



Nelson Makechnie tries one of the three privy seats in Linda Barnes' old farmhouse on Shaw Hill.
Staff photo: Heather Makechnie

Andover Third Grader Looks Into Indoor Privies

By Nelson Makechnie and Heather Makechnie
For the Beacon

You wake at 1 AM on a cold night in January. You are a 10-year old boy, and live on a farm in Andover in the 1890s. You have to "go." Bad. Do you hold it until morning? Or do you go downstairs to the privy in the ell-shed connecting your frame house and barn?

Yes, you could use the chamber-pot

under your bed, but then you would have to clean it out come morning, and your big brother would think you were a sissy. So... you shiver as you trudge down to the privy. You might light a candle, or you might just tough it out and tip-toe across the ice-cold floorboards in the dark.

You walk out to the shed, open the privy door, pull up the wooden cover over the seat hole and sit there, first with your clothes on to warm up the seat,

and then quickly pull down your trousers and do your business. The wind might howl icily back through the dark privy hole as you, teeth chattering, button your pants and beat a hasty retreat to your feather bed.

Nelson Makechnie, a third-grader at AE/MS, learned that there are still indoor privies in old houses and buildings in Andover. Not outhouses ... not buildings that stood alone outside the main building, but actually rooms inside the houses, that contained a dry toilet. These toilets were just a board-seat with a hole cut out, which sat directly over a hole dug in the ground. We were privileged to visit a number of them and to learn about "the old days" when these privies were in use.

Privy Research

First, Nelson learned that the State of New Hampshire now has a rule or RSA that states, "All plumbing fixtures must be connected to a sanitary drainage system or to an approved collection system."

Nancy Allen, the Chief Plumbing Inspector for the State, explained that in our state the local ordinances take precedence over state ordinances. "So the local health inspector has the ultimate say in these matters and can grant special exception. However, I do not personally know of any indoor privy being in current use within the State anymore. There are lots of old indoor privies still left in old houses, but they are being used as umbrella stands or extra closet space."

Also, Nelson learned that originally most houses and barns in this area were built separately. That way, if there were a fire in one, the other might be saved. Little by little, it became common in New England for the house and barn to be connected by a shed or an "ell," because that way, in the dead of winter, a farmer did not have to brave the cold or even get lost in a blizzard, just to milk his cows or feed the horses. Also, the

heat generated by cattle, poultry, and swine could help to heat the house.

From there, it was just one more step to ask, "Why should we go to the outhouse to do our 'duty'?" So during the late 1700s and into the 1800s the outhouse was more commonly moved inside the house. This became common not only in the rural areas, but until sewage systems were built in the cities, it was the norm there as well.

Nelson discovered that indoor privies were smelly. And attracted and bred a lot of bugs. Including spiders. That is why the privy was usually in the shed instead of the house itself. Also, that way, when a big gust of wind blew through the foundation, the smell didn't flush through the house's living space.

Nancy Allen explains, "Much of the smell associated with the privy was actually methane gas. If it were in the house it would make people ill. A hundred years ago there were deaths associated with that gas exploding and setting fire to the building."

"Yes," agrees Sheila Charles, archeologist at Strawberry Banke Museum in Portsmouth. "In the 1600s and 1700s, when these privies were common, there were workers called 'night scavengers.' They were hired to come by night and 'harvest' the 'night soil' which they then sold to farmers as fertilizer. They had lanterns to help them do their job, and unfortunately we have many old reports of the lantern igniting the methane and blowing up the lantern, scavenger, privy, and house." Was this the original "fire in the hole?"

The methane gas was not the only offender. With such a breeding ground of infection it is no wonder that many diseases were so rampant. "Modern plumbing is a blessing," sighs Nancy Allen.

"The old privies are a blessing," sighs Sheila Charles. "We archeologists find
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