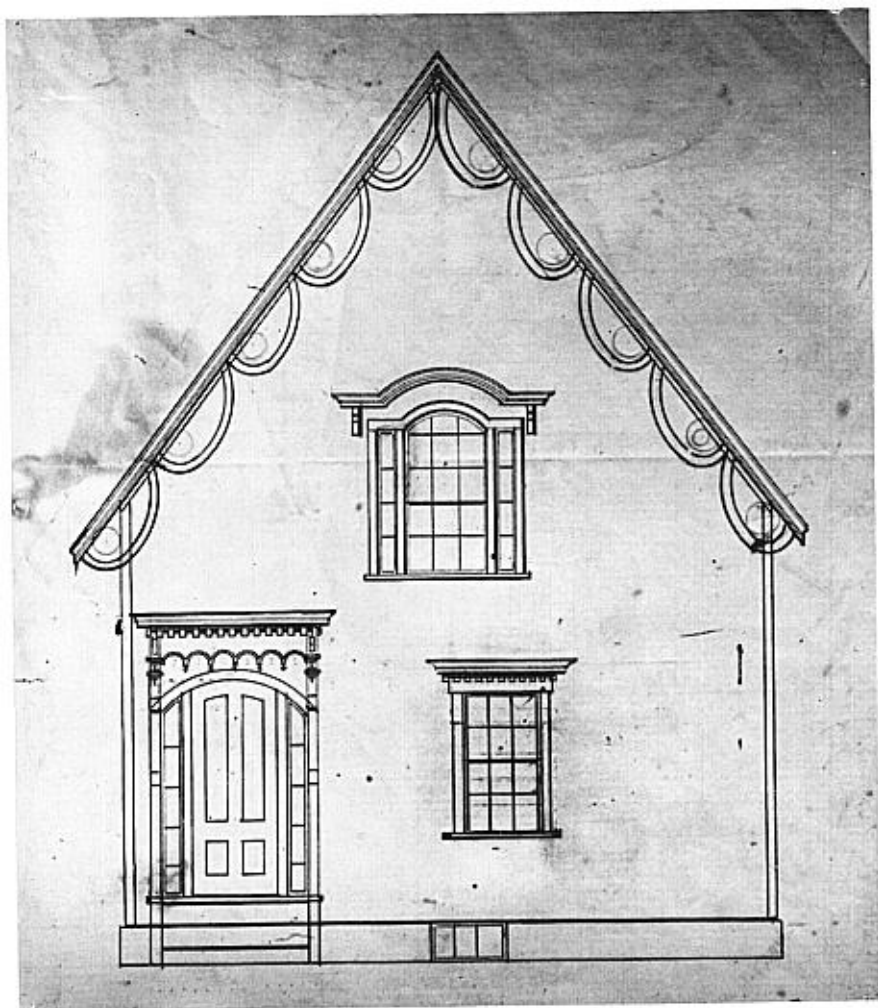


FIG. 2. ELEVATION BY CHARLES D. LAWRENCE, MID-1850's

rence reached manhood, and concrete evidence of his life and work begins to appear. On December 2, 1841, he purchased five acres of land from his father for \$300.⁴ Situated in Fairfield Center on the Middle Road leading to Skowhegan, it would one day serve as his

two, they share a number of characteristics. First, their over-all shape is that of the story-and-a-half New England farmhouse which uses a gable side as its front. Although this form was employed as early as the 1790's, it blossomed in the Greek Revival because of its similarity



FIG. 3. LAURENCE CARET HOUSE, OHIO HILL ROAD, FAIRFIELD, MAINE, MID-1850'S. CHARLES D. LAWRENCE, BUILDER

Photo courtesy of James Katz.

house lot. Over a year later on August 10, 1842, Lawrence sold a small portion of this for \$30 to Asa C. Holbrook. Sometime between then and 1847 Holbrook erected the little house that still stands there (Fig. 1).⁵ Although no drawings exist for it, its large, thin, wooden Gothic trim running down either side of the gable is much like that which appears on a drawing by Lawrence for a house of the mid-1850's (Fig. 2). Despite the fact that a decade separates the

to the outline of a Greek temple. Like most builders, Lawrence does not center his doorway but places it to one side.

In both houses he mixes styles at will. The Holbrook house employs a Gothic design over a double half-story window. The doorway and the corner detail are Greek Revival. In the drawing of the mid-1850's, Gothic trim appears on part of the entrance pediment as well as the gable, and is accompanied by an Italianate doorway and Italianate windows.

In his combining of styles, Lawrence shows an ignorance of or independence from the architectural principles of the period which Andrew Jackson Downing preached when he introduced his Gothic and Italianate villas and cottages to the nation's builders.

Wrote Downing in 1842 in his *Cottage Residences*:

Yet one can forgive Charles D. Lawrence for his violation of principles, because of the rather engaging charm of the crude interpretations he makes in trying to handle the leading styles of the day.

