

BEAR TAVERN
Washington Crossing State Park
Washington Crossing, New Jersey

The Park Office, at the intersection of Rte. 546 and Bear Tavern Road, is a very interesting vernacular structure. It appears to have been constructed as a farmhouse, c. 1790, and enlarged into a tavern c.1820. Although much modified, it retains a great deal of original fabric.

The building faces south. As originally constructed, it was a narrow "salt box" structure, one room wide and two rooms deep. (See illustration) Of this phase, the cellar, sills, most of the wall frame, the roof of the front, and many of the finishes survive. While the rear shed has been deepened and raised, its original configuration is apparent at the rafter plate between the front and rear rooms. This plate retains the notches for the shed rafters. Original interior plaster survives on the north side of the brick-filled partition below this plate. It extends above the level of the current ceiling continuing up to the former elevation of the shed rafters.

The front room appears to have been the original kitchen/living room. It retains a large fireplace (now blocked), closet stairs leading to the cellar and second floor, and a good quality corner cupboard. The cupboard is original, as the wall behind it has never been plastered. The first floor ceiling joists are chamfered and the undersides of the floor plank above are edge beaded.

The rear room most likely was the sitting room/master bedroom. Measuring about 9 by 18 feet, it has a corner fireplace. The current fireplace mantle appears to be slightly later than the building. This room has been radically enlarged and reworked. The closet doors in this room are early doors from other parts of this building.

The second floor consisted of three spaces: passage, a good chamber, and a low rear chamber. This floor was unheated. The chimney side closet appears original. The upper part of the closet stair from the first floor has been removed, but its plan and elevation are visible in the floor and wall. The partition between the passage and chamber consists of spaced 1 by 6 inch vertical plank lathed on each side and plastered. The ceilings of the second floor have always been plastered. Original chair rails survive in the two second floor rooms.

The chamber clearly was meant to have some status. While the kitchen/living room and 2nd floor passage have ovolo door and window moldings, the chamber has cavetto moldings. If this house was built for a couple with no children, initially this may have been the master bedroom while the rear lower room was a dining room/parlor.

The attic had a plank floor for storage, but was otherwise

unfinished. The stair leading to it (now removed), appears to have been whitewashed, as some of the framing above the stair opening is whitewashed.

The largest timbers in the building (sills, summer, etc.) are hewn. Most of the others were straight-sawn in a watermill. Most of the tapered roof rafters, however, were manually pit-sawn. (Two were hand-hewn.) These rafters stand on 3 by 4 inch rafter plates resting in notches cut into the ends of the attic floor joists. This roof detail is an import from the Chesapeake.

The roof was originally covered with 3 foot shingles 12 inches to the weather. This is visible on several north slope rafters where the rafters had to be notched to create a flat roof plane. Some of these notches are vacate except for nail holes or bent-over double-struck nails. Others, however, still retain their original shingle lath. These lath have bevel-lapped ends and are attached with double-struck nails. When, in the 19th-century, the building was extended west, the roof lath were respaced for two foot shingles 8 1/2 inches to the weather.

The cellar extends under the entire original portion of the house. Mortises on the underside of the summer beam show that it originally was partitioned. The original fenestration pattern is clearly visible: two windows on the west wall (one later a coal chute), one on the south wall (deepened into a door), and one on the south wall (now blocked). The original exterior entrance survives under the modern porch deck. The cellar walls are white washed. The ceiling joists are both hewn and straight sawn.

Early in the 19th century, say c.1820, the dwelling was extended 22 feet to the west. There is no cellar under this portion of the building, and the ground floor joists are hewn top only. (This portion of the building could be readily dated through dendrochronology.) The ground floor room of this addition appears to have been the public room of the tavern. A scar in the plaster of the south wall may be related to the bar. The plaster of the north wall bears marks of a blocked door (behind the present stair) and an adjacent peg board for hanging coats. Plaster scars show that the walls once had a chair rail, portions of which survive as the window aprons. On the second floor, the addition appears to have consisted of only a large dormitory. It was finished, however, with a chair rail, cavetto door and window moldings, and closets on each side of the fireplace.

The roof framing is identical to that of the original front portion of the house: widely spaced trusses of tapered rafters mortised and tenoned at their apices. They have no collars, and they rest on rectangular rafter plates. These scantlings, however, are mill sawn, not pit sawn.

Until further research, the dating for this house must rest on nail technology. Both the original construction and the addition are framed with early machine-cut nails. They are cut from common

sides and manually headed. The heads have two facets. Lee Nelson dates these "double-struck" nails to c.1790-1825. A lapse of a significant period of time between original construction and the addition is suggested by the observation that the room of the original portion was reshingled when the addition was made.

The moldings of the original portion of the dwelling also are consistent with a construction date of c.1790. These include ovolo and cavetto door and window moldings, and quirks on the sides of the door raised panels. The door hinges are cast, butt hinges, rather than wrought, face-mounted hinges.

Note: the last time that the roof lath was extensively repaired, fragments of fence pickets were used as spacers at each gable.

Samples: examples of double-struck flooring nails were collected from the attic joists in both the original section and the addition.

The building's occupants are shown on three Mercer County atlases or maps. These occupants are:

1849: J. Hart's Hotel, BEAR TAVERN
1875: Mc P. Ege
1905: C. McClennen

The J. Hart listed on the 1849 map was John "Bear" Hart. In the 20th century, the former tavern was a farmhouse. Its outbuildings are shown in detail in a low level aerial photograph in the collections of the New Jersey State Archives (NJSA 83.11.66, c.1930).

