

History

Isaac Fitch: Colonial carpenter ahead of his time

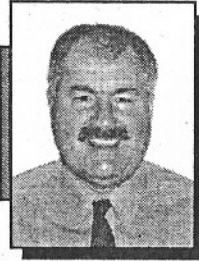
Part one of two

Isaac Fitch (1734-91) was one of Connecticut's most skilled and accomplished colonial builders and carpenters. He was born in Lebanon and was a cousin of Jonathan Trumbull Sr. (1710-85), the famed governor of Connecticut and supplier to Washington's Continental Army.

He died relatively young, and had he lived longer Fitch would probably have been known as one of Connecticut's greatest 18th century architects.

According to the Duke de Lauzun, who was encamped at Lebanon with his French cavalry forces in the winter of 1780-81, Lebanon then resembled Siberia. He caustically described it as "a few huts scattered among vast forest."

But during that very winter, as the French aristocrat and his troops were mingling with Lebanon's locals, master builder



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Isaac Fitch was renovating a house across from the Lebanon Green, into a fine Georgian-style house, fit for a gentleman.

The house belonged to Jonathan Trumbull Jr. (1740-1807), the future governor of Connecticut. By the time he began working on Trumbull, junior's house, he had built an enviable reputation across eastern Connecticut for the quality of his workmanship.

Isaac Fitch was a skilled cabinetmaker and joiner who supplemented his income making wheels, axles, coffins, and sleighs. He also made picture

frames for the famed artist John Trumbull (1756-1843), one of his cousin's sons. Evidence suggests that Fitch may also have built Jonathan Trumbull Sr.'s "shop" or workshop in 1758, the structure now known as the Lebanon War Office.

Little is known about Fitch's early training, or early life, but his 1791 probate records reveal that Fitch owned a book named "Architecture" penned by the famed British architect, Sir James Gibbs (1682-1754). Gibbs had a great influence on early American architecture, particularly the design of steeples.

The book may have been obtained for Fitch by his cousin, Jonathan Trumbull Sr., who was an importer of English books.

Records of Isaac Fitch's building and carpentry transactions appear in Jonathan Trumbull Sr.'s meticulous records, and reveal that Fitch probably built a "handsome porch" on the Second



An interview view of the Jonathan Trumbull Jr. House in Lebanon reveals Isaac Fitch's outstanding workwork.

Lebanon Meeting House as early as 1758-59.

The style of Fitch's buildings further suggests that he was influenced by a number of Rhode

Island architects working in Connecticut at the time. The Trumbull family had a shipyard in East Haddam in the colonial years, where ships were built and repaired for the lucrative transatlantic and Caribbean trade, and records show that Fitch worked on the building of a merchant ship at East Haddam called "Neptune."

Jonathan Trumbull Sr. was deeply in debt in 1764-65 to English merchants, and he formed a partnership with Windham's Eleazer Fitch to build a ship of 160 tons, the "Neptune," to help pay off his debts.

It unfortunately sank four days out to sea on its maiden voyage to London. Fitch also worked on a sloop called "Seaflower."

Isaac Fitch's outstanding workmanship can be studied and admired in the Jonathan Trumbull Jr. House in Lebanon. The house is open Saturdays and Sundays from 1 p.m. until 5 p.m.

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