

# FORM B – BUILDING

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING  
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Assessor's Number USGS Quad Area(s) Form Number

10A 12

Georgetown

GEO.100

**Town/City:** Georgetown

**Place:** (*neighborhood or village*): Elm Street Area

## Photograph



View from E

## Locus Map



**Address:** 123 Elm Street

**Historic Name:** Asa & Ruth Nelson House

**Uses:** Present: residence

Original: residence

**Date of Construction:** ca. 1815

**Source:** historic maps & family histories

**Style/Form:** Federal

**Architect/Builder:** unknown

**Exterior Material:**

Foundation: stone

Wall/Trim: wood clapboard

Roof: asphalt shingle

**Outbuildings/Secondary Structures:**  
None

**Major Alterations** (*with dates*):

Addition on north end

**Condition:** good

**Moved:** no ☒ yes ☐ **Date:**

**Acreage:** 2.87 acres

**Setting:** This property is at the intersection of Elm, Brook, and Central Streets, on the west side of Elm Street. The lot features mature hardwoods. Elm Street is primarily residential.

**Recorded by:** Kathryn Grover and Neil Larson

**Organization:** Georgetown Historical Commission

**Date** (*month / year*): January 2010

# INVENTORY FORM B CONTINUATION SHEET

GEORGETOWN

123 Elm Street

## MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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☒ Recommended for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

*If checked, you must attach a completed National Register Criteria Statement form.*

*Use as much space as necessary to complete the following entries, allowing text to flow onto additional continuation sheets.*

### ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

*Describe architectural features. Evaluate the characteristics of this building in terms of other buildings within the community.*

The Asa & Ruth Nelson House is a two-story wood frame dwelling with a gable roof and wood clapboard siding built c. 1815. It is situated in the northeast corner of a 2.87-acre lot bounded on the east by Elm Street, the north by Brook Street and the west by Central Street. There is a lawn close around the house; the rear of the parcel is wooded with the Penn Brook running through it. A driveway on the south side of the house connects the street to a parking area.

The house is designed in a traditional early-19<sup>th</sup>-century rural manner: a two-story rectangular form with a five-bay front façade surmounted by a pronounced entablature. End chimneys are a modern feature as is the one-room-deep plan with rear kitchen wing. Of particular distinction on this house—a singular feature in the neighborhood—is a two-story entrance architrave that frames the central doorway and sidelights with pilasters and an entablature detailed with modillions across the cornice extends up to the second story to embrace the tripartite window there with a similar features. This would have been considered quite stylish in its day. Windows are larger on the first floor, made to contain nine-over-six sash; with smaller six-over-six sash on the second story. (All sash have been replaced with sash of similar pane configuration.) There are demi-lune windows in the attic. The elegant, attenuated verticality of the house appropriately reflects the Federal-Period taste.

The original rear kitchen ell would have been less bulky and pronounced than the current two-story mass that nearly equals the size of the house. It was altered when the need for more interior space outweighed (and post-dated) the aesthetic value of the house's design. A one-story wing was added to the north end of the house more recently.

Local historian Henry Mighill Nelson asserted in the late 1880s that the house (then called the Sherman Nelson house, for Asa's son, a later occupant) incorporated parts of an earlier structure built in the eighteenth century on Baldpate Road, but corroboration of the claim would require interior analysis.<sup>1</sup>

The Asa & Ruth Nelson House is a distinctive example of Federal-style domestic architecture on Elm Street that reflects a high level of decorative expression for the period. The property is an important component of the Elm Street historic district.

### HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

*Discuss the history of the building. Explain its associations with local (or state) history. Include uses of the building, and the role(s) the owners/occupants played within the community.*

According to local histories, aside from the road (now Massachusetts Route 133) connecting Georgetown to its parent Rowley to the east and Andover on the west, Elm Street is one of the oldest streets in Georgetown, having been opened to "public travel" about 1686.<sup>2</sup> At that time between ten and twenty families lived in what was known as Rowley second (or west) parish or New Rowley. Beginning in the 1650s Rowley proprietors began to make land grants in the town's western reaches; in 1666-67, the town laid out three thousand acres in the area and granted John Spofford the job of penning cattle "the young cattle of the towne" where they had "been herded this last year." Pen Brook is named for these pens, which stood west of Elm Street. In 1732 families in the area successfully petitioned to form the Second Church of Rowley (ultimately Georgetown's First

<sup>1</sup> Henry M. Nelson, "Town of Georgetown History," in D. Hamilton Hurd. *History of Essex County, Massachusetts, with Biographical Sketches of Many of Its Pioneers and Prominent Men* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis and Co., 1888), 1: 815, 832.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Benjamin F. Arrington, ed., *Municipal History of Essex County in Massachusetts* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1922), 146.

