

AN
Architectural Monograph

NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE
an Eighteenth Century Town

By Wm. D. Foster

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AMSTEL HOUSE—MAIN FACADE—NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE

Built about 1730



NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE *an* EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY TOWN

By WM. D. FOSTER

THERE are few communities to-day which have retained their early American flavor as completely as has New Castle, Delaware. The examples of our colonial architecture in such centers as Boston and Philadelphia and even in Baltimore are so surrounded by present-day business, or lie isolated without any surroundings, that they can give little of the feeling of the actual community which existed when they were built. Quebec, Salem, Charleston and New Orleans do present, each in certain quarters, this sense of the completeness of the community, but New Castle, being a small town, presents the architecture of the middle colonies even more completely than do these other cities of their respective sections.

Though small now and comparatively little known, New Castle was up to the early part of the nineteenth century quite an important place and her commerce brought considerable wealth to her citizens. Her history had gone back to the earliest settlements, to the time of New Sweden and New Netherland. In fact, at the time Henry Hudson discovered what he termed the "North River"—our Hudson River—he also sailed up the "South River"—to-day the Delaware—and it was on that discovery that the Dutch, for whom Hudson was navigating, based their claims of ownership. However, they were slow to act and the Swedes were the first to establish a colony on the banks of the South River, calling the district New Sweden.

The Dutch did not look upon this settlement with much favor and after the Swedes had been established some eleven years Governor Peter Stuyvesant of New Netherland, in 1651, acting partly on instructions from Holland and largely in accordance with his own vigorous instincts, decided to take active measures to protect the Dutch claims. Accordingly he proceeded personally to New Sweden and established Fort Casimir, very near the site of the present town. There followed various turns of fortune for the fort. The Swedes captured it in 1654, but the Dutch came back and in 1655 gained all of New Sweden, or Delaware, and renamed

the settlement Fort Amstel, making it the seat of the Dutch government for the local colonies.

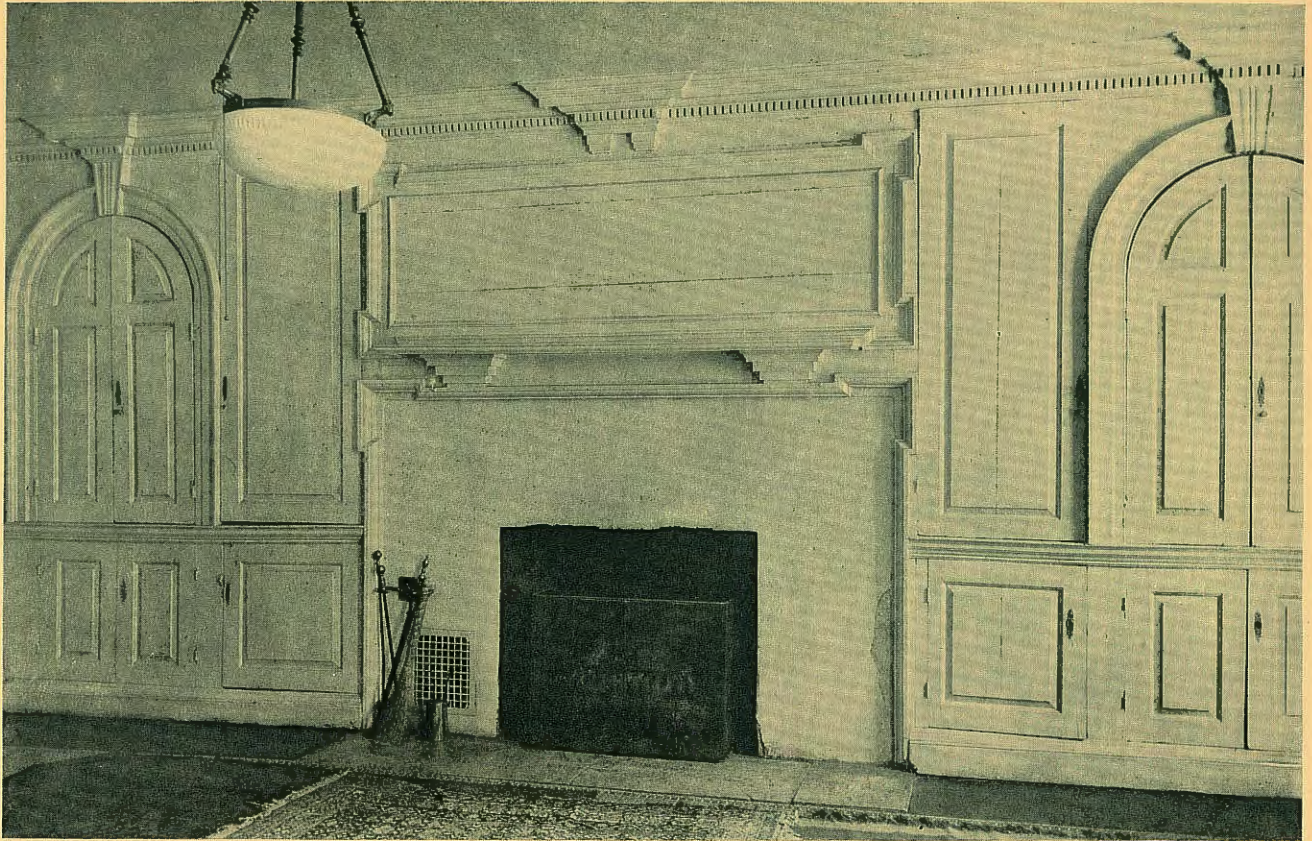
Disease and famine as well as a constant fear of the English caused most of the inhabitants to leave and in 1664 the English seized the whole district without much effort, again changing the name of the principal settlement, this time to New Castle. As New Castle it was frequently the meeting place of the legislature and later became the capital of the colony when Delaware was separated from Pennsylvania.

