

By JOHN W. SOBER

It's said that when the first settlers came to Stratford in 1639 instead of building log cabins they constructed hillside dugouts to weather the first winter.

Later, one of that hardy band of "Seventeen families containing sixty-five souls", used part of the wall of a dugout for the foundation of a more permanent home.

The man was William Judson and his house has not survived, but it's generally believed that his great-grandson, Captain David Judson, used that original 1639, mud and stone wall, for a house he built in 1723.

Today, the Stratford Historical society begins celebration of the 250th anniversary of that structure, known as "Judson House", as it opens the doors of the house for the 1973 season.

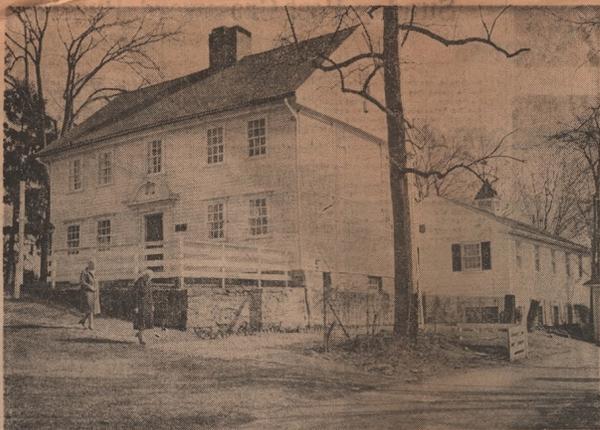
Currently, Judson House is the only house of the 1700s period in the Bridgeport area open to the public as a museum on a regular basis.

Beginning today, Judson House will open on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. until Nov. 1.

Unique Feature

In addition to the fact that the foundation of the house dates to the

(Continued on Page E-Five)



**HISTORIC SITE** — The present appearance of the former Judson House on Academy Hill street, Stratford, probably very closely approximates the way it looked when constructed in 1723.



**'YE LOWER KITCHEN'** — Despite the quaint reference, this kitchen on the lower level of Judson House was probably used to house the Judson family slaves. Stratford Historical society president, Elden Dustin, right, discusses details of restoration with member Marshall Nye.

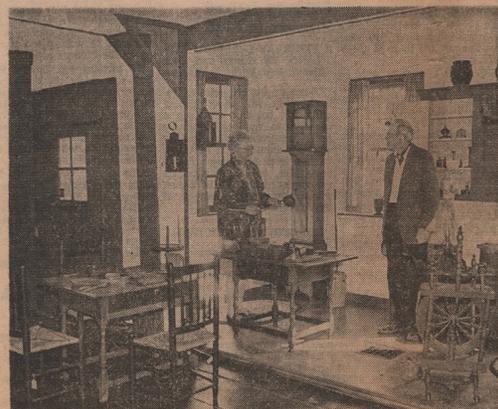
# Stratford's Judson House Opens Today for Its 250th Anniversary



**GAY NINETIES** — Historic Judson House as it looked in the 1890s. The Victorian era added the twin porches, drastically changing the appearance of the house. They were removed in 1926.



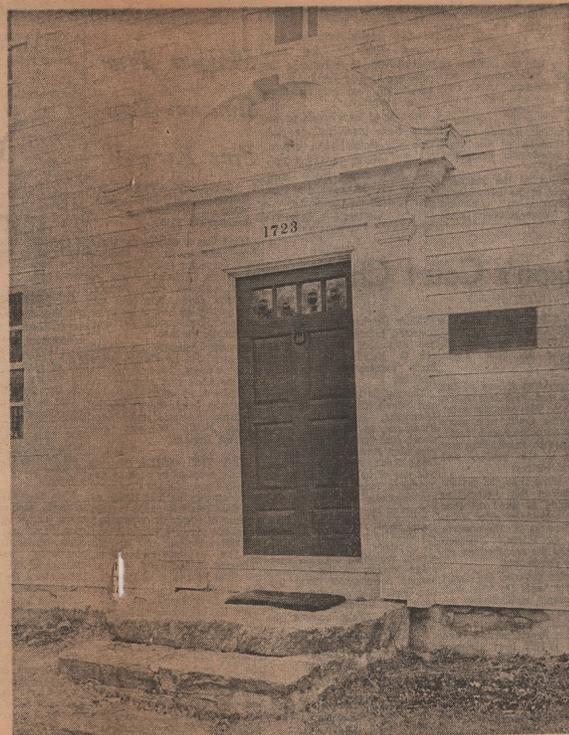
**PREPARATION** — Historical society members Mrs. Frank Scott, left, and Mrs. Stanley Sellick are pictured working on new curtains in the dining room of the Judson House.



**UPPER KITCHEN** — Historical society members Mr. and Mrs. Donald W. Fowler confer in the upper kitchen. The room contains a number of valued artifacts dating from colonial days.



**ASTOR PIANO**—Garro Ray, restorer of the rare Astor piano at Judson House, tests the action as his wife watches. Manufactured in London in the last years of the 1700s, the piano was once owned by United States Constitution signer and Stratford resident William Samuel Johnson.



**FRONT DOOR** — Unique Judson House portico is featured on the cover of J. Frederick Kelly's book, "Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut." Broken pediment design (above door), and glass set in the door, were unknown in this area at the time of construction of the house and may have set the pattern for later colonial architecture in Connecticut.

# Stratford's Judson House Opens for 250th Anniversary

(Continued from Page E-Three)

very year of Stratford's settlement, Judson House is valued because of a number of unique architectural features, and its fine state of preservation.

