

31 Union Street (circa 1807)

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



31 Union Street

ca. 1985

Number 31 Union Street is a three-story brick and stone trimmed Federal double house. It has planar wall surfaces and a granite-faced basement, visible on the Union Street side. Particularly noteworthy is its unusual form, which diverges from the more typical boxy rectangular form. The Rutherford Avenue end wall is treated as two angled wall segments. The house has a low hip roof.

In general, the windows are slightly recessed, and have wooden sills. At an early stage of this building's rehabilitation (fall 1986) the windows exhibit a variety of sash configuration-

2/2, 2/1, 1/1 wood sash- 6/6 would be appropriate. Small square windows appear at the third level .



31 Union Street

2015

The house has two principle façades The Union Street façade has five bays and a center entrance. Its one bay end wall meets a one bay segment associated with the Southeast principal façade, at an angle. The Union Street center entrance is reached via three stone steps. This entrance is shallowly recessed and has a replacement front door, a two-pane transom, and a broad brownstone lintel with tabs.



31 Union Street, southeast façade

1980s



31 Union Street, southeast façade

2015

The southeast façade has four bays with an off center entrance and angled one bay segment- for all purposes the "missing" fifth bay. The main entrance on the southeast wall has double

Victorian doors with long oval glass panels and square panels. Over the entrance is a broad brownstone lintel without tabs.

Original owner: John Gilmore

Architecturally, this house diverges from other Charlestown Federal style masonry and wood houses by virtue of its unique form. Instead of the more customary Federal style house with boxy rectangular form and narrow two bay end wall facing the street, number 31 Union's end wall is really two planar wall segments, which meet at an angle. The architectural significance of 31 Union Street is threefold. First and foremost it is the only double masonry federal style house still standing in Charlestown with both halves intact. Second, this house's form is unique in the Charlestown and probably the Boston area by virtue of its angled Rutherford Avenue wall segment. Third, it is part of Charlestown's choice collection of freestanding masonry Federal style houses. Charlestown surpasses even Beacon Hill in its number of freestanding masonry Federal style houses.

Built by 1815, and possibly as early as 1807, this house dates to the earliest phases of Lynde's Point's residential development (circa 1794-1820). The house is difficult to date via deed research. It was extant in early 1815 and most probably dates to 1807. On February 28, 1815, Jonathan Gilmore of Charlestown, a yeoman, took out a mortgage on this house, of \$2000, with John McFarland of Boston, a jeweler. The Gilmore/McFarland mortgage mentions "the brick dwelling house and wood house (meaning number 29) there on". The Gilmore/McFarland deed mentions that the former purchased this house's lot from John Smith, a cabinetmaker, on May 11, 1807. Although the Smith/Gilmore deed of this date mentions the 45-foot Union Street boundary, which appears in later

deeds, a Pleasant Street boundary mentioned in this deed does not seem to fit even an extended tract that might have been associated with this house. Further deed research is needed to solve the mystery of this house's date of construction.

Gilmore owned 31 Union until July 11, 1818. At that time he sold it to Elisha Wheeler for \$2500. Wheeler's executors sold this house to Alexander Bowers, Charlestown, a "gentleman", for \$2500 on March 3, 1821. In 1834 a Mrs. A Bowers is listed at 8 Union Street (presumably number 31 Union Street?). By 1860, Rubin Byam, a mason, is listed at 31 Union. Byam sold it to Francis R Maddox, a dispatcher, Fitchburg Railroad, Prison Point, on October 13, 1883. By the early 1900s Sarah and Mary Sweeney owned the house.

Number 31 Union Street's lot was evidently part of Capt. Archibald MacNeill's 20 acre tract at Lynde's Point-purchased in 1793/94 and encompassing that part of Rutherford Avenue formerly called Richmond Street and portions of Bow (now Devens), Union and Austin streets. Between 1799 and 1806, and later, purchasers of McNeil's lots included members of Charlestown's prominent Devens, Goodwin, Tufts, Sweetser, Forster, Frothingham, Edmands, Warren, Baker, Harris, Wiley and Kendall families. Sawyer notes that Washington Street, the principal street in the area, "very soon became one of the pleasantest for the residences in the town and its desirability for this purpose was maintained for more than half a century, at least".

Union Street was evidently named from Capt. Josiah Barker's ship Union, built at the shipyard on Washington Street in 1815. Originally intended for service during the war of 1812, the ship was fitted for the East India trade. Capt. Barker developed the row of late Federal/Greek revival houses at 74-86 Washington

Street, in the late 1830s. The Rutherford Avenue segment between Devens and Union streets was originally known as Richmond Street. It was named Rutherford Avenue in honor of President Rutherford B Hayes on May 28, 1878. Charles Devens, who lived across the street at 30 Union, served as US Attorney General in President Rutherford's administration.

Bibliography:

Maps- 1818, 1852

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

Middlesex deeds-175: 36, 212:70, 227:61, 247:397, 327:105

Suffolk deeds-1697: 4

Old Charlestown, T Sawyer, page 74-77/56/, 57

Charlestown Enterprise, August 30, 1919, page 3 "Deserved Honor Given the Name"

Charlestown/Boston directories-19th century

*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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