



John Ward House, c. 1684

John Ward House, c. 1684 Salem, MA



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1626, a group of people who left the Dorchester Company fishing station located on Cape Ann arrived in a harbor that the local Native Americans called Naumkeag, or “the fishing place.” The Dorchester Company directors transferred their claim to a Puritan group in Great Britain, and about 50 settlers sailed with leader John Endecott to the harbor settlement that would come to be known as Salem. The small Salem settlement prospered, primarily through harvesting and drying codfish that they traded along the Atlantic. As Salem grew and families subdivided land either to sell or to provide for future generations, it was impossible for families to support themselves by agriculture alone. Areas of the city tended to be inhabited by those in a particular trade; fishermen lived by the wharves, for example, and craftsmen lived farther toward the center of town. People would have made many goods needed at home, but would have traded for the rest.

ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

John Ward (c. 1653-1732), a currier (leather finisher), purchased an acre of land on Prison Lane (now St. Peter’s Street) in 1684, and probably began building his home shortly thereafter. When complete, the site included a two-story home with a lean-to, a modest kitchen garden, an outhouse, and a well. As was typical for the time, the home was built in stages.

The home was moved to the Peabody Essex Museum in 1910 and was extensively restored to suggest its “First Period” origins. The home features a steep-pitched gabled roof, an overhanging second story, a large central chimney, and an asymmetrical façade. A classical ideal of symmetry and balance was not the aesthetic of choice until the 18th century. Small, diamond-shaped glass panes in the windows were a practical choice; glass was shipped from England, and smaller panes of glass were less likely to break during passage.

SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Look carefully at the building’s exterior. What features do you notice?
- Are there structures or details that we commonly see in homes today? That are different from new homes today?
- If you lived in Salem during the colonial period, what else would you need to in addition to building a house in which to live? Would it make sense to spend all your time building a big house all at once?
- John Ward worked as a currier, finishing leather. Imagine yourself living in Salem’s bustling center during the late 17th century as a currier. How would your life be different from someone who lived closer to the harbor and worked as a fisherman? Would your home or your possessions be different?
- How would your life be different if you worked as a farmer, outside Salem’s center area? Would your home and possessions be different?
- How do you think the different types of work that people did during this time help shape the economy and lives of people in Salem?

SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Compare the exterior of the Ward House with either the Crowninshield-Bentley or Gardiner-Pingree House. Ask students to consider changes they see over time, and ask them to consider why people in the 1600s would have wanted features that the Ward House exhibits. (The idea here is to rethink the idea that “newer is better.”)
- Divide students into groups and give each a map of Salem from the 17th century (online at <http://www.saleminhistory.org/SalemAsPlace/SalemFrontierOutpost/primarysources.htm>). Assign each group an occupation (fishermen, farmers, craftsmen, etc.), and ask them to think about their lives. Where would they want to live? What would they need in order to perform their work? What could they make for themselves at home or through their work? What would they need to obtain from others? In a class discussion, ask each group to consider what they would offer and what they would need from the other groups in order to live in colonial Salem.