

The Trumbull House

By William C. Cleveland

With considerable assistance from the papers of Agnes DeForest Curtiss Buckingham
1977

This 200 year old house in Watertown played an important part in the Town's early history. It was built in 1772, before the War for Independence and when the community was Westbury Parish of Waterbury. It is a durable old structure, still useful and beautiful. Built by the community's first clergyman, it has served as a parsonage, a tavern, a home for the Davis Family for 73 years and for the Buckingham Family for 58 years. It now serves several purposes of the Congregational Church, having come full circle from it's original association.



Reverend Jonathan Trumble (early spelling), came to Westbury Parish in 1739 to serve as Minister of the Congregational Society which was then building its first meeting house on the corner of what is now Main and French Streets. He acquired a house on lower Main Street opposite what is now Trumbull Street and it was here that one of his sons was born who became a famous poet and wit. He was the author of the satirical poem M'Fingal during the Revolutionary War Period.

In 1772 the Meeting House, having become too small for the society, they built a new House of Worship where the town Hall is now. Reverend Trumbull in that same year acquired 11 acres of the Woodward Farm and built a new home for himself and family directly across the way from the new church of which he was still the minister. Public grants and church members donated part of his needs but he still had to raise garden products and cut wood for his family's maintenance. Apparently he was a thrifty man for at one time he owned another house in the Oakville section and owned two slaves which he freed when he died.

After Reverend Trumbull died in 1787 his family occupied the house until 1794 when they sold it to Captain Edmund Lockwood who made some alterations and operated it as a tavern. In 1810 the building and 10 acres of land were acquired by Garret Smith which he sold to Captain David Woodward in 1812. After the Captain's death in 1822, his daughters, Abby and Lydia, continued to live there for many years. Lydia, who outlived her sister died in 1895 and her



Charles Buckingham having winter fun with his children

niece, Mrs. Henry Davis, inherited the property and she and her husband lived there for a short time and they removed the tavern ballroom addition to a lot south of the old stone library where it became part of the home of Abby's nephew, David Woodward.

In 1895 the old homestead was purchased by John W. Curtiss as a wedding gift to his daughter, Agnes DeForest Curtiss, when she married Charles Benedict Buckingham and the property remained in that family for over 50 years.



The original building which Reverend Trumbull erected was 42 feet front by 34 feet in depth which 2 stories and attic and was not painted until many years later. There were 6 fireplaces; the base of the chimney being 15 feet square. Tree trunks were used to support the hand hewn beams which, with 2 foot thick stone walls, supported the building. Alterations at a later date disclosed that on the north side, bricks had been placed between the studs, probably for insulation.

There are several hatchway entrances from the cellar and between the chimney base and stone wall is a wine closet with shelves for bottles; probably for use in the tavern days.

The original framing was by mortise and tennon with other members fastened with hand forged nails. Outside walls were plastered on split lath and inside walls were paneled. Doors throughout the house were equipped with solid brass latch-type hardware.

There were 3 rooms on the first floor; a study for Reverend Trumbull and a parlor. The Keeping Room with its fireplace and brick ovens and long table and benches was the full width of the building. There were 3 bedrooms and a sitting room on the upper floor. There are no records of how the building was used during the time it was used as a tavern except mention of the ballroom. The tavern keeper was an important person in the community, serving as host for public gatherings and furnishing lodging and refreshment for those traveling the highways. The tavern served as Post Office and was a regular stop for stage coaches and first to get news from the outside.

Extensive changes were made by the Buckingham Family. The first floor north room was their dining room (now the church office). The first floor south room became a music room (now minister's study). A 12 foot addition to the old keeping room made a fine reception room with another fireplace, a butler's pantry and staircase to the upper floor. The old fireplace and ovens are now covered with paneling.

The sheds at the rear of the building were replaced by a two story addition which provided additional bedrooms, servant's quarters and a dining room and modern kitchen (now office utility room) and at the end was a laundry room (soon to be associate minister's study). There was an entrance at the corner of this room and a small addition on the north side for storage, since removed. On the second floor the 2 story addition provided a sleeping porch (now a kitchen).



