

History of House & Occupants, 268 Jefferson Avenue, Salem

By Robert Booth, 25 Feb. 2008

According to available evidence, this house was built for William Fregeau, tanner, in 1886, as a residence for himself, wife Octavie (Gagnon) Fregeau, and their children. It remained in the ownership of the Fregeau family for 120 years.

On September 13, 1886, Messrs. Moulton & Almy, owners of a large tract of land, sold this corner lot for \$100 to Octave (sic), wife of William Frazero (sic) of Salem. The lot, 50' by 100', was identified as Lot 28 on a plan of a subdivision of the Derby Estate (ED 1182:235). It fronted 50' on Jefferson Avenue, and bounded 100' on John Street (sic), south 100' on Lot 27, west 50' on Lot 24.

William and "Octave" Fragero (sic) on October 25, 1886, mortgaged the premises for \$289 to Frank A. Langmaid, a lumber dealer (ED 1185:8). At that time, the lot was described as having a building thereon, presumably this house. Perhaps Mr. Langmaid had sold the lumber for the construction of the house.

The Derby Estate to which the deeds refer was the former property of E. Hersey Derby, a wealthy farmer, son of the merchant E. Hasket Derby, who had opened Salem's trade with the Orient in the 1780s. The Derby farm occupied much of the acreage of the Southfields, as South Salem was known. In the 1840s, some of the lots along Lafayette Street were sold off, but most of the farm remained intact until 1867, when James F. Almy (co-owner of the city's biggest department store) and two partners purchased the entire property and proceeded to develop it with new streets and house-lots. Mr. Almy offered to set aside several acres as a beautiful park, but the city fathers, some of them motivated by jealousy of his business success, refused to accept his gift. This house-lot (#268 Jefferson Avenue) is one of the many carved out of the old Derby farmlands as they were transformed into new residential neighborhoods. It is in the district once known as Castle Hill, which had once been a summer retreat. The hill was taken down in the 1880s and used to fill in the marsh to make for buildable land.

John Street soon was re-named Arthur Street. Jefferson Avenue was originally (briefly) named Madison Avenue.

At the same time, the grantors were selling other lots hereabouts at “Castle Hill” to other French Canadian couples. The next-door property, #272, was sold to Olympe Gagnon in 1886. I suspect that she was the older sister of Mrs. Octavie Fregeau. Note: in the 1881 census for Hochelaga, Quebec, there is household composed of three Gagnon females: Olympe, 35, Amanda, 22, and Octavie, 19. Olympe Gagnon would marry Charles Tardif by 1895; the couple separated in 1904; and Olympe remained in the neighborhood until at least 1914.

Salem began to receive a large number of French Canadians in the decade of the 1870s. After the Civil War and through the 1860s, Salem had pursued manufacturing, especially of leather and shoes and textiles. The managers and capitalists tended to build their new, grand houses along Lafayette Street (these houses may still be seen, south of Holly Street; many are in the French Second Empire style, with mansard roofs). A third factory building for the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company was built in 1865, down on Stage Point, and in a few years, it seems, it was this Company that recruited French Canadians to come work at its textile machines.

Seafaring commerce was dying out. In 1870 Salem received its last cargo from Zanzibar, thus ending a once-important trade. By then, a new Salem & New York freight steamboat line was in operation. Seven years later, with the arrival of a vessel from Cayenne, Salem’s foreign trade came to an end. After that, “the merchandise warehouses on the wharves no longer contained silks from India, tea from China, pepper from Sumatra, coffee from Arabia, spices from Batavia, gum-copal from Zanzibar, hides from Africa, and the various other products of far-away countries. The boys have ceased to watch on the Neck for the incoming vessels, hoping to earn a reward by being the first to announce to the expectant merchant the safe return of his looked-for vessel. The foreign commerce of Salem, once her pride and glory, has spread its white wings and sailed away forever” (Rev. George Bachelder in *History of Essex County*, II: 65).

Salem was now so densely built-up that a general conflagration was always a possibility, as in Boston, when, on Nov. 9, 1872, the financial and manufacturing district of the city burned up. Salem continued to prosper in the 1870s, carried forward by the leather-making business. In 1874 the city was visited by a tornado and shaken by a minor earthquake. In the following year, the large Pennsylvania Pier (site of the present coal-fired harborside electrical generating plant) was completed to begin receiving large shipments of coal. Beyond it, at Juniper Point, a new owner began subdividing the old Allen farmlands into a new development called Salem Willows and Juniper

Point. In the U.S. centennial year, 1876, A.G. Bell of Salem announced that he had discovered a way to transmit voices over telegraph wires.

