

## **The History of the Tobias Lear House and Families** **Sandra Rux August 2016**

The basic story of the Tobias Lear House has been recounted many times in Portsmouth histories and guidebooks. John Meade Howells in *Architectural Heritage of the Piscataqua*, dating the house to 1740, sums it up:

The Lear House adjoining Wentworth-Gardner was built by the third Tobias Lear, grandfather of Colonel Lear, who for sixteen years was private secretary to General Washington. This severe and rather stately early type house is famous as one of those visited by Washington, who came to pay his respects to Madam Lear, mother of Tobias. Lear's [V] were both nieces of Mrs. Washington.

As with any pre-revolutionary house with ties to a founding father, various stories have accumulated about the house and its residents. A close look at the documents, including land records, probate inventories, family letters and newspaper accounts provide a more complete picture of the Lear House through its over 280 year history.

### **Family Background**

First, a brief history of the Lear family in the Piscataqua region to clarify who the first owner was and his relationship to other Portsmouth families. The first Tobias Lear (1629-before 1681) is said to have been born in Portsmouth, a son of Hugh and Joanna Lear. He and his brother Hugh were mariners. April 11, 1667 he married Elizabeth Sherburne Langdon, daughter of Henry Sherburne and widow of Tobias Langdon. Elizabeth was taxed as a widow in 1684 but married Richard Martyn shortly after that as his 3<sup>rd</sup> wife. She died before January 1692/93 when Martyn married Mary Wentworth, widow of Samuel, as his fourth wife. Elizabeth had two surviving Lear children—Elizabeth (b. 1669) and Tobias (b. c 1676). She also had four surviving Langdon children—Tobias (b. 1660), Elizabeth, Oner and Margaret.

The close relationship between the second Tobias Lear and his older half-brother Tobias Langdon is indicated by Lear choosing Langdon as his guardian following the death of stepfather Richard Martyn. Tobias Lear 2 also received a house and barn on Sagamore Creek in Martyn's will, stating that it had belonged to his mother Elizabeth (Sherburne Langdon Lear Martyn). He is usually designated as "yeoman of New Castle." This Tobias married three times—first to Sarah Curtis (married 1702, died 1703), second to Hannah Smith (married 1704, died 1714) and third to Elizabeth Walker (married 1714, died 1767). There were two surviving children from the second marriage—Tobias 3 (born 1706) and Nathaniel (born 1712). There were also three surviving children from the third marriage—Elizabeth (born 1716), Mary (born 1717) and Walker (born 1719). All of the children except Tobias 3 survived their father. However, when Tobias 2 died in 1755 1/3 of the estate was left to the widow and 2/3 to grandson Tobias 4.

### **Evidence for Dating the House**

The history of the Lear House begins on November 8 1731 when "Tobias Lear, Jr. of New Castle Mariner" purchased for £40 a lot of land from John Plaisted that fronted on the lane between Madam Hunking and George Hunt. It was 60' on the road, bordered by land of John Plaisted on the west for 80', 60' on the north, also bordering on John Plaisted and on the east 40' on Francis Plaisted's land and 40' on the land of Col. Mark Hunking,

deceased, that was occupied by his widow Madame Sarah Sherburne Hunking. This is the lot on which Tobias Lear Jr (also known as Tobias 3) built his house.<sup>1</sup>

The property was enlarged by two additional purchases. The first of these occurred on October 27 1738 when Tobias purchased a lot from Elisha Plaisted for £80 that fronted on the street that ran from the waterside up past the dwelling house and land of Lear, westward toward the new meeting house. It was 60' on the street, maintaining that breadth back 80' by Lear's land.<sup>2</sup> This lot was without significant buildings until early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was probably used for gardens.

The final piece of the Lear estate was acquired in April 1740 from Madam Sarah Wentworth, the only surviving child and heir of Hon. Mark Hunking. The price for this property was hefty £400 since it included a house, warehouse, wharf and the privilege of wharfing into the river. This piece was 40' wide and was bounded on the west by Lear's property and on the east by the Piscataqua River. Mark Hunking had purchased the property in 1720 from John Skillen. At that time it had a dwelling house and wharf privileges and measured 40' by 60'. In 1727, Hunking purchased a strip of land 40' by 10' from John Plaisted, making the lot 40' by 70'. Sarah Hunking Wentworth stated that her father had lived there.<sup>3</sup> The house on the corner of Hunking and Mechanic Streets is likely the house built by John Skillen between 1717, when he bought the lot from John Pickering, and 1720, although it has been much modified and essentially rebuilt over the years.

Since the Lear's second purchase mentions the lane running by his house, it can be dated to no later than 1738. In 1731, when he purchased the first lot it was unimproved. Lear married Elizabeth Hall (1715-1774) of Exeter in December 1733, so it is probable the house was built around that time and before 1738 when it is mentioned in the second deed.

### **What was the House and Life in it like in 1740-50?**

Tobias Lear 3 and wife Elizabeth Hall had three children—Mary (named after Mary's mother Mary Woodbury Hall) born 1735, Tobias 4 born 1736, and Elizabeth born 1739. Elizabeth's sister Mary had wed John Langdon, Tobias 3's first cousin so that the Langdon (Mary, Woodbury and John plus others) and Lear children were first cousins on their mother's side and 2<sup>nd</sup> on their father's. From his property purchases and the inventory taken after his early death in 1751, it is apparent that Lear was a merchant, not just a simple mariner, although not on the scale of the prosperous Portsmouth families such as Wentworth, Moffatt, Jaffrey and Warner.

Many who have written about the house have assumed it was built as it now stands. However, both the inventory of Tobias 3 and recent investigation by Steven Bedard reveal that the house was built as a two room over two room center chimney structure. There are tools for only two fireplaces, although it is possible that tools were moved around as needed.

Aside from his home property, Lear owned only a piece of pasture land. The two dwelling houses, other buildings and the land were valued at £2000—a good sum but compare with the 1749 inventory of George Jaffrey whose mansion house, land and buildings were valued at £9000. Lear owned a sloop and a boat valued at £900 with books on navigation and a quadrant. He also had cash on hand—£991 in paper money and £846 in gold and silver money valued at Old Tenor.

