

2, 3, 4 Dexter Row (1836)

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



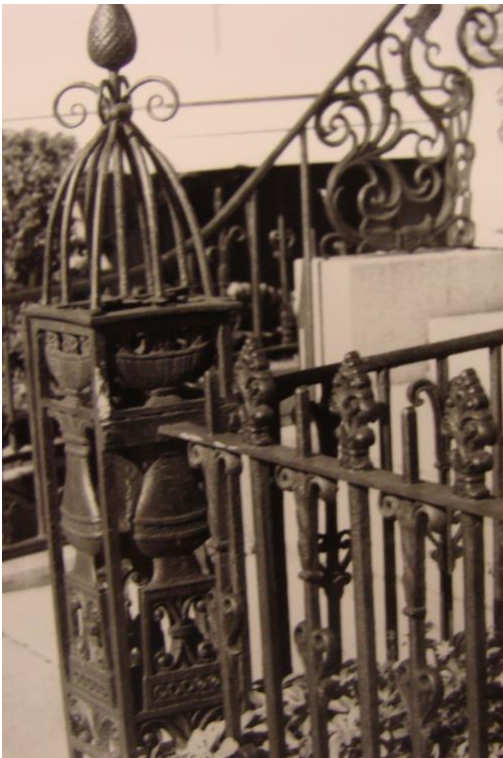
2, 3, 4, Dexter Row

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Dexter Row is a trio of flat front Greek Revival townhouses constructed of red brick with granite and brownstone trimmings. Originally six houses were part of the block-numbers 1, 5, and 6 are no longer extant. The buildings rise three stories from granite-faced basements to a gable roof, with two pedimented dormers per building. They have three bay main façades and side hall plans. There are partially below-grade basement entrances.

Flights of granite steps with ornate cast iron railings lead to recessed entrances. Outer entrance enframements consist of simple Doric pilasters with heavy pedimented entablatures, composed of brownstone, reworked on number 4. Multi-pane sidelights and transoms flank replacement front doors.

The windows have a simple brownstone sills and lintels, with 1/1 wood sash except for 6/6 on number 4's first floor. Tall second floor windows strike an elegant note and open onto cast iron railing/balconies (cast iron elements mostly intact). The tall second-floor windows of number 4 have been shortened. A broad oriel window/ storefront (ca. late 19th century?) covering two bays of number 3 features crisp paneling and openings containing a single pane of glass. An Italianate oriel (ca.1850s) has been added to number 2's second floor center.



Architect: Alexander Parris and/or George Minot Dexter? -
Attributed

Builder: Shadrach Varney-"developer", supervisor of
construction"

Original owner: Shadrach Varney and others

Dexter Row has a rich inventory of cast iron elements with front yards bordered by circa late 1830s-1840s cast iron fencing, elegant stair rails with swirling curvilinear linear forms, and a pineapple motif worked into gate posts.

Together with the massive polychromatic high Victorian Gothic main façade of the Charlestown Five Cents Savings Bank building (1876), the surviving townhouses of Dexter Row provide an impressive stately backdrop for Thompson Square, and a glimpse of the Thompson Square that was an important focal point of Charlestown commercial/residential life during the mid-19th century. Although the present Greek Revival townhouses are but a remnant of the original six unit Dexter Row, this masonry block is of enormous architectural and historical significance to Charlestown, even in its present altered state.

Architecturally, Dexter Row is a well-proportioned, chastely rendered and well-crafted example of Greek Revival luxury housing. It possesses Charlestown's most extensive and ornate collection of circa late 1830s/40s cast iron fencing, stair rails and balconies. Built in 1836, this row undoubtedly represents the work of an accomplished architect. Possible candidates for attribution include (in order of probability) Alexander Parris, George Minot Dexter, Asher Benjamin, Solomon Willard and Richard Bond.

Dexter Row's house lots were carved from the old Samuel Dexter estate in 1836. The Federal style Dexter mansion is still extant, although extensively altered, at 14 Green Street. The 1848 R P Mallory Panoramic View of Charlestown/Boston clearly illustrates Dexter Row's function as a "gateway" building. Dexter Row stands opposite the intersection of Austin and Main streets- At the time of its completion, Austin Street fed into the Craigie Point or Prison Point bridge which crossed Millers Creek/Charles River Bay, linking Charlestown with East Cambridge and Boston. In addition, three railroad lines converged near Austin Street, adjacent to the state prison. Dexter Row, at the foot of Austin Street, was the first substantial structure travelers saw upon entering Charlestown from the Southwest. Dexter Row at Thompson Square was also roughly midway between the shops and markets of City Square and the Middlesex Canal-trade oriented Neck Village. (By 1836 the Middlesex Canal was already well on its way to being phased out). Dexter Row was the focal point of an upscale residential/commercial quarter, which was developed around Thompson Square during the first half of the 19th century.

Architecturally, Dexter Row is a substantial, well-proportioned and severely plain example of mid-1830s Greek Revival luxury housing. Surface ornamentation is confined to brownstone entrances consisting of simple Doric pilasters and heavy classical pedimented entablatures. Tall windows at the second floor level strike an elegant note. Dexter Row possesses Charlestown's most extensive, elaborately detailed collection of cast iron fences, stair rails and second floor banding-dating to circa late 1830s-early 1840s. Dexter Row's cast iron features incorporate curvilinear lines and pineapple motifs. The stair rails evidently represent the generation of cast iron stair railing before the distinctive Rococo Revival cast iron railing of Boston's South End. Judging by the writings of Charlestown

historian Timothy Thompson Sawyer, Dexter Row's design was held in high regard during the late 19th century. Sawyer observed that "a critical look at this block of buildings will show the rare good judgment exercised in its elevation or location upon the lot of land and that great care was taken in selection of materials and workmanship in its construction. Compared with first-class buildings of the present day, it is only a very plain block of brick houses... and yet it is very credible to its architect and builder."

