

15-21 Chestnut Street (circa 1847-48, possibly as early as 1830?)

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



21, 19, 17, 15 Chestnut Street

2015

Numbers 15-21 Chestnut Street is a group of four, three-story red brick, granite/brownstone-trimmed Greek Revival townhouses. Number 15 is essentially identical to the houses at 14-18 Chestnut (see form).

Numbers 17, 19, and 21 have identical surface treatments. Each has a granite-faced basement. The houses are characterized by a pleasing planarity, with side hall plans and deeply recessed entrances. They have distinctive stepped-out corbel tables and gable roofs and each has a pair of pedimented dormers. Number 21 has a broad end wall gable with a rear ell and a later Italianate oriel on the second floor at the Adams/Chestnut Street corner.

The entry walls are wood paneled and the front doors are flanked by multi-pane sidelights and transoms. Number 17 has later outer door enframements. There are tall windows at the second floors; 21 has recently installed 6/6 and 9/9 sash. In general the windows have simple brownstone sills and lintels.

Builder: Thomas Greenleaf (?), And/or William Caswell (?)
Original owner: Thomas Greenleaf and William Caswell

These houses, which may be categorized within the Greek Revival style, together with the row across the street at 14-20 Chestnut, form a discrete enclave of tastefully rendered red brick granite/brownstone trimmed residences. Though they border a bleak area of vacant lots, elevated highway and ramps to the southeast, and they provide a fine introduction to the remarkably unspoiled 19th-century residential quarters to the northwest and northeast at Winthrop Square and upper Chestnut Street/Mount Vernon Street, respectively.

Architecturally 17-21 Chestnut is a good example of solid, relatively substantial Greek Revival style row housing. This trio is characterized by pleasingly planar masonry surfaces, interrupted only by the later Italianate second-floor oriel window on number 21's Adams Street end wall. They have deeply recessed entrances, tall elegant second-floor windows,

distinctive "stepped out" corbel tables and broad end wall gables.



21 Chestnut "stepped out" corbel table detail

2015

The usually accurate 1848 Mallory panoramic view from Bunker Hill Monument shows the trio (17-21) with linked chimneys at the end wall gables rather than the present simple end wall gable (without evident chimneys). Number 15 was built after 1848 and is identical in terms of form and surface

treatments to 14-18 Chestnut. Numbers 15-21 Chestnut was originally part of a more extensive group of contiguous townhouses, which stretched nearly all the way to Chelsea Street (see 1852 McIntyre map).

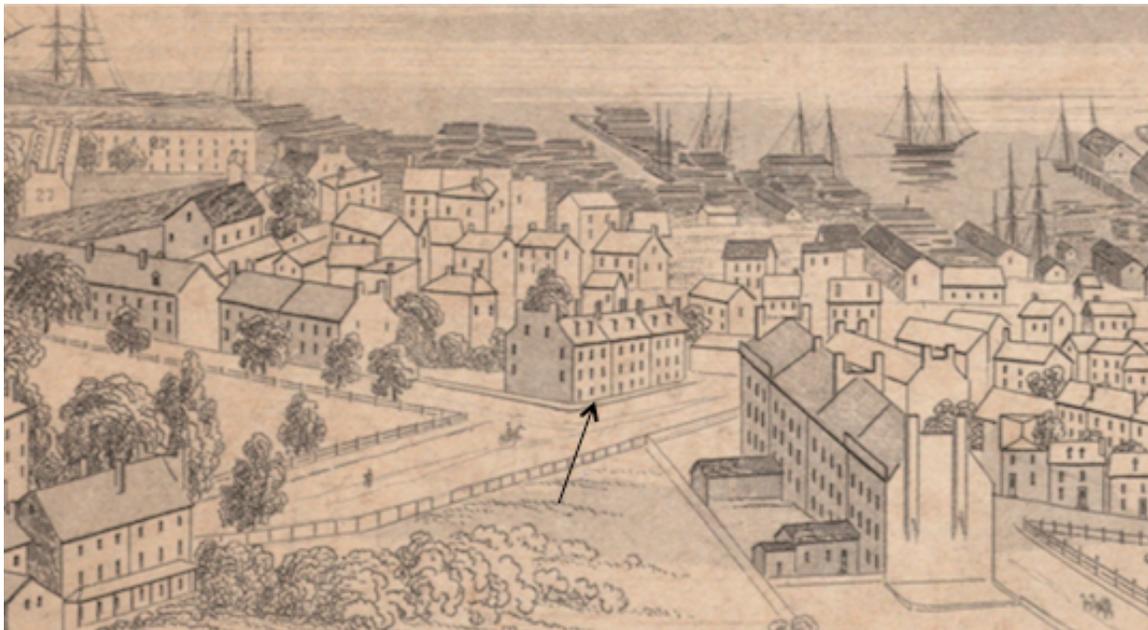
Middlesex deeds indicate that 17-21 was built circa 1847-48. At that time William Caswell, "wood and coal" and Thomas Greenleaf, a carpenter, purchased a large tract bounded northerly by Adams Street, 54 feet easterly by the land of Daniel Sampson and Jacob Foss, 154 feet southeasterly by the land of Jacob Caswell 49'10" and westerly by Townsend (Chestnut) Street (see Middlesex date 501:239, March 19, 1847). Numbers 15-21's plan was included in this parcel. Caswell and Greenleaf purchased this land from Samuel Frothingham and others. Evidently Frothingham and Company purchased this tract from the estate of Samuel Townsend ("being an estate which belonged to Samuel Townsend, late of said Charlestown, gentlemen, deceased".) Greenleaf and Caswell paid \$6125 for this tract, a relatively large sum which may reflect the existence of structures on this site even though the Frothingham/Greenleaf deed does not mention buildings on this parcel. Charlestown directories of the 1830s and 40s also seem to point to the presence of buildings on the east side of Chestnut (Townsend) Street.

