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A Preliminary Report on the Excavations at the House of Jireh Bull on Tower Hill in Rhode Island.

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1917

*The Excavations
at the
Fireh Bull House*

Archives

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VIEW OF THE HOUSE "A" FROM THE SOUTH

A
PRELIMINARY REPORT
on the EXCAVATIONS at the
House of JIREH BULL
on *Tower Hill* in *Rhode Island*

ISSUED at the *General Court* of the SOCIETY OF
COLONIAL WARS in the State of *Rhode Island* and
Providence Plantations, by its
Governor, HENRY CLINTON DEXTER, Esquire
and the
Council of the Society
December 31, 1917

PROVIDENCE:
Printed for the Society by E. A. Johnson & Company

TO THE COUNCIL:

Honored Gentlemen—

The Committee on Publications of the Society of Colonial Wars, instead of reprinting an ancient document, presents, for this Annual Court of the Society, a preliminary account of the investigations made by Messrs. Burlingame, Isham and Hazard, as a committee appointed by your honorable body, at the site of the house of Jireh Bull on Tower Hill in the South County. A complete report will be forthcoming when all the data can have been collected and arranged. As this house was, with that of Richard Smith, one of the foci of the early life of that region, the publishing of the extremely important information which your committee has discovered is, just as truly as the bringing to light of an old document, the setting forth of a new and most valuable source for our Colonial history.

EDWIN AYLSWORTH BURLINGAME,
NORMAN MORRISON ISHAM,
— CHARLES EDWARD CANNON.

Captain Waite Winthrop, writing from Smith's, July 9, 1675, to his father, Governor John Winthrop of Connecticut, says that his troopers had gone "to quarter at Jer: Bulls where there is about 16 of the neibours it being a convenient larg stone house with a good ston wall yard before it which is a kind of small fortyfycation to it." It was further to develop this, the only written evidence as to what the house was, that the excavations, of which this is a partial account, were undertaken.

Part way up the eastern slope of Tower Hill on that portion of the "Bull-Dyer farm," which is now owned by Mr. Samuel G. Peckham, there has been for many years a series of mounds, betrayed as stone heaps by the outcropping fragments, and marked, in part, as a rectangle by an old growth of buck-thorns. The spot thus indicated has always been the traditional site of what is generally called Bull's Garrison or Block

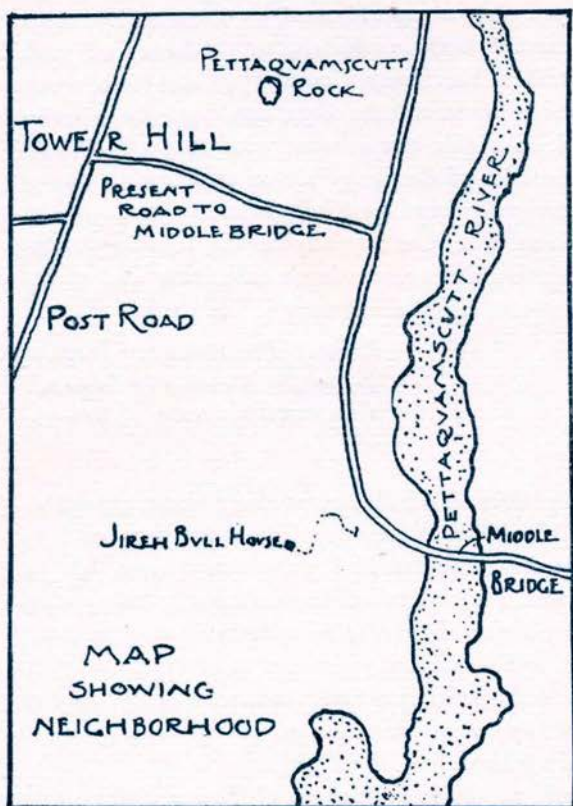


FIGURE 1.

House, which was burned by the Indians December 15, 1675, and which, though probably not originally intended as a fortification, did serve as a refuge for seventeen of the neighbors, only two of whom escaped the savages.

This location is exactly shown on the map which is given in figure 1. If one follows the Middle Bridge or Tower Hill road down into the valley of the Narrow River and turns to the right, or toward the south, he will see, just before the turn to the bridge, a triangular piece of meadow in the southwest corner of which is a bar-way. Beyond this an old road zig-zags up the hill. By following this road up to and beyond the stone wall, one will find a trail toward the left or south which will bring him to the site.

