

119 Main Street (circa 1790) (? 1794-96)

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



? date- before 1970

Number 119 Main Street is an extensively and sensitively restored late Georgian/Federal transitional house



119 Main

2015

with its two bay end wall facing Main Street and five bay main façade facing a well-landscaped garden. The edges are boldly accented by quoins. There is a dentillated cornice and a low hip roof. To the rear is a narrow alley, historically Thompson Street, now closed off.

It has a distinctive late Georgian center entrance with Doric pilasters, semicircular fan light, and broken pediment with modillion blocks. (Entrance treatments and evidently most of the main façade are recent re-creations). The windows are fully enframed and have 6/6 wood sash. There are small square windows on the third floor. The rear wall has first and

second floor windows contiguous with corner quoins. There is a tall arched window between floors one and two (stairway?).



109 Main, rear view

5/15

Builder: Timothy Thompson Sr.

Original owner: Timothy Thompson Sr.

Based on a scrap of wallpaper found in this house at the time of its late 1960s/early 1970s restoration, the house dates from 1780 -1790. According to an *Old House Journal* article, it was found that the paper had been manufactured by an English concern that was only in business at that time. Timothy Thompson Sawyer, local historian and owner of this house

during the late 19th century, maintains that this house was built circa 1794-96.

Architecturally the house is a superb example of a late 18th century late Georgian/Federal transitional wood frame vernacular residence of considerable style and substance. The Federal style comes into play at 119 via its boxy three-story form, fenestration (small square windows at the third floor), low hip roof configuration and distinctive and narrow end wall to street orientation. The house's elements are distinctly late Georgian-most notably corners boldly accented with quoins and the entrance's handsome broken pediment enframements. According to the old house journal article the house's main façade originally faced Thompson Street, at the rear. At some point prior to 1868 the house acquired an addition to what is now its main façade. This addition originally stood one story tall and by 1868 was evidently four stories in height. James Rivers Adams, restorer/owner of the house during the late 1960s/early 70s demolished the 19th century addition- he was able to save only the dentils on the cornice -otherwise nothing was salvageable of the original woodwork.

Number 119 Main Street is of major local historic significance because of its association with several generations of Charlestown's Thompson-Sawyer families. The Thompsons of number 119 Main were descendants of a James Thompson who settled in Charlestown in 1630 as part of John Winthrop's party of settlers. During the late 1770s, Timothy Thompson Senior purchased part of 119's house lot. On this lot he built a building containing one finished room and a room for a shop. (At some point Timothy Thompson Senior and family were forced to flee Charlestown on the eve of the British troops destruction of the town.) His second son, Timothy was born in this predecessor structure on February 24, 1777. Timothy is

said to have been the first male child born in Charlestown after the battle of Bunker Hill. By circa 1780 he had enlarged his house lot by a new purchase evidently in anticipation of building the present house. Timothy Senior's shop was subsequently moved to Back Lane, now Warren Street. He also moved his family into this structure until 119 was completed. Sawyer described this Warren Street (at corner of what is now Cordis Street) building as "two stories high on the front and one in the rear, the pitch of the roof on that side running farther down than on the front. The house was surrounded by shrubbery and fruit trees, among them an abundance of quince bushes, the blossoms of which are so charming to the eye in the spring, etc."

In any event, 119 Main was the home of Timothy Thompson Sr from 1796 until his death February 4, 1834 at age 84. Timothy Thompson, Sr was described by Sawyer as "an industrious, thrifty man from youth to old age. He was originally a carpenter, but for the greater part of his life was a ship chandler. He was active in town affairs, holding a number of important offices. He was with the Charlestown Company at the Battle of Bunker Hill. During the war of 1812 he mortgaged 119 Main Street to use the money for the purchase of timber to build barracks for the government.

During the mid-19th century, 119 Main Street was owned by Benjamin Thompson. According to historian J. F. Honeywell, Benjamin Thompson was "long an esteemed and substantial citizen, serving as a member of the US House of Representatives from 1848-1852".

Evidently 119 was adopted for commercial use as early as the 1830s and certainly by 1868. For many years it contained the apothecary shop of William B Morse. Later occupants of this

shop included Mrs. Sarah Colby of Waterville Maine-for many years she conducted a milliner's business in this house. Her son Gardner Colby, was a prominent Boston dry goods dealer, ship-owner and philanthropist-he donated \$50,000 to Colby University, Waterville Maine (named Colby in his honor). By 1875 119 was owned by the heirs of Benjamin Thompson. By 1885, it was owned by members of the related-by-marriage Thompson and Sawyer families.

In 1892 Timothy Thompson Sawyer and others owned 119 Main Street. Born in Charlestown on January 7, 1817, Timothy T Sawyer was a descendent of James Thompson and Thomas Sawyer, early Settlers of Lancaster Massachusetts (1641). T T Sawyer was a prominent mid-late 19th century businessman, bank director, politician and local historian. Initially engaged in a ship chandlery concern, he was later a partner in the major Boston area ice business known as Gage Sawyer and Company. This firm's ice trade was international in scope, reaching the West Indies, Rio de Janeiro, Calcutta, etc. For many years Mr. Sawyer lived at 46 High Street (see form). For 35 years he was a director of the Bunker Hill National Bank and served as its president from 1884-1890. He was a member of the Charlestown Common Counsel in 1855, 1856 and 1857. In 1857 he served as a state representative and was elected to the state senate in 1858. (See *Boston Today*, 1892, pages 383-384 for more biographical information on T T Sawyer).

By 1911, 119 Main St. was owned by an Annie Sampson.

For the purposes of the Boston Landmarks Commission Historic Building Survey of Charlestown (1985-1987) Mr. Sawyer has been an important source of historical information, anecdotes, local color etc. During the late 19th century he wrote numerous articles on local history for the Charlestown

Enterprise and Evening News, and published *Old Charlestown*, a history concerned primarily with the 19th century Charlestown events and personalities), in 1901.

Bibliography-:

Maps-1818, 1852

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

Boston today-edited by Edwin M bacon (1892)

Old Charlestown - TT Sawyer (1901)

The Old House Journal- date?

A Century of Town Life-JF Hunnewell

*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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