

28-34 Chestnut Street (circa 1853)

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



28- 34 Chestnut Street

2015

Numbers 28-34 Chestnut Street is a stylish, substantial row of four, three-story masonry Italianate townhouses. Each has a three bay main façade with a planar surface, a side hall plan, and a granite faced basement. The row has a flat roof with a cast iron scroll-bracketed cornice.

Low granite "stoops" with curved "shoulders" lead to recessed front doors. There are outer two-pane transoms at numbers 28 and 30, full outer doors with transoms on 32 and 34, and altered inner doors at 30. The entrances are surmounted by deep-bracketed door hoods which support oriel windows. Particularly noteworthy is extensive use of cast iron for trimming, e.g. on windows on all three floors, topped by delicately detailed cast iron lintels.



32 Chestnut Street, lintel detail

2015

Architect: John B Wilson

Builder: John B and Charles Wilson

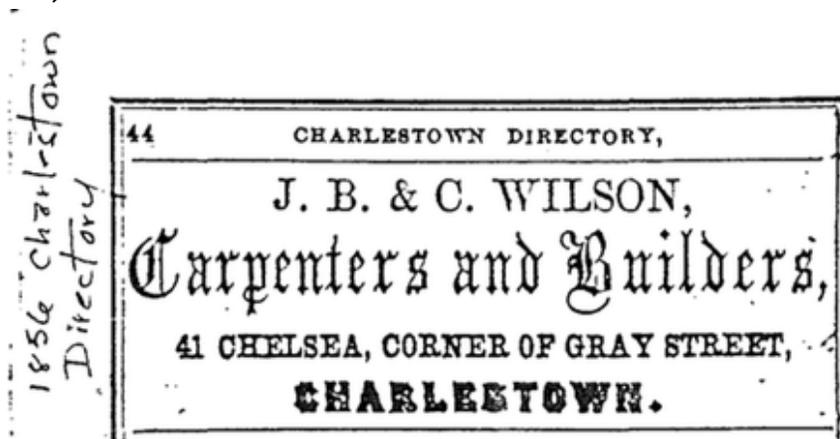
Original owner: John B and Charles Wilson

Although Chestnut Street does not present the same impressive "gapless" expanse of masonry façades as nearby Mount Vernon Street, it nevertheless possesses a fine

collection of stylish Italianate townhouses and the same dramatic views of Boston. Both Chestnut and Mount Vernon Streets run southeastward down the slopes of Breeds Hill. Situated near the intersection of Adams and Chestnut streets, 28-34 Chestnut provides a good introduction to Breed's Hill/Monument Square's fine collection of Victorian residences.

Numbers 28-34 Chestnut is the work of prolific mid-19 century carpenter-builders John B Wilson and Charles Wilson. Judging from 30 Chestnut Street deed chronology, 28-34 Chestnut was built circa 1853. On February 26, 1853, John Wilson and Charles Wilson, "Carpenters and co-partners," paid George Adams Kettel of Charlestown, merchant, \$1498 for 30's lot.

John B Wilson enjoyed a long and successful career in Charlestown's building trades, working from the 1830s to the early 1900s. His brother and co-partner Charles Wilson worked as a carpenter from the 1830s until his death in 1860. For more information on the Wilson's see the form on numbers 47, 49 Monument Ave.



George Adams Kettel was a well-to-do Charlestown merchant who resided in a large late Georgian/Federal mansion which was located across from 30 Chestnut Street, now the site of the vacant Bunker Hill Post #26. Kettel's house had relatively extensive grounds, which covered the northeast corner of Chestnut and Adams streets. The Kettel/ Wilson deed of February 26, 1853 carried certain restrictions-"the buildings to be erected on the land shall consist of a dwelling house of brick not less than three stories high of the same classification and appearance to those described in the plans and specifications of a block of three houses drawn by Mr. J Wilson for the purposes of building on the lot hereby conveyed and... lots adjoining. In addition, common walls of 8 to 12 feet thickness... to separate the houses with abutters sharing in the cost of materials and labor. In addition, number 30 along with the other houses in this group is to have a 4-foot setback from Chestnut Street

Further research is needed to determine the post-Wilson owners. By 1875, owners included James Adams Junior, cashier, Blackstone National Bank-28, Nahum Chapin, a "gentlemen", 128 South market-30; Albert Griffiths, a saw manufacturer, 145 Federal Street-32, and C F Fairbanks, treasurer, Bigelow Carpet Company, Clinton Wire Cloth Company-34.

By 1885 the owners included is James Adams, still at 28, Nahum Chapin-30, James Emery Jr of Brown, Seavey and Company, wholesale fish dealers, 34 commercial wharf (Seavey is also listed in 1885 as "treasurer, Union Ice Company")-32, and Frank E Sweetser, vice president, Washington F and M Insurance Company, 38 State Street.

Number 32 Chestnut has significant historical associations with the early days of telephone service in the US, and for that matter, the world. Its owner during the late 1870s/1880s, James Emery Jr, is said to have been "the first man in the world to lease a telephone and pay for service ... He was the second man in the world to establish a commercial line." In May 1877 a telephone was placed in the front room on the second floor of 32 Chestnut Street. Emery's telephone was linked with a small system of telephones belonging to various Emery family members/business partners living in Charlestown. Emery put his first two telephones at either end of a line connecting his house with his brother Freeman across the street, at 43 Chestnut Street. (Freeman Emery was a member of the firm of Bunting and Emery, wholesale fish dealers, on commercial wharf, Boston.) James Emery placed his third telephone in the house of his brother T Jefferson Emery, at 80 Green Street. A fourth line was placed in the home of his father in law James Brown at 280 Bunker Hill Street. The fifth telephone in this system was installed in the home of Emery's partner, William Seavey, who lived next door to Brown at 278 Bunker Hill Street. A reporter for the *Charlestown News* (May 10, 1924) noted that, regarding Emery's telephone system, "in this way the three brothers and all the members of the firm, except Bunting, who lived in Somerville, were connected on one line".

James Emery Junior is said to have attended Alexander Graham Bell's lectures and demonstrations of the telephone during the 1870s. Bell took out patents on his invention in 1876 and 1877. In 1924, an Emery family member recalled that "the telephone (in James Emery's house) was a small box with an attachment that was used to make a call. When you wanted to telephone you would hit a hammer signal. There would be a sharp noise at the other end, loud enough to attract attention. After you hit this hammer several times, you talked and listened through a

wood mouthpiece on one end of the box. It worked pretty well and you could hear what was said at the other end if you listened attentively."

By the early 1900s, this group's owners included J H and M A Meehan, cornice makers-28, the heirs of John J Brennan-30, Patrick D Brennan (occupation?)-32 and the heirs of Patrick Bonner-34

Bibliography:

Maps-1818, 1852

Panoramic view of Bunker Hill-1848

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

Middlesex deeds-number 30-601:407, 881:19

The Charlestown News, May 10, 1924

*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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