

John Kutts

Rare Drawings and Records for an 1830 House

Roger G. Reed



Winchester, Mass., Archival Center

FIGURE 1. The Robert Bacon House, located on Mystic Valley Parkway, was designed by Boston architect John Kutts in 1830 when the architectural profession in America was in its formative years.

The Robert Bacon House in Winchester, Massachusetts, is an excellent example of an early nineteenth-century country residence that also is unusually well-documented (figure 1). Located at 6 Mystic Valley Parkway, the Bacon House represents the substantial type of dwelling that began to be built in the rapidly growing towns around Boston for a new class of entrepreneurs — men

who used waterpower to launch a variety of manufacturing businesses. Of particular interest are the surviving elevations, plans, and building records for the house, dating from 1830, that provide insights into several aspects of early American architectural and construction practices.

When Bacon hired a Boston architect, John Kutts, to design his house, America's architectural profession was in its forma-

tive years. During the 1820s and '30s, Kutts was one of a small group of men who called themselves architects. These men distinguished themselves from other individuals in the building trades by providing their clients with measured plans and elevations, sometimes accompanied by full-scale drawings for architectural details, and written specifications. Architects also typically prepared contract documents for

the various building trades, and they sometimes provided construction supervision. This differed from the traditional contract between a client and a carpenter or mason who, using brief specifications and crude sketches, would agree to construct a building “according to the best of his knowledge and skill” in a “faithful and workmanlike manner.”¹ As the number of architects grew during the early nineteenth century, rising entrepreneurs like Bacon began to employ these experts to ensure competent construction. It seems likely that a number of houses in the communi-

ties around Boston at this time were designed by architects like Kutts, but documentation of their work is rare. With the Bacon House, Winchester has a residence from this early period that is especially significant because its owners have inherited original architectural drawings that were signed and dated by Kutts, as well as other records.²

Little is known about the careers of most of America’s early nineteenth-century architects. The lives and works of these men are often documented by only fragmentary evidence, and Kutts is typical in

this respect. Even basic facts about him have yet to be uncovered. His death at age 64 in 1860 is known, but no record of his birth has come to light. Kutts is an unusual name in New England, and it is possible that he came from Pennsylvania where a large German population had settled. If Kutts was an immigrant, he may never have become an American citizen, which would explain why his name is not recorded in the federal census records between 1820 and 1860.³ Yet Kutts was an ambitious man, judging by what has been learned about him.⁴ In at least three instances, he entered major national architectural competitions.

From 1828 through 1838, Kutts was listed in the Boston city directories as an architect. At different times, he rented rooms in buildings on Cornhill and Court Street in the vicinity of what is now Government Center. During this decade, he designed at least one store and several houses, including two surviving Massachusetts projects: a house at 74 Pinckney Street on Beacon Hill and the Bacon House in Winchester.⁵

