

Putting it back together again

*Book chronicles
history of house*

By HILLARY CHURA
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON, N.H. — When Ronald Jager works on his 18th century farmhouse, he sometimes feels as if the ghosts of its Revolutionary War builder and post-Civil War renovator are watching.

"I hear the chopping through the background that comes drifting through the 200 years. I know it's Ebenezer Wood chopping the timbers of this house and hewing them in a straight line," he said.

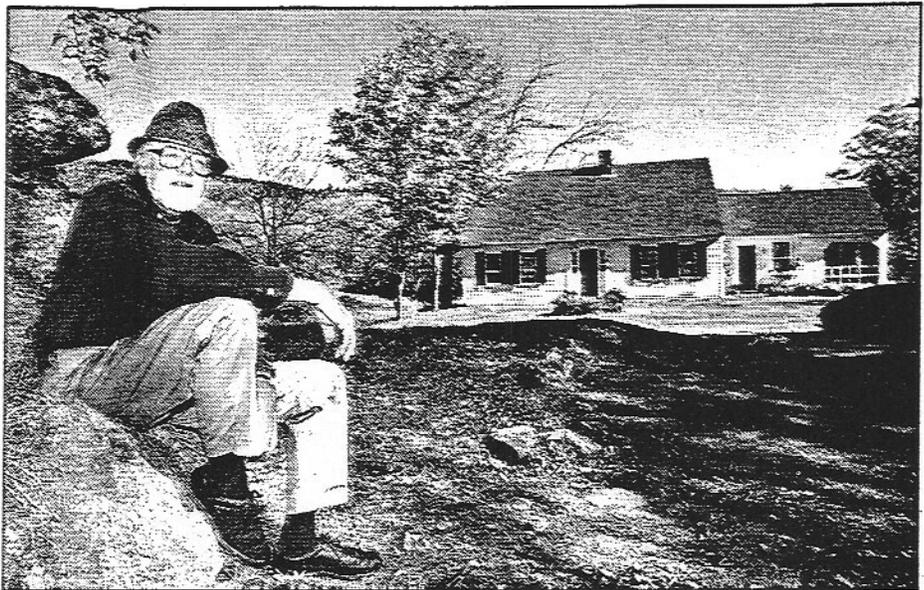
A quarter century of painstaking restoration has taught Jager, 61, to recognize the handiwork of Wood and the other men who lived in and worked on the house.

"There is a kinship based on a continuation of their lives. I can distinguish who did what work. I have a sense of them looking over my shoulder while I work," he said in a recent interview.

Jager and his wife, Grace, have discovered how the earlier residents supported themselves away from the farm and about the hay, barley, corn, oats and potatoes they grew on the rocky land surrounding the 214-year-old house.

The Jagers discovered the white, abandoned Cape Cod-style farmhouse 28 years ago in Washington, population about 600. They knew nothing then of Wood, the Revolutionary War lieutenant who built the house with his own hands five years after fighting at the Battle of Bunker Hill, nor of Auren Powers, who was born and died at the house and whose family occupied it for nearly a century.

But something told them to nurture the clapboard house with its dilapidated



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Ronald Jager says he feels the presence of his home's Colonial owners.

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— Ronald Jager, who's restoring his 214-year-old home.

barn, overgrown stone walls and yard littered with old farm equipment.

"There is a human impulse to take in a stray, to take in the old and make it new again," Jager said. "We thought of this as the stray that needed to be salvaged."

The couple bought the home and 100 acres in western New Hampshire for less than \$10,000. They renovated the inside, tearing out plaster ceilings to ex-

pose hand-hewn beams and building kitchen cupboards and a hutch from pine boards that once divided rooms.

They redid the yard. It's tidy and grassy now, lined with trees and accented with green iron lawn furniture. Yellow day lilies and blue hosta hide the septic tank. Stone steps lead to the backyard pond the Jagers built.

■ See **HOUSE** — Page B-6

■ HOUSE *Continued from Page B-1*

In the six-room home they dubbed Lovellwood, the Jagers — transplants from Michigan — realized their dream of buying and renovating an old house. Jager — gentle, witty and soft-spoken — detailed their experiences in "Last House on the Road: Excursions into a Rural Past," published this month by Beacon Press.

"I wanted to tell a local rural story that would resonate with the experiences of many other people in many other places in the country," he said.

The Jagers have tried to return the house to its origins. They restored the windows to their original style, painted the hardwood floors red, patched the horsehair plaster walls and painted other walls colonial colors.

Jager now is on a first-name basis with Wood, Auren Powers and Powers' father, Anson.

"Ebenezer's workmanship was high quality. Auren was more careless. The way in which the pantry, stairway and closets were built —

it was patchwork, not as neat and carefully cut," he said. "It was done as quickly and easily as possibly could be done. I felt Ebenezer Wood, who built the house, wouldn't have done it that way."

Jager writes in his book of Wood and his 11 children, all but one of whom survived childhood. He tells how Wood brought his wife and their first two or three children to Washington, the first incorporated settlement named for the nation's founder.

Jager knows it was Auren Powers who discarded the granite hearth Wood had hewn, and he remembers finding it 20 years ago, buried.

"Ebenezer made it. Auren dragged it out to a ditch. It was up to me to put it back," he said.

The Jagers, both writers and historians, learned about their home, the families who preceded them and the town through Revolutionary War records, old newspapers, town archives, agriculture records in Concord and at Yale

University, a voluminous 80-year-old book on Washington's history and pictures neighbors found in their attics.

As they worked like archaeologists through layer after layer of wallpaper and paint, the Jagers learned about the Woods, who lived in the house for 60 years, and the Powers clan, who lived there for 90 years.

"I believe in ghosts because I can hear them. I hear them best when I wear my philosopher's hat or my historian's hat or my writer's hat. But when I take off those hats, I just hear the wind blowing," Jager said.

Uncovering the past was only part of the reward.

"It's a consciousness of adding our story to their story and being able to develop their periods of American history. We are continuing. The Woods were the founders. The Powers were the survivors, and we are the stewards," Jager said.