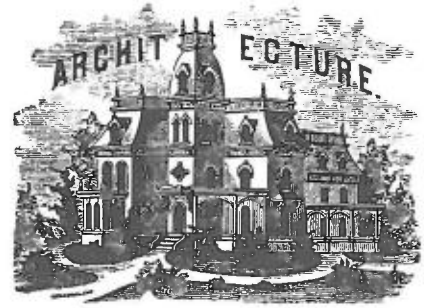


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Thomas Eaton (Active 1794-1831)

The unparalleled growth and prosperity of the District of Maine between the end of the Revolution and statehood in 1820 created unprecedented opportunities for the building trades. Among the housewrights attracted to Maine during this period were John Kimball, Sr., (1758-1831) and Alexander Parris (1780-1852) who removed from Massachusetts to Portland, Bradbury Johnson (1766-1819) of New Hampshire who worked in Saco and Irish-born Nicholas Codd (1754-1824) in the Damariscotta region.¹ In other areas a growing standard of living derived from increasing commercial activity gave local talent the means to build in ways not open to their forebears. Prominent among these native joiners were Samuel Melcher III (1775-1862) of Brunswick and Thomas Eaton, whose career began in York County in the 1790s.

Thomas Eaton's life remains one of the least documented of his contemporaries; neither the date of his birth nor the date or place of his death is certain. He is believed to be the son of Joseph Eaton of Wells, the ninth of eleven children born to two wives.² From his place in the birth order of his siblings whose dates are known and the fact that Thomas Eaton's wife Pheobe is known to have been born in 1769, he was probably born between 1765 and 1770.³ The particulars of Eaton's apprenticeship are unknown. He may have been trained locally, perhaps in York where his earliest work is thought to have been done. Or he may have received his professional training farther afield. Several of Eaton's early works show a direct dependence on Boston models, and at least one Maine-born joiner of the Federal Period, Nathan Nutter, Jr., of Otisfield, is known to have been trained in Boston and returned to his native place to work.⁴

The earliest building associated with Thomas Eaton is the house built for Judge David Sewall at York in 1794-96, known as "Coventry Hall." (Figure 1) Its L-shaped plan is of a type common in eighteenth century York, but its detailing ranks Coventry Hall among the first Maine houses to show an appreciation for the Adam-derived Federal Style then ascendant in Boston and other urban centers.⁵ The flush-boarded front of the Sewall House displays four full-height Ionic

pilasters, each carrying a section of frieze containing a single patera. The order is nearly identical with that employed by Bulfinch on his Tontine Crescent in Boston of 1793-94, but the manner of its application to mark the ends and central bay of the facade represents an older tradition in Boston-area architecture dating back to the late seventeenth century.⁶ This arrangement is hardly sanctioned by classical precedent, but is wonderfully expressive of the house's frame construction with each pilaster corresponding to a post of the facade wall.

What is unique about the Sewall House facade is the way in which the pilasters are grouped by the main cornice. Unlike a conventional Palladian arrangement which frames and enhances the center of a design, Coventry Hall's pilasters are grouped to emphasize the rooms flanking the entrance, which is de-emphasized by the recession of the cornice above. This same emphasis can be seen more forceably in the main doorway where coupled pairs of Ionic half-columns and piers flank the opening. The doorcase is based on another Boston work by Bulfinch, the Joseph Coolidge, Sr. House of 1792 and shares with it the curious arrangement of a fanlight wider than the door itself with no sidelights between the pairs of supports below. A third unusual feature which makes the Sewall House such a singular design is the way in which the dormers of its hipped roof have their windows let into the encircling parapet in place of balusters, a device almost Jeffersonian in its cleverness.