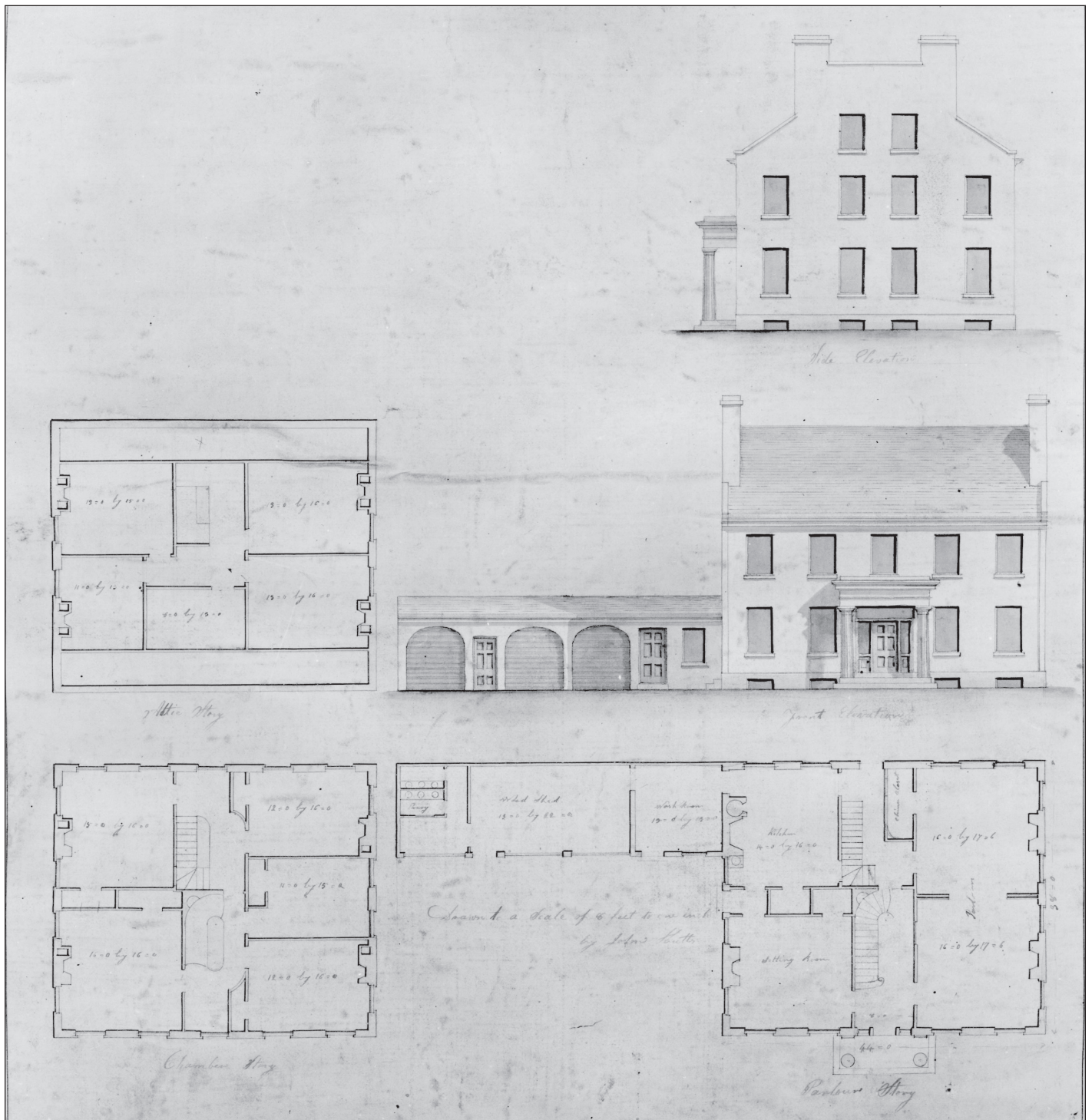
These two residences provide an interesting comparison between an urban rowhouse and a country house, both designed at a time when the Federal style was giving way to the Greek Revival style. Both structures were conceived as upper middle-class dwellings without showy architectural ornamentation. The earlier house (figure 2), 74 Pinckney Street, was begun in 1829 and completed in the following year, when the Winchester house was designed and built. Although the Beacon Hill address of the Pinckney Street dwelling might suggest a degree of grandeur, this house, like most in the immediate neighborhood, was relatively modest with little embellishment. In fact, the house at 74 Pinckney Street was built on speculation for a man who never lived there, Hollis Chapin. When the house was completed, Chapin sold it for \$4,000. Although original drawings have not been located, the building’s specifications survive.⁶

The principal facade of the Pinckney Street house is three stories high, with no basement or attic. The first floor (referred to as “basement” in the specifications, even though it is at street level) contains a front room with a fireplace and a kitchen in the rear, presumably with a bake oven



Courtesy of Roger G. Reed

FIGURE 2. In 1829 Hollis Chapin hired Kutts to design a rowhouse that would be built on speculation at 74 Pinckney Street, Beacon Hill. It was finished the following year.



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FIGURE 3. Kutts prepared two rendered elevations and three floor plans for the new house in Winchester and then signed his work.

that no longer exists. The house has a side hall plan with front and rear staircases. Attached to the rear of the house, but no longer extant, was a one-story wood shed with a privy. The second floor contains double parlors extending the depth of the house and a small room in the front hall

above the stairs. The bedrooms are located on the third story with natural light provided by a dormer in the front and a skylight in the rear.

Given the nature of this project, one cannot assume that Kutts designed all the interior finishes. A surviving contract

establishes that Phineas Weeks and Amos Perrin were hired as builders, and they were paid \$2,900 and were given a building lot behind the house. This compensation covered the cost of all materials as well as the labor. Because Weeks and Perrin were paid a flat fee, the architect

needed to specify a certain quality in the construction. This is evident in the specifications. For example, the quality of the marble mantels in the parlors was specified at a given value (\$90 to \$100 a pair). No cost was suggested for the first-floor (basement) mantelpiece, but for this item, wood painted in imitation of marble was permissible. There was a gradation in the quality of the wallpaper to be provided, depending upon the floor. The first floor was to be finished with paper that was worth 75 cents a roll, the parlors with paper worth \$1 a roll, the bedrooms on the third story 62 ½ cents a roll, and the entrance hall at 75 cents a roll, plus “a suitable border.” Not specified was the value of the architrave trim around the windows and doors, which was installed with plain corner blocks. Had the house been owner-occupied, Kutts might have been more involved with the design of the trim as well as other details.

