

53, 55 High Street (53-1838, 55-circa 1838?)

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



53 High

5/15

Number 53 High Street is a two story Greek Revival wood frame clapboard clad house with three bay by two bay main block, a granite block basement, and a long two-story ell to the rear. The house has a broad gable roof with the end wall gable to Green Street. There is a single gable-roofed dormer at the

center of the main façade's roof slope. The edges of the house are accented by baseboards, corner boards and fascia board. It has a side hall plan.

The entrance is flanked by Doric pilasters and surmounted by a cornice-headed entablature. The recessed entry walls have well-crafted wood paneling. The windows have 2/1 wood sash.



55 High

5/15

Number 55 High Street is a moderately altered Greek Revival single-family house which was evidently originally identical to 53 High Street. It is presently clad with wood shingles. It has a

three bay by two bay main block, a long rear ell, and a side hall plan. Wood shingles obscure the original base and corner boards. The house has a broad gable roof with the end wall gable to Green Street. There is a single gable-roofed dormer at the center of the main façade's roof slope.

The main entrance is flanked by paneled Doric pilasters and is surmounted by a cornice-headed entablature. It has a later outer entrance door and eight-pane transom. Like number 53, its windows are fully enframed but have 1/1 replacement sash.

Original owners: 53-Lemuel Mills, 55-E F Cutter

Situated at the northeast and southeast corners of the High Street/Green Street intersection, numbers 53 and 55 High Street serve as "gateway" structures to Green Street's interesting collection of circa late 1830s-1850s wood frame Greek Revival and Italianate houses. Number 53 is the least altered of the two houses, retaining its distinctive form (broad end wall gable facing Green Street), corner boards and fascia board, original fabric (clapboards) and handsome straightforward entrance enframing

Built circa 1838, 53 high has significant historical associations with James E Greenleaf, author of one of the most stirring marching songs of the Civil War, "John Brown's Body". Number 53 was probably built circa 1838 for Lemuel Mills, a "yeoman." In a deed dated October 15, 1853 in which Mills sells this house to miss Mary Elizabeth Willard, a "single woman," for \$4000, it is noted that 53 was "the same estate which I (Mills) now occupy and of which I have lived the 15 years last past, together with all my right and title in a brick party wall". Number 53 also is included in a marriage contract/property agreement (Middlesex Deeds 661:159) between Mary

Elizabeth Willard and James E Greenleaf of New York. Greenleaf agreed that Mary Elizabeth Willard "after the solemnization of said marriage shall continue to hold all the real and personal property and rights of action which she may be seized and possessed at the time of said marriage". Greenleaf allowed that "he will not reduce to possession any money which she may have at the time of her marriage aforesaid, but that she may change such such money into furniture, plate and other household artifacts to be placed in her dwelling house numbered 53 on High Street". James Greenleaf lived at 53 High Street until at least 1875. A Mary Greenleaf (presumably Mary Elizabeth Willard Greenleaf) lived here until at least 1911.

James E Greenleaf was the author of the stirring Civil War marching song "John Brown's Body". It is said that Greenleaf wrote this song while on duty with a detachment of troops at Fort Warren in Boston harbor. Greenleaf wrote this song at the very beginning of the Civil War, supposedly "spurred on by the enthusiasm of his comrades". He was the organist at St. John's Episcopal Church. In 1875 his occupation was listed as "agent, H F Cox Company, 38 Battery March, Boston".

Number 55 High Street, judging by form and elements which. Are similar to 53, was built circa 1838, possibly for Elisha F Cutter. From 1872-1874 the house was owned by Andrew J Bailey (evidently as an investment), prominent late 19th century lawyer and politician. (See *Charlestown enterprise*-special edition, 50th anniversary of the Bunker Hill Monument, "Charlestown Citizens Past and Present".)

From 1874 of until the early 1900s, 55 High Street was owned by George H Stetson, (boots and shoes), 158 Hanover Street,

Boston, (1885). His heirs owned this property until the early 1900s. By 1911 the house was owned by a Catherine F Sullivan.

Bibliography:

Maps-1818, 1852

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

Middlesex D-number 53-661:70, 661:159; number 55-1239:291, 1244:226

Charlestown enterprise-special edition, "Charlestown citizens past present and future"-1893

*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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