Shadrach Varney is credited by T T Sawyer as the developer and superintendent of construction of Dexter Row. Shadrach Varney was for many years the manager of the Smith's Department in the Charlestown Navy Yard. He was a master blacksmith by trade and later turned to local real estate speculation. Dexter Row, along with the masonry rows at 9-12 Adams, 7-23 Harvard, and 112-116 Main Street, was a harbinger of Charlestown's late 1840s-1860s transformation from semi rural town of wood frame dwellings to more urban city of masonry row houses. Varney, described by Sawyer as "a fine looking man" was one of the Captains of the old Charlestown Light Infantry.

It is Varney's Charlestown Navy Yard connection that seems to point toward either Alexander Parris and/or George Minot Dexter as the probable architects of Dexter Row. During the 1820s and 1830s Parris worked largely with Loammi Baldwin on the dry dock at the Navy Yard and on various sea walls and other works in Boston harbor. Parris was also the architect of Charlestown's Harvard Unitarian Church formerly located across the street from number 6 Dexter Row on what is now the Charlestown public library site. The Dexter Row architect, on the other hand, may have been George Minot Dexter (1802-1872). Returning from Europe in 1831, he trained as a civil

engineer under Col. Loammi Baldwin and Alexander Parris. In the early 1830s Dexter worked with Baldwin and Parris on both the newly incorporated Boston and Lowell Railroad and the Charlestown Navy Yard. Dexter's first architectural commission is considered to be the design of Pemberton Square, Boston (1836) but his possible work on Dexter Row may have been overlooked. The possibility remains that Parris and Dexter are too logical a choice for the authorship of Dexter Row's design.

Asher Benjamin (1773-1845) is another possibility for architect of Dexter Row-he may have been responsible for 30 Union Street (1815), Charlestown. Superficial similarities exist between the Dexter Row houses and Benjamin-designed houses on West Cedar St., Boston. Solomon Willard (1783-1861), with his many Charlestown connections vis-à-vis his design for the Bunker Hill Monument may well have designed these houses. Richard Bond, Boston-based architect, active circa 1830s-1860s, the architect of St. John's Episcopal Church, 27 Devens Street, Charlestown, is another possible source of Dexter Row's design.

Over time, a number of distinguished Charlestown residents have lived in Dexter Row. According to Sawyer, the first occupants of these houses were Shadrach Varney, John F Skinner, Henry P Fairbanks, Daniel White, and Rev. Dr. George E Ellis. John F Skinner was a partner with his father and uncle in the old firm of "Skinner and Hurd" (described by Sawyer as "a business house." Henry P Fairbanks was a hardware merchant, active in local and state politics. He was a member of the Charlestown Common Counsel 1848-1854 and was a member of Gov. Clifford's executive Council in 1853. His wife was a daughter of John F Skinner. Daniel White was a partner in Samuel Kidder and Company. This firm manufactured

chemicals in a factory located on what is now the site of St. Mary's Church. Rev. George E Ellis was pastor of the Harvard Unitarian Church in Charlestown (1840-1869) and was a well-known historian, biographer and theologian. Among Dexter Row's later residents were Nathan A Tufts, Benjamin Thompson, a businessman/politician-elected to the US Congress 1845-1847, Jacob Foster, Long Wharf, Boston merchant and railroad company director, John W Damon, Isaac Kendall, Dr. Hayes, Dr. Beckford and Samuel Knight. Nathan A Tufts lived in Dexter Row before moving to 35-39 Union Street in 1850. He was "confidential clerk" in the Lowell Manufacturing Company for many years. He served on Charlestown's School Committee and Board of Aldermen. In addition he was a leading member of the Winthrop Society and was president of the Warren Institute for Savings. Benjamin Thompson was a long time member of Charlestown's School Board. He represented Charlestown in the state legislature as a representative in 1830, 1831, 1833, and 1836. He was a state senator in 1841. He was a representative in the U.S. Congress in 1845-47, 1851-1852. Jacob Foster was a partner in Foster and Thompson (George) Commission Merchants, Long Wharf, Boston. He was involved in the early development of the Fitchburg, Cheshire, Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad and for many years was president of the Fitchburg Railroad. His son Dr. Edward J Foster set up a doctor's practice in Dexter Row. During the second half of the 19th century Dexter Row was something of a mini medical center. A number of leading Charlestown doctors took advantage of Thompson Square's central location, establishing offices as well as residences at Dexter Row.

By 1875 Dexter Row's owners included the Jacob Foster estate-numbers 1 and 2; Dr. White-number 3, Sarah Hayes-number 4, Samuel Knight-number 5 and Mrs. Jay and Damon-number 6.

By 1885, the Charlestown Five Cents Savings Bank owned number 1, Adolphus P Gunter owned number 2, while ownership of number 3-6 remained essentially unchanged from 1875. By 1892 Robert W Southwell, a dentist, and his wife Mary J Southwell owned number 1, Adolphus P Gunter still owned number 2, while number 3 was owned by the Winslow Warren estate as was number 4. Abby F night owned number 5 while F M McCutcheon, a teacher, 608 Washington Street owned number 6.

Numbers 5 and 6 Dexter Row were torn down during the early 1940s to accommodate a First National store. Number 1 disappeared at an undetermined date.



Dexter Row (block arrow), Mallory Panoramic View of Charlestown, 1848

Bibliography:
Maps-1818, 1852

Atlases- 1865, 1875, 1885, 1892, 1901, 1911
Charlestown/Boston Directories
TT Sawyer- *Old Charlestown*
Charlestown Enterprise

*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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