

FORM B – BUILDING

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

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

10B-55

Georgetown

GEO.8

Town/City: Georgetown

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

Photograph



View from W

Address: 8 Elm Street

Historic Name: Nathaniel & Mary Nelson House

Uses: Present: residence

Original: residence

Date of Construction: 1797

Source: local histories

Style/Form: Late Colonial

Architect/Builder: unknown

Exterior Material:

Foundation: stone

Wall/Trim: wood clapboard/wood trim

Roof: asphalt shingle

Outbuildings/Secondary Structures:

Garage (attached)

Major Alterations (*with dates*):

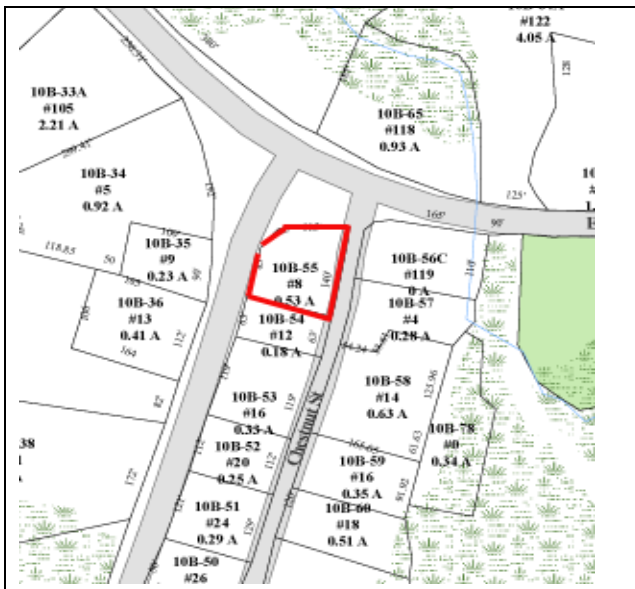
Condition: good

Moved: no ☒ yes ☐ **Date:**

Acreage: 0.53 acre

Setting: This property is located on the east side of Elm Street, which is primarily residential, and stands just south of the intersection of Elm and East Main Streets.

Locus Map



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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 Nathaniel Nelson House is situated in the center of a small half-acre lot at the intersection of Elm and East Main streets. The parcel abuts Chestnut Street on the rear (east) side, having once extended farther east to the Pen Brook where Nelson's tannery was located. The yard south of the house is enclosed with a paddock fence constructed with three horizontal boards; the north side of the yard is open with mature evergreens screening the house from East Main Street.

Tradition dates the house at 1797. The 1798 direct tax list assesses Nathaniel's dwelling at less than \$100, which suggests the large and elaborate house had been recorded in the possession of his father, Solomon Nelson, Jr. By 1810 a map of the area depicted the house as the only dwelling on the east side of Elm Street (Chestnut Street did not exist). The 18th-century construction date (and the elder Nelson's involvement) is indicated in the traditional 18th-century form and appearance of the building. However, the antique appearance may have been enhanced by Colonial Revival era alterations.

The two-story wood frame house has a squarish plan and a massive center chimney in a hipped roof. Narrow wood clapboards cover the walls with a shaped cornice to which gutters have been added. The five-bay front façade contains a center entrance contained within a Classical porch with fluted Doric columns, tall entablature and a pedimented roof. The entrance is flanked by narrow pilasters and topped by a transom; it is further bordered by fluted pilasters for the porch. Windows have simple, square-headed architraves; those on the first story also have a cornice. The six-over-six wood sashes are later replacements. Three dormers topped by pediments are evenly spaced across the front of the roof. There are three window bays on the north side and two window bays on the south side.

A narrow, two-story ell is centered on the rear façade leaving two closely-spaced bays on either side. This section purportedly was added in the early 1800s. It has a steep gable roof with a Greek Revival-style entablature and corner pilasters reflecting mid-19th-century taste hinting at a later period of construction or alteration. Entrances and irregularly-spaced windows are located on the sides. Historical accounts state that there once was an attached barn, which has been replaced with a one-story, gable-roof garage with two vehicle doors opening on a driveway facing Chestnut Street.

The Nathaniel Nelson House is a distinctive example of late Colonial architecture with its center chimney, tall hipped roof and Classical trim. Its late construction date illustrates the persistence of traditional house design and construction methods in the hinterlands of Essex County. The property is individually eligible for the National Register in the local context for its architectural integrity and distinction as well as its historical associations. It is a key component in an 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 1686.¹ 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

¹ 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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towne” where they had “been herded this last yeare.” 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 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.²

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.