In this decade, French-Canadian families began coming to work in Salem's mills and factories, and more houses and tenements were built. The better-off workers bought portions of older houses or built small homes for their families in the outlying sections of the city; and by 1879 the Naumkeag Steam Cotton mills would employ 1200 people and produce annually nearly 15 million yards of cloth. Shoe-manufacturing businesses expanded in the 1870s, and 40 shoe factories were employing 600-plus operatives. Tanning, in both Salem and Peabody, remained a very important industry, and employed hundreds of breadwinners.

In the 1880s and 1890s, Salem kept building infrastructure; and new businesses arose, and established businesses expanded. Retail stores prospered; horse-drawn trolleys ran every which-way; and machinists, carpenters, millwrights, and other specialists all thrived. In 1880, Salem's manufactured goods were valued at about \$8.4 million, of which leather accounted for nearly half. In the summer of 1886, the Knights of Labor brought a strike against the manufacturers for a ten-hour day and other concessions; but the manufacturers imported labor from Maine and Canada, and kept going. The strikers held out, and there was violence in the streets, and even rioting; but the owners prevailed, and many of the defeated workers lost their jobs and suffered, with their families, through a bitter winter.

By the mid-1880s, Salem's cotton-cloth mills at the Point employed 1400 people who produced about 19 million yards annually, worth about \$1.5 million. Perhaps the Fregeau and Gagnon families were living and working there. The city's large shoe factories stood downtown behind the stone depot and on Dodge and Lafayette Streets. A jute bagging company prospered with plants on Skerry Street and English Street; its products were sent south to be used in cotton-baling. Salem factories also produced lead, paint, and oil. At the Eastern Railroad yard on Bridge Street, cars were repaired and even built new. In 1887 the streets were first lit with electricity, replacing gas-light. The gas works, which had stood on Northey Street since 1850, was moved to a larger site on Bridge Street in 1888, opposite the Beverly Shore.

William Fregeau (1860?-1950) was born in Canada c. 1860, the son of Louis Fregeau and Mary Scott. His father was of French Canadian background, perhaps descended from the families who had been in Canada since the 1600s. In Salem records, over the years, William's surname would be spelled Frazero, Fragero, Fregeault, etc. William came to the United States when he

was a boy, at some point between 1866 and 1872, probably with his parents and siblings. The family evidently first settled in Grosvenordale, Conn., a mill town. William's mother tongue was French (per 1920 census). In 1881 or 1882, he married Octavie Gagnon, twenty, who had been born in Canada and come to the U.S. between 1870 and 1873, but perhaps did not stay (Note: in the 1881 census for Hochelaga, Quebec, there is household composed of three females: Olympe Gagnon, 35, Amanda, 22, and Octavie, 19).

At first William & Octavie Fregeau evidently lived in Grosvenordale, Conn., where their first child, a son whom they named William H., was born in April, 1883. By the summer of 1885 they had moved to Massachusetts, probably to Salem, where William got work as a tanner. In July, 1885, their son Arthur was born; and they would have three more children, Albina, Joseph, and Emilie, in 1887, 1893, and 1897.

William Fregeau (1860-1950), born Canada, son of Louis Fregeau & Mary Scott, died in Salem on March 7, 1950, aged about ninety. He m. c.1881 Octavie Gagnon (1861-1925), born Canada, died in Salem on Nov. 27, 1925. Known issue:

1. *William H., 1883 (Conn.)*
2. *Arthur, 1885-1934, m. Bertha Berube; had issue.*
3. *Albina, 1887, m. Mr. Michaud; of Magog, Canada.*
4. *Joseph C., 1893-1967, m. Bazelice Bourgeois; of Salem.*
5. *Emilie, 1897, m. Albert Bouchard; of Salem.*

As has been mentioned, the Fregeaus had this house built in 1886, as their family residence. The 1890/1 Naumkeag directory lists William Fregeau, tanner, "house at Castle Hill"; in 1893/4 directory he is listed the same except working as a currier. This indicates that he was employed in the leather-manufacturing business. Tanning was the process by which the raw cattle hides were turned into leather; currying was a refinement, in which the tanned leather would be further prepared for specialized uses. Most tanneries had currying departments. Most of Salem's tanneries were situated in North Salem or along Boston Street, but the Poor Brothers Leather Company, a large tanning factory, was operating along the railroad tracks, on Broadway Street, across from Lawrence Street in this neighborhood, by 1890 or so. Mr. Fregeau may have been employed there. Within a few years that factory was merged into the M. Robson Leather Company.