Housebuilding was not Lawrence's only interest. On June 5, 1845, he married Melinda Page of Fairfield.⁶ Almost

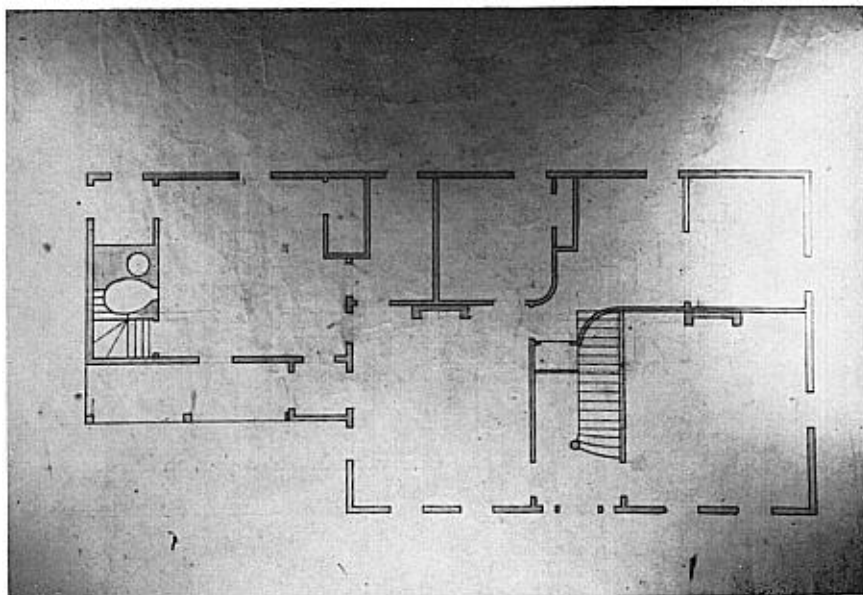


FIG. 4. FLOOR PLAN BY CHARLES D. LAWRENCE FOR LAURENCE CARET HOUSE, OHIO HILL ROAD, FAIRFIELD, MAINE, MID-1850's

There should be an unity of design in all portions of the same building, showing, by a correspondence of its various parts, that they all originated in the same mind; an unity of style avoiding the introduction, in an established mode, of any portions or members not in keeping with that mode; and an unity of decoration, evinced in the appropriate application of enrichment to the whole, rather than to a single part, of an edifice. These rules of Unity are not unfrequently violated by architects, but always at the expense of beauty and perfection of their works, as no artist is superior to principles.

a month later, on July 2, he purchased ninety acres of land from his father for \$1,000.⁷ This tract was located outside of Fairfield Center. In five days he took a \$500 mortgage on the property.⁸ As has been mentioned before, building was probably not a steady vocation, and this land may have been used to raise crops or to supplement Lawrence's income. Yet before 1851 he had disposed of it. There is no evidence that he built a home here

or anywhere else at this time. Probably he and his bride stayed with family.

Between 1840 and 1850 the population of Fairfield grew from 2,198 to 2,458, a gain of 260 inhabitants.⁹ This meant a need for new homes, and the number of plain domestic structures of the period attests that Lawrence and his

owner, Professor F. Mark Benbow, was told by an aged Fairfield Center resident, now deceased, that a Lawrence was its builder.

Four houses beyond on the same side of the road is a Lawrence-designed home now belonging to Laurence Caret (Fig. 3). Built in the mid-1850's, the draw-



FIG. 5. ELIHU LAWRENCE HOUSE, OHIO HILL ROAD, FAIRFIELD, MAINE, MID-1850's, CHARLES D. LAWRENCE, BUILDER

Photo courtesy of James Katz.

contemporaries had many opportunities to ply their trade. The houses that they created followed either the New England story-and-a-half form or the variation with a gable side as the front.

In the countryside around Fairfield Center the former was preferred. One by Charles D. Lawrence dating in the late 1840's or 1850's stands on the Ohio Hill Road just a short distance from the Center. No drawings exist for it but its

ing for its floor plan survives (Fig. 4). The doorway molding is much like that on the Benbow house as is the doorway and corner pilaster paneling except for the fact that the tops are straight instead of curved. The border below the roof line is thinner, and molding appears above the first-floor windows. Inside, the woodwork is stark except for the parlor which Lawrence handles in a finished manner. The parlor fireplace, for example, is cir-

cular headed. The ell, instead of being in back of the house, is to the left and has a little piazza attached on the front.

On February 22, 1848, Charles D. Lawrence's younger brother, Elihu, paid his father \$800 for a large piece of land in Fairfield Center on the Ohio Hill Road diagonally across from the meet-

was exactly the year in which the home was built, it does establish a probable period of erection for it and similar Lawrence houses.