Garry Wheeler Stone
State Park Service
Philip A. Hayden
Princeton Historical Society
10 March 1993

SOURCES:

Map Collection, NJ State Library:

- 1849: J. W. Otley & J. Keily, Surveyors, Map of Mercer County, New Jersey, Entirely from Original Surveys. Camden, Lleye Van Der Veer.
- 1875: Everts & Steward, Combination Atlas Map of Mercer County, New Jersey. Philadelphia.
- 1905: A. H. Mueller & Co., Automobile Driving and Trolley Map of Mercer County, New Jersey.
- Nelson, Lee H. Nail Chronology as an Aid to Dating Old Buildings. Technical Leaflet 48, American Association for State and Local History. Nashville, 1968.
- New Jersey State Archives. Aerial Photograph 83.11.66: Intersection of Bear Tavern and Washington Crossing-Pennington Roads, N.D. [c.1930].
- Reynolds, Richard. "Just another Rural Tavern until Christmas of 1776." The Trentonian, Saturday Morning, 2 November 1963.
- Stone, Garry. Field Notes, 21 & 28 January, 1993.
- Stone, Garry and Philip Hayden. Field Notes, 10 February 1993.
- Tichy, Charles R. "Evaluation of 18th-century Buildings at Washington Crossing State Park." Memorandum, 1 June 1972. Files, Division of Parks & Forestry.
- Washington Crossing State Park, Washington Crossing, New Jersey. Artifact Collection: three nail samples.

"Bear Tavern"

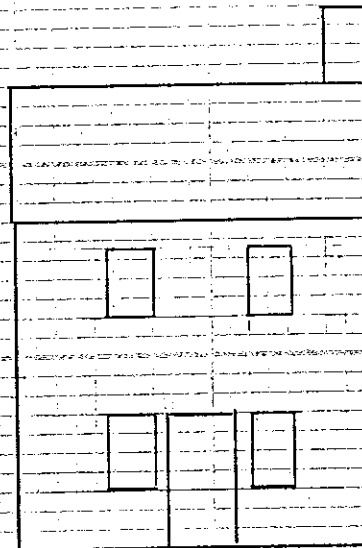
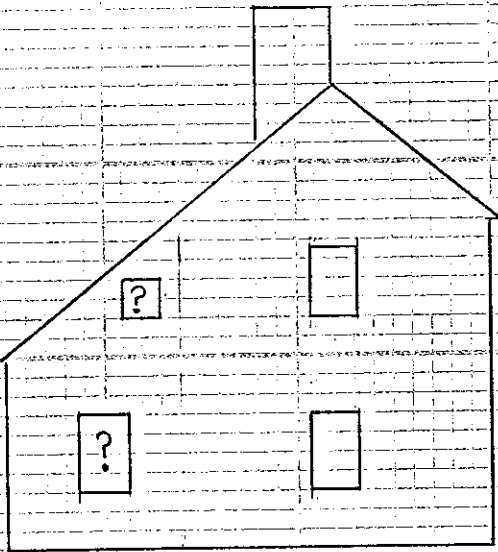
Washington Crossing State Park
Washington Crossing, NJ

PHASE 1: c. 1790

Schematic Interpretation, No Scale

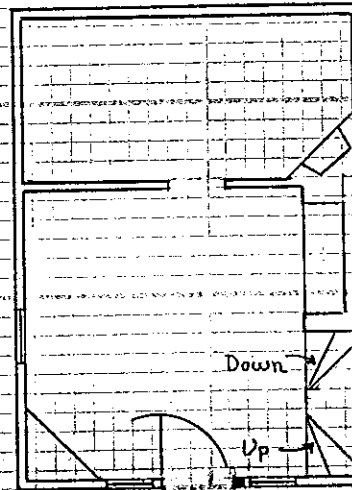
West Elevation

South Elevation



Ground
Floor
Plan

25'-0"



15'-8"

18'-2"

Philip Hayden, Princeton Hist. Soc.
Garry Stone, State Park Service
10 February 1993

Note: Dimensions are of frame,
not finishes.

