

CHAPTER TWO

ARCHITECTURE AND DECORATIVE ARTS:

VIRGINIA, NEW ENGLAND, AND NEW NETHERLAND IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The quest for religious freedom and the search for economic opportunities were the two primary reasons for which people came to the shores of the New World in the seventeenth century. Each was as potent an incentive as the other, and they proved by no means mutually exclusive. As the century opened, English merchant-adventurers were growing increasingly interested in the profit potential of the New World. By 1602 Bartholomew Gosnold was exploring the New England coast, and he became the first Englishman to set foot on Massachusetts soil. Then came the founding of Jamestown and the vast territory named Virginia in honor of the English "Virgin Queen," Elizabeth I (reigned 1558–1603).

About the same time a small group of dissenters broke with the Church of England and organized themselves into a congregation in Scrooby, Nottinghamshire. These "Pilgrims" wandered in search of religious freedom, to Leyden and Amsterdam in Protestant Holland, then back to England and, finally, in 1620, to a place in North America they called Plymouth Plantation. Meanwhile, the English sea captain Henry Hudson, under commission of the merchants of the Dutch East India Company, sailed the *Half Moon* into what is now New York harbor and up the broad river that bears his name. The Dutch soon established a fur-trading post on Manhattan Island, and by 1624 a group of Walloon (French-speaking Belgian) Protestants had settled Fort Orange, later renamed Albany. A fine natural harbor led to the establishment of Salem, Massachusetts, by 1628. Then in 1630 the Great Migration began, with the arrival in Boston harbor of Governor John Winthrop. He came from England with a fleet of eleven ships under the auspices of the Massachusetts Bay Company—its stockholders hoped that the colonists would make them rich.

Settlement of the New World proceeded rapidly. By 1631 the Dutch arrived in Delaware Bay, and in the following year Lord Baltimore received a royal charter from England's King Charles I. He was to establish a colony on Chesapeake Bay

which was named Maryland in honor of Charles's Catholic queen, Henrietta Maria. It was to be a religious haven where English Catholics would be free to practice their religion.

The Rev. Roger Williams had a similar motive in founding Rhode Island in 1636—there Baptists in particular, but also members of other denominations, could worship as they chose. By the 1650s, Quakers were beginning to arrive in Rhode Island, fleeing from Congregationalist Massachusetts. They had been warned they would be hanged if they returned—some did, and they were. In 1654, the first group of Jews arrived, seeking escape from persecution in Brazil. The colony of South Carolina was created on paper in 1670, and ten years later Charleston was settled. At first it was an economic venture, but later it became a refuge for Huguenot Protestants fleeing from France. With the founding of William Penn's Quaker colony in 1681, the great wave of establishing new colonies along the coast of America was complete.

To the north, the French had been attracted to the vast expanses of Canada by the richness of the fur trade. To the west, the French Jesuit missionary Jacques Marquette and the fur-traders Sieur de La Salle and Louis Joliet had explored the great Mississippi River region in the 1670s and 1680s.

Everywhere there was wilderness—a "howling wilderness," one New England minister called it. Settlements took root slowly, often painfully, but root they did. If the land was raw and untamed, it was also free of much of the restriction, privilege, and prejudice that had become knotted into the fabric of European society. The colonists naturally brought with them an array of cultural habits, but being remote from monarchical, ecclesiastical, and economic authority, this new land offered the opportunity for new patterns of life to develop.

In Virginia, for example, where land was plentiful and enormous estates evolved, one family could establish several plantations of hundreds or even thousands of acres for each

of its children. In England and Europe, very little land was available to commoners because it was already owned by either the aristocracy or the church. Furthermore, under the law of primogeniture, only the eldest son inherited the family estate, while siblings were essentially left out of the will and had to make their own way. The abundance of land in the New World made such a law unnecessary. In the patriarchal society that emerged, every white male colonist in Virginia had the opportunity of becoming a great landowner, and land ownership symbolized power, authority, and wealth. That Native Americans actually owned the land was seldom either an ethical or a legal consideration—European settlers saw the land there for the taking.

The economic motive was strong in Virginia, and success gradually began to unfold. By 1612 the early Virginia planter John Rolfe had begun to cultivate tobacco, and two years later he sent the first shipment of it to England, thereby founding the economy upon which the southern plantation system would be based. Rolfe had married Pocahontas, daughter of a Native American chief, and in 1616 he took her to London, where she was presented at court. That same year a shipload of women was sent to Virginia where they were sold to planters, to become their wives, for 120 pounds (54 kg) of tobacco each. Another group of one hundred pauper children from London soon arrived to become apprentices in useful trades, and by 1619 slaves from the west coast of Africa were being imported to work the fields. At first the plantations were modest, even crude, but the incentive toward refinement of lifestyle seems to have arrived with the colonists, and it remained with them ever after.