The inventory is not room-by-room but mentions shop, kitchen, north-west chamber and garret. The more formal living space has two tables, one of which is a "new oval" one. There is also a table in the kitchen. It is not clear if there are any bedsteads at all. The best bed, listed as a new one with its furniture (usually the bolsters and bedding) is valued at £100, so may well have included a bedstead. Two feather beds and furniture are valued at £130, so might also have had bedsteads. A sea bed with coverlid was valued at £25. Another

bed with furniture valued at £50 was inventoried in the attic. Other furniture includes a desk, two cases with drawers, six chests and two trunks. Chairs are the most plentiful furniture form in the inventory. There is a set of six chairs, one of which is a great chair. A dozen chairs are listed after the new oval table as are “19 chairs and frames” (these are perhaps unfinished as they are valued only at £5 for the lot). None of the furniture is listed as old or broken. The household also had 48 ounces of wrought silver, earthenware dishes, two teapots, glasses and a coffee mill. There were 70 pounds of pewter and some old pewter. Two looking glasses and pictures graced the walls. A sufficient number of tablecloths, sheets, towels and napkins were available for the household. Tobias 3 possessed clothing for his upwardly mobile status including several coats with waistcoats and breeches, a banyan, shirts, caps, stockings, boots, shoes, four wigs and seven pair of gloves. He also owned silver buckles for the knee breeches and for the shoes, five gold rings and a pair of gold buttons. Although he died at the beginning of winter the household does not seem to have an extensive supply of vegetables put by—only two bushels of onions and “roots in the cellar” for 40 shillings. There are however 20 gallons of West Indies rum, 26 gallons of New England rum, two barrels of cider and 275 gallons of molasses. The household was served by “a Negro woman and her child,” who were valued at £250. The family owned a pew in the South Meetinghouse, so presumably worshipped there. The shop had a total of £181 in goods that are not enumerated. The inventory totaled £7893 9 8 in Old Tenor. It does not include things that belonged personally to Elizabeth Hall Lear, which would have been primarily her clothing, jewelry, and some linens.<sup>4</sup>

### **Occupancy by the fourth Tobias Lear**

Because Tobias 3 died intestate, the estate would have been divided according to the laws of the time. Widow Elizabeth Hall would receive 1/3 of the estate during the time she remained a widow (plus anything she directly inherited from her parents she would keep). From subsequent records it seems that daughter Mary had died before the death of Tobias 3, leaving 2/3 to be divided between Tobias 4 and his sister Elizabeth. Tobias, as the eldest son would have received a double portion, or 4/9 and Elizabeth 2/9. Tobias 4 was only 15 and Elizabeth 12 when their father died. Widow Elizabeth did not remarry and continued to live with the family until her death in 1774. In 1759 Elizabeth married Nathaniel Sherburne (1735-1770), son of John Sherburne (d. 1736) and Eleanor Mendum. The couple had six children in the 11 years of their marriage. In 1767 widow Elizabeth Sherburne deeded her share of the mansion house of her father to Tobias 4.<sup>5</sup>

Tobias 4 married Mary Stilson, daughter of James Stilson (1714-1789) and Mary True on December 29, 1757. James Stilson had purchased the lot just west of the Lear property and built a house in 1742. He also owned land and a shop on Spring Hill as well as sloop *Charming Molly*. Mary (1739-1829) was the eldest of nine children. By 1773, Stilson had moved to New Durham and sold his various Portsmouth properties. While early guide scripts for the Lear House suggest that James Stillson paid for construction of the Lear house, it does not appear that he had sufficient income for that. He probably did provide his daughter with furniture and linens for her new household.

Mary Lear, elder child of Tobias and Mary Stilson Lear was born December 30, 1759. Prior to her father's death in 1781 she married Samuel Storer (1752-1815), son of John and Mary Langdon Storer of Wells Maine. Mary Langdon Storer was the eldest child of Tobias Langdon and Mary Hall, thus sister to Woodbury and John Langdon. Samuel and Mary were thus 2<sup>nd</sup> cousins and Samuel was a nephew of Gov. John Langdon.

Tobias 5, the only son, was born on September 19, 1762. While Tobias Lear 4 always seems to have identified himself as “mariner” he acted more like an upwardly mobile

Portsmouth merchant, sending his son to Governor Dummer Academy and then to Harvard College.

The 1760's and early 1770's seem prosperous ones for the Lear family. An article by Stephen Decatur detailed the silver from the Lear family, with English silver made in 1768 and 1769, a piece of Silver made in Rhode Island by Daniel Rogers and spoons made by Portsmouth silversmith Samuel Drowne—all have initials T-M L for Tobias and Mary Lear and most have the Lear crest.<sup>6</sup> Lear made voyages to London in the ship *Panther* during the 1760's and would thus have been able to purchase the silver himself. It is also during this decade that he probably expanded the house he inherited from his father into the “mansion house” listed in his inventory. He may have been inspired by construction of the Thomas Wentworth house nearby in his back yard.

Misfortune struck on July 2, 1776 when the ship Polly, with Lear as master and owner, was captured by the Massachusetts privateer Revenge. Lear had been on a voyage from Antiqua to London with a cargo of 350 hogsheads of rum and 12 hogsheads of sugar. Although the ship had left London before Sept 9 1775, the judge condemned her.<sup>7</sup> After this, Lear supervised his cousin John Langdon's shipyard, overseeing construction of the *Ranger* and the *America*. For this work he was paid in Continental certificates.<sup>8</sup>

Tobias 4 died November 6, 1781, leaving a will that he had made in April of that year. He provides generously for his wife Mary, leaving her one-half of his houses, land, wharf and warehouse, three-fourths of the household furniture, the farm left to him by his grandfather Tobias Lear and the balance of his Continental certificates—all of this for the time of her widowhood. Son Tobias is to receive all that is left to Mary after her decease or remarriage. Some of the Continental certificates are reserved to complete his education. When he reaches the age of 22 he is to receive £500 in Continental certificates and the land Tobias 4 owned in Epping. Daughter Mary Storer received one-half of the houses, land and warehouse in Portsmouth and one-fourth of the household furniture. She is to get all of the debts owed her father in England and the West Indies and £500 when Tobias leaves college. She is requested to put no tenant into the house unless agreeable to her mother. Son-in-law Samuel Storer was to have all of his books and instruments and nephew Tobias Sherburne (one of his sister Elizabeth Sherburne's sons) £50.<sup>9</sup>

The details of the inventory of property of Tobias Lear are given here because they show how much the house had changed since the death of Tobias 3. Even though he died in November of 1781, the inventory was not taken until the following July.

