

49-63 Chestnut Street (circa 1839-1842)

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

Ed. note-The address numbers 51, 55, 59, 63, and 65 Chestnut Street, as recorded in the 1981 survey notes appearing in MACRIS, differ from the address numbers on the houses in 2015. The following text reflects the current addresses.

Numbers 49 and 51 Chestnut Street, three-story, flat roof Italianate houses, were originally similar in appearance to numbers 55, 59, and 63 Chestnut in terms of form and elements. Their gable roofs were removed (circa?) and replaced with flat roofs. All five houses are constructed of wood and have side hall plans, three bay main façades, and outer entrance enframements consisting of paneled Doric pilasters with heavy cornice-headed entablatures. Numbers 49 and 51 now have Italianate bracketed door hoods superimposed upon their Greek Revival entablatures.



49 Chestnut Street

2015



51 Chestnut Street

2015

Numbers 55, 59 and 63 have retained their gable roofs and pedimented attics with fascia and sideboards; 55's sideboards are broad and paneled. There are dentils at the mid section of 63's fascia board, and 59's fascia board has a narrow raised band at its center. Numbers 63 and 59 have open front porches, as shown the 1848 Mallory panoramic view. The porch posts are treated as paneled Doric columns; only the capitals of 63's Doric pilasters are still intact.

Numbers 55 and 63 have second floor oriel windows. In general, the windows are fully and simply enframed and have a variety of sash configurations.



55 Chestnut Street

2015



59 Chestnut Street

2015



63 Chestnut Street

2015

A rear ell of 63 Mount Vernon Street is of interest as a possible pre-1840 Federal or late Georgian house, with a five bay main facade and center hall plan. The house lends considerable charm to the narrow Mount Vernon streetscape. An interior inspection might bring the true age of the ell to light.



Rear ell, on Mt Vernon Street, of 63 Chestnut Street, 1981



Rear ell, on Mt Vernon Street, of 63 Chestnut Street, 2015

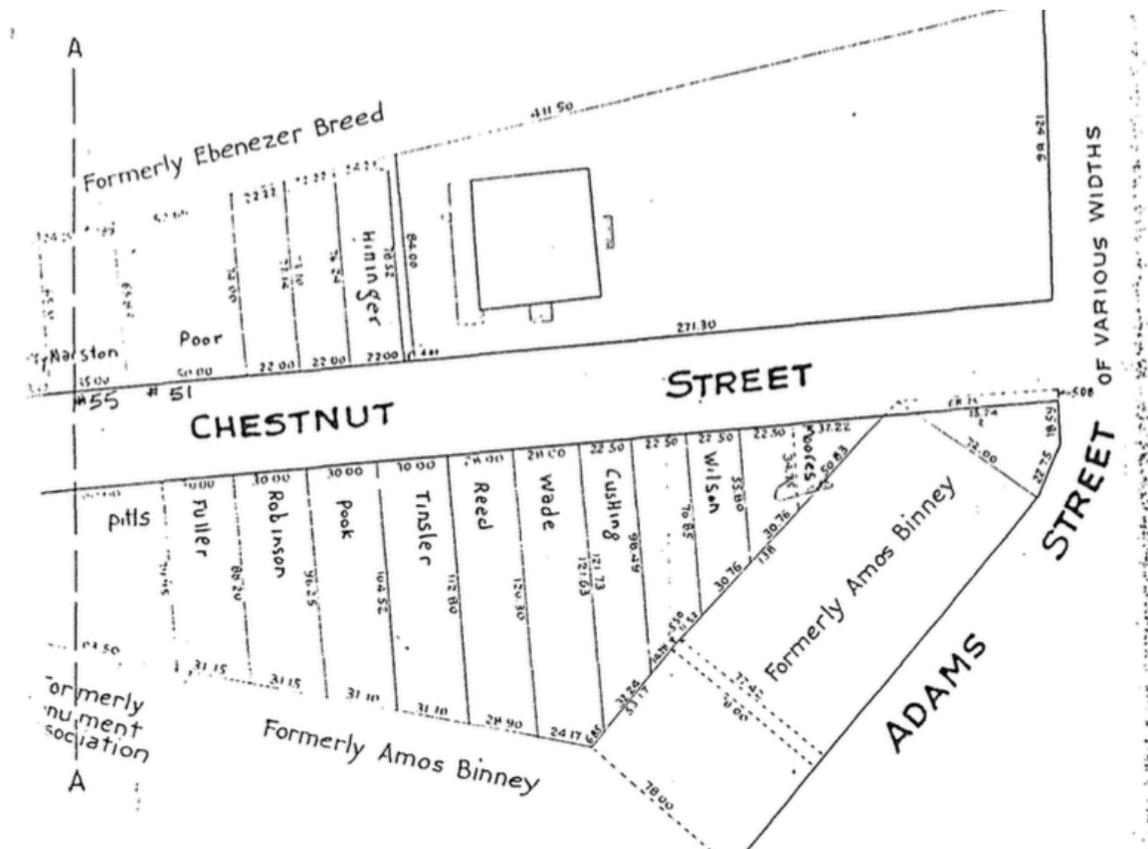
Builder: Nathaniel Low-carpenter, Aaron Hadley-carpenter, possibly others