During the colonial days and the years of the Revolution the town played its part in making history. Two of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were residents, while a third had been born in New Castle.

And yet with this imposing background, as rich as that of many towns which are quite large to-day, New Castle at the end of the eighteenth century was as important as it probably ever will be. The principal industrial growth of the district is being assimilated by Wilmington, six miles to the north. While there are some factories with their resultant nondescript housing, they are all grouped near the branch-line railroad which comes in to the west of the town proper. The compact older portion is still complete and removed from too much "progress."

Around the Common, which remains as an open park in the center of the town, are the public buildings. There is the old Court House, one wing of which is supposed to have been built about 1680, though the main portion dates from 1707. It was this building which served as a center for a twelve-mile radius which established the "northern boundary of the colonies on the Delaware," the arc which still is on the maps. Not far behind the Court House is the Episcopal Church, parts of which were built in 1701 and 1705.

To the east of the Court House is the very interesting square building (Plate LXXXII), generally known as the Town Hall, but which has been put to various uses from time to time. Once it was the terminus of some sort of railroad and again it formed the end of a shed which covered the town market; at that time the fire engine was kept there and the upper floor was used as



PANELLING IN AMSTEL HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE

a town hall or common room. This three-story building, a perfectly simple square brick structure with its charmingly proportioned cupola and the balustraded deck, is as dignified and satisfying a public building as one can find remaining from the colonial period.

One of the principal residential streets is Orange Street, running along the western side of the Common. At Number 2 (pages 10 and 22), facing one end of the Court House, is the house now occupied by Dr. Booker but known historically as the Kensey Johns house, having been built for that gentleman in 1790. The facade is extremely simple but with a fenestration which gives great dignity. The low addition to the right adds considerable interest to the house; it was built as an office for Attorney Johns. This wing contains an entrance hall and one room, a room which with its delightful proportions and arched ceiling testifies to the taste of the builder. The main part of the house has the hall and stairs to the right, with a connecting door to the office, and on the left the living and dining rooms. The kitchen and service rooms are in a wing at the rear.

The panelling and mantels in the two principal rooms are simple, with rather Georgian character in the mold-

ings. The other walls of these rooms are plastered with a dado band carried around, vigorous moldings on the door trims and panelled reveals at the windows. The stairs are interesting, particularly for the very simple manner in which the handrail forms a cap for the newel post.

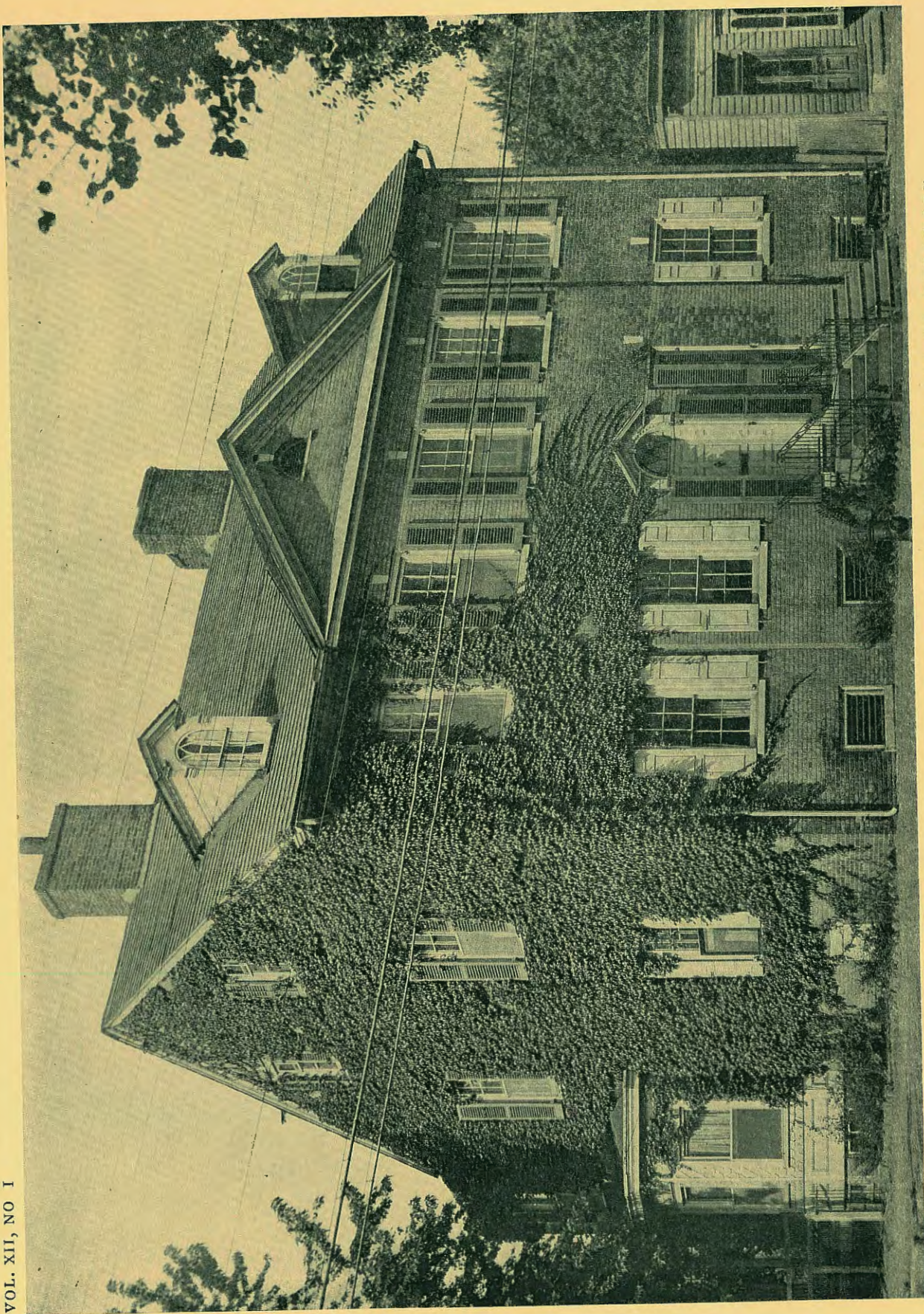
On the facade we notice one peculiarity which is found in several other houses at New Castle; the marble lintels over the windows, though cut in profile to resemble a flat arch with a keystone, are really of one piece and without any cutting to imitate joints.