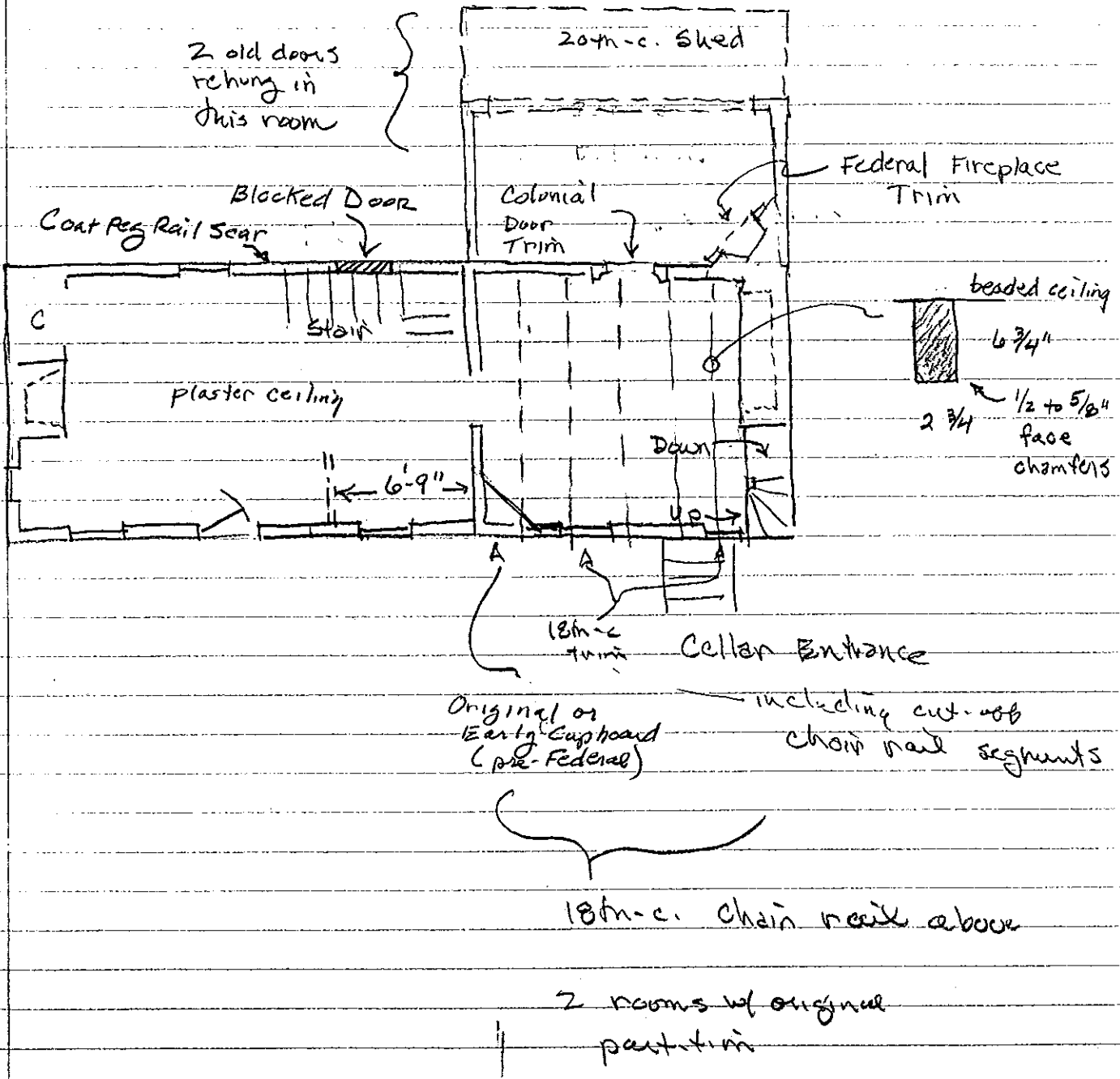
Stone 2 March 93

BEAR TAVERN

1-21 & 28-1993 gws

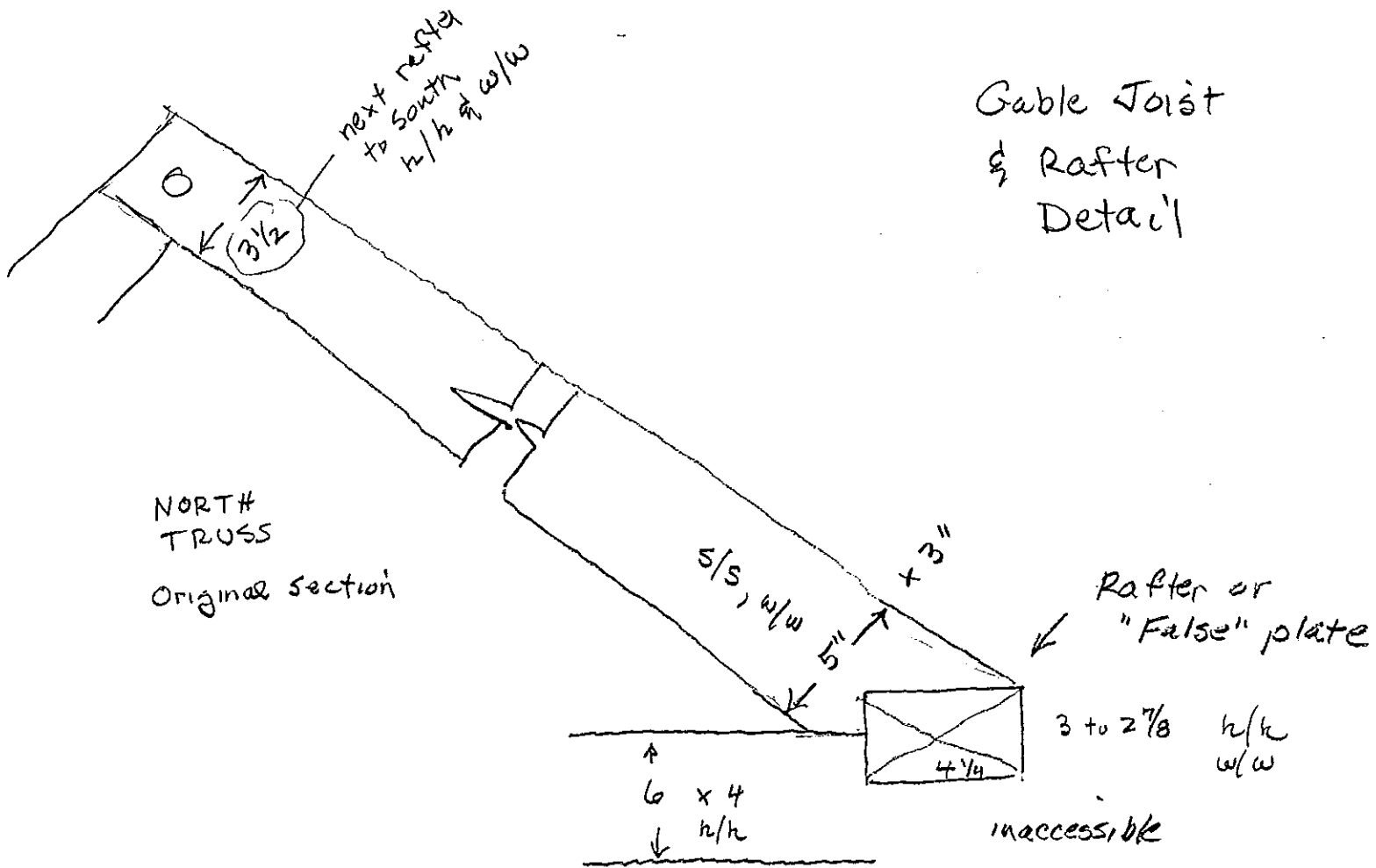
2-10-93

gws + P.A.H.

