

17-21 Essex Street (circa 1847-1853)

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



17-21 Essex

2015

Numbers 17-21 Essex Street is a three story red brick Greek Revival trio of row houses. They have three bay, flat front main façades and low granite post and lintel basements with 3/3 wood sash basement windows. There is dentil-like brickwork at the cornice, and a gable roof. Over each entrance there is a dormer with a gable roof.

They have side hall entrances-number 19 has its original entrance treatments, with granite lintels. In general the windows have simple rectangular stone sills and lintels; number 21 has 6/6 wood sash and 19 and 17 have 2/2 wood sash.

Builder: Lemuel M Standish, Charles Woodbury
Original owner: Standish and Woodbury

Essex Street and Lyndeboro Place are a charming enclave of circa mid-1840s-mid-1850s row houses which have escaped the intensive circa 1960s urban renewal that occurred in much of the surrounding area. Numbers 17-21 Essex and the other houses on this thoroughfare were developed on former Middlesex Canal Company-owned land. The Mill Dam, Mill Pond/southern terminus of the Middlesex Canal, was once located at the southwestern terminus of Essex Street, which was originally called Canal Street.

Architecturally, this trio of red brick row houses represents a restrained, chastely rendered approach to Greek Revival domestic architecture. These houses stand taller than most of the houses on this street and are characterized by planar

masonry surfaces and granite trim confined to straightforward post and lintel basement treatments and simple rectangular

sills and lintels. The cornice is crisply accented by narrow raised brickwork banding and a dentil-like brick course. The narrow gable roofed dormers are set out in a regimental row. Evidently the fourth house in this group (at Essex and Lyndeboro Place, disappeared circa 1892-1901.

Built circa 1847-1853, these houses represent the work of Lemuel M Standish and Charles Woodbury. These masons evidently worked together beginning circa late 1840s but are not listed as copartners until the mid-1860s. Charles Woodbury is first listed in the 1834 Boston directory at 2 Bradford Place, occupation, mason. By 1850 he lived at 41 West Cedar on Beacon Hill and by 1860 he lived at 91 Pinckney, Beacon Hill. By 1865 he was a partner in Standish and Woodbury "Masons and Builders"-also mentioned as a partner in this firm was David Connery (I think he was the builder of the Roxbury Puddingstone worker's houses on Mission Hill, Tremont Street- G W G). Woodbury is listed at 16 Commonwealth Avenue in 1890, but does not appear in the 1892 Boston directory.

Lemuel Standish is first listed in the 1839 Boston directory as a carpenter at 59 Carver Street, where he lived until the early 1860s. Standish and Woodbury were active in a formal copartnership from 1865-circa 1885. In 1885 Standish lived at 32 Commonwealth Avenue. He is not listed in the 1890 directory.

Middlesex deeds indicate that this group was built at some point between the drawing up of the "plan of building lots in Charlestown" belonging to Lemuel Standish and Charles Woodbury and others on December 10, 1847, and the sale of number 17 to Michael Gorman, file cutter, 30 April 1853 (Middlesex deed 611:71).

By 1875 owners of this trio included: D W-Keyes- 17, Abner Stearns of Waltham-19, and Gustavus Peterson, of Peterson and Jamison, 410 Commercial Street (house 60 Chestnut, Charlestown- 21. Owners in 1901 included Elizabeth F Goodrich Junior-17, George E Shaw, clerk, 270 Hanover, house in Chelsea, and Henry Kane-21.

Essex Street was originally called Canal Street because of its proximity to the Middlesex Canal. Set out circa 1830s and evidently in a more formal fashion by 1844 (see Middlesex plan two, book 120). The residential development of Essex Street over Middlesex Canal Company land during the mid-1840s/early 1850s was a sign of the Middlesex Canal's impending dissolution. Prior to the mid-1840s, Essex Street and nearby Mill Street were lined with Middlesex Canal-related structures.

Beginning circa mid-1840s Essex St. began to be developed with Greek Revival masonry and wood row houses. The primary developers of these groups were apparently former Middlesex Canal Company employees, including Thomas Greenleaf, lock tender, during the 1820s, later carpenter and developer of much of the Isaac Mead estate (see form on 38 Mead Street), Richard Frothingham, Canal agent, Lemuel M Standish and Charles Woodbury, both masons.

Then known as Canal Street, Essex Street originally ran southwestward from Main/Mill streets to the old Charlestown Mill Pond, turning northward along the path of present day Rutherford Avenue and terminating at Sullivan Square. The Mill Pond was the southern terminus of the old Middlesex Canal, in operation from 1803-circa 1851, linking Boston with the Merrimack Valley and ultimately Concord, New Hampshire.

The Charlestown mill pond was a tidal pond lying just south of the neck and between the natural shoreline west of Main Street on the east and the shoreline of the McLean Asylum grounds on the west. A dam was built, circa 1645, between these lines, running from approximately the junction of Mill Street and Rutherford Avenue in a northwesterly direction, by an irregular line to the opposite shore. During the mid-17th century the mills were at the southeasterly extremity of the pond, by the dam; Mill Lane, now Mill Street (with no early mill or canal-related buildings presently extant) leading to them. These mills are variously referred to in 17th and 18th century deeds as "Charlestown Tide Mills", "The Water Mills in Charlestown", "The Grist Water Mills", and "The Corner Mills". Early owners included members of the Sedgwick, Stetson, Croftmore, Allen and Phipps families. In 1775, a part of the mills was destroyed by British shells and the remainder was burned by the Americans the following year. Evidently the dam and mills were not rebuilt until the late 1780s. The inventory of the estate of William Payne, filed January 16, 1787 mentions "the ruins of an old mill dam, store cellar etc. situated upper end of Charlestown". In 1796, the town of Charlestown took possession of the Mill Pond, dam marsh and beach "in behalf and for the use of said town". In 1803 the entire mill property was bought by the Middlesex Canal Company for \$11,250.

Evidently Essex Street and adjoining lots were part of the 2 and 1/2 acre parcel purchased from the Commonwealth between the Mill Pond and Main Street for \$1800. Henceforth the Mill Pond became a sort of storage basin for rowboats and also for large rafts of logs and ship spars. The use of the pond by the millers became subservient to these uses made by the canal company. A floating towpath was built along the easterly side of the pond and in 1826 this was superseded to by one made of

solid filling, which is now within the limits of the Rutherford Avenue extension of Canal/Essex Street.

In any event, the Middlesex Canal linked Boston with the Merrimack Valley and ultimately Concord, New Hampshire. The canal was supplied with water from the Concord River. The canal's total length from the Merrimack River to Charlestown was 27 miles.

Bibliography:

Maps 1818, 1833, 1839, 1848, 1851

Atlases-1875, 1885, 1892, 1902

Boston directories-1830-1890

Middlesex deeds

*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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