The owner is justly proud of the key plates and handles on the main doors, for it is maintained that they are the only ones of that particular design except those at Mount Vernon. In fact, a few years ago, he gave one of these to replace one that had disappeared from Mount Vernon.

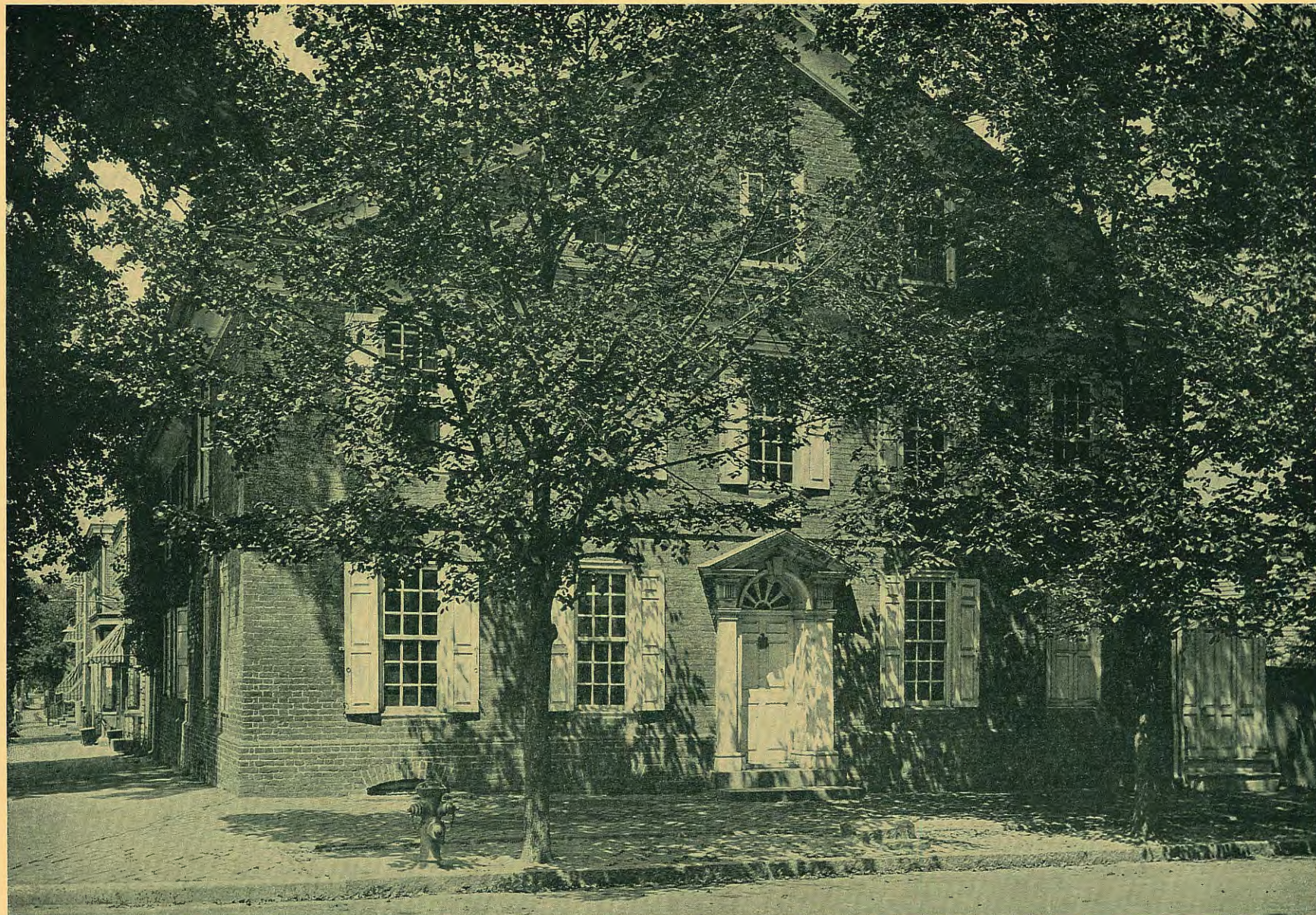
Along this same street are several interesting brick facades. These are all similar in design, each has a simple, well-fenestrated wall, a sturdy, well-designed doorway, some richness at the cornice and usually a dormer with pilasters and a small pediment. With their interior panelling, even in rather simple, small rooms,