*Land and buildings:*

Mansion House, outhouses, wharf, warehouse, garden and another dwelling house 700 pounds

Farm at Little Harbor 100 acres with 7 acres salt marsh 4 fresh marsh dwelling house and barn 650 pounds

30 acres woodland at Rye 200 pounds

9 acres pasture Portsmouth 75 pounds

15 acres in Epping 50 pounds

*Inventory of the property in the mansion house. This is not a room by room listing but the spaces are discernable.*

1<sup>st</sup> room (probably parlor) 2 mahogany tables, burnt china tea cups, saucers, teapot and board, 8 black bottom chairs, brass andirons, tongs shovel and poker, 8 images

2<sup>nd</sup> room (possibly the room now the dining room)

Black walnut oval table, square mahogany table, 52.5 oz. of silver plate, china plates, china punch bowls, mugs, tumblers, wine glasses etc.; 11 leather bottom chairs, 2 windsor chairs, looking glass, iron dogs [for fireplace], bellows, 4 pictures, small globe, mahogany knife case

3<sup>rd</sup> room (possibly NW 1<sup>st</sup> floor room)

tongs shovel and andirons, table, tea chest, case with bottles, tureen, cannisters, books, desk, 6 flag bottom chairs

4<sup>th</sup> room (kitchen)

tongs, shovel and andirons, 3 trammels [*means probably no crane in kitchen fireplace*], usual kitchen tools for well-equipped 18<sup>th</sup> century kitchen

5<sup>th</sup> room (probably best chamber)

Bed, bedstead, bolster pillows bedstead, quilt, sheets, pillowcases, suit of white curtains, small piece of carpeting, dressing table, 3 trunks, picture of a Son of Liberty

6<sup>th</sup> room (bedchamber)

bed, bedstead, bolster, pillows, coverlid and sheets, pine toilet table, 2 trunks, 2 pieces carpet, 2 chairs

7<sup>th</sup> room (bedchamber)

Bed bedstead pillows bolster, sheets blanket and coverlid, 3 pr cards, 2 old chairs, 4 coverlids, 2 green rugs, 4 blankets, 1 suit green curtains

8<sup>th</sup> space possibly in same room or perhaps in garret or cellar:

Flax combs, Saddle, bridle, saddlebags, side-saddle, cradle, 35 pounds sheeps wool, bedstead, bed tick and 3 pillows, canvas cott, hammock, steelyards, scales, tools, baskets, 2 spinning wheels, 2 barrels cider & perry, troughs, mash tubs, washing tubs, 356 pounds of oakum

9<sup>th</sup> space (possibly hall)

Stair carpet, rum and molasses, table cloths, pillow cases

*Other*

Pew in the south meeting house

Schooner, boat and appurtenances, small yawl with sails and oars, canoe with paddle and oar

Total value £3266.13.2 pounds (this is a lot less than his father's inventory but that was taken when currency was inflated in the 1750's).<sup>10</sup> There are no enslaved Africans included in this inventory. Note that there is no indication of additional space that would have been in the added ell.

### **Samuel Storer, Tobias Lear and Mary Lear 1782-1829**

We know from family accounts and letters that the widow Mary Stilson Lear lived at the Lear house until her death in 1829. She did visit her son Tobias and his family during and after his service to George Washington. She brought grandson Benjamin Lincoln Lear, son of Tobias

and first wife Polly Long, to live with her at various times during his childhood so that he would not be exposed to the unhealthy conditions of Philadelphia and Virginia. Granddaughter Mary Lear Storer also spent time at the Portsmouth house and on visits to her uncle Tobias. She then lived in the house until she and her brother sold it in 1860.<sup>11</sup>

Tobias Lear never lived in Portsmouth after his 1783 graduation from Harvard, although his first wife, Polly Long was from a Portsmouth family. In 1784 General Benjamin Lincoln recommended him to George Washington for the position of personal secretary Mount Vernon and Philadelphia. After Washington's death, Lear was appointed consul to Santo Domingo and later appointed consul to Algiers. In 1812 he returned to Washington and was made accountant for the War Department. He committed suicide in 1816, leaving Benjamin Lincoln Lear as heir to his estate, including the share of the Lear house that would have come to Tobias upon the death of his mother.

The common assumption about who lived in the Lear house after the death of Tobias 4 is that Samuel Storer and wife Mary Lear Storer and their children shared it with the widow Mary Stilson Lear and that they were living there with their three children—John Langdon Storer, Mary Lear Storer and baby George Washington Storer—when George Washington visited in 1789. However, it appears that the Storers lived on Cross St, corner of Market in a house that Mary Lear Storer later described as a “mansion house.” Samuel Storer who received some support and encouragement from his uncle John Langdon, kept a store on Spring Hill selling English goods, window glass, West India rum, nails, bar iron and German steel during the 1780's. He owned the snow *Eliza*, 132 tons that had been built in Kittery. Several voyages were made to the West Indies 1790-92; all were fraught with problems that he discussed in letters to John Langdon. He was finally able to sell *Eliza* in 1793. In 1793 Tobias Lear 5 sold his share of the eastern part of his property to Storer, including the dwelling house, wharf and warehouse, stating that the widow Mary Lear lived in the mansion house. Storer promptly put this on the market, but it did not sell.<sup>12</sup> By 1795, Storer was living in Rochester where he had a store and was developing property. This proved no more successful than his Portsmouth ventures and in 1800 he was declared bankrupt. John Langdon helped to bail him out by purchasing some properties. The part of the Lear property owned by Storer was sold to Daniel Huntress as part of the bankruptcy proceedings.<sup>13</sup> In 1809 President Madison appointed Samuel Storer Navy Agent for Portland Maine. Clearly this is through the influence of Gov. John Langdon as another of Langdon's nephews, Henry Sherburne Langdon, was appointed Navy Agent for Portsmouth on the same day.<sup>14</sup> It appears he was already living in Portland, where he had several siblings. Storer died in 1815 and his son John Langdon Storer was appointed to replace him.<sup>15</sup> Mary Lear Storer remained in Portland until at least 1821, as she is listed “of Portland” when she repurchases the eastern part of the Lear property, minus the wharf, from Daniel Huntress.<sup>16</sup> Her eldest surviving son, John Langdon Storer is listed in the 1821 Portsmouth Directory living on Hunking St—either with his grandmother in the mansion house or in the dwelling at the corner of Hunking and Mechanic. Mrs. Mary Lear Storer may have lived with her daughter Miss Mary Lear Storer at the Lear house from the late 1820's as she died in Portsmouth at age 71 in August 1831. There is no evidence that the Storers rented their half of the house during the lifetime of Mary Stilson Lear.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century all seemed to be going well for the Lear and Storer families. They had settled claims from the loss of ship *Polly*, Tobias had a good job with the president of the new nation and Samuel Storer was having some success in business. As we have seen above that economic and personal difficulties made it less practical to keep the house. However, the family considered it important to preserve it because of Washington's 1789 visit to widow Mary Lear.