Original owner: James H Dix-63, Nathan Low-59, Andrew Hadley-55, (49, 51-?)

The houses in this group are shown on the 1848 Panoramic View of Boston/Charlestown, by R Mallory.



Mallory Panoramic Map of Charlestown, 1848, showing 49- 63 Chestnut Street



Detail, from plan of Mansion House Estate of Nathan Adams, Jan 1858

Built by local carpenters circa 1839-42, numbers 49-63 Chestnut Street occupy a position of considerable significance in the annals of Charlestown architectural/residential developmental history, with possibilities for great citywide significance as well. Originally, they were nearly identical wood frame, gable roofed, Greek Revival houses. At some point circa late 19th century, 49 and 51 were altered with the removal of their gable roofs and the addition of flat roofed third floors. The three remaining gable roofed houses in the group at 63, 59, 55 Chestnut Street convey a sense of how effective the rhythmic repetition of gable roofs must have been as they descended the southeastern slope of Breeds Hill.

These houses date to the earliest days of Breed's Hill's residential development. Although the nearby Bunker Hill Monument Association's 115 lot tract (beginning circa 1839) included wood frame, modestly scaled Greek Revival houses along Lexington, Monument, and Concord Streets, there was no large group of identical, or at least very similar, houses like 49-63 Chestnut Street. The Chestnut Street group represents a very conscious effort on the part of George Adams Kettel, to develop and sell a relatively large group (five) of suburban houses with identical forms, materials, elements, etc. These houses represent a very early American example of a "cookie-cutter" (not meant pejoratively) approach to suburban housing, an approach that would be widely used in Boston suburbs and elsewhere in the U S by the 1890s and would, of course, be the order of the day in the 20th century suburbia. The widespread use of early "prefab" techniques such as "balloon framing" by the 1830s made developments such as 49-63 Chestnut Street possible.

This group represents the work of local carpenters Nathaniel Low, Andrew Hadley and possibly others. Their house lots were carved from the old George Adams Kettel (formerly Nathan Adams) estate. The old Federal Adams mansion house was located on the site of the now abandoned Bunker Hill Post #26, opposite 50 Chestnut Street.

Perhaps the best known, at least locally, resident of this group was Benjamin F Brown, prominent insurance executive and political figure in Charlestown during the 1850s, 60s, and early 70s. He lived at 63 Chestnut Street.