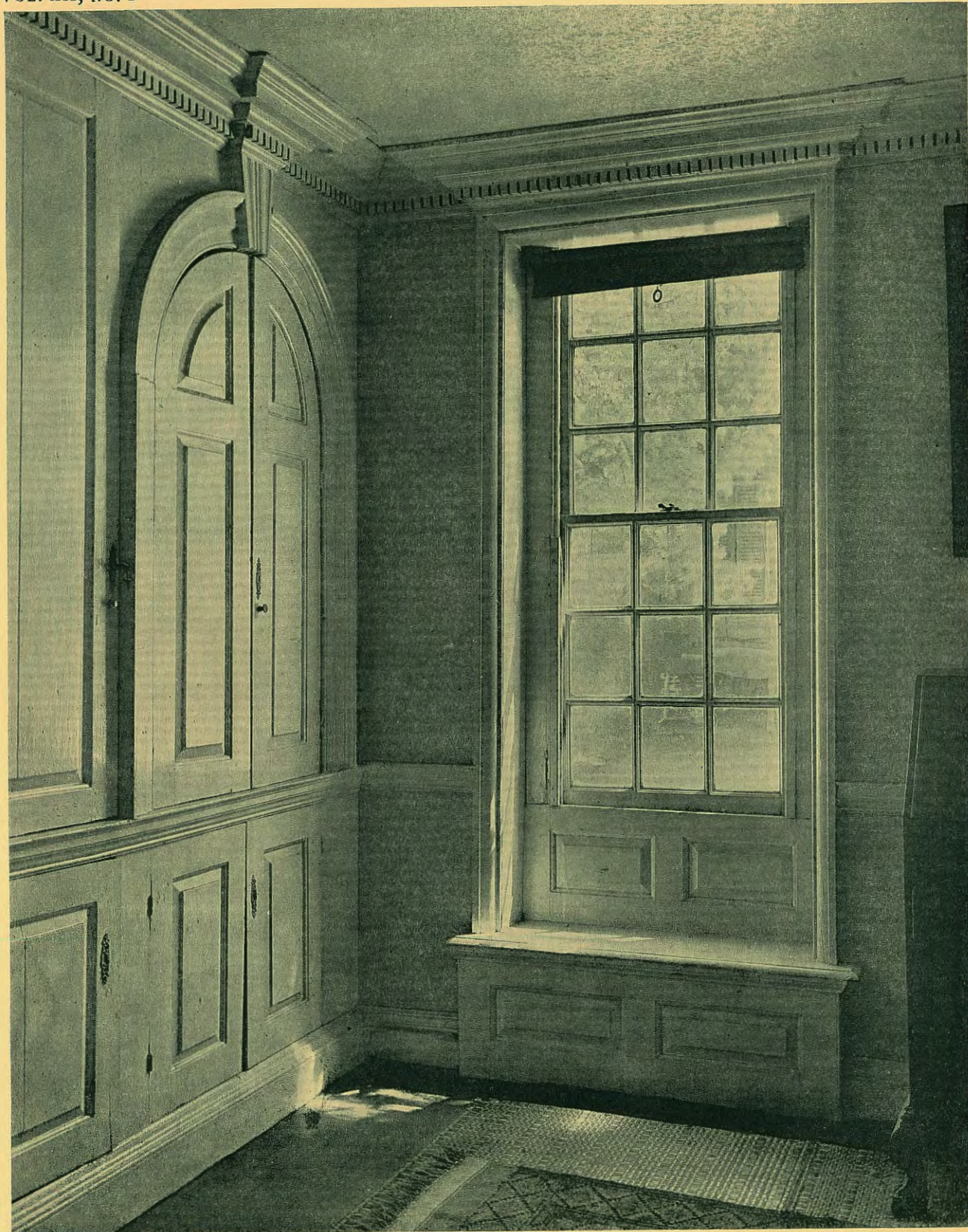
"THE OLD DUTCH HOUSE" (ABOUT 1665), NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



THE VAN DYCK HOUSE—NUMBER 400 DELAWARE STREET—NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



AMSTEL HOUSE—BUILT ABOUT 1730—NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



CORNER IN MAIN ROOM—AMSTEL HOUSE—NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE

they show the refinement which went with the general affluence of the town during its heyday.