In 1830 Robert Bacon owned a hat store on Ann Street in Boston’s North End. He commissioned Kutts to design a new house in what was then the town of Medford, later a part of Winchester (figure 3).⁷ We do not know why Bacon chose Kutts, but there is one likely connection. In early 1829, a merchant named

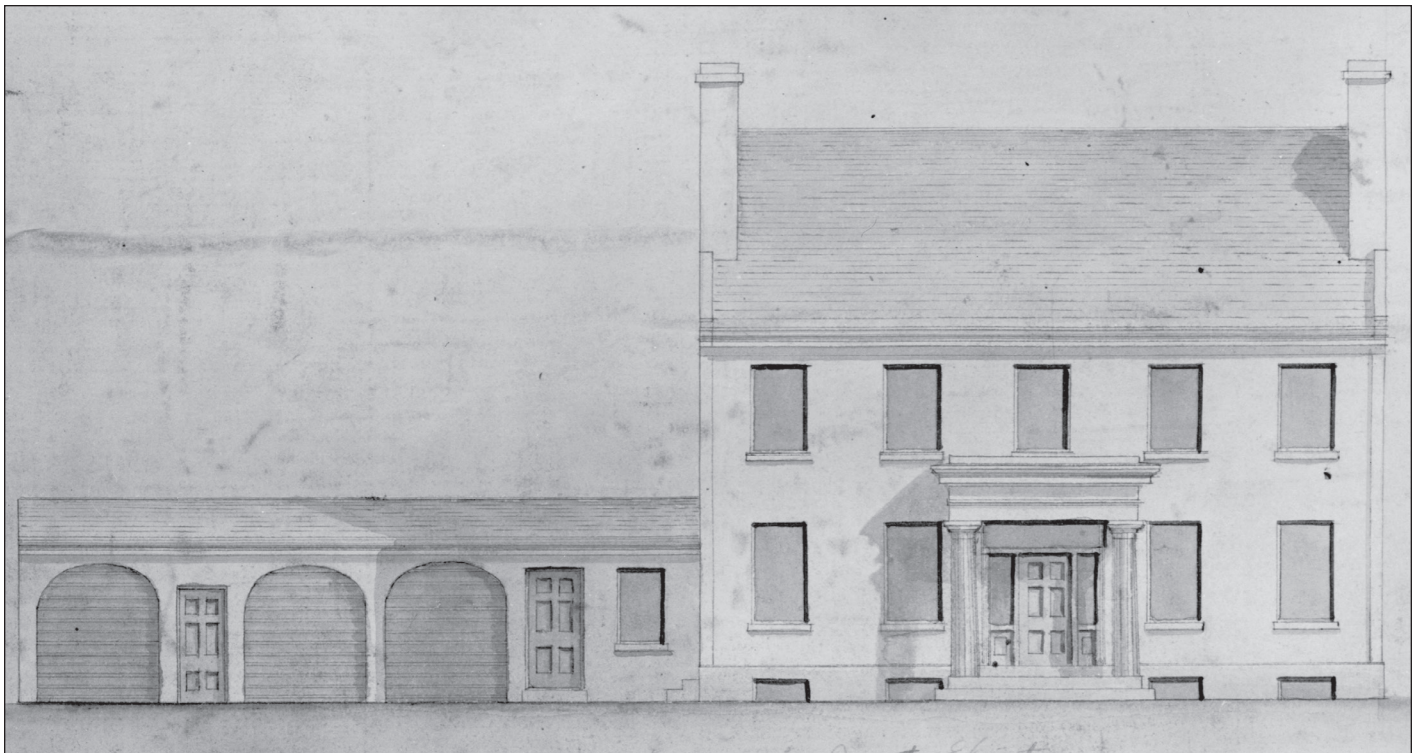
John Symmes hired Kutts to design a house on Baldwin Place in Boston.⁸ Not only was Baldwin Place close to Bacon’s Ann Street store, but Symmes was probably the same man who sold Bacon his Winchester property in 1824.⁹

Bacon was more than a store owner. He controlled two patents for manufacturing felt that was produced for hats and is said to have made improvements for the production process. He was operating two mills in Winchester when he turned over his Boston hat store to his son Robert, Jr., and decided to build a house near his factories. This move coincided with the construction of the Boston and Lowell Railroad through Winchester during 1831–35. Another son, John, later joined him in Winchester, building a house and mill for himself in a neighborhood that came to be called “Baconville.”

The original orientation of Bacon’s house on the north side of the Aberjona River faced the mill pond rather than a road. All the factory buildings and other housing were located on the opposite side of the river and mill pond and were reached via Grove Street. The railroad ran through the middle of this small manufacturing establishment. In 1863 land was taken by eminent domain to provide

aqueduct access to the Mystic Lakes for the City of Charlestown. In the 1890s, the surrounding area changed substantially with the construction of Mystic Valley Parkway. The mill pond was filled and the new road ran directly in front of the Bacon House, giving it the conventional suburban house orientation that it has today. At the rear of the property, land was sold for residential lots on Bacon Street and Lakeview Road. In 1903 the house itself was sold and left the Bacon family.

