

# LOWELL CULTURAL RESOURCES INVENTORY

IDENTIFICATION 83 MERRIMACK STREET MAP SHEET # 7  
 1) CURRENT OWNER Elias Brothers Realty Trust OWNER OCCUPIED no  
 2) HISTORIC NAME Nesmith Block  
 3) CURRENT NAME same  
 4) PROPERTY TYPE commercial 5) ZONING CLASSIFICATION B3  
 6) TAXES: PAYMENTS delinquent since 1978 STATUS tax title  
 7) WITHIN BOUNDARIES OF LHPD, Merrimack-Middle Streets HD

## HISTORICAL ABSTRACT

1) CONSTRUCTION DATE ca. 1836  
 SOURCE circumstantial: North Middlesex registry 23;420, April 28, 1836  
 2) ARCHITECT OR BUILDER unknown  
 3) HISTORIC OWNER John and Thomas Nesmith (1835)  
 4) ORIGINAL USE: GF commercial UF commercial  
 5) PREVIOUS BLDGS ON PROPERTY no DATE \_\_\_\_\_  
 SOURCE \_\_\_\_\_

## DESCRIPTIVE DATA

1) ARCHITECTURAL STYLE Federal/Greek Revival  
 2) PRESENT USE:  
 GF commercial  
 UF commercial, res.  
 3) NO OF STORIES 3  
 4) PROP SQ FT 4,362  
 5) PLAN wedge shaped polygonal (5)  
 6) ROOF partial hip with gable ends  
 7) STRUCTURAL SYSTEM load-bearing masonry  
 8) OUTBUILDINGS none  
 9) MATERIALS:  
 FOUNDATION not visible

VIEW FROM southwest PHOTO TAKEN May 1979



FACADE all sides: painted white in stretcher bond

TRIM GF: metal storefronts; granite piers and lintels

10) NOTABLE SURFACE & LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS none

ADDRESS 83 MERRIMACK STREET

VISUAL ASSESSMENT

- 1) CONDITION OF BUILDING FABRIC needs minor repair
- 2) IF DETERIORATED, CAUSES lack of maintenance
- 3) INTEGRITY OF HISTORIC BLDG FABRIC: GF intact with evolutionary alterations  
UF intact with evolutionary alterations
- 4) SURROUNDING LAND USES commercial
- 5) INTEGRITY OF PROP'S HIST SETTING intact with minor intrusions and/or losses
- 6) IMPORTANCE OF PROP TO HIST SETTING integral to character

ADDITIONAL DESCRIPTION

See Research Report.

ADDITIONAL HISTORICAL INFORMATION

See Research Report.

ARCHEOLOGICAL COMMENT

The Nesmith Building covers its lot, and is the first known structure to occupy the site. The potential for the property yielding significant archeological remains is therefore low.

Research Report  
83 Merrimack Street  
Nesmith Block  
ca. 1836

The Nesmith Block is a wedge-shaped corner building three stories in height. It is executed in red brick with granite trim in a simple Federal form, with solid, plain detailing of the Greek Revival style. The building is now painted white. The two main portions of the roof form gable ends against the neighboring buildings to the north and east. At the Merrimack-John Street corner, the two parts of the roof meet in a rounded, hip roof form.

The John Street and Merrimack Street facades are closely balanced, with eight bays on the John Street side and nine on the longer Merrimack Street facade. The focal point of the design is the rounded corner, which is recessed slightly from the straight street facades.

Most of the ground floor has been altered on both streets, and consists mainly of nineteenth century wooden and twentieth century metal storefronts. Some original granite piers and lintels are still visible, however, on the Merrimack Street side. On the second and third floors, the John Street side is less changed, with granite sills and lintels at most of the windows. An exception is the canted-sided oriel on the second floor near the corner, which appears to have been inserted into an opening made by combining a pair of the original windows. Facing Merrimack Street, the second floor has been substantially altered by insertion of a long metal lintel, and creation of wide, double windows. The top floor retains its original window openings, with granite sills and lintels.

