

“A Quiet Country Town”

Early Medford History as Told by the “Marm”
Simonds Historic District

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Few people realize that, as they make their daily trek along route 60 from Arlington and beyond through West Medford to Medford Square, they pass one of the most important sites to early Medford history. The intersection of High and Woburn Streets and Hastings Lane has been occupied by residents for almost three hundred years. Taking a step back in time, we will walk you through the district according to each home which still stands today.

In the late 17th century, Medford was an established town, but contained fewer than 300 residents. Overland routes consisted of High Street, Woburn Street, Grove Street, Hastings Lane, Riverside Avenue, South Street, Main Street and Salem Street, all of which are principal routes to today's automobiles. Nearly all residents were farmers, and the buildings in which they lived were all products of the former Cradock's Plantation. Desiring their settlement to become a true established town, the residents elected to build a meetinghouse at the intersection of Woburn and High Streets, choosing this location for the number of people who passed through this way on their way to Boston. At this time, the only way to cross the Mystic River would have been to take the ford, and then follow South Street to Main Street, or to pay the toll and cross the Cradock Bridge, then continue towards Boston.

With the meetinghouse came several “accessory” buildings. Meetinghouses served as the hub of towns, as all the residents met here every Sunday, and could purchase some goods necessary to survival, such as food. When this meetinghouse became overcrowded, a second meetinghouse was erected at the corner of High and School Streets. The homes which you see today are a product of this second

meetinghouse and being on a well traveled route.

Standing at the intersection of High Street and Woburn, the first house you see is the Jonathan Brooks House, 2 Woburn Street.

This house is one of Medford's few surviving 18th century vernacular buildings. This building was thought to have been originally built in the late 17th century, however no actual mention of a building occurs until 1768, when Jonathan Patten purchased land and a “Frame Covered with Boards.” In 1781, Thomas Brooks III purchased the building. In time it passed to Thomas Brooks Jr. and then to Jonathan Brooks.

Jonathan Brooks was a member of the wealthy Brooks Family, who owned most of West Medford during the late 18th and 19th centuries. Brooks was a tanner with his shop located at the corner of High and Canal Streets until his marriage in 1791 to Elizabeth Albree, after which his tannery was moved to Whitman Road, where his wife's brothers, Samuel and John, had operated a tannery since the 1780's. Brooks remained owner of this house until 1837, when he sold the house and “Tanyard Place” to his son Charles. Jonathan died in this house in 1847.

To the left, at the corner of Hastings Lane and High Street, stands the John Bradshaw House, 298 High Street.

This building was constructed in the later half of the 17th century. It was one of the first houses in the area, and it is believed to have been constructed from pieces of the dismantled meetinghouse. Interestingly enough, it is the product of several periods of construction. The southeastern section of the building, consisting of heavy timber construction, is the older portion. Later, the northwestern section of the house was added. This house was moved slightly to accommodate the expansion of Hastings Lane in the late part of the 19th century.

A stone's throw down Woburn Street, set back from the road with its perpendicular entrance, is the Captain Caleb Brooks House, 24 Woburn Street.

Another one of Medford's few 18th century vernacular buildings, ca. 1765, this building is rectangular in shape and has a one-room-deep plan. This house contains 3 chimneys, set into the north side of the structure. The house is simple for the time period and contains some decorative work at the main entrance.

Captain Caleb Brooks was one of four members who responded to Paul Revere's midnight call and was present at the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

A short walk up High Street rests the Charles Brooks House, 309 High Street.

This house was known as "The Lilacs." Constructed prior to Charles' birth, the house was originally owned by his uncle Isaac Brooks. It was sold to Charles' father, who, in time, sold it to him. The building is symmetrical, with a central entrance and two end chimneys. This house is one of Medford's grandest late Georgian / Federal houses. It was constructed around 1780.

Reverend Charles Brooks (1795-1872) was a Unitarian minister and educational reformer. In the 1800's he played an active role in the establishment of schools in Massachusetts. He was educated in Europe, spending four years there. For many years, he held a professorship at the University of the City of New York. In the 1840's and 50's he served a number of charities and on the Boston School Board. Last, but most importantly, between 1853 and 1855, he compiled the first history of Medford, which was later updated in 1885. This publication still serves as the most complete book on the subject.

Turning around and walking down High Street towards Medford Square, as you round the corner down the hill, to your left is the Abigail "Marm" Simonds House, 265 High Street.

This house is a center chimney building with a rear ell set on a brick foundation. The house was built by Abigail Simonds, who was a school mistress in Medford after 1810. It is likely this house was built shortly after this date. During the 19th century, the hill on which the home resides became known as "Marm" Simond's hill.

The last eighteenth century house in this district is the John Wade House, 253 High Street. This house is ca. 1784-94. It is one of only two eighteenth century cape cod houses in Medford. Between 1784-94, John Wade, a tanner, agreed to lease or buy land owned by Abijah Usher, a cardmaker who lived nearby. During that time, he built this house. He purchased the land formally in 1799. The house remained in his possession until his death in 1821, when his entire estate was sold to John Bishop. Bishop sold his house to Charles Caldwell, a local carpenter who added the present design over the front entrance, in 1837. In or near this house was the Pierce Tavern, another product of being on a well traveled road. It is not known if this house was a part of the tavern or if the tavern was a separate building. The setbacks of this and its neighboring building suggest the tavern was in front of both these dwellings.

Some other buildings of interest in the district are the Willis-Reaves Cottage (mid 18th Century), 273 High Street; the Noah Johnson House (1837), 279 High Street, and the Jonathan Fletcher House (1835), 283 High Street.

For recent photographs of these buildings, and all buildings included in local historic districts, please visit www.medfordhistoricalcommission.org