

**NEWTON PUBLIC BUILDINGS SURVEY
PHASE II – ANALYSIS OF HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE**

Building Analysis

Newton Corner Library



Address: 124 Vernon Street
Year of Construction: 1848

Level of Significance: High

Recommended Treatment Level: Preservation

PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance

Building History

124 Vernon Street was originally constructed as a single-family home in the Greek Revival style. The house is not present on an 1847 map of the area, but appears to have already been constructed when John C. Chaffin purchased the site in 1849. Whether the house was constructed for Chaffin or if he bought it already completed is unknown, but it was one of the first structures to appear on Vernon Street. The original house was typical of the Greek Revival style with a low pitched gable roof, a wide band of trim, raised corner pilasters and a full length porch at both sides of the ground floor supported by ionic columns. The building had a low ell at the north side. Italianate details, most prominently the bay windows and decorative roof brackets at the perimeter of the house and its attached ell, were added by Chaffin in the 1850s.

John Crowninshield Chaffin (1823-1904) was born in Princeton, MA to Leonard and Betsey Chaffin. Both of his parents died in 1826, leaving him an orphan at age 3. In 1837 he began working for his brother Darwin Chaffin who opened one of the first men's clothing stores in Boston at 80 Washington Street. After the death of his brother in the mid-1840s he began his own business. It is likely that his residency in Newton began with the purchase of the Vernon Street house the same year as his marriage to Mary Elizabeth Cole of Watertown. By 1870 George Sawin, a Newton neighbor who lived on nearby Elmwood Street, had joined Chaffin in his business and the company was known as John C. Chaffin & Co. The store had moved to its own building on Washington Street. Chaffin and his wife Mary had seven children, but only one daughter, Hattie West Chaffin, survived past the age of 19.

John Chaffin was very involved with Newton's civic life. He was one of the original eleven trustees of the Newton Free Library and was a major donor to the construction fund for the new library building, which opened in 1870. A reading room in the library was named in his honor. Upon his death his estate was left to his daughter with the condition that after her death 2/3rds of the estate would go to the City of Newton to establish an educational fund for Newton students who wished to study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology but were financially unable to do so.

Hattie Chaffin married John Sherman in 1904. The couple lived in the house until her death in 1930. At this time the house was offered for sale to the City, which purchased the property with the intention of converting it into a children's library. The building served as a branch of the Newton Free Library system until 2008. It currently houses offices for Newton's Department of Parks and Recreation.

Level of Significance

124 Vernon Street is a contributing structure within the Farlow and Kenrick Parks National Historic District. The building is significant under Criteria A for its association with the development of Newton and with John C. Chaffin. It is also significant under Criteria C as an interesting transition between Greek Revival and Italianate building styles. The building retains a high degree of architectural integrity despite being somewhat altered by its conversion from residential to institutional use.

References

- Chaffin, William L. *History of Robert Chaffin and His Descendants and of the Other Chaffins in America*. New York: Frederick H. Hitchcock Genealogical Publisher, p. 82. <<http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/william-l-william-ladd-chaffin/history-of-robert-chaffin-and-his-descendants-and-of-the-other-chaffins-in-amer-fah.shtml>> (accessed 6, March 2012).
- City of Newton Board of Aldermen. "Finance Committee Report, Monday, April 25, 2011".
- Cutter, William Richard. *Historic Homes and Places and Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*. Volume 4. New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company (1908), p.1896.
- Massachusetts Historical Commission, "Form B NWT.737—124 Vernon Street" (1997, 1976).
- Newton City Directories 1868-1931, Newton Blue Books 1892-1927. Boston City Directories 1845-1875.

PART I - Analysis of Historical Significance: Historic Images



Figure 1: Aerial view of Newton, 1878. The home of John C. Chaffin is the second from the right on Vernon Street. Note the gazebo directly to the left. (Credit: Leventhal Map Center, Boston Public Library.)



