

# THE STONE-ENDER—FROM SUSSEX TO R.I.

An authority on local history and architecture, with aid from England, throws new light on the origin of the homes of our early settlers

BY JOHN HUTCHINS CADY

**W**HAT was the origin of the early Rhode Island house with the stone-end chimney? The English craftsmen who first settled in New England built their dwellings in accordance with their native traditions. As the early settlers were of the humbler classes their houses followed the technique of the yeomen's cottages erected during the Tudor period. That simple English tradition was continued longer in Rhode Island than in the wealthier and more progressive Massachusetts and Connecticut colonies, whose craftsmen of the second and third generations were copying a more ambitious type of English home or developing a style of their own. Accordingly it was in Rhode Island, and particularly in Providence—for Newport and the South County were influenced by the Connecticut trend—that the traditional end-chimney house reached its highest degree of perfection.

The origin of this English style of dwelling has been rather obscure and it is only recently that possible prototypes have been identified in Sussex.

The discovery was quite accidental. *The National Geographic Magazine* ran an article by George W. Long in its August, 1948, issue entitled *Rhode Island, Modern City-State*. A clipping, showing the Thomas Clemence house in Johnston, was received by Miss Dorothy Boykett, an English schoolteacher, with the comment of a friend "Isn't this like your cottage?" Intrigued by the similarity, she wrote the Geographic Society, asking if perchance some of the early Rhode Island craftsmen had come from her part of Sussex. The letter reached my hands and I have since been in correspondence with Miss Boykett, to whom I am indebted for the Sussex photographs and historical data used in this story.

Miss Boykett's cottage, Mercer's, is in Twineham, a small village, with a history that goes back to its status as a Roman domicile, located about 12 miles northwest of Lewes, the Sussex county town. The village has an old burial ground, recalling the days when that part of Sussex was a stronghold of Friends. William Penn dwelt in the neighboring town of Warminghurst and George Fox preached at nearby Steyning. The latter founded the Society of Friends in New England in 1672 and conducted meetings in Newport and Providence that year. As the government of the Rhode Island colony was in the hands of the Friends during that period, a link of some sort with Sussex is indicated, which may have an architectural bearing.

English cottages have always been constructed of local materials; in forest areas they were built of timber and in stone areas they were built entirely of stone. In sections of Sussex, where both materials abound, wood and stone have been used in combination. In the old Saxon villages, each peasant had the use of a common field, strips of which were cultivated by co-operative effort of groups of villagers. They built their cottages to house their oxen and other animals as well as their families. In plan the units were "bays" and "half bays," an ancient version of our current modular planning. The bay, which accommodated two pairs of oxen, was about 15 by 16 feet and the half bay, intended for a single pair, about 8 by 15 feet. Those units, added to the family requirements, determined the shape and size of the cottages for many generations.

In the earlier days, before the construction of chimneys was undertaken, fires were built on the floor and a hole was left in the roof through which the smoke could escape. There is a tradition that when the original First Baptist Church in Providence was built in 1700 by Elder Pardon Tilling-



↑ EVIDENCE that early houses in R.I. were built along lines of homes the settlers had known in England is seen in similarity between the Clemence House (above) on George Waterman Road, Johnston, and the 15th century Mercer's Cottage in Twineham, Sussex. ↓



hast, a former Sussex dweller, a similar smoke hole was provided.

Mercer's cottage, erected in the early 15th century, is a story-and-a-half high and consisted originally of a bay and a half bay to which a lean-to was later added. It was framed with ships' timber, the sections pinned together with oak pegs, and each wall was built lying on its side and thrust upright by means of poles on to its stone foundation. The open wall spaces were filled with wattle and daub, a method in which laths were nailed to strips between the timbers, covered on both sides with a mixture of clay and straw, and finished with plaster. The original stone chimney terminated below the roof gable, and a hole in the wall, underneath the eaves, served as a smoke outlet. During the Elizabethan period the chimney was extended up through the roof, of brick construction, and bricks were laid in the walls in replacement of the wattle and daub. The two cottages at Wineham, a neighboring village, have the same general characteristics as Mercer's cottage.