Inside, the house is distinguished by a fine triple-run stair with square balusters and a columnar newell quite different from the traditional massive handrails of the earlier eighteenth century. Under the upper run a door with a broad arched top leads to the rear of the house. The hall, the parlor which occupies most of the depth of the block to the left of the entry, and the two front chambers all contain elements of trim enriched with composition ornament. This use of composition ornament is the earliest surviving in the state and was probably imported from England via Boston or possibly Salem where similar examples are known.⁷

There is no proof that Thomas Eaton was the designer of Judge Sewall's house, but it seems certain that Eaton must have been employed on its construction if not as its principal contractor.⁸ Certain details such as the almost Baroque coupling of classical orders, the stair lay-out and use of composition ornament seen at

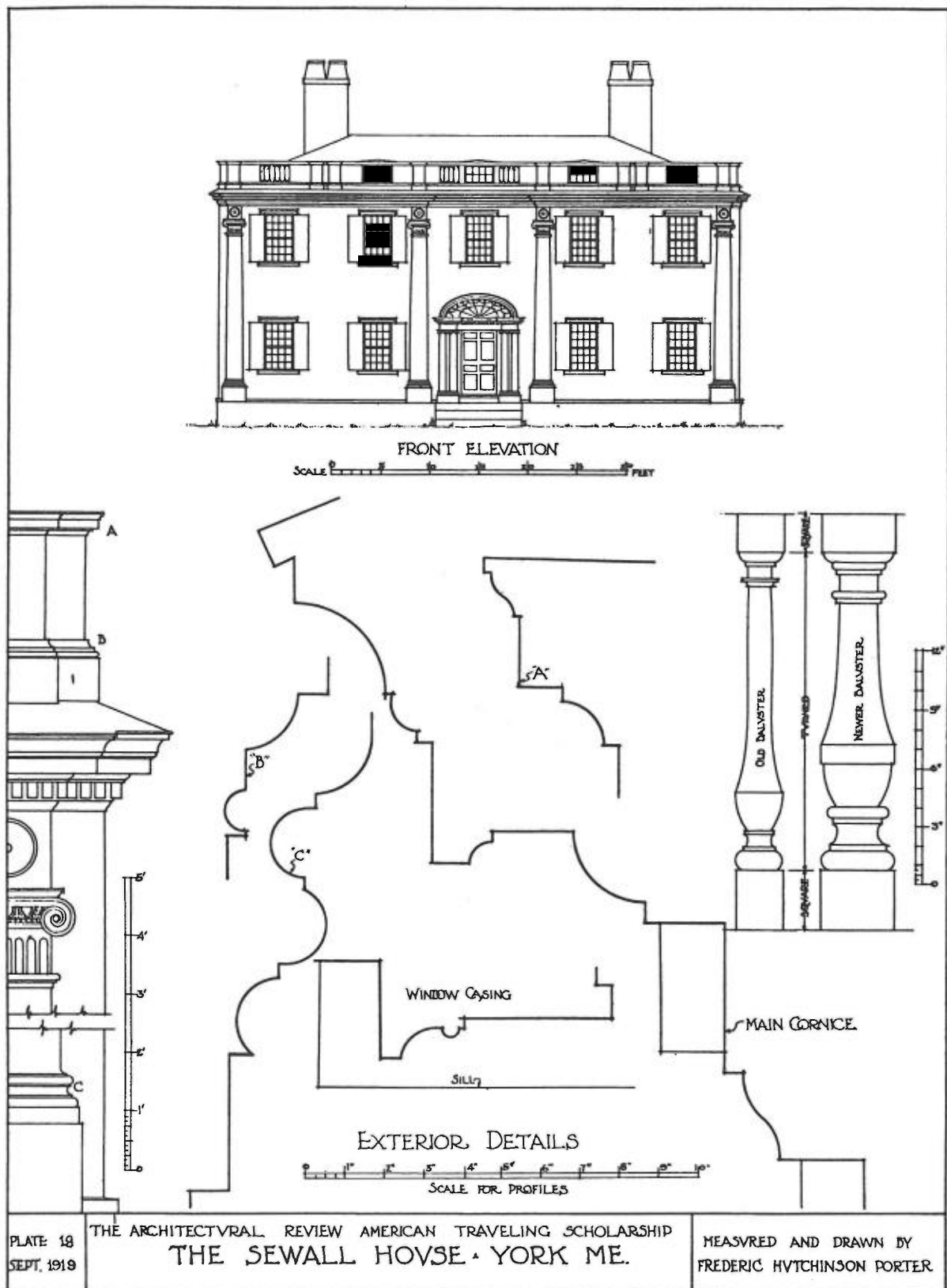


Figure 1. Judge David Sewall House, York, sheet of drawings by Frederic Hutchinson Porter, *The Architectural Review*, 1920 (MHPC).

Coventry Hall reoccur throughout Eaton's career. The precocious use of up-to-date Boston models and techniques evident in the Sewall House is echoed in later Eaton houses to such a degree that it is not hard to regard it as the first "masterwork" of a talented and ambitious joiner. Its florid nature is very similar to the earliest houses of Alexander Parris in Massachusetts and Maine or Russell Warren (1783-1860) in Rhode Island, all works by talented young men just out of their indentures.

The first group of buildings that reasonably can be assigned to Eaton were built from 1799 on in what was then the Second Parish of Wells, incorporated as the Town of Kennebunk in 1820. Eaton resided in the village from about 1799 to 1807,⁹ and in that time according to the diary of Andrew Walker he built at least four houses besides being the "architect and head carpenter in enlarging...the First Parish Church and building its steeple."¹⁰