New forms of government were created almost immediately. In them the seeds of the later Constitution, Bill of Rights, and systems of checks and balances can often be seen. In Virginia, the governor was appointed by the king and ruled with the advice of his council (a kind of "upper house"). But from the beginning there was also a form of "lower house" in the House of Burgesses, which was composed of men who were elected as representatives of their constituents. In New England, the Pilgrims had not yet disembarked when they signed the Mayflower Compact, in which they created their own new form of government—although they did pledge loyalty to the king. Here were people laying a foundation for governance with the consent and approval of the governed. This form of group decision-making also found strong expression in Congregationalism, the official religion of Massachusetts (as opposed to Anglicanism in Virginia). It united secular and religious authority, and its very name indicates that it was the congregation (that is, the people) who met to determine all things, from the selection of their minister to the allocation of common resources. This religious forum was the origin of the New England town-meeting type of government, where people could stand up and have their say, and, if franchised, cast a vote to decide an issue.

But if the new Americans eagerly discarded the useless or

unworkable trappings of Old World governance and social stratification, they also retained much of the culture of their homelands. In the end, it would be English cultural patterns that dominated. By the end of the seventeenth century the Eastern Seaboard, from Maine to Georgia, was ruled by England.

ARCHITECTURE IN EARLY VIRGINIA

The first permanent English settlement was at Jamestown, Virginia. It was founded in 1607 by a motley group of wellborn gentlemen, pardoned prisoners, a few craftsmen, and a handful of soldiers, all sent out by the merchant-adventurers of the London Company. It would be hard to imagine a group less prepared to wage the fierce struggle with the wilderness, the climate, and the Native Americans, but survive they did. Their early period is chronicled in Captain John Smith's *General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles* . . . (1624).¹

As ships from home brought more settlers and supplies, the little town grew. But towns were to be rare in the vast expanse of land known as Virginia, for farming was to prove more central to the economy than trade. The plantation houses of the great estates turned out to be the real hubs of activity and the centers from which English cultural patterns radiated. Tobacco—the source of the planters' wealth—was baled and loaded aboard ships that carried it to England. There it was exchanged for necessities and, increasingly, for refined English-made objects to grace the lifestyle of the Virginia plantation owners. The great plantation house in its most elegant form, however, was a creation of the second quarter of the eighteenth rather than of the seventeenth century. All evidence indicates that the homes erected during the first century of the colony's existence were little more than modest farmhouses.

ADAM THOROUGHGOOD HOUSE

Few structures survive intact from seventeenth-century Virginia, but those that do are all constructed of brick. This is misleading, for most of the houses were timberframe structures of the English Tudor type. The timberframe buildings were probably similar in plan to the Adam Thoroughgood House (Fig. 2.1), which was made of locally produced brick. The lime for the mortar was obtained from crushed oyster shells.

Adam Thoroughgood arrived in Virginia from England in 1621, prospered as a farmer, and by 1629 had become a member of the House of Burgesses. Before he died in 1640 he owned over 5000 acres (2000 ha) of land. His home has traditionally been dated about 1636, but some scholars believe the house now standing must have been built by his descendants, and assign it a date of about 1680.

The house has a simple plan of two rooms on each of the



2.1 Adam Thoroughgood House, Norfolk, Virginia, c. 1685.

main and attic floors. The doorway is placed near the center of the façade, and leads into a small hall which also accommodates the stairway. Chimneys, which dominate each end, diminish twice before reaching the chimney stack. There is a fine geometric boldness and simplicity in this form, and a comparable design had been used in contemporary English farmhouses. Both the high rise of the compound chimney stack and the high pitch of the roof give a vertical accent to the design that reveals its medieval origins—or at least the Tudor survival of a medieval form. The windows, with their small diamond-shaped, leaded panes, further contribute to the medieval appearance.

The symmetry of the façade is only approximate, for the door is slightly to the left of center, and neither window is precisely in the middle of its half of the wall. There is neither an exacting application of a classical theory of proportions, nor any use of classical decorative motifs, despite the fact that the Renaissance-Baroque architectural tradition of classical inspiration had already been introduced into England through such works as Inigo Jones's Queen's House at Greenwich (1616–35) and his Banqueting Hall at Whitehall (1619). Jones (1573–1652) was an architect working in the service of court circles that readily embraced the current vogue of Continental Baroque high style and Palladian design.