Although the English settlers in Providence planned their houses like those of their forefathers,

a good many years elapsed before they were able to give them the full English flavor. They first built single-room houses, framed with hand-trimmed logs, the walls made of saplings or rough planks, plastered with mud, the roofs covered with bark or with thatch from the cove, and the bare earth serving as floor. The earlier chimneys were made of logs, as stone construction involved skilled workmanship and the use of mortar. Of the half-hundred houses known to have been standing in Providence in 1650 probably only a few had such refinements as built-in fireplaces, glazed windows and wood floors.

The earliest Providence house of which we have first-hand knowledge is the one built about 1653 by Roger Mowry some distance north of the home lots on what is now Abbott Street, and used by him as an "ordinaire" or tavern. It escaped the ravages of the Indian War, when most of the houses on the Towne street were burned in 1676, and survived until about 1900. Although it had been altered and enlarged, sufficient clues were available to permit an analysis of its original status by Norman M. Isham, architect, author, and diagnostician of the

—Photos by Harry A. Scheer, Dorothy Boykett and Nicholas Romano

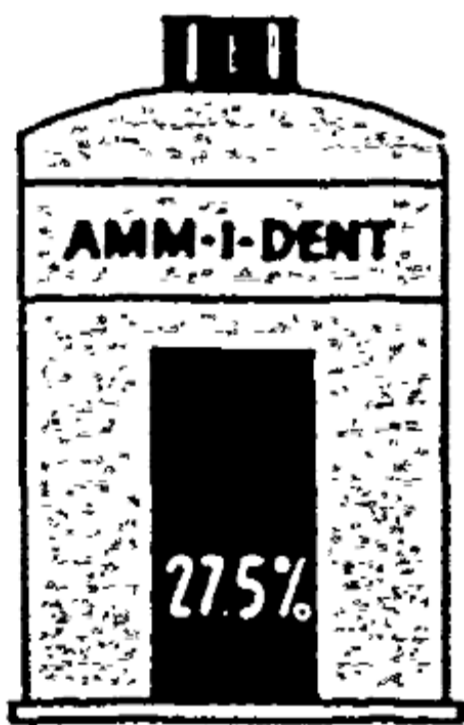
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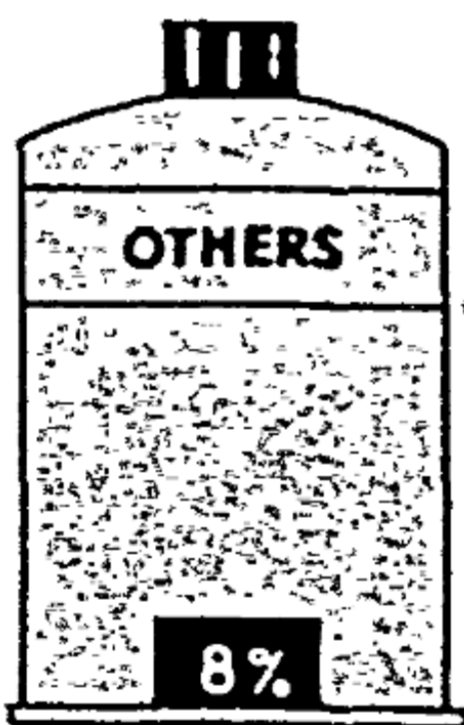


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↑ STONE-END CHIMNEYS are similar on the Thomas Fenner house (above) on Plainfield Street, Cranston, and 15th century Potts Cottage, Wineham, Sussex (below). Both dwellings have been altered for modern living. Construction date of Fenner house is on chimney. ↓



**The Stone-End—from Sussex to R.I.**

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colony's 17th and early 18th century dwellings. The Mowry house, which may be considered typical of the stone-ender as developed before the Indian War, contained a single first-story room with a large stone fireplace at one end flanked by a narrow flight of stairs leading to a garret chamber. The walls were framed with corner posts, sills and side girts, lined with vertical oak boards and finished with clapboards. The floors were framed with joists and covered with wide boards, and the center of the ceiling joists was supported by a "summer," a large beam which spanned the room lengthwise from chimney girt to wall girt. The steep roof was framed with rafters and covered with shingles or thatch. Foundations and chimney were built of field stone, laid in shell mortar; the chimney cap and water tables were made of projecting courses of flat stones.