When the exterior of the house is analyzed, most striking are its brick end walls with their H-shaped stepped gables. Often built during the Federal period, these brick ends were traditional, especially in southern climates where the heat loss from end wall chimneys was of little concern. The brick end walls are not in themselves a stylistic feature, but they prevented the employment of Greek Revival gable ends, suggestive of classical temple pediments, that might be expected in a house of this period. One stylistic element associated with Federal designs is on the one-story wing extending from the house’s west side (figure 4). This wing, built for the wash room, wood shed, and privies, has round-arched shed doors typically found on Federal-style carriage houses. A typical



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FIGURE 4. The dominant feature of the Bacon House is the Greek Revival portico with columns in the Doric order.

Greek Revival-style wing would have dispensed with the round-arched doors and might have had a prominent entablature with a cornice.

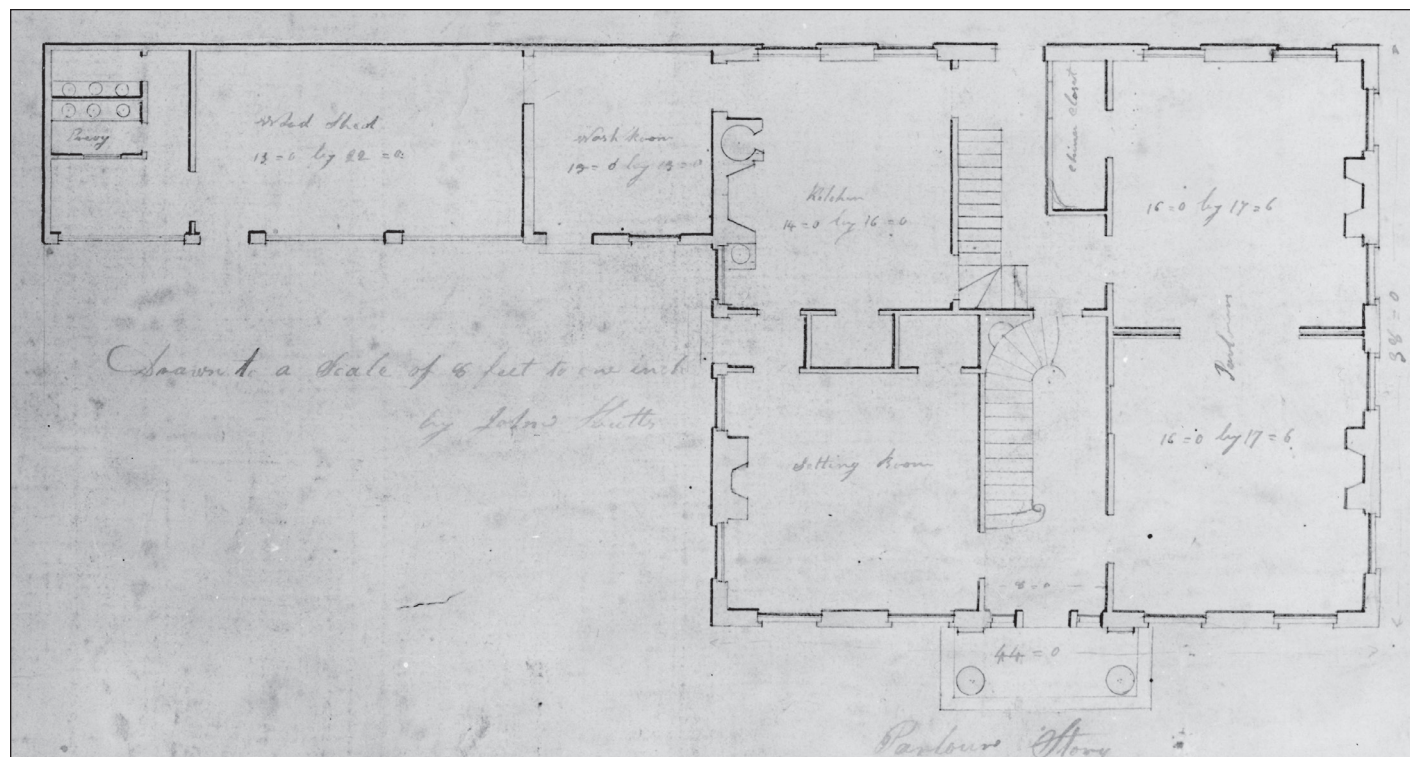
By 1830 Boston already featured several major architectural landmarks in the Greek Revival style, including St. Paul's Church, 1819, and Quincy Market, 1824–26, both by Alexander Parris, and the Tremont House hotel, 1828–29, by Isaiah Rogers. Certainly Bacon would have been aware of these buildings, and Kutts provided the Bacon House with Greek Revival elements. Most notable are the Greek Revival portico and entrance surround, while the paneled door is framed by side lights and transom lights similar to those of the house on Pinckney Street. The leaded glass has unusual geometric designs that are unlike the floral motifs associated with the Federal style. The same geometric treatment is repeated at the side entrance, which has a transom but no sidelights. The portico at the front entrance, supported by Doric columns, demonstrates that Kutts understood the rules of the classical orders as well as the new architectural fashions. A balustrade on the roof of the portico is not in the original drawings, so it is not known whether it was a later addition.¹⁰

