Located on the southeast corner of Main Street and Mountain Road, the Jonathan Cowles House is prominently sited above a brownstone retaining wall. Situated in the heart of Miss Porter's School campus and Farmington's historic district, this building is surrounded by other well-preserved eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century historic architecture.
This landmark example of Federal-period architecture is three stories in height and features a five-bay facade capped with a low-pitched hip roof. The decorative detail is Adamesque in character. The central entry door exhibits a semi-circular fanlight and paneled door. The small classical entry portico displays slender columns supporting a frieze adorned with triglyph, metopes, and a modillioned cornice. A common Federal-period feature is the second-story, ornate Palladian window over the entry way. The central bay of the third story also displays a tripartite window adorned with brackets and a decorative frieze. The elaborate roofline cornice is embellished by both a modillion and dentil course. Note the decorative window crowns above the first and second story twelve-over-twelve sash. The third floor features smaller six-over-six windows. Alterations include the south elevation addition which connects this building with 65 Main Street.

Jonathan Cowles erected this house around 1799 on land he and his brother, Elijah Cowles, Jr., purchased from William Wadsworth in 1793 (FLR 30:205). Born in Farmington, Jonathan (1757-1822) was the second eldest son of Elijah and Eunice (Gould) Cowles. He and his four brothers, Elijah, Jr., Seth, Gad, and Martin, operated the successful and prosperous mercantile firm of Elijah Cowles and Company. They exported native goods, such as cattle and fruit, as well as importing West Indian products like rum and molasses. The firm owned a number of ships, including the "Three Brothers", which was captured during the French Revolution. Jonathan Cowles was active in the militia and served as Lieut. Colonel of the 7th Connecticut Militia Cavalry in 1800-01. In 1783 he married Esther Lewis (1764-1838), the daughter of William and Mary (Bull) Lewis. Cowles received full title of his homelot from his brothers in 1813 (FLR 37:559). Upon his death in 1822, the house was equally divided among his three surviving children: William Lewis, Henry, and Maria L. (Cowles) James. The eldest son, William Lewis, a merchant like his father, resided here with his family. Between 1866 and 1868 the heirs of Jonathan Cowles sold the homestead to Dr. Franklin Wheeler (FLR 57:476, 500,581). Dr. Wheeler was married to Emily Cowles, daughter of William Lewis Cowles and granddaughter of the house's original owner, Jonathan Cowles. Born in Avon, Wheeler (1827-1907) was a graduate of the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York. While residing in Farmington, he served as physician for both the town and Miss Porter's School and from 1891 to 1907, was president of the Farmington Savings Bank. In 1908 Mrs. Elizabeth V. Keep, the headmistress at Miss Porter's School, acquired the property from Wheeler's (SEE CONT. PG. (see below))


CAPE TO BUILDING OR SITE

None known □ Highways □ Vandalism □ Developers □ Other

□ Renewal □ Private □ Deterioration □ Zoning □ Explanation

Greater Middletown Preservation Trust

27 Washington Street, Middletown, CT

CONTRIBUTORS

estate (FLR 74:171). The building has housed both students and classrooms since that time.

One of the village's most elegant and well-preserved buildings, the Jonathan Cowles House reflects the wealth and influence of the Cowles family.
NAME: PORTER'S SCHOOL, MISS

ADDRESS: 59 Main Street & Mountain Road

DATE BUILT: 1799 (J. Gay) OR: Jonathan Cowles

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

ARCHITECT

MASTER-BUILDER

Additions of recent years the R.F. Jones Co

FORMER OWNERS

Miss Porter's School from the estate of Elizabeth V. Keep, Trustee,
by will 3/15/1919, Vol. 74, p. 336: Keep E.V., Trustee from the estate of
Dr. Franklin Wheeler, 4/7/1908, Vol. 74, p. 171: Wheeler, Franklin from the
estate of his wife, Emily (Cowles) Wheeler, by will 8/3/1889, P. R. Vol. 20
p 213: Cowles, Emily from the estate of her father William Cowles by will
3/6/1867, P. R. Vol. 13, p. 444: Cowles, William from the estate of his father
have tenant right of dower in 1/3 of the estate, William to have 1/3
of 2/3rds, Henry to have 1/3 of 2/3rds and Maria to have same, this
distribution to continue after the death of their mother Esther.