When making alterations, a secret pass way from cellar to attic was discovered, suggesting that the house may have been used as a way station for runaway slaves during the Civil War period.

The small house on the lawn was built for children's activities and other outdoor affairs. There was a stable for horses and for the children's pony. Later the building was rebuilt as a 3 car garage and as quarters for the chauffeur, John Olsen and his family. This house was sold by Mrs. Buckingham to Jerry Low and later to the church. It will soon become the home for the associate minister. A major change during the Buckingham occupancy was the conversion of the attic into living quarters, including the dormer windows in the roof.



Charles & Agnes Buckingham and their children Anne, John, Betty & Nancy - circa 1920

When the chapel which stood between the church and the Buckingham house was torn down in 1924, the church deeded a small strip of land to Mr. Buckingham which enabled him to add the fine porch on the north side. Much credit is due to the Buckingham Family for preserving this fine old building.

In 1953 an agreement was made with Mrs. Buckingham for the church to purchase her old home with one provision - that she should have the old parsonage on North Street which became her home for the next 20 years. The church converted the second floor of Trumbull House as quarters for their minister and the first floor as offices, etc.

When the Trumbull House was built in 1772, 8 years before we became Watertown, there was no Woodbury Road as we know it today. The road to Woodbury was via Middle Turnpike, now Hamilton Avenue. There was no North Street or Cutler Street. There was no direct connection from DeForest Street as now. Connection to the main highway was from the south via Woodruff Avenue and to the north via a road at that time through the green to Main and Baldwin Streets.

Trumbull House is the oldest house in the center of town.

W.C. 1977



Addendum

Reminiscences from Betty Buckingham Howard

Charles Benedict Buckingham, my father, married Agnes DeForest Curtiss on June 3, 1905 in Watertown, Connecticut. Father bought a wonderful home for us all. It was an inn built in 1772.

It is situated on a hill with a stone library on the left side given by mother's uncle. On the right side is the Congregational Church, then the Town Jail and Fire House. The jail usually only housed a drunk now and then. Father was the volunteer chief of the fire department. When he received a call, he would run to the Fire House and harness the horses while mother ran across the street to pull the rope on the clock tower to alert the other volunteers. Across the street was the brick Town Hall, then the Post Office and pharmacy. We used to buy candy there.

Half a mile up the street is a big green where our grandmother, Nana, lived with her son and family. It was about 5 acres then, including a barn and carriage house. It was surrounded by lilac bushes and looks as beautiful today as it did then. Beyond her property is the Taft School. Grandfather sold his back property (about 300 acres) to Mr. Taft (Horace Dutton Taft, President Taft's brother and the headmaster of the school) for his school. It became coed in the 1970's but was a boy's school for many years. Mr. Taft became a very dear friend of mother's and companion after both his wife and my father died. Mother would often invite friends of my brother John over for meals, especially those who were far from home, like Nelson Howard, my future husband. This is how we met.

Across the street to the south is our Episcopal Church and parish house. We all went to school there with the two Miss Woodards as our teachers with sixteen children attending. We went to Sunday School with the Campbells, Merrimans and Heminways.

Father (Charles Benedict Buckingham) owned the Watertown Manufacturing Company, which made plastics for victrola records and mouth pieces for telephones. Across the street was the Hemingway and Bartlett Silk Company, the only silk thread company in the country, I think. Most of Watertown's people worked for one of these two companies.

I have wonderful memories of my grandmother, Nana. Her name was Annie McLean Buckingham and she was married to my grandfather, John Aaron Buckingham, but I don't remember him. She always seemed elderly, with her white hair and formidable demeanor. She was a marvelous woman and very loving to all of us grandchildren. She was the grand dame of Watertown in her day. Her husband died quite young and she was alone until she died, but lived with her son, McLean, and his family in the big white house on the green. Nana was very deaf and had her chauffer drive around to all the ear doctors to collect every hearing device made at the time. She would pass them around to all her friends during church services and talk the whole service, which probably caused quite a commotion. She was also very energetic and would often go to New York for shopping and then the same day, call my father and friends to come and play bridge far into the night.

