

## The story behind the Shingle House

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Warwick Village Historian Jean Beattie May contributed this essay.



Photo provided by Jean Beattie May/Warwick Village Historian Daniel Burt's Shingle House - located on Forester Avenue in Warwick - this year celebrates 250 years. This photograph was taken about 100 years ago, give or take a year.

The Shingle House - located on Forester Avenue in Warwick this year celebrates 250 years. If you drive by today you may do a double take. It is definitely showing its age.

Several areas around the house have been opened up to evaluate its difficulties, which is the reason for those white patches on the corners.

Owned by the Historical Society since 1916, the Shingle House is Warwick's most precious treasure. Here is a legacy that has been left to us that few towns in Orange County can boast about, which, along with the society's nine other buildings in the heart of the Village, are virtually what make Warwick distinctive and different from other towns.

Shirley Gordon, who with her late husband Seymour, were docents of the Shingle House and the adjoining Sly Barn for about ten years, notes that: "Every fourth grader will remember the tour he or she took to the Shingle House to see the way the early settlers lived; their method of cooking on the fireplace with the bee hive oven which reminded them of a pizza oven and the cone of sugar, which brought to mind Sugar Loaf Mountain."

Daniel Burt and his son Dan Jr. were its untrained architects and builders. They began to construct the house in 1764 but it took them five years to finish. They had trees to fell, the shingles and the beams to make by hand, nails and other hardware to forge, while at the same time planting and harvesting their crops, and even helping to build Warwick's first log church during those same years. The church was located on the corner across from Daniel's house on Galloway Road, on land now known as the Hallowed Ground.

Daniel Burt first found land in the Warwick in 1746 when he moved to what is now known as Pioneer Farm on Route 94S. After building a log cabin, he tried to make a go of homesteading. His nearest neighbors were a tribe of Minsis Indians whose village was virtually in his back yard.

But the remoteness of the area discouraged him. It took his family many days riding their horses from Ridgefield, Conn., to try to even locate him in a place covered in dense forest with no real roads and only a handful of other settlers. They convinced him to leave this wilderness and return to Connecticut.

He returned to Warwick a second time, and built a mill on the creek in Bellvale. But when it was washed out in a storm he exchanged that property for 200 acres in what wasn't even a village yet, building his house on Galloway Road, which, to this day, is still owned and lived in by his descendants, the McFarland family.

When Daniel Jr. was thinking about marrying Martha Bradner, he and his father chose a knoll on his land on what was then called Burt's Lane. It is now Forester Avenue.

The original Shingle House was of "salt box" design with a center chimney similar to the houses in Ridgefield, Conn. It was an English core design, brought from England, where such houses were known as "yeoman cottages."

According to Michael Bertolini, curator of the Historical Society: "The refined quality of the raised paneling in the two front rooms of the house is unlike any others of that age in this area, showing that the builders brought with them a knowledge of a better quality of living and building."

## SHINGLE HOUSE PUZZLEMENTS

The Shingle House, begun in 1764 and completed before 1770, is today the oldest building remaining in the village of Warwick. A paper, presented in 1915 during a Historical Society subscription drive for funds to purchase the house from the estate of Sallie Servin, claimed it to be, with one exception, "unchanged since it was built". But an ongoing archaeological excavation begun in 2013 has raised a number of challenges to that "unchanged" claim.

The current format (center door, two stories, partial cellar and center fireplace) and current footprint of the house, based on the archaeological evidence, appear to be significantly different today from what they were 250 years ago. To be sure, the basic location of the house (on the knoll) and the orientation (facing due west) remain as they were. But it appears from the excavated evidence that there were one or more large changes made over time. For starters, artifacts found *beneath* the south parlor, at a depth of about 18", include some items ("McMunn's Elixir of Opium" bottles) which did not exist prior to 1835. Additional finds included pottery and butchered animal bones, typical kitchen trash, which extended at least 3' beyond the south parlor's south wall. Directly beneath the floor boards was found a well-worn scythe blade. A 4" thick black band of organics exists at the 12" to 18" depth around the entire south and southeast sides of the building and under the parlor itself.

**Puzzlement: Was the south parlor expanded over a trash pile, or did the occupants lift the floorboards and discard trash beneath?**

Examination of the north wall of the cellar from the outside appears to show a butt-joint line near the roofline break at the rear kitchen. The



length of the extension matches the width of the rear kitchen, but neither the original or lengthened cellar extends under the south parlor or under the south half of the kitchen.