Evidently Nathaniel Low, a "carpenter", and Aaron Hadley, a "carpenter," were responsible for the construction of these houses. Low is listed only in the 1845 Charlestown Directory (as living on Chestnut Street). Aaron Hadley, on the other hand, was active in Charlestown's building trades from 1842 until the early 1870s. In 1842 he is listed as a carpenter living at 19 Union Street, by 1845 he is listed at 10 Union Street, and from circa 1852 to the early 1870s he lived at 29 Union Street, always listed as "carpenter. "

As early as June 1839, George A Kettel sold 55's lot to Aaron Hadley Jr for \$653.07. Chestnut Street is described in the Kettel/Hadley deed as "a new street". It was stipulated in this deed that "no house shall be placed or erected thereon other than a dwelling house and appurtenances equal in value and appearance to those now occupied by Messers Doane and Skilton on High Street, nearly opposite Wood Street". Hadley sold 55's land to Isaac Cook, blacksmith, on November 10, 1845. Although the Hadley/Cook deed does not mention buildings on this site, the sale price clearly indicates the presence of a house on this lot.

Owners of 55 Chestnut during the 1860s included Charles T Newall, real estate agent, 1862-67, and James a Sawtell of Chelsea. The latter paid \$8000 for this house on October 3, 1867. Sawtell was a grocer who lived here from 1867 until circa 1890. By the early 1890s, Abram P Donns, of A P Donns Provisions, 364 Shawmut Ave., 40 1/2 merchants Row, owned 55. He lived at 29 High Street during the late 19th century (see form on 29-41 High St.).

Number 59 Chestnut was mortgaged to Nathaniel Low, a "carpenter... recently of Boston" by G A Kettel on July 5, 1842 for \$2700. Low received "land with the buildings thereon". Michael Hittinger, a blacksmith, purchased this house for \$4250 in April 1847. He sold it to Lewis C Ricker, circa 1860s. (Re-check the date, 861:514, Middlesex). Ricker's business is listed as "fruit and vegetables", seller, 19 Faneuil Hall Market. Ricker owned 59 until circa 1890. By 1892, Edward O'Hara, salt dealer, 2 India, Boston, lived here. Later owners included Joanna E and John Hurley, early 1900s.

G A Kettel sold 63, both land and buildings, to James H Dix (occupation?) On January 24, 1842 for \$1205. Kettel was a merchant who had trained (?) with Ebenezer Breed of the neighboring estate, later Moount Vernon Street. Dix sold 63 to Nathaniel W Coffin of Boston on April 11 1850s for \$4250. By 1856 Dix was living in Malden.

By 1865 Benjamin F Brown owned 63 Chestnut Street. Born in Candia, New Hampshire in 1829, Brown came to Massachusetts "early in life", working initially as a teacher. By 1856 he came to Charlestown, opening an insurance agency in City Square at 1 Chelsea Street. He later moved his business to 19 City Square. His company was known as B F Brown and Sons. Active in local politics, he was elected a member of the

Common Council and for six years was a member of the School Board. He moved to Lexington, Massachusetts in 1876. Evidently, Brown retained 63 as an investment property. He owned this house until at least 1901. By 1911 a Mary A Sheehan owned 63.

Number 63 Chestnut's rear ell may have been built as a separate house prior to 1840. It appears to be a circa 1820s or early 1830s center hall plan, late Federal, wood frame vernacular house. It is shown by 1848, on the Mallory panoramic view, as being the rear ell of 63 Chestnut Street.

Further research is needed on the altered a three-story houses at 49 and 51 Chestnut Street. The 1848 Mallory panoramic view indicates that 49, 51, and 55 Chestnut did not have porches, while 59 and 63's porches are clearly shown.

Bibliography:

Maps-1818, 1852

Atlases-1865, 1885, 1892, 1901, 1911

Middlesex Deeds-#65-410:392, 551:276, 671:309, 931:561;
#63-416:382, 463:559, 501:39, 501:298, 851:542, 861:514;
#59-384:568, 473:116, 861:489, 1011:168

Charlestown/Boston directories-19th century

Panoramic view of Boston/Charlestown, 1848

Charlestown Enterprise-special edition, 1893, "Charlestown Citizens Past and Present"

*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.

R. Dinsmore