The Elihu Lawrence home differs from the Caret dwelling in only two ways. The panel on the pilasters has a single Gothic point, and, instead of an

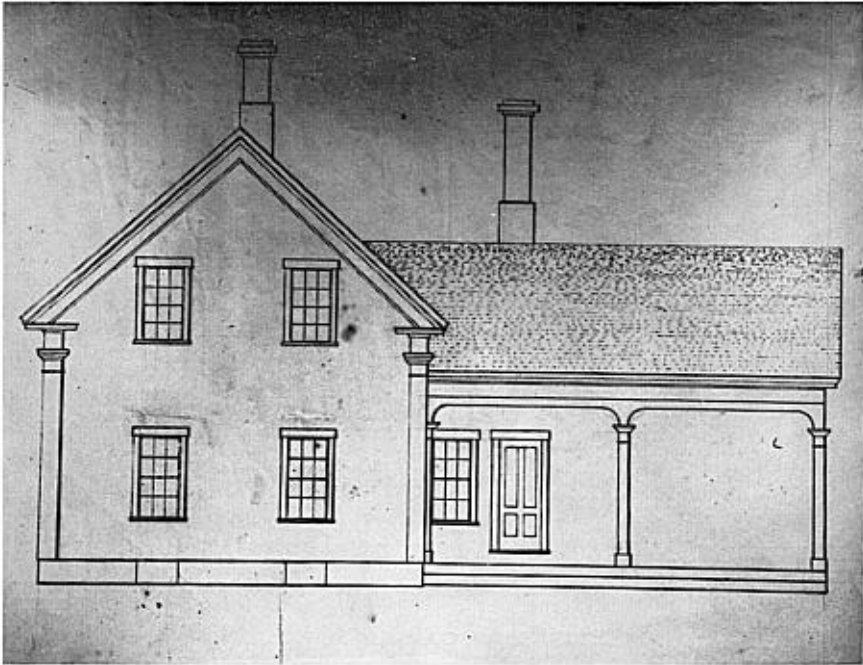


FIG. 6. ELEVATION BY CHARLES D. LAWRENCE FOR ELIHU LAWRENCE HOUSE, OHIO HILL ROAD, FAIRFIELD, MAINE, MID-1850's

inghouse.¹⁰ Elihu, a farmer, had been married in 1845 but like Charles, there is no record of where he lived until he had his home built on his property by his brother in the mid-1850's (Fig. 5). This date is determined by an 1854 watermark found on one of a number of drawings for the house (Figs. 6, 7). Although it is impossible to know if 1854

actual ell, there is an extension of the house coming almost centrally from the rear. On the right side of this runs a piazza of the same style as Caret's. A circular-headed fireplace makes its appearance in one of the front rooms.

Another Ohio Hill Road house, now owned by Frank Tozier, has definite Lawrence characteristics and dates from

this period of the mid-1850's. A similar floor plan may be found among the Lawrence drawings. The Tozier house is one of the Fairfield Center homes with its gable turned to the road. The doorway and window moldings receive basically the same treatment as those on the Caret and Elihu Lawrence houses. The

parlor and, in this case, the front hall. There is a circular-headed fireplace in the parlor something like that in Elihu Lawrence's home. Close examination shows that it greatly resembles a fireplace drawing by Lawrence (Fig. 8). The molding matches exactly, and a faint pencil line reveals that the builder

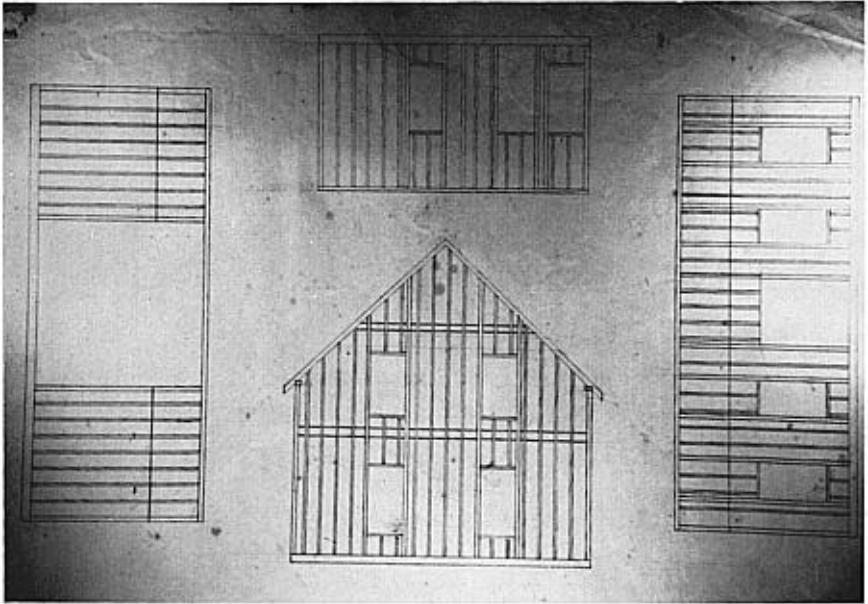


FIG. 7. FRAMING SCHEME BY CHARLES D. LAWRENCE FOR ELIHU LAWRENCE HOUSE, OHIO HILL ROAD, FAIRFIELD, MAINE, MID-1850's
CHARLES D. LAWRENCE, BUILDER

pilaster panels are identical to the ones on the Lawrence home. The smooth band below the roof line is now placed on the sides to accommodate the difference in form. The left side has a bay window which is probably later and beyond that, a delightful piazza, with large, thin wooden fancywork reminiscent of the Gothic trim on the Holbrook house. Again the interior is plain except for the

had a circular-headed fireplace in mind, as well as the straighter one he drew in ink.

