

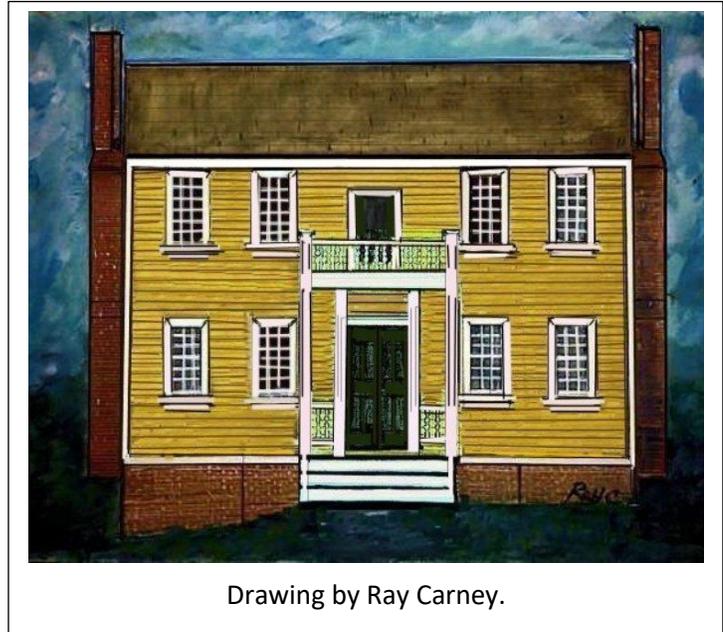
St. Lawrence House: “The Yellow House”

Update August 2016

Background

The Patrick St. Lawrence House/Tavern was purchased by Ray and Janet Carney in 2012. Since that purchase, the husband-wife team has done extensive research and restoration.

Called “The Yellow House” because of its original color, the house was built by Patrick St. Lawrence. St. Lawrence had previously been an innkeeper for wealthy physician James McCarroll, who owned a tavern a few miles east of what would later become Siler City. After Dr. McCarroll’s death, St. Lawrence married his widow, Elizabeth.



Drawing by Ray Carney.

St. Lawrence purchased several lots in the newly formed Town of Pittsborough (as it was spelled at that time), where he served as one of the town’s original commissioners, a trustee for the Pittsborough Academy, and early member of the Masonic Order. It was on a quarter-acre, corner lot adjacent to the new courthouse town square—lot number 50—that he would build The Yellow House.

Although the lot was purchased in 1786, we don’t know when construction of the Yellow House began. The Carneys have discovered on one of the corner channel posts a date in old script “Sept 22, 1790.” We can’t know at what stage the construction was at the time this was written, but it had to be prior to the plastering process and completion of construction.

FOR SALE, OR TO LET,
For a term of years.
IN THE TOWN OF PITTSBOROUGH,
Gatham County.
A NEW, TWO STORY
H O U S E,
COMPLEATLY finished,
and well fitted for a TAVERN,
with convenient Out Houses, among which
are a neat BILLIARD ROOM, with a
TABLE, much frequented,—also, a
good GARDEN, the whole of the im-
provement on two adjacent LOTS, con-
taining one acre, an excellent STABLE
with stalls for twenty Horses, a COACH
HOUSE and GRANARY, adjoining a
handsome peice of MEADOW, contain-
ing about ten acres.
The situation is agreeable
and healthy, and the summer society is
one of the best in the state—within one
mile of the Mineral Springs, which, tho’
but lately discovered, are much frequen-
ted in the season. For terms apply to the
subscriber on the premises.
P. St. LAWRENCE.
Pittsborough, September 29, 1792. (†)

An ad placed by St. Lawrence in the September 1792 *Fayetteville Gazette* confirms that the structure was finished by that date. The ad offers for “sale or let” the grand house “completely finished and well fitted for a tavern” and having the following amenities on two adjacent lots and adjoining a ten-acre meadow:

- a granary
- a stable
- a carriage house
- a good garden
- a billiards house

A unique feature of the St. Lawrence house that is not mentioned in the ad is the hinged panel partition that can be raised to create a large, 27' by 27' room and provide direct access to the two parlors on the lower floor. Experts note that this is consistent with the mention of the "summer society" in St. Lawrence's ad. Such a room would have provided the local gentry--which in the case of Pittsborough consisted of well-heeled summer visitors from the east, as well as lawyers, doctors, and local planters--with a large assembly room that could be used for dances, meetings, and fine dining. The inn, placed strategically on the courthouse square, would have been a popular accommodation during court sessions when landowners, judges and lawyers traveled to town from their county estates.