The absence of the classical approach reflects the relatively low social status of the Virginia settlers. They would continue to cling to the old medieval-based Tudor style. Adam Thoroughgood, for example, had arrived there in 1621 an indentured servant, with roots in the yeoman class. He, therefore, erected the type of house that was known to that social group in England. The Thoroughgood House's unpretentiousness befits the social conditions of its owner.

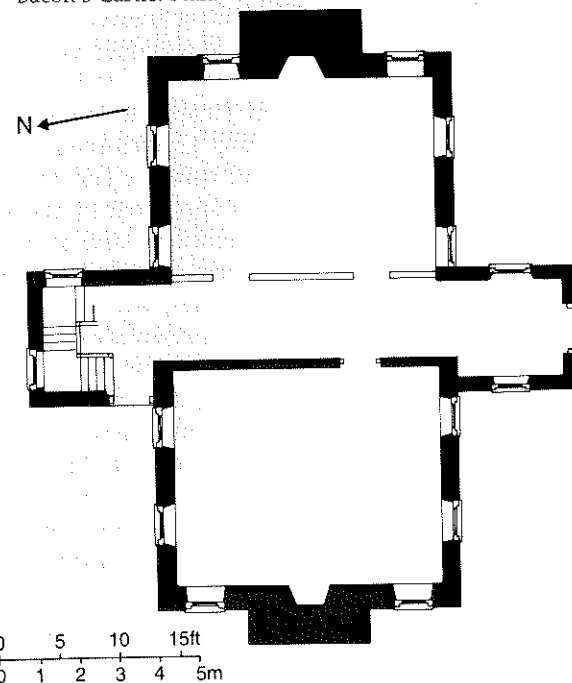
BACON'S CASTLE

Bacon's Castle, also constructed of brick, is a grander type of house (Fig. 2.2). Built by the planter Arthur Allen about



2.2 Bacon's Castle, Surrey County, Virginia, c. 1665.

2.3 Bacon's Castle. Plan.



1655, it acquired its name from being used as a bastion by the followers of Nathaniel Bacon during Bacon's Rebellion of 1676. This was an unsuccessful popular revolt against the royal governor when the latter failed to provide adequate defense on the frontier against Native American raids.

In plan, Bacon's Castle has one room on either side of a hall that runs through the center of the house. There is an entrance porch at the front, while a similar construction at the end of the hall axis contains the stairway (Fig. 2.3). In elevation, it is two-and-a-half stories high. The gabled porch or tower on each façade forms a central vertical axis that establishes the symmetry of the design. Seen from the front, the house is a rectangular block, with a stringcourse (a slightly projecting row of bricks) dividing first and second stories. At each level there are two windows on either side, aligned one above the other. The geometric scheme of the façade was clearly carefully thought out.

The most distinctive element of the design, however, is seen in the ends of the house. Here shaped gables and three chimney stacks, set diagonally, rise above the ridge line of the roof. The gable form had been imported into England from Holland or Flanders in the late sixteenth century, and had become a frequent component of late Tudor architecture. The juxtaposition of the three diamond stacks with the curves and angles of the gable provides a handsome decorative effect. It indicates a knowledge of high style that goes well beyond the vernacular style of the Thoroughgood House. These features are found in various English Tudor houses, such as Conover Hall, Shropshire, or Hatfield House, Hertfordshire, and also in the Dutch House at Kew Palace, Surrey, which was built in 1631. But as ambitious as Bacon's Castle was, it was still not of the size or grandeur that was to characterize the great plantation mansions of the eighteenth century. Nor was it wrought in the classical design of the late Baroque.

CHURCHES

The powerful medieval heritage surviving in the architecture of the English middleclass is obvious in the one remaining seventeenth-century church in Virginia—St. Luke's, built in 1632 in Newport Parish, Smithfield (Fig. 2.4). This survival is not surprising, for few new churches had been built in England after King Henry VIII renounced Roman Catholicism and established the Church of England in 1534. Instead, the old church buildings had been appropriated and used throughout England until the 1660s, when the age of the great English architect Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723) ushered in a new, Baroque style. Even thereafter, the medieval churches continued in use, despite the fact that they were stylistically out of date. Thus the parish architecture familiar to the settlers of Virginia was of English Gothic design. A typical small parish church had a nave with a squared-off eastern end for the altar and a large square tower at the west for the entrance—precisely the form seen in St. Luke's. As there were no towns in early Virginia other than Jamestown, the fifty or so churches that were erected in the seventeenth century were small and placed at locations convenient to the burgeoning plantations. Without any large centers of population, there was no need to erect large churches.