The first house was for Nathaniel Frost on Main Street in 1799. It is an L-shaped two story structure with a low hipped roof once concealed by a balustrade. Its only noteworthy feature is a slightly projecting, flush-boarded, one-bay pavillion in the center of the facade. This contains a Palladian window at the second floor level above the main entrance which takes the form of a fanlight opening framed with Doric pilasters which also enframe the detached sidelights, all under a continuous entablature. The sidelights are particularly novel with their arched heads.

An even more conventional exterior is found on the Summer Street house built by Eaton for William Taylor in 1803, now known as the Taylor-Barry House and owned by the Brick Store Museum. Taylor's house was hip-roofed, almost square, and possessed four nearly identical doorways. These entrances are of a typical early Federal type which lack sidelights, are flanked by pilasters, and are topped with a triangular pediment partially enclosing a fanlight like those seen in the books of William Pain or Asher Benjamin's *County Builder's Assistant* of 1797.

The relative plainness of the Taylor House's exterior is at odds with the lavishness of its interior. The principal stair is nearly identical to that of Coventry Hall but with the added feature of a handrail respond along the walls of the stairwell which swoops up and down between pilasters echoing the curves of the handrail and newells in a delightful manner. The hallway has cornices and overdoors with composition ornament and preserves a colorful early stenciled wall treatment. The parlor and parlor chamber also contain a considerable amount of composition ornament.

Adjoining the Taylor-Barry House Eaton built a house for Judge Jonas Clark whose facade is his most complex undertaking in Kennebunk. (Figure 2) It may have been begun as early as 1801 and is really an elaborate wing appended to an enlarged 1760s house already on the site.¹¹ As Judge Clark was a colleague of Judge Sewall, it is not surprising to find some suggestion of Coventry Hall, namely the flush-boarding and pilasters,