Figure 2: Photograph of John C. Chaffin from the Jersey Stock Club of Newton members' photo album. The organization was founded in 1866 for the purpose of encouraging the importing of Jersey cows into Newton (Credit: Digital Newton).

Part 2 – Description of Historically Significant Features

Exterior Visual Character

Setting

- Open lot located between Chaffin and Farlow Parks. A small parking lot is located at the east side of the building.
- Also located on the site is the Rosedale Gazebo, a wood garden structure with a slate roof constructed c.1868.

Shape

- Two and a half-story rectangular structure with a two-story flat-roofed ell to the south.

Roof and Related Features

- The gable roof at the main building is clad with purple and green slate and has copper flashing and standing seam copper installed at the gable edges. The roof has deep eaves with a wood cornice. A non-original dormer with a hipped roof is present at the west elevation.
- Low-sloped roofs clad with standing seam copper are located above the porches at the east and west sides of the building.
- The south ell has a flat roof with a rubber roofing membrane.
- Two masonry chimneys are located at the gable roof and two at the ell. Chimneys are painted white and have corbelled brick bands at the top.
- The roofs typically have copper gutters and leaders.

Openings

- Windows are typically 2-over-2 wood sashes set within single window openings.
- Approximately 7'-0" Tall first floor windows are present at the west elevation.
- Two projecting bay windows with hipped roofs are present at the north elevation of the first floor. There are also projecting bay windows at the second floor of the east and west elevations. The bay windows each have three 1-over-1 wood sashes.
- Paneled double entrance doors are present at both the east and west elevations within the areas covered by the porches. The doors are wood with glazed panels at the upper 2/3rd of each leaf. The west double door is set within a non-original opening.
- The east elevation of the ell has a single wood opening with a paneled wood door.

Projections:

- One story porches extend across the majority of the length of the main building at both the east and west elevations. The porches are supported by wood columns at their outer edges and have wood tongue and groove ceilings and decks. The first floor building wall is bumped out to form large bay at the south end of each porch, although the protrusion at the east elevation appears to be a later addition.
- A small canopy roof with wood brackets is located over the first floor ell door.
- Modern concrete ramps with metal railings have been constructed at each entrance. A steel fire escape is located at the south elevation of the ell.

Trim and Secondary Features:

- Wood brackets, typically set in pairs, are located along the tall wood fascia below the eave and gable ends of the main roof. Smaller brackets (also typically in pairs) are located at the eaves of the porch roofs.
- Windows typically have squared pediments. The pediments of the first floor windows are supported with small wood brackets, as are the eaves of the first floor bay windows.
- Decorative paneled wood pilasters are located at each corner of the main building and ell.

Materials

- Walls are clad with wood clapboards except for the first floor wall below the roof of the west porch, which is clad with wide planks set flush.
- The building has a stone foundation at the main structure and a brick foundation at the ell. There are brick light wells around the basement windows.

Craft Details

- The main and porch roof brackets are carved in a leaf motif.
- Porch columns have fluted shafts and Ionic capitals.

Interior Visual Character

Individually Important Spaces

Circulation and Reading Rooms (ground floor, main building)

- Box beams are present at the ceiling at portions of the circulation room and at the reading rooms.
- Decorative wood brackets are located at the interior of the bay window at the west side of the circulation room.
- Wood pocket doors are located within the doorway leading to the Sloan Study.
- Elaborately carved stone mantelpieces (identical to one another) are present in the two north reading room spaces. The fireplaces are infilled with iron fireplace heaters with iron grilles at their centers.

Sloan Study (ground floor, ell)

- The room has a wood parquet floor with an elaborate border with geometric patterns created with different wood colors.
- A large wood mantelpiece with a decorative tile fireplace surround and tile hearth is located at the center of the east wall. The mantelpiece has an overmantle with a mirror.
- The room has paneled wood wainscoting and carved wood door and window casings.
- Built-in bookcases with drawers below line the east wall at either side of the fireplace.