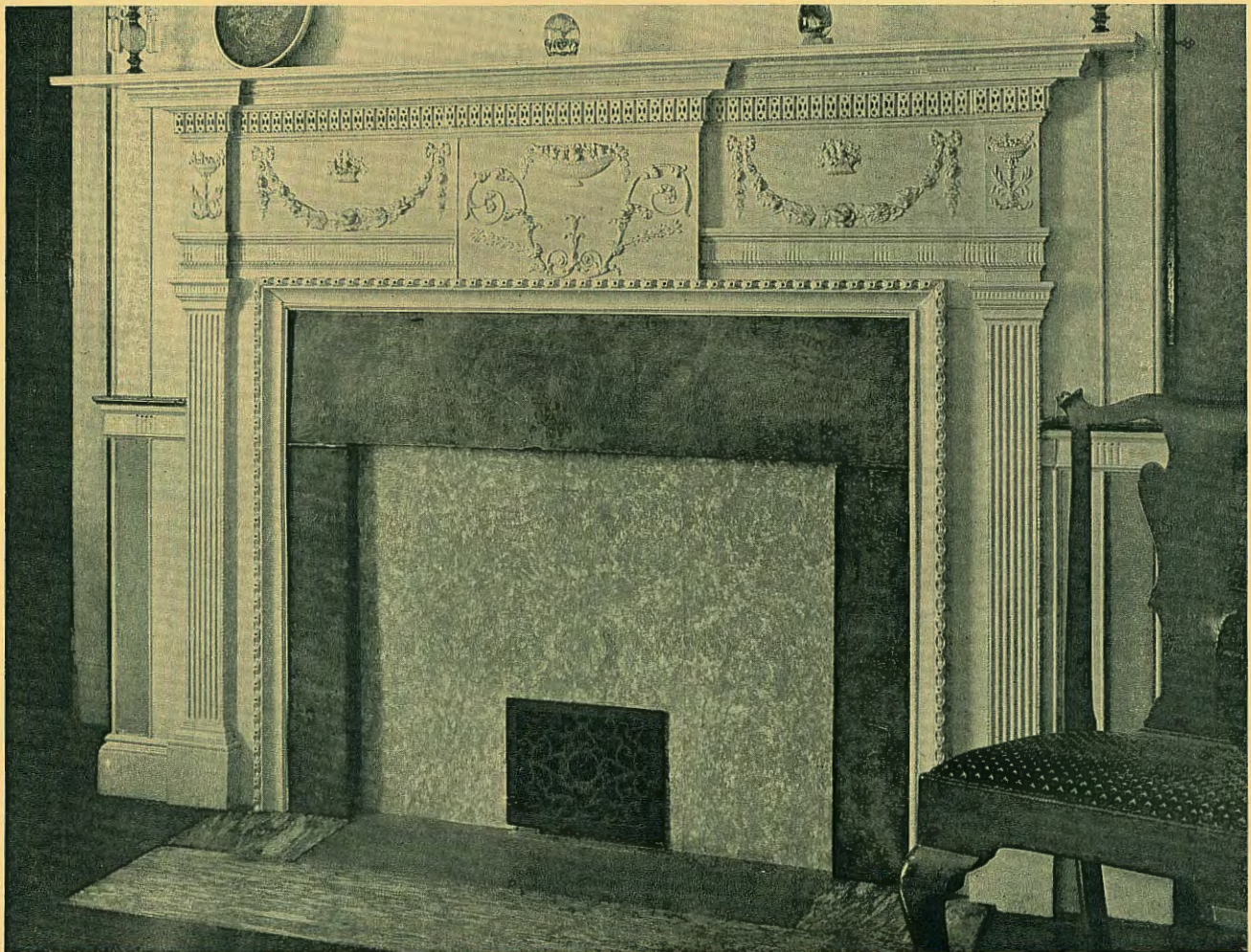
Also on Orange Street is a remainder of the earlier settlement, of a time nearer the pioneer days. It is a little house with its eaves not many feet above the sidewalk and is known as "The Old Dutch House" (Plate LXXIII). Its date is not certain but it is presumed that it was built near the middle of the seventeenth century.

On the other side of the Common and one block beyond is the Strand, another street which was favored as the location for many of the better houses. This street runs more or less along the water front with the back yards of one side continuing down to the river in many places. It is on the Strand that we find the most pretentious house in New Castle, the Read house, which has been fully described in the previous Monograph.