The building has a simple brick cornice consisting of a narrow frieze and dentils. Comparison of the present structure with historic views (Figures 1,2,4, and 5) shows that the building has lost tall chimneys that stood near the eaves, and five dormers, the latter after the 1930's. Probably the roof was originally slated. Now without chimneys, dormers, or slate, the asbestos-shingled roof forms a relatively smooth skin.

The curved corner of the Nesmith Block was designed in response to the intersection of Merrimack and John Streets. The latter street was laid out in the mid-1830's when the Boott Manufacturing Company was chartered and built its mills at the foot of John Street. Previously, Kirk Boott's house



had stood alone in relatively palatial splendor on that tract north of Merrimack Street.

John Street is not listed in the Lowell directories until 1837, but is cited in two deeds of 1835. The first, dated August 1, conveyed the land on the north side of Merrimack Street and the east side of John Street from the Locks and Canals Company to Gilman Kimball, a Lowell physician, for \$3,400 [1]. Three months later Kimball sold the same parcel to John Nesmith [2]. The 1841 map outlines the present building on the site, dating its construction between the end of 1835 and 1841. Since Nesmith entered into an agreement in 1836 with his eastern neighbor to share a party wall between buildings they were contemplating erecting, the Nesmith Block probably rose in 1836 [3].

Though John Nesmith alone bought the building lot, the 1850 map makes clear that he shared ownership with his brother Thomas. They owned considerable real estate in Lowell, including the building across John Street on the other Merrimack Street corner (Figure 3). That building was also erected in the 1830's, as a smaller reflection of the main Nesmith Block.

John and Thomas Nesmith were brothers in a family of nine children, fourth generation New Englanders, raised in Windham, New Hampshire. Their father operated a prosperous general store on the 400-acre family farm. The brothers both gained business experience in various capacities and operated two general stores in partnership in New Hampshire before they came to Lowell in 1831.

They purchased the estate of the late Judge Edward St. Loe Livermore in Belvidere for approximately \$25,000, subdivided the property and sold sizable lots to "select residents", cashing in on Lowell's early prosperity and rapid growth [4]. Both brothers built handsome homes in Belvidere. Their downtown holdings included not only both corners of the John and Merrimack Streets intersection, but also adjacent buildings east and west on Merrimack Street and north on John Street.

Thomas Nesmith was a third lieutenant in the War of 1812, and he became a colonel in the New Hampshire militia in 1820. He married Lucinda Fay of Lebanon, New Hampshire. They had five children, two of whom died in childhood. Thomas died in 1870 at the age of 82. His bequests included money for establishing a public library in Windham, New Hampshire, and \$25,000 to establish a fund to help the poor of Lowell [5].



John Nesmith was five years younger than Thomas and a more hard-driving business man. He was either an agent or owner of mills in Lowell, Dracut, Chelmsford, and Hookset, New Hampshire. He recognized the potential of Lawrence as a manufacturing town and bought up large portions of the land on which the city was subsequently built. He was an inventor and developed a machine to weave shawl fringe and one to make wire fence. John also served as Lt. Governor of Massachusetts, and as a Presidential elector. He married three times, was twice a widower, and had fourteen children, several of whom died quite young. He died in 1869 at the age of 76, leaving money for a park in Franklin, New Hampshire, and for the aid of the "indigent blind" of his native state [6].

The directories first list John Nesmith's office at John and Merrimack in 1839. Presumably, he occupied the three-story Nesmith Block, rather than the humbler structure he owned on the opposite corner. As early as the 1860's, the F. E. Bailey and Company drug store tenanted the first floor of the Nesmith Building, and retained its occupancy until 1976. In 1879 the building contained boot, book, and cigar manufacturers, in addition to stores and offices. In 1896 coal and brick dealers, among others, had offices here [7]. Sometime around the turn of the century, curbside trees were removed that virtually hid the corner building in early photographs (Figures 4 and 5). The building was owned by Nesmiths as late as 1924.

The building appears to be in generally good condition, although a small area of the pressed brick facing has fallen away from the Merrimack Street facade, near the corner. Alterations, including the storefront modernization, the added bay window on John Street, and the streamlining of the roof are evolutionary changes which dilute, but do not destroy the impact of the original architectural design. The Nesmith Block is still used as a commercial structure, contributing to the Lowell downtown core area.

