

## The ‘HABS Nots’: A Gallery of ‘Undocumented’ Newburyport Houses

Visiting architecture enthusiasts and local residents alike are captivated by the understated majesty of the dozens of Federal-era homes along Newburyport’s High Street. Six of those homes were chosen to be documented in the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), and one could advance an argument for the inclusion of many more. But Newburyport’s surviving riches in period domestic architecture extend beyond “The Ridge” and beyond the Federal style, to both older and newer forms throughout the city.

In 1984, approximately 2500 pre-1930 structures from the Joppa neighborhood in the South End to Atkinson Common in the North End were included in a National Register Historic District designated by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Newburyport’s designated area encompassed 750 acres, among the largest such districts in Massachusetts. The ambitious historical and architectural survey of neighborhoods and individual properties for the 1984 nomination is still relevant today – the National Register District boundaries and “contributing structure” designations inform and direct the city’s pro-preservation zoning laws unanimously approved and adopted in 2014. (See Appendix II for more about the city’s National Register Historic District.)

From the handful of spare 17th-century homes remaining in the South End of the city, to the handful of early 20th-century bungalows in the North End, the range of relatively modest homes in representative period styles remains. These homes were not the palaces of the economic elite. These were the homes of the storekeepers, clerks, printers, clam-shuckers, fishermen, stable-tenders, mariners, wagon-masters, rope-makers, coal-shovelers, shipyard workers, and factory hands – the generations of

regular folks and families, long-established and new arrivals alike, who enabled Newburyport to hum along through both high times and hard times.

Fellow admirers of building craftsmanship rightly enthuse over the fine details of the well-preserved architectural gems along High Street. In parallel, fellow history enthusiasts, for whom authenticity is like oxygen, rightly marvel that so many of the more modest workers’ homes survive. Since the 1970s, when Newburyport began to recover from many decades of economic doldrums that “preserved” acres of older period homes by the phenomenon of “benign neglect,” the city’s historic neighborhoods have been subject to demolitions, overbuilding, and infill that compromise whatever authenticity remains. (See the earlier chapter, *Newburyport History In-Brief: A Preservation Perspective*.)

Therefore this Gallery of “Undocumented” Newburyport Houses – the “HABS Nots” – aims to document some of the city’s more modest-sized homes still valued as “contributing structures” within Newburyport’s National Register Historic District.

The selection for inclusion in this gallery was subjective. The smaller building footprints were identified through an eyeball-drooping study of the map of Newburyport properties hosted by the Merrimack Valley Planning Commission. The square-footage of living area was gleaned from city property tax assessment records. The hard-to-verify building dates are from the 1980-1984 survey forms for the Newburyport National Register Historic District, and not from the even more questionable dates in the city tax assessment records. The choice for inclusion in the gallery was also influenced by a desire to represent a range of neighborhoods, periods, and styles.

As seen in the photos, many of the homes have already received recent tender-loving-care by their owner/stewards. Other homes in the gallery, equal as “contributing structures,” await that tender-loving-care. In the current climate of unrelenting gentrification and soaring property values, those buildings that appear to await “rescue” may be at

the greatest risk of being lost as authentic historic structures. Considered individually and even objectively, such homes may be resoundingly “ordinary” in comparison to a High Street architectural showplace. But situated within their neighborhoods, sometimes in small clusters, collectively the “ordinary” homes contribute to the city’s singular character. For residents within those neighborhoods, in similarly-scaled homes already proven to still function just fine in the 21st century, these remaining modest structures contribute to a cherished sense-of-place in an increasingly bland and homogenized world.

All photos were taken by the author in color, and converted to grayscale with contrast boosted for print production. With just a few exceptions, the photos were taken in winter, admittedly the most unflattering season for photographing a property, but a season free of camouflaging vegetation. The purpose was documentation only, not fine art. For example, there was no effort to crop out or clean up tangles of utility wires. In choosing a vantage point for the photos, there was an effort to avoid

automobiles and Dumpsters. In a few instances, unsightly trash heaps, or permanently-sited front-and-center recycling bins, were kindly cropped out to forestall any possible owner embarrassment.

For each photo in the gallery, the living area and building date are noted, as listed in city records available to the public. Specific addresses of individual houses are not included, but the photos are grouped by neighborhood, according to the National Register Historic District neighborhood designations as listed and described below.

With the economic incentives of the current market and the growing appeal of more compact homes, it is quite possible that within a few years, some of the most at-risk small-footprint homes in this gallery will be lovingly revitalized. It is equally possible that they may be “restored” beyond recognition, or rebuilt as incongruous towers from the foundation up. But if some of Newburyport’s more modest historic structures – the “HABS Notes” – are eventually lost to either misfortune or the “march of progress,” at least they are documented here.

– R.W. Bacon

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## Special Districts within Newburyport’s National Register District

**Joppa Historic District:** Bordered by Water, Marlboro, Hancock, & Bromfield Streets; including Harrison, Lunt, Madison, & Neptune Streets.

**South End Historic District:** Bordered by Water, Federal, Lime, & Prospect Streets; including Franklin, Milk, Purchase, Ship, Beck, School, Atwood, Spring, Orange, Temple, Liberty, Middle, Independent, Center, Charter, Essex, & Fair Streets.

**Chestnut Street Victorian Residential District:** Bordered by Marlboro, Bromfield, Hancock, & High Streets; including Barton, Chestnut, Oak, & Pine Streets.

**Fruit Street Historic District:** Fruit Street, between High Street and Prospect Street.

**High Street Historic District:** High Street, from the Newbury town line west to Toppan’s Lane.

**Market Square Historic District:** The junction of State, Merrimac, & Water Streets.

**Pleasant Street Industrial District:** Bordered by State Street, Prince Place, Hale’s Court, & Pleasant Street; including Tracy Place.

**Washington Street Historic District:** Bordered by Merrimac, Winter, High, & Kent Streets, including Atkinson, Boardman, Buck, Congress, Elm, Merrill, Olive, Plum, Russia, & Strong Streets.

**Ocean Mills Historic District:** Bordered by Kent, Carter, & Eagle Streets; including Dove, Lafayette, Munroe, Ocean, and Warren Streets, and Cutter and Griffin Courts.

**Merrimack Shipbuilding District:** Merrimack Street, including all feeder streets between Carter Street west to Jefferson Street.