

**The Double Front Peak House  
of Bonavista, Newfoundland**

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ARB 2117 The History and Theory of Building

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## **Background**

Located on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, Bonavista has been a prominent town since its settlement in the 17th century. From 1700 to the early 1900s, Bonavista was the largest center outside of St. John's. It has retained its position as one of Newfoundland's primary inshore fishing towns.

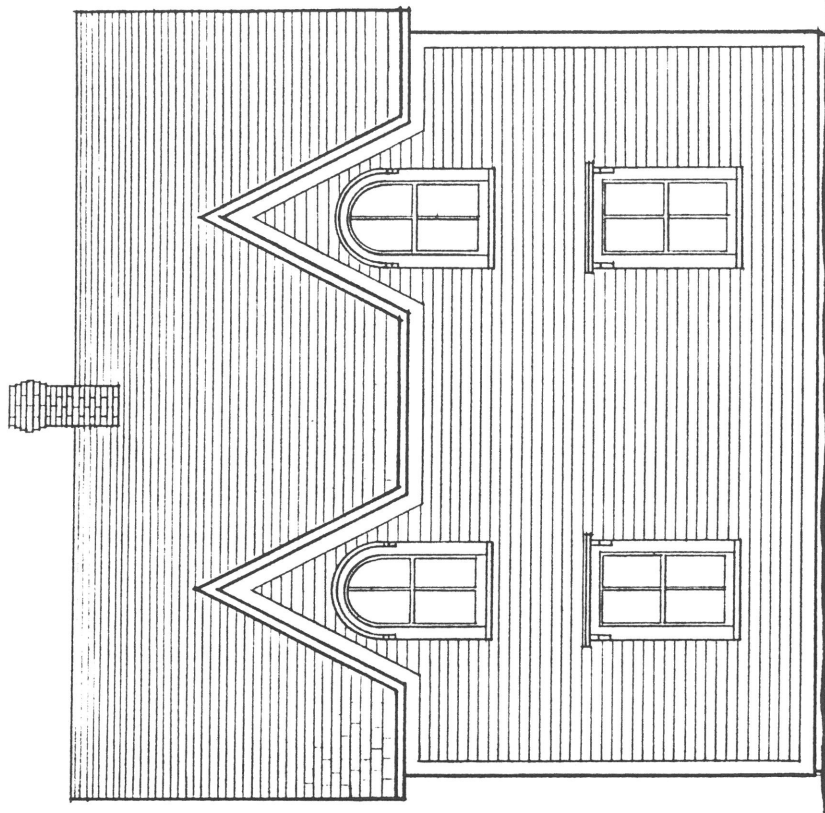
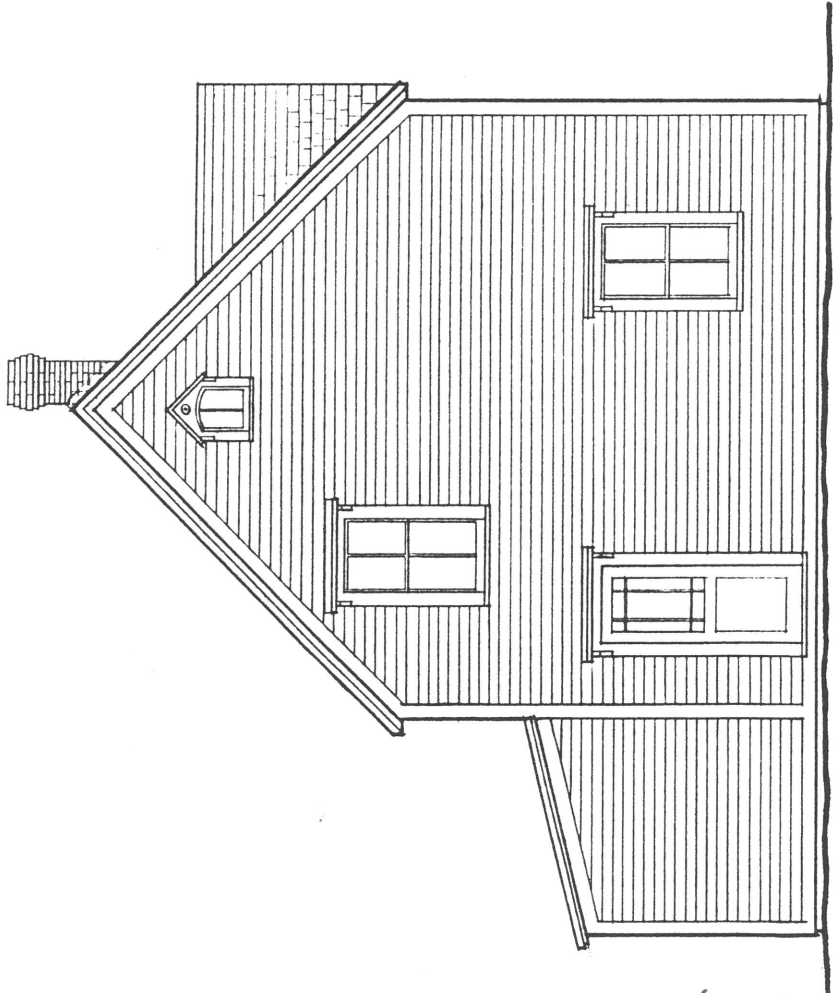
Bonavista grew rapidly during the latter half of the 19th century, but by its end, population growth had slowed substantially. However, building activity seems to have remained high from 1880 through to around 1920- the period in question here. The 1884 census indicates a population of 3463 with 583 inhabited houses, 110 houses under construction, and 146 fishing rooms (PANL). By 1911 there were 850 inhabited dwellings, 43 houses under construction, and 198 fishing rooms. In 1921, the population stood at 4,050.

Bonavista offers a rich variety of architectural features, including finely detailed examples of commercial, institutional, and residential buildings. This brief analysis focuses on a house type particular to Bonavista: the Double Front Peak House (DFP). At least 70 of these distinctive houses were constructed between 1900 and 1930 (Bradley, D., telephone interview). The material for this analysis was gathered from personal interviews, selected texts, and personal observations made during the author's work term.