At the same time that he was building simple Greek Revival-oriented structures, Charles D. Lawrence was also trying his hand with the Gothic and Italianate styles. In his portfolio are five similar drawings of little houses which combined the two modes. It was at this time

that he built his first home, and he was probably experimenting with ideas for it. One of the drawings (Fig. 2) has been discussed in connection with the Holbrook house. In Fig. 9 he has introduced a central Gothic gable with an Italianate window. Below, the plan for

ing today in Fairfield Center on the Middle Road to Skowhegan, it shows the gap that can sometimes occur between an architectural drawing and its result. In the drawing Lawrence was attempting to invoke style. The three second-story windows are slightly curved, the

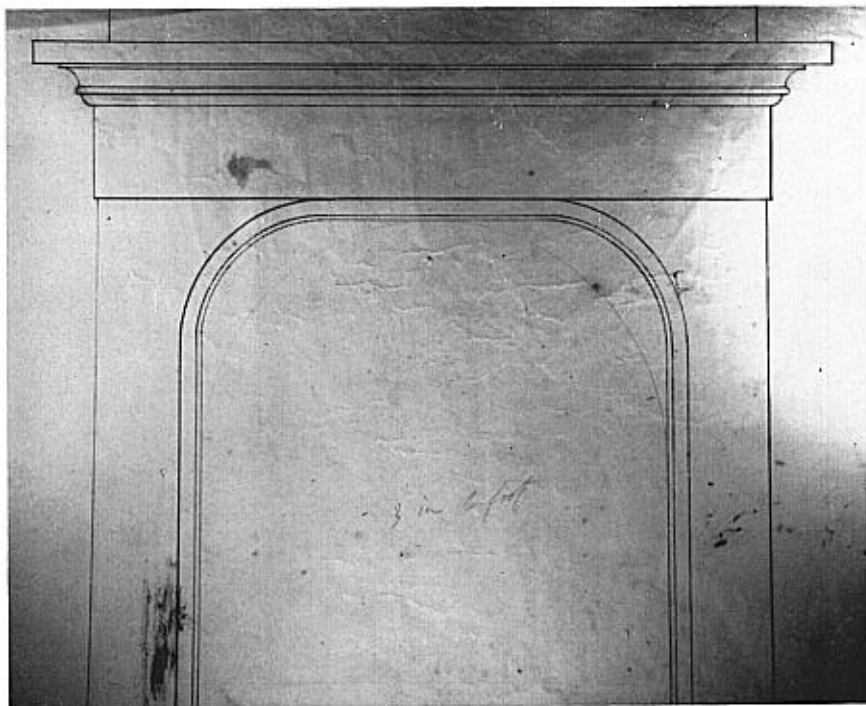


FIG. 8. ELEVATION OF FIREPLACE ENFRAMMENT BY CHARLES D. LAWRENCE

the doorway and windows might just as well be for one of his farmhouses. The porch, which juts on the left beyond the house, has a plain balustrade and Gothic fancy work that seem too intricate for Lawrence to have got beyond the drawing board.

Fig. 10 is the design from which stemmed Lawrence's own home. Stand-

porch is decorative, and the balustrades add finish. In the actual house, his three second-story windows are straight with moldings comparable to those on his other homes. This is also true for his side windows. The first-floor windows and doorway are essentially the same, but the porch is alike only in basic form. None of the detail of the drawing is present. Per-

haps balustrades once existed, but they no longer do. The only trim to break the dwelling's plain lines are large, thin, double brackets on the porch and around the eaves.

From the drawings and surviving houses that have been discussed, one can see that the 1850's were productive years

acres of land they owned.¹² However, Lawrence, in one typical year, 1856, possessed only the five acres where his house stood and a horse on which he probably traveled to and from work. Yet he also had \$700 in the bank.¹³ His father and brothers were not dependent on much cash because they were prob-

