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REPORT ON THE NOAH PARKER HOUSE
182 MARKET STREET
PORTSMOUTH, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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DECEMBER 15, 2007

This report is based on a brief inspection of the Noah Parker House on the morning of December 14, 2007. Also present during the inspection were Patricia Meyers of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of New Hampshire, representing the owners of the property, and property manager Joseph Hunkins. The purpose of the inspection was to evaluate the architectural integrity and preservation values of the house in order to facilitate planning for the future treatment of the property.

Summary: The Noah Parker House is a character-defining element in the streetscape of the northern end of Market Street. It is one of few eighteenth-century structures to survive in Portsmouth's North End, a part of the city that was transformed by Urban Renewal and subsequent rebuilding. The Parker House is contemporaneous with the adjacent Moffatt-Ladd House. Together, the two buildings represent rare survivors in a neighborhood that has seen rapid and large-scale transformation in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The Parker House has been much altered, yet its presence still helps to define upper Market Street. Its future treatment is of importance to the character of one of the principal gateways to the older portion of the city.

History: The history of the Noah Parker House is poorly known at this point in the absence of concentrated research into deeds, probate records, court records, and city directories. The house has been dated as early as 1720, but its more likely date of construction is circa 1760.[1] It is

[1] The 1720 date is given in Dorothy M. Vaughan, "An Inventory of Historic Structures, Portsmouth, New Hampshire," typescript (Portsmouth: Community Improvement Program, c. 1972). This date is probably derived from the following statement in Caleb S. Gurney, *Portsmouth . . . Historic and Picturesque*, reprint of the 1902 edition (Hampton, N. H.: Peter E. Randall for Strawbery Banke, Inc., 1981), p. 34: "The roof of this house, made with a double pitch, is called a gambrel roof. The oldest houses in the city generally had steep roofs. The gambrels

known that the house already stood when the Rev. Noah Parker moved to the dwelling from his former residence (now destroyed) on Daniel Street, at the western corner of Penhallow Street, "during the Revolution, after selling his residence on Ark (Penhallow) Street."[2]

Noah Parker (1734-1787) was well educated, but practiced the trades of blacksmith and whitesmith, being highly skilled in both trades.[3] Parker became interested in religion, reportedly preaching at times in the Sandemanian meeting house, built on Pleasant Street in 1764. He was later an early adherent of the tenets of Universalism, and became the first Universalist minister in Portsmouth in 1784, shortly before his death. The first Universalist meeting house was built in Vaughan Street in 1784 to accommodate Parker's congregation.[4]

Following Parker's death, one of his daughters reportedly utilized the large dwelling as a boarding house suitable for ladies. In the absence of deed research, the outline of the subsequent history of the house is sketchy. Brewster reports that the property was later owned by C. Cushing.[5] Brewster further noted that the house was owned in 1869 by Captain John N. Frost.[6]

The house apparently remained a single-family residence through the early twentieth century. Its condition around 1900 is shown by a photograph in Gurney's *Portsmouth . . . Historic and Picturesque* (1902). The house was then in largely original condition on the exterior, with the only evident change to its façade being a doorway (frontispiece) in the Greek Revival style, probably dating from circa 1850. Remnants of that doorway may be incorporated beneath the present bracketed door hood.

As indicated by Sanborn fire insurance maps for the twentieth century, the house apparently remained a single-family dwelling until the early twentieth century. By 1920 it was a boarding house called "The New Boston," with automobile garages in the yard behind the dwelling. The fire insurance maps change the designation of the house from 2½ stories to 3 stories between 1904 and 1910, so the shed-roofed extension on the rear slope of the gambrel roof and the central gable in the front slope of the roof, both of which make the former attic more habitable, may both have been added at that time. The existing bay window south of the front door was added by 1920, perhaps relating to the conversion of the house to "The New Boston." The house very likely remained a boarding or apartment house from that time (and perhaps earlier) until the present. The "Inventory of Historic Structures" of circa 1972 indicates that the property was

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came into fashion as early as 1720 and went out after the Revolution . . ." The date was also given in a newspaper article by Mrs. Marston Fenwick, "Mr. Parker Lived Godly Life," *Portsmouth Herald*, September 13, 1958. Mrs. Fenwick sated that "The date of this house is uncertain but, because of its style, it could go back to 1720."