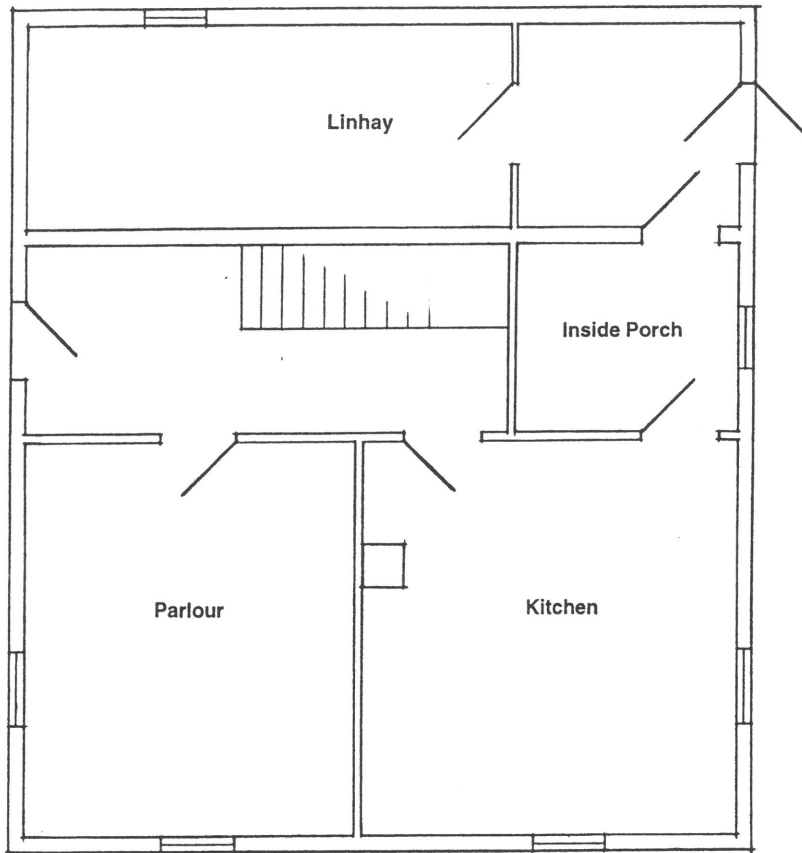
## **Description**

The form of the Double Front Peak House is basically that of the prevalent steep gable type with the addition of two steeply peaked dormers that cut the front eaves line. These strong vertical elements contrast with the horizontal clapboard and wood roof shingles. These houses tend to be well proportioned and feature a distinctiveness of detail. Ornate window raincap mouldings are common, as is a small gable end pedimented window. The dormers typically contain arch topped windows. The front elevation is a two bay facade which is reflected in the layout of rooms in plan.

The "front" door is typically located in the gable end, and some houses, such as the Samson Mifflin House, feature a porch and verandah. A hallway is found along the back with doors leading into the kitchen and parlour. Originally, the parlour was the formal room of the house used for restricted courting, receiving the priest, or funeral functions. The kitchen, the primary social space, may also be entered through an inside porch from the "linhay" or back porch. This is the most commonly used entrance to the house. The inside porch would have contained a counter and wash basin, while the linhay was often divided into a porch and storage area. Sometimes a vegetable cellar was constructed under the floor of the linhay. The chimney is centrally located and services a stove in the kitchen and one in the parlour. Upstairs, four bedrooms are located at each corner. A small attic storage space is lit at each end by small windows.



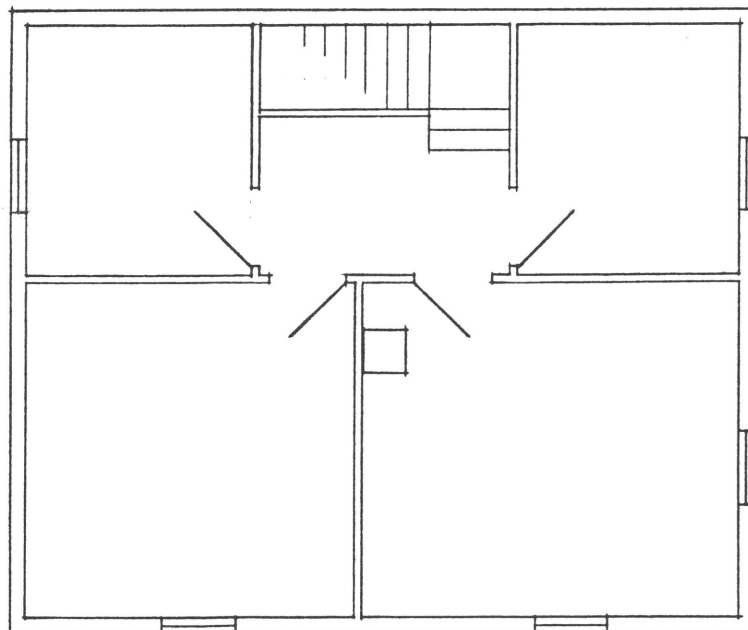
Typical Double Front Peak House. Variation occurred in the porch additions.



Main Floor

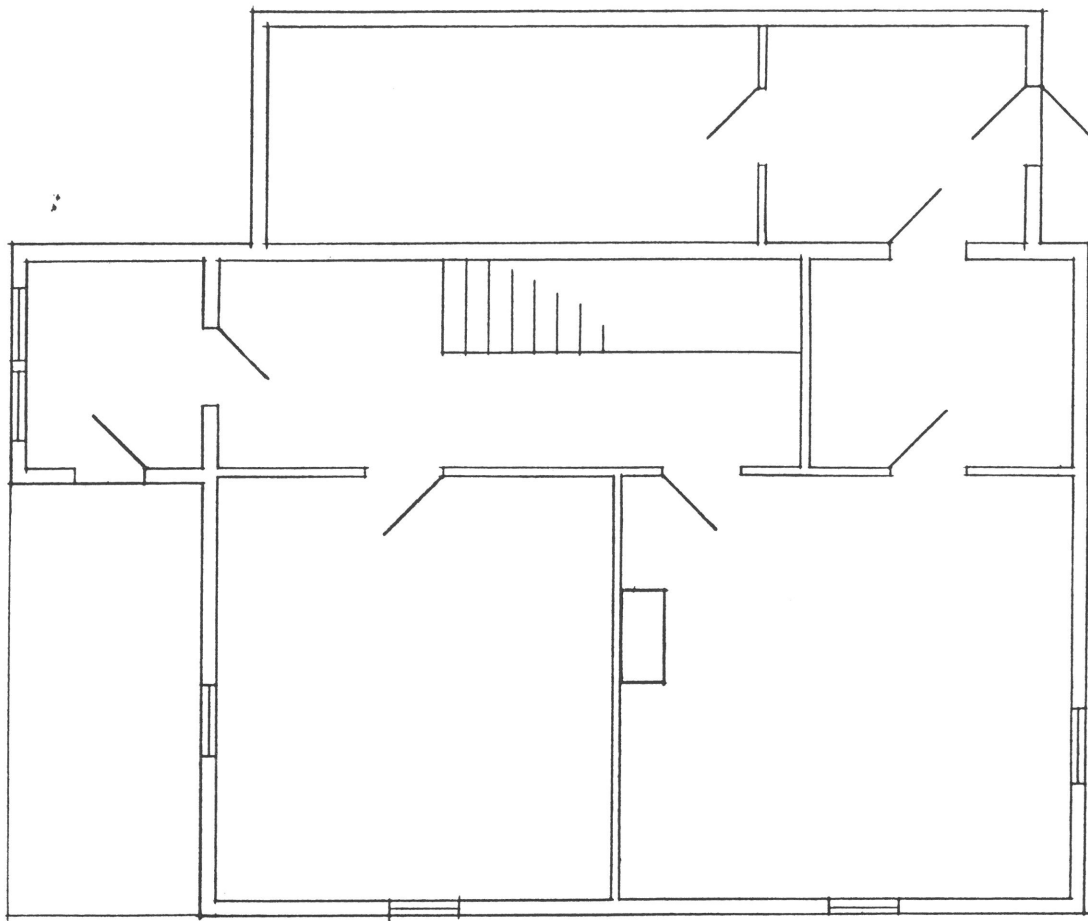


Second Floor

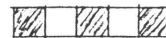


Floor plans of typical Double Front Peak House.





**Main Floor Plan - Samson Mifflin House.** This house represents the largest extreme of this type.



Apart from the linhay and porch additions, which vary considerably, the main body of the house is remarkably similar among nearly all surviving examples. Plan dimensions do differ somewhat, however. The typical Double Front Peak House is 20 x 24 ft. plus additions (Bradley, G., telephone interview). It may be as small as 18 x 22 ft. and as large as 21.5 x 28.5 ft. (the Samson Mifflin House).

