

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Asher B. Bassford 1805-1887

Asher B. Bassford was born in Mount Vernon, Maine in 1805, the son of Moses Bassford, a farmer who had moved to the state from New Hampshire about 1799. Little is known of Bassford's early years except that his family had moved to Farmington by 1810, where his older brother David established his own household by 1820.¹ David moved his family to Calais around 1825, where he is first recorded as a house carpenter.² His younger brother Asher, also a house carpenter, and perhaps late of an apprenticeship with David, joined him there in 1829.³ It is not known whether the brothers worked together or separately, but subsequent court records and deeds indicate that if a partnership did exist, it was strictly informal.

The town on which the brothers set their fortunes was then experiencing a population growth unprece-

ented in eastern Maine. During the 1820s Calais quadrupled in size, changing from a relatively insignificant village, eleventh in population in Washington County, to the county's second largest town. In the following decade it would overtake the older commercial town of Eastport, and by 1850 would become the largest town in Maine east of Bangor. This dramatic expansion resulted from the construction of numerous sawmills at Calais' "Mill-town" village (and later upriver at Baring) starting in 1824 and the transformation of the village proper into a lumber port. The town must have been in serious need of building tradesmen in the late 1820s, in contrast to Farmington, whose population grew by only one-third during the same decade. In both the short and long term, Calais would prove a fortuitous choice for Bassford, continuing its expansion until about 1850—and then sustaining growth, albeit at a decelerating rate, until after his retirement.

Asher Bassford must have arrived in Calais with capital, for he immediately purchased a building



Figure 1. Frederick A. Pike House, Calais, 1856 View (MHPC).