In February, 1896, for \$350 the Fregeaus mortgaged their homestead here to Messrs. Putnam & Pope (ED 1472:43).

In the 1897 directory, Wm. Fregeau was listed in house, corner Arthur & Jefferson. In 1899/1900 directory, William "Fregeault" was listed in house 268 Jefferson Avenue

More factories and more people required more space for buildings, more roads, and more storage areas. This space was created by filling in rivers, harbors, and ponds. The once-broad North River was filled from both shores, and became a canal along Bridge Street above the North Bridge. The large and beautiful Mill Pond, which occupied the whole area between the present Jefferson Avenue, Canal Street, and Loring Avenue, finally vanished beneath streets, storage areas, junk-yards, rail-yards, and parking lots. The South River, too, with its epicenter at Central Street (that's why there was a Custom House built there in 1805) disappeared under the pavement of Riley Plaza and New Derby Street, and some of its old wharves were joined together with much in-fill and turned into coal-yards and lumber-yards. Only a canal was left, running in from Derby and Central Wharves to Lafayette Street.

Salem kept growing. The Canadians were followed in the early 20th century by large numbers of Polish and Ukrainian families, who settled primarily in the Derby Street neighborhood. By the eve of World War One, Salem was a bustling, polyglot city that supported large department stores and large factories of every description. People from the surrounding towns, and Marblehead in particular, came to Salem to do their shopping; and its handsome government buildings, as befit the county seat, were busy with conveyances of land, lawsuits, and probate proceedings. The city's politics were lively, and its economy was strong.

In 1900 (per census, ward 3, ED 449, sh. 19) the house was occupied by William Fregeault, leather tanner, 32 (sic), with wife Octavie, 38, and their five children, William, 17, a shoe nailer, and Arthur, Elbina, Joseph, and Emilie, two.

In 1901 St. Anne's parish was formed hereabouts, and the Fregeaus, who had been at St. Joseph's parish, became members. In 1903 the senior Fregeaus became citizens of the United States. By 1907 (per 1908 directory) son William was working as a mariner and son Arthur was working as a shoe cutter; both boarding here. William Sr. remained a tanner.

In 1910 the city took small slivers of property along Arthur Street to lay it out as a public way (ED 2020:529). In 1910 the Fregeaus resided here (per census, ward 3, prec. 6): William, 48, working in tannery, Octavie, 47 (a French-only speaker), keeping house, son William H., 27, in US Navy, son

Arthur, 24, cutter in a shoe shop, daughter Albina, 22, son Joseph, 16, trimmer in a shoe shop, and daughter Amelia, 12.

In 1910 William Fregeau Sr. secured employment as a fireman, working at the Bell Brothers shoe factory at 82-84 Boston Street (later #62), where he would continue to work into the 1920s (per directories).

By 1911, Arthur Fregeau, living here, had gone into business as an insurance- and mortgage-broker and a real estate agent, with office at 83 Lafayette Street (see advertisement, 1911 Naumkeag Directory, appended). He purchased property farther up Arthur Street. In 1912 his office was at 114 Lafayette Street; he worked as a shoe operative in a factory as well. In 1913 Arthur moved out of #268 and resided at 4 Gardner Street; he had perhaps married Bertha Berube at that time. In some instances, evidently, he had his father William serve as a straw in conveyances (ED 2206:297). In others, he sold property to his father: in May, 1915, William Fregeau, having purchased from his son Arthur a lot at Brook and Lawrence Streets nearby, would sell the same to Arthur's wife Bertha (Berube) Fregeau (ED 2295:62).

