Growing up in an old brick house:
Remembrances of Thornton Weeks, Jr.

On September 15, 1985 Marcys Weeks, John Leeke, and Ken & Sally Weeks were fortunate to meet with and hear the recollections of Thornton (Skip) Weeks, Jr., the last weeks to live in the Brick House before it was sold out of the family.

We gathered by the well at the back door with Thornton and his wife Myra. Skip’s first recollection was how as a boy it was his job to climb down the rocks to clean the well out in dry times. There were actually three wells on the property – “a soft-water well, a hard-water well, and a no-water well,” as Thornton put it. When one well was dry, another was used. Water was pumped from the well to the barn for the animals, as well as to the kitchen. When Thornton was growing up there was no water at all in the Brick House. The community kitchen was in the ell with its water pumped into the sink from one of the wells. Much later the house was hooked up to city water as a solution to the unreliable wells.

Toilet facilities were a 3-hole in one of the connecting outbuildings. His parents used the north side of the house for their grandparents, the south side. Each had a dining room at the back of the house and a living room at the front.

It is Thornton’s theory that the ell was the house in which Leonard lived. He remembers that the nails were old square ones, for instance, and the ell was a complete house in itself with a living room beyond the kitchen, a two room sleeping loft above, and a cellar below. A hired man (called a “tramp”), by the name of Frank Buckley, who helped with haying in summer, slept in the loft.

The kitchen had a wood burning stove for cooking. There was a hole in the wall that allowed heat to pass from the kitchen into the living room, which was called the milk room and was used for processing milk when the farm had cows. A sink with a hand pump was located under one of the windows. Skip remembers that the water from the sink drained onto the ground outside the kitchen. There were three windows across the West side of the ell. He pointed out that the large stone step on the back door entrance is the original step to the door of the ell, and in its original location to the right of the windows had been. Inside, through a small entry, the ell kitchen is to the left, and the brick house is to the right.

One of Thornton’s least favorite jobs as a teenager was spending a Saturday in the cellar jacking up the ell when it had started to sink. Another of his jobs was to take a horse and wagon up the lane to the woodlot and haul in pine needles (called finch) to bank around the foundation of the brick house to keep out the wind in the wintertime.

The ell abutted the back of the brick house. The outline in the bricks is still visible today. All the buildings were originally attached to each other. After the kitchen and milkroom in the ell came the outhouse, the woodshed, the carriage garage, a 3 or 4 horse stable, and the barn with tie-up for 20-25 cows. To get to the wagon shed and chicken house one had to go through the tie-up. In a section of the barn called the engine room was a one-cylinder engine with a pump for pumping water into the big trough inside the barn for the cows, and a trough outside for the horses. A belt went from the engine out the back to a circular saw for cutting cordwood for the furnace.

The ell was eventually torn down for insurance reasons. Thornton said that was fortunate because the Brick House never would have survived the fire of March 4, 1938 if the ell had stood. As an almost 17-year-old, Thornton remembered the fire well. He received two badly burned wrists when he went up into the attic and pushed open the skylight. It was surmised that the cause of the fire was a barn full of hay that had been put in in the fall, and by late winter the fermentation and resulting heat buildup caused the spontaneous combustion. Thornton said that a wooden house could never have survived the intense heat. The remains of the fire can be seen on the charred beams and roofing boards in half of the attic. John Leeke also discovered charred areas on a window frame on the West side of the house when he was removing paint.

When the ell was torn down Thornton’s mother made a sunken garden in the far end of what had been the cellar. It was Skip’s job to haul loam from out back to fill in the cellar area closest to the Brick House to make a terrace for his mother (the area where the new deck now stands, and a little beyond.)

As we walked through the house Thornton had many observations and stories to tell. One of these stories was how the great room got its false ceiling. Before the barn burned there was a lot of trouble with rats. So long as the barn had livestock and was warm the rats stayed there, but when there were no longer animals in the barn the rats came into the house between the partitions and died – with a resulting unpleasant odor. So, Skip’s father took the floor up in what was called the 4-poster bedroom to remove the rats and warned young Skip to stay away from the opening. “No problem, Dad,” said Skip. But no sooner had father gone downstairs than there was a leg sticking through the ceiling. Now there is a false ceiling to replace the original lath and plaster.

When Thornton’s family lived there, the great room was two rooms, each with its own fireplace. In the late 1930s, when the family redecorated, the partition came down and by removing two fireplaces the original one was exposed. It was in bad shape and an artisan was hired to fix it. Most of the fireplace brick we see today is not original, except for inside a small beehive oven in the left of the fireplace. The large oak beam across the top of the fireplace is original, and Thornton owns the muller loader gun which hung there. He thinks that the original floor boards are under the present oak flooring. We were surprised to hear that under the window sill in the back wall is a dry sink where water drained out to the back yard.

The house was heated with a one-pipe wood furnace. The heat came through a big square register in the first floor, its location now in evidence at the foot of the stairs. It wasn’t the most efficient heating … Thornton remembered “freezing to death” on the second floor.

Thornton never swam in Great Bay, but he and his friends went “skinnying dipping” off the railroad bridge in the creek. His last recollection was of the abundance of mushrooms on the property. His family picked them and people came out from Portsmouth with hushel buckets. His father didn’t mind, except he wished they’d knock and ask first, because sometimes they knocked down fences.

After the new highway (now Rte. 33) was built, Skip’s parents had to move to a bedroom in the back of the house in summer because of the noise. If his father hadn’t intervened, Skip says the present highway would have passed right along their front lawn. The isolating effect of the highway was one of the reasons Skip and Myra eventually sold the Brick House. After leaving the military, Skip and his young family lived at the Brick House for a while, but excessive taxes along with the isolating effect of the new highway from the center of town made him decide to sell and move away.

Thank you, Skip, for reminding us about growing up in the Brick House.