

30 Union Street (circa 1814-1815)

From Boston Landmark Commission's Charlestown Historic Resources Study 1981*:



30 Union Street

S.P.N.E.A. 1937

Number 30 Union Street is a well proportioned three story Federal "brick ender"; the main block's front and rear walls are composed of wood. It has a brick basement. To the rear is a

two-story ell. The main façade, with five bays and a center hall plan, is presently (1985) clad with modern shingle siding with clapboards in evidence to the left of the entrance. The rear wall retains clapboards. The building is enclosed by a gable roof with chimneys, at the centers of the end wall gables, which are continuations of the brick end walls. Particularly noteworthy is the proportional relationship between the narrow end wall gables and main facade. There are pairs of dormers, widely spaced and enclosed by pedimented gables at the front and rear façades of the main block.

The house is prominently sited at the corner of Lawrence and Union Streets.



30 Union Street

1968



30 Union Street

2015

The main entrance is enframed by multi-pane sidelights and an elliptical fanlight. Old photos indicate the house is missing its entrance pilasters and cornice-headed lintel. The Lawrence Street end wall façade has one window near the

Lawrence/Union street corner. There are no windows at the southwest wall. The windows are fully enframed with 6/6 wood sash, and 2/2 wood sash at the rear wall and the rear ell.



30 Union Street rear ell

1980s

Architect: Asher Benjamin (Middlesex deeds)

Original owner: Apollos Field

The architectural/historical significance of 30 Union Street is threefold. First and foremost, this house almost certainly represents the work of major early 19th century Boston architect Asher Benjamin. As such it is the only early 19th century house in Charlestown that can be credited to an

architect, as opposed to a builder, carpenter, mason etc. Second, 30 Union was the birthplace of Charles Devens, Attorney General of the United States under President Rutherford B Hayes in the late 1870s, and Justice of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts. Third, this house is a survivor from the earliest phase of the Union Street/Washington Street area's development (circa 1800-1820).

Number 30's lot was part of the 20-acre tract at Lynde's Point (later Prison Point) owned by Capt. Archibald McNeil, ropewalk owner and real estate speculator.

Architecturally, number 30 Union Street's greatest strength lies in its pleasing proportions. It is characterized by narrow brick end wall gables and a five bay main façade. The end wall gables culminate in brick chimneys, which are carried through the gable's apex from the planar wall surface below. Although the main entrance's pilasters and deep cornice-headed entablature are missing, this house retains its elegant elliptical fanlight. No other Federal style house in Charlestown is proportioned in quite the same way as number 30. Also of interest is number 30's orientation to the street, predicated by lot shape. Here the main façade's long side is facing the street, rather than its narrow end wall gables. The rear ell may be original. It seems to be shown on the not always reliable McIntyre map of 1852 and is definitely shown in the 1868 Sanborn Atlas.

Apparently it was built for Apollos Field, a painter, at some point between September 1814 and September 1815 (See Middlesex deeds 205:48, 206:412, and 207:505). Field was a mortgagee of Daniel Fuller of Leominster, a "gentleman", William Wiley of Charlestown, a carpenter, and Sally Bernard, a

Charlestown widow. Wiley may have played a role in the house's construction. Apollos Field, in order to pay his debts, sold number 30 at auction on 29 July 1815. Asher Benjamin of Boston was the highest bidder paying \$1040 for the property. Benjamin did not own the property for very long, selling it to Elisha Wheeler, a Charlestown merchant, for it \$1750.00. Only one Asher Benjamin is listed in the 1816 Boston directory. His trade is listed as "paint store, 55 Broad Street." By that time Benjamin was in fact an architect as well. Evidently Apollos field, "painter" was Benjamin's paint trade-related Charlestown contact.

Asher Benjamin (1773-1845) was born in Greenfield Massachusetts. As a young man Benjamin lived and worked as a carpenter in Windsor Vermont. His name first appears in Boston directories in 1803. Early important Boston examples of his work include the Charles Street Meetinghouse, 1807, and the West Church on Cambridge Street, 1809. During the early 1830s he built the house at 9 West Cedar Street for his own occupancy and he is probably the designer of other houses in the block as well. Asher Benjamin, however, is better known to architects by the books of design, which he published in the years from 1797-1830. These were entitled *The Country Builder's Assistant*, the *American Builder's Companion*, *The Rudiments of Architecture*, and *The Practical House Carpenter*. These works contained designs not only for the façades of houses and churches, but details of exterior and interior doorways, cornices and all sorts of moldings and ornamental work which were widely copied by builders of the day.

In any event, and Alisha Wheeler's executors sold number 30 to Mary Devens Balfour, Wife of Rev. Walter Balfour, \$2300. For many years Rev. Balfour was associated with Charlestown's Universalist Church. He was born in St. Ninians,

Scotland. He died in Charlestown, at 30 Union street, on January 7, 1852 at age 77.

Number 30 Union was the birthplace of Charles Devens (April 4, 1820-January 7, 1891). He was a state senator at age 28, United States Marshall at 30, major general during the Civil War, Justice of the Supreme Court, US Attorney General in the cabinet of President Hayes and a Justice of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. (See *Charlestown enterprise*-special edition June 1893, "Charlestown Citizens Past and Present", page 30, column 3).

His aunt was Mary Devens Balfour. In 1852, a David M Balfour, 103 State Street, Boston, is listed at this address along with the Rev. Balfour. By 1866 "the Misses Balfour" lived here. In 1875, the house was owned by the heirs of Mary Balfour. From circa 1882 to the early 1900s it was owned by a Mary Balfour. By 1911 a John J Crowley owned the house.

Bibliography:

Maps-1818, 1852

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

Boston after Bulfinch, Walter H kill house, 1946, page

Charlestown directories- 1834-1874

Boston directory-1816

Middlesex deeds-205:48, 206:412, 207:505, 213:38, 253:215

Charlestown advertiser 1/7/1852-obituary, Rev. Walter Balfour

Charlestown enterprise-special edition, June 1893,

"Charlestown Citizens Past and Present", page 30, column 3

*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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