

121 Main Street (1814), 125-127 Main Street (1808)

From Boston Landmark Commission's Charlestown Historic Resources Study 1981 (E. W. Gordon, Consultant)*:



127-121 Main

?Mid-Late 20th century

Number 121 Main Street (known locally as “the Round Corner House”) is an early 19th century Federal commercial/residential block with a distinctive curved corner where Main Street intersects with the former Thompson Street, now a private driveway. It has four bays on the Main Street façade and three bays on the sidewall. In general, the building is

characterized by planar wall surfaces, red brick, gray-white granite color contrasts, and a hip roof.



127-121 Main Street

2015

The ground floor has storefront windows set within granite posts and lintels. The second floor windows have simple stone sills and lintels with 6/6 wood sash.

Original owner: Capt. Joseph Cordis

Numbers 125, 127 Main Street was originally entirely enclosed by a hip roof similar to that of 121; at some point after 1867 an additional story with a Mansard roof and high firewall were

added. The original tall chimneys can be seen encased in the firewall at the edge of 121 Main Street's hip roof. Like 121, this building's ground floor has post and lintel storefront -framed windows, composed of granite. The second floor windows have frames slightly recessed into the planar brick surface, and have 6/6 wood sash. On the third floor, the middle two windows have simple stone sills and lintels, and the outer windows have Italianate (cast iron?) cornice-headed lintels. Above the third floor is a deep-bracketed cornice and Mansard roof slope with three flat-roofed cornice-headed dormers. The Mansard retains its slate shingles.

Original owner: J. Edmands

Together with the Phoenix block at 20- 34 Main, 121-127 Main is the last of the early 19th century commercial blocks with granite pier and lintel storefronts still extant, displaying granite pier (or post) and lintel storefront enframements. Built circa 1808, 125, 127 was altered at some point after 1867 by removal of its hip roof (evidently similar to that of 121- 123 Main Street) and the addition of a mansard third level.

Numbers 125- 127 Main has important historical associations with Samuel T Armstrong. He was a prominent politician, serving as mayor of Boston and Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts. He was also a publisher whose printing business was located in the ground floor granite pier and lintel-fronted commercial space.

The first meetings of the First Universalist Society in Charlestown took place in a hall (Edmands Hall) located in the upper floor of 125-127 (further research is needed to determine the dates of the Armstrong press's tenancy as well

as the time frame of the First Universalist Society use of this building).

Numbers 125, 127 Main deed chronology reveals that John Phillips Jr. of Andover Massachusetts sold this building to James Edmands of Charlestown on December 21, 1808 for \$1320.00. The Phillips/Edmands deed mentions "the northwest corner of a brick store lately erected by said Edmands on the premises". The deed also mentions a "passageway to be kept open forever" it was agreed that "said Edmands will always have a common sized cellar door on the west corner of said passageway" (the Southworths referred to 125, 127 Main's first owner as John T Edmands, rather than James Edmands?)

In July 1831, William Clark Christie of Charlestown, a "victualer", acquired 125, 127 from the Edmands heir, Leah Isaac Sweetser, a "sailor". Christie paid \$3700.00 for this property. The Christie purchase included 125, 127 as well as a parcel immediately behind this building, bordering Warren Street. Christie's heirs sold 125, 127 to Andrew Byrnes of Charlestown on March 14, 1867. In 1870, Byrnes is listed as "clothing, 42 Washington St., Boston, house 13 Union St.". Evidently it was during the Byrnes ownership that 125, 127 acquired a mansard roof. This building remained under the Byrnes family ownership until 1903-at that time 125, 127 was purchased by a Mary J Leen.

Numbers 121, 123 Main has been traditionally dated by local historians to 1814. It has significant local historical association with major early 19th century real estate speculator Capt. Joseph Cordis. Capt. Joseph Cordis is said to have been this building's first owner/occupant. Architecturally, 121, 123 is significant as a rare extant Charlestown example of an early

19th century Federal style mixed-use structure. Nos. 121, 123, 125-127, and 20-34 Main are the only surviving examples in Charlestown of storefronts enframed by granite piers and lintels. This type of commercial space enframing was very common in Boston during the first half of the 19th century. The pier (or post) and lintel system was a key feature of the so-called "Boston Granite style". Charlestown probably had many more examples of granite pier and lintel storefronts in the area between City Square and the Navy Yard, along the waterfront (now an area of vacant lots and elevated highways). The 1800-1835 Middlesex Grantee Index contained 10 or so entries for Capt. Joseph Cordis, but none of these deeds seem to relate to number 121 Main (no less than 51 grantee listings for Capt. Cordis appear in the late 18th century grantee listings). Further research is needed to unravel the mystery of Cordis ownership of 121, 123 Main Street. Capt. Joseph Cordis owned considerable pasture lands on the southwest slopes of Breed's Hill-he is perhaps best remembered as the developer of Cordis Street and adjacent house lots beginning in 1799.

During the mid-19th century, this building was owned by a family named Guild. A Lucy W Guild owned it in 1875. Her heir, Robert B Guild, sold 121, 123 to Louisiana A. Gassett of Melrose Massachusetts on May 2, 1899- by that time Robert B Guild was living in Omaha, Nebraska. Further research is needed to determine from whom Lucy W. Guild purchased 121, 123 Main Street (Middlesex deed indexes don't seem to provide clues).

Biography:

Maps-1818, 1852

Atlases-1868, 1875, 1885, 1892, 1901, 1911

R Mallory "panoramic view from Bunker Hill Monument"-1848

A. I. A. Guide to Boston-Susan, Michael Southworth, pages 6-364

Middlesex deeds-180: 457, 306:21, 991:259-129-#127
Suffolk deeds-2926: 233-3#127
Middlesex deeds-? -#121, 123, Suffolk-2603: 403-#121
TT Sawyer-*Old Charlestown*- chapter on Cordis Street

*Digitized, and edited without change in content, from the scanned record in the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System, and with addition of current photographs. In the case of houses that have been altered since the survey, these photographs may not entirely correspond to the architectural description. If earlier photographs of suitable quality are available, these have been included.

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