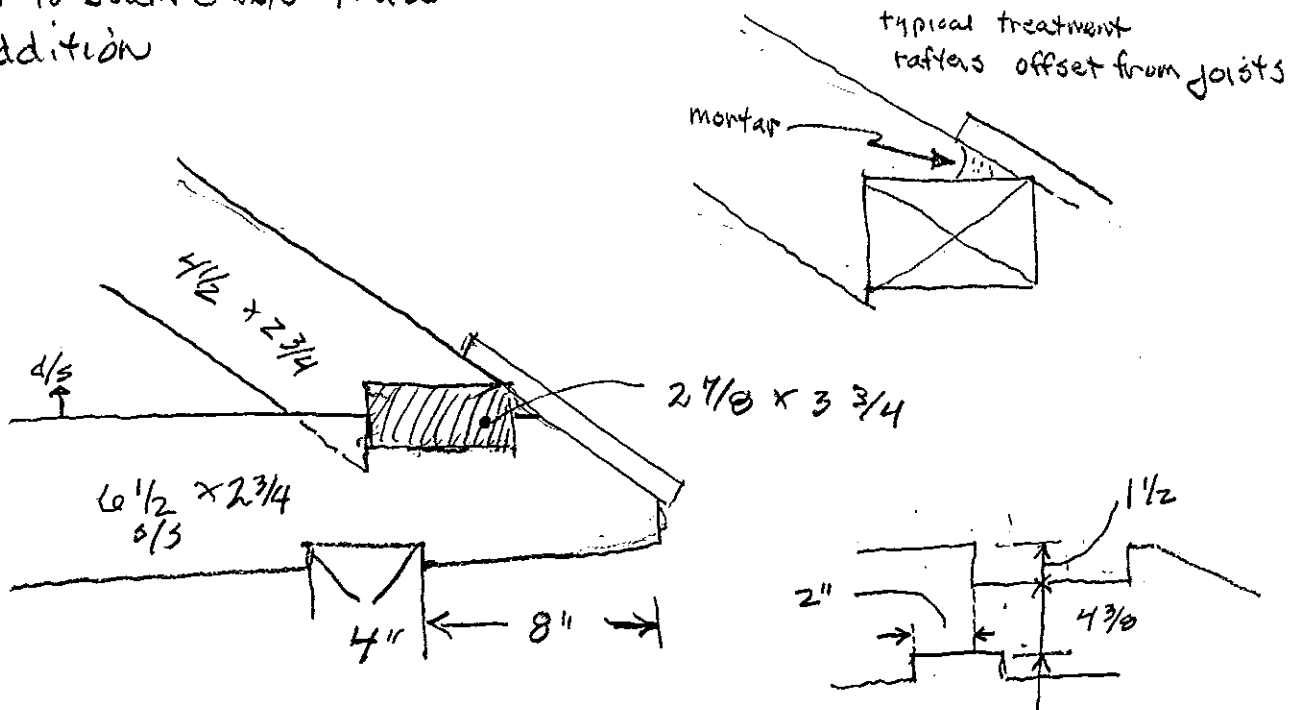


Bear Tavern

1-28-93



Next to South Gable Truss Addition



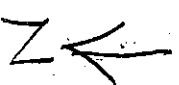
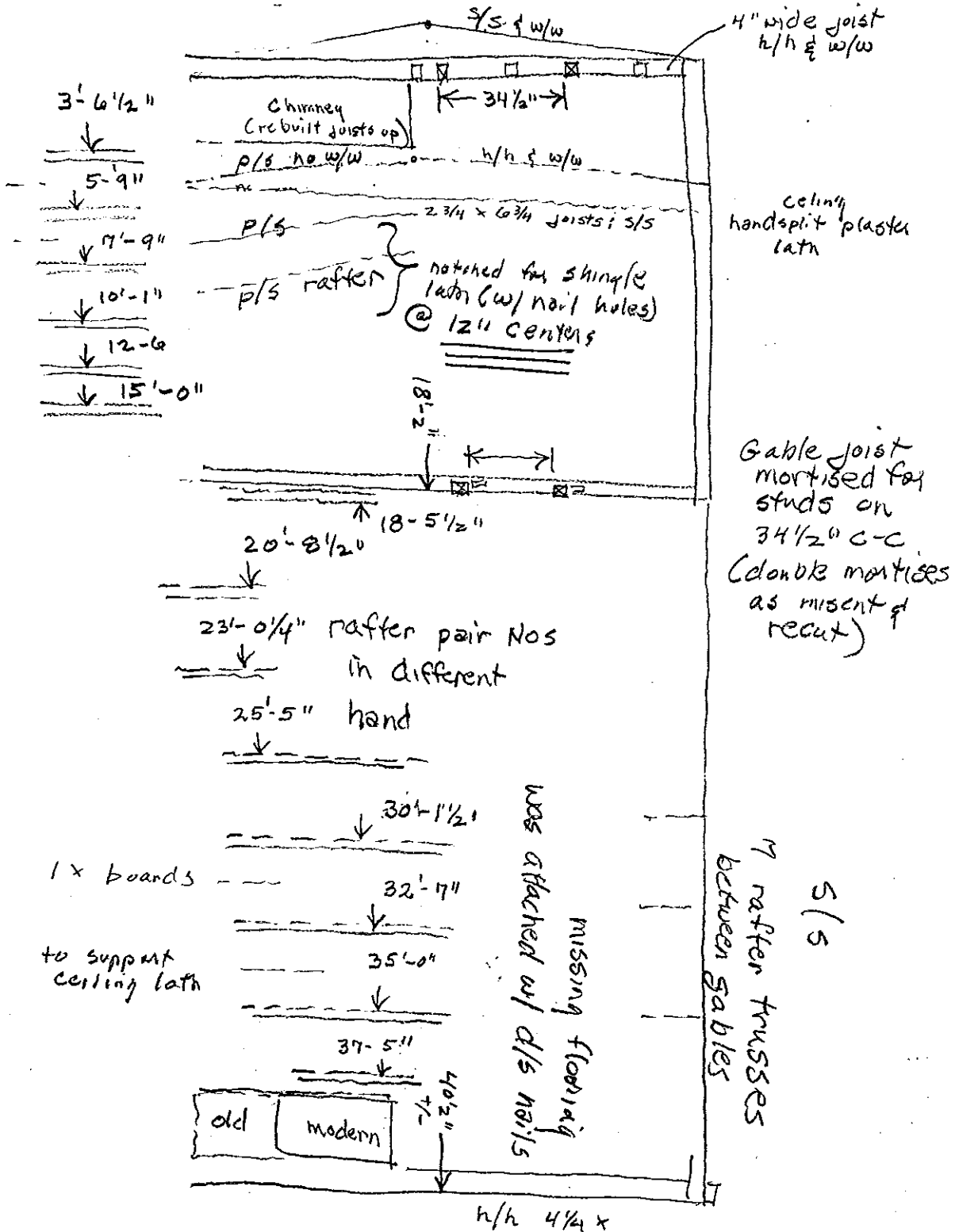
BEAR TAVERN