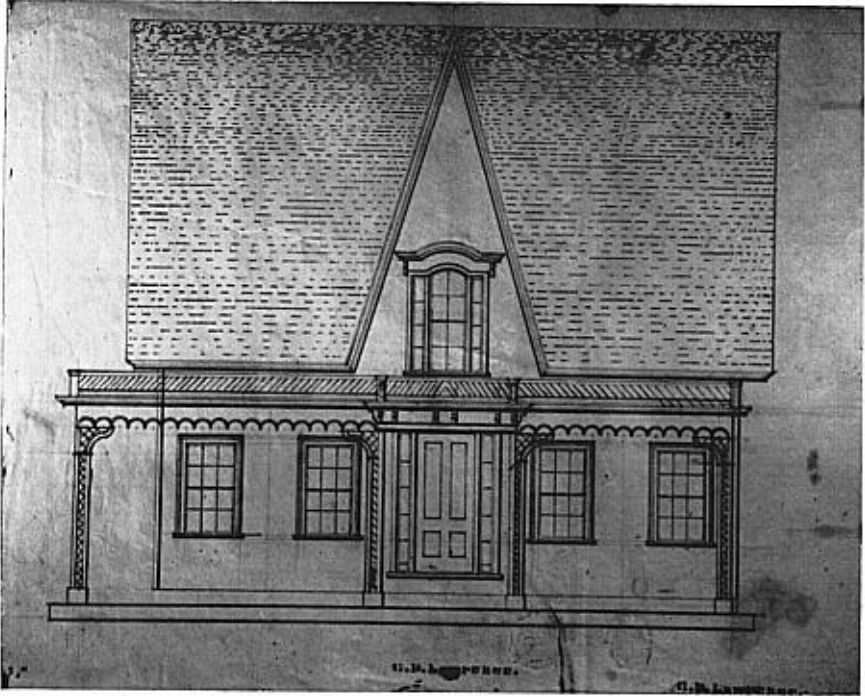


FIG. 9. ELEVATION OF HOUSE BY CHARLES D. LAWRENCE

for Charles D. Lawrence. Certainly the demand for new homes did not wane, for the population increased by 295 during the decade.¹¹ In a sense, being a builder meant living a different way of life from the majority of one's fellow townsmen. Like most Fairfield men, Lawrence's father and three brothers farmed for a living, and their investments lay in the cattle, sheep, horses, and many

ably self-sufficient to a great extent, but he needed it to buy the food and goods that he could not produce himself.

Lawrence was only one of many who led this different way of life in a predominantly rural state. In 1856 the second edition of the *Maine Business Directory* was published, carrying the names of 1,580 men in over 340 communities who called themselves carpen-

ters. It was these men, rather than the ten architects listed in Portland, Bangor and Bath, who were responsible for a major part of the designing and building that went on across the state.

The year 1856 was not without sorrow for Charles D. Lawrence. On May 24 his twenty-four-year-old brother Al-

erected a large, plain, two-story brick house. Perhaps being executor of his father's estate and the recipient of its residue after specific bequests enabled him to build such a home. In any case it was a more pretentious dwelling than the wooden farmhouses nearby. Although no plans exist by Charles D.

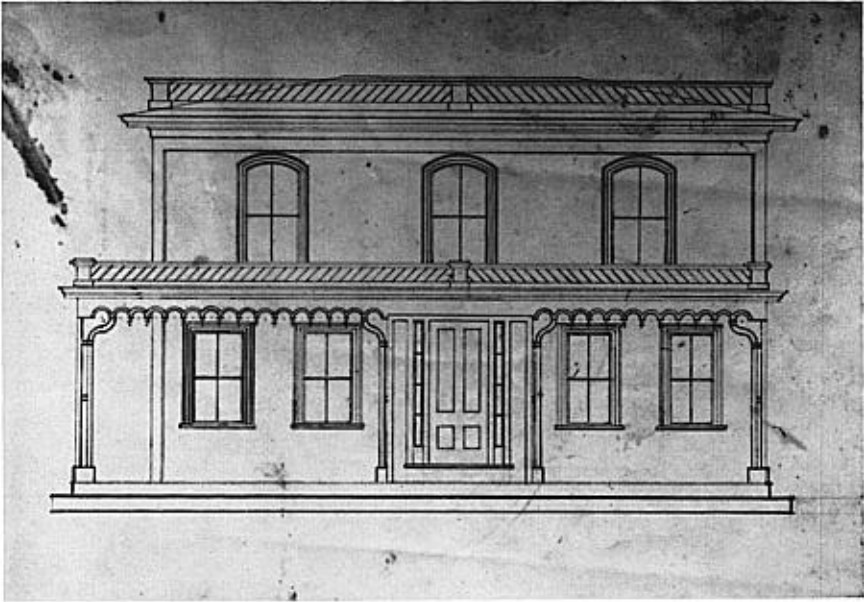


FIG. 10. ELEVATION OF HOUSE BY CHARLES D. LAWRENCE

bion died, and less than seven months later his mother Rose was gone. Within ten months after that his father Henry would die.¹⁴ 1856 was also the year in which his youngest brother, Alfred E. Lawrence, came of age. From all that can be determined, Alfred was endowed with an enterprising spirit. While his brothers had waited until their mid-twenties to buy property, he purchased, at twenty-one years of age, 180 acres in Fairfield Center from his father for \$2,000.¹⁵ Sometime before 1860 he

Lawrence for his brother's home, it would seem only natural that he would design and build it. Because it is a brick house with a brick ell, the usual identifying exterior features are absent. Interior woodwork is either completely unadorned or of a simple Greek Revival pattern which is also found on some of the fireplace mantels.

Although Alfred Lawrence's home may have seemed impressive to the people of Fairfield Center in the mid-1850's, five drawings in his brother's

portfolio would have given their conservative tastes a jolt. Four are Italianate and the fifth bears many Italianate characteristics although it has a French mansard roof. It is impossible to say whether they were built. Neither Fairfield nor Waterville has anything quite like them today. Yet two now-demolished houses photographed in Waterville in the 1870's (Fig. 11) have much in common with Lawrence's Italianate drawings, especially Figure 12.

Whatever the answer, the five Italianate drawings show what is probably Lawrence's highest level of achievement. Impressive at first sight, they still bear the mark of a man one step below professional training and understanding.

