

# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



## Isaac Gilkey 1768-1814

Although they were necessary to construction and although most were at times architects as well as builders, early housewrights were generally “unsung heroes”, whose names were seldom recorded in connection with their work. Among those escaping complete historical oblivion was Isaac Gilkey of Gorham, who, according to that town’s historian Hugh D. McLellan, “was in his day a famous carpenter or joiner”<sup>1</sup> Gilkey was active for more than twenty years at the turn of the eighteenth century and probably had a hand in constructing many of the homes and public buildings erected during what was a time of growth for his town. Some of his public and commercial undertakings are known; but, as he was not the only builder in the locality, it is impossible definitely to link his name with any houses except those built on his own.

Born in Gorham on July 14, 1768, Isaac Gilkey was the youngest child of James and Margaret Elder Watts Gilkey. Both parents came originally from Northern

Ireland. James had seen action on the Louisburg Expedition, for which service he had received his land grant. He had eventually settled on a thirty acre farm not far from the road to Falmouth on the southern edge of what became Gorham village, but which was in 1753 somewhat exposed, being more than a mile and a half from the town fort.<sup>2</sup>

Nothing is known of Isaac Gilkey’s education or of his training. However, Gorham was large enough to support schools during his childhood, and he probably attended some of the classes held nearby. James Gilkey’s “strong Presbyterian” background would suggest that an ability to read at least the Bible was valued, and his service in various town offices, including a committee to study the new Constitution and report to the town, indicates a degree of learning. Margaret Gilkey “made her mark” when signing deeds, but it is to be expected that both parents would have wished their son to obtain some education.<sup>3</sup>

Training could easily have been accomplished within the family. Mrs. Gilkey’s brother was the builder Samuel Elder, who might have welcomed the opportunity to gain the services of an eager nephew

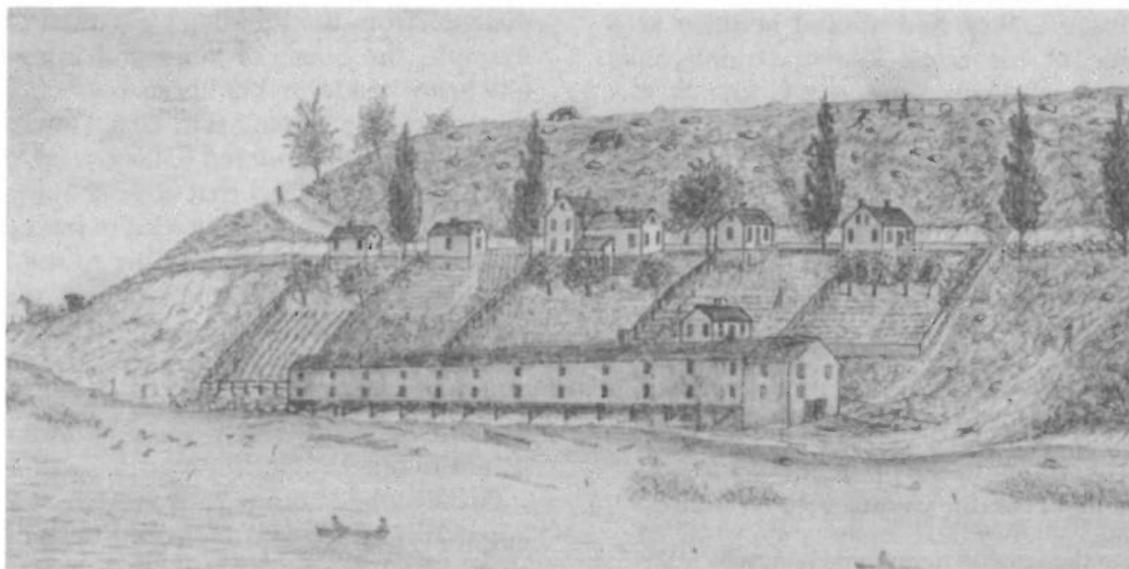


Figure 1. Hammond’s Rope Walk, Portland, 1902 drawing by C.Q. Goodhue (Courtesy of Maine Historical Society).



