

MAR 10

Historic Ithaca & Tompkins County

March 1993

Rare Sprung Dance Floor Discovered!

The old Rawson Hollow Inn is located in the far southwest corner of Tompkins County in the Town of Caroline. Purchased last year by Mike Carroll and Karen Burlew, the circa 1811 Inn is currently being rehabilitated for use as a home. The contractor for the project is Rick Lazarus, a member of Historic Ithaca and sometime contributor to this newsletter. In this article, Rick describes some of the interesting things he has encountered while working on the building, including some details about the unusual dance floor in the second-story ballroom.

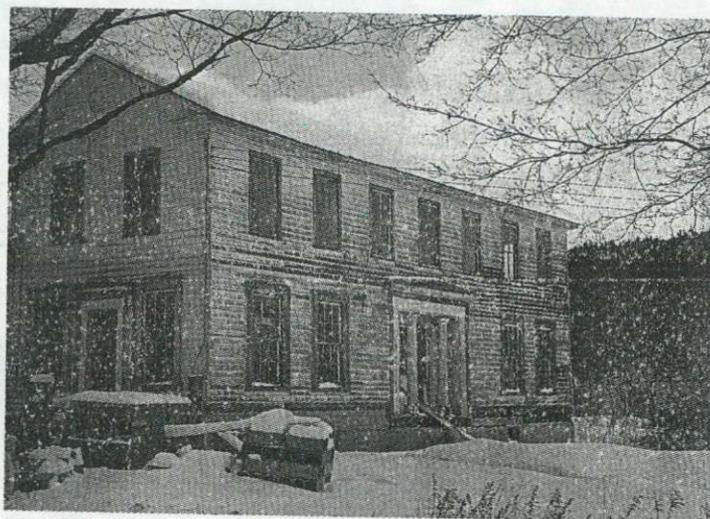
Volunteers Needed to help at the Old House Fair

Please call Molly Adams (539-7815) if you would be willing to bring cookies, brownies, easy-to-slice cakes, or prepared sandwiches to our snack bar at the Old House Fair. Volunteers are also needed to help with Historic Ithaca's booth, ticket sales, the snack bar, and children's corner. Even an hour would be greatly appreciated. Come out and see all the action and craftspeople!

The Inn is situated at the halfway point on what I'm told is an old stage coach route between Owego and Ithaca. Tim Jones, who lives in a renovated school house next door, told me that the stage coaches stopped at the Inn for fresh horses for the second half of the trip. He has photos of the place taken before it was raised to increase the height of the foundation walls. Looking at the floor plan today it's hard to imagine that there were many rooms available for overnight guests, and whatever accommodations there were had to be lacking in privacy.

The Rawson Hollow Inn has two features that I have not come across before in any of the hundred and fifty houses and barns that I have worked on in Tompkins County. The first is hand-split lath, a specimen of which I will bring to the Old House Fair in March. In old houses, lath (narrow pieces of wood, split by hand or cut by saw) are nailed to the frame of the building to provide an anchor for

the wall and ceiling plaster, which is then applied in several "lifts", or layers. Most buildings in Tompkins County have sawn lath, rather than lath that was laboriously split by hand with a hatchet.



The Rawson Hollow Inn

The second intriguing feature of the Rawson Hollow Inn is found in its second-floor ballroom. This room measures 17' 4" wide by 35' long. Original twelve-over-twelve light Federal style windows still remain on the short side of the room. All of the windows along the main facade of the building were replaced with two-over-two windows sometime later in the 1800s. Traces of the original paint scheme are still visible in the ballroom: slate blue with bright terra cotta baseboards. All of the vertical framing members in the room are "boxed", that

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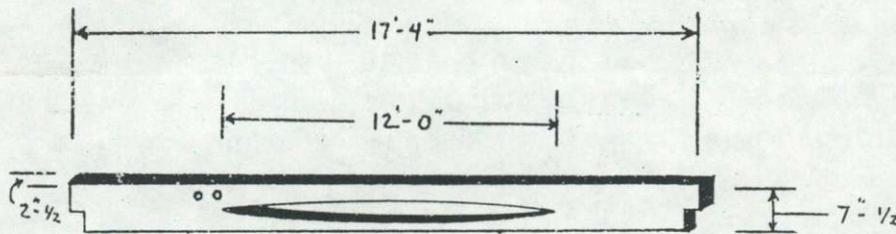
is, enclosed in a decorative casing, which has a beaded edge, carved with a special plane. Benches, which appear to be original, line the walls of the room. The original ceiling (which has since been taken down, but is being restored) was elliptically vaulted, with hand-carved arched rafters and a huge hand-carved, arched main joist supporting the lath and plaster. But even with all of these rare original features, perhaps the most interesting element of the building is the spring-joist dance floor.