The Nesmith Block occupies a crucial site in the streetscape. This building and the Kearney Square Building, which forms the Bridge Street corner on the east end of this Merrimack Street block, frame the impressive Hildreth Building, which rises five stories and spans the center third of the block. The Nesmith Block also relates more directly to the two other buildings which wrap around it, both with double faces on Merrimack and John, the Italianate Nesmith Building, and the Union National Bank.

Even with interruptions on this block face and others, Merrimack is still an essentially nineteenth century streetscape, to which the Nesmith Block is integral. The building of itself possesses further local significance. It is an early example of an important Lowell architectural style, the red brick Federal/Greek Revival form. Like the Welles Block, it is one of the few fairly intact examples of this style downtown, particularly in its commercial adaptation to Merrimack Street's wedge-shaped corner lots.

Historically, the Nesmith brothers, John and Thomas, who constructed this building, were prominent early Lowell promoters and developers. John was also important at a state level for having served as a lieutenant governor and Presidential elector.

#### Footnotes

- 1) South Middlesex Registry, 344:440 (Aug. 1, 1835).
- 2) North Middlesex Registry, 26:437 (Oct. 31, 1835).
- 3) Ibid., 23:420 (Apr. 28, 1836).
- 4) Coburn, History of Lowell, 1920, v.1, pp. 183-4.
- 5) Cutler, Historic Homes...and Families of Middlesex County, pp. 1113-5.
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) Lowell City Directories.

#### Other Sources:

Lowell city maps and atlases.

Lowell city directories.

U. of Lowell Special Collections photo files.

U. of Lowell Special Collections vertical files.

Historic Homes and Places and Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of Middlesex County, Massachusetts. William Richard Cutler, A.M. N.Y.: Lewis Historical Publishing Co.; 1908. pp. 1113-5.

Contributions to the Old Residents' Historical Association of Lowell. Vol. III. Lowell; 1887. pp. 366-374.





Figure 1

Ca. 1875, looking west on Merrimack Street. U. of Lowell Library, Special Collections, photo file.





July 5. 1886 E.

Figure 2

U. of Lowell Library, photo file.

View on Merrimack Street, July 5, 1886.