### **Benjamin Lincoln Lear Complicates Matters**

Benjamin Lincoln Lear (1792-1832) was the only child of Tobias Lear and his first wife Polly Long. As he was only two when his mother died, Benjamin Lincoln spent much of his early life with his grandmother in Portsmouth. He worked as a lawyer in Washington DC. His first wife died in childbirth in 1828 and he married second wife Louisa in August 1831. At the time he made his will there were no children from this marriage, but daughter Louisa was born a few months after his death in October 1832 after a “short illness.” Lear left property in Washington to his step-mother Frances D. Lear and to his wife. All property in Portsmouth was to go to his cousin Miss Mary Lear Storer, and after her death to Lincoln Lear Storer, son of cousin George Washington Storer. However, he also made provision for Mrs. Lucy Chamberlain who had cared for his grandmother in Portsmouth. Mrs. Chamberlain was granted the “use and occupation of the dwelling house in Portsmouth which she now occupies.”<sup>17</sup> Portsmouth City Directory and U S census records place Mrs. Chamberlain at the Lear house until her death on June 23, 1856. Her obituary in the *Portsmouth Journal* states that she was the mother of Albert Chamberlain of Portsmouth and that she was formerly of Portland. She had been walking around half an hour before being found lifeless on her bed by another occupant of the house.<sup>18</sup>

The 1839 the Portsmouth Directory listed Mary Storer and Lucy Chamberlain, widow of Joshua, at 7 Hunking. The 1850 census listed Mary Storer with the John Moulton family. It consisted of John and Sarah Moulton, her mother Hannah Drown, six Moulton children ranging in age from 10 to 26, Margaret Peveryly age 15, possibly servant to Mary Storer, and Mary Storer age 60 (she was actually 65); she is shown as owner of the house. Lucy Chamberlain is listed as a separate household. The 1851 and 1854 Portsmouth Directories list John Moulton, blacksmith at 7 Hunking. By 1856, 7 Hunking was occupied by Mary Storer, John Newton (clerk) and Mrs. Chamberlain. By 1860 another new tenant was in place—Joseph H. Hart who was keeper of the Boon Island lighthouse. It appears Mary Storer was able to remain in the house while renting half of it. At this point, she owned  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the house and her brother, George Washington Storer owned  $\frac{1}{4}$ . Having risen to Admiral in the US Navy, he lived with his family at 19 Middle St.

Ramble 54 in Charles Brewster’s *Rambles about Portsmouth* tells the story of the Lear house and its most famous visitor. Written in 1858 when half the house was rented, he ignores this fact and proceeds to recount the story of the visit of Washington. The house is described as an ancient, hip-roofed, two-storied, yellow dwelling. His description of the room where Washington was received is the earliest of any part of the interior of the house. The room remains “with the same paper on the walls, and the same chairs, (made of cheery wood raised in the garden,) and other furniture, except the carpet, which were then used. There is also in the room three china mantle ornaments, a bird on a branch, a peasant with a bouquet, and a lass in a basque of modern cut, with flowers. These ornaments were taken from Washington’s own mantle and forwarded by Martha Washington ‘for the children.’ There is worth imparted to these trifles, by the circumstances, which renders them invaluable. The parlor, fashionable in its day, having remained for seventy years untouched by change of fashion, is now of interest to visitors, aside from associations of Washington’s visit.”<sup>19</sup> While this passage does not indicate how the house was divided between Mary Storer, her renters and Mrs. Chamberlain, it does show that the parlor was not part of the rented space and was likely not much used by any of the occupants.

The second complication caused by Benjamin Lincoln Lear’s will began in 1858 when Louisa Lear Eyre (posthumous child of Lear) and her husband William Eyer sued George Washington and Mary Storer for  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the Portsmouth property. They won their case and in 1860, the Storers settled. The Eyres sold their interest and claim for profits of one undivided half of land and dwelling on Hunking St for \$575 to George Wahington Storer.<sup>20</sup> He now owned  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the house and his sister Mary owned  $\frac{1}{4}$ . It is interesting to note that the property was “undivided” meaning that the Storer family had not formally divided the property after the deaths of Mary Stilson Lear and Benjamin Lincoln Lear and possibly not even after the 1782 death of Tobias 4.

It was perhaps the lawsuit and its costs that prompted the Storers to offer the house for sale. The Portsmouth Journal carried the following notice on August 17, 1861:

Noted House—The house on Hunking street to be sold today was formerly owned and occupied by Captain Tobias Lear, the father of Hon. Tobias Lear, Jr., who was for many years Washington's secretary. Washington visited this house when in Portsmouth, and some very interesting memorials of him are still in the house. The house is still in good preservation, and from it opens a splendid river view.<sup>21</sup>

The sale to Jeremiah Falvey and James D. Flynn was finalized on October 22, 1861. The property is described as being bounded on the north by Joshua Peirce (then the owner of the Wentworth-Gardner Houses), East by Leonard Cotton (in 1833 he had purchased the eastern part of the Lear property last owned by Mrs. Mary Storer from George Washington Storer and Miss Mary Storer), south by Hunking street and west by Lucy Seward. The price was \$700, so the Storers lost money, having settled with the Eyres for \$575 for ½ of the property.