Inside, the Bacon House features a central hall plan with front and back staircases, found in both the Federal and Greek Revival periods (figure 5). The flying staircase with a niche, shown on the original plans, was common in early nineteenth-century Boston townhouses. Indeed, Charles Bulfinch designed a strikingly similar curved staircase and stairwell niche for the Thomas Amory Mansion, 1803–4, on Park Street in Boston, one of the grandest Federal-period houses constructed in the city.¹¹ The long-term interest in this type of staircase suggests that Bulfinch-designed houses for wealthy Bostonians still provided a standard of excellence for men like Bacon. Plans with double parlors on one side of the central hall became popular with Greek Revival houses, but double parlors also were found in Federal houses. Linking these two rooms was made possible by locating the chimneys on exterior walls. A willingness to build fireplaces and chimney stacks on exterior walls coincided with improvements in fireplace designs, including the increased efficiency promoted by Count Rumford.

Located on the other side of the front and back stair halls were a sitting room and the original kitchen, labeled on the plans.

Between the two rooms is a side entrance that provided access to the house without intruding on the “best” rooms. The kitchen originally had a large bake oven. The floor plans do not indicate a particular room for dining, although the rear parlor had a china closet, suggesting that this room was used for that purpose. As noted, the ell off the original kitchen provided space for the wash room (laundry), the wood shed, and the privies, located in the far end. On the second floor of the house were located five bedrooms, four of which had fireplaces. The third story was also partitioned to create five rooms, four with fireplaces.

Bacon erected a comfortable house that was probably substantially larger than what he would have been able to build in Boston. In the congested city, only the very wealthy could afford to build a house on this scale. The interior finishes of the Bacon House, while not lavish, reflect a refined elegance. The flying staircase is graceful in its execution, with a curved handrail ending in spiraled newel post. The architrave trim around the windows and doors has bold molding profiles that are characteristic of the Greek Revival style. Symmetrical corner blocks are ornamented with rosettes, also characteristic of



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FIGURE 5. The plans of the first floor reveal that the kitchen originally was located at the rear of the main house, and a laundry, wood shed, and privies were in the wing.

Medford August 12th 1830

Survey of Mr Nathaniel Holmes work for Mr Robert Bacon

To 2063 feet boarding & shingleing at 2¹/₂, 112 ft rally pieces at 4 \$ 48, 32
 " 42¹/₂ ft saddle bit at 6, scuttle & steps 7, 32, 78 ft capon walls at 15, -- 22, 42
 2225 ft boarding at 2¹/₂, 100 ft coving & returns at 7¹/₄, put 3 up pipes 2, 50, 112, 65
 94 ft watertable at 6, 80 ft rustic corners at 20, 1026 clapboards at 3, -- 52, 42
 801 ft butting at 2, 45 ft ballustrade at 15, 11342 ft cutting & farring at 1, -- 189, 94
 1313 ft bridg'd part at 2, 8 door casings sining & hang doors & steps at 6, 31, -- 76 74
 finish 27 door cases & doors at 15, 76, finishing portico 147, 12, -- 573, 14
 finish 39 windows at 14, 93, cellurnind " doors & stairs 38, 98, -- 621, 25
 finishing closets 111, 71 9 chimney pieces at 2, 88, 19 ft casings at 7, -- 192, 96
 100 ft steps at 4, 4270 ft floors at 4 7/8, 381 ft mopboards at 6, -- 241, 31

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FIGURE 6. Several documents relating to the construction of the Bacon House survive, including an itemized list of the carpentry work.

the new style. In the double parlors are marble mantels with fluted pilasters supporting corner blocks. The sitting room has a plain version of the same Greek Revival mantels.

Over the years, relatively few changes have been made to the house. After the original kitchen was remodeled as a dining room, the ell became the location of the kitchen. Additions to the rear of the house were made in the 1950s, and recently a garage was erected at one end of the kitchen wing. These changes, along with the construction of a pool house built in the 1950s, were executed in a neoclassical vocabulary that reinforces the Greek Revival features of the original house.