The floor itself is made of one inch thick tongue and groove pine, $6\frac{3}{4}$ " wide, on top of a half inch thick pine subfloor of random width boards from 12" to 15". The wood springs of the dance floor are actually the joists, cut into a most interesting and effective shape. Steve Jordan, of the Landmarks Society of Western New York, has taken an interest in the floor and has recorded the details for this drawing.

The openings in the joists show straight parallel saw marks, indicating that they were sawn by hand. The wood is old growth white pine, probably from the area's virgin forests. According to John Bero, a preservation architect in Rochester, the lenticular arch is a very sophisticated engineering element, similar to arches used in bridge construction. It would be interesting to see how long it would take a strong arm and a sharp rip saw to cut one of these joists; twenty-five of them were needed to support the dance floor. Steve Jordan observed that all of the

work put into the design and creation of this "sprung" floor goes to show that people were serious about their fun in those days!

None of the joists at the Rawson Hollow Inn show any fatigue or cracking, and function just as they did when they were installed over 175 years ago. The handful of other known spring-joist floors in the county have not fared so well.

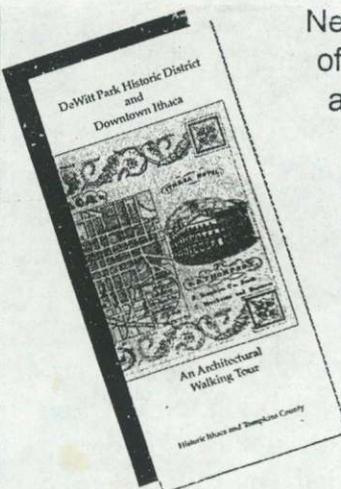


According to Steve Jordan, there was once a sprung floor in a building in Jacksonville which has since been demolished. There was also one in a building across the street from the church in West Groton, however this floor has collapsed. Interestingly, the width of the West Groton floor was greater than that at the Rawson Hollow Inn; perhaps the load was too much for the longer spring joists

to support over the years. Local lore holds that there is a sprung floor in the ballroom of the Rouges Harbor Inn in Lansing, but since the floor system is not exposed, this cannot be confirmed. The only damage which has been inflicted on the joists at the Rawson Hollow Inn came at the hands of the electrician who installed the wiring many years ago. Inexplicably, he chose to drill $5/8$ " holes through the solid part of the joists,

rather than simply run the wires through the existing lenticular opening. With the ceiling plaster removed, and the joists exposed for wiring, the openings could not have escaped the electrician's notice, yet he chose instead to drill new holes, thus compromising the integrity of these important features.

The floor at the Rawson Hollow Inn is definitely "springy", and I like to think about how much fun it would be to be launched by these wood springs into the air with my dancing partner.



New Architectural Walking Tour Brochure of the DeWitt Park Historic District and Downtown Ithaca

Copies of this new 37-page brochure with photos and descriptions of 50 landmark buildings are available at Historic Ithaca and at the Chamber of Commerce Visitors Services Bureau.

Historic Ithaca produced the brochure with funding from the Tompkins County Advisory Board for Tourism Development and the New York State Council on the Arts.



The
Landmark Society
of Western New York



June 9, 1994

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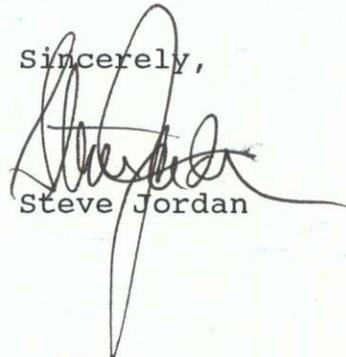
Dear John,

I'm writing to thank you for giving me the information on spring dance floors last week. I was not able to visit the second site but was pleased to get the opportunity to actually see the system used over the carriage stalls near Bethel.

I'm enclosing an article that was written about a spring floor that was exposed two years ago in the Ithaca, NY area. Let me know if you discover a similar design in the Kent Tavern.

Thanks again for your help.

Sincerely,



Steve Jordan