"The fact that so much is original", is the way Donald W. Fowler of the historical society describes the worth of the house.

The Connecticut Historical society will recognize the significance of the house on May 19 when it holds its annual meeting in Stratford.

Most unusual in the construction of the house is the "broken pediment" design over the front door and the original "bull's-eye" glass set in the door itself.

## Inspiration

The broken pediment design was practically unknown in this part of the country in the 1720s and, in fact, may have been the inspiration for later broken pediment porticoes elsewhere in Connecticut.

The placement of the glass windows in the door itself was also an oddity as normally the glass windows were present above the door.

So extraordinary is Judson House doorway that it's featured on the cover of J. Frederick Kelly's book, "Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut."

Although there obviously have been some modifications in the house, the fundational structure is virtually the same as when it was built in 1723 and even some of the original handhewn shingles, now 250 years old, are still on the building.

## 'Solid Citizens'

The Judson family itself, that occupied Judson House for most of its existence, were not people of great renown but, as one

member of the historical society has remarked, "just good, solid citizens".

Captain Judson, builder of the house, was, however, a man of some local prominence serving as auditor of the Connecticut colony records and as a deputy of the General Assembly.

When he built his house in 1723 it stood at about the center of town on a hill called "Watch House Hill", later "Meeting House Hill" and now known as "Academy Hill." Today, in fact, Judson House is located on Academy Hill street, Stratford, about 100 feet east of Main Street.

The house continued in the hands of seven generations of Judsons and through 165 years until sold to John Wheeler in 1888.

## 'Cosmetic' Changes

During the three years that he owned the house, Mr. Wheeler made several "cosmetic" changes including laying new flooring over the original floor and wainscoting over the original paneling.

Years later, the Stratford Historical society was grateful to Mr. Wheeler for these "improvements," for when removing the floor and wainscoting to expose the original wood they found it well protected and preserved.

The 1891 the house was purchased from Mr. Wheeler by maiden sisters, Celia and Cornelia Curtis.

Recognizing the value of the old home, the sisters agreed that each should make the other the beneficiary of her will with the understanding that the surviving sister would deed the house upon her death to the Stratford

Historical society (although there was no historical society in Stratford at the time) as a "permanent repository".

Celia Curtis outlived her sister and, on January 20, 1925, deeded over the property, subject to use in her lifetime to three trustees, providing, additionally, that sufficient funds could be raised for adequate maintenance of the property and that an historical society be founded.

## Society Founded in 1925

A public invitation for membership was made by the trustees and in September, 1925, the Stratford Historical society was officially founded with 134 members.

Although the basic structure of Judson House is essentially unchanged since its construction in 1723, 19th century photos show the front of the house drastically altered by the addition of a two-level porch.

This "Victorian intrusion", as the historical society calls it, was removed along with several other less obvious exterior and interior additions in 1926, and today's Judson House probably very closely approximates its 18th century appearance.

Surprisingly, when the porches were added in the 19th century, the pediment over the front door was moved by the carpenter to the second-floor porch level.

With the removal of the porches, the pediment was moved back to its original position and is again a part of the architecturally unusual and fully original-front portico of the house.

Generally speaking, the interior of the house is character-

ized by careful preservation of the original wide board flooring and paneling-in some cases hidden for years behind the false walls and floors added in the 1800s.

## Slave Quarters

One feature of the house most unusual in northern colonial homes is what is referred to quaintly as "Ye lower kitchen", or more accurately, the slave quarters.

This room, with its massive stone fireplace, is also well preserved today and a number of farm and household implements are on display.

It is known that during colonial days the Judson's did keep slaves as they are listed in the wills of several Judson family members along with their value in English pounds.

Some of the interior furnishings of Judson House are of as much interest as the house itself. One highly valued piece of furniture with particularly distinguished background is the "Quadrangular," "Astor or Piano."

Manufactured in London, England, by the Astor Piano company close to 200 years ago, the piano is one of only two of this type known to be in existence.

## W. S. Johnson's Piano

Probably most significantly, the Astor piano once belonged to William Samuel Johnson, a Stratford resident and signer of the United States Constitution.

In later years it passed out of the hands of the Johnson family and was on display at Mount Vernon for some 50 years until returned to Stratford in the 1920s.

Also in the parlor is a Chip-

pendale wing chair while the northeast chamber, or "Hawley Room," features a collection of furniture from the Lt. Governor Hawley mansion in Stamford.

In the "parlor chamber" (i.e., second-floor bedroom located directly over the first-floor parlor) is a pink Staffordshire wash bowl and pitcher formerly used in Stratford's Marshall tavern, and said to have been used by Lafayette when he passed through Stratford in 1824.

In addition to these items of note, many other piece of furniture, crockery and similar artifacts dating from the early days of Stratford are present at Judson House.

Many items for which there isn't room in the house itself are stored or on display in the museum. At present, the Accessions committee of the society is cataloging about 20,000 artifacts that belong to the Stratford Historical society.

## Additional Land

The land on which Judson House stands was expanded last year when the former Sammis property, adjacent to Judson House on the east, was willed to the society.

Determined to be beyond economic repair, the former Sammis house was razed in the fall, leaving a large open lawn area extending a way from Judson House on the east.

In a "Statement of Significance" prepared recently by the Stratford Historical society, Judson House was deemed to be important "because it shows how one family lived 250 years ago in Stratford . . . The house and its furnishings show how difficult life was and how self-reliant these people were."