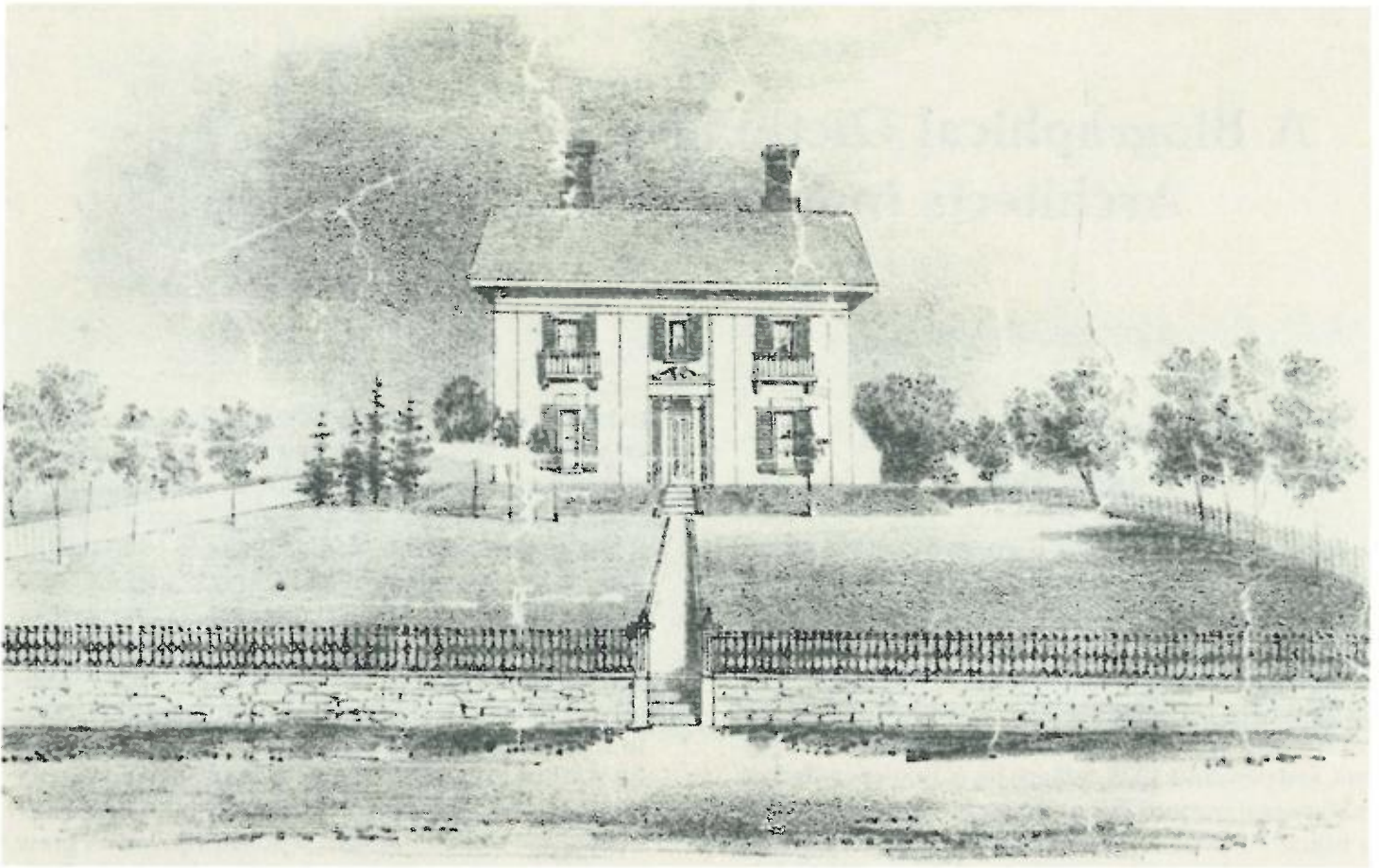


Figure 2. Nathaniel Lindsay House, St. Stephen, N.B., 1856 View (MHPC).

known locally as “the yellow store” for \$1,000, probably for use as a shop.⁴ David was less fortunate. Not only did he fail to amass taxable property, but he was sued at least three times for unpaid debts between 1829 and 1835, the last action involving bills unpaid in Farmington in 1825. At least \$180 was collected against him, a relatively large sum which may have been responsible for his leaving town before 1840.⁵

Despite notable reverses, Asher Bassford persisted and eventually flourished. In 1831 he, too, was unable to pay a creditor on time and lost \$45.72 in the resulting court action.⁶ That same year his wife Mehittable, whom he had probably married the year before, died, leaving him with a baby girl.⁷ By 1834 he had married Lucy Jane Stuart of St. David, New Brunswick, and in 1835 he purchased a lot on a four year mortgage and erected a house. He was doing so well by the following spring that he was able to liquidate the mortgage. However, this was the depression year of 1836, and Bassford was quickly in crisis. He was forced to mortgage the house again at the end of the year and a second time in 1837, both on unfavorable terms. In the early 1840s the house was either lost or sold, and Bassford lived for a few years without taxable property.⁸

Calais’ lumber-based economy recovered strongly in the 1840s, and the town experienced what was to be its decade of greatest expansion. In 1845 Bassford purchased property on Germain Street in a newly-lotted subdivision, erecting a house there in 1846-47.⁹ The comfortable size of house and lot is one evidence that Bassford had also recovered financially. Although nothing is yet known of his actual work to this point, his house and other evidence indicates that Bassford had risen to the top of his profession locally by about 1850 and had aspirations beyond those of Calais’ other carpenter-builders.

Little is yet known about either the work patterns or the social and economic relationships of nineteenth century carpenter-builders. These subjects are best examined for mid-nineteenth century Calais by using the Federal Censuses of 1850 and 1860, which straddle the decade of Bassford’s major known commissions. In both returns the carpenter-builder appears as the single most common tradesman. By 1850, when Calais’ growth rate had stabilized after twenty-five years of rapid increase, the community of carpenter-builders is a mature one, over half of the thirty-seven men who comprise it being forty years or older, with only four classified as appren-



Figure 3. Lindsay House, Main Entrance, 1984 View (Photo MHPC).

ly increased. Bassford, like other skilled and ambitious tradesmen of his era, took quick and full advantage of this new technological development.