[2] Gurney, *Portsmouth . . . Historic and Picturesque*, p. 34.

[3] Nathaniel Adams, *Annals of Portsmouth*, reprint of the 1825 edition (Hampton, N. H.: Peter E. Randall, 1971), p. 289. Adams, whose ancestral home was also the ancestral home of Noah Parker, stated that Parker "made himself well acquainted with every branch of the [smithing] business, especially with those parts, which required most ingenuity to execute."

[4] Charles W. Brewster, *Rambles About Portsmouth*, First Series, 1859; reprint of the second edition of 1873 (Somersworth, N. H.: New Hampshire Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 124-127.

[5] Brewster, *Rambles About Portsmouth*, First Series, p. 125. This was presumably the Charles Cushing who lived nearby in Portsmouth's North End, rather than a second Charles Cushing who lived in the Governor Benning Wentworth House at Little Harbor.

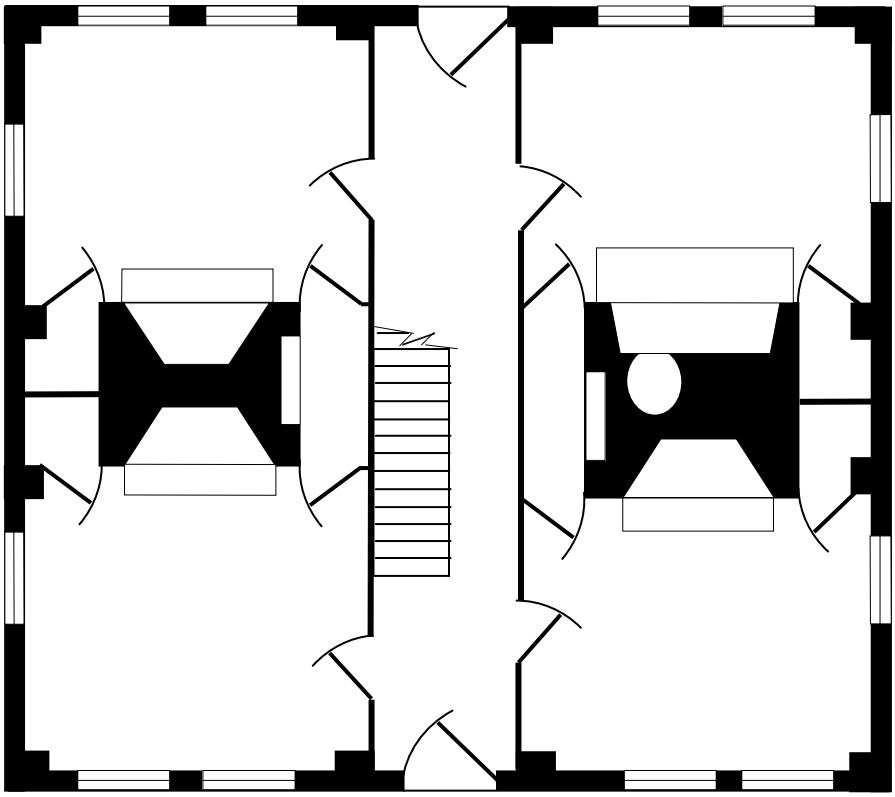
[6] Brewster, *Rambles About Portsmouth*, First Series, pp. 125, 343.

then owned by Richard Morton of Rye Beach, but that it had previously been "completely modernized, inside and out, by a former owner, Paul Napert."[7] A photograph published in the *Portsmouth Herald* on September 13, 1958, shows that the clapboards were then covered by cement-asbestos siding; they are now covered by vinyl siding.

