

18 – 34 Main Street, the Phoenix Buildings (ca. 1828 – 1829)

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



18- 34 Main Street

2015

Numbers 18-34 Main Street, the Phoenix Buildings, is a handsome late Federal /Greek Revival/Boston Granite style block. The Phoenix buildings and 121-127 Main street are the only extant Charlestown examples of the so-called Boston Granite style, and are the oldest commercial/residential blocks remaining in Charlestown. They are constructed of red brick in

the upper floors, and granite piers and lintels at the ground floor. The upper floors have plain, planar masonry surfaces. There are brick ells to the rear. The sidewalls culminate in distinctive linked chimneys and the buildings have a gable roof.

There are seven arched openings at the center of the block; flanking openings are square headed. The windows have simple granite sills and lintels with 1/1 replacement sash.

Builder: unknown

Original owner(s): Edward Soley, Peter Gassner, Nathan Austen, and others?

The Boston Granite style, developed in Boston during the 1810s and 1820s, a sub-style of sorts within the Greek Revival in some of its later renditions, is characterized primarily by the use of heavy granite piers or posts and lintels in a goalpost-like configuration on the ground floor of commercial blocks and warehouses. In some cases this post and lintel system was employed on the upper floors as well. This construction method results in a handsome solidity and simplicity of form as well as pleasing textural contrasts of rock-faced and hammered granite surfaces. In the case of numbers 18-34 Main, pleasing polychromatic effects have been achieved by the use of gray granite and red brick. The Boston Granite style persisted in Boston until as late as the mid 1870's. Several post-fire (1873) post and lintel commercial buildings are still extant on Franklin Street in Boston.

The Phoenix building's original owners seem to have included Hayward Soley (by the 1830s a New York City merchant), Peter Gassner, a broker, also of New York City, Nathan Austin, and possibly others. Numbers 18-34 Main Street is referred to in an indenture dated 9 April 1829 between Soley and Gassner

as "a block of new brick stores in Charlestown known as the Phoenix buildings". Further research is needed to unravel the 1830s-60s web of deeds between Soley, Gassner, various Austin family members etc.

The 1868 atlas uncharacteristically sheds light on the usage of these buildings-numbers 18, 20, 22, 24 are labeled "stores" while numbers 16 and 28 contain a "tinsmith's shop" and "candle factory". Numbers 32, 34 are labeled "painting and glazing". Further research is needed to pinpoint specific commercial concerns associated with 18-34 Main Street, as well as the origin of the name Phoenix.

By 1875 this block's owners included William Decosta, publisher of the Charlestown advertiser, 11 City Square. He was also a partner in the Decosta and Sawyer coal, wood, real estate and insurance brokers. DeCosta lived at 56 Elm Street (1875). G W Warren, a prominent Charlestown lawyer/jurist, Mayor of Charlestown etc. owned numbers 24-30 and possibly 32 and 34 as well. By 1885 numbers 18-34's owners included Charles Thompson....

Bibliography:

Maps-1818, 1852

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

Charlestown/Boston directories (more work needed)

Middlesex deeds-numbers 22, 24- 681:1, 264:430

numbers 26-30-741:308, 189, 353:58, 57, 290:10,
287:523

Suffolk deeds-numbers 22, 24-1545:76

numbers 26-30:1543:397

*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.

R. Dinsmore