Notes on 2nd Floor Ceiling Joists,
Gable Studs, Rafters, etc.
1-28-93

☒ whitewashed studs w/ d/s nails
mortised into joist
☐ studs toe-nailed to joist w/ mc/mh nails

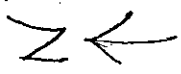
oldest
existing
lath
@ 8 1/2" c-c
w/ beveled
ends & d/s nails

JOIST
SPACING



Bean Tavern
2-10-93 GWS+PAH

Further Notes in Attic



frag. niven shingle lath
frag. sawn fence picket

Evidence for Shed

Chimney

7/8 x 4" lath nailer

finish coat plaster on brick nogging

7'-9"

2'-4"

1" x 6 1/2"

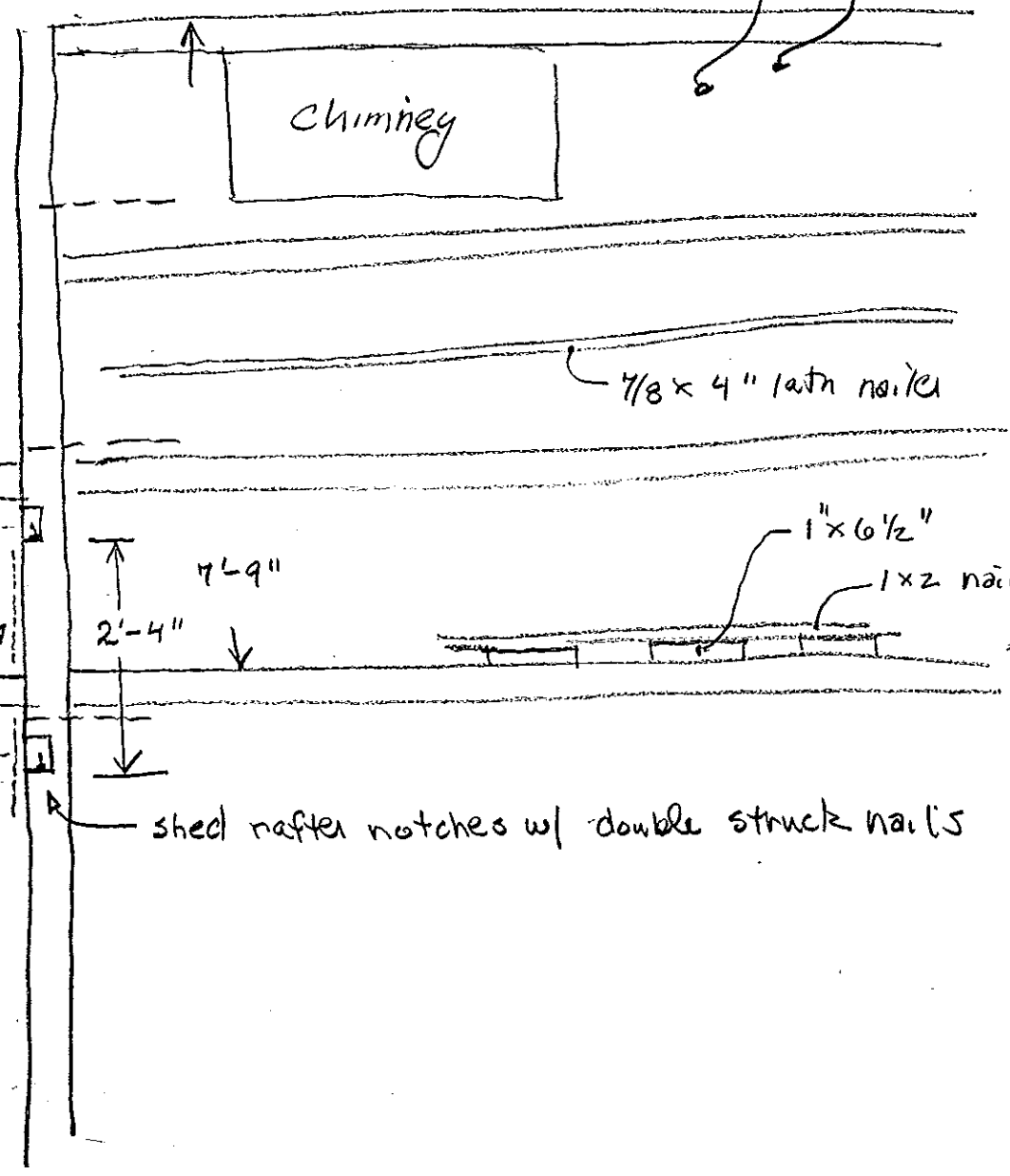
1 x 2 nailer for

Partition

plaster came to bottom rafters

shed rafter notches w/ double struck nails

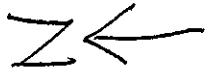
frag. sawn picket



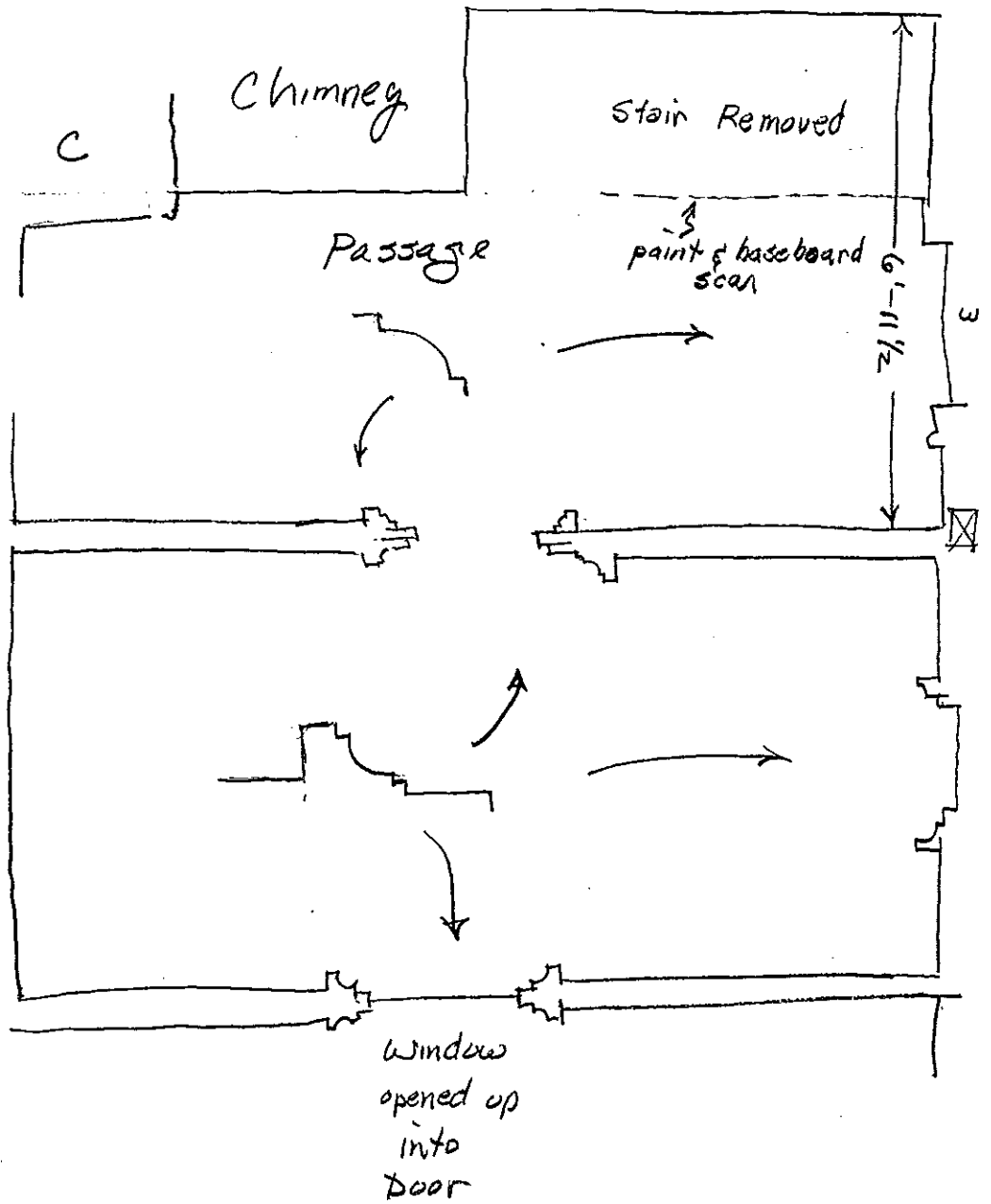
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BEAR TAVERN
2ND FLOOR
ORIGINAL SECTION