In addition to the plans, a list of the carpentry work for the house survives (figure 6). It notes that the carpenter was Nathaniel Holmes, a housewright from Boston's North End.¹² The itemized list was prepared by J. Stodder, a "surveyor," which in this case meant he measured all

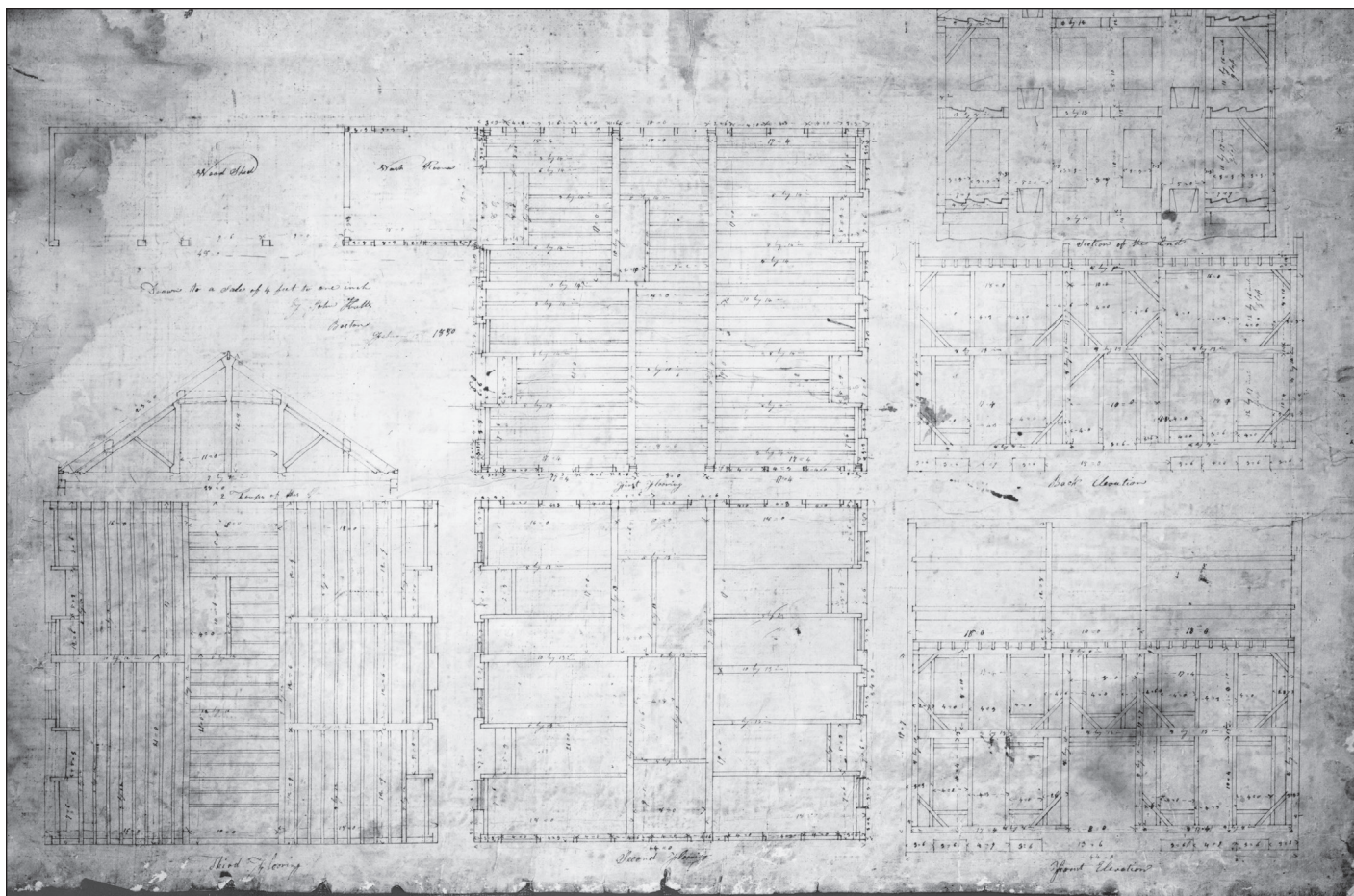
the carpentry work to establish the costs that Bacon owed Holmes. Unlike the arrangement made for the construction of the Pinckney Street house, Bacon paid directly for the building materials for the Winchester house.¹³

This list raises the question of the role of the architect in the design of the Bacon House's interior finishes. The surviving drawings prepared by Kutts consist of two sheets. One sheet has a front elevation and one side elevation, along with three floor plans, including the woodshed wing. The second sheet provides the framing plans, including the roof truss (figure 7). No documentation survives to indicate whether the architect provided detail drawings either for the exterior or interior of the house. An experienced housewright like Holmes could have made decisions regarding finishes, and he could have purchased the mantels. On the other hand, Kutts may have been hired to supervise the construction of the house, in which

case he would have provided direction to Holmes. Holmes was paid for interior carpentry, including the staircases and sashes. He was also paid for exterior carpentry, including boarding and shingleing and "finishing the portico."

