

The Prescott Girls - Study Guide

The Old Pownalborough Court House

A Historic Building in the Story of *The Prescott Girls*



The Old Pownalborough Court House in Dresden, Maine is one of the most important historical buildings in the region. Built in **1761**, it originally served as the courthouse for the town of Pownalborough, which at the time was one of the largest settlements along the Kennebec River.

Today the building is preserved as a museum and is recognized as one of the **oldest surviving courthouses in New England**.

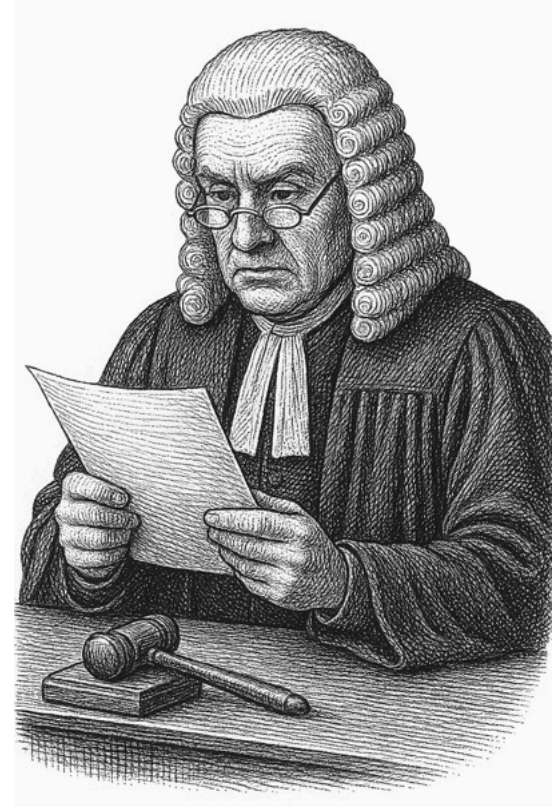
A Court House on the Frontier

When the courthouse was built in the mid-eighteenth century, Maine was still part of the **Province of Massachusetts Bay**. The Kennebec River region was a frontier area where settlers were establishing farms, trading along the river, and building new communities.

The courthouse served as the center of local government. Important legal matters were decided there, including:

- property disputes
- criminal trials
- local government meetings
- tax and land records

Because communities were spread far apart, the courthouse became a gathering place for people throughout the region.



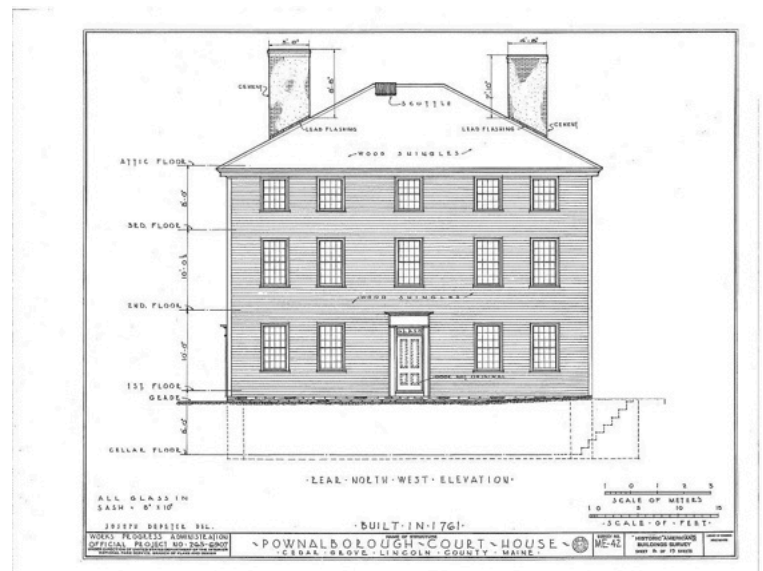
Architecture of the Building

The courthouse was built in the **Georgian architectural style**, which was common in colonial America.

Some of its notable features include:

- a tall three-story wooden structure
- symmetrical windows
- a large courtroom occupying the main floor
- wide pine floors and heavy timber framing

Buildings like this were designed to be both **practical and imposing**, symbolizing the authority of the law.



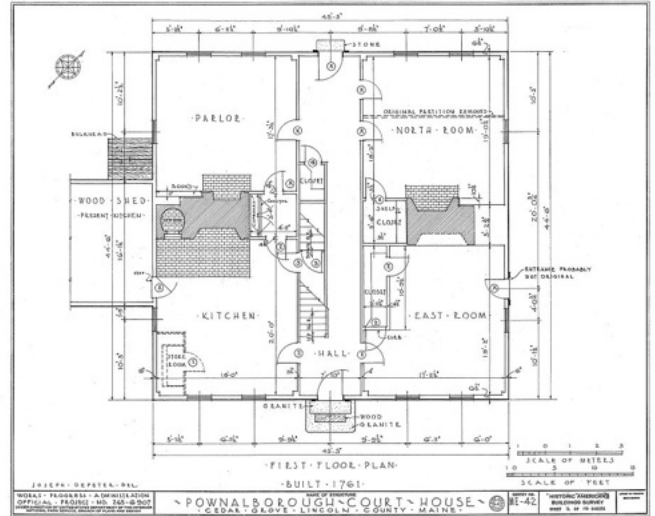
From Court House to Family Home

By the early nineteenth century, the county government moved to other locations, and the building was no longer needed as a courthouse.

Instead of being abandoned or destroyed, the building was converted into a **private residence**.

Members of the **Johnson family**, including Thomas Johnson, who served as the Dresden postmaster, lived in the building. Several generations of the family shared the home.

It was in this unusual setting that the Prescott girls later lived.



The Prescott Family at the Court House

After the death of Warren Prescott in 1833, his widow **Rebecca Johnson Prescott** returned to her childhood home with her daughters:

- Rebecca Goodwin Johnson Prescott (Beckie)
- Caroline Louisa Prescott (Louisa)
- Sarah Augusta Prescott (Sallie)

They moved into the former courthouse where Rebecca's brothers lived.

The girls grew up surrounded by the building's history. Rooms that had once held court sessions were now used as living spaces, bedrooms, and family gathering places.

The Court House Today

The Old Pownalborough Court House still stands on a hill overlooking the **Kennebec River**.

Today it is preserved and maintained by the **Lincoln County Historical Association** as a museum. Visitors can explore the building and learn about its role in the history of Maine.

Artifacts connected to the Prescott and Johnson families—including historical needlework samplers—are now part of the museum's collection.

Why Historic Buildings Matter

Buildings like the Old Pownalborough Court House help historians understand how people lived in the past.

They reveal:

- how communities were organized
- how government worked in early America
- how families adapted older buildings for new uses

Because the courthouse still survives, it provides a direct connection to the world of the Prescott girls.



Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think the courthouse was built near the Kennebec River?
2. Why might an old government building be converted into a home rather than being destroyed?
3. How might it feel to live in a building that once served as a courthouse?
4. What kinds of stories might the walls of an old building hold?
5. Why is it important to preserve historic buildings?

Activity

Imagine living in a building that once served another purpose, such as a school, church, or courthouse.

Write a short description of how the building might be used as a home today. What parts of the original building might still remain?