Mary Lear Storer, who lived until 1870, moved into her brother's house on the corner of Middle St and Richards Avenue. After his death in 1864, his daughter Mary Washington Storer Jones and her husband Albert Jones replaced the house (the only octagonal one in Portsmouth) with a more modern and larger mansion. Mary Lear Storer lived with them and left her Washington and Lear family items to Mary Jones.

### **The Elusive Ell**

While there does not seem to be any description of space in a possible ell in the inventory of Tobias Lear 4, it must have been built soon after that. It appears on the 1812 Hales map of Portsmouth, looking much like the watercolor by Sarah Haven Foster that was painted around 1850 but was said to represent Hunking Street in 1740 (as described above the Lear House was much smaller in 1740 than in this representation that made the Lear House look as it did when painted, while the rest of Hunking is shown with smaller houses). The 1850 Portsmouth city map also shows an ell—this one is barely touching the house. It is last shown in the 1877 birds eye map as a story and a half building attached to the rear of the main building—much like the Sarah Haven Foster version. The one story lean-to addition on the east side makes its first appearance in 1877. Physical evidence in the main house is limited to a boarded up doorway in the west rear chamber on the second floor. The surviving “images” show that the ell was offset to the west side of the main house by at least five feet and did not extend as far as the back door. How many rooms might have been in this ell and what purpose did it serve? Another of the advertisements for the sale of the house in 1860 describes it as a “house with 14 rooms convenient for two families.”<sup>22</sup> The main house as it now exists has eight rooms on two floors plus a finished room in the attic, for total of nine. However, we know that the front of the upstairs hall had been portioned to make a room there. If done before 1860, this would provide a total of 10 rooms in the main house, leaving four for the ell. The most likely reason for it to be added by Mary Lear and Tobias 5 is to provide an additional kitchen and other service areas for when the Storers rented their half of the house. It is possible that the ell was the home of Lucy Chamberlain both when Mary Lear was still living and afterward when Benjamin Lincoln Lear left her life use of the home where she had lived. The ell did not long survive after the 1877 map was made. All known photographs of the Lear house show it without the ell. The earliest of these is a photo by Davis Brothers of Portsmouth that is dated between 1880 and 1890. It also has the old windows with small panes. By the time of the photograph taken for *Portsmouth Historic and Picturesque* by Gurney (1902), the windows have been replaced with two over two panes and the front door updated. Sanborn insurance maps for the south end of Portsmouth begin in 1910. None of them show the ell but all include the one-story lean-to on the east side of the rear of the house. There appears to be no record of what happened to the ell—was there a

fire, did it get sold and moved to a new location or merely torn down? Archaeological investigation of the area where it stood could help to determine its size, perhaps its purpose and its demise.

### Falvey Family Ownership

The guide script prepared by Dorothy Vaughan for the Tobias Lear House states:

By the late 1800's the neighborhood and the house had deteriorated. Falvey and Flynn had converted it into a tenement. Stephen Decatur in the *American Collector* wrote that up to six families lived in the house at once.

This simple statement has colored the interpretation of the Falvey ownership ever since. But, is it true? The houses on Hunking Street were occupied primarily by renters by 1860, so that the owner occupied Falvey house was unusual. Jeremiah Falvey (1809-1876), who bought out James Flynn in 1865, was a respectable laborer (though Irish and Catholic) who worked at the Portsmouth Navy Shipyard. Jeremiah was married to Ann McCarthy Falvey (1816-1892). They are probably the Jeremiah and Ann Falvey who arrived in New York from Ireland (via Liverpool) in July 1844. He first appears in Portsmouth in the 1850 census living in the household of John Jones. He petitioned for citizenship in 1853 and was admitted a citizen in 1855, with John Jones and Thomas Palmer as his sponsors. On the petition Jeremiah makes his mark, indicating he did not know how to write. The 1870 census confirms this, although he did know how to read. Wife Ann could neither read nor write. They had two children—Ellen born in 1853 and died in 1860 and Margaret (1860-1944) who married William Ballard. Jeremiah mortgaged one-half of the property for \$300 to Bartholomew Falvey and one-half to Flynn for \$300 when he bought out the earlier mortgage to Flynn for \$800. Jeremiah did pay off these mortgages promptly and thus owned the entire house.<sup>23</sup>

Bartholomew Falvey (1833-1898) stated that he had arrived in the United States in 1859 on his 1876 application for citizenship. His occupation was laborer and he could neither read nor write. He married twice; first to Ellen (1835-1868) and then to Ann (1835-1915). Bartholomew and Ellen had one child—Bartholomew, born in 1868 died at the age of 2 weeks. He and Ann also had one child—Dennis born 1877 and died in 1887.

From the above facts it appears that the house was no more of a tenement in the first decade of the Falvey ownership than it had been when owned by George and Mary Storer. The Jeremiah Falvey half of the house was occupied by Jeremiah, Ann and Margaret. James Flynn (1803-1866), who lived in the house between 1861 and 1865 had wife Hannah (1812-1864) and several children who were born in the 1830's and may have been living on their own by 1861. Bartholomew and Ellen essentially were a household of two, since their one child died as an infant.

However, the 1870's brought more residents and some excitement to the house. John Falvey, his wife Hanora and five children joined the other Falveys in 1870 (the Falveys all seem to be related but were not father/sons or brothers, but probably cousins from Killarney, Kerry Ireland). John Falvey (1825-1873) worked as a laborer, could not read or write and lived in New Hampshire by 1852 when eldest son Timothy was born.<sup>24</sup> Prior to 1870, the family lived on Bow St. It is probably because of John's persistent problem with drink that they moved in with Jeremiah and Bartholomew, possibly occupying the ell. John Griffey, a marine with the US Navy, also lived at the house for a brief time in 1873.