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Congregational Church) and built a second meetinghouse at the junction of Elm and East Main Streets in 1769. In 1838 the General Court of Massachusetts incorporated Georgetown, which embraced most of the second parish.<sup>3</sup>

By 1800, according to a map showing the town center at that time, various branches of the Nelson family owned large tracts embracing both sides of Elm and Chestnut Street and both sides of Main Street in this section. All of these branches descended from Thomas Nelson (1615-about 1648), who was among the twenty families who had come to the New World in the winter of 1638 with the Puritan cleric Ezekiel Rogers (1590-166). With Rogers most of these families settled at Rowley, incorporated in 1639.

The extent to which Nelson family lands reached southward is not clear from the 1800 village map, but by 1830 the tract on which this property is sited belonged to "Deacon" Asa Nelson (1790-1855). The first Nelson to own the land in this section of Elm Street was Joseph Nelson (1682-1744), the grandson of the immigrant Thomas Nelson. According to local historian Henry Mighill Nelson, Joseph Nelson was the "first of this name to settle in Georgetown."<sup>4</sup> A detailed title search would be necessary to establish early ownership firmly, but this tract ultimately descended not through the immigrant Thomas's son Philip, Joseph's grandfather, but through his son Thomas (1638-1712). Deacon Asa Nelson was the great great grandson of Thomas. His father David (1761-1847) was the cousin of Nathaniel Nelson (1767-1853), who in 1800 owned the land at the southeast side of the intersection of East Main and Elm Streets and lived at 8 Elm Street; his uncle Solomon (1742-1821) owned land on the west side of Elm Street that also bordered this junction.

In 1814 Asa Nelson married Ruth Perley (1795-1881), a descendant of the Welsh immigrant Allan Perley and a distant cousin of Gilman Perley (70 Elm Street), Apphia Perley Low (126 Elm), and Apphia Ann Perley Merrill (35 Elm). A Perley family history published in 1906 describes Ruth Nelson's character and early life:

The first years of Mrs. Nelson's marriage were spent upon the estate now known as the "Larkin Place," where her husband established and carried on his tannery; but the growth of the center of the town attracted them, and they moved their residence and business to the place on Elm street, where for sixty years as wife and widow the deceased has lived, and with one or two exceptions has never spent a night away from it. She was a woman possessed of a very even temperament, never excited or depressed, nor enthusiastic over new things, but tenacious of old friendships.<sup>5</sup>

If the chronology in this account is correct, the house at 123 Elm dates at least as early as 1821. An 1888 history by Henry Mighill Nelson places Asa Nelson's presence on Elm Street earlier. "In 1815, or near that date, Deacon Asa Nelson, who had served his three years' apprenticeship with his relative Deacon Solomon Nelson, and had worked at the business for two or three years at the Pearson tannery, on North Street, began operations at his home on Elm St., now owned by his son, Sherman Nelson."<sup>6</sup> No house appears on this site in the 1810 map of the village, so the house may date to 1815.

Local historian Edwin Hill states that Asa Nelson was among eleven "principal tanners and curriers" in Georgetown. The tanning business began in Georgetown about 1780 when Benjamin Adams set up a tannery on Central Street, and by 1839 there were nine "tan-houses" in Georgetown. These nine businesses, combined with six in Rowley, tanned 11,600 hides worth \$43,400 in that year and employed thirty-one people.<sup>7</sup> In a single year, John Kimball, who had bought the Adams tannery in 1825, tanned and curried four thousand South American horsehides.<sup>8</sup>

At some point Asa Nelson, whose tannery is said to have done a "large business," began to make shoes as well. A 1938 town history states that Asa Nelson had a shop on his property at the corner of Elm and Brook Streets; he made shoes on the first floor, and at least five other shoemakers worked on the second floor. At some point this shop was moved behind the shoe

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Gage, *The History of Rowley* (Boston: Ferdinand Andrews, 1840), 31-32, 320, 324, 326, 329.

<sup>4</sup> Henry M. Nelson, "Town of Georgetown History," in D. Hamilton Hurd, *History of Essex County, Massachusetts, with Biographical Sketches of Many of Its Pioneers and Prominent Men* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis and Co., 1888), 1: 812.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Van Buren Perley, *History and Genealogy of the Perley Family* (Salem: by the author, 1906), 1:312-13.

<sup>6</sup> Nelson, "Town of Georgetown History," 845. Asa's son Sherman and the historian Henry Mighill Nelson had the same great great grandfather, Solomon Nelson (1703-81). Deacon Solomon Nelson was the great uncle of Deacon Asa Nelson.

<sup>7</sup> Gage, *History of Rowley*, 402-3.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson, "Town of Georgetown History," 844.