Five members of the Nelson family—four descended from Thomas Nelson’s son Sergeant Thomas Nelson (1638-1712) and the fifth from the immigrant’s son Philip (1636-91)—owned the land around Elm Street and the contiguous section of East Main Streets. Three were the sons of Thomas’s grandson Solomon Nelson (1703-81) and Mercy Chaplin—Amos (1736-1806), Asa (1739-1815), and Solomon Jr. (1742-1821). Another, Nathaniel Nelson (1767-1853), was the son of Solomon Nelson Jr., and the fifth, Aaron Nelson (1740-1804), was the great-grandson of Philip Nelson. Nathaniel Nelson’s parcel extended from the 1767 church along the east side of Elm Street. Local histories state that Nathaniel’s father Solomon had built a house for him on this tract just south of the church in 1797.³ Indeed, the 1798 Federal Direct Tax schedules for Rowley show that Solomon owned two houses at that time. By 1800 he had given one to Nathaniel and owned another two, one at the southwestern side of the junction of Elm and East Main Streets and the other east of these, now 144 East Main Street, which became the home of Nathaniel’s brother Stephen Mighill Nelson (1770-1855).

Many of the early Nelson men owned and operated tanneries. “The most important and extensive early mechanical industry established in this town was that of tanning and currying, the annual production of leather being quite large,” local historian Edwin Hill wrote in 1878. A statistical survey mandated by the state in 1837 found sixteen tanneries in Rowley, nine of which were in the Georgetown section of the town, processing \$43,400 of leather from 11,600 hides and employing thirty-one people. By that year Georgetown (incorporated the following year) was both larger than Rowley and much more focused on industrial development; Rowley remained by and large agricultural.⁴

According to Edwin Hill, Solomon Nelson Jr., his brother Asa, and his son Nathaniel were all engaged in the tanning business, as were Nathaniel’s brother Jeremiah (1768-1838) and Nathaniel’s son William (1810-89), who were identified as a tanner and currier in the 1850 federal census. The local business is believed to have been initiated by Captain Benjamin Adams on Central Street, just west of Elm, in 178; at some unstated date soon after, according to Henry M. Nelson’s 1888 history, Nathaniel Nelson began a tannery “near the meetinghouse.”⁵ Nelson noted that some of these tanners, including Nathaniel, used locally supplied hides:

An extensive business in the slaughtering of cattle was carried on in town early in the present century and during the war with England. This was conducted principally by Deacon Solomon Nelson and his cousin, Nathaniel Nelson. Drovers of fifty or more head were often purchased at one time. Cattle were frequently bought of Governor Colby, of New Hampshire. The deacon was also State inspector of beef. The cellar floor under his house has at times been completely covered with barrels of beef awaiting shipment. The hides were converted into leather, and both industries carried on simultaneously.⁶

² Thomas Gage, *The History of Rowley* (Boston: Ferdinand Andrews, 1840), 31-32, 320, 324, 326, 329.

³ “Map of Centre of Georgetown in 1800,” in Sidney Perley, “Centre of Georgetown in the Year 1800,” *Essex Antiquarian* 2, 7 (July 1898), 101, based on the manuscript map “Georgetown 1800,” 1996.07.01, Georgetown Historical Society. This map shows only a northern section of Elm Street and does not show how far south Nathaniel Nelson’s tract extended. On the west side of Elm Street Aaron Nelson’s tract abutted Solomon Nelson’s on the south, but again the map does not reveal how far it extended southward. Perley, “Centre of Georgetown,” 105, asserts the probability that Solomon Nelson Jr. built 8 Elm Street for his son.

⁴ See Gage, *History of Rowley*, 402-3, and Blanche Evans Hazard, *The Organization of the Boot and Shoe Industry in Massachusetts before 1875* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 210, which notes that these statistics were gathered and published by John Warner Barber in *Historical Collections of Every Town in Massachusetts* (Worcester: Dorr, Howland and Co., 1839), 66, 201.

⁵ Henry M. Nelson, “Town of Georgetown History,” in *History of Essex County, Massachusetts, with Biographical Sketches of Many of Its Pioneers and Prominent Men*, ed. D. Hamilton Hurd (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis and Co., 1888), 1:844.

⁶ Nelson, “Georgetown History,” 844-45.

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Nelson added that at some point Nathaniel Nelson moved buildings from another part of town to Chestnut Street, just behind his house, to use in his tannery business: he is shown as owning what may be 4 Chestnut Street on an 1830 Georgetown map, but by 1856 it had apparently been sold, and by 1872 his son William owned 119 East Main Street, just north of 4 Chestnut.