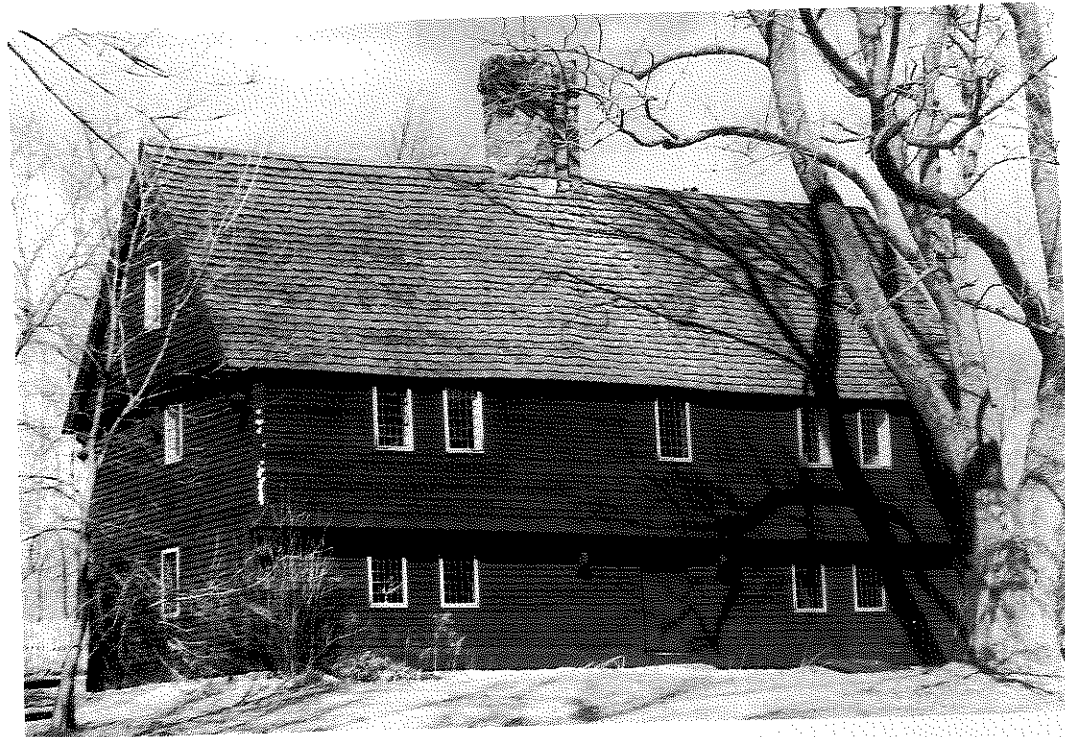
2.4 St. Luke's Church, Newport Parish, Smithfield, Virginia, 1632.

Medieval vestiges at St. Luke's are also seen in the buttresses of the nave, and in the windows between them with their pointed arches and mullions. Windows of similar design are found in the second level of the tower and in the chancel wall. The stepped gable reveals a Dutch influence. However, the quoining at the corners of the tower, the round-headed arch of the doorway, the triangular pediment naively worked into the wall above it, and the circular windows of the tower base suggest that the classical motifs of the Baroque had begun to intrude upon the medieval style.

ARCHITECTURE IN NEW ENGLAND

New England architecture of the seventeenth century similarly reveals a medieval heritage. But for social, economic, and religious reasons it evolved in forms very different from those of Virginia. Many who came to Massachusetts were Puritans—nonconformists seeking religious freedom. There can be no doubt that the rocklike faith of these people had much to do with the success of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and had a great impact on the character of the settlements. But the immigrants came for other reasons, too. Almost all of them were from the ranks of England's middleclass and yeomanry, and many sought economic opportunities not available to them at home. Economic depressions in the seventeenth century left thousands destitute, and to the destitute even the howling wilderness seemed like a land of opportunity. The combined desire to worship according to one's conscience and to prosper economically forged an iron will that commands respect.