**Puzzlement: Isn't this evidence of a lengthening of the house?**

An often noted feature of the house is the large central fireplace, with openings to the south parlor, the north parlor, the upstairs room(s) and the large kitchen fireplace with its beehive oven. But if the south parlor was a later add-on, that opening, at least, would have been made later.

Extend the north wall of the south parlor (with its fireplace) straight to the rear of the current building. At the north corner of the door between the parlor and the kitchen, restorers discovered an extremely worn "good luck" coin in the mortise/tenon joint of the kitchen floor joist and rim board. The coin was oriented in an on-edge position, so the wear could not have occurred in-situ. The coin, a US Large Cent, *did not exist* prior to 1797.

**Puzzlement: Unless the kitchen was expanded to the rear after 1897, how did the coin get there?**

The rear (east) wall of the house, now the kitchen, contains two doors with no wall between them. But if the entire south side of the building (parlor and kitchen) was added at the same time, a wall extending straight back from the "good luck coin" corner would place the doors in separate rooms.

**Puzzlement: Why two doors on the rear wall, and another on the south wall, entering the same room from the same porch?**



We have found a copy of a 1797 survey of the "Lands of James Burt" which includes hand-drawn pictures of the area houses. These at first appear to have been drawn by a child, but they are, with one possible exception, completely accurate as to building location and as to the location/number of chimneys. This includes the absence of chimneys on the churches. The exception (perhaps) is Shingle House. It is shown *without* a center chimney, but with one at each end, where none exists today. However, the front of the house is shown in its current center-door format. Note however that there are only two first floor windows depicted. Additionally, the rear "stone house" is shown adjacent to and south of the main house and facing west, with a chimney on the south end. We know from excavations in progress that the stone house was located *behind and parallel* to the main house. Evidence indicates that the chimney was located on the north end of this building.

**Puzzlement:** Were the drawings added, not by a child, but by an untrained adult who was showing, to the best of his ability, what he observed. Note that if the small stone house on the drawing is rotated to the rear and counter-clockwise, the chimney is on the correct end. Without training, the drawer might not have known how to show the correct positioning.



Considering all of the above, we would suggest the following:

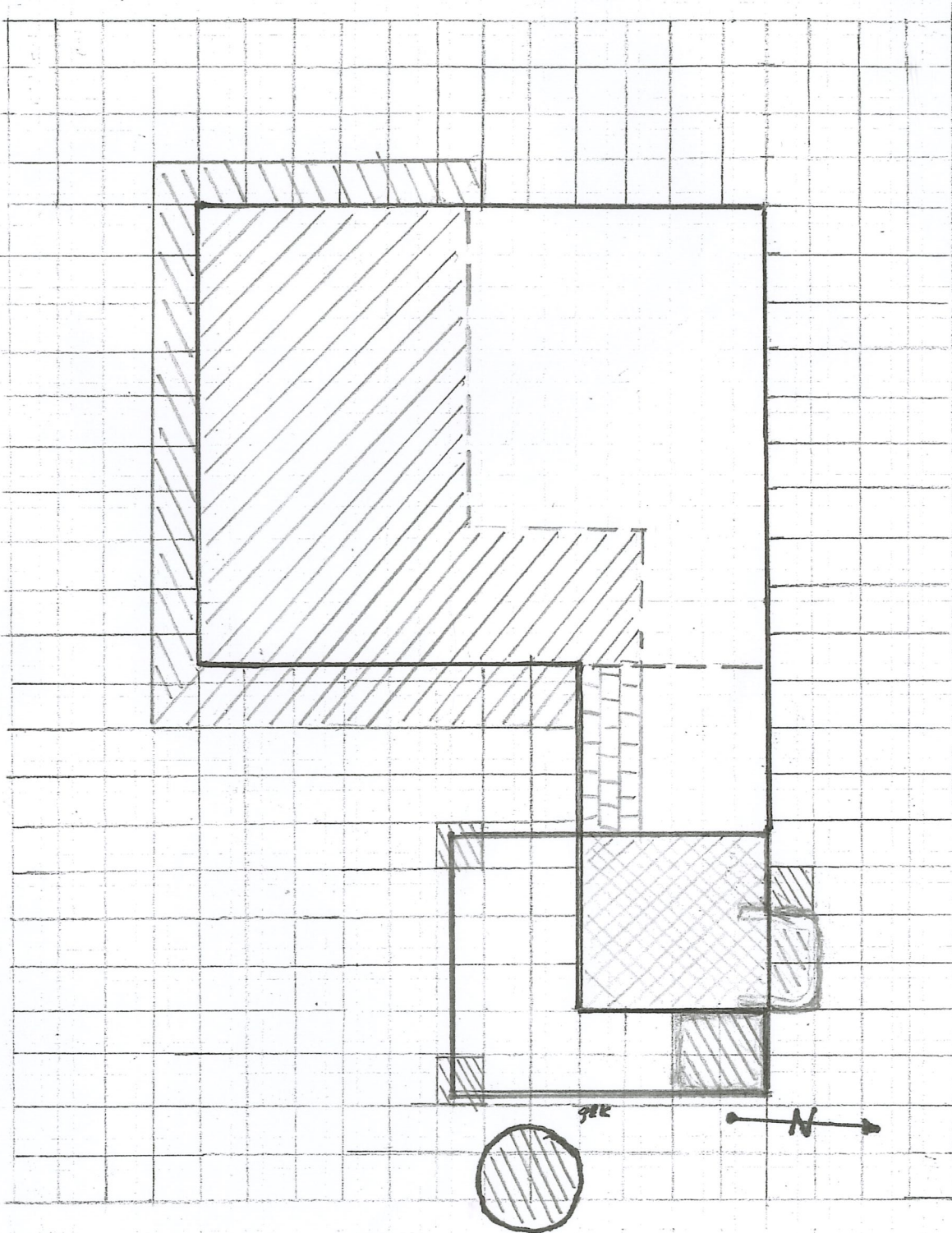
The original house was of a smaller one-or-two rooms down, one-or-two up, two front windows flanking a center door, full cellar format, with a fireplace on each end of the house, first floor only.