Related Spaces

Staircases

- The main staircase between the ground and second floor located within the circulation room at the ground floor has an elaborate wood newel post, banisters and rail. The stair has stylized scrollwork along the face string. The rail and banisters extend across the second floor landing.
- The back staircase, located within the ell, has carved newell posts (one at the ground floor and additional posts at intermediate landings) and decorative banisters.

Other Significant Interior Features

- Most rooms retain their original wood flooring.
- Original wood trim elements such as baseboards and crown molding, window and doors casings found at many locations.
- Original wood doors and associated hardware are found throughout the building.
- Iron heating registers with stone surrounds.

Part 2 – Images



Figure 3: Double entrance door at east porch.



Figure 4: Close up view of ionic column capital at east porch.



Figure 5: Eave brackets at main building roof.



Figure 6: Stone fireplace surround in ground floor reading room.



Figure 7: Wood fireplace surround and overmantle in Sloan Study.

Part 3 – Treatment Recommendations

Preservation Treatment Level

Despite being somewhat altered from its original appearance during conversion from residential to institutional use the Newton Corner Library building retains a large amount of its character-defining material and is still recognizable as a residential structure from the mid-1800s. Due to the building's importance as one of the oldest structures in its National Register district the recommended treatment for the building is the "Preservation" level of treatment outlined in the U. S. Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*. The Preservation treatment level assumes that the majority of the building materials and significant features have survived unchanged over time. The emphasis of this treatment is to protect these elements through maintenance and repair. If additional renovations to the interior are needed to meet new programmatic needs alterations should strive to maintain the overall arrangement of the rooms and the existing distinction between primary and secondary spaces. Significant features listed in Part 2 should be protected as much as possible.

The following bulleted list contains an analysis of existing conditions and recommended treatments for the significant features catalogued in Part 2 of this report.

Exterior Recommendations

Critical/Urgent (Timeframe: As soon as possible)

- Clear gutters and replace missing leaders, repair damage to wood elements below.
- Repair broken slates at roof.
- Stabilize Rosedale Gazebo and protect from further vandalism.

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

- Determine the source of moisture that is causing the porch decking to warp and address. Repair or replace the porch floorboards in kind.
- Remove biological growth and peeling paint from porch columns and repaint.
- Repair cracks in the wood elements at the north roof ridge.
- Remove peeling paint from previously-installed wood dutchmen at north bay windows, repair or replace the existing dutchmen and repaint.
- Restore areaway windows with new glazing putty and paint.
- Repair brick foundation and areaways at the ell. Rebuild areas of damaged or deteriorated brick and repoint all brick surfaces 100%.
- Replace the deteriorated wood stairs to the basement door at the rear of the ell with new stairs.
- Repair spalled concrete at stairs to ground floor ell door.
- Restore missing/damaged wood lattice elements at the Rosedale Gazebo and restore the broken and missing gazebo window sashes and glazing. Paint all wood elements at the gazebo.

Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

- Scrape existing paint from chimneys and repaint.
- Remove multiple layers of built up paint from decorative wood elements and repaint. It is recommended that paint analysis be performed prior to stripping to identify historic paint colors.
- Replace the deteriorated modified bitumen roof over the first floor ell entrance door canopy with a more historically appropriate material.

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- Continue regular maintenance of character-defining features.
- Maintain all gutters, leaders and drains to keep clog-free.

Interior Recommendations

The interior of the Newton Corner Library has been recently renovated for its conversion into office space. Carpeting was removed, the original floors refinished, and areas of damaged plaster repaired.

Critical/Urgent (Timeframe: As soon as possible)

First Priority (Timeframe: 1-3 years)

Second Priority (Timeframe: 3-5 years)

Maintenance (Timeframe: Ongoing)

- Continue regular maintenance of character-defining features. Elements that become deteriorated should be repaired or replaced in kind.
- Alterations should protect and preserve as much of the existing historic building fabric and overall arrangement of the major interior spaces as possible.