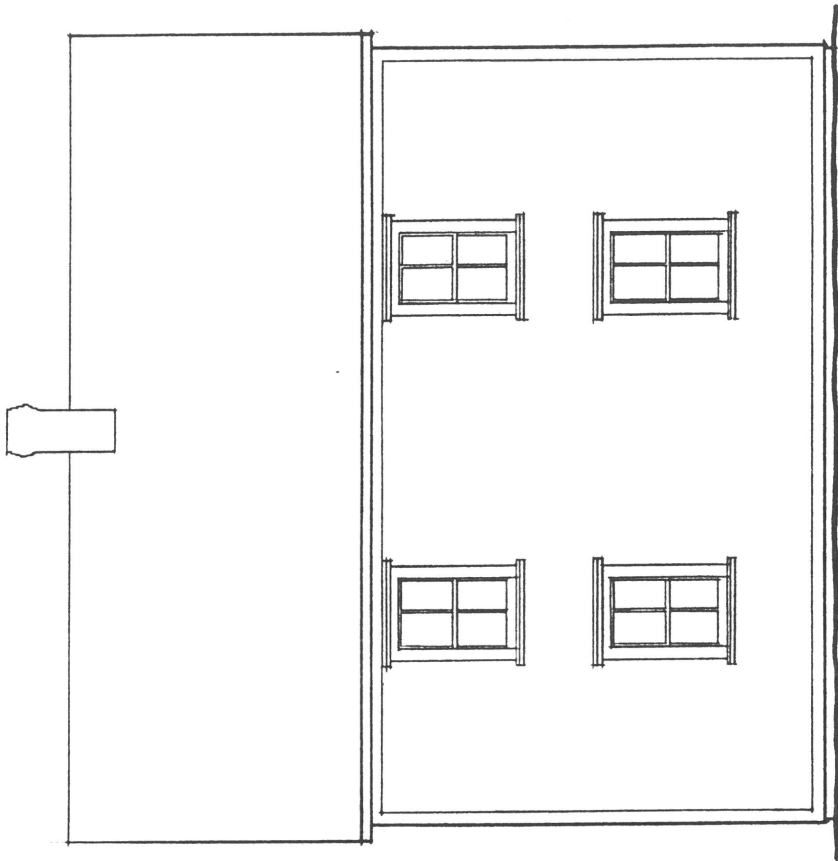
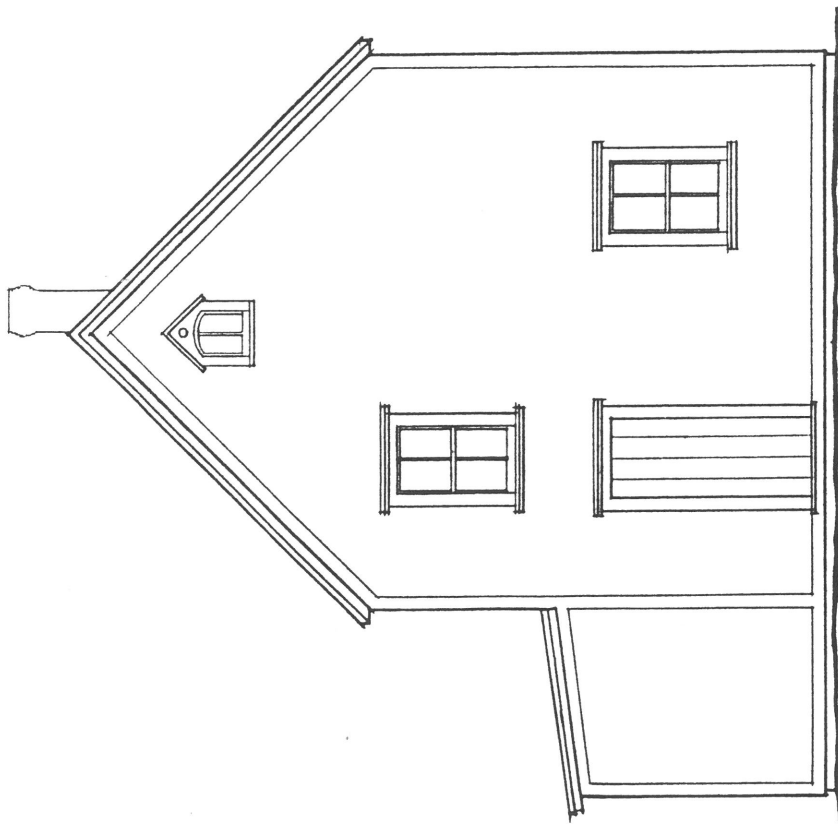
Construction consists of a balloon frame supported on a wood post or concrete foundation. Roof rafters join at the peak; ridge beams were not common in house construction (Mills, 1982). Siding is clapboard, and the roof was originally covered with spruce or pine shingles.

### **Origins and Influences**

The design of the Double Front Peak House is locally attributed to Ronald Strathie (hence the alternative title of "Strathie House" or "Victorian Strathie"). The Strathie family has been closely associated with the architecture of Bonavista since 1810 (Jarvis, 1997). Members of this family of builders constructed many of the prominent commercial and institutional buildings in the town, as well as many houses. Ronald Strathie was the third generation of builder, active in the early part of this century. Many of his buildings survive today, including the Orange Hall, the Memorial United Church, the Alexander Chapel of All Souls, and several finely detailed houses.

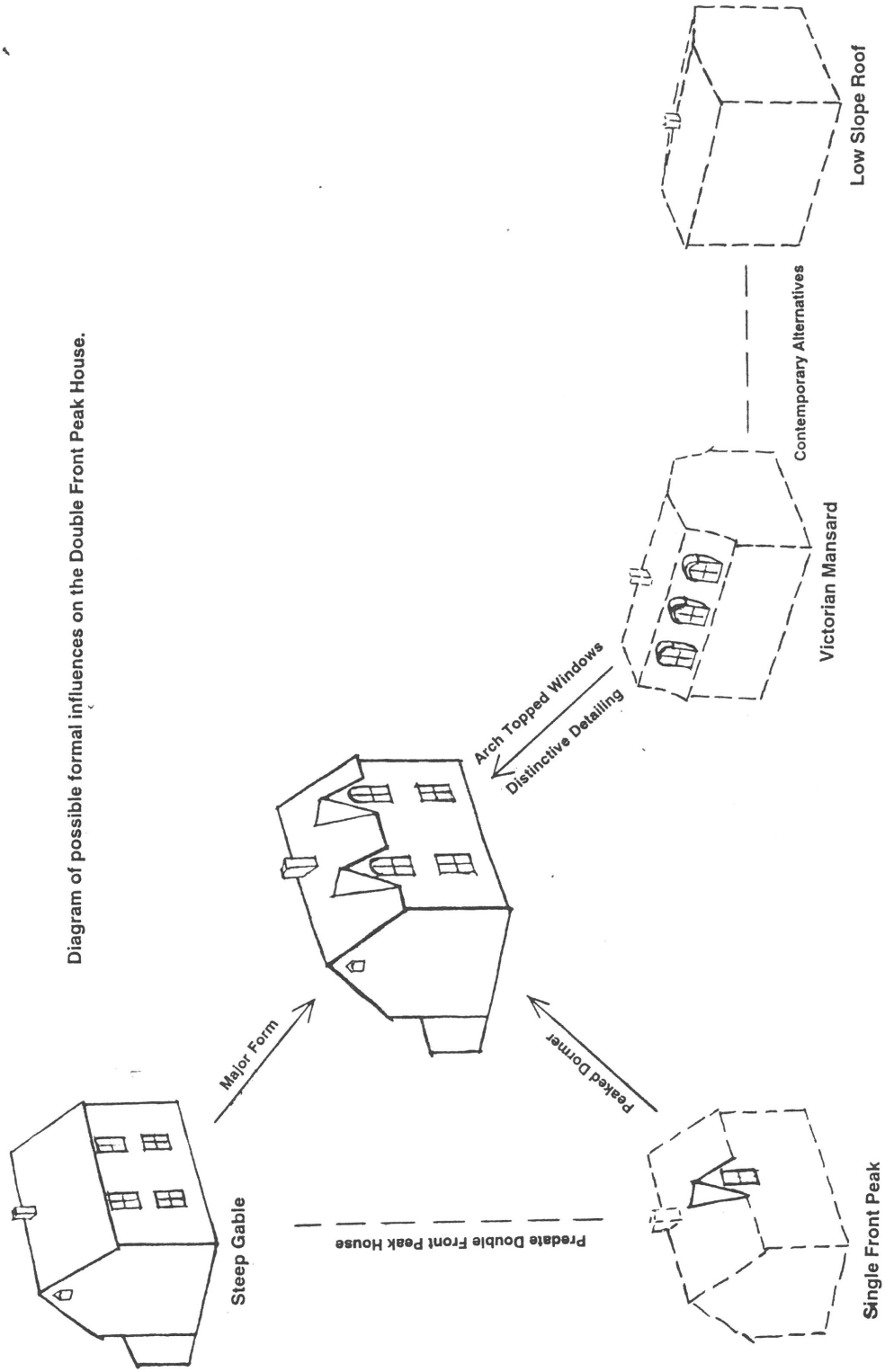
The Samson Mifflin House, built by Strathie around 1905, has been described as possibly the first example of the double front peak. However, an earlier house, constructed circa 1895 by Robert Ryder, throws some doubt on the question of origins (HFNL, 1997). This house features twin peaked dormers and a central front door. Ryder was also a prominent carpenter. Either builder could have been responsible for the original design, although it was certainly Strathie who was responsible for the refinements that were copied by many other builders: the two bay facade, the back hall plan, arch topped windows, and pedimented gable window.