Figure 2. Baxter House, Gorham, 1987 view (MHPC).

while passing along knowledge of his trade. Tax records show that Isaac was not living at home after he reached sixteen; his father paid but one poll tax then. At the same time, Samuel Elder, whose sons were still very young, was paying three polls.<sup>4</sup> This could indicate apprentices living with his family.

It may be that the two men cooperated on later work, though the only recorded instance of their working together on a construction site was at the framing of the First Parish Church in 1797. McLellan claimed that Gilkey "was second under Wentworth Stuart" in doing that framing and elsewhere noted that Elisha Cobb "was one of those who framed the... church edifice, in company with Samuel Elder and others"<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Isaac Gilkey had special abilities as a farmer. Some of his other known commissions depended on such skills. One was Gorham's hay scales, originally located near the junction of the roads to Portland and Scarborough, extending into the latter. The scales were essentially a frame and a roof. As McLellan remembered them:

Their general appearance was that of a sort of open shed, under which the loads to be weighed were driven. From under the side of the roof was suspended a horizontal bar, the principle of whose working was precisely that of a pair of old-fashioned steelyards. From the short end of the lever hung two chains, one of which was attached to each of the clumsy wooden hubs of the great wheels. (It must be borne in mind that the ox-carts then in use were all of the old-fashioned two-wheeled variety.) Heavy weights were then placed in the scale-pan, which was suspended from the long arm of the bar: in this way the load was weighed; the cart when balanced being lifted bodily clear of the ground.<sup>6</sup>

More extensive undertakings in the way of framing were ropewalks in Portland. Gilkey is said to have constructed "a number of" these. Portland had four in the early nineteenth century. One, described as being "on the shore of Back Cove, under the hill", would have been the ropewalk on the present Hammond Street, which was owned by Thomas Hammond when it burned in 1846. It was built for Neal Shaw in 1804 and was framed in Gorham, then taken to Portland for final assembly. As all members for the period's heavy frames had to be carefully cut, with mortises and tenons shaped and with holes drilled for the treenails even before the posts and beams were lifted into place, it was not unusual for much of the shaping to be done at a site some distance from the building's eventual location. For example, the house of Mary and Joseph McLellan had been "made" in her home town of Gorham and then erected in Falmouth in 1756. However, the size of the ropewalk rendered Gilkey's task noteworthy. Townspeople recalled that after shaping the posts, he laid the frame out in the road in front of his house in three sections, each reaching to the hay scales.<sup>7</sup> No contemporary depiction of that ropewalk has been found. However, a drawing made from memory fifty-five years later shows a long simple structure, given character only through a wider bay on one end and two levels of widely-spaced windows running its entire length (Figure 1).

Two dwelling houses were erected by Gilkey, both apparently in the late 1790s and both on land purchased from his family. It is not entirely clear which was built first. The present Baxter Museum (Figure 2) was constructed on land deeded to him in 1797



Figure 3. Isaac Gilkey House, Gorham, 1988 view (MHPC).

and was sold in 1799, while the house he and his family occupied until 1810 was on a lot purchased in 1796<sup>8</sup> (Figure 3). None of these dates correlates with the usual times for a man to erect a new home—his leaving home or his marriage. Isaac was listed as a head of household in the 1790 census. He married Catherine (Catey) Staples in April of 1792. Where they lived in the early years of their marriage is not recorded, although he may have built on family land before purchasing it.

Neither house today is quite as originally built. Even before being moved to the back of its lot in 1907, the Baxter House had undergone many changes. The roof was extended to form wide eaves which were visually supported by small brackets resting on a broad entablature board. To accommodate this, second floor windows were lowered. Those on the first floor were enlarged, and two dormers were inserted in the front roof. The Gilkey home retains the older roofline (and until recently the early windows), but was given a front entry and updated parlor woodwork in the Greek Revival period. Since the entry was made part of the stair hall, there remains no evidence as to whether the house had a louvered fan above the front door like that on the Baxter House.<sup>9</sup>

However, the two houses are similar in shape, and the floor plans are representative of newer developments. Instead of the locally common central chimney or center hall plans, Gilkey utilized a two story, one room deep layout with two chimneys on the rear wall. Each house also has a kitchen ell extending from the south side of the rear wall. That in the

Baxter House retains its cooking fireplace and bake-oven. The present ell on the Gilkey House appears to be of a slightly later date, but there are indications that some form of kitchen addition was there from the beginning.