REFERENCES:

"Farmington, Conn., 1906" p 24
Cowles Genealogy p. 133
Baker & Tilden Atlas 1869 p 33 'Dr F. Wheeler'
The estate of Henry Cowles of Gainville, Ala., was heavily encumbered, mostly to William, and was settled by commissioners with his share of the place going to William, 11/21/1856, P R Vol. 12, p 38 - by default of mortgage. There is no record of a transfer or of the estate of Maria.

By the distribution of the estate of Jonathan, Henry and William divided the house by a line through the center, giving each other only passway rights to the part of each one.

Jonathan had lived on this site since 1785 in an older Cowles house. Emily Cowles married Franklin Wheeler in 1854.
This house is pictured in the Farmington Book on page 24 as the Jonathan Cowles place, residence of Franklin Wheeler, A. M., M. D., and is shown in Baker and Tilden's 1869 Atlas as "Dr. Wheeler". It was built in 1799 by Jonathan Cowles, who is stated to have lived on this site since 1785 in an older Cowles house.

The original settler on this land, which "embraced two acres on Town Street between the 'meting house yard and Mountain Road'", was Obadiah Richards. The land probably also included that on which stood, or rather now stands, No. 63 Main Street. Mrs. Hurlburt states in "Town Clerks" on page 370:

"Obadiah Richards sold his land with a dwelling house to Daniel Andrews in 1672 and removed to Mattatuck (Waterbury). Obadiah was the son of Thomas Richards of Hartford, an early settler of Farmington, Freeman May 1669, married Hannah Andrews of Farmington, later married Esther. He died November 11, 1702, in Waterbury".

Mrs. Hurlburt's chart on page xvi of "Town Clerks", shows the land at this site as Block No. 63, and on page xix Block No. 63 shows the same ownership as above stated:

"Obadiah Richards sold to Daniel Andrus 1672".

Daniel Andrus is mentioned only one other time in that book, on page 30, as one of the original proprietors in 1672.

The writer's search for title transfers of this property between 1672 and 1799 were futile, so we shall start the second phase of the history of this site with the gentleman mentioned on the second line of the first paragraph at the top of this page.

Jonathan Cowles, 1757-1822, was the son of Elijah Cowles and his second wife, Eunice Gould of North Guilford. His father Elijah lived across the street on the site of what is now 56 Main Street. Jonathan served as a private in the Revolutionary War, and later advanced from Lieutenant to Lt. Colonel in the Connecticut Militia in the years from 1792 to 1801. His wife was Esther Lewis, daughter of William Lewis and Mary Bull, the latter of whom was the daughter of David Bull and Sarah Ashley.

Jonathan Cowles' four daughters were:

Nancy, born 1784, lived three years,
Nancy, born 1789, died 1809 of scarlet fever,
Maria Louisa, born 1795, married Robert D. James, a planter of Alabama,
Louisa, born 1797, lived four years.


March 23, 1972
Mr. Mansfield says, after speaking of a social evening in Farmington: "The evening passed pleasantly away, and I was launched into Farmington Society. As there were only three of us at the close of the entertainment to escort the young ladies home, it was fortunate that Farmington was built almost entirely on one street, so one of us took the girls who went down street, one those who went up street, and a third those who branched off. Of these young ladies more than half bore one name, that of Cowles. I was told there were in this township 300 persons of the name of Cowles. There were on the main street five families of brothers, in all of which I visited, and to whom I was indebted for many pleasant hours."

This was one of the "five families" mentioned, and the writer was interested to find out just how extensive was the Cowles family at that time. This research turned up the information shown in the following chart. It lists the houses on Main Street which have been owned by Cowles families. The maximum ownership appears to have been in 1850, when 24 houses were under Cowles ownership. Of the thirty houses on the list, two of them still remain under that ownership. These are "Oldgate" at 148 Main Street, and "The Maples" at 400 Main Street.