Description: The Noah Parker House is a two-and-a-half story, gambrel-roofed house standing on a high stone foundation. The main body of the house measures about 44'-0" wide by 33'-8" deep. The northern end of the house is partly embraced by a twelve-foot-wide, one-story wing that extends westerly for some distance beyond the body of the main house.

The building began its history as a center-stairhall "double" house, with two chimneys. The chimneys remained intact until the 1960s, but were subsequently removed to provide more room in the several apartments within the house. No trace of the chimneys remains except perhaps for a portion of the base of the southerly chimney in one of the basement apartments.

The general first floor layout of the house, before twentieth-century alterations, is shown in the generic plan below. It may be assumed that the kitchen of the dwelling was on the north side, adjacent to the one-story wing, which probably served as an adjunct to the kitchen. As noted below, this wing appears not to be an original feature, but was probably added in the early 1800s along with certain other modifications to the dwelling.



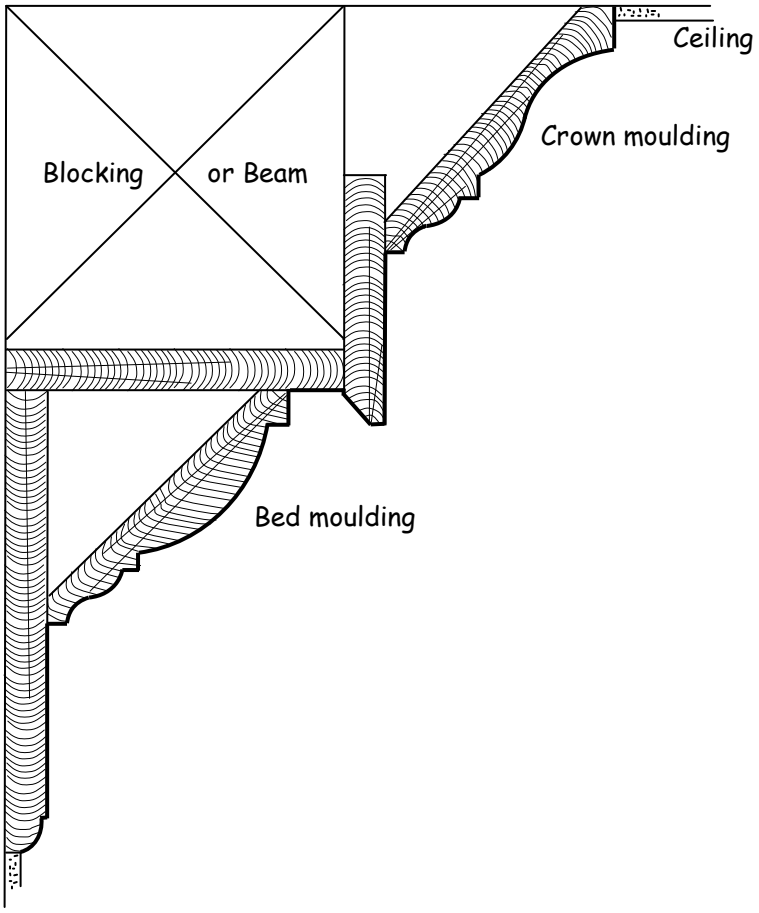
[7] Dorothy M. Vaughan, "An Inventory of Historic Structures, Portsmouth, New Hampshire," typescript (Portsmouth: Community Improvement Program, c. 1972).

As it presently stands, the house retains little of its original interior room arrangement. The frame of the house remains largely intact, as seen in the projecting corner posts in most rooms and in the visible wall plates at the ceilings of the front and rear rooms of the second story. The framing of the gambrel roof, which usually includes vertical posts that support the timber at the change or break in the roof line, is not visible on the top story because of the addition of many partitions to accommodate the apartments at that level.

The house may retain significant features of interior joinery, but few of these are visible. Most rooms have been finished with laminated wall coverings, and provided with dropped ceilings. These alterations have created apartment units that meet the expectations of modern tenants, but cover most diagnostic features that might permit a deeper understanding of the original level of finish in the house, or a more accurate estimate of the date of its construction.