Mr. Isham's claim that the houses on the Towne street followed the Mowry pattern was strengthened when the foundations of Roger Williams' house, at the corner of Howland Street, were excavated in 1906, revealing an almost identical plan. The only other early house on the Towne street of which we have knowledge was erected by William Field, and fitted up with gratings at the windows during the Indian War as a garrison for the defenders of the town; it survived until 1774 when Joseph Brown built his house on the site, the present 50 South Main Street.

The houses erected in the Providence area during the last quarter of the 17th century had the characteristics of the earlier type, but were larger and better equipped. Among the survivors are the

Thomas Fenner ("Sam Joy") house (1677) in Cranston, the Clemence house (c. 1680) in Johnston and the Eleazer Arnold house (1617) in Saylesville. While similar in design and construction these dwellings vary in size and details. The Fenner house, as analyzed by Mr. Isham, originally had two stories and a garret, one room on each floor; each with a fireplace. Fenner, by the way, although born in Providence was descended from a Sussex family. The Clemence house, as restored in 1938, has a story and a half and a lean-to, with a fire room, a bedroom and a garret chamber in the main house and a kitchen and bedroom in the lean-to. The



FIREPLACE of the Clemence house is strikingly similar to that in Mercer's Cottage in Sussex. The latter appears in the pen sketch at the right.