This was the Victorian era. Although new building styles were slower to reach areas outside St. John's, as a major town, Bonavista would likely have been one of the first to adopt new ideas. Buildings became more ornate around this time, and the Second Empire or Victorian Mansard style was introduced. The DFP borrows elements from this style and a number of local house types. The essential form is that of a two bay steep gable house, which although not as common as the three bay type, seems to be more prevalent than outside Bonavista. The peaked dormer can be found on two examples of single front peak houses from 1840 and 1865. The arch topped windows are features of many Victorian Mansard houses. The plan of the DFP is similar to that of most of the two bay houses of the time, although this plan may have been a relatively new development (O'Dea, 1983). Thus, the existence of a diversity of buildings and such a strong building



Steep gable house- two bay. This type was common throughout the 19th century. It is the essential form behind the Double Front Peak House.

Diagram of possible formal influences on the Double Front Peak House.



tradition in Bonavista created an environment for experimentation and development of new types.

Why did the Double Front Peak House become so popular? While other communities were embracing the Victorian Mansard or the more practical low slope roof type, Bonavista was constructing the DFP. Of the existing houses constructed prior to 1940, the DFP is second only to the steep gable type. There are a number of possible answers to the question of popularity.

From a practical point of view, the use of the dormers allows raising the windows, thereby letting light enter more deeply into the upstairs front rooms. More importantly, the higher windows permit improved visual comfort; one no longer has to stoop to peer out, as in many steep gable houses.

Most of these houses were owned and constructed by fishermen. It is often the assumption that "poor" fisher people, financially at the mercy of the fish merchant, could only afford to build simple unadorned structures, and that the ornate buildings were the property of the merchants. This may have been the case in Bonavista before the mid-nineteenth century, but it does not apply after. There is evidence that a stratification existed within the fishing population in this later period (Bradley, 1994). A number of fishermen lived in relative prosperity, while most were at least able to find ingenious ways to improve their financial position. How these economic and social factors relate to the built environment of the time bears further investigation. However, it is likely that fisher people would want to display their fortitude by constructing the most ornate houses possible within their means. Even if the average fisherman could not afford to hire a professional builder like Ronald Strathie, there would have been a desire to emulate his work.

Another important reason for the popularity of the Double Front Peak House may have been the pronounced preoccupation with the steep gable roof in Bonavista. This form was found in commercial and institutional buildings, and in most houses through to the turn of the 20th century. One can also see this inverted "v" in architectural features such as Gothic windows, door and window drip mouldings, and even in the pointed tops of paling fences found around many properties. The Double Front Peak House allowed the continued use of the gable roof and actually repeated this form in the peaked front dormers. It is interesting that this house type was able to compete so well with the contemporary Victorian mansard and low slope roof houses which offered advantages in ease of maintenance due to their tarred roofs.

## **Conclusion**

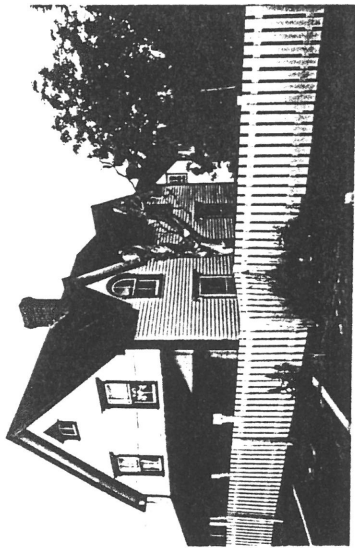
The Double Front Peak House is one of many variations that contribute to the diversity of Newfoundland vernacular houses. It developed from a rich building tradition at a time of major change in rural Newfoundland. To a certain extent, I believe the embracing of this house type represented an attempt to hold on to traditional values in the face of this change. This is an issue that we are faced with today as designers. Consequently, there are practical lessons to be learned from this type of investigation- implications for designers in studying how others have adapted traditional forms to create a successful variant.

## Telephone Interviews

Bradley, David. President, Bonavista Heritage Society.  
Bradley, Gordon. Bonavista Heritage Society.

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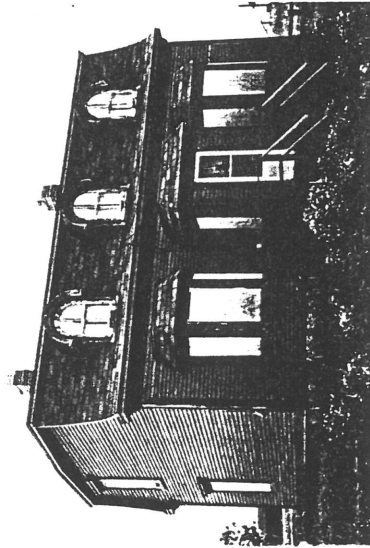
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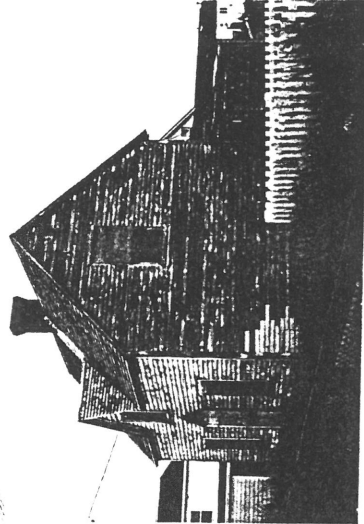
Milfin House. Constructed circa 1905 by Ronald Strathie.



