

Union Block, 112, 114, 116 Main Street (1838)

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



112-114 Main

ca. 1980

The Union Block is a trio of substantial three story, severely elegant late Federal/Greek Revival town houses constructed of red brick with granite-faced basements and brownstone trim. They have side hall plans with three bay main facades and four bay sidewalls. The Union street sidewall of 116 has been altered by brick infill of some center windows and no longer has the original linked chimney gable profile, present in a photograph in Sammarco, *Charlestown*, p.95, and retained on 112 at its Union Court gable end wall. The houses have a gable roof, and each has one gable roof dormer.

Each house has a two-story ell at the rear; 112's ell has a third story solarium, added in the 1980s.

The entrances have Doric pilasters and cornice-headed entablatures, and are recessed, with granite steps leading to front

doors with multi-paneled side and transom lights. The windows have simple brownstone sills and lintels and 6/6 wood sash on the first, third, and fourth floors, and tall 6/9 sash windows on the second floor main facades. These tall, elegant windows open onto ornate cast iron balconies (no longer present at 116) with a Gothicized motif.



112-114 Main St.

2015



112 Main St. balcony detail

2015

Architect: unknown

Builders: Benjamin Brown, carpenter; Slade Luther, mason

Original owner(s); 112: Edward Lawrence; 114: Henry Forster;
116: Jacob Forster, Jr.

The construction of masonry row houses at Harvard Street (1936), Dexter Row (1836) and the Union Block (1838) marked a watershed in the history of Charlestown domestic architecture. Until the 1830s, Charlestown was still a semi-rural town characterized by modestly scaled wood frame late Georgian/Federal houses. The new masonry rows of the 1830s struck a decidedly urban note and presage the more extensive construction of masonry townhouses in Charlestown during the mid-1840s-1860s, along Monument Square and Chestnut, Mount Vernon, High, Baldwin, and Bunker Hill Streets, etc. These masonry rows are symbolic of a Charlestown that had become more closely linked to the outside world via the coming of the Fitchburg Railroad (183_) and the opening of the Free (Warren) Bridge in 1836. The old, pastoral Federal estates, such as the Dexter estate on Green Street, began to be subdivided for both single-family and row housing during the mid 1830s.

Architecturally, number's 112, 114, and 116 Main Street, or the "Union Block," are a good example of a type of severely elegant Greek Revival row housing characterized by planar wall surfaces, crisp lines, granite and brownstone trimmings, handsome classical entrance enframements, and tall, elegant second floor windows with ornate cast iron banding. This group probably represents the

work of an architect as well as masons, carpenters etc. During the mid-1830s several Boston-based architects are known to have had Charlestown connections including Alexander Parris (1780-1852), Solomon Willard (1783-1861), Asher Benjamin (1773-1845) And Richard Bond. During the 1830s, Parris, architect of Boston's Quincy Market, was working as a civil engineer at the Charlestown Navy Yard and Solomon Willard, architect of the Bunker Hill Monument, was providing the Bunker Hill Monument Association with street plans for Monument Square and vicinity. Asher Benjamin may have been responsible for the Federal brick-ender at 30 Union St. (1815). (He is known to have been involved in somewhat similar row house construction on Beacon Hill- West Cedar Street, during the 1830's) Richard Bond was the architect of the granite and brick St. John's Episcopal Church (1841). Middlesex deeds did not provide clues as to the identity of this block's mason and/or carpenter.