Architect-builders like Calvin Ryder and Benjamin S. Deane in the Penobscot Valley had pioneered in the 1830s and 1840s in matching the capabilities of the new woodworking machinery to the ornamental possibilities of the then-current Greek Revival style.¹⁵ Their interpretations of Greek Revival pattern-book drawings relied heavily upon replacing clapboards with planed tongue and groove boarding over increasingly large amounts of a building's exterior wall surface. This matched or flush boarding defined pilasters, entablatures, and the wall surfaces between them and was accented very sparingly and subtly in the best examples by carved wooden and/or cast-iron floral ornament. This new ornamental mode was copied and expanded upon by carpenter-builders throughout the Penobscot Valley before the Civil War.

There is perhaps no clearer illustration of the ornamental revolution than the proliferation of matched boarding. Matched boarded facades had been a symbol of wealth and status in Maine at least since the 1760s, and a few even exist on pre-industrial buildings in Washington County.¹⁶ Before the introduction of the mechanical rotary planer, however, the act of planing, tongueing, and grooving boards by hand was so time consuming and expensive that only major buildings were sheathed with them and then, generally, only their facades. By the 1850s, however, the rotary planer had so cheapened the process that some small-sized houses had matched-boarded fronts, and many more expensive residences had matched boarding on all sides, including the ell and sometimes the carriage house. Matched-boarded houses are particularly prevalent in Bangor and Belfast, where they exist in conjunction with every style from Greek Revival to Mansard.¹⁷

Information on early woodworking machinery in Maine is sparse, but "a machine for planing and grooving boards" existed in Calais as early as 1838, when it was offered for sale "together with the rights for Washington County".¹⁸ In 1855 there was at least one planing mill in St. Stephen, and by 1860 two planing mills existed in Calais and two in St. Stephen.¹⁹ The best evidence of the presence of such machines on the St. Croix, however, are Bassford's buildings of the early 1850s. Although certain buildings of the 1830s in Calais-St. Stephen have matched-boarded facades,²⁰ which may or may not have been executed using the new technology, at least three of Bassford's commissions of the 1850s are sheathed with matched boarding over virtually their entire surfaces, a feat which would have been prohibitively expensive without the rotary planer.

Two of Bassford's finest houses, those for Nathaniel Lindsay and Henry F. Eaton, both in St. Stephen and nearly identical, are examples of the matched boarded Greek Revival style (Figure 2). Except for the rear wall of their ells, both houses are entirely sheathed with tongue and groove, which is raised to form pilasters and entablatures whose planar quality is accented by iron balconies on two second story facade windows and door surrounds consisting of two columns supporting an entablature with wreaths and an anthemion above (Figures 3, 4 & 5). The Eaton House has two such doorways, the second on the ell. The wreaths, which also exist throughout the interior of the house on the corners of door surrounds, are reminiscent of Charles G. Bryant's work in Bangor during the 1830s.

The grandest of Bassford's known commissions, the Calais Academy of 1851, had a decorative scheme extremely similar to that of the Eaton and Lindsay Houses, again relying on an entirely matched-boarded exterior, with columns and anthemion this time extending two full stories before the door (Figure 6). Crenelations atop the belfry and quatrefoil moldings applied to the walls of the facade were gothic flourishes probably copied from Calais's elaborate Unitarian Church of 1834.

The now demolished dry goods store, "The Golden Fleece", which Bassford designed for the Cullinen Brothers on Main Street in St. Stephen, probably had a matched-boarded facade only, as it closely abutted adjacent buildings (Figure 7). Like the Lindsay and Eaton Houses, and a few other buildings then existing in St. Stephen, the Golden Fleece made use of an ornamental balcony, probably of cast iron. Ornamental cast iron became common on the better buildings of eastern Maine, either as balcony rails or fencing, only after the establishment of iron foundries in the larger towns in the 1830s.