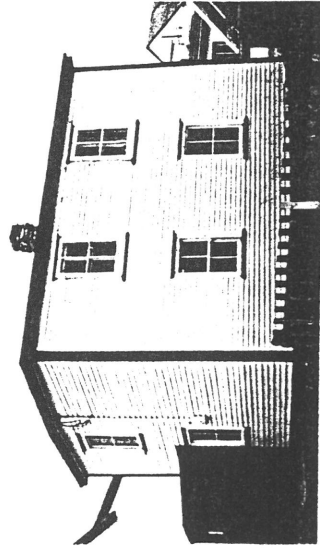
Templeman House. Constructed circa 1895 by Robert Ryder.



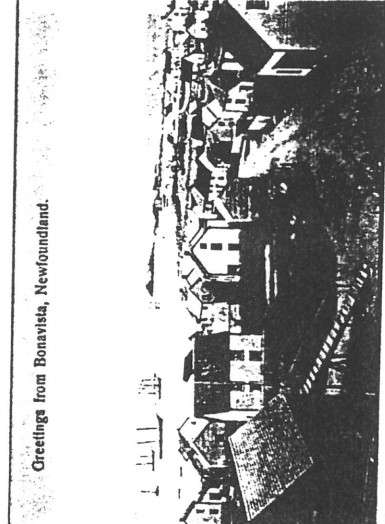
Mansard or Second Empire house type. Introduced circa 1895.



House with single front peak dormer. Constructed in 1840.



slope roof house type. This type became popular in the early part of this century. It was made possible by the introduction of roof felt.

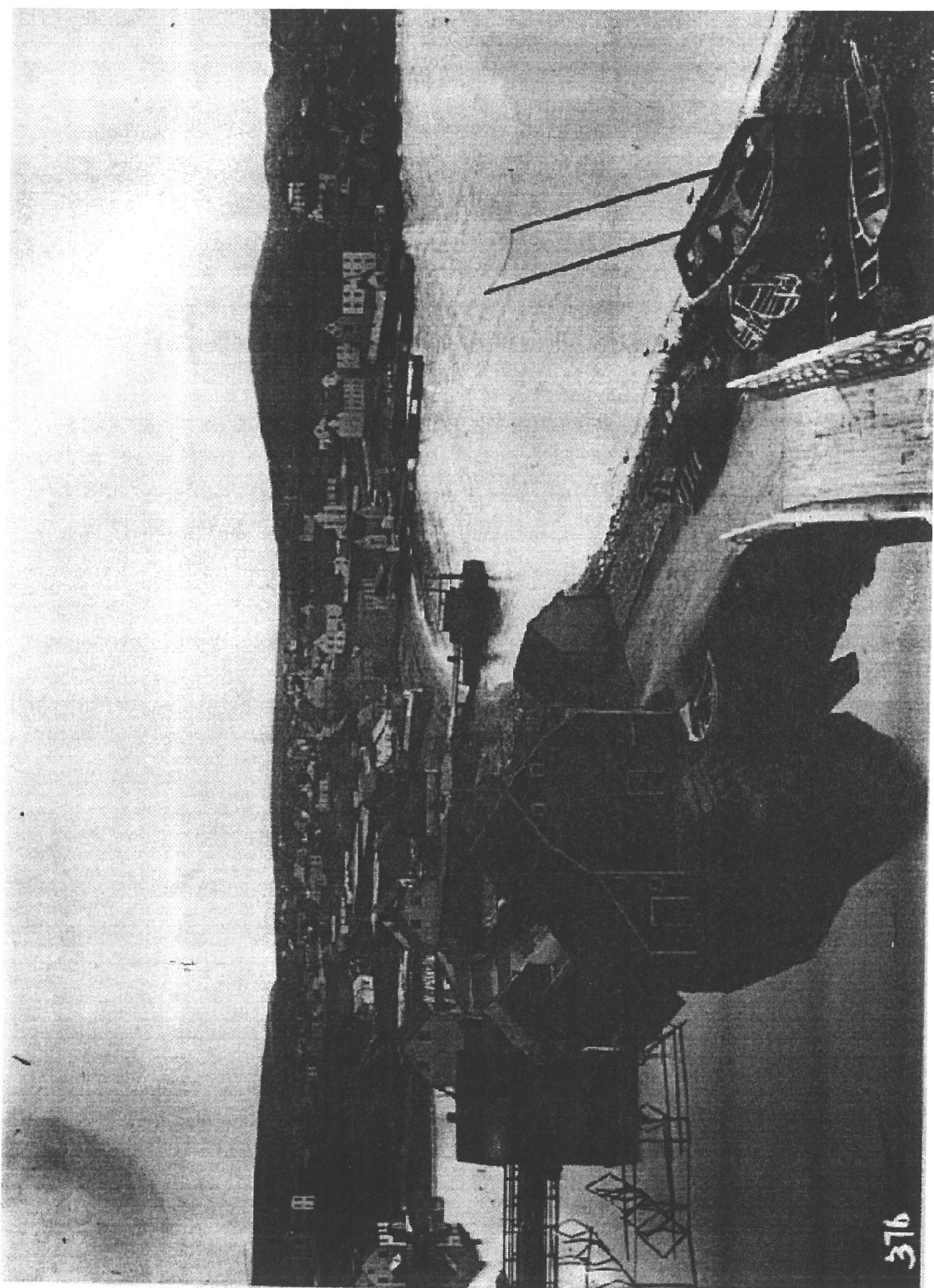


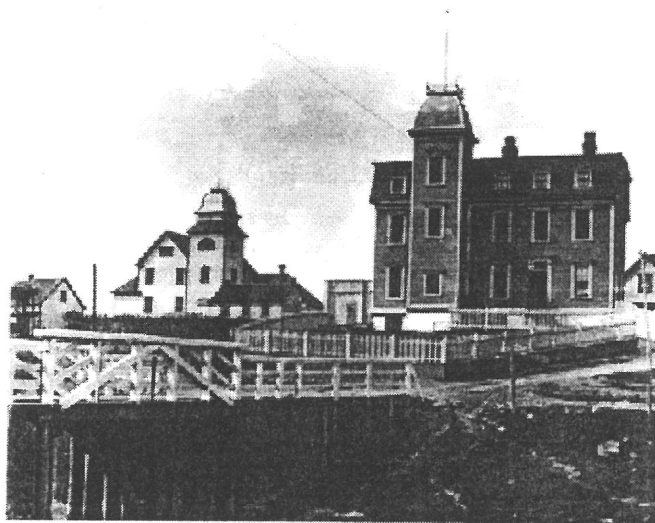
View of Bonavista circa 1900. The predominance of the steep gable evident. (From the collection of Gordon Bradley.)