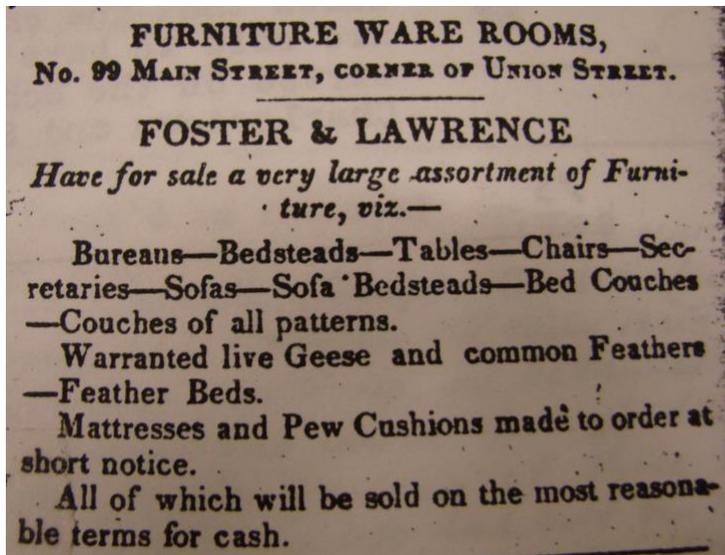
In any event, the Union Block was built in 1838, for \$12,952 (Middlesex Registry of deeds, 2 February, 1838). The housewright Benjamin Brown appears in Boston city directories from 1822 through 1838. He became a member of the Mechanics Association in 1831 and died in 1839. Slade Luther, the mason, appears in Boston city directories beginning in 1823 and continuing through at least 1845. He also used the mechanic lien law process for a number of buildings in Boston in the 1830s and 1840s. By 1850 he apparently lived in Chelsea. He was also a member of the Mechanics Association, beginning in 1826 (information from Laura B Driemeyer).

The row was built on what had been the old Catherine Bradish estate. The Bradish house, which was located on or near this site, was "of wood and painted yellow. It was set back from Main Street and was surrounded by a garden with Lombardi poplar trees". In 1837, the Bradish estate was sold to Jacob Forster Jr and Edward Lawrence. Forster (variously, Foster), a commission merchant with

an office on Long wharf, Boston, and Edward Lawrence, a prominent local furniture manufacturer and politician were among the original occupants of the Union Block.

Jacob Forster Jr (1803-1857) was the son of Jacob Forster of Berwick Maine. His father settled in Charlestown in 1786. Jacob Forster Jr was initially in partnership with George Thompson as a commercial merchant at Long wharf, in Boston. He was instrumental in the founding of several railroads including the Fitchburg Railroad and Massachusetts Railroad. Evidently Forster lived at number 116 in the Union Block; he moved to Dexter Row in 1846.

Edward Lawrence (1810-1885) was a prominent figure in mid-late 19th century Charlestown business and political circles. For many years he was linked with the Forster family via business partnership. Born in Harvard, Massachusetts June 21, 1810, he came to Charlestown in 1825 to work in the furniture manufacturing trade-the business was conducted by Jacob Forster, Senior. Lawrence was later associated with Jacob Forster's brother Charles in a furniture business located at the corner of Main and Union streets (across the street from the Union Block, housed in an old wooden building built for Jacob Forster Senior in 1793). In 1833, the firm of Forster, Lawrence and Company contracted for the labor of convicts at the state prison, and until the firm dissolved in 1856, it continued to carry on its manufacturing business largely in shops in the prison (now the site of Bunker Hill Community College, Austin Street) in addition Edward Lawrence was president of the Bunker Hill National Bank, and took an active interest in public affairs-for many years he was one of the Selectman for the town. He moved to 44 High Street in 1851.



During the mid-19th century, the Union Block, along with Dexter Row, was a "physicians row." "These blocks with their resident physicians constituted an important Boston area medical Center at Thompson Square. The physicians included Dr. William Mason at number 114 (circa early 1850s-early 1880s), Dr. James McDonald at 116 (1868-circa 1880) and Thomas J Broderick at 114 (circa 1890s).

Edward C Riddle, variously listed as an auctioneer (1840s) and "carriage depository" (1870s), owned number 112 from circa 1840s-circa 1880 and a briefly owned 116 (1846-1848). From circa 1880 until at least 1911, 112 was owned by Margret J McCarthy, a widow.

Bibliography:

Maps-1818, 1852

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

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Boston directories-post 1875

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Forster, a valuable citizen"

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*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

Addendum: Interior views: 112 Main Street, 2015



Front Stair

Beehive oven door, kitchen



Door hardware



Dining Room Window with interior shutters, ground floor



Living Room mantel, 2nd floor



Shutter pull



Living Room Woodwork, shutters, 2nd floor



Mantel, 3rd floor, bedroom



Back Stair



Attic Servants Quarters Doorknob, Rosewood

Ground Floor: dining room, front stair hall, back stair hall, and kitchen, with ceiling height ca 10'. There is a small sitting room in the rear ell, which was probably added in the 1850s.

Second Floor: living room and back parlor/library, front and back halls, with ceiling height ca 11'.

Third Floor: three bedrooms. The back ell room is a solarium, added late 1970s.

Fourth (attic) floor: former servants quarters.