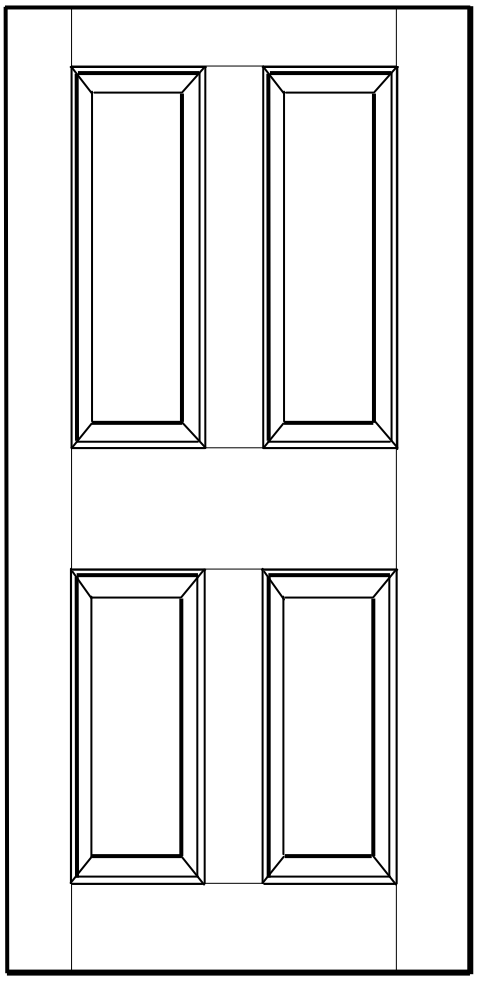
The single area that most obviously retains original joinery is the second story of the central stairhall. Where not obscured by modern finishes, this area retains its original interior cornice, paneled wainscoting, baseboards, and door casings. These features are characteristic of the best mid-eighteenth-century dwellings in Portsmouth, and in fact are directly comparable to equivalent details in the Moffatt-Ladd House next door to the south.

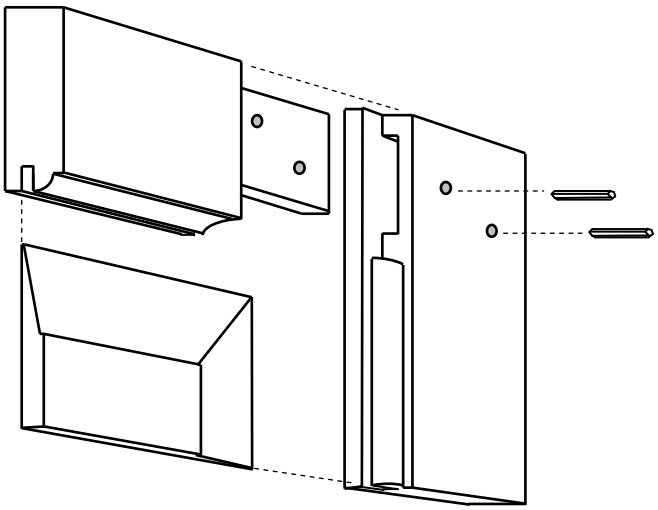
The cornice of the stairhall is especially well exposed in a small room at the front of the hall, now connected with the apartment in the northern side of the second story. As in the better houses of the mid-1700s, this cornice is mitered forward above original door and window openings, showing where doors originally opened from the front of the stairhall into the bedchambers. The profile of the cornice is shown below:



A break in the cornice and wainscoting at the rear (west) wall of the second story indicates that the house had a large window at the head of the stairs in this position. To judge from the baseboards of the exposed sections of wainscoting, the current level of the floor is only slightly higher that the original level. This indicates that the stairs rose directly to the second story without an intermediate landing.

The house retains a few two- and four-panel doors that are clearly original. These are characteristic eighteenth-century doors. A few retain their original H-hinges.





Exploded section of Georgian door

Where it survives, the wainscoting in the upper stairhall exhibits the same patterns of stiles, rails, and raised panels that are seen in the doors shown above.

