

A SNUG HOME AND TAVERN AND FICTIONAL WITCH

Belden House and Tavern (Buttolph-Williams House)

— 249 Broad Street —

Before twentieth-century zoning required the separation of industrial and commercial uses from residential neighborhoods, most men conducted their business or trade at home. This was certainly true for licensed tavern keepers, whose homes also functioned as taverns where locals could gather for hard cider or rum, and travelers might find lodging for the night. It was not unusual for strangers to share beds with each other or a member of the keeper's family.

Tavern keepers were licensed with specific reference to their character and the location of their establishment. In 1673, John Belden (1631–1677) was “chosen ordnary keeper, for the entertainment of straingers and travillers, as the law requires.” (Adams 1904) This was the location of what would become the Buttolph-Williams House that stands today.

The Belden House and Tavern — when acquired in 1949 by the Antiquarian and Landmarks Society (now Connecticut Landmarks), the house was straight sided. Two layers of clapboard removed during restoration revealed the original overhang and evidence of diamond-paned windows.







Looking into the north chamber.

Although precise ownership records are not available, there is documentation that David Buttolph inherited the property around 1692 and sold it in 1698 to Robert Turner.

Subsequently, John Belden's grandson, Benjamin (1687–1741), purchased the property at 249 Broad Street from Turner in July 1711, returning it as the Belden family's home and to tavern keeping.

Benjamin Belden married Anne Churchill in January of 1714 and was licensed as a tavern keeper later that year, by which time he had presumably completed his house and established a new Belden Tavern. They had six children, who would have helped with the family business.

The Belden House and Tavern was framed in such a way that the steeply pitched gable roof projected beyond the walls of the second floor, and the front and side walls of the second floor projected beyond the walls of the first. The extended upper stories were reminiscent of the practice in English towns where the overhang sheltered the sidewalk from rain.

A view of the south hall with its period appropriate furnishings.



*The kitchen fireplace and its equipment,
including a clock jack to rotate a spit for
roasting meat.*

(following spread)
*The whitewashed kitchen is furnished
with an excellent assemblage of appropriate
late seventeenth and early eighteenth-
century furniture, and kitchen tools and
vessels collected by Frances Phipps, author
of Colonial Kitchens, Their Furnishings,
and Their Gardens.*











*The north gable
end showing the
prominent attic
overhang.*

The corbeled chimney, steep roof, projecting upper floors, nail-studded board and batten door, and the diamond-paned casement windows are features of the Jacobean style. Belden's continued use of this style was a little retro; at a time when the Georgian style was already in vogue, his use of the older Jacobean style might have been a conscious attempt to retain the look and appeal of a traditional English tavern.

In 1721 Belden sold the property to Daniel Williams, who remodeled the house in the Georgian style. The lower floors were built out to conceal the overhangs, and the house was resided with long pine clapboards. The window openings were altered to accommodate double-hung windows paired on either side of the center doorway.

The south chamber's ambitious and handsome woodwork and the great bolection molding of the fireplace surround. Red is the original color.





The Antiquarian and Landmarks Society (now Connecticut Landmarks) purchased the property in 1949 and decided to restore the house to Benjamin Belden's preferred Jacobean-style appearance. One of the organization's founding members, the preservation architect Frederic Palmer, supervised the structural investigation and restoration. His documented methodology established the highest professional standards for preservation in Wethersfield and across the state.

The crew took the Belden House and Tavern down to the frame, resided it with oak clapboards, and installed casement windows and reproduction board and batten doors. The interior of the house followed the two-room plan. The center chimney stack included a fireplace in each room. It is notable that the sides of the fireplaces were square with the opening taller than wide, as they were in England, rather than angled and wider than tall, as they were in houses built in America in the late eighteenth century. During this period, it was unusual to have a mantel, but in the Belden House and Tavern, all four fireplaces had them.

The south side of the house showing the bracketed overhang and the door into the south chamber.



*View of the façade with the second story
and attic overhangs.*





According to Palmer, the south room and its chamber contained “the most ambitious and handsome woodwork, so far as the fireplace surround and doors were concerned. . . . There are few counterparts — that is, in scale — existing in Connecticut of the great molding used on these two fireplaces.” (Palmer 1956) The original bricks in the back wall of the fireplace were laid in a decorative diamond pattern. Apart from the woodwork around and above the fireplace, the rest of the fireplace wall, the three outside walls, and the ceiling were plaster. The coffin door on the south end of the house opened into the south room, which probably functioned as the tavern’s public room.

The fireplace in the north room included a bake oven in the back wall, indicating this room was the kitchen. Here the edges of the chimney girt, posts, and transverse summer beam had rather flat chamfers ending in lambs-tongue stops. The fireplace wall consisted of vertical sheathing with a decorative joint. Frederick Palmer described the joint as “having two quarter-inch beads with a double bevel between them — the whole rather resembling very deeply cut shadow molding.” (Palmer 1956) This distinctive joint also appeared on the sheathing in the front entrance porch.

View of the reproduction nail-studded board and batten door.





*The south
chamber with its
original fireplace,
woodwork, and
plastered walls.*

The other three walls and the ceiling of the kitchen were plastered. A painted strip around the base of the walls served as a baseboard. A crown molding delineated the transition from wall to ceiling.

The second-floor chambers retained their original features including the fireplaces, woodwork, and plaster walls. The ceilings were not plastered. It is interesting to note that the casement windows on the front wall were closer to the floor than the casements on the end walls. This might have been done to prevent the large overhang of the roof from blocking the daylight.

The Buttolph-Williams House was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1968. Meanwhile, the successful evocation of life in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Wethersfield inspired Elizabeth George Speare to use the home as the setting for her 1958 Newbery Award-winning novel, *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*. Due to that connection, the Buttolph-Williams House was designated a Literary Landmark in 2009. 🏰