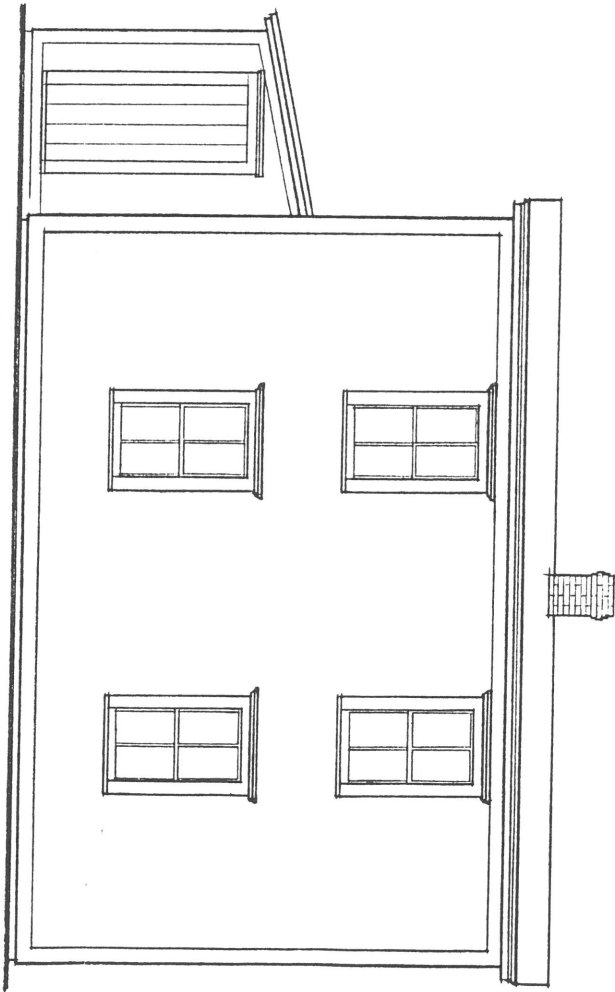
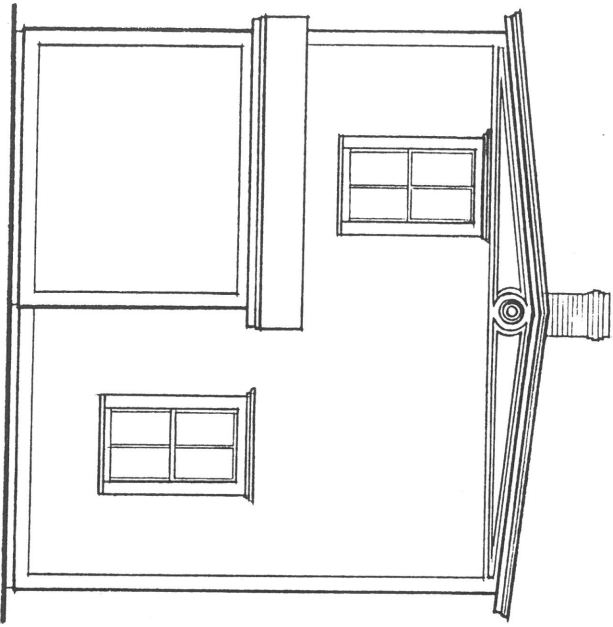