Charles D. Lawrence first learned building in rural Maine in the 1830's. The houses that he was familiar with, as well as those that he worked on, must have been of the basic rectangular design with a story and a half or two stories. Four or five windows would be spaced across the front of the second story and two on either side of the doorway. Arrangement of side windows would vary, and there would be an ell attached to the rear. This form became ingrained in Lawrence, and it appears in much of his work. One can understand his willingness also to use a gable end as a front for the idea had been in existence for over six decades and had begun to gain wide acceptance during his formative years in the 1830's. But as he employs the comparatively new Gothic and Italianate styles in the mid-1850's, he does not handle them as creatively as he could.

Beginning in the early 1840's a good number of architectural pattern books were published offering dozens of suggestions in treating the latest modes. By

the 1850's the balloon frame had been developed, and it enabled builders to free themselves from the rigid square or rectangular house form. Yet in only one Italianate house does he give evidence that he knows of this (Fig. 13). In Figure 12, although the bay window and trim are in vogue, the rectangular house form and ell could have been used years before.

It is evident, therefore, that the widely circulated builder's guides and architectural plan books did not directly affect Charles D. Lawrence. He probably owned or read some of them, for he shows an acquaintance with styles not in general use during his formative stage. Yet his knowledge could have been acquired from observation of what others were doing in nearby towns. Whatever the case, Lawrence's houses are conceptions, not copies. In his mind, he carried a collection of methods and designs from which he drew when the need arose. Although Lawrence's work has definite shortcomings, he should not be condemned for them. As has been indirectly stated, his training, period and region must be taken into consideration before giving him a fair evaluation. Although a window may be crowded or a chimney ill-placed, his houses still have a genuine appeal.

Charles D. Lawrence and his brothers Elihu and Alfred did not take part in the Civil War which changed the lives of many men in their generation. Yet for Charles and Alfred a change of a different nature was forthcoming. In the spring of 1865 James W. Sylvester and Reuel W. Woodman purchased the former Gage and Cate's planing mill on the Kennebec River at Kendall's Mills, now the community of Fairfield. They



FIG. 11. HOUSE (NOW DEMOLISHED), WATERVILLE, MAINE
From a stereograph in the Society's collections, taken probably in the 1870's.

paid the widow of George Gage \$4,500 for the land, building, mill machinery, tools and water rights.¹⁶ That fall Charles and Alfred Lawrence accepted an offer by Sylvester and Woodman to own a large share in the mill. On September 26, Sylvester sold all his rights to them for \$1,500, and eight days later

Sawing. Orders by mail or otherwise promptly attended to."¹⁸

In a sense this was a remarkable change for the Lawrences to make, because both of them had lived all their lives in the country and their occupations had been rural ones. However, it was no different from the transformation that

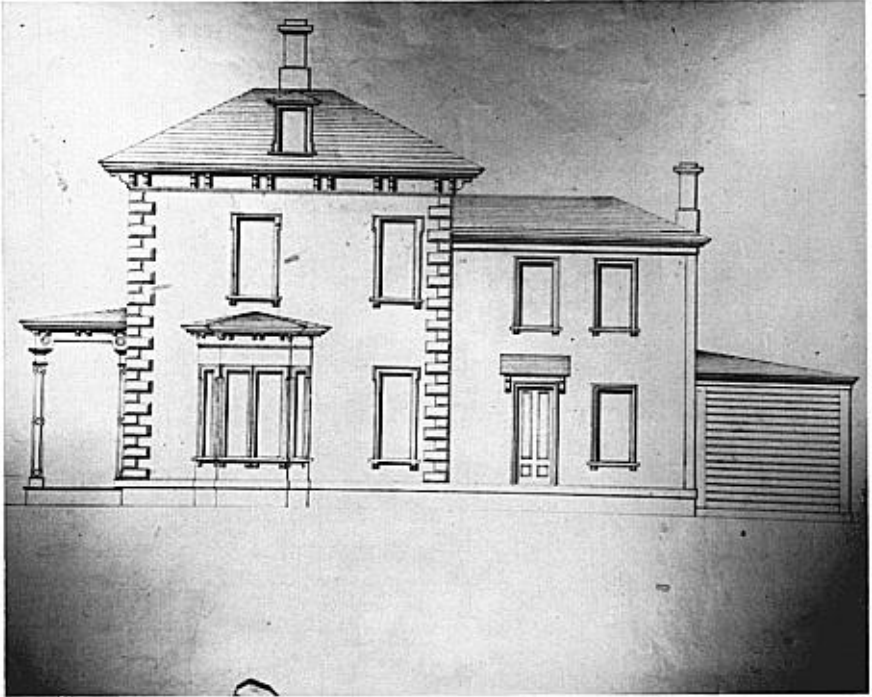


FIG. 12. ELEVATION OF HOUSE BY CHARLES D. LAWRENCE

Woodman parted with one third of his for \$400.¹⁷ A new firm called Woodman, Lawrence and Company was then founded. In one of its earliest ads it described itself as "manufacturers of Doors, Sashes and Blinds, Door and Window Frames. Mouldings of different patterns. All kinds of Packing Boxes made to order. Custom Planing and

had been happening to New England people since the early nineteenth century when the establishment of mills and factories first began to lure them from the farms to the towns. From its earliest days of permanent settlement in the late eighteenth century, Kendall's Mills had harnessed the Kennebec for sawing wood and grinding flour. By the end of the

Civil War the village had become a small manufacturing center as well as the business section of the town. Perhaps the Lawrence brothers felt that the future no longer lay in the country. Their decision to leave was a good one, for within a short time the population of Fairfield would be shifting to Kendall's Mills.