In July 1872 John Falvey cut his throat at his home. The *Portsmouth Journal* reported that the gash was so deep he was not expected to survive.<sup>25</sup> However, he pulled through, only to commit suicide while confined to the Portsmouth jail for persistent drunkenness on the anniversary of his first attempt.<sup>26</sup>

The 1880 census shows three households living at 7 Hunking St. Listed first are Timothy Falvey, 26 (son of John and Hanora), Ann Falvey, 65, widow of Jeremiah, Timothy Falvey, 45, brother (not clear whose brother he was—possibly Bartholomew's), the second household consisted of Batholomew Falvey, 45, his wife Ann, 45 and John Falvey, 24 listed as brother (he was another son of John and Hanorah). The 3<sup>rd</sup> household consisted of Hanorah Falvey, 46 who worked as a servant and her two younger children Daniel, 22 and William, 18. All of the sons were working as laborers. It is the presence of the adult children of John and Norah that led to the conception that the Lear house was occupied by six families.<sup>27</sup>

By 1890 Nora and her son William are living at 6 Hunking Street, where she remained until her death in 1909. Her obituary noted that she had lived in Portsmouth for over 60 years and was known by the older residents as a woman who had done much for the comfort of others.<sup>28</sup> Her move may well mark the demise of the ell on the Lear House. Ann Falvey, widow of Jeremiah, died in October 1892.<sup>29</sup> Daughter Margaret had married William Ballard in 1887 and probably moved back into the house at that time.<sup>30</sup> The 1900 census reveals that Margaret Falvey Ballard, her husband William Ballard and their two children are living at 7 Hunking Street. Nancy Falvey (widow of Bartholomew—who had died in 1898) is listed as a boarder.

The year 1900 brought recognition of it as the birthplace of Tobias Lear. As part of the Portsmouth celebration of Washington's Birthday on February 22, the Sons of Revolution installed a bronze plaque on the west front corner of the house indicating that Lear, Secretary to George Washington had been born here in 1760. The event was reported in many newspapers, some including that Mr and Mrs William Ballard had provided the southwest parlor, where Mrs. Lear had entertained George Washington, for the event.<sup>31</sup> Around this time, the Ballard's changed the windows to two over two's, thus modernizing and probably improving the condition of the house. They also apparently added shutters, as the earlier Davis photo (c 1890) does not have them.

Margaret and William Ballard used their ownership of the Hunking St property to leverage their move to a new house on Middle St (now 25 LaFayette Rd.). On April 5, 1901, Margaret obtained a mortgage for \$1200 on the Hunking St property. By June they had purchased a lot the lot on Middle St and during that year probably also built the house at 5 ½ Hunking, first shown on the 1904 Sanborn Insurance Co. map. By 1903, the Ballards are living at 81 Middle St. Margaret Ballard is supposed to have taken the balusters from the Lear house to her new house. Possibly other house parts were taken as well, as Jessie Varrell later found that some paneling was missing. The Lear house was rented as a two family from that time forward—in 1903 Mrs. Sarah Marden had one half and George Brooks the other.<sup>32</sup> Sarah Marden, a widow in her early thirties with a son Charles, had previously lived with her father Augustus Spinney at 9 Hunking St. Brooks worked as a mason. Both tenants were New England natives. By 1910, David Briggs, a lobster fisherman, wife Alice and 5 children live in one half of the house and Sargent Morrison, a tow boat fireman, wife Blanche, two children and boarder Ella Ham occupy the other half. Again, all are from either New Hampshire or Maine. There were a total of twelve people living in the house (without the ell)—possibly the most crowded that it had ever been. The Briggs family stayed until at least 1914, when the other half was occupied by Frank Petersen of the United States Navy.<sup>33</sup>

### **Wallace Nutting to the Rescue**

Apparently Margaret Ballard tired of being a landlord. She sold 51 Hunking St to Wallace Nutting on October 27, 1917. Nutting presumably wanted to protect his adjoining museum property at the Wentworth-Gardner house and perhaps intended to add the Lear house to the complex. However, World War I intervened, forcing him to close all of his museum houses. It appears he did nothing to either improve or restore the Lear house. Shortly after this, Margaret Ballard sold 33 Hunking St (formerly 5 ½ ) to Mary Kelleher. These two sales are the first time

dimensions are given for the western part of the property since it's purchase by Lear in the 1730's.

The Lear house property as sold to Nutting is described as land and buildings on the north side of Hunking St. It was bordered south by Hunking St for 85.4', East by Addie A Curtis for 39.3', turning and going west by Nutting 27.7' and then turning again and continuing north by Nutting's land for 42.3', then it turned and went west by Nutting's land for 54.7' and then south by Ballard's land to Hunking St for 78'. This piece was originally 60' wide by 80' deep.

The property at 33 Hunking sold to Mary Kelleher began at the southwest corner of land that had belonged to Elvin Newton and went east by Hunking St for 65' to land formerly belonging to Ballard, then north by this land for 79.1' to land formerly belonging to Hattie Newton and then west for 65' to Elvin Newton's line and then south 78.3' to Hunking St. This piece had also started as 60' by 80'.

It is clear that Margaret Ballard had taken a 5' strip from the original center lot and added it to the lot for the house built at 33 Hunking St—leaving the Lear house quite close to the western border of its new lot. The extra width on Hunking St for the Lear house lot seems to have come from the eastern lot (originally 40' (on Mechanic) by 60' (on Hunking) with an additional strip of 10' making it 40' by 70'. When Tobias 5 sold the eastern lot to Samuel Storer in 1793, it measured 42' by 68', not far from the original 40' by 70'. It does seem that there was extra land between the lot owned by Mark Hunking and the one purchased by Tobias 3 for his house, accounting for the piece of land belonging to the Lear house that is approximately 27' on Hunking St and 39' on the east side.<sup>34</sup>

While Nutting owned the property 51 Hunking was rented to Hormisdas Bilodeau, a French Canadian. He is listed first as a painter in the 1917 Portsmouth Directory and then in the 1920 census as a music teacher with a wife and five children. It does not appear that 49 Hunking (the west side of the house) was rented.