Here, at the west end of the rectangle already described as marked by the buckthorns, the excavations were begun by Mr. Kissouth and his workmen under the direction of the committee. The ruins of a large stone house with two fireplaces and remains of a paved court in front of it soon came to light. This is clearly shown as house A in the plan, figure 3, and in the photographs. There was no cellar. On the south there was apparently a large door, near which a lock and large key were found. A pine tree six pence in splendid preservation—except that, alas, it has been clipped!—and a beautiful silver bodkin, probably of Dutch origin, but possibly made at Newport, were brought to light in the same house. The bodkin was marked M B, probably for Mary Bull. Fragments of glass, too, and pottery appeared, the latter not earlier than 1700—and several early spoons of tinned brass and iron, like those dug up on the field of battle in the Great Swamp.

The eastern house, A, is a large rectangular structure 30 feet wide by 40 feet long. At the western end are the two large fireplaces, placed side by side, as they are in the Eleazer Arnold house, near the Butterfly Factory in Lincoln. The smaller of these openings is 4 feet 10 inches across, the larger 9 feet 4 inches. They are 3 feet 6 inches deep. Only in the smaller does the hearth remain. Within the house a fragment of an iron fireback was found.

At the southwest, in the corner, were most probably the stairs. It was as a support for these that the flat stone shown in the plan was put across the corner. Beside this stone there was another which fell in the course of the digging.

No signs of supports in the middle of the space appear, except at the east end, where an exceedingly rough foundation, not so heavy as the outer wall, projects about 10 feet from the eastern wall.

In front of the eastern part of the house was a good sized area paved with rough flat stones. These were not laid level, but followed the slope of the ground, and were highest opposite the old opening in the south wall of the house. A pod auger, as it is called, a plane iron, a gauge, a chisel, and a stone or brick hammer were found here.

The house and the space around it were full of stone. The gable ends had fallen eastward; the one into the area of the house, the other down the hill on the outside.

About ten feet west of this first house, we discovered, by trenching westward, to find, if possible, the outer wall spoken of by Winthrop, another building, even larger than the first, which we have indicated by B on the plan. The south wall of part of this was in line with the south wall of the eastern house, but the north wall was about four feet north of the northern wall of the building A.

This new building proved to be divided into two rectangles, an eastern and a western, by a heavy partition wall. The western rectangle, again, was nearly divided by a mass of masonry into two others.

At the south of the eastern division of the house was a pavement or fragment of a pavement of a blue slate which is found near the Bonnet on Boston Neck. It is in the wrong location for a hearth and extends across the whole rectangle. At the southwest corner is a break in the wall and, in the re-entrant angle, an area with a rough stone foundation, which probably once carried more pavement, but which seems to be outside the house.

The western rectangle is about 27 feet wide and 65 feet

long. Near the middle of it, close to the south wall, are some foundations which appear to be those of a heavy central chimney. On the eastern side of this chimney foundation is a clearly defined hearth, mostly of the blue slate from the Bonnet which we have already spoken of. In front of this a charred joist—mere charcoal—is still in place. On the western side is a single flat stone, at a higher level than the blue slate hearth. It is a fragment of another hearth all the rest of which has disappeared, for the remainder of the chimney is merely rough foundation, from the northwest corner of which a piece of wall runs northward for a few feet.

From the east wall of this house B, as the plan will show, there runs a rough foundation which is very similar in position and quality to that at the eastern end of house A.

On the western wall of B are two projections which look like the rough foundations of another fireplace. Just north of the northern projection begins a foundation which runs eastward in a line with the eastern foundation just spoken of above. It looks as if it formed a corner with the wall running north from the chimney.

Against the south wall, again, is a foundation which seems to be that of an inner wall.

In this area some very interesting and important fragments were found. A pair of cock's head hinges came to light, the first to be found in Rhode Island. On the north side of the outer north wall a small pocket of charcoal was found, and in digging into it, we unearthed a pair of H hinges. The window sash or shutter had fallen or been thrown there and had burned.

Some old glass appeared here, still in its original lead calmes or setting. It had, from its long sojourn in the earth, the beautiful iridescence which makes "favriile glass" sell at a high price. Here, too, was part of a gun barrel, a flint lock, possibly of the same gun, a dripping pan, a piece of an andiron, part of a trammel, bone knife handles and several other bits of shovels and hoes, with hinges and other ironware. Everywhere were fragments of tobacco pipes of old shapes, most