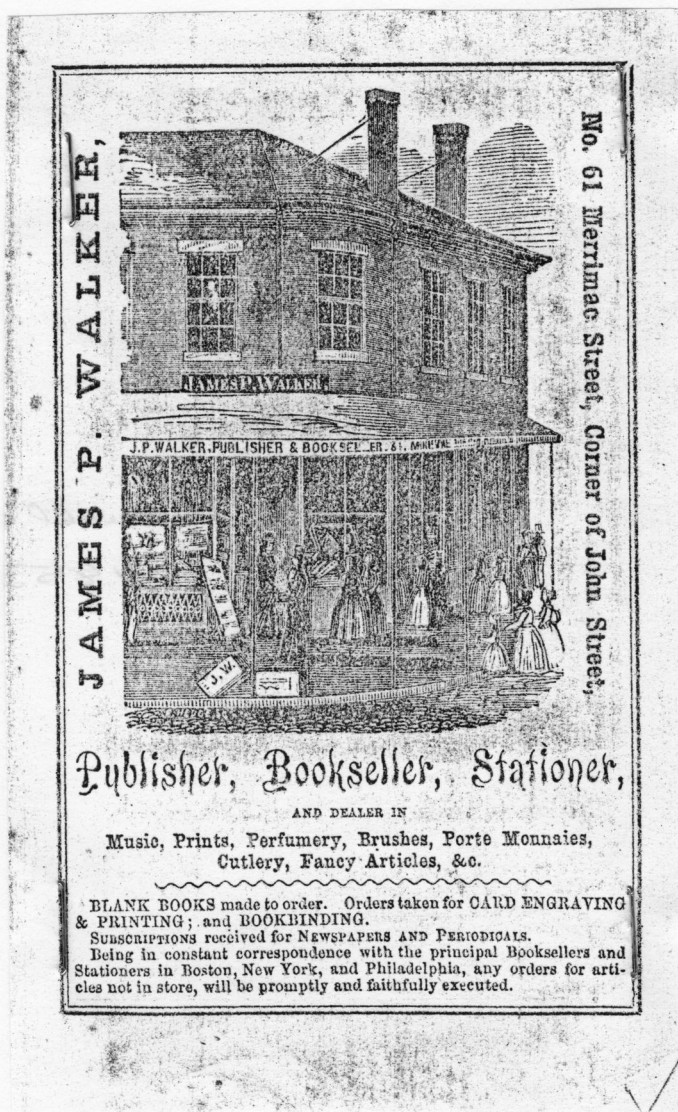


Figure 3

View of building on northwest corner of John and Merrimack Street intersection, opposite Nesmith Block.

From 1853 Lowell City Directory.



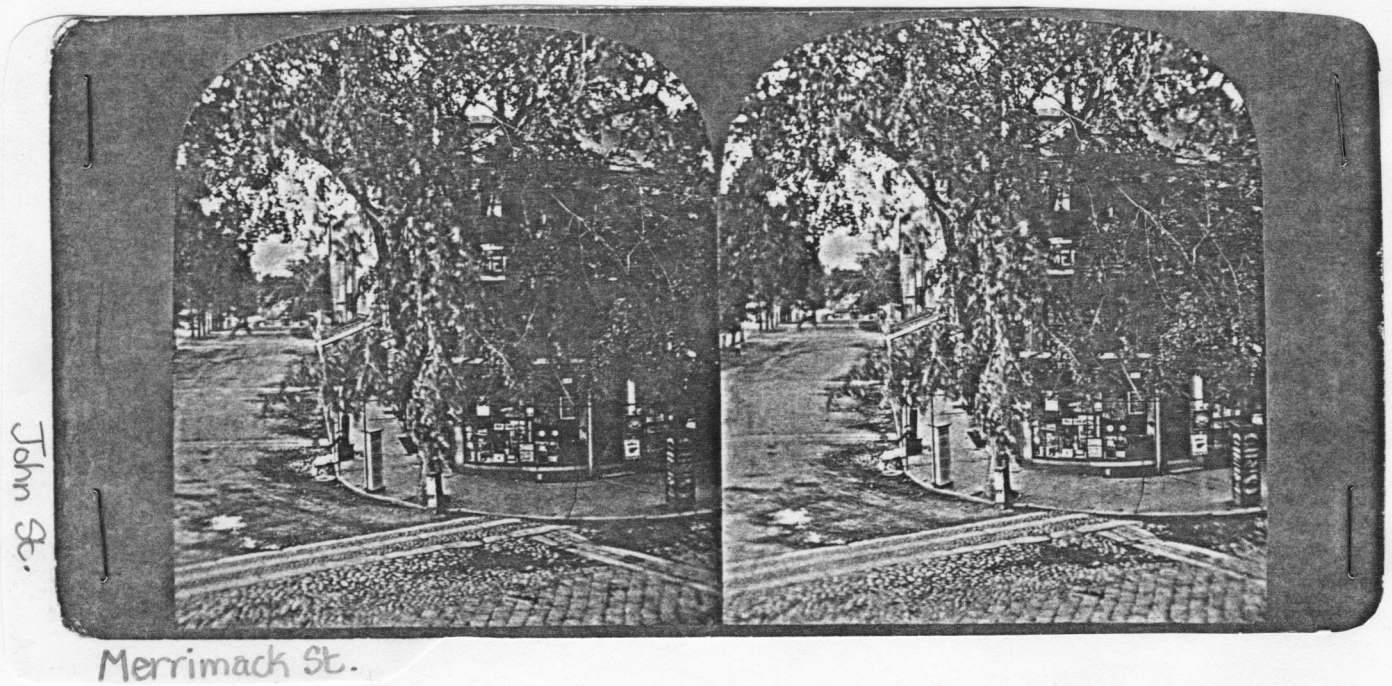


Figure 4

SPNEA, Stereo file, "Lowell."

John Street is at left, Merrimack at bottom.