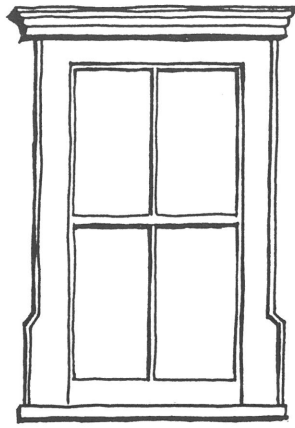




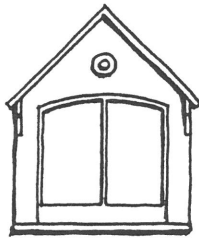








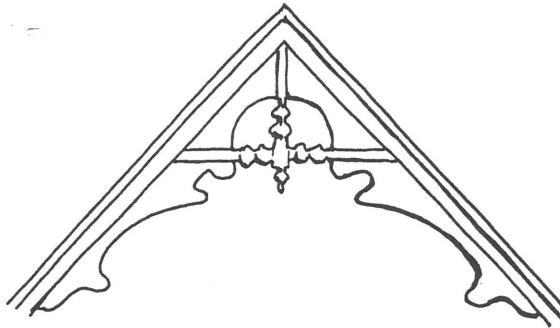
WINDOW TRIM



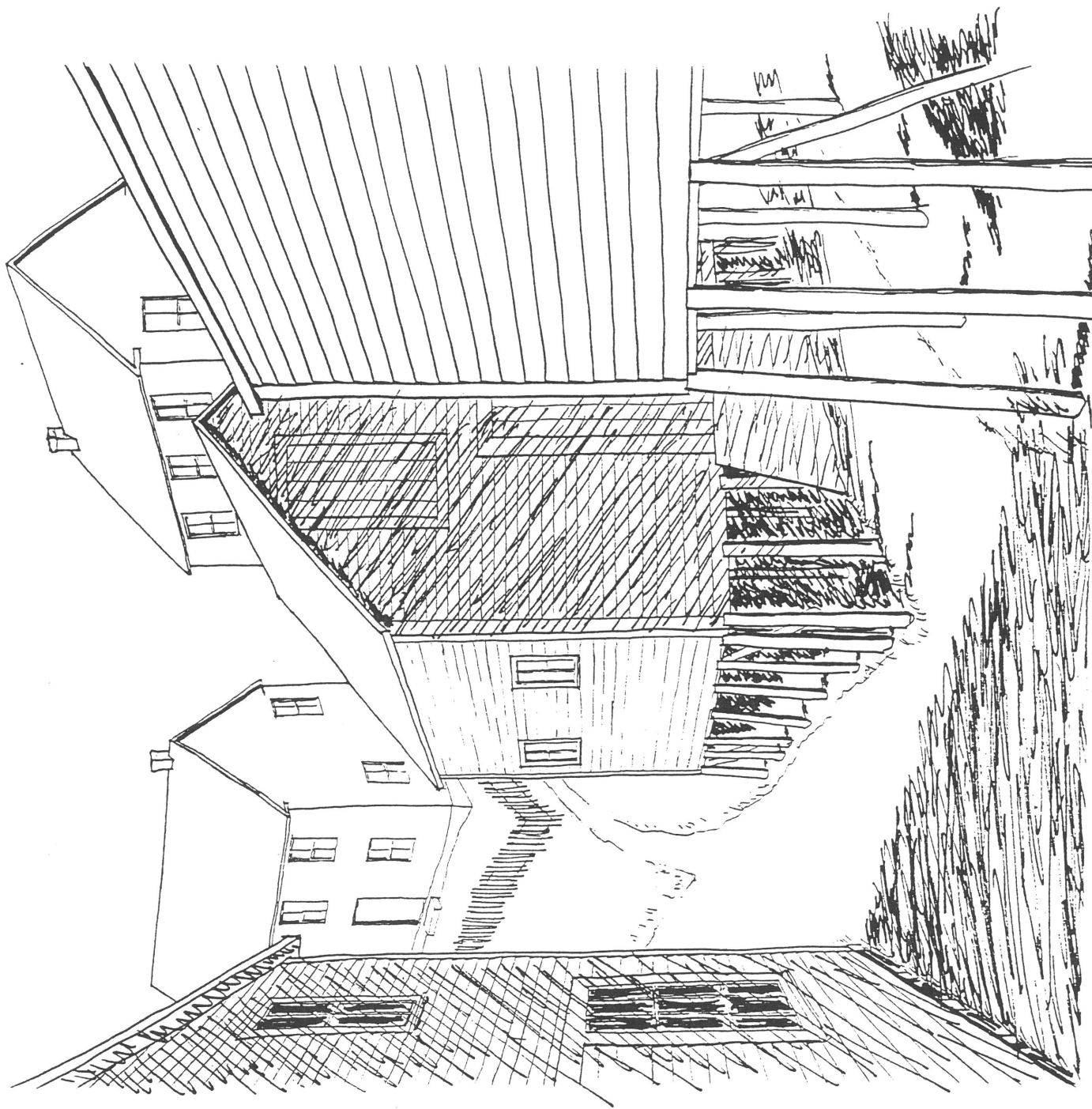
GABLE END WINDOW



PANEL & ROUNDEL



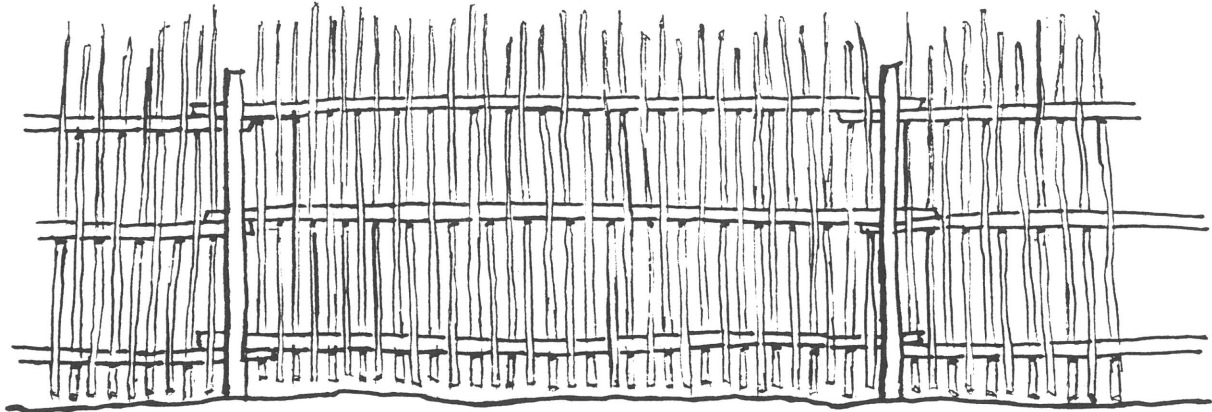
BARGE BOARD



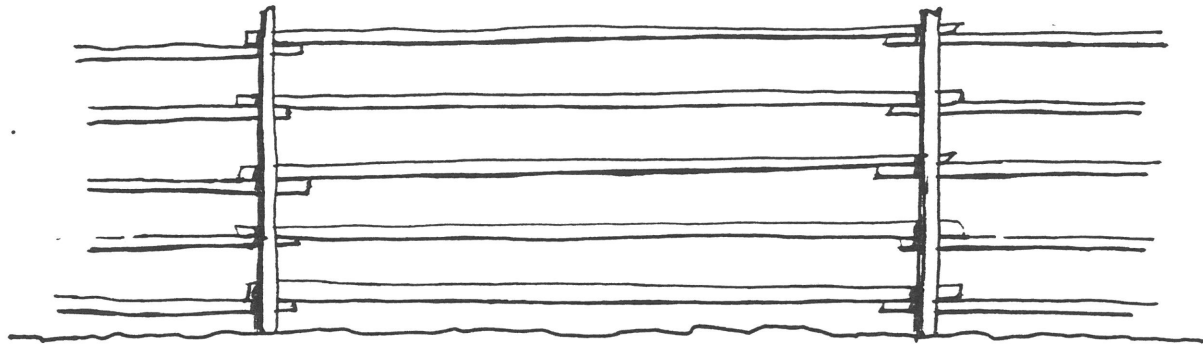
TWILLINGATE HISTORIC FISHING VILLAGE



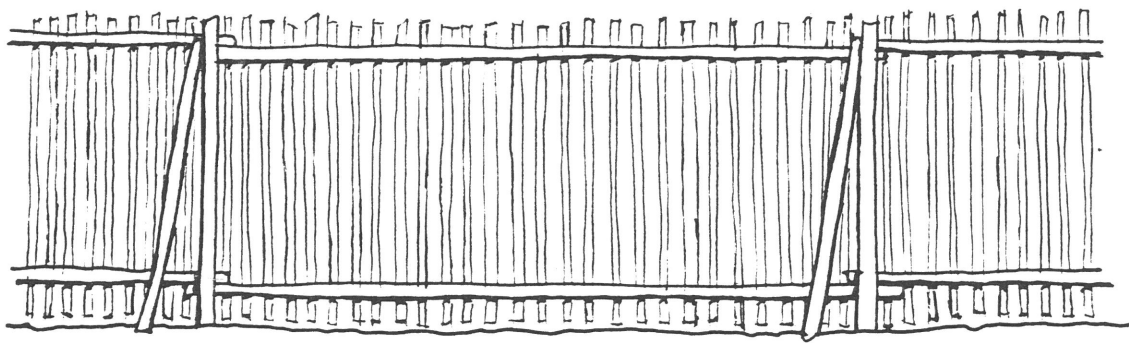
## FENCE TYPES



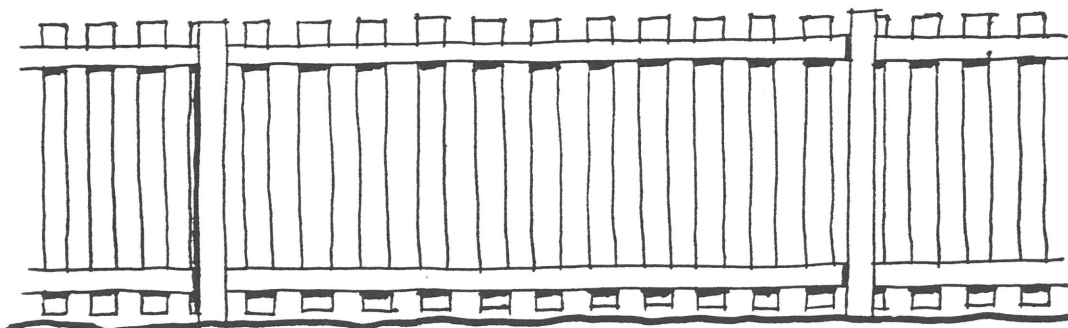