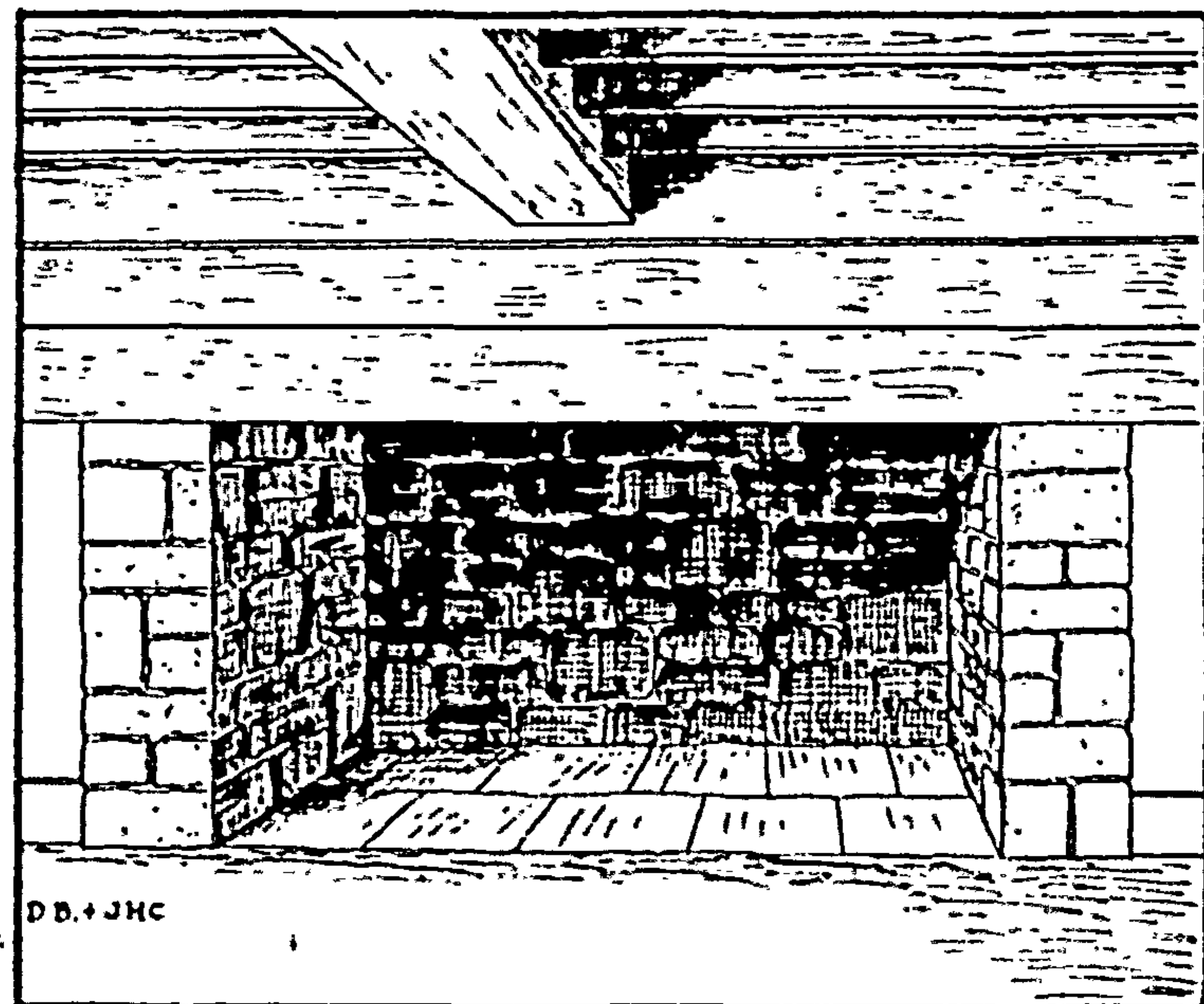


↑ PILASTERED chimney stacks, projecting caps show relationship between Eleazer Arnold house (above), Great Road, Saylesville, built 1687, and Badger's Cottage, Wineham, Sussex (below) built in 15th century. Original Arnold lean-to followed the chimney pitch (left). ↓



chimney has two fireplaces on the first floor. The Arnold house, in its original status, was similar in plan to the Clemence house except that it had two and a half stories and a third fireplace in the second story.

These houses, fabricated in an exquisite and sturdy manner, reflect the ultimate achievement on the part of Rhode Island craftsmen in reproducing the Tudor cottages of their English forefathers. And, so closely do they follow the characteristics of the Twineham and Wineham cottages, their Sussex origin seems unquestioned. They have the same steep-pitched roofs and the same lean-tos.



LENGTH of both fireplaces is nine feet. The beam structure of the ceiling is similar, each room having a "summer" framed into the chimney girt.

Our "fire rooms" or "halls" were the same size as the Sussex bay. The use of heavy timbers, including the summer, for framing, and the dovetailing and pegging of beams were identical in both countries. Our chimneys were like those in Sussex except that they were built entirely of stone, with pilasters and caps in imitation of the Elizabethan brickwork in the English chimneys.

It is only in the outside wall treatment that our houses differ radically from the Sussex cottages, and it may well be that the wattle and daub construction was used by our early settlers and discarded in favor of weatherboarding when it was found that plaster was too vulnerable to changing New England climates. The English method of framing the house timbers together a wall at a time, before raising and fixing them in place, was the custom in Rhode Island as in other New England colonies.

The surviving records of early Rhode Island are fragmentary and full of gaps, for many documents were lost when the Town of Providence was burned by the Indians. There were no historians, no diarists, and few inventories to give us any contemporary knowledge of the houses. In spite of the obscurity of the colony's early history, considerable progress has been made by modern historians, during the last 60 years, in reconstructing the original aspects of the Rhode Island colony. Miss Boykett's contribution to our knowledge has been of great value and an investigation which she has undertaken in a search for Sussex ancestry of emigrants to Rhode Island may effect further disclosures concerning the houses of our forefathers.

