

THE EVOLUTION OF AN AMERICAN BEAUTY

Thomas Chester (Hurlbut-Dunham) House

— 212 Main Street —

In 1794, Thomas Chester (1764–1831) engaged a builder to construct a brick house at 212 Main Street and contracted James Francis to do the joinery. His brother, Colonel John Chester (1749–1809), who had been serving in the Connecticut legislature since 1774, was appointed chairman of the building committee in 1792 to oversee the construction of the new State House in Hartford. That summer, Colonel Chester and a Hartford builder traveled to Boston to consult with architect Charles Bulfinch about the design. The Chester House was built while the State House was taking shape, perhaps best explaining its sophisticated design.

The Thomas Chester House — centered above the portico is a Palladian window. The original lights were replaced with stained glass and leaded tracery when the house was extensively remodeled around 1865 by Levi Goodwin in the Italianate style, including a new portico over the original entrance, bracketed cornice, rooftop belvedere, and verandah.







The double parlor on the south side of the house dates from the Goodwin remodeling. Extensive changes included the opening of the wall between the two parlors, installation of the arched opening and closets between the rooms, architrave trim around doors and windows, marble mantels, and lengthened windows and French doors opening onto the new verandah.

The refined details included a carved brownstone drip table separating the brownstone foundation from the brick walls, a brownstone string course between the first and second floors, and brownstone windowsills and lintels. The front entrance included both sidelights and a transom. Although it was altered by a subsequent owner around 1865, the original design included a classical portico. The roof of the original portico fit beneath the brownstone string course. Centered over the portico was a Palladian window, nicely framed by the small intersecting gable that projects from the hipped roof.

*A view from
the southeast
parlor into the
center hall.*

The house had four separate chimneys built into its north and south walls. The interior consisted of two rooms on either side of a through center hall. The stairs, originally in the center hall, were later located in a separate hall between the two north rooms.





The northwest sitting room — although the late eighteenth-century mantel dates from the house's construction, its size suggests it was originally in one of the south parlors. Its installation likely dates from the Goodwin remodeling of the parlors with marble mantels.

In 1804, John Hurlbut (1770–1808) used the proceeds from his trip to China on the American ship Neptune to purchase Chester's brick home. By the spring of 1805, he had engaged James Francis "to finishing the space way [hall] for 25 dollars," and later "to making a frame for a fanlight." (Francis 1805) The fanlight could only refer to the semicircular part of the Palladian window.

The Palladian window might have been inspired by one at the 1767 Duke of Cumberland Inn in Rocky Hill.

John Hurlbut died in New York of smallpox in 1808. His wife, Anna, died in 1810. Their only surviving daughter, Anne, went to live with her uncle, Ashbel Wright, and then with her older cousin, Martha Wright. Martha's husband was the Reverend Royal Robbins, who became the minister at Berlin.

Anne quitclaimed the Chester House to her uncle and John's brother, James Hurlbut. James and his wife, Wealthy Griswold, had five children, and the family lived in the Chester House until Wealthy inherited the Michael Griswold House at 116 Garden Street.





The dining room, the house's original kitchen, dates to Goodwin's addition of the ell and new kitchen between 1865–1873. The Gothic Revival fireplace mantel dates from that time. The ceiling cornice was added in 1891.



The brass and glass chandelier and sconces are early twentieth century and might have been added for Jane and Howard Dunham's wedding in 1907, in addition to the wallpaper, wainscot, and chair rail.

By 1862, Levi Goodwin had assumed sole ownership of the brick house at 212 Main Street and remodeled it in the Italianate style. Unable to change the underlying structure, horizontal proportions were the norm when Thomas Chester built the house in 1794, Goodwin introduced a degree of verticality with a new entrance portico and a rooftop belvedere. Goodwin's builder must have obtained the various components, including the Corinthian columns; arches, brackets, and cornice of the portico; the arched windows and frames; and brackets and cornice molding of the belvedere from a local lumberyard, because their counterparts can be seen on a number of Hartford buildings such as the brick houses built on Congress Street around 1858–1860.

Goodwin lengthened the first-floor windows on the south side of the house to provide access from the double parlors onto the newly added veranda against the south and east sides of the house. Since the original roof was already a shallow hip, it was relatively easy to have the builder extend the eaves and add heavy brackets and a cornice.

The house's original center staircase, rising on the north side of the back hall to a platform and then along the back wall, was probably removed during Goodwin's remodeling.









The cove ceiling dates to the Goodwin remodeling. The late nineteenth-century millwork grill, which divides the hall, was probably installed between 1880 and 1900.

The gasoliers, dating from about 1875, were probably installed after Silas Robbins purchased the house that year for his son, Elisha Robbins. They were electrified by the Dunhams.





In 1875, Silas W. Robbins (1822–1918) purchased the house for his son and daughter-in-law, Elisha Robbins and Ida Adams. Their daughter, Jane Robbins (1884–1963), inherited the house and lived in it with her husband, Howard Dunham, until the 1930s when they moved to New York City.

Jane Robbins Dunham left the home to the Wethersfield Historical Society, who received it in 1971 after Howard's death. The Society still owns and operates the property and preserves the home as it existed between 1899–1930 when the Dunhams and Jane's mother, Ida Robbins, inhabited it. Howard and Jane Dunham selected a colonial revival color scheme of red brick, cream trim, and green shutters, which they proudly displayed one year on their Christmas card. 🏰

The verandah on the south and east sides of the house was part of Goodwin's Italianate remodeling.