Even though the floor plans were both up-to-date and locally innovative, many interior details suggest that Gilkey was ultimately conservative. The unaltered north parlor in his home contains a mantel wall with a mitered, crossetted molding around the fireplace opening and simple panelling above the mantel shelf, all more typical of the earlier Georgian mode than of the new Federal period. The surviving early parlor mantel in the Baxter Museum is more clearly Federal in form, although without even the central tablet often used for trim. Bedroom fireplace surrounds tend to be simple and of mitered moldings, matching those around other openings and being conventional for their time and place.

The 1810 sale of Isaac Gilkey's home was actually an exchange. Gilkey parted with his house and the lot on which it stood, in addition to a nearby woodlot, and in return obtained a fifty acre farm located a few miles north of the village center. The exchange marked a change of occupation as well as of location. The deeds for both transactions referred to "Isaac Gilkey, house carpenter"; but when he sold a piece of his farm two years later, Gilkey was called a "yeoman".<sup>10</sup> Perhaps a partial reason for the move was his health, for Isaac Gilkey died on May 14, 1814, two months before his forty-sixth birthday.

Isaac Gilkey was no doubt responsible for the building of many more of the homes erected in his

immediate neighborhood, as his parents' farm and the acreage he bought across what is now South Street were subdivided while he was living there and working in his trade. At least two of the houses on the lots were erected with floor plans similar to those he introduced to the town. The building just south of the Baxter lot has a staircase very like that in Gilkey's own home. A Main Street house which would have been next door to that of Isaac's half-brother has some of the few other local examples of the coved window lintel found on both known Gilkey-built homes. We can hope eventually to locate further documentation as to other works of this "famous carpenter".

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Hugh D. McLellan, *History of Gorham, Maine*, Portland, 1906, p. 515. McLellan lived in Gorham and would have been ten years old when Gilkey died.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 513, 481, 47-48.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 513, 373-4, 151; Cumberland County Registry of Deeds, Vol. 28, pp. 225 and 324.
- <sup>4</sup> Gorham tax records, 1785, 1786, 1788. Two of Isaac's half-brothers also paid extra polls during some of these years, though not in 1788.
- <sup>5</sup> McLellan, pp. 515, 440. Stuart, younger than any of the others, seems an unlikely choice for head framer. However, surviving church records do not mention the builders.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 515, 663-4; William Willis, ed., *Journals of the Rev. Thomas Smith and the Rev. Samuel Deane*, Portland, 1849, p. 416. The scales were 800-900 feet from Gilkey's home. The ropewalk, as shown on Portland city maps, extended for about a thousand feet along the shore.
- <sup>8</sup> McLellan, p. 513. The 1797 transfer was not registered, but when Mrs. Gilkey sold her interest in the farm in 1798, she excepted Isaac's lot. CCRD, 28/225. For sale, with buildings, see CCRD 34/237; for the other property, CCRD 60/41, 55/19 and 60/46. The current designation refers to the 1806-1826 owner, Dr. Elihu Baxter, whose son, James Phinney Baxter, purchased the house in 1907 and made it into a museum dedicated to his father.
- <sup>9</sup> Nor is it certain whether the existing fan is original. Many exist in the area, but on houses which either are later or which, like this one, were remodelled. The building had a front porch before it was moved and before it was "fixed and remodeled according to the taste of Mr. Baxter." *Portland Evening Express*, Aug. 19, 1907. An old photo is in *Gorham-town...A Pictorial History*, Gorham, 1977.
- <sup>10</sup> CCRD 60/46; 60/44; 68/204.

## LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY ISAAC GILKEY

Isaac Gilkey House, 76 South Street, Gorham, 1796, Altered.  
Baxter House, 69 South Street, Gorham, 1797, Altered.  
Hay Scales, South Street, Gorham, c. 1800, Destroyed.  
Neal Shaw's Ropewalk, Hammond Street, Portland, 1804,  
Destroyed.

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