

## Clear Sky, Onshore Breeze, a Rising Tide: Perfect Moving Day for Old Stratford House

By **AVRIL M. WESTMORELAND**

"It was built in Stratford, and it will stay in Stratford."

To fulfill this dream, a Stratford native and her husband, new residents of Philadelphia, have spent more than \$50,000 in floating a 238-year-old house a short distance up the Housatonic river today to a permanent site.

Resting in the path of a soon-to-be-constructed condominium, the eight-room saltbox house, built in 1735 by Nathaniel and Hannah Welles Curtis, faced an uncertain future at its original location, 1460 Elm street, Stratford, a short distance from the recently-demolished historic old Phelps mansion.

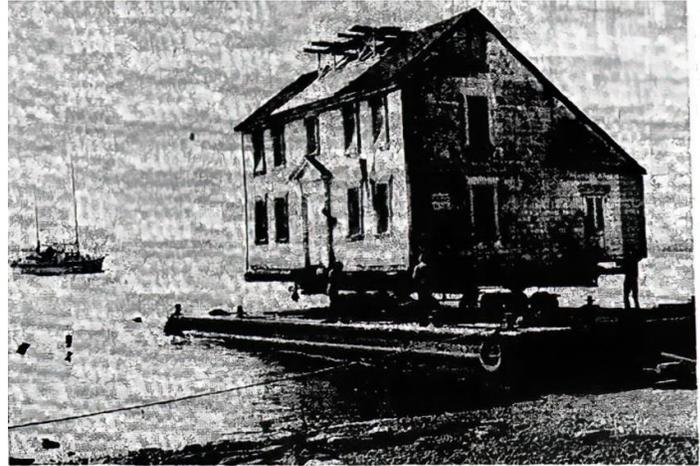
Mr. and Mrs. Edward Richardson, determined that the old house would not be razed by a contractor's bulldozer, negotiated to purchase the house "at a nominal price," from Associated Builders, Inc., of Westport, the owners of the relic.

Mrs. Richardson, the former Margaret Clinton, is a direct ninth generation descendant of Nathaniel Curtis, builder of the house.

The house, which was sold out of the Curtis family in the 1840's, was most recently occupied by Mr. and Mrs. John Kramer, who retired to Florida about three months ago.

At 8 a.m. today, crews of the Edwin L. Monroe company, 29 Fair street, Norwalk, neared completion of a month-long operation in moving the house, which last week was relocated from the Elm street site to a lumbering barge moored at the Municipal Boat Launching ramp, at the foot of Birdseye street, Stratford.

About 50 spectators, including children on bicycles, fishermen, sightseers, families



Stratford Landmark on the Move

The "Old Nathaniel Curtis house," built in 1735, was launched aboard a barge today on the Housatonic river and pulled by tug to a permanent resting place on Housatonic avenue, Stratford, about one-half mile from where it was constructed 238 years ago at 1460 Elm street, Stratford. The house, soon to be removed or demolished to make way for a condominium project, was saved by its owners, Mr. and Mrs. Edward Richardson, of Philadelphia. Mrs. Richardson is a ninth-generation direct descendant of the builder.

and policemen, watched as the tide slowly rose sufficiently to lift the barge from the riverbed and subsequently to allow it to be maneuvered by the tugboat, "Mirage," to its new site on Housatonic avenue, about one-half mile away.

The project has been underway for several months, the Richardsons reported, when they first learned that the Elm street property had been acquired for use as a condominium complex.

Word of the operation reached the couple in Philadelphia through Mrs. Richardson's three sisters, all life-long residents of Stratford. They include Mrs. Ranson R.

Micks, Jr., Miss Mary S. Clinton, and Mrs. Stephen G. Lawrence.

Contacting Associated Builders, the Richardsons learned that the contracting firm was "not interested" in restoring the house, and it possibly faced demolition.

"My first thought was to put the house on a barge and float it up the river to Guilford, but my wife objected strenuously," Mr. Richardson reported. "She felt that the house belongs in Stratford, where Nathaniel Curtis built it."