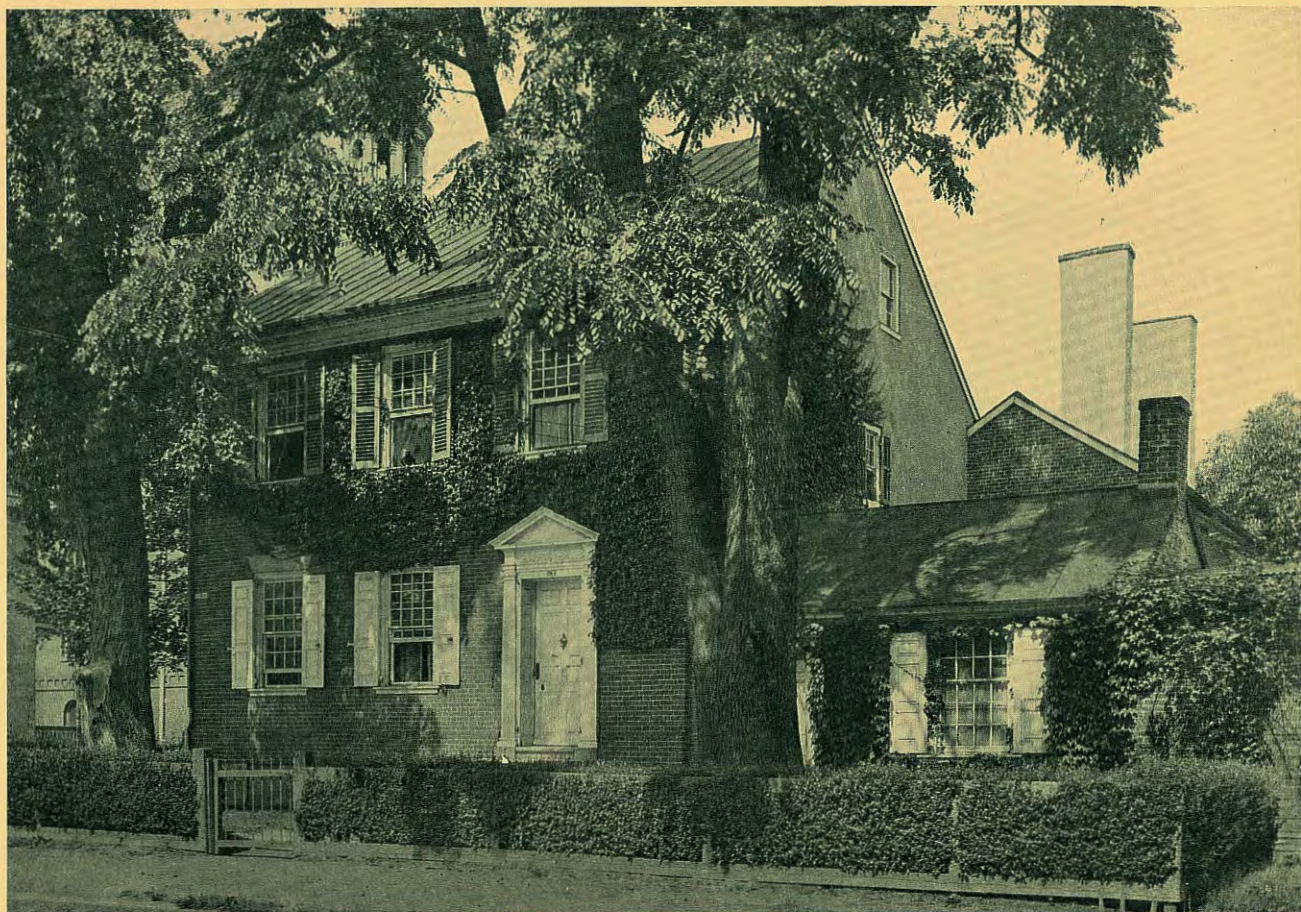
Near the Read house is the four-story building known as the "Parish House" (Plate LXXX). It was built for Charles Thomas a very few years after the completion

of the Read house. The facade facing the Strand is similar in detail to many others in the town, the pedimented doorway, the one-pieced keystone lintels, the modillioned cornice and the single dormer. It does differ in that the doorway is in the middle instead of at one side where it would have permitted the maximum width for a principal room entered from the hallway. However, as it stands on a corner we find that the side elevation becomes quite important, though the designer seemed content with the balance of the front and made little attempt at an axial treatment on the side. The gable, spanning the broader dimension, is cut off at the top by a narrow deck or walk which was probably used for watching the shipping.

The detail of the doorway shows the moldings and ornament which are almost identical with those of the Read house and were undoubtedly done by the same workmen. Few surfaces were left plain. Facias were treated with regular series of gouges, half-round



LIVING ROOM MANTEL—THE VAN DYCK HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



THE KENSEY JOHNS HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE

moldings were carved with rope-like grooves and pitted with auger holes, while dentil courses were replaced by intricately devised bands of great richness.