There are a few indications that the house was modernized in the early 1800s, but the wholesale removal or covering of interior joiner's work makes it difficult to be specific about these changes. The most obvious early nineteenth-century modernization is the presence of hammered granite underpinning across the front of the house, and extending back some distance on the two sides. Hammered stone of this type is a building material of the late 1700s or, more commonly, of the early 1800s. As is common in other eighteenth-century houses in Portsmouth, the original, mortared rubble foundation of the house was eventually made more substantial and attractive through the substitution of two deep course of hammered granite in the most visible areas of the foundation.

As may be seen in earlier photographs, beginning with the image of circa 1900 reproduced in Gurney's *Portsmouth . . . Historic and Picturesque*, the elevation of Market Street in relation to the first story of the Noah Parker House has changed considerably over the years. Gurney's photograph shows a flight of seven risers ascending from the sidewalk to the threshold of the front door. The same photograph shows a low granite retaining wall or curb at the inner edge of the sidewalk. The space between the foundation and this curb was filled with sloping soil and planted with shrubs.

By 1958, when Mrs. Marston Fenwick's article was published in the *Portsmouth Herald*, the sidewalk and street had been lowered to the degree that the front steps included nine risers. The granite curb adjacent to the sidewalk had apparently been underlain by a concrete wall that rose perhaps two feet above the lowered sidewalk.

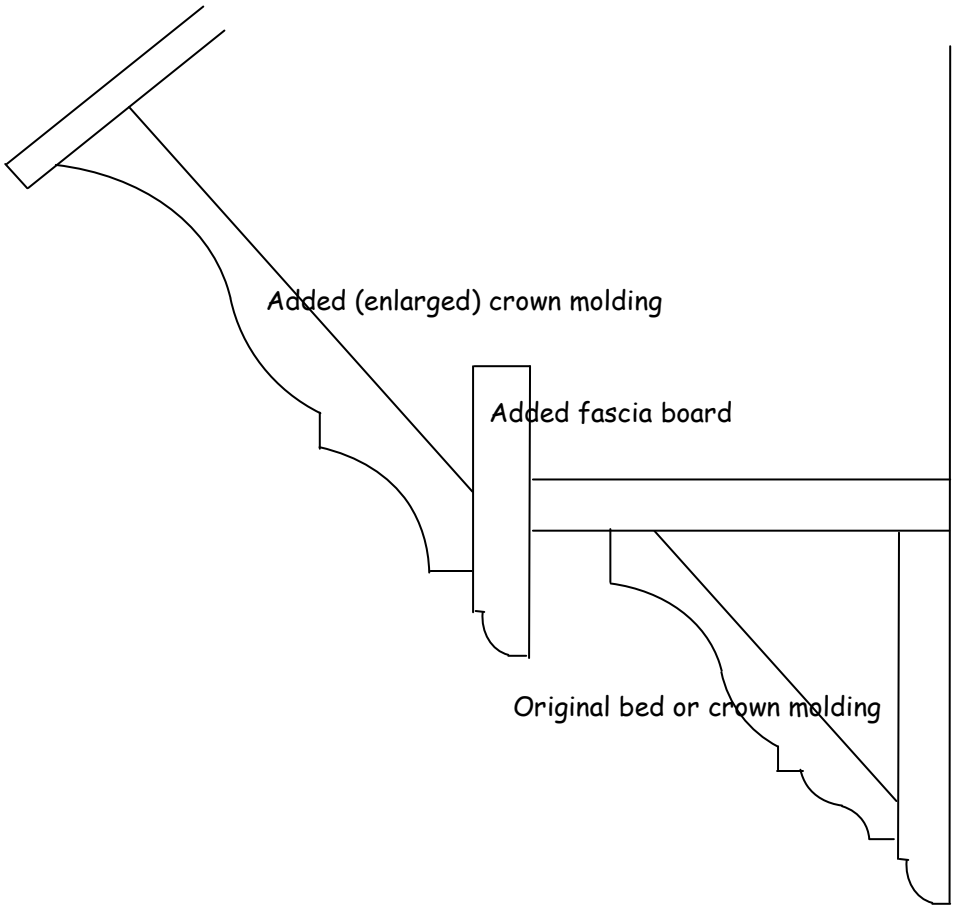
Today, the soil in front of the house has been removed. The foundation wall, presumably built of rubble below the two courses of hammered ashlar, has been faced and buttressed with concrete, which extends around the northern end of the house to support the side foundation in a passageway that has been excavated below the side porch to provide access to a basement apartment. The front steps now include twelve risers, and can no longer descend from the front door at right angles to the house. The new steps are of concrete construction, and descend from a porch floor at the front door along the front wall of the foundation, parallel and adjacent to the wall. These steps are penetrated by a doorway and passageway that provides access to a second apartment in the southern portion of the basement.