When the immigrants first came ashore, the initial concern was to erect temporary shelters. These probably took the form of bark huts, which Native Americans taught them to build. Others are likely to have been crude dugout sod



2.5 Parson Capen House, Topsfield, Massachusetts, 1683.

hovels copied from the fields or moors of England. The earliest permanent structures had a single-room plan with a large fireplace at one end. The door was set near the corner and gave access to a small entrance hall. Behind this was a stairway to the loft (Fig. 2.6a). The timber post and beam construction used horizontal planks for the exterior. As on many of the small farmhouses the settlers had known back home, the roof was thatched.

PARSON CAPEN HOUSE

The Parson Capen House was built at Topsfield, Massachusetts, in 1683. In plan, it consists of two "cottages" placed end to end (Fig. 2.5). Families often started out with a one-room cottage and then added another virtually identical section to one end (Fig. 2.6b). This accounts for the position of the chimney in the center of the house, and also explains why the doorway is slightly off center (as in the Adam Thoroughgood House, Fig. 2.1). The Capen House is two stories high, with one room on either side of the central fireplace on each floor. The door leads into a small entrance hall, which contains a steep, rather cramped stairway;

although sufficiently utilitarian, it is far from elegant.

There is a solemn dignity to the design and appearance of the Capen House, arising in large part from the simplicity of its form and from the minimal use of decoration. In style it is medieval, and it follows a form long used by the middleclass in England. The steep pitch of its roof gives it a decidedly Gothic verticality, and there are no classical architectural adornments.

The Capen House and others of its type were products of carpenter-craftsmen, rather than of architects who were versed in the Renaissance and Baroque theories of classical architecture. Artisans who raised such houses were applying the skills and practical knowledge inherited from generation upon generation of carpenters—people who had little or no knowledge of Vitruvius, Palladio, or Inigo Jones.

The typical seventeenth-century New England house was constructed of wood from the local forests (Fig. 2.6 a, b, c). A frame of heavy squared timbers was first erected, with angle braces at the corners. Vertical studs were then inserted to define the walls, and joists were laid to support the floors. The open spaces of the walls were filled with a mixture of clay and straw (daub and wattle) or with crude bricks, and

then the outer wall was covered with clapboards. Fireplaces and chimneys were constructed of brick or stone. Windows were few, relatively small, and made of small diamond-shaped panes that were leaded together, as they had been since the late Middle Ages. A more modern form of windows has replaced these in the Capen House. The door, like the windows, was always set within a simple casement frame, without decorative moldings, classical pilasters, or pediments. It was made of solid planks, adorned only by the pattern of the nails that held it together. In the typical house, an overhang resulted where the second story extended (for structural purposes) a little beyond the lower floor. The pendant, suspended from the corner of the overhang, was one of the few instances of architectural ornamentation.

There is, undeniably, a certain plainness about seventeenth-century New England houses of the Parson Capen type. But it should not be assumed that it resulted only from the austerity demanded by Puritan religion. In fact, Puritanism never made such demands. John Calvin—the great codifier of Puritan beliefs—advocated anything but a stern, harsh life for his followers. While Puritans were opposed to ostentation, austerity was demanded only by the

rare fanatic. In addition, the house type is not an exclusively New World-Puritan creation, for it was used in England long before there were Puritans. It can hardly be understood as an expression of Puritanism, given that it served equally well for Catholics and members of the Church of England—the antagonists of the Puritans. Such houses should be seen as the homes of the middleclass in general. Their leanness of design is due more to economy and middleclass cultural traditions than to Puritanism. The Capen House was actually quite pleasant and comfortable for its day, sober though it may appear to later generations.

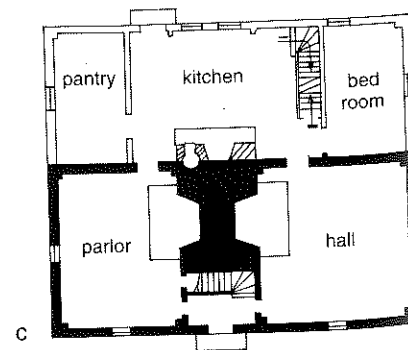
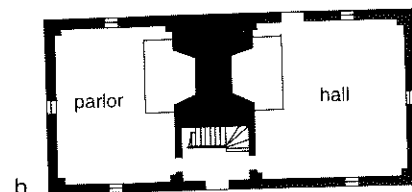
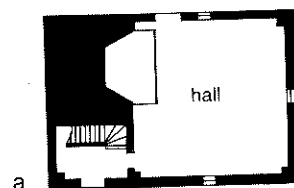
JOHN WARD HOUSE

The John Ward House in Salem was built in 1684, and was constructed in the same way as the Capen House. Its form was modified at attic level—two large gables were added (Fig. 2.7). The timber frame is covered with clapboards, enclosing two rooms on each floor, one on either side of the central fireplaces. The overhang, the asymmetrical arrangement of door and windows, the small diamond-shaped, leaded panes, and above all the steep pitch of the several gables reveal the medieval origins of the building.