On June 25, 1914, in the morning, in Blubber Hollow (Boston Street opposite Federal), a fire started in one of Salem's fire-prone wooden tanneries. This fire soon consumed the building and raced out of control, for the west wind was high and the season had been dry. The next building caught fire, and the next, and out of Blubber Hollow the fire roared easterly, a monstrous front of flame and smoke, wiping out the houses of Boston Street, Essex Street, and upper Broad Street, and then sweeping through Hathorne, Winthrop, Endicott, and other residential streets. Men and machines could not stop it: the enormous fire crossed over into South Salem and destroyed the neighborhoods west of Lafayette Street, then devoured the mansions of Lafayette Street itself, and raged onward into the tenement district. Despite the combined efforts of heroic fire crews from many towns and cities, the fire overwhelmed everything in its path: it smashed into the large factory buildings of the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company (Congress Street), which exploded in an inferno; and it rolled down Lafayette Street and across the water to Derby Street. There, just beyond Union Street, after a 13-hour rampage, the monster died, having consumed 250 acres, 1600 houses, and 41 factories, and leaving three dead and thousands homeless. Some people had insurance, some did not; all received much support and generous donations from all over the country and the world. It was one of the greatest urban disasters in the history of the United States, and the people of Salem would take years to recover from it. Eventually, they did, and many of the former houses and businesses were rebuilt; and several urban-renewal projects

(including Hawthorne Boulevard, which involved removing old houses and widening old streets) were put into effect.

No doubt the Fregeau family was badly affected by the fire. Arthur's office was burned down and he was forced to remove shoe-making for a couple of years before re-establishing his insurance and real estate business. The senior Fregeaus evidently also suffered financially, as did most people in Salem. On 17 Dec. 1915, having lost a lawsuit, Octavie Fregeau assigned the real estate here to John T. Sweeney (ED 2318:486, Land Court #1041 Miscellaneous; see also Land Court doc. #125D). She recovered ownership subsequently.

In 1920 (per census, ward 3), William Fregeau, 56, working as a dryer in a leather shop, resided here with wife Octavie, 55, son Joseph C. Fregeau, 26, an edge trimmer in a shoe shop, and with their daughter Emilie, 22, and her new husband, Albert Bouchard, 23, a machine-shop machinist who had come from Canada six years before.

In July, 1925, Joseph C. Fregeau conveyed to his mother Octavie some property (original Lots 14-15) on Jefferson Avenue; and she re-conveyed it to him in November, 1925 (ED 2839:592). She died here at home on Nov. 27, 1925, aged 64 years, of cardiac problems; and her remains were interred at St. Mary's cemetery.

Joseph, who continued to reside here and work in a shoe factory, married Bazelice ("Bessie") Bourgeois in the 1920s; and they had one child, a son, whom they named Henry J. In 1925 Joseph opened a shoe repair business at #3 rear Arthur Street.

In the 1920s, Salem was once again a thriving city; and its tercentenary in 1926 was a time of great celebration.

In January, 1926, William Fregeau, unmarried, sold some property that he had just bought, on Read Street, to his son Joseph C. Fregeau (ED 2691:564).

Joseph C. Fregeau (1893-1967) was born in Salem, the youngest of the three sons. When sixteen he left school and entered a shoe factory; and he spent the rest of his life making and repairing shoes. He resided here for most or all of his life. By 1929 his shoe-repair shop (formerly at rear of #3 Arthur) was located at 270 Jefferson Avenue.

In the late 1920s, William Fregeau went to work as a machine operator at Hygrade Lamp Works in Salem, where he remained for about 15 years until retirement.

The Depression hit in 1929, and continued through the 1930s. William Fregeau continued to reside here with his son, daughter-in-law, and grandson Henry. William died of heart disease on March 7, 1950, aged about ninety. He was, per the newspaper, the oldest person, in length of residence, among the Franco-Americans of Salem, where he had resided for nearly 70 years. He left his two daughters and surviving son Joseph as his heirs.

Salem, the county seat and regional retail center, gradually rebounded, and prospered after World War II through the 1950s and into the 1960s. General Electric, Sylvania, Parker Brothers, Pequot Mills (formerly Naumkeag Steam Cotton Co.), Almy's department store, various other large-scale retailers, and Beverly's United Shoe Machinery Company were all major local employers. Then the arrival of suburban shopping malls and the relocation of manufacturing businesses took their toll, as they have with many other cities.

On August 13, 1967, Joseph C. Fregeau died at the age of 74 years, having retired from his shoe repairing. He was a veteran and a member of the American Legion and the Franco-American War Vets. He had survived his two brothers, and left his wife, son, and his two sisters. His wife Bazelice, a native of New Brunswick, Canada, survived him by three years and died on Sept. 23, 1970, in her 82d year. The property descended to their son Henry J. Fregeau, of Wilmington, Mass., who owned it until his recent death.

