

Why the Osterville Historical Society wants to save the Cammett House

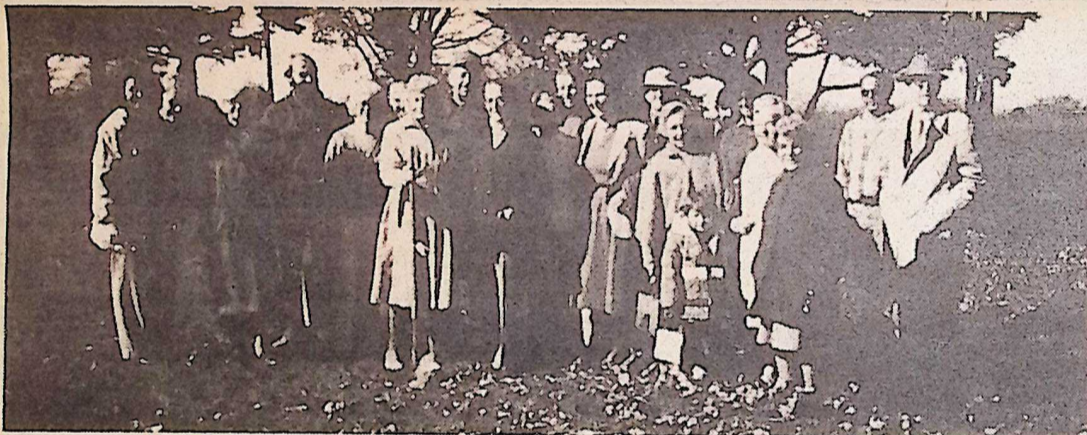
by Phyllis W. Cole

Not many of us today think there are any advantages in being poor, but we have one case here on the Cape, in the village of Osterville, where there actually has been an advantage in being poor. In Osterville there is a house that faced certain destruction up until little more than a week ago. The owners of the building, wanting to make room for condominiums, said the Osterville Historical Society could have the house providing they moved it and did so quickly.

Clair Baisly, Architectural Historian from Chatham, has said of the Cape, "Every old style of building here has a history, a history that has been preserved largely due to the poverty the area experienced throughout history." Because of the poverty of the inhabitants of earliest Osterville, this little house was a modest one. It began its life about 1720, had an ell and extension added in the 1830's and thereafter with the exception of a couple of bathrooms added on in the twentieth century, remained virtually unchanged, because of poverty. Small families or widows lived in it over the past 250 years, and along with their simple life and lack of wealth went making do with the house they had. In our prosperous time the building looks insignificant and uninteresting -- to the untrained eye.

Why would the Historical Society want the old Cammett House? What's so special about the house? What does the trained eye see when viewing the building?

The fact that it was one of the very first houses ever built in Osterville, believed to be the second oldest, could be considered enough to make it special. But aside from its uniqueness to Osterville, what is there to appreciate? The Cammett House, so named for its earliest known inhabitant, is a central chimney Colonial narrow house, one room deep. Narrow houses, or as Clair Baisly calls them, "One Pile deep houses," are little known in Cape Cod history because they were built mainly in the 1600's and quickly developed into salt boxes and other bigger houses. Russell Lovell, Sandwich Town Archivist and Historian, says the Cammett House "is a dead ringer for the Daniel Fish House in Sandwich, which has been moved and remodeled into a modern residence...These little



Group pictured above gathered at the Osterville Historical Society property on Tuesday morning to break

ground for the Cammett House foundation. (Village Advertiser Photo by Mark Cote)

narrow houses are so rare now...This is the only one I've ever seen that hasn't been expanded over the years."

The house was built on an eight post frame. The sill or timbers rest on a foundation created by laying stones directly on the ground. In the center of the foundation is a stone chimney base upon which bricks are used to form two fireplaces and a chimney. A pair of girts run along each side of the chimney from front to rear. The floor joists are just oak tree trunks, top side hewn flat to hold the floor boards, many with the bark of 250 years ago still clinging. The roof rafters do not meet at a ridge, but are bridled and half-lapped joints pegged with oak. The roof boards are placed vertically, a sure indication of very early building methods. The walls have no studs, only boards nailed above and below to the outside of the timber frame. The early builders used rods in lineal measurement, and the narrow house is a standard 16.5 feet wide or 1 rod. These early builders knew that one rod was the widest space they could span without support. The eighteenth century part of the Cammett House is one rod wide and two rods long.

The construction itself is reason enough to save the building, for the narrow house is very rare and one basically unchanged is even rarer. When Quentin Munson, early house expert and antiques restorer from Barnstable, viewed the house, he could only marvel at all the fine examples of early construction details, such as rafters with purlins and chamfered edges. "There are lumber marks on some of the boards which are very rare, and hand and pit sawn boards with almost no wear." Paul White, consultant on early houses, says the house has all the signs of early eighteenth century materials and construction methods and is 'remarkably well preserved.' "The 1830's ell is extremely well built. A real craftsman worked here." And so, we can appreciate the materials and methods used in the construction as fine examples of the building practices of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Can the house really be an educational addition to our community? Can we learn anything else besides how these early houses were built? Abbott Cummings in "The Framed Houses of Massachusetts Bay 1625-1725" writes, "...By the middle of the eighteenth century the lean-to Kitchen had become the undisputed area for preparation of food, though

occasional exceptions can be found." Our Cammett House is one of those exceptions-- there is no evidence in excavation to indicate that a third fireplace existed. Both fireplaces in the house have fittings for iron cooking arms, indicating that cooking took place in both rooms and that the rooms were multi-purpose. There may have been a lean-to shed at the rear of the early house, for as Lovell says, "The narrow house, even with two rooms, was substantially smaller than the Cape Half-House and people invariably added on to them." There is a root cellar or "Cape Cod Cellar" in the area

just at the back of the house and it is believed to have been built at the time the house was first inhabited. The root cellar will be recreated in the same location and in the same dimensions in relation to the house when it is moved to the Historical Society site.

Experts date the ell on the house at 1830, a time when summer kitchens came into use. People remodeled to put in big iron stoves. Our Cammett House had one. People lived in the entire house in the warmer months of the year and moved into one or two rooms of the main house which they heated during the cold months. In their book "Old American Houses 1700-1850," Henry and Ottalie Williams wrote, "...Houses that are lived in and are a part of people's lives are themselves living, growing things, and normally change with changing times." We can learn from the Cammett House, by careful observation and research, how our ancestors lived 250 years ago. We can learn how they lighted their rooms, kept their food from spoiling, cooked, obtained water, and met the basic requirements for survival. We can learn because our little house gave shelter to poverty. Now we have the chance to gain the wealth of knowledge from that poverty. All the experts agree, the house should be saved and restored. The Historical Society has been helped with this project because the people want to help; and they have helped to the point of saving the building and getting it on a foundation. Will we be able to take it on to its restoration? Now there are no advantages in poverty.

We need contributions. Please send your check made out to the Osterville Historical Society Cammett House Fund and send to: Cammett House Fund, The Osterville Historical Society, P.O. Box 3, Osterville, MA 02655.



Photo shows the hand-hewn tree trunks which comprise the floor joists for the

Cammett House. (Village Advertiser Photo by Mark Cote)