Hinged panel wall after restoration work. One panel is down and the other up in this photo.

Experts have noted that the quality of the Georgian woodwork in the house is of very high quality and design, making the structure comparable to other fine inns "such as Gadsbys in Alexandria, VA or the inns in Williamsburg." Prior to the Carney's restoration, many descriptions of the house indicated that the woodwork was of fine, imported wood.

Not so, the Carney's discovered. When Janet Carney removed layers of paint from doors and woodwork, she discovered that the "fine, imported wood" was actually faux mahogany finish on yellow pine lumber.



Panel detail showing faux mahogany finish on yellow pine lumber.

Fine inns were built throughout the 18th century to serve main roads. Travel was slow and often required overnight stays. High quality inns of this time would have their own stables and often farmland so they could be relatively self-sufficient. St. Lawrence probably built the house counting on this trade.

Billiard tables are said to have been a real selling point for taverns in the late 18th century as entertainment "for

gentlemen." Taverns also often mentioned mineral springs or similar features to attract wealthy travelers looking for a health retreat. Both are mentioned in St. Lawrence's ad. He seems to have thought of everything when he planned his tavern.

It is unclear whether St. Lawrence was spending his own money or that of his wealthy wife, Elizabeth McCarroll, when he undertook construction of the extravagant Yellow House. Ultimately, however, the endeavor did not prove to be successful.

By 1798, St. Lawrence was in debt to his stepson, Thomas McCarroll, and to Robert Donaldson, a merchant from Fayetteville, who bought the house and lot for 720 pounds when it was put up for public sale by the sheriff that year. An inventory taken at the time of sale lists a billiard table, two dozen chairs, a clock, a buffet, desk and bookcase, twelve pictures, a settee, and four beds, among other things. Donaldson sold the house, in 1805, to Joseph Harmon, who continued to operate it as an inn and tavern.

Harmon sold the house in 1815 to Winship Steadman, and afterward the house changed hands a number of times and was moved twice before being purchased by the County in 1999 for a future building site. In 2011, after a long period of neglect, the St. Lawrence house and two other historic houses were moved to Small Street, within Pittsboro's historic district, where they awaited further disposition under the auspices of [Preservation North Carolina](#). The Carneys purchased the St. Lawrence house in 2012.

Restoration

Since the 2012 purchase, the Carneys, working in concert with Preservation North Carolina and the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, have made great progress toward developing a very historically accurate plan for The Yellow House restoration.

- A historically accurate post and beam front porch is in progress
- 90% of the structure decay has been repaired
- All missing interior moldings have been hand-crafted and installed, and
- Door and window restoration is almost complete



The Yellow House awaiting purchase in 2011.

The St. Lawrence House/Tavern has also profited from all new electrical and plumbing systems which have recently been installed. When the rough-in inspection is complete, the Carneys will be covering the interior walls using “blueboard” (a form of drywall that requires a coat of plaster to finish it), which will be in keeping with an old house.

Eventually, the Carney’s say, the house will again be “yellow,” though they have discovered that the original color, which they will match as closely as possible, is more a mustard brown.

The Carneys consider themselves caretakers of this 225-year-old treasure in Pittsboro. They welcome visitors to the site when they are working, and generously share their knowledge about and enthusiasm for the house. They are happy to receive any information or stories about the historic structure. Ray and Janet, expressed appreciation to all who have provided support and information to date.

The Carneys contact information:

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Ray Carney works to stabilize a deteriorated beam in order to lock the double doors.

For more info on the St. Lawrence House/Tavern or Yellow House:

[Background on the Yellow House and Patrick St. Lawrence](#)

[National Register application form for Patrick St. Lawrence House](#)

[<http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/nr/CH0091.pdf>]

[Fred Vatter article from Chatham County Line, Dec. 2012](#)

[<https://archive.chathamcountyline.org/pdfs/CCL.dec12.web.pdf>]