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factory of George Jewett Tenney, near the current center of town, "and there it housed the first pegging machine used in Georgetown."<sup>9</sup>

In 1855 Asa Nelson died, and in 1860 his widow Ruth is shown as a boardinghouse keeper but with only one boarder at this location. In the household as well were her children Solomon and Sherman, both farmers, and Solomon's wife and son. According to one family history Sherman was schooled at Thetford Academy in Vermont and then worked on his father's farm until 1867, a year after his marriage to Catherine S. Spofford of Georgetown. For a time he worked as a grocer in Georgetown and in 1870 he went into the livery business with a brother. By 1875 he returned to farming, but he no longer lived on Elm Street after 1867.

The house at 123 Elm Street is labeled "Moore" on the 1872 map and "Mrs. Moore" in 1884. The 1880 census makes clear that Ruth Nelson was still living on this part of Elm Street, though she may have moved when Sherman did to another Nelson house on Elm; the 1872 map appears to show her at the house that then stood across Brook Street at 119 Elm Street. She died in 1881. The "Mrs. Moore" was probably Deborah Bridges Edmunds Moore, whose husband was the merchant and farmer Caleb K. Moore. In 1880 she is enumerated among residents of Central Street but seemingly near the site of this house and worked stitching boots by hand; Elizabeth, the daughter of her first marriage to David Edmunds, lived with her and worked at the same trade. By that time Caleb Moore had died, and in 1884 Deborah Moore died of consumption.

Who owned the property between 1884 and about 1908 is not known, but at some point between those years it may have been inherited by Greenleaf Nelson Dole, whose mother Caroline M. Nelson Dole was Sherman Nelson's sister. Dole's father George was a Georgetown shoemaker, and Greenleaf followed the same trade. In 1908 Greenleaf Dole and his partner Stephen Marshall, both of Haverhill, were bankrupt, and the property was sold to George E. Newcomb of Georgetown. The next year Newcomb sold it to the shoe manufacturer Fred W. Baker, who lived near his Central Street factory but grew up at his father Cornelius's house at 150 Elm Street. Cornelius Baker took his son as a partner in 1890, and in 1900 Fred W. Baker began his own business and manufactured "the famous "Little Ripper" shoes for boys and youths." After a fire in 1917 destroyed his factory, Baker went into business with the Salem shoe manufacturer Cass and Daley as F. W. Baker Shoe Company and bought the H. Prescott Chaplin shoe factory, also on Central Street. Baker and his partners enlarged the facility, "installed a full line of modern machinery," and manufactured shoes worth "upwards of half a million dollar business annually."<sup>10</sup>

The Bakers owned 123 Elm until 1939 and sold it that year to Elizabeth T. Morse, who owned it until 1963. In that year Morse sold the property to Virginia H. Rickard; she in turn sold it the next year to Harvey J. and Carol R. Collins, who were occupying the house at the time. Five years later the Collinses sold it to current owner Carol A. Faraci.<sup>11</sup> In 1983 Faraci subdivided what was then a 3.83-acre tract into 123 and 129 Elm Street in that year.

<sup>9</sup> Forrest P. Hull, *Georgetown: Story of One Hundred Years, 1838-1938*. (1938; reprint, Georgetown, MA: Georgetown Historical Commission, 2006), 66.

<sup>10</sup> Arrington, *Municipal History*, 259-60.

<sup>11</sup> J. Lester Adams, trustee, to George E. Newcomb, 15 April 1908, SED 1916:256; Newcomb to Fred W. Baker, 30 July 1909, SED 1987:142; Maud L. Baker to Elizabeth T. Morse, 24 November 1939, SED 3202:470; Morse to Virginia H. Rickard, 23 October 1963, SED 5175:551; Rickard to Harvey J. and Carol R. Collins, 19 May 1964, SED 5175:552; Collinses to Carol A. Faraci, 5644:738; See Faraci plan, 13 January 1983, Southern Essex Registry Plan Book 335 plan 20.

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**MAPS**

"Map of the Centre of Georgetown in 1800." In Perley, Sidney H., "Centre of Georgetown in the Year 1800." *The Essex Antiquarian: A Quarterly Magazine Devoted to the Biography, Genealogy, History, and Antiquities of Essex County, Massachusetts* 2, 7 (July 1898): 201.

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[Delete this page if no Criteria Statement is prepared]

National Register of Historic Places Criteria Statement Form

Check all that apply:

- ☐ Individually eligible      ☐ Eligible **only** in a historic district
- ☒ Contributing to a potential historic district      ☐ Potential historic district

Criteria:    ☒ **A**    ☐ **B**    ☒ **C**    ☐ **D**

Criteria Considerations:    ☐ **A**    ☐ **B**    ☐ **C**    ☐ **D**    ☐ **E**    ☐ **F**    ☐ **G**

Statement of Significance by \_\_\_\_\_Neil Larson and Kathryn Grover\_\_\_\_\_

*The criteria that are checked in the above sections must be justified here.*

The Asa & Ruth Nelson House is a distinctive example of Federal-style domestic architecture on Elm Street that reflects a high level of decorative expression for the period. The property is an important component of the Elm Street historic district.



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View from SE



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View from NE



View from N