The first Christmas I remember when I was about six was very exciting. We always opened our Christmas stocking in the upstairs sitting room. Then we went down to breakfast. John got a head start and he lay on his stomach and looked through the banister and called out "there's a pony by the Christmas tree!" Prince, our Shetland pony, was with us for many years. We all rode him and drove a wicker basket cart. There was a lot of snow and very little traffic in those days. Father had a pair of shaves attached to the sled and we used to go around town picking up our friends. We would attach the ropes to the sled and Prince would pull us up hills and we would slide down. Winters were more fun! We all had gray costumes with leather belts, warm caps and galoshes and would go out frequently to make snowmen. We also did a lot of ice skating on the lake and river.

Trumbull House: Still Elegant And Beautiful

(Ed. note: The following is a description rendered by William Cleveland of the Trumbull House, one of Watertown's fine old homes that to this day is still a magnificent piece of heritage.)
 Rev. John Trumble (early spelling) came to Westbury Parish of Waterbury in 1739 to serve as minister of the Congregational Society, which had just finished their Meeting House on the corner of what is now Main and French Streets. He acquired a house for his family on lower Main Street opposite what is now Trumbull Street. One of his sons, Jonathan, was born there and became a famous poet and wit. He was the author of the satirical poem

for at one time he owned another house in the Oakville section, and he owned two slaves.

After Rev. Trumble died in 1787, his family occupied the house until 1794 when they sold it to Capt. Edmund Lockwood, who made some alterations and operated it as a tavern. In 1810 the building and 10 acres of land were acquired by Garret Smith. He sold it to Capt. David Woodward in 1812. After his death in 1822 his daughters Abby and Lydia continued to live there for many years.

Lydia, who outlived her sister, died in 1895 and her niece, Mrs. Henry Davis, inherited the property and she and her husband lived there for a short time.

G. B. Buckingham's Bookstore, Watertown



THE TRUMBULL HOUSE as it appeared around 1905 ...



... around 1930, with the front entrance changed, dormer windows in roof, and the adjacent chapel no longer in existence ...



... and around 1950, with porches added on both sides.

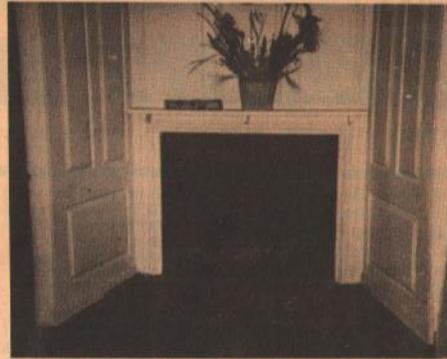
“M’Fingal” during the Revolutionary War period.

In 1772 the Meeting House became too small for the Society, and a new house of worship was built where the Town Hall is now. Rev. Trumble in that same year acquired 11 acres of the Woodward farm and built a new home for himself and family directly across the way from the new church, of which he was still the minister. The church members and public grants supplied some funds as salary but Mr. Trumble had to raise vegetables and cut wood for his family's maintenance. He apparently was thrifty and shrewd. They removed the Tavern ball room addition to the adjacent lot

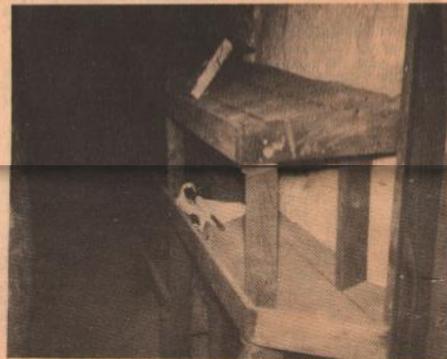
(south of the old stone library) where it became a part of the home of Abby's nephew, David Woodward.

The old homestead was purchased by John W. Curtiss as a wedding gift to his daughter, Agnes DeForest, when she married Charles Benedict Buckingham. The property remained in the Buckingham family for over 50 years.