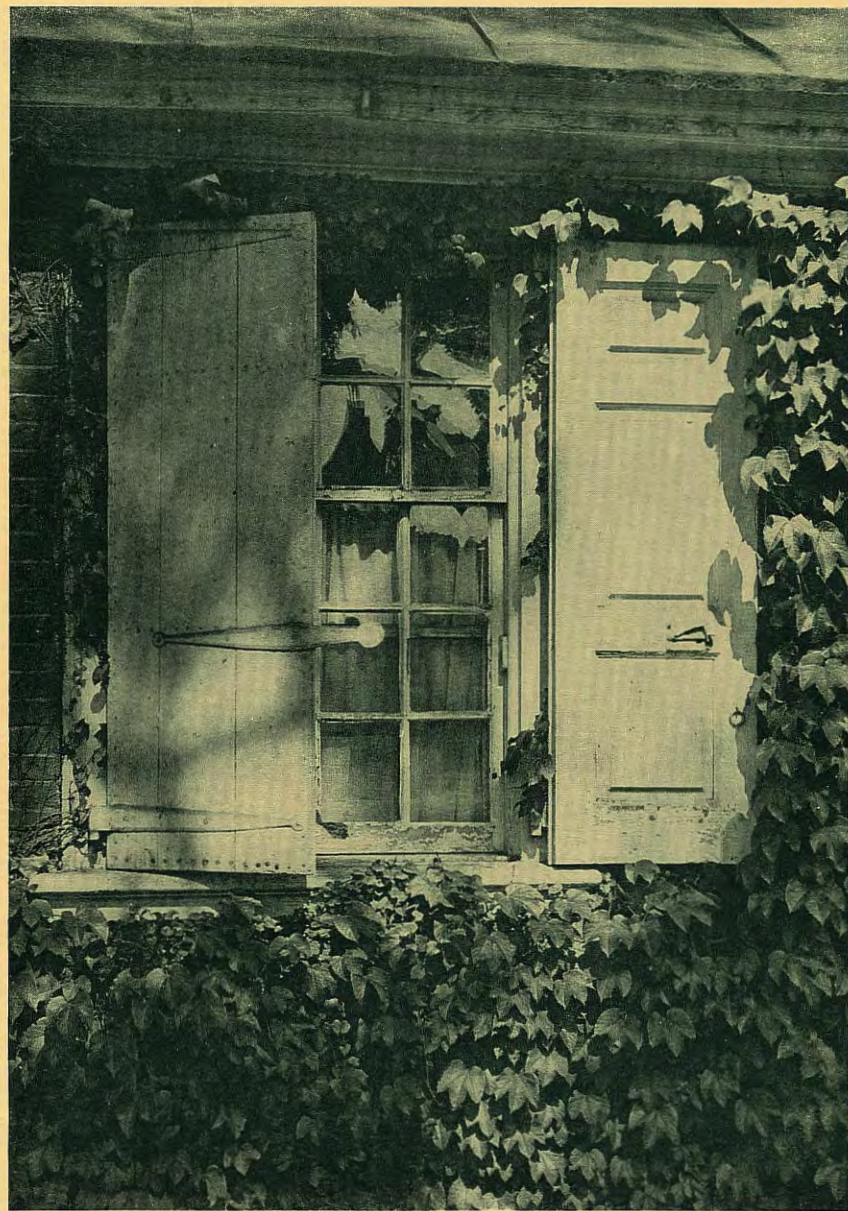
In many ways the most interesting house in New Castle is Amstel House (Plates LXXII and LXXV) as the present owners, Prof. and Mrs. H. Hanby Hay, have named it, recalling one of the early names of the town. Very strongly Dutch in the feeling of its detail, it was built about 1730. The wide gable with an angle of about 29 degrees spans what is the main front, though now on a minor street. The rather heavy doorway, the wide muntins and the large curved frieze surface are more like various houses in and around Philadelphia than those in New Castle. There is a great deal of panelling on the interior and it too has a heaviness which is not found in the other houses, though at the same time it is quite interesting. (Page 4 and Plate LXXVI.)

The house at Number 400 Delaware Street (Plate LXXIV), just opposite Amstel House, was built for Nicholas Van Dyck in 1799. It has in recent times been divided for two families by changing a window into a doorway as is seen in the illustration. The mantel

(Page 9) is quite ornate and in the piercing of the ornamental bands with auger holes takes its place with the work found in the Read house.

There are a number of other interesting houses along the few streets of New Castle which are similar to those shown here. Fortunately there seems a good chance that they will remain for some time to come, for not only is industry removed but in this older town there is a compactness, with the houses built as close to one another as in a city on plots of narrow frontage, which will keep the newcomer from squeezing in as he has on the larger plots of many of the New England towns.

There is, moreover, another reason for the probable permanence of the town as it now stands, in that there is a real pride and understanding in the community of the architectural heritage represented by these buildings, an appreciation of tradition which is in restful contrast to the incessant changes which are sweeping away so much of our colonial background. New Castle is still the complete setting for the simple and genteel life which brought these eighteenth-century houses into existence.