Location of ovolo & cavetto moldings



Low
shed
chamber

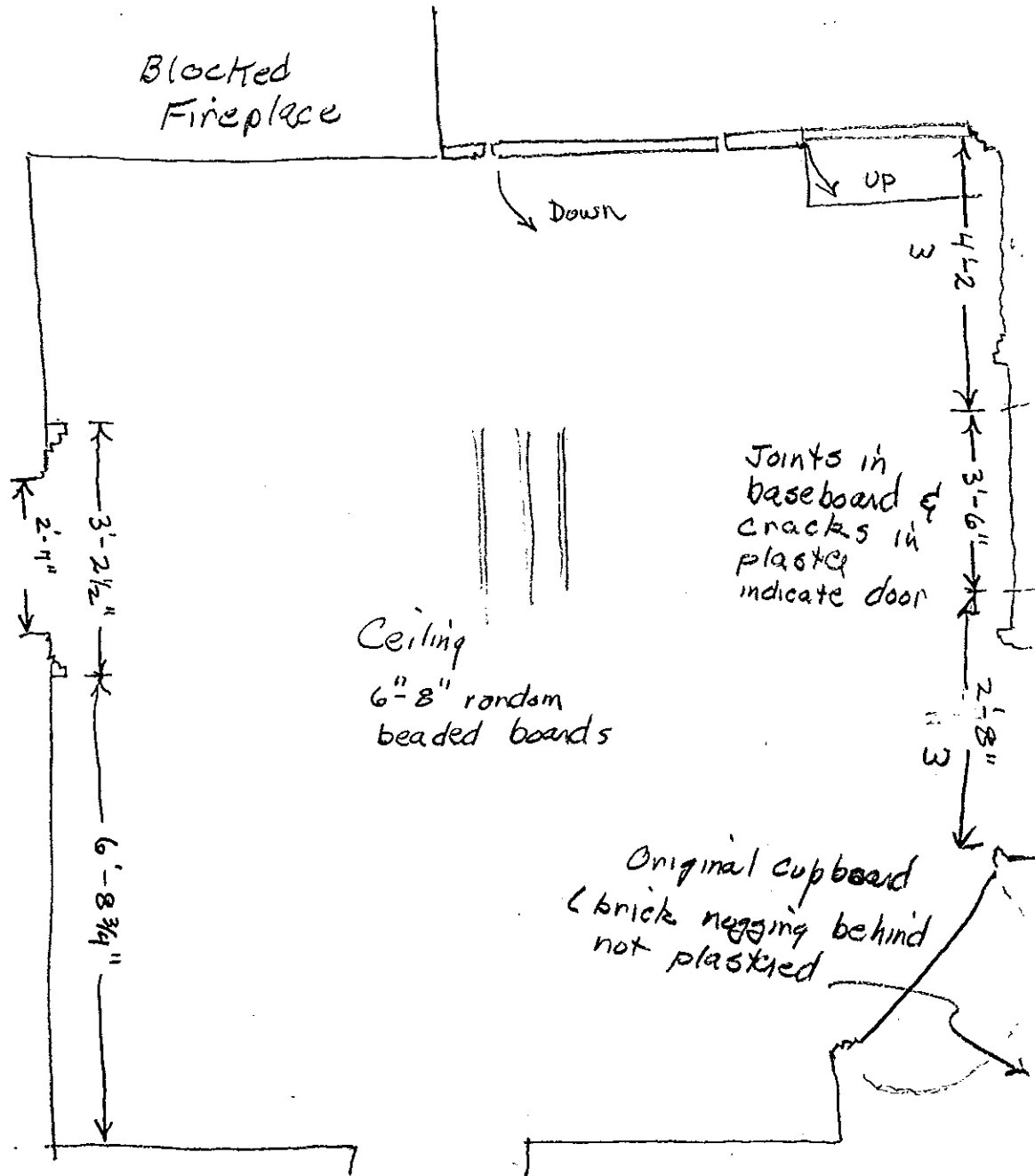


Bear Tavern

Phase I Kitchen/Living Room

Stair door: assembled w/
double-struct nails

(stair to cellar has
been rebuilt w/
m/c, m/headed nails)



Bear Tavern

Corner Copboard



Corner Copboard



cupboard cornice

rounded back

cast hinges

c. 1790 - 1810

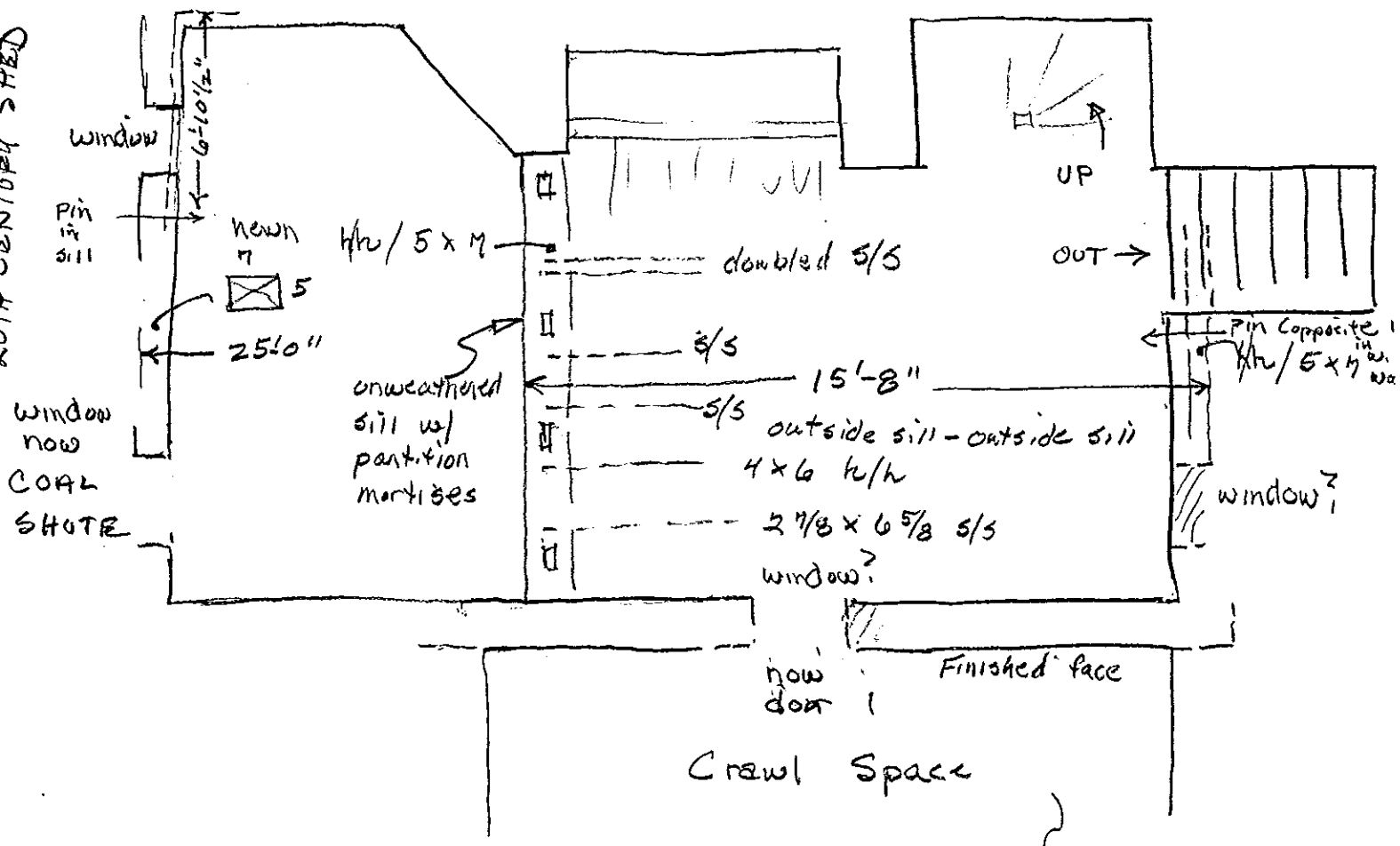
Hayden & Stone

2-10-93

Z A

BEAR TAVERN CELLAR
1-28-93 GWS

20TH CENTURY SHED



All old finishes whitewashed

1/2 round joists

Just Another Rural Tavern Until Christmas of 1776

By RICHARD REYNOLDS
(Fourth of a Series)