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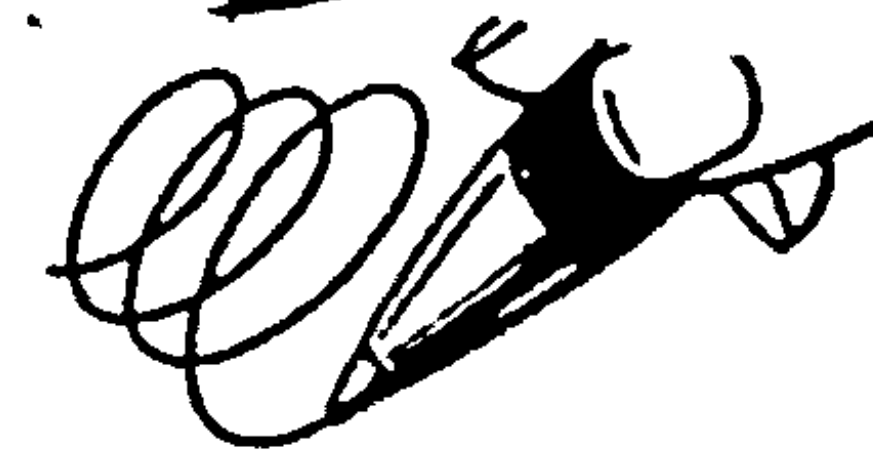
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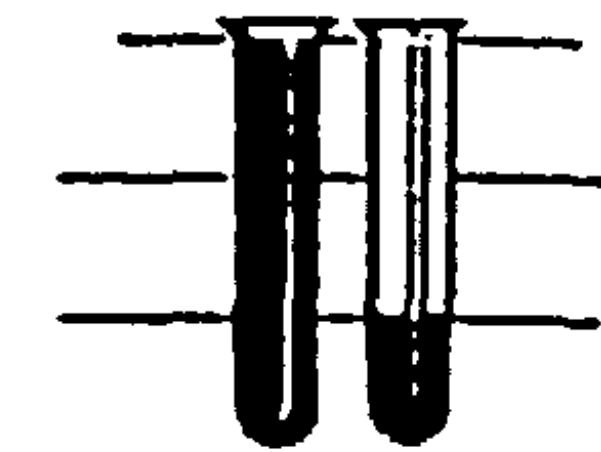
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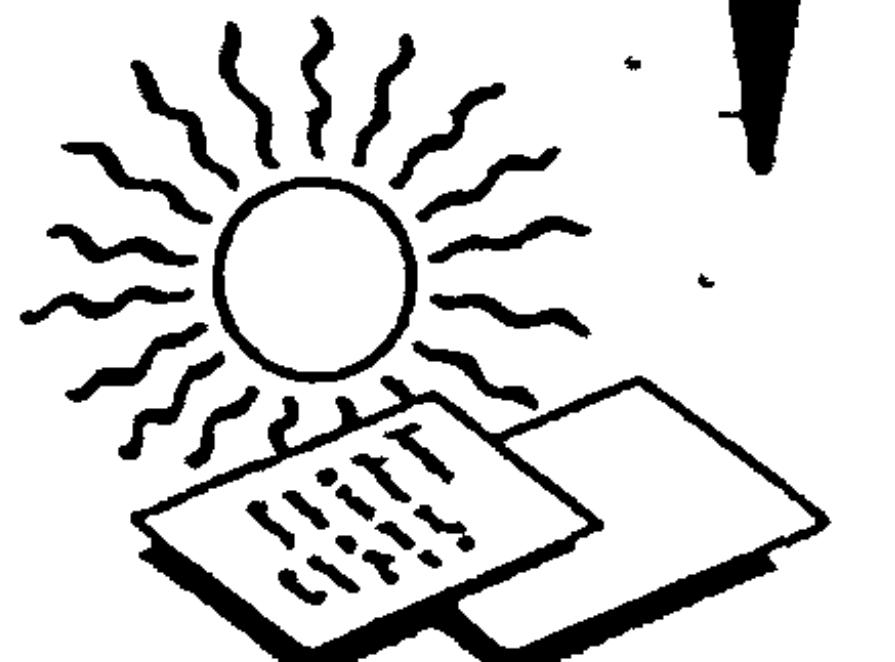
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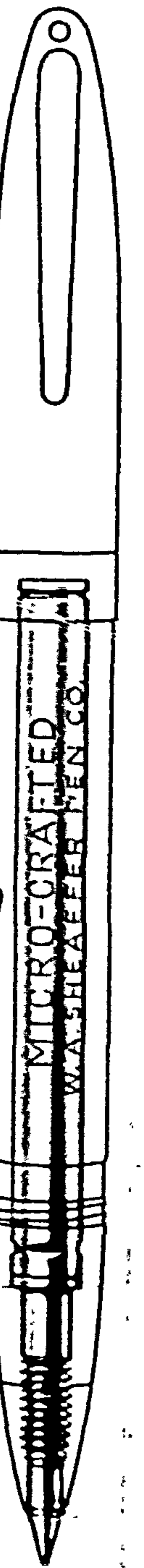
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