### **Jessie Varrell Attempts Restoration**

Nutting sold the property to Jessie B. V. Varrell of Portsmouth on March 11, 1919 (for \$1 and other considerations).<sup>35</sup> It will probably never be known exactly what inspired a 47 year-old unmarried woman who worked as a bookkeeper to purchase this landmark house with the intent of restoring it. Her father, Thomas J. F. Varrell, undoubtedly provided the inspiration. He was trained as a sparmaker and cooper, established a shipyard in Providence RI and then returned to Portsmouth to work at the navy yard, where he was responsible for preparing models of the war ships. His 1911 obituary reveals that his "knowledge of Portsmouth history for the past century was perfect and he took keen delight in reminiscences of the past."<sup>36</sup> The family was descended from John Gardner, brother of William, whose daughter Margaret married John Varrell. William Gardner paid for land that had previously belonged to her husband, after it had been sold for taxes.<sup>37</sup>

Jessie herself wrote a note to Dorothy Vaughan describing some of the trials of restoration:

I saved it from modernization for renting purposes and purchased without seeing the interior as the tenants on each side always apparently being away. I found the house in deplorable state. After being rented for eighteen years—several doors were gone—paneling gone in two places, stair spindles gone. All the ancient paper and paint of one hundred and eighty years to remove, a built-in room in the upper hall (marks on the floor show this) removed—eight bricked-in fireplaces taken out and imperfect plastering made perfect—tiles and bricked-in fireplaces to put in—in fact a thousand and one things to attend to before the work of papering, painting etc. began. I was three months with two and three employed on the tedious work and opened it for the tercentenary in 1923 a wonderful transformation. Taxes tripled from the start and for 16

years I paid these on an unoccupied house. I had to offer it for sale with all the expenses....<sup>38</sup>

This note does help to explain the changes Miss Varrell made to the house and provides a starting point for the changes made during the time the house was owned by SPNEA. She continued to rent the house until 1922. Hormisdas Bilodeau on one side and William C Caswell on the other. Caswell was married to Jessie Varrell's sister Margaret. In 1923, the house is vacant—the work described by Miss Varrell obviously ongoing. However, in 1925, William Caswell is once again renting 51 Hunking. After that year, the house was vacant as Miss Varrell states in her note to Dorothy Vaughan. Several years in the 1920's and early 30's brought threat of sale of the house for a tax lien. She never lived in the house, continuing to reside in the house inherited from her father on Marcy St. and then in Old Orchard Maine with her sister Lena Parkhurst.

The Lear House was opened to the public for one day on August 31, 1934 as part of a benefit for the girl scouts of Cambridge MA and Portsmouth. Other houses on this tour included the Langley Boardman house and the Jacob Wendell house. Jessie Varrell complained to Dorothy Vaughan that the real estate agent had arranged this without her permission and that she went to the house and found her furniture moved. The benefit was organized by Edith Greenough Wendell and Virginia Tanner Green—both of whom would be active in the restoration of the Lear house after it was purchased by William Sumner Appleton.<sup>39</sup> There is a photograph of the kitchen taken in 1929 that shows some of the objects that are still in the house. A list of Varrell furniture and objects is in the Wentworth-Gardner and Tobias Lear Houses Association files kept at the Portsmouth Athenaeum. This list has not been matched with the objects in the house, but it is clear that many are still there—especially the rugs—rag, braided, and hooked and some of the chairs.<sup>40</sup> This indicates that Jessie Varrell left these things with the house when she sold it to William Sumner Appleton in March 1935.<sup>41</sup>

### **Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities and the Portsmouth Committee**

Stephen Decatur, who chaired the local committee for the restoration, wrote an article about the silver of Captain Tobias Lear and had this to say about the progress of restoration:

Two years ago [1935] the venerable house was on the point of collapse. Fortunately it was taken over by the present public spirited owner, a man who is holding it until sufficient funds can be raised for its acquisition by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Meanwhile it is open to visitors during the summer months and is gradually being restored to its original condition. Work on the interior has already been completed, so now it present much the same appearance it must have had when Washington made his famous call on Madam Mary Lear, his secretary's mother, in the autumn of 1789.<sup>42</sup>

The national committee set up to raise the \$4000 needed for purchase and \$20,000 for endowment contained more people of influence that have been associated with the Lear house since that time, including Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt, widow of the President Roosevelt, Charles Francis Adams, Senator Harry Flood Byrd of Virginia, Theodore Roosevelt [son of President Roosevelt], Gov. Huntley N. Spaulding, Thomas Washington USN and George L. Washington.<sup>43</sup> Although the purpose was to raise funds for the purchase of the house by SPNEA, it was eventually decided that a Portsmouth based group should control both the Lear house and the Wentworth-Gardner house. The group busied itself with furnishing, wall papering and adding curtains, bed coverings and objects appropriate to the two houses. Benefits were held each year to raise funds. For example, the 1938 benefit was an exhibition of old glass and china. The Portsmouth committee, including Stephen Decatur, who was a Lear descendant, Virginia Tanner Green, Edith Greenough Wendell, Mrs. J Winslow Peirce, and Mrs. Arthur Rice held two exhibitions in August 1939—one at the Lear house and one in the Wentworth-Gardner house. At

the Lear house, Decatur displayed a collection of Washingtonia and lectured about the objects and manuscripts. Collections of shawls, combs and fans were displayed at the Wentworth-Gardner house where there were also paintings by Miss Bessie Howard of Boston.<sup>44</sup> Much of the furniture was borrowed from SPNEA (and not returned until 1990), Jessie Varrell's objects were incorporated and the houses received a few donations of furniture from patrons. Although not yet formally a museum, this is probably the most successful period of the Lear house as a public space. The committee had advice of experts in choosing wallpapers and textiles and bought the best available at the time. The house was open regularly, along with the Wentworth-Gardner House that was being managed by the same committee and attendance, at least at the exhibitions, was good. A set of postcards issued in the late 1930's details the results.<sup>45</sup>

By 1940 the committee had not yet raised enough money to purchase the houses. Former NH Governor, Charles Dale, persuaded Jessie Prescott to donate \$10,000 toward the purchase. It was completed on July 20 of that year and the Wentworth-Gardner and Tobias Lear Houses Association took over ownership of the properties.<sup>46</sup>