Nathaniel Nelson was also at some early point in the 1800s a banker in Newburyport, which no doubt provided the pretext for an event historian Benjamin Arrington described in a 1922 history of the town:

In the cellar of this house may be seen a recess in one of the great chimneys where, tradition says, papers and gold belonging to the city of Newburyport were stored for safe keeping during the War of 1812, when much fear of a British invasion was felt in the New England coast towns. Mr. Nelson brought the valuables from Newburyport in an ox team by night, and in telling the story years afterward to his daughter, Mrs. J. P. Jones, said at its conclusion, 'And only think, daughter, they never asked me to give any security for all that gold.' Such was the reputation for probity of one of the early founders of our town.⁷

By 1850 Nathaniel Nelson was eighty-three years old and shown in the census as a farmer with more than seventeen thousand dollars in property. His second wife, Mary "Polly" Spofford, was sixty-one years old, and the household included their daughter Mary Spofford Nelson, born about 1830, and six boarders, four of them born in Ireland; one of these men was listed as a painter, but the others may have been workers at William Nelson's tannery. In 1853 Nathaniel Nelson died, and the house passed to his son. By the 1860 census William Nelson too was shown as a farmer. He died in 1889, one year after his wife Mary Stickney Nelson died. The house may then have passed to their daughter Elizabeth, who in 1851 married the attorney Jeremiah Pingree Jones (1819-92), a New Hampshire-born attorney of some renown in Essex County and a prominent Georgetown resident.⁸ Jones's widow Elizabeth died in 1902, and by 1906 Henry L. Adams of Georgetown had acquired the property. Adams, the son of longtime Elm Street resident (#5) and horse dealer and stable proprietor Jophanus Adams, then ran an express company. He rented the property from at least 1914 to the shoemaker Joseph H. Scates, who died in 1914; his widow Prudence remained at 8 Elm Street until at least 1930. During that time the house changed hands three times. In 1923 it was sold to Henrietta G. Lee of Salem, whose husband Benjamin was, like Adams's father, a horse dealer.⁹ Lee also rented the house. In 1933 assessor's records show 8 Elm to have been occupied by three shoe factory workers—Charles Murray Watson, his son-in-law George I. Hayes, and Charles A. Timmons.

Lee's family owned 8 Elm until 1936, when they sold it to Everett A. and Mary A. Spaulding. A Georgetown native, Everett Augustus Spaulding made colonial revival furniture under the corporate name Spaulding Colonial Reproductions; some of his pieces were modeled on the furniture made by Newburyport cabinetmaker Joseph Short (1771-1819). The 1930 census shows Spaulding as an antique dealer, an occupation in which he may have been schooled by his uncle Wilbur B. Spaulding, an antique furniture dealer from at least 1910. In 1931 Everett Spaulding and his wife bought 108 East Main Street, now the Brocklebank Museum/Georgetown Historical Society; the couple lived there and ran the business in buildings on that site and across the street at Jophanus Adams's old 5 Elm Street property. The Spauldings owned numerous Georgetown properties, a number of them on Elm Street, during this time. In 1936 they sold 8 Elm Street, and the property changed hands four times before it was purchased by current owners Charles D. and Betty G. Allen in 1981.¹⁰

⁷ Arrington, *Municipal History*, 248.

⁸ A lengthy biography of Jones appears in *Memorials of the Essex Bar Association* (Salem: Newcomb and Gauss, 1900), 158-62.

⁹ Henry L. Adams to Alice Tilton Damrell, 6 August 1906, Southern Essex County Registry of Deeds book 1837 page 362 (hereafter cited as SED book:page); Wilfred Abbot Crouch to Henrietta G. Lee, 27 December 1923, SED 2584:123.

¹⁰ Harold C. Lee to Everett A. and Mary A. Spaulding, 8 October 1936, SED 3091:576; Bruce A. and Anna G. Bugbee to Charles D. and Betty G. Allen, 30 April 1981, SED 6858:790.

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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.
- Map of Georgetown in 1810 and 1840. In Gage, Thomas. *The History of Rowley, Anciently Including Bradford, Boxford, and Georgetown, from the Year 1639 to the Present Time*. Boston: F. Andrews, 1840. 320.
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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 Nathaniel Nelson House is a distinctive example of late Colonial architecture with its center chimney, tall hipped roof and Classical trim. Its late construction date illustrates the persistence of traditional house design and construction methods in the hinterlands of Essex County. The property is individually eligible for the National Register in the local context for its architectural integrity and distinction as well as its historical associations. It is a key component in an Elm Street historic district.

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View from NW



View from SW

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View from W



View from S

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View from NE

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View from SE



Aerial view from SW