



Above, this house in Dedham, built in 1641, is the oldest surviving wood-frame house in America, according to testing. Below, this Beverly house was once claimed to be the oldest. (Photos by Aram Boghosian and Lisa Poole for the Boston Globe)

## Bragging rites

### Test adds new wrinkle to old rivalry

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By Michael Levenson, Globe Staff | April 26, 2007

To the casual visitor, both are stoic survivors of early New England history: spartan, Puritan houses built in an era long before power drills, sheetrock, and nail guns. But between the families whose forefathers built the Balch House in Beverly and the Fairbanks House in Dedham, a rivalry has been brewing for generations.

Descendants of both families have long contended that theirs is the oldest surviving wood-frame house in America. Both proudly proclaim the year 1636 on plaques, and the year is an oft-mentioned part of any tour given to historians, tourists, or school groups. For the families, it was more than a question of history. It was a matter of pride.

But a new test has upended the rivalry and shown that the Balch House might not be the venerable old pillar of the community it claims to be. According to tree-ring samples tested by specialists from Oxford, England, the house was probably built in 1678, making it a newcomer on the block by Yankee standards.

Among the Balches, whose ancestors first settled in Beverly in the 1620s, there has been a sense of loss and sadness, mixed with stern defiance. "It is still one of the oldest, probably still in the top 10 or 12, even with these later dates," said Stephen P. Hall, a 12th-generation descendant of the Balch House's original occupant, John Balch.

Among the Fairbanks, who first arrived in the colony in 1632, there has been a fair bit of gloating.

"We always knew it," said Lynn Fairbank, a 13th-generation descendant of the Fairbanks House's first occupant, Jonathan Fayerbanke.

"I have to say that every once in a while, a house crops up and says they're the oldest house, but it never pans out. We're the oldest standing wood-frame house."

The Beverly Historical Society, which commissioned the study in hope of settling the debate, broke the news quietly this month, in an item on page four of its quarterly newsletter, the Chronicle.

Under the headline, "Balch House Dendochronology Report," readers were told that samples of oak and pine timbers tested by the Oxford Dendochronology Laboratory "all dated to the winter of 1678/9, with the exception of the summer beam, which dated to the winter of 1677/8, and the principal rafter of the rear lean-to, which was felled in the summer or autumn of 1678."

Abbott Lowell Cummings, a noted architectural historian from South Deerfield, said he learned of the findings and worried about the impact they might have.

"I was told that some time ago and told to keep it under wraps, because at that time I think the Balch House Family Association wanted to be very deliberative of the way they wanted to release the information," he said. The association helps care for the house.

"It ought not to change people, but people do love to think of something as the oldest," Cummings said. "It's one of our human frailties. And it is always a little unsettling for people to realize something isn't the oldest in town. But it's still a marvelous house and very interesting and one of the earliest."

The families have been competing over the age of the houses at least since the early 1900s, when both opened as museums.

"We've been slugging it out for about for about 100 years now," said Hall, who is also director of the Beverly Historical Society. "It's been quite fun."

Said Alexandra Service, curator of the Fairbanks House, "We always hoped it was a friendly rivalry."

Then in 2001, the Fairbanks House, which has the year 1636 painted on its chimney, sent some of its timbers to be tested by the Oxford lab as part of a broader effort to establish accurate dates for New England buildings. The results showed the oldest timbers from the Fairbanks House dated to 1641.

To most visitors, both houses evoke the simplicity of life in the early 17th century. The Balch House is stocked with period furniture, including a wooden cradle and bed, and boasts a giant soot-blackened hearth, low-slung, timber-frame ceilings, and wide, wood-plank floors. The Fairbanks House has its own cradle, loom, and bellows, and a sizable hearth, low ceilings, and wide, wood floors.

But Cummings, the historian who has visited both, said that the way the timbers were joined in the Fairbanks House suggested it was the older of the two.

"I never had any trouble accepting that early date for the Fairbanks House," said Cummings. "I've always been somewhat more worried about the Balch House.

"I had to keep my mouth shut on the subject, but there were one or two aspects of the way it was framed that led me to believe it might be closer to the middle of the century."

Last year, curators of Balch House, eager to reassert their claim on history, had their timbers tested.

They had long known from Colonial deeds that the land was given to John Balch in 1635, and they hoped that the test, first reported by the Salem News, would show that building began that year.

The results, however, were disappointing.

Hall, from Beverly, said he is not giving up. He said he was confident that further testing would prove the Balch house is the oldest.

"I'm not quite ready to surrender at this point," he said. ■