The presence of the granite underpinning seems to denote a modernization of the early 1800s, possibly as late as the mid-century, when the house received a front doorway in the Greek Revival style. It may be surmised that the rear wing of the house, which is framed with sawn scantlings below its first floor, also dates from the early nineteenth century. Although little of the framing of this extension is visible, the presence of a modern boiler room beneath the northwest corner of the original house makes it possible to study the original sill of the main house (which had decayed somewhat before the wing was added) and the original rubble foundation. A recent opening excavated through the old foundation and some adjacent ledge provides a glimpse of the floor framing of the wing.

There are stylistic as well as technological hints of a modernization in the early-to-mid 1800s. The first of these is seen within the house. The vertical face of the stairwell is visible at the second floor. This well has a rounded (rather than square) corner toward the front of the house.

The use of curved balustrades at the second story of stairwells is frequently seen in Portsmouth houses of the early-to-mid nineteenth century, but seldom before that period.

A second adaptation that reveals a modernization is seen in the front exterior cornice of the house (the original rear cornice was obliterated by the shed roof extension at the back of the house, mentioned earlier). The change to the front cornice shows the placement of a new crown molding over the original, as shown below:



The enlarged crown molding that was added in front of the original molding is of a nineteenth-century profile. It was added in an awkward way, with a fascia board that partly obscures the original molding that remains against the wall of the house, indicating a later alteration that was undoubtedly part of the updating of the façade—again, possibly in conjunction with the granite underpinning.

Significance: The Noah Parker House survives as a now-rare example of the gambrel-roofed house form in Portsmouth. Such houses were once fairly common. As noted above, their distinctive roofs elicited comment about their period of construction and popularity. Probably the first commentator to notice this type of roof was Charles Warren Brewster. In his first volume of *Rambles About Portsmouth* (1859, reprinted 1873), Brewster recounted a conversation with an elderly gentleman of more than ninety.

> The old gentleman stated that he well remembered the erection of Rev. Dr. Langdon's house, (now occupied by the family of John K. Pickering,) and Col. Oliver Whipple's, (on the spot where William Petigrew's house new stands.) All the houses were alike, of two stories, with gambrel roofs, and were built by Hopestill March of Dover, a mulatto.[8]

In the second series of his *Rambles*, Brewster elaborated somewhat upon the idea that Hopestill March was responsible for framing most or all of the gambrel-roofed houses of Portsmouth:

> Five years later, in 1743, Paul March, who married a daughter of John Newmarch, built the Bell Tavern. The building was framed by Hopestill Caswell of New Market, a mulatto, half brother of Paul March. That it was strongly made, the test of a century and a quarter has shown. On the completion of the work there was, according to the custom of the day, a merry gathering to commemorate it. Though Hopestill had performed an important part of the work, he did not venture to approach the board, until it was decided by the company that he should be permitted to come in and partake with them on the joyful occasion.[9]

Brewster's varied references to Hopestill "Caswell" or "March" confuse the identity of this housewright. In fact, he was Hopestill Cheswill, and his son Wentworth is well known and is commemorated by a New Hampshire state historical marker in Newmarket, which reads as follows:

WENTWORTH CHESWILL[10]
(1746-1817)

> One of the earliest students at Governor Dummer Academy in Massachusetts, Cheswill was among Newmarket's best-educated and most prosperous citizens. He was entrusted with many offices, including justice of the peace, selectman, town clerk, moderator, and representative. He amassed a noted private library, helped found the Newmarket Social Library, corresponded with Jeremy Belknap (1744-1798), New Hampshire's first historian, and conducted pioneering archaeological investigations. His father, Hopestill, was a noted housewright. His grandfather, Richard, was listed as "Negro."