"The Maples" appears to have the longest continuous ownership, it will complete 250 years in the Cowles family on the tenth of next month. "Oldgate" does not seem to have come under full Cowles ownership until Zenas Cowles took title in 1802, so it completes 170 years during this current year.

The chart mentioned is shown on the following page.

March 23, 1972
Jonathan Cowles had six children, the two boys being William Lewis Cowles, born 1787, and Henry Cowles, born 1791.

Jonathan Cowles was a member of an active firm of merchants consisting of five Cowles brothers. For more of their background, see the account of 56 Main Street. He had lived on this site, as stated on the first page, from 1785, which was two years after his marriage, in an older Cowles house. At his death, sometime prior to 1824, this house was carefully divided down the center of the front hall, and all the buildings also were explicitly divided, between William and Henry. It is thought that both brothers lived here with their respective families, for some time. When Henry Cowles moved sometime later to Alabama, his portion of the estate was heavily mortgaged to William, and his share passed to William on November 21, 1856.

Henry Cowles, 1791-1855, married Rebecca L. Green of Long Island and Alabama. She became a member of the Farmington Church in 1824. Mr. Cowles was a major in the Connecticut Militia 1813-1814, serving for a time as Aide-de-Camp to Major General Solomon Cowles, as did his brother later. Henry Cowles and his brother William were co-owners of what is now the "Corner House", from 1813, inheriting it from their father. Henry sold his share in 1816 to his brother William. Henry appears to have been very mobile. He is stated to have been a merchant in Farmington and in Rhinebeck, New York, yet he was notary public in Farmington 1834-35, and deputy sheriff 1837-47. He died in 1855 in Alabama, probably in Gaines'town. His widow died in Rhinebeck in 1876.

Mr. and Mrs. Henry Cowles had three children, all born in Farmington.

Louisa, born in 1815, married William Samuel Cowles, born in 1796 in Litchfield, the son of Elias Cowles. She died in 1843 in Rhinebeck, New York. Her husband was a merchant in Rhinebeck, died there in 1867.

Frederick Augustus Cowles, born in 1820, was an Ensign in Connecticut militia in 1843, and lieutenant from 1844 to 1847. He married Lucretia Erwin of Alabama, where he resided in 1850.

Emily Virginia, born 1833, lived unmarried in Orland, Florida, as late as 1895.

William Lewis Cowles, 1787-1868, was married in 1809 to Charity Cowles, born 1788, daughter of Major General Solomon Cowles and Polly Gleason, of what is now 154 Main Street. The Cowles Genealogy states that he "was a merchant at the north end of Farmington Street". He was a major in Connecticut Militia 1809-1815, served as Aide-de-Camp to his father-in-law Major General Solomon Cowles, as had his brother, and was a justice of the peace in 1849.

November 27, 1971
William L. Cowles and his brother Henry took title from their father in 1813 to what is now the "Corner House". In 1816 William purchased his brother Henry's share. This property stayed under his ownership from 1816 until his death. In the deed from Henry to William in 1816, its wording indicated inclusion of "house, store and other buildings". There have been vague reports of a barber shop having stood there in the late 19th century, and one of the "other buildings" may have housed a store near the "Corner House" when the two brothers owned it. That may have been the site of his business as merchant, mentioned in the genealogy.

William L. Cowles did build in 1850 the house just below the Corner House, situated facing Farmington Avenue. It does not appear that it was ever a store, but we do not know its actual use, except that it may have been built for rental purposes. It was the house later the home and property of John Rourke, pictured on page 112 of the Farmington Book.

Mr. Cowles died in 1868 and the property at 4 Main Street, now the Corner House, was sold that same year by his estate, to John Thompson, father of Mrs. Frank Sneath.

The Cowles genealogy states regarding both Henry and William, that "he lived on his father's homestead". This is explained in the second paragraph of the previous page. This double occupancy probably did not last long, as Henry seems to have spent much time in the South.