Riddle or Wrigglin



Longer

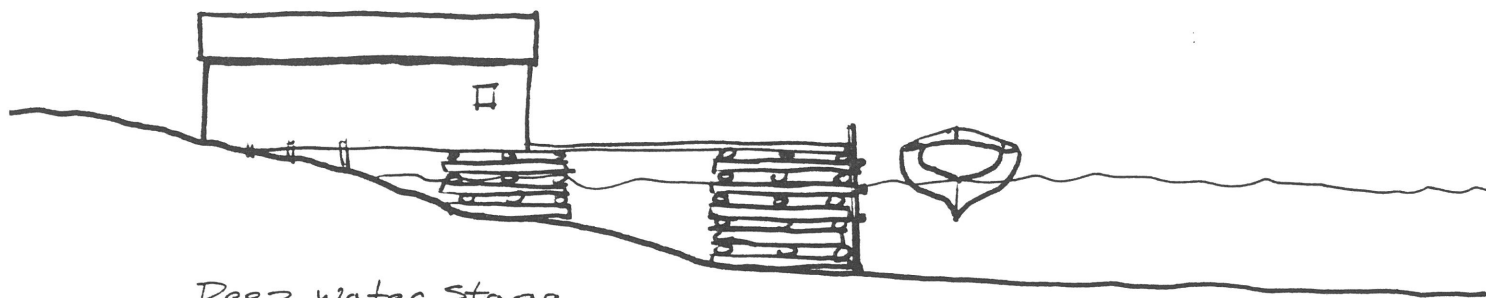


Picket

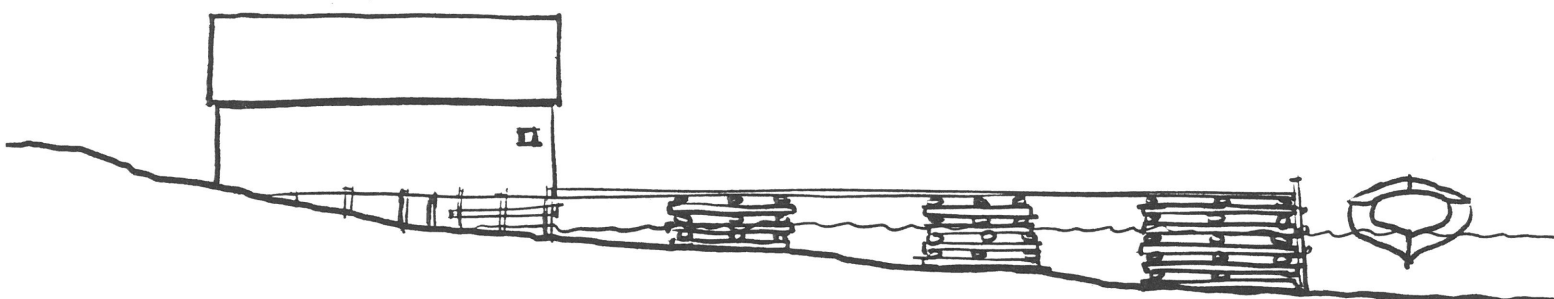


Paling

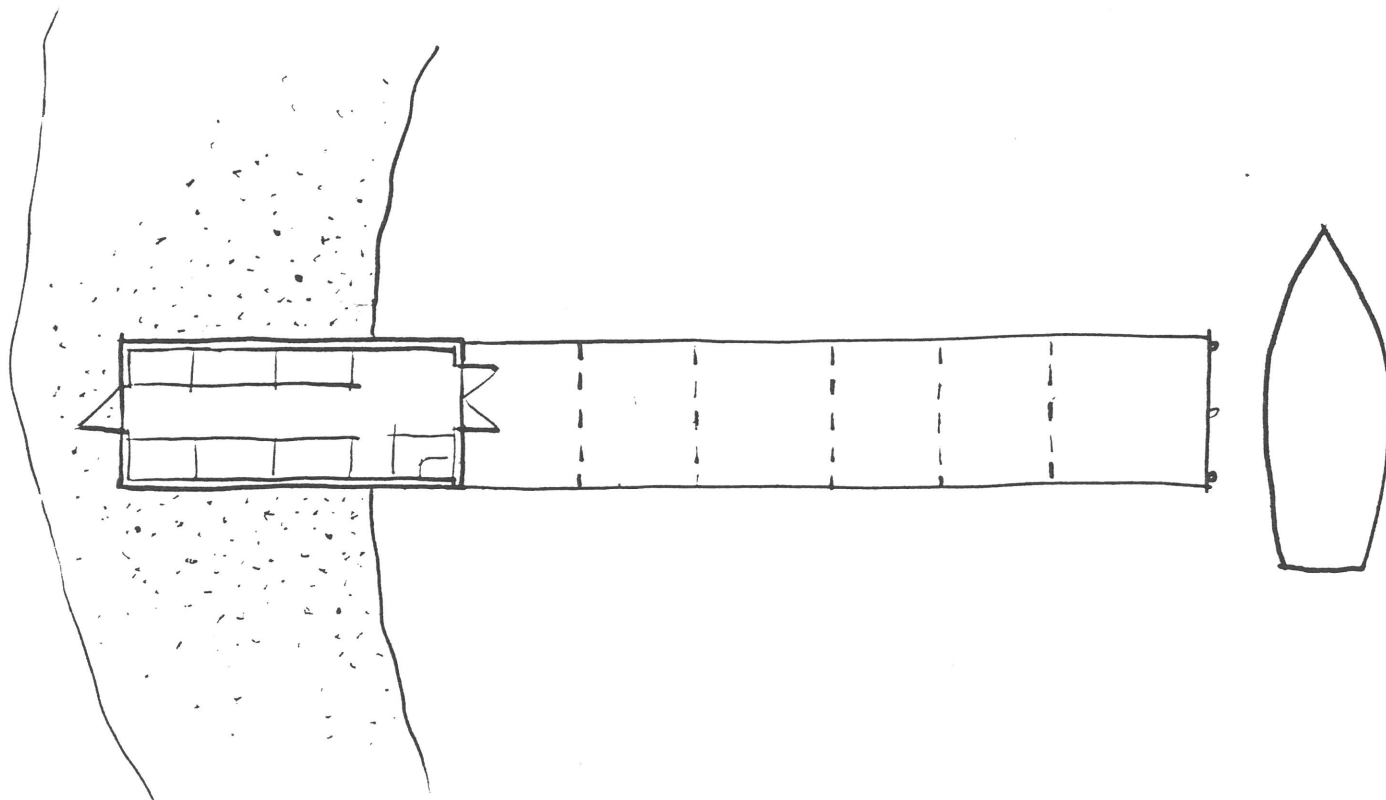


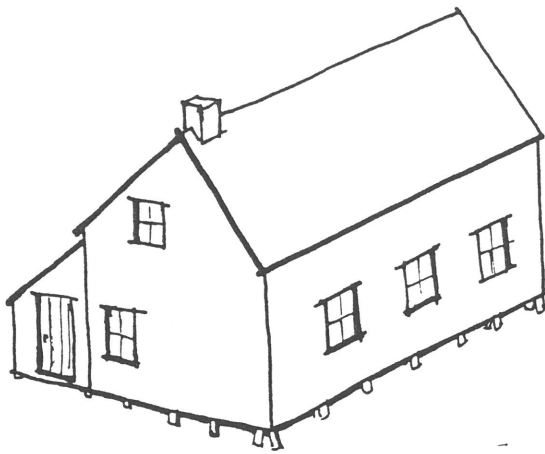


Deep water stage

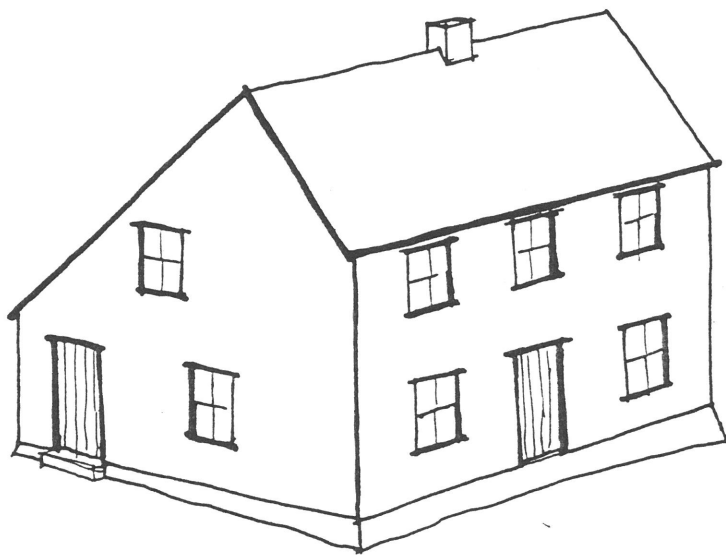
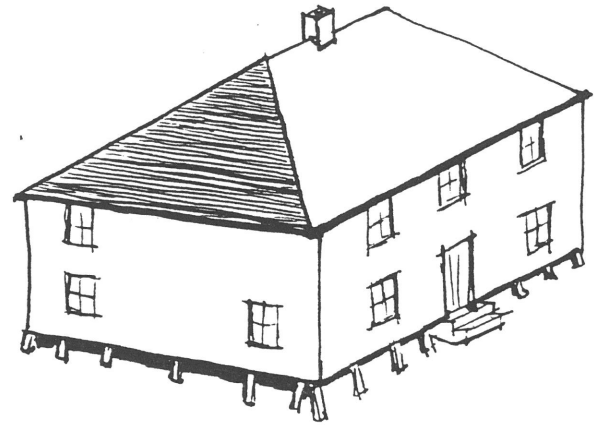


Stage for shallow water - Davis Cove





Early house types  
1835 - 1900



Second generation  
Saltbox 1865 - 1910

Third generation  
1880 - 1935