Despite the stature of his son, Hopestill Cheswill has been poorly documented as a housewright. Nevertheless, the longstanding belief that Cheswill was responsible for

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[8] Charles W. Brewster, *Rambles About Portsmouth*, First Series, reprint of the 1873 second edition, p. 321.
[9] Charles W. Brewster, *Rambles About Portsmouth*, Second Series, reprint of the 1869 edition, pp. 339-40.
[10] There are several variants of the name "Cheswill." Erik R. Tuveson notes in his chapter on the family that "I have chosen 'Cheswill,' the form Wentworth Cheswill used when referring to himself in his Last Will and Testament/Codicil." Erik R. Tuveson, "'A People of Color': A Study of Race and Racial Identification in New Hampshire, 1750-1825," M.A. thesis, University of New Hampshire, 1995, Chapter 1.

framing most of Portsmouth's gambrel-roofed houses has brought him strong attention from the creators of Portsmouth's Black Heritage Trail.

Whoever may have framed the gambrel-roofed houses of Portsmouth, several of those that had survived until 1900 were lost to the city during the twentieth century. The Boyd-Raynes House was demolished in the 1930s; the Rev. Samuel Langdon House on Pleasant Street was moved to Old Sturbridge Village in 1952; and the Meserve-Webster House on Vaughan Street was razed during Urban Renewal in 1970. Others, such as the Samuel Sheafe House, or the smaller gambrel-roofed houses that had stood at the corner of Court and Washington Streets and at the corner of Congress and Fleet Streets, disappeared early in the twentieth century. Today there are only a few such houses left in Portsmouth, the first in importance being the John Paul Jones House on State Street and the Chase House on Court Street, a component of Strawbery Banke Museum.

Given the alterations that have changed the Noah Parker House throughout the twentieth century, the greatest significance of the house is as a character-defining element in the streetscape of Market Street and as a companion to the Moffatt-Ladd House in recalling the eighteenth century waterfront. Much of eighteenth-century Market Street was erased by the great fire of 1802, which swept northward from today's Market Square to the riverside just below the Moffatt-Ladd House. The area north and west of the Moffatt-Ladd House remained a largely intact neighborhood, containing many framed dwellings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, until about 1970. At that time, the largest Urban Renewal project in Portsmouth's history erased virtually the entire North End, leaving only a handful of moved houses in "The Hill" project north of North School Street and west of High Street.

In recent years, the land that was emptied by Urban Renewal has been extensively redeveloped. Construction of new buildings, many of them of a larger scale than any previously known in Portsmouth, has changed the northern end of Market Street and adjacent Deer Street beyond recognition. The property now owned by the Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of New Hampshire—the Moffatt-Ladd House and garden and the adjacent Noah Parker property—remains the only streetscape along the western side of upper Market Street that has not been transformed by redevelopment in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Dominated by two imposing eighteenth-century structures, the view north from Merchant's Row at the intersection of Market and Bow Streets remains largely unchanged from what has been familiar for the past century and more.

A decision regarding the future disposition of the Noah Parker House will, therefore, be appropriately focused on the streetscape as a whole, rather than on the details of the much altered dwelling. The construction of many new, large-scale buildings in Portsmouth, especially along Congress Street, Pleasant Street, and adjacent to the Moffatt-Ladd House on the south, has erased much of the once-familiar aspect of the city. The Noah Parker House is an integral element in Market Street as seen from the south and is also a dominant gateway building as one approaches from the north along Market Street

Extension. The Noah Parker House is therefore a character-defining element on one of the principal entry points of the city.