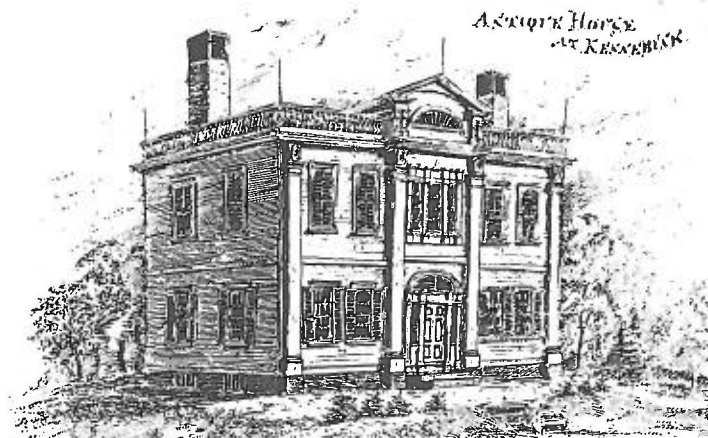


Figure 2. Judge Jonas Clark House, Kennebunk, 1874 sketch by William E. Barry (MHPC).

Doric in this case. But the Clark House also has a prominent belt course and a pedimented attic story over its slightly projecting central bay. These features are almost certainly modeled after a house of 1800 in Roxbury, Massachusetts, called "Grove Hall."¹² Also like Grove Hall, the Clark House features a modified Palladian window with sidelights but without an arched center, a type introduced into Portland by Alexander Parris at about the same time. The front of the attic pavillion has an arched opening now covered by a louvered fan framed by diminutive coupled Doric half-columns. The rear repeats these framing elements but with an open recess between them forming a covered balcony that must have commanded a superb view down to Kennebunk Landing. This romantic little loggia, if it is original, is unique in the canon of Maine's Federal period architecture.

Inside, the Clark House has surprisingly plain woodwork but with a stairhall similar to those in the Sewall and Taylor Houses. The large parlor or "assembly room" that Clark was "advised to have" as he began his ambitious dwelling occupies the entire depth of the new wing and recalls the equally spacious parlor of Coventry Hall and that of the George Wallingford House in Kennebunk which shares other features with the Clark House.¹³

George Wallingford built his house south of the Mousam River below the center of the growing village, perhaps as early as 1804, but more probably in 1805-06.¹⁴ The facade of "Wallingford Hall" recalls the Clark House with its flush-boarding, prominent belt course and modified Palladian window, but without pilasters and attic story. Its L-plan links it to both Coventry Hall and the Frost House. Attached to the south side of the house is an arcaded ell leading to a handsome barn forming one of the earliest and best-preserved examples of this type of extended layout that became so common in nineteenth-century Maine.¹⁵



Figure 3. First Parish Church, Kennebunk, 1909 view (MHPC).

The principal work for which Thomas Eaton has been remembered is the First Parish Church of Kennebunk. (Figure 3) In 1773 the Second Parish of Wells erected a meetinghouse of traditional plan measuring 44 by 56 feet, with a projecting porch on the long side opposite the pulpit. In 1803 it was sawn apart and the northern half moved back 28 feet, the porch removed and a belfry erected on the south end re-orienting the structure to a church form. The next year a three-stage tower was completed.¹⁶ (Figure 4) The lowest stage is square with an arched opening on each side joined at the impost by a belt course. The middle stage is octagonal with pairs of collonettes with projecting entablatures on the original sides. The upper stage is also octagonal with elongated oval "windows" rendered in black paint with a domed top and spirelet.

The overall dimensions of the enlarged structure can be ascribed to a vote taken by the parish as can the decision to have the belfry constructed entirely outside the body of the meetinghouse in the typical eighteenth-century manner rather than riding atop a projecting pavillion as at the contemporary Saco Meetinghouse erected by Bradbury Johnson. To Eaton must go the credit for the design of the steeple itself, one of the handsomest of its time in New England. It is a unique creation and owes little to contemporary published sources.¹⁷ Typical of Eaton are the paired collonettes which contrast so effectively with the simpler forms of the stages above and below. Eaton almost did not live to build the steeple. As the enlargement of the body of the building was being completed, he slipped and nearly fell from the roof. As a nineteenth century history relates:

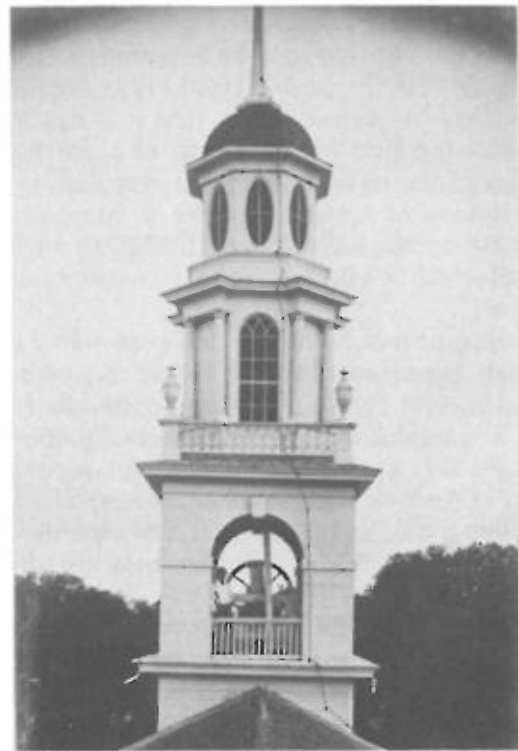


Figure 4. Spire, First Parish Church, Kennebunk, c. 1910 view (Courtesy of Brick Store Museum, Kennebunk).

"Mr. Eaton succeeded, by judicious use of his arms and legs, in slaking his speed, but still continued to descend until his feet were beyond the roof's edge, when he stopped. A shingle nail had not been driven home and this, catching in his pantaloons, arrested his progress."¹⁸

The enlargement of the Kennebunk church may not have been Eaton's first ecclesiastical commission. In 1800 a Baptist congregation in the Merriland section of Wells had raised a meetinghouse. As Thomas Eaton's first cousin Joseph Eaton was the society's minister, it is possible that he erected that costly structure. However, no image can be located that shows the Baptist meetinghouse before its destruction by fire in 1930 that might suggest Eaton's hand.¹⁹

Another possible Eaton work in Kennebunk before 1807 is the remodeling of his father's house that Joseph Storer undertook prior to his marriage in 1808. Before it was further remodeled in the Greek Revival style about 1850, the house featured a pilastered front and side elevation. The roof had a low balustrade.²⁰ No contemporary source directly links Eaton with the Storer House, but Eaton was buying land in Wells from Storer in several transactions between 1800 and 1811, and such relationships are not unknown between other builders and clients in Maine at the same period.²¹

Thomas Eaton next appears in Portland in 1807 as the builder of a house on State Street for lawyer Prentiss Mellen. According to one source Mellen brought his builder from Biddeford. However, Eaton cannot be documented as having worked outside of Kennebunk before 1807, and it is likely that the author has confused the fact that Mellen had himself removed from Bidde-



Figure 5. Front elevation of the Nathaniel Lord House, Kennebunkport, Drawing by Scott Benson (Courtesy of the Brick Store Museum, Kennebunk).