Both brothers sold their homes and land in Fairfield Center¹⁹ and purchased a joint lot on February 12, 1866, at what is now Western Avenue and High Street.²⁰ In keeping with his character, Alfred Lawrence took the corner portion and erected the only brick house in the village.²¹ It is doubtful if Charles Lawrence designed this large home. The brickwork, cornices, trim and cupola seem too intricate and unlike his other work. More likely he was occupied with the mill and with the building of his own house next door. Today it is somewhat defaced, having become in recent years both a residence and a bakery. Fortunately, a drawing survives to show it in its original state, and it is a typical Lawrence creation, very plain except for the cupola on the barn and the large, thin, double wooden brackets much like those on his earlier home in Fairfield Center. This house of about 1866 attests to the probability that Lawrence never excelled in his creative powers beyond the Italianate dwellings of the mid-1850's.

Charles D. Lawrence was not to have the same home life he had known in Fairfield Center, for his wife Melinda had died during the negotiations for the mill.²² She left him with three young children to care for, two daughters, Ellen C. and Lizzie M., and a son, Charles P. However, in the fall of 1869 he married twenty-five-year-old Jennie Davis.²³

The following March Alfred E. Law-

rence sold his share of the mill to his brother and began a grist and plaster mill with S. H. Blackwell. A year later in 1871 Reuel W. Woodman also sold his portion and started manufacturing furniture. Now Lawrence had sole ownership of the company, and it bore only his name.

Strangely enough, for the year 1871, Lawrence was listed under carpenters in the *Maine Business Directory*. However, it is doubtful that he had the opportunity to practice his old trade once more for there were fourteen other carpenters in the town. No houses in what is now the community of Fairfield seem to be his work except his own and perhaps his brother's. The next year his name disappeared from the directory for by this time his main concern was the mill. On March 10, 1872, tragedy struck his family once again when his young wife died in childbirth. The infant boy lived only six months.²⁴

Businesswise, the next decade must have been good for Lawrence. Kendall's Mills grew rapidly, causing a demand for his sashes, blinds, doors, window frames and moldings. He probably also had trade beyond the town for he was listed and advertised in the *Maine Business Directory* (Fig. 14).

Throughout his life Lawrence was a staunch Methodist. When he moved to Kendall's Mills he promptly transferred his church membership there. In July of 1868 he gave \$100 toward the purchase of the Methodist parsonage.²⁵ On one occasion he spoke in behalf of temperance, and at various times he contributed toward the cause. On April, 1876, he became a classleader, a steward and a trustee of the church.²⁶