The following modifications were made:

- 1) The original house and cellar were extended to the rear (only) and the north side of the current kitchen added with only a single rear door. The kitchen may have included the current fireplace and oven.
- 2) The south parlor and the south side of the current kitchen were added, with the south and north sides of the kitchen separated by a wall. The current front façade was achieved by swapping the original door and the original right window, then adding two more windows to the right of the new door. Note that dendrochronological dating of the building's east and west second-floor headers might confirm this. The cellar was not extended beneath this construction, but the left side of the kitchen seems to have had a crawl space below (possibly a cold storage area).
- 3) The original fireplaces at each end were replaced by the very large central fireplace we see today, with additional flues added for the upstairs openings, and connected to the kitchen fireplace.
- 4) The outside backfilling of the yard area (as much as 5' deep), the addition of the porch (pre-1894), the construction of the brick cistern, the addition of the Bilco-type cellar access and the demolition of the stone house were all completed over a relatively short period of time.



TOWNS SHINGLE HOUSE DIG



MAP OF JAMES BULLETS

D. Burt's



R. Mellings





MARCH 23-29, 2018

The Warwick Advertiser

# Archaeology team to update Shingle House findings on March 25 at the Buckbee Center

**WARWICK** — On Sunday, March 25, at 2 p.m., the Warwick Historical Society's archaeology team will present "Shingle-Dig Season 4: 'Fragments From The Past.'"

The informative event will take place in the A.W. Buckbee Center, the former Albert Wisner Public Library building, at 2 Colonial Ave.

The presentation is free and open to the public. Reservations are recommended, but not required.

## It begins with fourth-graders

The 1764 Shingle House on Forester Avenue is the oldest remaining building in the Village of Warwick.

In 2013, a group of fourth grade students from the Warwick Historical Society's Summer Camp were participating in an archeological dig behind the structure when they made an interesting discovery.

They had uncovered the remains of a cistern and that led George Knight, a volunteer at the Warwick Historical Society Archive, to do more research on the historic house, which is one of the buildings owned and maintained by the historical society.

He especially wanted to chase the legend, which the subsequent archeological dig proved true, that there was a stone building behind the Shingle House.

## Old coins from several realms

In 2015 a team of volunteers began a dig that unearthed numerous artifacts including a 1753 British half-penny, an 1818 U.S. cent and an 1864 Indian Head penny, along with beverage and medicine bottles (some that contained opium), buttons, pottery and dish shards, glass, clay pipes, doll heads, marbles, nails and animal bones.

In addition to displaying many of the nearly 15,000 artifacts unearthed during the 2017 digging season, the team will present information on the 1700's spring-house find, the chimney/hearth area of the buried stone house, and new data on the cisterns; along with a picture of daily life between 1770 and 1915 at Shingle House as painted by the very large excavated trash pile. They will also share their plans for the upcoming 2018-digging season.

Following the presentation itself, the team will be on hand to provide information on individual artifacts and to answer questions.

For additional information, or to become a member of the Warwick Historical Society, call 845-986-3236 or visit [www.whsny.org](http://www.whsny.org).

- Roger Gavan