

The House at Sixteen Main Street

by Maria C. Ward

Known by various names, 16 Main Street is most famous for its historic name, the Katharine Lee Bates House, although her tenure there was brief.

The house was built by William Nye for Mayhew Hatch in 1810 in the Colonial Federal style. The two and one-half story home, originally on two acres of land, retains to this day the workmanship of William Nye, including rooms in the Colonial style with Federal touches in others. The front staircase features carved panels and a curved cherry bannister that soars up and around the landing and upstairs hallway. The mantels of each of the original front four fireplaces are detailed as is the wainscoting. (A fifth fireplace may have once existed.) The foundation is a local granite, known as “pink granite”; the basement floor contains ballast from ships arriving in Falmouth.

Sixteen Main Street has always been a residence with just a few owners. Mayhew Hatch sold it to Silas Hatch in 1852. It was he who rented it to the Congregational Church in 1858 as a manse for their new minister, Reverend William Bates, his wife and their three surviving children. On August 12, 1859, their last child, Katharine Lee Bates, was born in this



Front view of 16 Main St. under restoration. Sign identifying the house as the birthplace of Katharine Lee Bates stands to the left of the front door. Photo by Janet Chalmers.

house. Reverend Bates baptized her shortly before he died four weeks later. Mrs. Bates and the children remained in the house for a short while, then boarded at various other Falmouth houses until 1871.

Meanwhile, Benjamin Franklin Jones, a successful whaling captain, bought the house in 1865 and it remained in the Jones family until 1970. His son, George Washington Jones added an ell in the back of the house (assisted by his neighbor Captain Moses Fish) in 1883. The carriage house in the rear of the house was converted to a separate residence in 1920. In 1953, the original plot was divided into two lots, and the rear house became 20 Main Street with an easement so both houses could use the same driveway. The

16 Main Street house was used for many different purposes during the Jones years – including as a doctor’s home and office, and even as a boarding house. The house was vacant from 1958 – 1970.

In 1970, Edward Sherry bought both houses for \$45,000. He lived at 20 Main Street as he tried to restore and sell 16 Main Street to various entities, for as much as \$65,000.



Upstairs Federal style mantel surrounding the fireplace. Most of the non-original green paint has been removed by hand sanding. Photo by E. Graham Ward.

One scheme involved selling the house to Disneyland or Disney World to enhance the existing America the Beautiful pavilions. He proposed renaming it “The America the Beautiful House” and shipping it by land or sea to Anaheim or Orlando. His rationale was that:

“..should I sell the property to a private concern ... there would be an effort to:

- A. Commercialize the property, thus destroying one of the town’s genuine landmarks.
- B. Entertain the idea of replacement with the existing structure being demolished.”

(letter dated August 10, 1976, to Walt Disney Enterprises, Glendale, California)

The reply, dated August 19, 1976, said:

“We appreciate receiving the information from you. However, we regret that we would have no interest in purchasing this house for either Walt Disney World or Disneyland.”

Another plan to create interest in “The America the Beautiful House” was to partner with the Island Queen for a combination ticket to Martha’s Vineyard and 50% off the admission to The House. Charles Bardelis, the Island Queen owner, was not interested.

In May of 1975, learning of a planned visit by Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako to Woods Hole, Edward Sherry asked the Japanese Ambassador to arrange for their majesties to stop at his house. He was told that a tight timetable prevented a stop, but they would be apprised of the house’s history when the motorcade passed by. On October 4, 1975, Mr. Sherry decorated the house with Japanese and American flags and more than fifty neighbors turned out in 18th Century costumes. The motorcade was delayed, but as the disappointed crowd dispersed, the Japanese dignitaries finally drove by, waved, and were photographed by Edward Sherry.

Meanwhile, the Falmouth Historical Society was attempting to raise the money to buy 16 Main Street, but could gather only \$5,000. Then a 1915 graduate of Wellesley College and summer resident



The curve of the bannister that leads from the upper hallway to the first floor. Photo by E. Graham Ward.