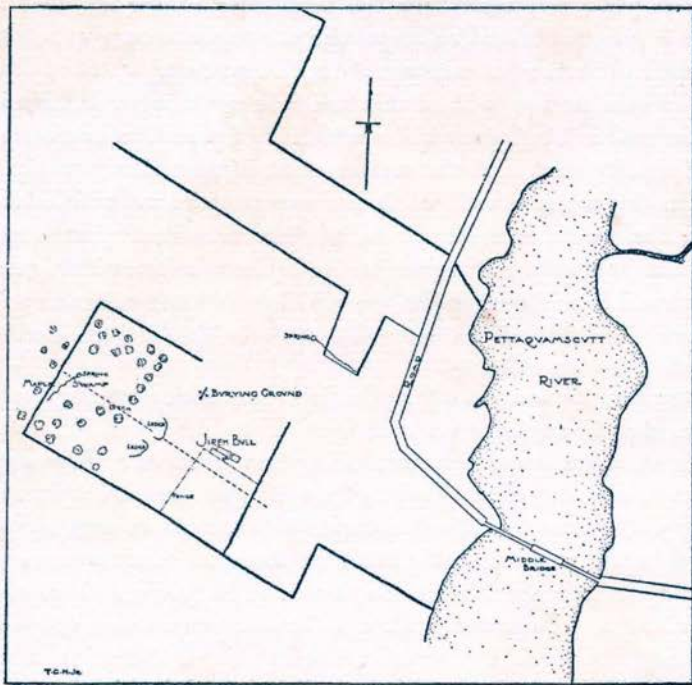


FIGURE 2.



VIEW OF HOUSE "A" FROM THE EAST



PAVED COURTYARD FROM SOUTHEAST OF HOUSE "A"

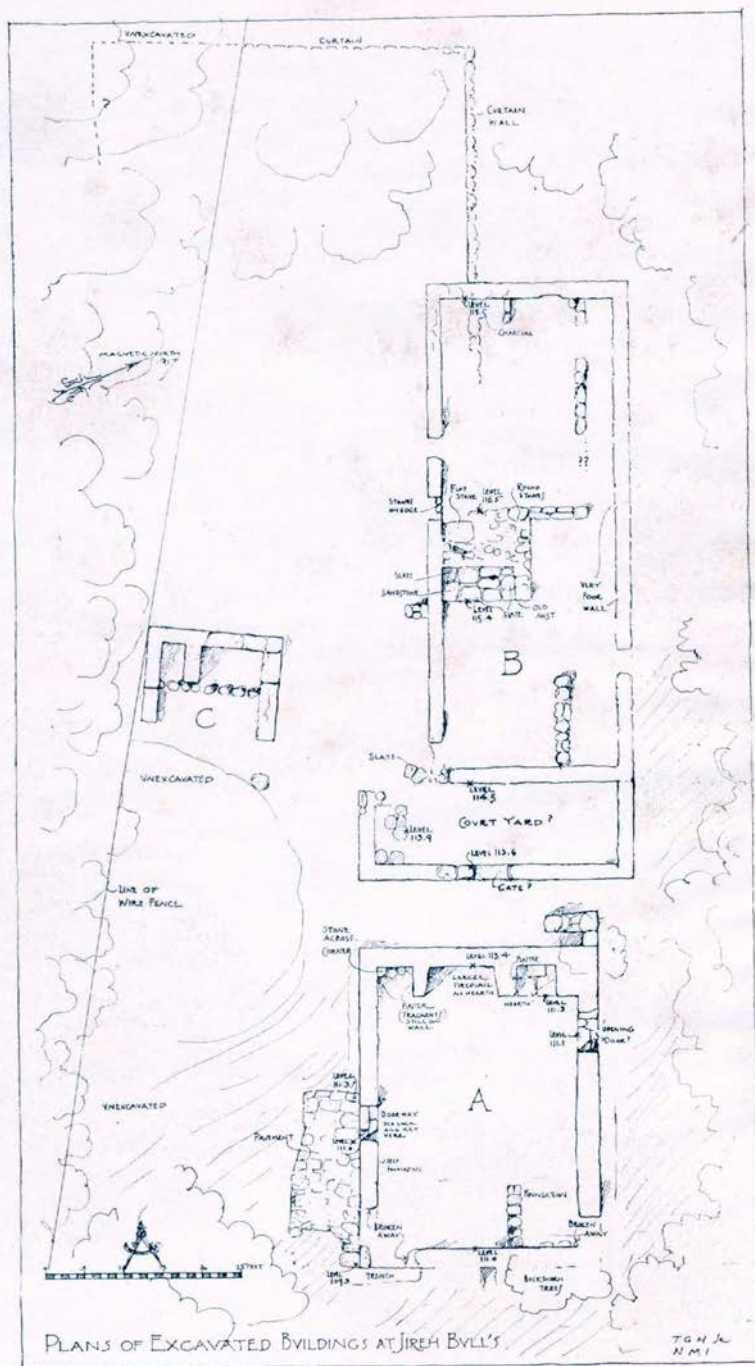


FIGURE 3.

all of them white, but some of red clay. This was true of all the area dug over.

In the extreme southwest corner was another pocket of charcoal, and here two joists, one across the building, the other at right angles, were marked by the charcoal remains of them, while a continuous layer represented the floor. A small mass of melted lead was found here, and also a quantity of nails.