### **Wentworth-Gardner and Tobias Lear House Association**

Charles Dale ran the Association by himself until 1976. During World War II, both house were closed. Apparently, the textiles were taken down and put away and furniture warehoused in the buildings. Dale apparently wanted no help from the influential committee. Shortly after the war, the Wentworth-Gardner House was opened seasonally. The Lear House, which still had much of the borrowed furniture from SPNEA, was kept closed because Dale insisted it needed work to be safe for visitors. When the Wentworth-Gardner and Tobias Lear Houses Association finally got control from Charles Dale, they made repairs to the house; but in the process destroyed much of the historic fabric in the cellar by reframing. The Lear House was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

Dr. Dorothy Vaughan was responsible for museum interpretation and acquisitions from 1976 until 2004. Since she believed the organization should be run only by local volunteers, the Association missed out on the professionalization of museum standards that occurred during these decades.

Both the isolation fostered by Charles Dale and the insular attitudes of Dr. Vaughan hurt the chances of success for the Lear House as a museum. Although efforts have been made recently to repair and restore the building, it remains a museum with one good story, a poor collection and a need for more resources in order to recognize the 1930's vision of Stephen Decatur and the Friends of the Wentworth-Gardner and Tobias Lear Houses.

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- <sup>1</sup> Rockingham County Land Records 18/186. John Plaisted had received much of the land between what is now Hunking St and Gardner St, from the river to Marcy St from John Pickering. Plaisted was married to Mary Pickering. Francis Plaisted, who had bought one lot from Pickering was John's younger brother.
- <sup>2</sup> Rockingham County Land Records 23/456. Elisha Plaisted was the son of John Plaisted and Mary Pickering.
- <sup>3</sup> Rockingham County Land Records: Pickering to Skillen 10/149 Skillen to Hunking 15/88, Plaisted to Hunking 24/447, Wentworth to Lear 24/424. Mark Hunking (c1650-Oct 1728) was a member of the Council and justice of the superior court. He married Sarah Sherburne, daughter of Henry Sherburne about 1671. Sarah was a sister of Elizabeth Sherburne who had married Tobias Langdon, Tobias Lear and Richard Martyn. Madam Hunking was thus Tobias Lear 3's great aunt.
- <sup>4</sup> Rockingham County Probate Records 18/241-242
- <sup>5</sup> Rockingham County Land Records 90/49.
- <sup>6</sup> Stephen Decatur, *The American Collector*, December 1937
- <sup>7</sup> John Langdon to Josiah Bartlett, 28 Sept. 1776 in *Morgan, Naval Documents* 6:1031.
- <sup>8</sup> Stephen Decatur, op cit
- <sup>9</sup> Rockingham County Probate Records
- <sup>10</sup> Rockingham County Probate Records
- <sup>11</sup> Portsmouth City Directories 1834 and 1860, US census 1850.
- <sup>12</sup> *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth NH), V37, issue 1970, 4.
- <sup>13</sup> Rockingham County land Records, 157/250.
- <sup>14</sup> *Columbian Detector* (Boston, MA), V 1, issue 24, 3.
- <sup>15</sup> *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* (Portsmouth, NH), V 51, issue 40,3.
- <sup>16</sup> Rockingham County Records 229/1216
- <sup>17</sup> Washington DC probate records, will book 4, probated Nov 9 1832.
- <sup>18</sup> *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* (Portsmouth NH) V67, issue26:3
- <sup>19</sup> Charles Brewster, *Rambles about Portsmouth*, Portsmouth NH 1859, 1:269-272.
- <sup>20</sup> Rockingham County Land Records 384/469.
- <sup>21</sup> *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* (Portsmouth, NH), v72, issue 33, 2.
- <sup>22</sup> *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* (Portsmouth, NH), v72, issue 46,4.
- <sup>23</sup> Rockingham County Land Records, 406/314,315 and 316.
- <sup>24</sup> United States Census, 1870, page 20 for Ward 3 Portsmouth.
- <sup>25</sup> *Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics* (Portsmouth, NH), v 82, issue 29, 2
- <sup>26</sup> *Springfield Republican* (Springfield Massachusetts), July 8, 1872, 2
- <sup>27</sup> United States Census, 1880, 7-296.
- <sup>28</sup> *Portsmouth Daily Herald*, July 27, 1909, 8.
- <sup>29</sup> New Hampshire Death Records 1637-1947 as found in ancestry.com
- <sup>30</sup> New Hampshire Marriage Records Index 1637-1947 as found in ancestry.com
- <sup>31</sup> *Pawtucket Times* (Pawtucket, Rhode Island), May 2, 1900, 8.
- <sup>32</sup> Portsmouth City Directory, 1903, 60.
- <sup>33</sup> See 1910 United States census for Portsmouth NH and Portsmouth City Directories for 1903-1914. By 1914 the street had been renumbered—7 Hunking became 51 Hunking.
- <sup>34</sup> Rockingham County Land Records 721/007 and 726/137.

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- <sup>35</sup> Rockingham County Land Records, 734/18.
- <sup>36</sup> Portsmouth Herald 1911
- <sup>37</sup> Rockingham County Records, 221/0052
- <sup>38</sup> From Lear house guide script 1990's.
- <sup>39</sup> *Boston Herald* (Boston, Massachusetts), August 19, 1934, 4.
- <sup>40</sup> Portsmouth Athenaeum, MS 4, B1 F4.
- <sup>41</sup> Rockingham County Land Records 908/177.
- <sup>42</sup> Stephen Decatur, "The Silver of Captain Tobias Lear of Portsmouth," *American Collector*, December 1937.
- <sup>43</sup> *Boston Herald* (Boston, Massachusetts), July 12, 1936, Rotogravure Section.
- <sup>44</sup> *Boston Herald* (Boston, Massachusetts), August 26, 1939, 6.
- <sup>45</sup> See MS4 at the Portsmouth Athenaeum for copies of the postcards and records of improvements made by the committee as well as early inventories of objects in both houses.
- <sup>46</sup> Rockingham County Land Records 972/0067.