2.7 John Ward House, Salem, Massachusetts, 1684.



2.6 Plans, showing evolution of typical 17th-century New England houses: (a) cottage, (b) hall and parlor, and (c) hall and parlor with lean-to.





2.8 Old Ship Meetinghouse, Hingham, Massachusetts, 1681.

Another modification of the basic seventeenth-century New England house plan was the addition of a lean-to section at the back (Fig. 2.6c) to create the saltbox form. The extra roof could either continue in the same plane, as at the rear of the Ward House, or could be set at a different pitch. The lean-to section usually contained a kitchen with its own fireplace. Thus its addition removed much of the daily activity, clutter, and congestion from the hall.

MEETINGHOUSES

There were, of course, structures other than houses erected in seventeenth-century New England. Warehouses were built down by the wharves, and there was a need for shops and taverns. The Boston Town House of 1657 was a large public market and meeting place. Educational buildings were required too. Harvard College was founded in Cambridge in 1636, and Harvard Hall was built in 1674–7.

One example survives of a type of building central to the lives of New Englanders—the Congregational meetinghouse. The Old Ship Meetinghouse was so-called because the curved struts of the roof supports resemble the framing of a ship's hull, turned upside-down. It was built at Hingham, Massachusetts, in 1681 (Fig. 2.8). Congregationalist Puritans detested Anglicanism almost as much as Catholicism, and they wanted nothing in their house of worship that reminded them of either the Church of Rome or the

Church of England. Therefore, all earlier ecclesiastical forms were purged in favor of a simple, square construction. The aim was to leave the praise of God to the individual soul rather than to rely on glorious temples.

As it had no known prototype in the history of English church architecture, the meetinghouse must be seen as an original form that was developed in New England in response to deep-rooted religious convictions. And just as religion and civil matters were often integrated in the day-to-day events of life, the meetinghouse served as both a place of worship and the site of the famed New England town meetings. Hence, the Old Ship Meetinghouse looks as much like a secular as a religious structure.

Its original form was square with a hipped roof that had a large steeply pitched gable on each side, giving it more of a medieval appearance than it now has. The interior is consciously unelaborate, with enormous rough-hewn wooden beams and struts left exposed in the vast open space. There is no longitudinal orientation toward a sanctuary, as is the norm in previous Christian church design. The pulpit is placed against one wall, and there is no altar. At this date, Protestants were absolutely opposed to any form of religious imagery, so this building is deprived of the carved and painted decorations and stained glass that enrich the interiors of Catholic churches. Throughout, the meetinghouse's unpretentious plainness bespeaks the simple faith and strength that guided the lives of those who met within its walls.

NEW ENGLAND INTERIORS

On the inside as on the outside of New England houses there was not much in the way of architectural frills or applied decoration. Bedrooms were on the second and third stories, while two rooms of the ground level were typically a hall and a parlor. The word "hall" did not designate a hallway as the term is used today, but referred to a large living space in the medieval sense. While the parlor was used mainly upon formal occasions, the hall was the center of daily life. Food was cooked at the great fireplace, and meals were eaten at a nearby table. Candlemaking, spinning, sewing, and record-keeping were done in the hall, and it was there that the family gathered in the evening, often for the reading of Scripture or secular literature.

The rooms had low ceilings with exposed beams, plastered or occasionally paneled walls, and floors laid with broad planks. The usual complement of furnishings in the hall included a table, chairs and stools, a chest, a carved

wooden Bible box, and possibly even a small bed. In addition there would be an assortment of cooking and eating utensils, as seen in the Oyster Bay Room at Winterthur Museum (Fig. 2.9). The parlor normally contained the best furniture in the house.

FURNITURE

New England furniture in the seventeenth century was basically late medieval in style, although occasionally a Renaissance or mannerist motif appeared. It was the work of local craftsmen who had mostly learned their cabinetry and joinery skills in England, where such furniture was used in middleclass homes. Made of oak or pine, it was characterized by heavy proportions. Geometric designs or abstractions of natural forms were incised in low relief as decoration. Some parts were turned on a lathe.

The great oak table of the type used in the hall is simple in design and construction, and sturdy in its turned legs of bold

2.9 Oyster Bay Room, 17th-century interior, as installed in Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware.

