

Capt. David Mathews, the Man Who Built the State Line House

By Corinne Eldred

On a vintage postcard postmarked 8/28/1916, there is a photo of an old brick house with the caption, "STATE LINE HOUSE, ERECTED IN 1783, HOOSICK FALLS, N.Y. STANDS IN TWO STATES, THREE COUNTIES, AND FOUR TOWNS." Nearly every written account of the old structure makes this false statement. It is true one part of the foundation stands in the town of Hoosick, NY (Rensselaer County), and the other in the town of Shaftsbury, VT (Bennington County). No part of the house stands in the town of Bennington, VT or White Creek, NY. It's almost half a mile from the White Creek, Washington County line.

Therefore, it is accurate to say that the house stands in TWO states, TWO counties and TWO towns. Why would the builder do this? Was it accidental or intentional? As far as being erected in 1783...well, because there were no building laws in those days, there is no definite record of the date when the brick house was actually built, or who built it. It is presumed that Captain David Mathews, a militia man who fought in the Revolution was the original proprietor, though no solid proof is available. In spite of this, we can glean some insight into Capt. Mathews' life, his family and his house from century old letters of correspondence written by his descendants and held in a file at the Bennington Museum.

Mathews was born in Merrimac, NH, March 2, 1747, the son of James and Mary Mathews. He died March 29, 1811. He always rode spirited horses and carried a gold-headed cane. One day he was thrown from his horse, was injured and died in a few days, in the 65th year of his age. He is buried in a small churchyard cemetery (Sweet Cemetery on Cottrell Rd) about a mile from his house where a Methodist Church once stood, the outline of the building still visible. His resting place is quite prominent. It's a tomb waist high laid up in brick covered with a marble slab. His mother Mary, who died in 1809 at the State Line House at age 93, is buried there also.

David is said to have stood 6 ft. 4 in. in his stockings. He married Lucy Fay, daughter of Captain Benjamin Fay of Marlboro, MA in 1773, who was also the niece of Captain Stephen Fay, proprietor of the Catamount Tavern in Old Bennington. Together they had twelve children, of whom eight survived childhood. Before moving into the brick house, David Mathews and his family lived in a humble frame dwelling on a farm he owned in South Shaftsbury, referred to in the letters as "the red house." It seems he owned quite a bit of property, including some where the Revolution was fought.

Mathews formed a company of soldiers who were in his employ (tenants), took charge of them and offered his services to the commanding officer. He was accepted, thus becoming captain. It was here on that fateful day in August of 1777 when the unfortunate German officer, Lt. Col. Friedrich Baum, was mortally wounded and carried into David Mathews' house, the nearest residence to the battlefield, where he died within 48 hours. A monument marks the site. Lucy was said to have nursed and fed the wounded, American and British alike, making "soups and gruels." During the last half of the 1700's there was much feuding and conflicting claims among the New York province (Bennington was part of Albany County then) and the colonies of New Hampshire and Massachusetts over land grants. Even after the battle of Bennington, as it is known, Vermont

remained an independent republic for 14 years before joining the Union in 1791. Perhaps Mathews built at this location to make a political statement.

Mary Ann Mathews Shedd, granddaughter of David and Lucy, was born in the State Line House in 1802. She was in her old age when she shared this story: There were three stories and an attic in back. The lower story had two rooms in front, used as a kitchen, and an empty room that was partially underground. In back of the two was one dark room called the “bee room” as grandfather talked of keeping bees in it. Broad steps went up from ground to piazza and had large round pillars on each side of the steps and again at the corners, with a balustrade. Columns and all went up three stories and ended in a pointed roof, and in that point was a plate of David Mathews.

So, when did he build the stately brick house? Perhaps it took a period of time. One letter states that teams were going between the house and battlefield during its progress, bearing the wounded thither. However, it is unclear whether “during the progress,” relates to the brick house or the battle.

In 1930, John Spargo wrote a somewhat controversial little book entitled, *The True Story of Capt. David Mathews and His State Line House*. He believed the house was built between 1800 and 1805. He also set out to prove that David Mathews was not a Tory, but a Patriot. True. If he had been a Tory, his land would have been confiscated. As it was, he received a militia grant for his Revolutionary service, 150 acres in the town of Solon, Cortland County, and a lot in Seneca County, which he left to his only son, John.

John also inherited the State Line House from his father and later sold it to a Methodist Community. He divorced his wife, Polly Green and went to Truxton, Cortland County, NY, leaving his mother and his daughter, Lucy Merrill, to live in a couple of rooms at the State Line House. The Methodists had only partially paid for it.

He later went back to the House, sold it again and moved to Truxton. For a while, Lucy Fay Mathews and her divorced daughter-in-law lived with Mary Ann Mathews Shedd, John’s daughter. Lucy died in Lysander, a place north of Syracuse in 1839 at the home of another daughter. The State Line House has changed hands many times over the years. It was used as a home, a hotel, a restaurant, even a tavern. In 1938, the building emerged unscathed from a fire that destroyed a cow and hay barn on the property. Later on, in the sixties, baby boomers will remember it as the “Five Flys,” a classy nightclub where bell bottoms swept the dance floor as young adults rocked to the blaring music and multicolored flashing stage lights. Go-Go Girls were included. If those old brick walls could speak, what a tale they would spin.