

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

Parson Capen House

AND/OR COMMON

Parson Capen House

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

Howlett Street

\_\_\_ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Topsfield

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

\_\_\_ VICINITY OF

6th

STATE

Massachusetts

CODE

25

COUNTY

Essex

CODE

009

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

**CATEGORY**

- \_\_\_ DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- \_\_\_ STRUCTURE
- \_\_\_ SITE
- \_\_\_ OBJECT

**OWNERSHIP**

- \_\_\_ PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- \_\_\_ BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- \_\_\_ IN PROCESS
- \_\_\_ BEING CONSIDERED

**STATUS**

- OCCUPIED
- \_\_\_ UNOCCUPIED
- \_\_\_ WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- \_\_\_ YES: UNRESTRICTED
- \_\_\_ NO

**PRESENT USE**

- \_\_\_ AGRICULTURE
- MUSEUM
- \_\_\_ COMMERCIAL
- \_\_\_ PARK
- \_\_\_ EDUCATIONAL
- \_\_\_ PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- \_\_\_ ENTERTAINMENT
- \_\_\_ RELIGIOUS
- \_\_\_ GOVERNMENT
- \_\_\_ SCIENTIFIC
- \_\_\_ INDUSTRIAL
- \_\_\_ TRANSPORTATION
- \_\_\_ MILITARY
- \_\_\_ OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

The Topsfield Historical Society

STREET & NUMBER

70 Central Street

CITY, TOWN

Topsfield

\_\_\_ VICINITY OF

STATE

Massachusetts

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Essex County Registry of Deeds

STREET & NUMBER

CITY, TOWN

Salem

STATE

Massachusetts

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

Historic American Buildings Survey (6 photos, 1 data page)

DATE

1935

FEDERAL \_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_ COUNTY \_\_\_ LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR

SURVEY RECORDS Library of Congress/Annex Division of Prints and Photographs

CITY, TOWN

Washington

STATE

D.C.

## 7 DESCRIPTION

### CONDITION

EXCELLENT  
 GOOD  
 FAIR

DETERIORATED  
 RUINS  
 UNEXPOSED

### CHECK ONE

UNALTERED  
 ALTERED

### CHECK ONE

ORIGINAL SITE  
 MOVED DATE \_\_\_\_\_

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### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Parson Capen House is a two-and-a-half story frame structure with central chimney and high pitched gable roof. The framework of heavy oak timbers is mortised and tenoned together, held in place by wooden pins. The foundation timbers of the two-story house rest on an under-pinning of unmortared fieldstones. The second story widely overhangs in the front and the third story projects slightly at either gable end. These overhangs are supported by shaped wooden brackets, and carved drops or pendants ornament the corners of the building. These brackets and pendants are the only decorative features on the exterior. The casement windows are slightly asymmetrically placed. The entrance is also placed off-center and receives no special emphasis in the arrangement of openings.

The house has the typical two room floor plan of a seventeenth-century, central chimney structure, with the parlor and hall or kitchen located on either side of the brick chimney. Although as seen from the outside the house seems large, inside the effect is small and somewhat confining. This is caused primarily by the low ceilings and huge summer beams. Also each of the first floor rooms is dominated by a fireplace which fills the major portion of the inner wall. This is particularly well illustrated in the hall, the room to the right of the entrance porch. Serving both as kitchen and living room it is an important carry-over from the Middle Ages where the hall formed the core of the building. The parlor was used for more formal entertaining and has no medieval counterpart. Instead, it illustrates the changing social pattern of the British middle-class and was directly related to life in the New England community.

Inside the porch or entryway, the steep staircase, with the original knobbed newel and turned oak balusters winds up beside the chimney. The brickwork of the chimney is exposed in the entry. Hand forged nails stud the heavy front door, while battens secure the board doors to the hall and parlor. The floor has characteristic wide boards, sanded smooth and the walls are wainscoted in the typical fashion for the period. A reproduction of this hall and kitchen appears in the American wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The upstairs rooms were once used for a resident caretaker and are still in their modern state.

As it exists today the Parson Capen House is the product of its 1913 restoration. Two major changes seem to have occurred at this time. Photographs taken before the restoration show a plain rectangular chimney without clustered sides and ornamental cap. There may have been no reason to assume that the plain chimney was original but there was also no evidence to indicate the compound chimney of the restoration duplicated the original one. This new chimney is a reproduction of one which was on the Hunt House in Salem (Note: Pierson, p. 52) as stated in a letter by Dow to William Sumner Appleton dated March 9, 1914 in the files of SPNEA.

The other change concerns the windows. Structural evidence indicates the original windows were not paired vertical frames but rather horizontal strips of three casements,

## 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES      1683

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Parson Capen House is a remarkable survival of a New England seventeenth-century house. Still occupying its original site on a slight knoll immediately adjacent to the town common across from the meeting house, the house is unique in that it can be dated exactly by the date of the raising of the frame, June 18, 1683, which is carved on the chimney girt in the upper east chamber. Its location on the common near the meeting-house illustrates the central role of the parson, Reverend Joseph Capen, in the life of the town; its simplicity and austerity recall the vigorous life of the New England pioneers.

### HISTORY

The Reverend Joseph Capen was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts in 1658 and was educated at Harvard. In 1681, at the age of twenty-three, he was called to the pastorate at Topsfield where he was promised a salary of either seventy-five pounds in country pay, (such as corn, pork and keep), or twenty pounds in silver and forty-five pounds in country pay. He chose the latter. A year later he married the daughter of a well-to-do Ipswich family, Priscilla, daughter of John and Priscilla Appleton. The Parson Capen House was built in the summer of 1683 on a twelve acre lot of land laid out to him by the town in 1682.

The house was acquired by the Topsfield Historical Society in 1913 and extensively restored under the direction of George Francis Dow, who also restored the John Ward House in Salem. It is operated today as a house museum.

## 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Kimball, Fiske, Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic, New York, 1922.
- Millar, Donald, "A Seventeenth Century New England House," The Architectural Record, Vol. 38, No. 3, September 1915.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Measured Drawings of Some Colonial and Georgian Houses, New York, 1916-1930, Plates 6 and 7.

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY 1.1

UTM REFERENCES

A	<u>19</u>	<u>340140</u>	<u>4722850</u>	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The Parson Capen House is bounded on the west by East Common, approximately 292 feet, on the north by the south property line of residential property for approximately 195 feet, on the east by vacant land for about 215 feet, and on the south by the northern property line of adjoining property for approximately 105 feet. This boundary defines the property owned by the Topsfield Historical Society and contains no other structure but the Parson Capen House.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

## 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME/TITLE Patricia Heintzelman, architectural historian, Landmark Review Project  
original form prepared by Charles Snell, 1968.

ORGANIZATION

DATE

Historic Sites Survey

STREET & NUMBER

TELEPHONE

1100 L Street, NW

CITY OR TOWN

STATE

Washington

D.C.

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL     

STATE     

LOCAL     

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. (NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION)

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE 3/4/77

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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CONTINUATION SHEET Parson Capen House ITEM NUMBER #7 PAGE #2

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the type found in the Whipple House in Ipswich. The timbers in the framing of the house are original, but much of the interior woodwork and exterior finish has been replaced.

A modern ell, was added in 1974 for use by the Topsfield Historical Society as a study room.

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Morrison, Hugh, Early American Architecture, New York, 1952.

Pierson, William H. Jr., American Buildings and Their Architects: The Colonial and Neo-Classical Styles, Garden City, New York, 1970.