Original cistern in the cellar where run-off rainwater was collected for household use. Photo by E. Graham Ward.

of Davisville, Beatrice B. Gorman, chose to honor the memory of her favorite English teacher at Wellesley, Katharine Lee Bates, with a \$40,000 donation, anonymous at the time, acknowledged later. Mrs. Gorman was the mother of Connie Gorman Bidwell, the wife of Robert Bidwell, then head of the Falmouth Historical Society. And so, Edward Sherry sold 16 Main Street to the Falmouth Historical Society on October 1, 1976, for \$45,000. The banner headline in *The Falmouth Enterprise* the next day was, "We bought it."

Buying 16 Main Street was only the first hurdle for the Falmouth Historical Society. Opening the house to the public for tours involved a series of curators, the first of whom lived-in and paid a nominal rent for five years. The second did not live there but opened it to the public five afternoons a week. Finally, ten years later in 1986, only one room was open for summer visitors. But maintenance expenses were mounting. By the fall of 1986, the Board of Directors meeting agreed that "the Bates House would require major reconstruction." It was decided that with little memorabilia exhibited, in just one room, the best solution would be to rent the house for two

years and keep the funds separate to set the house up properly.

For one brief moment in 1990, Gertrude Vose and her proposed group, The Katharine Lee Bates Historic Preservation Society, agreed in principal to buy the house. But the price the Board set of \$150,000 was unacceptable. A day later Mrs. Vose withdrew her proposal.

So it continued to be a rental house until 2008 with the rents ranging from \$400/mo. to \$1000/mo. The last tenant moved out in September 2008 and the house sold in October 2008 for \$300,000 to Linda and David Newton who were known for the restoration work they have done. Two examples are the Osterville offices of C. H. Newton and work currently being done on the Mashpee Wampanoag Old Meeting House.

A walkthrough with David Newton on March 30, 2009, revealed his passion for authentic restoration and pride in the work being done on the house. The quality of William Nye's work still exists under one-



Perhaps Katharine Lee Bates' birthing room behind the master bedroom. The steps lead to the attic. Photo by E. Graham Ward.



Restorer David Newton points out the original wide boards used in the construction of the house. Photo by E. Graham Ward.

quarter inch of accumulated paint as the mantles, wainscoting and chair rails are hand-sanded down to the original wood details. There is little deterioration in the plaster, wood, and brick fireplaces. The exterior wood and the window frames are in good shape. Where necessary old windows have been replaced with restoration glass. Much of the original board will be reused. Where code requires new rafters, the old roof joists also remain. Some old fireplaces were discovered. The original cistern will be viewable through a clear covered back room floor; the three-holer remains in form if not in function. A master bath will be added on the second floor, complete with a claw foot tub. The radiators, not original, are being replaced with forced hot air and then the floor will be repainted as it was in 1810. Storm windows have been carefully crafted to blend in with the windows. While the house will be all rewired, the old ballast bricks, small and uneven, still frame one interior chimney. Eight of the original shutters for the front of the house were rediscovered in storage and are also being refinished. The front porch has

been shored up; some original pink marble reused in the foundation repair.

Inquiries have already been made about the availability of the house, but no decisions have been made about future usage. Meanwhile the town can look forward to an open house upon completion, expected in July. William Nye's house will shine again.

Maria C. Ward is a graduate of Wellesley College where the Katharine Lee Bates dormitory opened in her freshman year. She was previously head of the North Andover Historical Commission and founded a quarterly journal, *The Cochichewick Chronicles*, (modeled after the *Spritsail*) for the town's 350th anniversary celebration in 1996. Maria acknowledges the help of Carolyn Powers, Mary Sicchio, Falmouth Historical Society and *The Falmouth Enterprise*.



Rear view of 16 Main St. showing the ell under restoration. The ell houses a three-holer. Photo by E. Graham Ward.