In many of his designs, Bassford freely mixed elements which we, in retrospect, usually associate with individual styles. To Bassford and many of his contemporaries, style was simply an end, and whatever elements suited the builder's fancy, particularly on other buildings which he admired and considered up-to-date, were included in his work. As late as 1867, on the Captain Wooster House, Bassford was still using Greek Revival-inspired pilasters and entablatures along with more contemporary Italianate brackets. To Bassford and his client, this was certainly not *passee*, but simply the way houses were ornamented in Calais.

Aside from a relatively minor commission in 1867, nothing is known of Asher Bassford's life or career from the Civil War until his death in 1887. His unexplained absence during the well-documented rebuilding of Calais after a disastrous fire in 1866 and

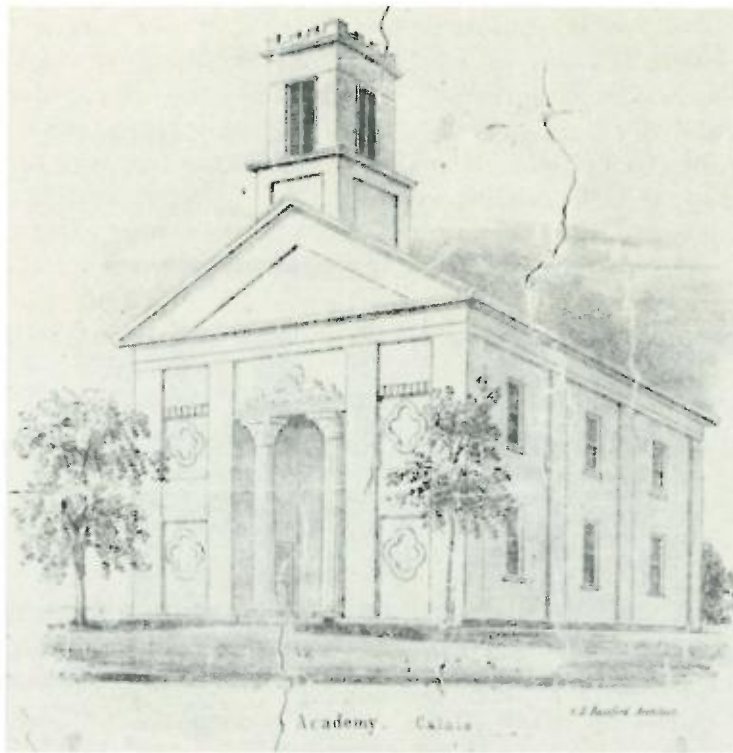


Figure 6. Calais Academy, Calais, 1856 View (MHPC).

the fact that all of his property was placed under the successive ownership of his son Edward and his wife Lucy after 1864, suggest that Bassford was in retirement, perhaps due to illness, during the last two decades of his life.²¹

One outstanding accomplishment already alluded to was Bassford's education of his three sons in the building professions. Levi L. Bassford (1834-?), the eldest, was referred to as a civil engineer in the 1860 census, the only member of this new discipline locally. Whether he was trained partly or wholly by his father and whether he worked with his father or others is unknown. None of his work has come to light, and he appears to have moved to Chicago during or just after the Civil War.²²

The middle son, Edward Payson Bassford (1837-1912), is listed as an "architect and builder" in the 1860 census, the same in which his father is called a "master builder". If the elder Bassford never became an actual architect, he certainly trained his son to that end. Edward left Calais after the Civil War for Portland, where he practiced briefly as an architect in 1866, moving to St. Paul, Minnesota by the end of the year. He became one of that city's leading architects, residing there until his death.²³ At least once, in 1871, he drew a set of house plans and sent them to Calais, where they were executed by his younger brother, Asher, Jr.²⁴

Asher B. Bassford, Jr., was also trained as a builder, but appears not to have called himself an architect while working in Calais. He stayed in Calais

until sometime in the 1870s. By 1887 he had joined his brother in St. Paul and was in Lansdowne, Pennsylvania in 1898, the year of his mother's death.²⁵ It is not known whether he, too, eventually became a professional designer.

Asher B. Bassford's career was not unique, for it was repeated in scores of New England towns during the same period. However, it helps in a small way to illuminate the little-understood world of the pre-Civil War architect-builder.

