

Who Were the Builders of the Fairbanks House?

We tend to imagine the early English settlers building their own houses, as pioneers often did in the later era of 19th-century western expansion. However, professional builders were among the first English immigrants to America. Instead of picturing Jonathan, his sons and their neighbors raising the house themselves, to find the Fairbanks House's builders we need to look for professional carpenters in late 1630s Dedham.

The style of the Fairbanks House's construction gives us clues to its builders' identity. Dr. Abbott Lowell Cummings demonstrated in *The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay* that the Fairbanks House is constructed in the style common in the late 16th and early 17th centuries in the East Anglian region of England. Dr. Cummings writes, "The Fairbanks House ... can be readily identified with East Anglia both in profile and in detail ..." The Fairbanks House's closest comparisons are found in the East Anglian counties of Essex and Suffolk. Like the Fairbanks House, the typical houses there were of timber frame construction with wattle-and-daub insulation. The major difference between the East Anglian examples and comparable Massachusetts houses is that those in East Anglia were typically plastered and painted on the exterior, while in Massachusetts the colonists quickly began finishing their houses with wooden clapboard siding. Even today, a drive through the Suffolk countryside will show you many old farmhouses identical to the original portion of the Fairbanks House, with the exception of the fact that the Suffolk houses are plastered and typically painted "Suffolk pink."

Two or three professional carpenters from East Anglia are known to have lived in Dedham, MA at the time the Fairbanks House was built. Abbott Lowell Cummings writes:

Thomas Fisher, from Winston in Suffolk, apparently middle-aged, was admitted a townsman in July 1637 and "undertooke the Meetinghouse," but died on August 10, 1638, before it was finished. John Roper, who called himself carpenter before he left England at the age of twenty-six in 1637, came from New Buckenham, Norfolk, close to the southern border of the county, and having landed at Boston on June 8, 1637, is mentioned for the first time in the Dedham records on August 11. There was also present among the Dedham company as early as August 1636 one John Kingsbury who came from Boxford in Suffolk where he had been baptized in 1595. Although we have no record of his craft, the inventory of his estate in 1660 includes an impressive array of carpenters' tools as well as a "mason trowel," "lathing hammer," and "one thatcher's needle and rake."

We will probably never know for sure, but perhaps any or all of these men were involved in the Fairbanks House's construction.

Intriguingly, a John Roper who seems to be the same man as the Dedham carpenter reappears later in connection with Fairbanks family history. Jonas Fairbanks (Jonathan and Grace's third son) and John Roper were among the colonists killed in 1676 in the siege of Lancaster, MA, during King Philip's War.

Jonas was killed on February 10, and John Roper was killed on the day the colonists abandoned their garrison, March 26. On March 11, the beleaguered colonists had petitioned the government in Boston to send them carts in which to evacuate, and two of those who signed this petition were John Roper and "Widow Fairbanks." Was John Roper, who shared danger and tragedy with Jonas Fairbanks and his family, the same man who had constructed the Fairbanks House in Dedham around forty years earlier?

#

04/13/2007