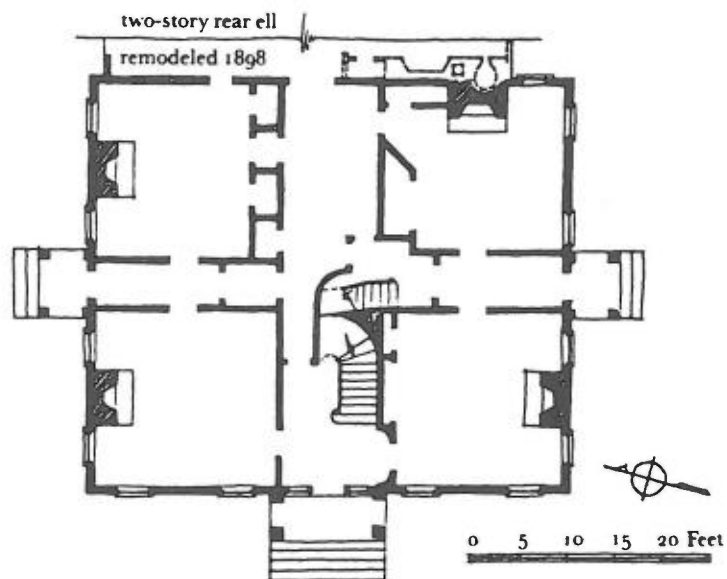


Figure 6. Floor plan of the Nathaniel Lord House, Kennebunkport, Drawing by Scott Benson (Courtesy of the Brick Store Museum, Kennebunk).



Figure 7. Nathaniel Lord House, Kennebunkport, c. 1850 daguerrotype view (S.P.N.E.A., Boston).

by James Gibbs in his *A Book of Architecture*, 1728. The steeple design was admired locally; versions of it appear on the First Congregational Church, Kennebunkport, 1824; the First Parish Church, Wells, 1831; and the Kennebunk Academy, 1834 (destroyed).

- ¹⁸ Remich, pp. 310-11.
- ¹⁹ Bourne, pp. 352-58. The church cost \$3,000.
- ²⁰ Candee, p. 73.
- ²¹ York County Deeds, Vol. 67, p. 121, 3/07/1800; Vol. 77, p. 44, 4/20/1804; Vol. 81, p. 190, 7/12/1806; and Vol. 84, p. 241, 6/27/1811, record land sales in Wells from Joseph Storer of Wells and Clement Storer of Portsmouth, N.H., to Thomas Eaton. Alexander Parris had similar dealings with one, possibly two, of his clients in Portland.
- ²² William Goold, "The Judge Mellen House and its Owners", *Portland Daily Press*, August 17, 1877.
- ²³ The Hopkins House at Danforth and Brackett Streets in Portland, built in 1807, is also a variant of the Preble House by an unknown builder.
- ²⁴ Portland Tax Records for 1802-11 and 1815-31, at Maine Historical Society, Portland, Coll. 257.
- ²⁵ York County Deeds, Vol. 84, p. 241, describes Eaton as "of Wells" on a deed made June 27, 1811. He is listed in the 1811 Portland Tax Records, but may have relocated after the assessment was made.
- ²⁶ Gilpatric, pp. 89-91.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.
- ²⁸ William E. Barry, *Pen Sketched of Old Houses, Boston*, 1874, shows a tall-case clock in a staircase niche that is almost certainly the one in the Parsons House.
- ²⁹ Candee, p. 84. Laura Fecych Sprague discovered the documentation in the probate records of Lord's estate at the York County Courthouse in Alfred.
- ³⁰ Barry's sketch of the house shows the portico on the south side, but none on the front. The rear ell was probably added to the house in 1824. See Candee, p. 87, n. 44.
- ³¹ Candee, p. 84.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- ³³ 1823 Portland Directories, Maine Historical Society, Portland.
- ³⁴ Jordan, p. 101.
- ³⁵ Joyce Butler, *The South Congregational Church, Kennebunkport, Maine: An Architectural History*, Portland, 1974, p. 1.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY THOMAS EATON

"Coventry Hall", Judge David Sewall House, York, 1794-96, Extant.
 Nathaniel Frost House, Main Street, Kennebunk, 1799, Extant.
 Judge Jonas Clark House, Summer Street, Kennebunk, 1801, Extant.
 Remodelling of First Parish Church, Main Street, Kennebunk, 1803, Extant.
 William Taylor House, Summer Street, Kennebunk, 1803, Extant.
 Wallingford Hall, George Wallingford House, Route 1, Kennebunk, 1804-06, Extant.
 Prentiss Mellen House, State Street, Portland, 1807, Altered.
 John U. Parsons House, Kennebunk, 1812, Extant.
 Nathaniel Lord House, Kennebunkport, 1814-16, Extant.

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Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Editor
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