Gregory K. Clancey
February, 1985

NOTES

- ¹ U. S. Census, Maine, 1800, 1810, 1820, 1830.
- ² Washington County Court of Common Pleas, Johnson vs. Bassford (1835).
- ³ Obituary of Asher B. Bassford, *Calais Advertiser*, August 10, 1887.
- ⁴ Washington County Deeds, Vol. 20, p. 40; Vol. 20, p. 41.
- ⁵ Washington County Court of Common Pleas, 3 separate actions; Town of Calais Tax Assessor's Records.
- ⁶ Washington County Court of Common Pleas, Waterhouse vs. A. Bassford (1831).
- ⁷ Vital Statistics, Calais, Maine State Archives.
- ⁸ Washington County Deeds, Vol. 31, p. 148; Vol. 32, p. 193; Vol. 33, p. 516; Vol. 36, p. 334; Town of Calais Tax Assessor's Records.
- ⁹ Washington County Deeds, Vol. 56, p. 31.
- ¹⁰ *Calais Gazette & Advertiser*, August 16, 1836.



Figure 7. "The Golden Fleece", Cullinen Brothers Store, St. Stephen, N.B., 1856 View (MHPC).

- ¹¹ Washington County Deeds, Vol. 62, p. 379; 1856 Map of Calais-St. Stephen.
- ¹² Illustrated on 1856 Map of Calais-St. Stephen. In addition, seven of the buildings pictured identify Bassford as the architect.
- ¹³ Town of Calais Tax Assessor's Records.
- ¹⁴ These are the Hayward Pierce House, Bangor (1851), by Benjamin S. Deane; the C. D. Jameson House in Upper Stillwater Village, Old Town (by 1855); and the H. P. Sargent House in South Brewer. These similar houses are related to the Pike House in chronology, plan and style, but differ in many ornamental details.
- ¹⁵ Charles G. Bryant of Bangor, whose career preceded and overlapped those of Ryder and Deane, introduced in Bangor much of the decorative vocabulary these men came to use. It is doubtful, however, that Bryant's work, occurring as it did in the early 1830s, relied much, if at all, on powered machinery.
- ¹⁶ e.g., the Thomas Ruggles House in Columbia Falls (1818) and Washington Academy, East Machias (1823).
- ¹⁷ This paragraph is based largely upon unpublished research by the author.
- ¹⁸ *Calais Gazette & Advertiser*, August 15, 1838.
- ¹⁹ *Maine Register and Business Directory*, 1855; *Calais Advertiser*, February 2, 1860.
- ²⁰ e.g., Milltown Methodist Church, Calais (1836).
- ²¹ City of Calais Tax Assessor's Records.
- ²² Bassford File, Maine Historic Preservation Commission, Augusta.
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Machias Republican*, June 10, 1871.
- ²⁵ City of Calais Tax Assessor's Records; Obituary of Asher B. Bassford; Washington County Probate Records, Lucy J. Bassford.

**List of Known Commissions in Maine and
Charlotte County, New Brunswick
By Asher B. Bassford**

- First Asher B. Bassford House, "Cooper Road", Calais, 1835, Unlocated.
 Second Asher B. Bassford House, Germain Street, Calais, 1846-47, Altered.
 Job Holmes House, Main Street, Calais, c. 1850-51, Extant.
 Calais Academy, Calais, 1851, Destroyed.
 Milltown Academy, Milltown, St. Stephen, New Brunswick, c. 1850-56, Destroyed.
 H. & P. Cullinen Store, St. Stephen, New Brunswick, c. 1850-56, Destroyed.
 Henry F. Eaton House, Milltown, St. Stephen, New Brunswick, c. 1850-56, Extant.
 Nathaniel Lindsay House, Main Street, St. Stephen, New Brunswick, c. 1850-56, Altered.
 Frederick A. Pike House, Calais, c. 1855-56, Destroyed.
 Captain Wooster House, Main Street, Calais, 1867, Extant.

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