Further research may prove that 17-21 Chestnut are contemporaries of nearby 9-12 Adams, meaning that 17-21 Chestnut may date to as early as 1830. (Samuel Townsend's heirs should be located in Middlesex grantee indexes for 1830-1835). On the other hand, Middlesex deed 501:239 (March 1847) may be the best indication of this trio's construction date because:

A)-there is no mention of "the buildings thereon" and

B)-Thomas Greenleaf and William Caswell's roles within Charlestown building trades.

William Caswell was a leading wood and coal dealer, place of employment 68 Water Street, during the 1830s-50s. Thomas Greenleaf was initially employed as a lock tender on the Middlesex Canal, later turning to carpentry (circa late 1830s, see forms on Mead Street Court and Oak Street, also 374, 376 Main Street).



Mallory 1848 Panoramic View, #s 17-21 (arrow)

Number 15 Chestnut was apparently built between 1848-1852. It does not appear on the 1848 Mallory panoramic view but does appear on the 1852 McIntyre map, as part of a more extensive row, which curves southeastward to Chelsea and Henley Streets. On April 13, 1853, Edward Harding, mast maker, purchased number 15 Chestnut from Thomas Greenleaf, "gentlemen", and William Caswell, "wood and coal dealer" for \$3600.

Number 17 Chestnut was owned for many years by Thomas and Betsy Greenleaf as an investment property. The Greenleafs lived around the corner at 26 Adams Street during the 1850s. Bessie Greenleaf sold 17 to Andrew McAuliffe in May 1880.

Further research is needed on 19's deed chronology. Early owners of 19 included Fred W Moores, "Master, U.S. Navy", 1855-1858, (sold to Moores by Greenleaf), Isaac C Cushing, prominent Charlestown Mason/builder, 1858, (evidently a mortgage holder), Charles T Brown of Boston, 1858-1868, and George A Adams of Charlestown, 1866-1871. This house's owner during the late 19th century was George B Wheeler, "periodicals, B and M Depot, Boston".

Number 21 was owned by Jacob Crowninshield, possibly as early as 1848. In that year he is listed at 7 Chestnut Street and in 1845 he is listed at 5 Chestnut (indicating the present numbers 21 and 19 Chestnut?). He is listed as Capt. U.S. Navy. Members of the Crowninshield family owned this house until at least 1885. For development history of Charlestown see form on numbers 14-20 Chestnut Street.

Lower Chestnut Street, between Adams and Lowney Way, has a development history that is separate from that of upper Chestnut Street. Upper Chestnut Street had been part of the Nathan Adams (later George Adams Kettel) estate. Upper Chestnut Street started out as a lane leading northward, up Breeds Hill to the George Adams Kettel house, once opposite 50 Chestnut Street. Kettel subdivided his estate into house lots as early as 1840.

Lower Chestnut Street existed as a street as early as 1818 (see Tufts map). At that time it was called Shippey Street. During

the 1830s and early 1840s it was called the Townsend Street in honor of Samuel Townsend whose wooden house stood at the corner of Adams and Townsend (Chestnut Street). Until the late 1840s, the Townsend house was the only house in lower Chestnut Street. This house was surrounded by horse chestnut trees, hence the name Chestnut Street. All the rest of Thompson's land was "fenced and used as a garden".

Bibliography:

Maps- 1818, 1852

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

Panoramic View from Bunker Hill Monument- R M Mallory, 1848

Middlesex Deeds-#15- 601:539, #17- 501:239

Suffolk Deeds- #17- 1491:145, 146; #19- 761:297, 781:502, 501:186, 971:342, 1158:346

Charlestown Directories-mid- late 19th century

Old Charlestown, T T Sawyer, pp 171-176

*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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