The original building which Rev. Trumble erected in 1772 was 42 feet front and 34 feet in depth, with two stories and attic and is was not painted until many years later. There were six fire places and the base of the chimney was 15 feet square. Three trunks were used to sup-



ONE OF SIX beautiful fireplaces, with exquisite paneling.



THE WINE CLOSET was located between the chimney base and a stone wall.

port the handwren beams which, with two-foot-thick stone walls, supported the building. Alterations disclosed that on the north side bricks had been placed between the studs, probably for insulation.

There are several hatchway entrances from the cellar, and between the chimney base and a stone wall is a wine closet with shelves for bottles. This was probably for use during the tavern days. The original framing was by mortise and tenon with other parts fastened with handforged nails. Outside walls are plastered on split lath; inside walls are paneled. Doors throughout the house are equipped with solid brass latch-type hardware.

There were three rooms on the first floor, a study for the Rev. Trumble and a parlor. The kitchen in back of those two rooms was full width of the building and had a fireplace with brick ovens, since covered with paneling. There were four bedrooms on the upper floor.

There are no records of how the building was used during the many years it was used as a tavern except for mention of the tavern ball room.

Extensive changes were made during the 50 years occupancy of the Buckingham family. The first floor north room became a dining room and the south room eventually was a music room.

A 12-foot addition to the old kitchen area resulted in a fine reception room with another fireplace, a stairway, a butlers' pantry and the porch on the south side.

The sheds at rear were replaced by a two-story addition to provide a kitchen, servants dining room and a laundry from which at one corner there was an exit with two or three steps to ground level. There was also a small addition on the north side of the laundry room for storage, since removed.

On the second floor there were two front bedrooms and bathrooms. The middle room was a sitting room with windows letting in the sun light from the west. The two-story, 12-foot addition provided a sleeping porch. The portion extending toward the back was used as bedroom and for storage.

When making alterations a secret passway from cellar to at-

tic was discovered leading to the idea that the house had been used as a way station for runaway slaves during the Civil War period.

The small house on the lawn in back was built for children's and other outdoor activities and at one time for a wedding reception. A building at rear was, at one time, a three-car garage and quarters for the chauffeur, John Olson, and his family. This building was sold by Mrs. Buckingham to Jerry Low and now belongs to the church.

A major change during the Buckingham occupancy was the conversion of the third floor attic into living quarters, including the dormer windows in the front and back of the roof.

When the chapel which stood between the church and the Buckingham house was torn down in 1924, the church deeded a small strip of land to Mr. Buckingham which enabled him to add the fine porch on the north side. Much credit is due to the

Buckingham family for preserving this fine 200-year-old building.

In 1953 an agreement was reached whereby Mrs. Buckingham deeded the old home to the Congregational Church for a sum of money, plus the old parsonage on North Street which became her home. The church made some minor changes which included conversion of the second floor as living quarters for their minister once again. The first floor provided a study for the minister and a secretarial office and a fine room for receptions and committee meetings, etc. Classrooms and needed storage space were provided on the upper floor of the rear portion.

When the Trumbull House was built in 1772, eight years before we became Watertown, there was no Woodbury Road as we know it today, but there was Middle Turnpike, now Hamilton Avenue. There was no Cutler Street. There was no direct connection between what is now Main Street and the church and Trumbull house area. Connection to the main highway from the south must have been via Woodruff Avenue.

Every week a group of retired men contribute several hours in the maintenance of this fine old building and grounds as an active landmark of Watertown for over 200 years.



During WWII, several of the Buckingham daughters came back to the house to live with their children, while their husbands were stationed overseas. This is Natalie, Betty and Joan Howard in Watertown 1938.

Warranty Deed.

(8)

John W^m Curtis

FROM

Henry & Abby W. Davis

Received for Record December 2¹ 1904

at h m M., and recorded in

Vol. 35 on Page 96 of Watertown

Land Records by

M^r Leau Buckingham Town Clerk.

Warranty Deed.