Sometime during this period Law-

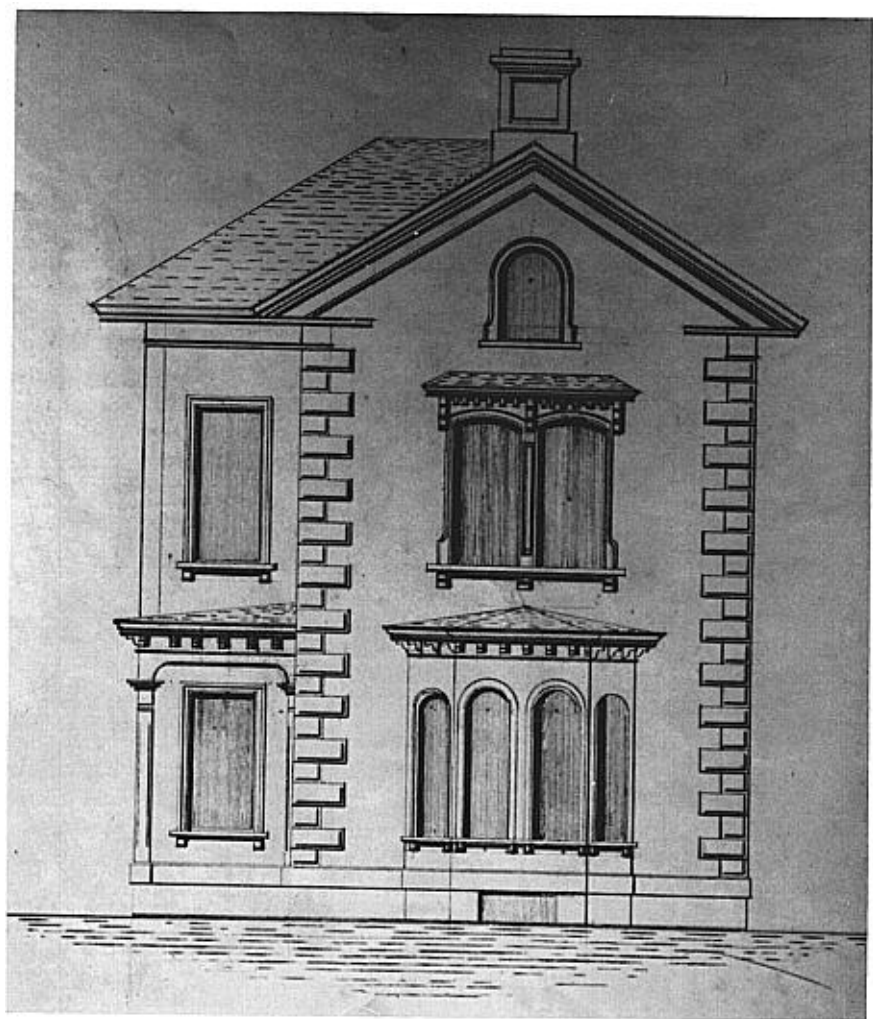


FIG. 13. ELEVATION OF HOUSE BY CHARLES D. LAWRENCE

rence married Emily F. Davis, his third wife. In December of 1878 his son was also married.²⁷ On the evening of July 21, 1882, Charles D. Lawrence once more faced change when his mill was completely destroyed in a large fire.²⁸ He seems to have carried no insurance, so the

his original trade, carpentry. A year before he had lost his son Charles and in 1889 his daughter Lizzie would die.³⁰ That year, at the age of seventy, Lawrence sold his house to his brother Alfred and moved to a dwelling on Elm Street near Newhall.³¹

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FIG. 14. ADVERTISEMENT OF CHARLES D. LAWRENCE IN THE MAINE BUSINESS DIRECTORY FOR 1878

only compensation he received was the proceeds from the sale of the lot and the water rights, a slow process that was not completed until 1895.²⁹ The business that he had helped to found and then carried on himself was swept away. The loss of the mill forced him to resort to manufacturing boxes in the barn of his home. Yet the work probably proved unfeasible for by 1887 he had returned to

1890 saw his brother leave town for Danville Junction where he had established a gristmill after the Fairfield fire in 1882. As late as 1892 Lawrence listed himself as a carpenter in the *Fairfield Directory*. His third wife Emily died in 1901.³² He continued to live in Fairfield until 1904. The last years of his life were spent with an adopted son, Eben Davis of whom nothing is known.

Lawrence died on July 12, 1907, at Davis' home in Eagle Lake, Aroostook County.³³ He had suffered a paralytic shock a few days before and did not recover from it. The next day funeral services were held in the Fairfield Methodist Church. There family and old friends paused to pay their respects to a man who had been a part of the town

for most of his eighty-eight years. As time passed, Charles D. Lawrence became completely forgotten and might have remained so had it not been for the fortuitous survival of a portfolio of his architectural drawings. These provided the key to unlock the story of Lawrence's life and give due credit to this man who left a mark upon the land.

NOTES

¹ Birth, Marriage, and Death Records of Fairfield, town clerk's office.

² Dates for Elihu and Alfred E. on their graves at the Maplewood Cemetery, Fairfield; for Hannah B. and Albion P., Fairfield, Maine, Cemetery Records, Maine State Library, Augusta.

³ *Census for 1820*, Washington, 1821.

⁴ Somerset County Registry of Deeds, Skowhegan, Vol. 62, p. 136.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 71, p. 250.

⁶ Birth, Marriages and Death Records of Fairfield, town clerk's office.

⁷ Somerset County Registry of Deeds, Skowhegan, Vol. 60, p. 288.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Vol. 62, p. 263.

⁹ *Seventh Census*, Washington, 1853.

¹⁰ Somerset County Registry of Deeds, Skowhegan, Vol. 64, p. 530.

¹¹ *Eighth Census*, Washington, 1864.

¹² Fairfield Tax Record, 1851-1856, Fairfield town office.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Fairfield, Maine, Cemetery Records, Maine State Library, Augusta.

¹⁵ Somerset County Registry of Deeds, Skowhegan, Vol. 82, p. 478.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. 110, p. 137.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Vol. 109, pp. 296, 297.

¹⁸ *Fairfield Woodpecker*, Vol. 1, January 29, 1867.

¹⁹ Somerset County Registry of Deeds, Skowhegan, Vol. 111, p. 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. 120, p. 316.

²¹ *Fairfield Chronicle*, Vol. 6, April 11, 1877.

²² September 29, 1866 (on her grave at the Maplewood Cemetery, Fairfield).

²³ Birth, Marriage and Death Records of Fairfield, town clerk's office.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Fairfield Methodist Church Records*, in possession of Rev. George W. Broadbent, Fairfield, Maine.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Clinton Advertiser*, July 27, 1882.

²⁹ Somerset County Register of Deeds, typical examples: Vol. 174, p. 244; Vol. 211, p. 237; Vol. 230, p. 344, Skowhegan.

³⁰ Charles P. Lawrence, May 11, 1886, and Lizzie (Lawrence) Chenery, March 30, 1889 (on their graves at the Maplewood Cemetery, Fairfield).

³¹ Somerset County Registry of Deeds, Vol. 195, p. 512, Skowhegan.

³² December 10, 1901, on her grave at the Maplewood Cemetery, Fairfield.

³³ *Waterville Morning Sentinel*, July 13, 1907.