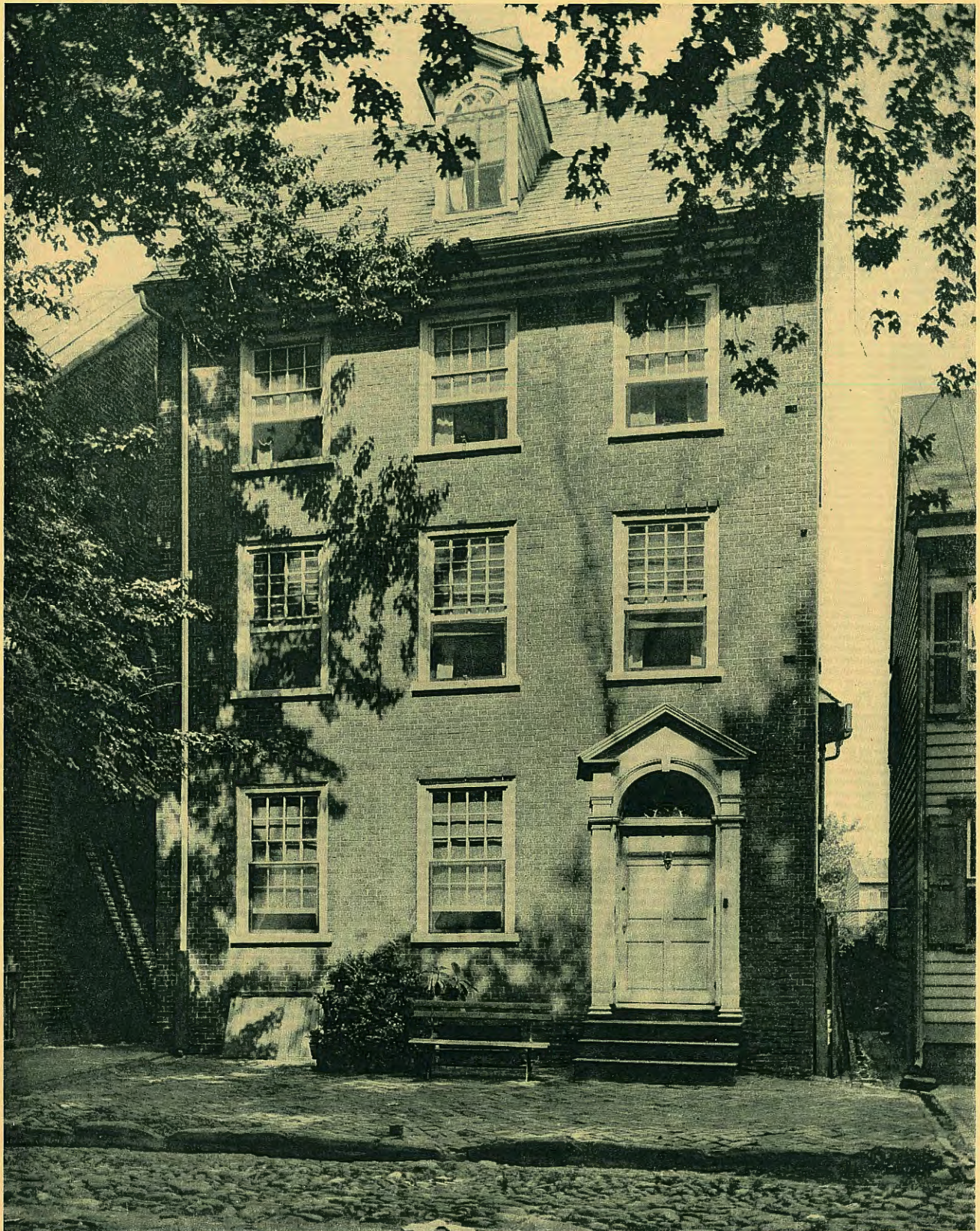
WINDOW DETAIL—AMSTEL HOUSE (1730)

WINDOW DETAIL—KENSEY JOHNS HOUSE (1790)

NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE—WINDOW DETAILS



THE CHARLES THOMAS HOUSE, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE
(Built about 1801—Now called "The Parish House")



HOUSE AT NUMBER 18 ORANGE STREET, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE



CUPOLA OF THE TOWN HALL AND MARKET, NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE

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FEBRUARY, 1926

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Of The White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs, published monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1925.

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Russell F. Whitehead, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the owner of The White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs, published by him, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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Publisher, Russell F. Whitehead, 150 East Sixty-first Street, New York

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Managing Editor, None.

Business Manager, None.

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Russell F. Whitehead, 150 East Sixty-first Street, New York

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RUSSELL F. WHITEHEAD.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 20th day of December, 1925.

[Seal] NORMAN E. WARD.

(My commission expires March 31, 1927.)

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We have now come to the place where we ask "how" instead of "what" about our ancestors. We want to know how they lived, how they thought, how they planned and schemed their lives. Of course, books are a guide to answers for these questions, but their revelations are guarded; a writer may say as much or as little as he wishes, leaving pretty much the impression he wants to, but his house is the embodiment of his aspirations and shows unreservedly the mind behind the work. Every man craves to express and perpetuate himself in his dwelling; he puts into it his whole personality and he who would learn what his forefather was like has only to study his house, within and without.

To catch and retain for our descendants this elusive thing, the personality of our ancestors, as expressed in their buildings, we have studied their architecture from the earliest shelters of the Colonists to the charming and sophisticated "mansions" of the early Republic. We find them a fascinating and inspiring record of the growth of the germ of our native art,—a germ that grew and thrived in the face of great hardships and handicaps.

We have in our possession tangible evidence of the changes and advancements that came into the lives of the early American; photographs of his houses and furniture, mute but eloquent revelations. We intend to present these treasures so that the peruser of The Monographs Series will see before his eyes the procession, vivid and splendid, of our development from earliest Colonial days to our eclipse in mid-Victorianism, from which we have recently emerged. We do not aim to issue single copies, but a series of monographs, which, taken as a whole, compose a collection of books on Early American Architecture. The individual monographs might almost be called chapters in the history of Early American Architecture; we want each issue or chapter to be so vital to the subject of the Series that to lack one would make a break in the continuity of the whole.

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