

Nichols House Awarded Historic Marker

SALEM — Historic Salem, Inc., awarded the second marker in the group's continuing house sign project to the Mason, Roberts, Colby, Nichols house at 93 Federal St. One of the earliest square houses built in the city, this home spans a history of almost 200 years and its occupants have ranged from the captain of an early Salem schooner to a recently retired captain of the United States Navy.

Built by Jonathan Mason in 1768, the house was originally located at the north side of Mall St. in Washington Sq. on land that had been in the Mason Family for about 100 years. Records imply that the house was erected on an old foundation, the original structure having been moved or destroyed by fire.

A sea captain in his early twenties, Jonathan Mason was in command of several of the fast schooners that carried salt, fish and lumber to the West Indies and returned to Salem with molasses and rum. He also became a successful merchant, selling food and supplies to outgoing vessels. Prominent in the Salem Marine Society, Capt.

Mason served as its secretary for many years and took an active part in the building of the first beacon on Bakers Island, a gift of the society to mariners of the area. This beacon predated the lighthouse built by the federal government in 1798. Capt. Mason spent the latter years of his life as wharfinger, or superintendent, of the Union Wharf, commonly called long wharf. He died on Nov. 10, 1799.

After the death of the original builder, the house had several different owners until it was bought at auction by William Roberts in April, 1818. It was then moved off of its foundation on Mall St. on to Ferry Ln. or Brown St. where it remained to obstruct traffic for a week. In an entry in his diary dated May 14, 1818, Dr. William Bentley notes, "We have been amused, not to say affronted, by the attempt to convey through our streets from Washington Sq. to Federal St., a house of three stories from Mason's lot. The smaller parts had been sent on. The main house was dragged into the street and stood for a week. Yesterday it passed St. Peter's church. The pumps on the street corners were removed and the cornerstone of the

church, and after a long day's work, with a total of 60 oxen and their proper drivers and with screws, chains and cables, I saw it turned. The operation did no honor to their judgment."

After what must have been a trying time for the owner and one of sheer delight for the children of Salem, William Roberts eventually got his house to the vacant lot at what is now 91 and 93 Federal St. A brickmason and contractor, Roberts built many buildings in Salem, including the present St. Peter's Church and the Salem Depot, since torn down. He was married to Sally Sanderson, the daughter of Elijah Sanderson, Salem cabinetmaker.

A study of the records reveals the interesting history of the open tract of land on Federal St. to which William Roberts moved his house. In 1806 Micah Wild, gentleman, and Capt. James Barr, mariner, held adjoining lots of nearly equal size with a combined frontage of 150 feet on Federal St., and which extended back southerly to the estate of Nathaniel Ropes. On Feb. 12, 1806, the two men agreed to divide the land, each giving up 12 feet in order, "to

lay out a court or private way of 24 feet wide." This agreement was the origin of Federal Court.

The lot owned by Micah Wild was purchased by Hugh Irwin, who in turn sold it on April 6, 1813 for \$712 to John Cheverus, the Right Reverend Bishop and Pastor of the Roman Catholic Society of Boston. It is thought that the Bishop intended to build a chapel there, but he may have decided that, with the increased number of Catholics in Salem, the lot was too small. He sold the site to William Roberts in April, 1817 for \$500. In 1920 the Bishop did purchase land on the northeastern corner of Mall St. and Bridge St., on which was built the first Catholic Chapel in Salem. This lot was a part of the original Jonathan Mason estate.

The ownership of the Mason-Roberts-Colby-Nichols house has remained with the descendants of William Roberts until the present time. A grandson, William R. Colby, (1844-1922), lived in the house for 76 years. He was in the Marine insurance business and the member of several trusts, including the Ropes Memorial. The present owner, Mrs. Agnes Colby Nichols has resided at 63 Federal St. for 44 years and Capt. Henry C. Nichols has made the house his permanent home since his retirement from the United States Navy in 1959. Capt. and Mrs. Nichols occupy the west side of the 18 room house, and the Misses Kathleen and Mary Adams, the east side.

Historic Salem, Inc. is anxious to aid any residents of Salem who wish to trace the history of their property in order to qualify for the group's house marker. The president, Mrs. Robert W. Reardon or members of the board of directors may be contacted. The final authorities

in documentation are Mrs. Ralf Emerson and Mrs. Charles Potter.

(Reference material for the above was found in: "Diary of William Bentley"; Essex County Court Records; "Salem Register", 1818; Curwen's Lists; Essex Institute; Shipping Records, Peabody Museum; and the parish records of the Church of the Immaculate Conception.)