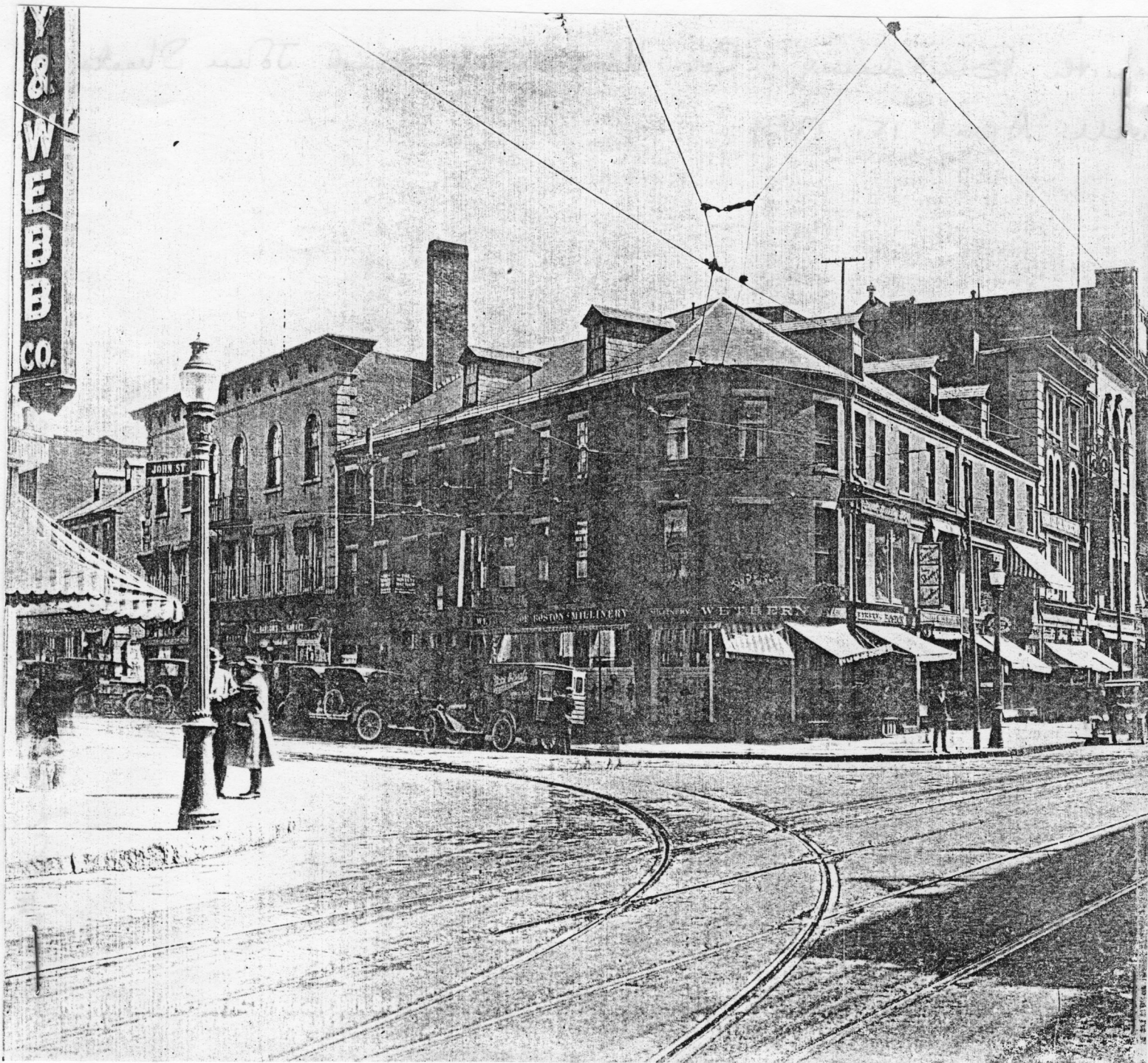


Figure 5

U. of Lowell Library, Locks and Canals photo file, #2062.

View of Nesmith Block in 1924.



Figure 6

Coolidge, John, Mill & Mansion, 1942.

Photo ca. 1935.