

Keeping Warm in the Winter: 1808-1880



The fireplace shown above is located in the Dana House's kitchen. The hearth still retains its crane and cooking implements. The opening to the right of the hearth is a beehive oven.

All of the fireplace hearths in the Dana House are soapstone, a type of stone that was mined locally and valued for its ability to retain heat. Pieces of soapstone were often kept inside the fireplace or hung on the side. The hot pieces could be used to dry out wet boots and other clothing. The soapstone blocks could also be used to keep one's hands and feet warm when riding in a sleigh or sitting through a long church service.

Around 1830, the Dana House's ell off the main house was built. This, in time, likely accommodated a cast iron stove for baking and cooking. Such a stove would have also provided heat for the house, giving additional warmth during those sub-zero days in the middle of January.

In the 1800s, keeping warm during a Vermont winter was no easy feat.

When Mary and Charles Dana moved into their new home on Elm Street in 1808, they had the builders construct eight fireplaces, including one large fireplace in the kitchen.

Not surprisingly, kitchens were often the warmest room in early homes, and because of this, families tended to use the kitchen as a multi-purpose workroom in which they would do their daily chores, such as weaving and spinning.



The soapstone block—in the upper left hand corner of the picture—is hanging on one of the fireplace's side walls.

Parlor stoves became popular between 1825 and the 1840s. Around 1880, in the middle of the Victorian Period, coal came into use.

As one might imagine, with houses being so cold during the winter, it was a chore to prepare oneself to go to bed. A nightcap was donned, along with a flannel nightshirt and wool socks. In addition, a warming pan was often run under the sheets to warm them. Then, if the bed had a canopy, the curtains would be drawn to keep out drafts and help hold in any heat. (Similarly, in rooms that had interior shutters—such as the Federal Parlor in the Dana House—the shutters would be closed to help keep out cold drafts.)



View of interior shutters in the Dana House. In addition to keeping a house warmer in the winter, interior shutters could be used to provide privacy and/or block out the sun in the summer.

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