(7)

Agnes de F. C. Buckingham

FROM

John William Curtis

Received for Record July 7¹, 1905

at h m M., and recorded in

Vol. 35 on Page 188 of Watertown

Land Records by

M^r L Buckingham Town Clerk.

Watertown town Oct 6 1913

Permission is hereby given to Mr + Mrs Chas. Buckingham to erect a veranda on property about to be acquired from The First Ecclesiastical of Watertown

A. F. Copeland } Societys
 J. E. Kingsford } Committee
 S. M. Jones

What great history this house has in Watertown. I found the original deed in my Great grandmother's papers, i.e. Agnes DeForest Curtiss Buckingham saved everything!

Parsonage—Then Tavern

The house now owned and occupied by Charles B. Buckingham has for many years been a landmark to generations of travelers on their journeys from country towns to the city. Built in 1772 by Rev. John Trumbull for a Congregational parsonage, it was later purchased by Col. Edmund Lockwood and used as a tavern, and a large ballroom added. Shortly before the opening of the 19th century the house came into the possession of Capt. David Woodward, son of Abel Woodward of Revolutionary fame, and for a score of years thereafter it passed through the most important period of its existence. The golden age of the stage coach brought business and prestige to this convenient and sumptuous tavern. Capt. Woodward did not live to see these prosperous days of the stage coach decline before the inexorable progress of the railroad. He died in 1822. His widow and children continued to occupy the old homestead. It descended to the eldest daughter, Abby. The ballroom was removed to a nearby lot and transformed into the house now owned by David Woodward of Atlanta, Ga. The old tavern in later years descended to Mrs. Henry Davis, passing from the Woodward family to its present owner in 1905.

To all People to whom these Presents shall come:—GREETING:

Know Ye, That I, John William Curtis, of the City, County and State of New York

For the consideration of a valuable sum in Dollars received to my full satisfaction of Agnes de T. C. Buckingham of the town of Watertown, Litchfield County, Connecticut, wife of Charles B. Buckingham do give, grant, bargain, sell, and confirm unto the said Agnes de T. C. Buckingham that

certain piece of land, known as the "Old Woodward Homestead," situate opposite The Town Hall in the said town of Watertown with a dwelling house, barn and other improvements thereon and containing one and one quarter acres, more or less.

Said land is bounded as follows; Starting at North-east corner, North on land of Congregational Society; thence East along present line of horse sheds on same; thence North on land of Centre School District; thence West on land of Mr. E. K. Loveland and land used as Congregational Parsonage; thence South on land of David Woodward and the Watertown Library, thence East on said Library & highway. For my title see W. L. R. V. 35, p. 96

grantee her heirs and assigns forever, to me and their own proper use and behoof. AND Also I the said grantor do for myself, my heirs, executors, and administrators, covenant with the said grantee her heirs and assigns, that at, and unto the ensembling of these presents I am well seized of the premises as a good indefeasible estate in fee simple, and have good right to bargain and sell the same in manner and form as is above written; and that the same is free of all incumbrances whatsoever.

And Furthermore, the said grantor do by these presents bind myself and my heirs forever, to WARRANT and defend the above granted and bargained premises to the said grantee her heirs and assigns, against all claims and demands whatsoever.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and seal this 7th day of July Anno Domini, 1905-

Signed, Sealed, and delivered, in presence of

Chas Jackson
M^r C Buckingham

John W. Curtis.

[LS]
[LS]
[LS]
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[LS]

LITCHFIELD COUNTY, ss.