But land is at a premium in Stratford, and not so easy to come by, when you want to relocate a two-centuries old house on a suitable shoreline site near the Housatonic river.

Efforts of the Richardsons and William Rowland, of O'Connor and Gazley, real estate agents, proved successful after two months, and the site on Housatonic avenue was acquired, and the project got underway.

### **Aid Of Consultant**

In addition to the Monroe crews, John Spangler of Stratford supplied the barge and tug-boat. Jack Wardman of Stratford, a retired contractor and historian, has served as technical consultant in the preparation and restoration of the house.

The \$50,000 represents, the "overall restoration, preparation, and moving price, including placing the house back on a foundation," Mr. Richardson said. He declined to give the "nominal price" for which he purchased the house from the building contractors.

"This will become our retirement and vacation home in the future," he added, noting that "there is only minor plastering and carpentry work to be done."

The excellent condition of the house has been attributed to the fact that it has been in use throughout its existence. "There has always been someone living in it, until the Kramers moved out a few months ago," he added.

The decision to move the house by water rather than along town streets was made, he said, because "this was the only way it could be moved intact. Many times, houses are completely dismantled and then reconstructed. We did not want to disturb its original condition. The only part which was dismantled was the chimney."

The move by river was also prompted by hazards presented by low-hanging trees and utility wires along possible roadways, he added.

### **'In Colonial Style'**

Mr. Richardson noted that the house is believed to be one of the four oldest houses in Stratford "and is still completely intact in Colonial style."

Watching the weary, time worn gray house atop the barge, on the riverbed, he said the structure had been lifted from its base by the sills, "which are pretty strong, constructed of eight by 12-inch oak." Some of the sills will be replaced, he noted.

Interior beams, Mr. Richardson said, are an estimated eight by 14 inches, also of oak, and the floors are constructed of 18-inch oak planks. The kitchen is about 30 by 15 feet.

Of the four fireplaces in the house, he said, two are approximately eight by five feet, and four feet in depth. He smiled at the recollection of three bake ovens, commenting: "Hannah Curtis must have done a lot of cooking in those ovens, years ago. She was the daughter of a colonial governor, you know."

The house, which was loaded at low tide, and launched and moored at high tide, will be unloaded at the next low tide, "in order to keep it intact," he said.

At its new location on Housatonic avenue, the "Old Curtis house" will command a view of The river, "as Nathaniel Curtis originally planned," Mr. Richardson stated.

In dismantling the mammoth chimney, the moving crews took down 120 tons of stone, "all held together with grey clay," he added.

## Book Has History

In his book, "History of Stratford," published in 1939, when Stratford was 300 years old, former Stratford town clerk W. Howard Wilcoxson includes a photograph and background on the Nathaniel Curtis house, "built about 1735, later known as the Miller Duck Farm."

Mr. Wilcoxson writes: "Few of the early houses still standing in Stratford today suggest more forceably [sic] their early origin than does the ancient Nathaniel Curtis house on lower Elm street, a few rods south of Sandy Hollow.

"Its outlines still remain the same as when it was first built, even the simple and excellent type of doorway having withstood down through the years the usual decorations that time brings in the way of porches or verandas.

"In its later years, it was known as the 'Miller Duck Farm,' having been purchased by Robert Miller in 1859, from Lewis Curtis and Benjamin Curtis, sons of Dea. Agur Curtis, who died in 1844, at the age of 84

years. Dea. Agur Curtis inherited the property from his father, Samuel Curtis, who had in turn inherited it from his father, Nathaniel Curtis, who built it, probably about 1735.

## 'Staunch and True'

"Today the old homestead, perched on the edge of the meadow, still stands, looking quite staunch and true, commanding an excellent view of the harbor and the Sound beyond. While it is many years now since members of the family have occupied it, yet it is interesting to recall that the descendants of Nathaniel Curtis, its builder, are numbered among the titled families of Europe."

Today was a beautiful day for a house-moving, clear, cool, sunny, with an on-shore breeze.

Watching the barge start its short voyage, accompanied by Mrs. Richardson and Mrs. Micks, a spectator onshore commented: "Nathaniel Curtis would be happy if he knew the house has a new home."