Another document in possession of the Bacon House owners is a contract for the lath and plaster work with a tradesman named Philip Kelley. A contract for the brick masonry has not survived.¹⁴ Also missing is any record of the carpenter who framed the house. Unless this work was managed by Bacon, it is logical to assume that Kutts would have provided supervision to ensure that the plans were carried out as designed.

We have records of only a few other buildings in Boston by John Kutts. These are probably all demolished, or, in the case of some North End projects, extensively altered. According to the city tax records, Kutts earned a modest income during his ten years in Boston. At one point, in 1833,



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FIGURE 7. A second sheet that Kutts prepared for Bacon provides the framing plans, including the design for the roof truss.

he is recorded as being in partnership with another Boston architect, William Sparrell.¹⁵ As early as 1829, Kutts was attempting to advance his career well beyond Boston. In that year, he entered the competition for a new City Hall in Albany, New York. Philip Hooker won the competition, but Kutts's design for the cupola was incorporated into the winning entry.¹⁶

In 1832 Kutts entered one of the major national architectural competitions of the era, the design of Girard College in Philadelphia. At least seventeen architects from around the country participated in the competition, which was won by Thomas U. Walter.¹⁷ Six years later, in 1838, Kutts entered the competition for the new State Capitol at Columbus, Ohio. This nationally advertised competition provided a \$500 premium for first prize, \$300 for second place, and \$200 for third place, but Kutts was not successful in any category.¹⁸ Travel in pursuit of this proj-

ect, plus the serious economic depression that began in 1837, may explain why Kutts left Boston in 1838. The depression was national, but Boston architects were particularly hard hit. A year later, Richard Upjohn, one of the finest architectural talents in the country and a resident of Boston at the time, left for New York.

Kutts also moved to New York. He is recorded as working for Isaiah Rogers, another Boston transplant, in 1839.¹⁹ By 1843, Kutts had settled in Philadelphia. While there, he submitted watercolor designs for public buildings at the Artists' Fund Society, which suggests he was accomplished in his rendering skills. From 1845–49, he resided elsewhere. In 1847, the office records of Richard Upjohn list payments made to Kutts for work that is not described. By then, Upjohn's national practice may have sent Kutts to a number of far-flung locations. In 1850 he was back in Philadelphia. The only projects by him that have been identified in that city are a

commercial building, long since demolished, and a Gothic-style monument in Woodlawn Cemetery. He died of scarlet fever in Philadelphia in August of 1860.²⁰

Many of America's earliest architects died in obscurity. Although little is known about Kutts, enough evidence survives to suggest that he met with some success in his chosen career, even if he never became a leading figure of his era. The surviving drawings for the Robert Bacon House serve to document the work of a member of this lesser-known tier of architects — designers whose careers and buildings will for the most part forever remain unknown, yet who contributed substantially to the appearance of America's leading cities and their surrounding towns in the early nineteenth century.

(Roger G. Reed is an architectural historian and works as a preservation planner for the Town of Brookline, Massachusetts.)

NOTES

1. These phrases were commonly used in early contract documents in the building trades.
2. The drawings and other original documents related to the construction of the Bacon House are in possession of the owners of the property, Dr. and Mrs. Arlan Fuller. My appreciation to Alice Fuller for kindly allowing me to visit the house and examine it from top to bottom.
3. The only record of death I have found is in the United States Federal Census Mortality Schedules Index, which recorded that John Kutts, an architect, died of scarlet fever in Philadelphia in August (no date) 1860, age 64, which would make his birth year around 1796. The City of Philadelphia has no record of his death to corroborate that information. Transcripts of federal census records for 1840 indicate that a John Kutts was living in Exeter Township, Berks County, Pennsylvania. Inquiries to the Historical Society of Berks County Museum and Library indicate that the transcription for the federal census was incorrect and that the name was "Kutz." There were many Kutz family members from Berks County, including a John Kutz born in Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania, in 1798. It is not likely that this man was the architect. While the spelling of the name might have been changed from Kutz to Kutts, the age given does not match the death record for the architect. Moreover, Berks County was very rural and would have offered little work for an architect in 1840.