At the west of the building was a thin wall, or rather the foundations of such a wall, which may have been an enclosure for a yard. It ran 30 feet westward and turned toward the south. There was mortar in the south wall of this house, but a good deal of the work was laid dry. There was very little stone apart from that still in place in the walls, and the work was quite rough. The north wall was especially poor.

South of the house B, about 20 feet away, was a small structure with heavy walls. This building, which we have called house C, is best described by the plan. It forms three sides of a rectangle and measures 16 feet from south to north. It thus has two side walls and a back wall, and against the back wall is a fireplace of which the hearth, with the foundation thereof, has long ago disappeared. South of the fireplace is a place for the stairs or the ladder which served as a stairway. Across both fireplace and stairway is a rough foundation which probably carried an old sill or a line of joists.

There is mortar in the outer walls of this building. The south wall shows, at the corner, where it meets the end wall, a bond-stone or "tooth" as if it had once gone on further toward the west.

No well has yet been found. It is almost certain that one existed in the enclosure. A spring still flows several hundred feet to the west, another at the northeast and still another at the southeast; but all are too far away.

For years the buildings must have served as quarry for the farm. It is known that they were still used 80 or 100 years ago for the building of stone walls. Only the smaller stones were left, and those which were so piled up as to be troublesome to get out. The outer wall of which Winthrop speaks

was probably the first to go. Then the stones from the others were taken till the masonry was cut down to the level of the ground where it was soon covered by earth and grass.

It may be in order now to make some suggestions as to the history of the various buildings the ruins of which we have unearthed. These will be subject to revision in the light that further investigation, not only upon the site, but in the town and State records, may throw upon the whole matter.

That there have been three houses on the land is evident. Possibly there was once a fourth.

The first house excavated, "A," is the latest. It was probably built after Bull came back to the site when the war was over, or by his son after Jireh's death in 1684. It is of a lean-to type, closely resembling the Eleazer Arnold house in Lincoln.

The house which Capt. Waite Winthrop saw and described was what we have called the western building and have designated as "B" on the plan. This had on the east what may have been a courtyard or terrace, which still retains part of its paving. This house was probably one room deep, with a center chimney, on either side of which was a room and behind which was a stair. This placing of the stairs behind the chimney was an old English or perhaps a Welsh plan, as can be seen in any book of plans of English cottages. The western end of this house may well be an addition. It cuts across the foundation of the old wall, which seems like a part of the curtain, which we found still further west. It is possibly the house sold to Jireh Bull by William Bundy, October 27, 1663. (R. I. Land Ev. II, 320.)

The south building may be the oldest on the place. It looks to be a stone fireplace end for a small wooden house, such as the Carr house was on Conanicut Island before it was rebuilt. More excavation, however, has yet to be done at the east of this fragment.

Winthrop says of Bull's at Pettaquamscutt "which is a convenient larg stone house with a good ston wall yard before it, which is a kind of small fortyfycation to it."

The large court enclosing all the buildings could hardly be called small. That at the east of the house would be before it to one approaching from the lower slope of the hill, and this was probably the original approach, for Bull was of Newport and came and went in a boat. The last we know of him before the burning of the house is told by Roger Williams in his letter to Governor Winthrop, dated July 27, 1675: "Sir, just now comes in Sam Dier in a catch from Newport, to fetch over Jireh Bull's wife and children and others of Pettaquamscutt."

That Bull returned to this farm after the war is certain, since he had Church of England services held there in 1683 by Rev. Mr. Spear, as is proved by the deposition of Henry Gardiner in 1738.

Jireh Bull came to Pettaquamscutt in 1663, perhaps earlier. On October 27 of that year he bought of William Bundy a twenty acre house lot stretching up the hill from the river, which formed the eastern bound. On the south it was bounded by a lot Bull already had, and on the north by "A Lott granted Rowse Helme." On the west it was bounded by land "not Layd out which said Lott hath a hous upon it." (R. I. Land Evidence, Vol. II., p. 320.)

In 1668, on June 4, for £28 the Pettaquamscutt purchasers deeded to Jireh Bull 500 acres, 20 of which formed a house lot bounded north "by a Lott formerly granted unto William Bundy & now in possession of sd Jireh Bull on the east by Pitticomscutt river on ye south by a Lott granted unto William Haviland & now in Possession of Jireh Bull." This is apparently the lot which Bull had south of Bundy, as mentioned in the latter's deed, and which he was then holding, though he received no deed of it till five years later.

On one of these three lots these houses probably stand. We may be able, in the later and more complete report which we shall make to the Society, to place these old lots accurately on the plat of the present farm, as well as to speak more confidently of the buildings themselves.

The thanks of the Society are due to those who have helped us financially, and to Mr. Peckham, who has so generously allowed us to dig whenever and wherever we desired.

EDWIN AYLSWORTH BURLINGAME,
NORMAN MORRISON ISHAM,
THOMAS GEORGE HAZARD, JR.

DATE DUE