William L. Cowles and his wife had nine children. Six of them: Nancy, Mary Ann, Margaret, Julia, William and Mary Louisa, had lives not exceeding 21 years, and were unmarried. The other three were Jonathan, Ralph and Emily.

Jonathan, born in 1810, attended Norwich Academy, Northfield, Vermont, 1825-27, was an ensign in Connecticut Militia in 1831. He married Eliza King of Hartford, born New York 1821. He spent several years in California, perhaps before his marriage. Three daughters were born in Hartford, none of them married. Jonathan died in 1867, his widow moved to Brooklyn, living until 1892.

Ralph, born in 1813, died in 1855, with no known history.

Emily, born in 1829, the youngest child, married Dr. Franklin Wheeler in 1854. She inherited this house in 1868, and they lived here thereafter.

Dr. Franklin Wheeler, born in Avon in 1827, was the son of Seth Wheeler and Harriet Woodford, members of two of the oldest families in Avon. Dr. Wheeler had attended Deacon Simeon-Hart's School here in Farmington at the age of twelve, and was a graduate of Yale at the age of twenty. He was graduated from the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York in 1852. After practicing a year in Avon he came to Farmington and set up practice.
Town records show that Dr. Franklin Wheeler was named to be Town Physician and Surgeon for the year 1855. He became a member of both the Hartford County and State of Connecticut Medical societies, was physician for Miss Porter's School from 1858 to 1898, and was president of Farmington Savings Bank from 1891 until his death in 1907.

Many of Miss Porter's School girls were quartered in this house during the Wheelers' occupancy, and possibly even before. Two who were known to have lived here in the 19th century were Elizabith Dickson and Harriet Lowrie, grandmother and mother respectively, of Mrs. Austin Dunham Barney, who herself lived here later.

Dr. and Mrs. Wheeler had no children of their own, and the Miss Porter girls may have filled what they perhaps considered a void in their lives. They even added a third story to their house so they could provide shelter for more girls. Dr. Wheeler is said to have had the appearance of just what he was, an "old country doctor". John Thomas Flood of the house on Farmington Avenue near Wolf Pit Road drove the doctor's team on house calls for many years. Dr. Wheeler was much better liked by the children than the sternervisaged Dr. Carrington. In his later years he cut down on house calls and spent most of his time caring only for those of Miss Porter's School. Kenneth Ruic, born at 778 Farmington Avenue around 1897, remembers his vaccination by Dr. Wheeler, who also had to sew up his head when he fell on a rock, a toddler running away from his mother on Main street.

At the present time it is not known where the Wheelers lived their first married years, after their wedding in 1854. Dr. Wheeler acquired title in 1868 to the house on Farmington Avenue which Mrs. Wheeler's father had built in 1850, and it is possible that the Wheelers had lived there in their earlier married years. Mrs. Wheeler inherited this property at 59 Main Street in 1868, after her father's death, and the Wheelers probably lived here from then on, making it a home for Mrs. Wheeler's mother also, as Mrs. Cowles lived until 1875.

Mrs. Elizabeth V. Hale Keep, headmistress of Miss Porter's School at the time of Dr. Wheeler's death in 1907, purchased the house from his estate in 1908, and in 1919 it became the property of Miss Porter's School. It is still a dormitory for the girls, and also has some classrooms. At least two additions have been built, but its facade remains the same. It has been known for many years as "Colony", the residential offshoot from the mother building "Main", which has always been the center of school life. Part of its interior shows in photo on page 194 of the Farmington Book.

Mrs. Lloyd Woodbury, housemother for four years, retired in June 1971. Present house directors are Gordon W. Adams (music and glee club) and his wife, the former Laura J. Adams (English), and they are accompanied by Michael (4) and Hadley (2).

March 23, 1972

This house has been endowed, through a "70's Fund" gift, by Mr. and Mrs. James Biddle (Louisa Copeland '54), thus assuring its maintenance and preservation.