Watertown, July 7th A. D. 1905-

Personally appeared,

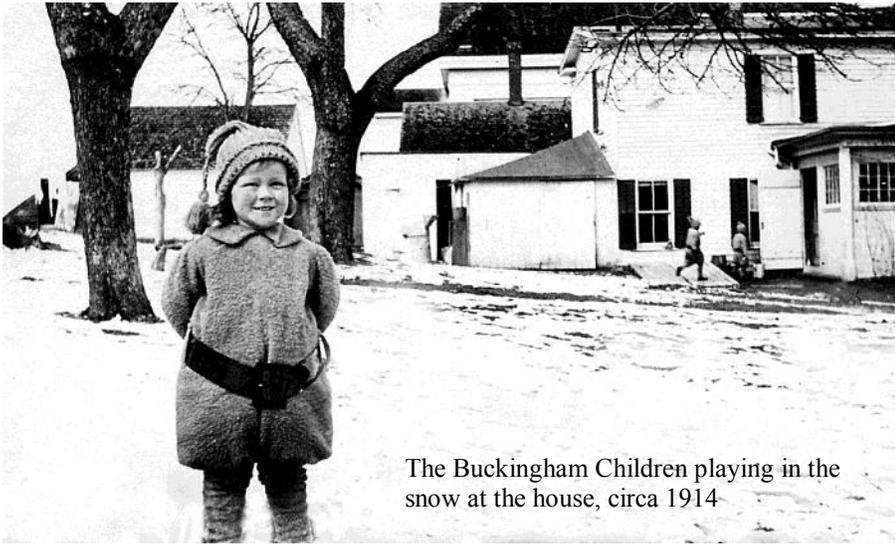
John William Curtis.

Signer and Sealer of the foregoing instrument, and

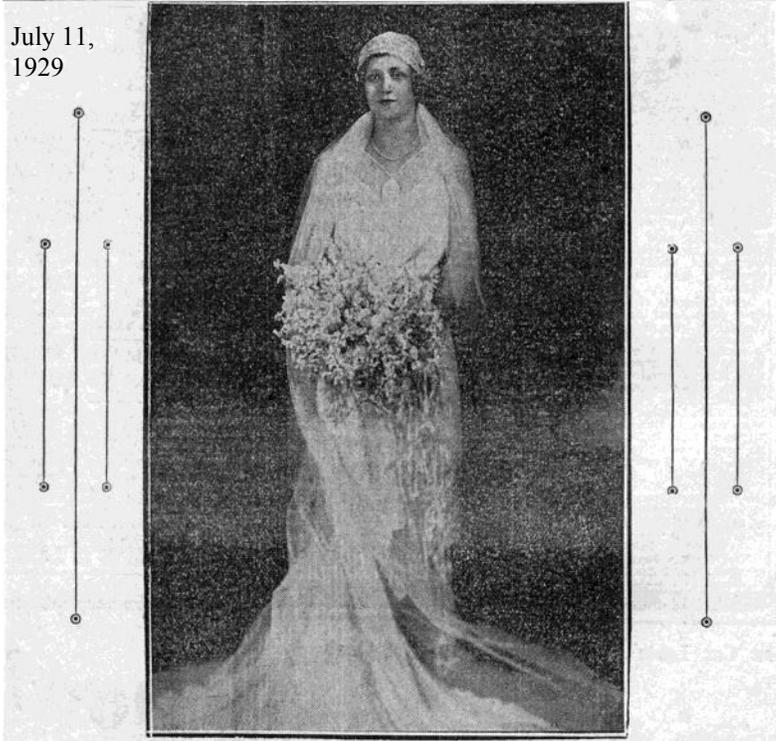
acknowledged the same to be his free Act and Deed, before me,

M^r C Buckingham

Notary Public.



The Buckingham Children playing in the snow at the house, circa 1914



July 11,
1929

Photo by Davis & Sanford, N. Y.

MRS. NELSON ARTHUR HOWARD, JR.

Mrs. Howard, one of the most prominent members of the younger set in local and Watertown society, is the former Elizabeth Murray Buckingham, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Charles B. Buckingham. Her wedding to Mr. Howard of Pasadena, Cal., took place on Friday at Christ Episcopal church in Watertown. Mr. Howard and his bride will make their home in Pasadena.



Peggy, Betty and Mary Buckingham-cousins



Our visit to the house the summer of 2014, with a tour by RJ Buckingham and his son Mike. Alena, cousin Sarah and I had so much fun looking in the nooks and crannies, the basement (over 240 years old), and trying to find the hiding place for the Underground Railroad. And finding my grandmother's room with the familiar wallpaper was icing on the cake.