Except for a night in December 1776, it might have been just another inn from colonial times. But George Washington and his force of some 2,400 men stopped there after crossing the Delaware on their way to attack the Hessians in Trenton on that Christmas night.

And so the old Bear Tavern, located at the intersection of the Washington Crossing - Pennington Rd. and Bear Tavern Rd. in Hopewell Township, about eight or nine miles from Trenton, is remembered as one of the stops along the road to American independence.

Actually a historical dispute has grown up around the course of events after Washington and his army reached the tavern.

One group of historians thinks that the entire force proceeded down the old River Rd. to Birmingham, some four miles from Trenton, where the division under General Greene crossed over to the Pennington Rd. and followed it to Trenton.

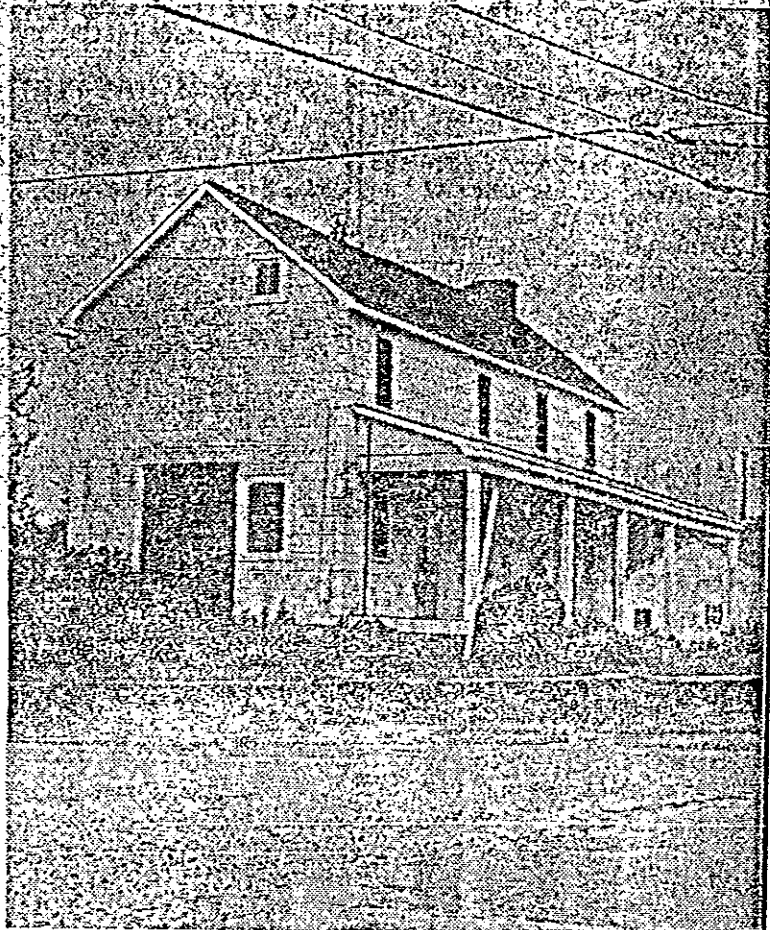
Another group contends that Greene's troops left the other at Bear Tavern and made a circuit by the Pennington, or Scotch Road to Trenton.

But in any case, all are agreed that the army marched to the tavern from Washington Crossing before turning toward Trenton and one of the most significant battles of the Revolution.

Local legend has it that the tavern got its name from one of its owners, a certain John "Bear" Hart who was on the premises as early as 1818.

However, in actuality, it was already known by that name in 1776. When Washington's troops came through, it was referred to as the Bear Tavern in a diary kept by a Captain Forrest of events surrounding the Battle of Trenton.

Apparently, the inn was built about 1740. Andrew Mershon was the first tavern keeper



Bear Tavern, the spot to which George Washington and his troops marched after crossing the Delaware before turning towards Trenton to attack the Hessians. The present building is believed to be the same one at which Washington and his men arrived on that Christmas night in 1776.

definitely identified with the place.

In 1761, he applied for a license for a house "on the River Road about 8 miles from Trenton." Unfortunately, a lack of historical records prevents further identification of the Andrew Mershon who kept the tavern. A petition for license in 1788 is in a handwriting different from that of 1761.

This could be explained by the fact that in later years of his life, Mershon (who died about

1792) had someone else sign papers for him or that the Andrew Mershon of 1788 was his son or nephew.

In either case, the tavern passed from the Mershons and in 1800 a license was granted to one Jesse Atchly for the house. He was there until about 1813, when the property was sold to John Huff.

The next owner was John "Bear" Hart from whom legend says the place got its name. It continued on as tavern under different owners, serving as a stopping point for farmers who were driving their animals to the markets in Trenton.

Local residents say they have been told by a former slave who lived in the area about a big corral across the road from the inn where animals were put while the farmers rested and refreshed themselves on their drive into town.

Later it became a farm and finally was turned over to the state as part of Washington Crossing Park at the dedication ceremonies on June 6, 1926.

NJ STATE ARCHIVES, 83.11.66: Intersection of Bear Tavern and Washington Crossing-Pennington Roads. N.D. [c.1930]. Facing SE. The Bear Tavern farmstead is at the lower left.