More than most places, Salem has navigated its way forward into the present with success, trading on its share of notoriety arising from the witch trials, but also from its history as a great seaport and as the home of Bowditch, McIntire, Bentley, Story, and Hawthorne. Most of all, it remains a city where the homes of the old-time merchants, mariners, tanners, and mill-operatives are all honored as a large part of what makes Salem different from any other place.

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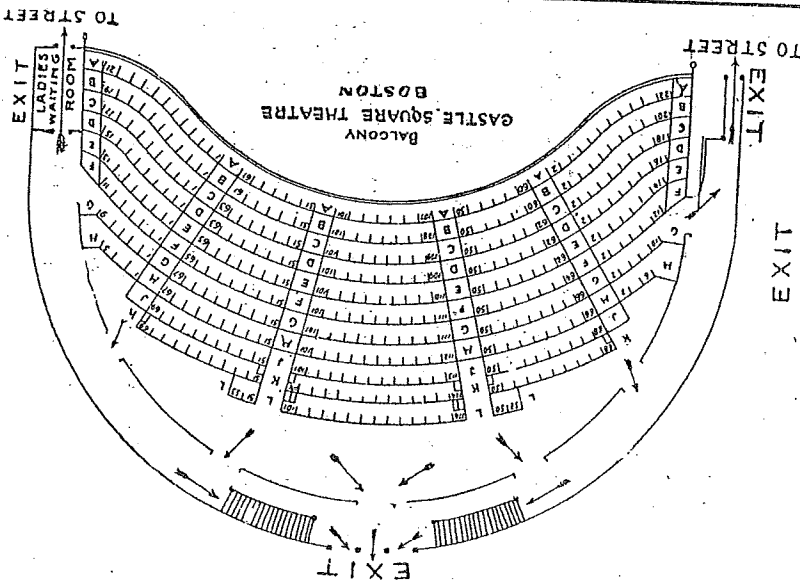
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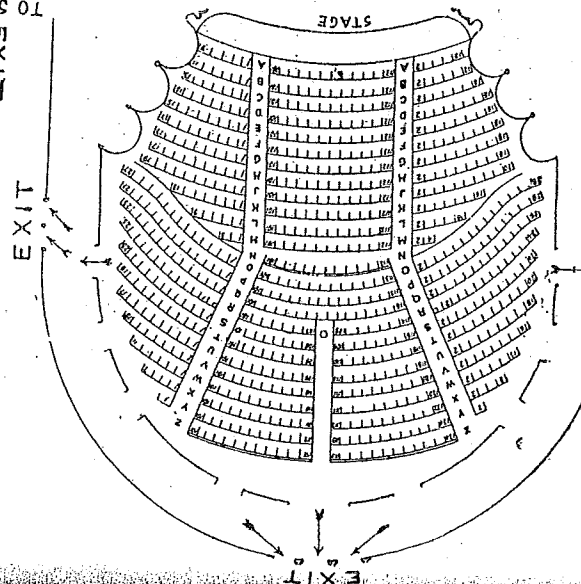
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Glossary & Sources

A figure like (ED 123:45) refers to book 123, page 45, Essex South registry of Deeds, Federal Street, Salem.

A figure like (#12345) refers to Essex Probate case 12345, on file at the Essex Probate Court, Federal Street, Salem, or on microfilm at Mass. Archives, Boston, or at the Peabody Essex Museum's Phillips Library, Salem.

MSSRW refers to the multi-volume compendium, *Mass. Soldiers & Sailors in the Revolutionary War*, available at the Salem Public Library among other places.

MSSCRW refers to the multi-volume compendium, *Mass. Soldiers, Sailors, & Marines in the Civil War*, available at the Salem Public Library among other places.

EIHC refers to the Essex Institute Historical Collections (discontinued), a multi-volume set (first volume published in 1859) of data and articles about Essex County. The indices of the EIHC have been consulted regarding many of the people associated with this house.

The six-volume published Salem Vital records (marriages, births, and deaths through 1849) have been consulted, as have the Salem Directory and later Naumkeag Directory, which have information about residents and their addresses, etc.

Sidney Perley's three-volume *History of Salem, 1626-1716* has been consulted, as has the four-volume *William Bentley's Diary*, J. Duncan Phillips' books, some newspaper obituaries, and other sources.

Salem real estate valuations, and, where applicable, Salem Street Books, have also been consulted, as have genealogies.

There is much more material available about Salem and its history; and the reader is encouraged to make his or her own discoveries.

--Robert Booth