To add to the confusing possibilities, Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., of Augusta, Maine, owns a copy of Edward Shaw's builder's guide, *Civil Architect*, which includes the following notation by the owner, John Bellamy: "Bought at Boston, Mass. October 1834, Price \$7.50, while he was a student with Professor John Kurtze the celebrated Architect and a Dane, from Denmark in Europe." As there is no record of a John Kurtze in Boston at that time, it is possible that this inscription refers to John Kutts. Even if Kutts were of German descent, this is possible as Denmark then included some German provinces. Yet I have been unable to find any reference to a school for architects run by John Kurtze or Kutts.
4. Much of the information on John Kutts was uncovered by Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., who generously shared his research with me.
5. For several buildings designed by John Kutts in Boston, see "An Index to Boston Building Contracts Recorded in the Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, 1820–1829," and "An Index to Boston Building Contracts Recorded in the Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, 1830–1839," both compiled by Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Augusta, Maine: privately printed by the author, 1995.
6. Allen Chamberlain, *Beacon Hill: Its Ancient Pastures and Early Mansions* (Boston: Houghton

Mifflin, 1925), pp. 259–60, 280. The building contract and specifications recorded in the Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, Boston, are in Book 341, pp. 85–87. My thanks to the current owner of the house, Andrew R. Kirk, for kindly showing me his home.

7. The sheet of drawings showing elevations and floor plans are $\frac{1}{8}$ " scale on a sheet roughly $18" \times 20"$. The framing plans are $\frac{1}{4}$ " scale on a sheet roughly $38" \times 25"$. Winchester architect Allen Charles Hill photographed the drawings and made them known to scholars.

8. Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, Boston, Book 337, pp. 256–59.

9. For Bacon's activities in Winchester, see Henry Smith Chapman, *History of Winchester, Massachusetts* (Winchester, Mass.: Town of Winchester, 1975, orig. pub. 1936), pp. 50, 129, 132, 133–34. There is also information on the Bacon family in what was part of a "Winchester Then and Now" series by local historian Henry E. Simonds: "The Bacon family's houses," *Winchester Daily Times and Chronicle*, July 28, 1981. A bound collection of these articles is available at the Winchester Public Library.

10. The present balustrade is a recent replacement of a balustrade that appears in a circa 1920 photograph. There is at least one other change from the original plans. The woodshed ell is an additional half-story taller than shown in the architect's elevation drawing, which allows for dovescotes. With no early photographic evidence available, it is not known when these changes from the original design were made.

11. For an illustration of the Amory Mansion staircase, see Harold Kirker, *The Architecture of Charles Bulfinch* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 180.

12. According to an obituary index of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Holmes died on Dec. 5, 1872, age 73.

13. The document is identified as "Survey of Mr. Nathaniel Holmes work for Mr. Robert Bacon," dated Aug. 12, 1830, Medford. Holmes was paid \$2,493.30 for his work. J. Stodder was probably Joseph Stodder, who was listed in the Boston directories first as a housewright, 1796–1818, then as a surveyor, 1820–21, a housewright again in 1822 and 1823, and finally a surveyor from 1825–37. His widow is listed in the 1838 directory.

14. The handwritten agreement between Bacon and Philip Kelley is dated May 26, 1830. Curiously, Kelley's rates were to be figured in shillings. Philip Kelley (1805–1878) was listed in the directories as a mason in 1832–33, a plasterer in 1835–41, and a stucco worker in 1842–46. Christopher Hail, "Boston Architects and Builders: Compiled from the Boston Directory, 1789–1846" (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1989); a

short obituary appears in *Annals of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association*, 1795–1892 (Boston: Rockwell and Churchill, 1892), p. 247.

15. City of Boston Tax Assessment Records, Boston City Archives, Ward 4.

16. Mary R. Tomlan, editor, *A Neat Plain Modern Style: Philip Hooker and His Contemporaries* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993).

17. Agnes Addison Gilchrist, "Girard College: An Example of the Layman's Influence on Architecture," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 16 (May 1957), pp. 22–27.

18. Sandra L. Tatman and Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects: 1700–1930* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985), p. 461.

19. According to Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Kutts is referenced in the Isaiah Rogers Diaries for June 14, 1839, and July 6, 1839. The diaries are located at the Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University, New York City.

20. Tatman and Moss, *Biographical Dictionary*. For the Upjohn connection, see Judith S. Hull, "The School of Upjohn: Richard Upjohn's Office," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 52 (Sept. 1993), p. 304. Kutts was listed in the office records on March 31, 1847, and was gone by August of that year. For the Woodlawn Cemetery monument, see the National Historic Landmark Nomination for Woodlawn Cemetery, addendum prepared Fall 2004, p. 46, National Park Service. According to architectural historian Pamela Scott, there is also an index record in the National Archives in which John Kutts petitioned for "compensation for plan of customhouse." The date, customhouse, and location have not been identified.

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