

HISTORIC STRUCTURES REPORT

PART I

ON

BUILDING NUMBER LIN-3

THE JOSIAH NELSON HOUSE

Minute Man National Historical Park Project

Architectural Data Section

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Architect

February 1963

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service
Eastern Office, Design and Construction

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A P P R O V A L S H E E T

RECOMMENDED

Superintendent

Date _____

Robert G. Hall

Robert G. Hall
Chief, EODC

Date 2-27-63

Regional Director, Northeast Region

Date _____

APPROVED

Director

Date _____

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I. FOREWORD

Conversation with Mr. W. Newton Nelson of Lincoln, Massachusetts on October 1962, revealed that the Josiah Nelson House burned to the ground on July 4, 1908.

The site upon which the house stood and over eight acres of surrounding land were acquired by the National Park Service by transfer from the United States Air Force and designated a National Historic Site, April 14, 1959. The site designation ended after Minute Man National Historical Park was authorized by Act of Congress in September, 1959.

Until August 1962, only general maintenance had been performed on the property. The house site was almost completely obscured by a heavy overgrowth of trees and ground vegetation. During the latter part of August the trees were removed and the vegetation cut; loose architectural artifacts were removed from the site, tagged and stored in a facility within the park.

The author wishes to express his appreciation to Mr. and Mrs. W. Newton Nelson for their assistance in the preparation of this report and for the loan of certain of the photographs which are reproduced herein. Josiah Nelson was the great-great grandfather of Mr. W. Newton Nelson.

Russell V. Keune
Architect
February 1963

II. GENERAL

The Josiah Nelson House was a part of the Nelson farm in North Lincoln. The owner and occupant was a member of the Lincoln Minute Men and was the individual responsible for spreading the alarm to the town of Bedford on the morning of April 19, 1775. Prior to this action, the road in front of his home was the scene of an encounter between himself and the British officers who had captured Paul Revere, a peddler and Lexington scouts approximately a quarter of a mile farther west on the County Road who were returning with their prisoners towards Lexington. It was during this encounter that the first blood of the Revolution was drawn, when Nelson was struck on the crown of his head by the sword of a British Officer.¹

The earliest documentary evidence uncovered to date that shows a house on this site is a Lincoln town map of 1758; the map notes the house as "Josiah Nelson".²

¹ Interim Report of the Boston National Historic Sites Commission Pertaining to the Lexington-Concord Battle Road, House Document No. 57, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1959, p.33.

² "A plan of the town of Lincoln as it was taken by Stephen Hosmer which contains 9493 acres and 70 rods Surveyed April 1758 which to the Gentlemen Selectmen of Said Lincoln is Hereby Submitted by their very Humble Surveyor, Stephen Hosmer. Laid Down by Scale 110 Rods to an Inch." (Original map in care of Lincoln Historical Society, Public Library, Lincoln, Massachusetts).

From all evidence available at this time, it is likely that the wood frame house was two stories in height with a garret and stone cellar, had an equal gable roof and was rectangular in plan with one room to either side of a central brick chimney.

III. PRESENT STATUS

The house foundations and surrounding property are owned by the United States Department of the Interior and are within the approved boundaries for the Minute Man National Historical Park. The house site is situated approximately 120' back from Nelson Road, which is historically known as the "County" or the "Country Road".³

³Ibid.

IV. DESCRIPTION OF EXISTING CONDITIONS

A. Site

The partially visible cellar remains and a mound of crumbled brick covered with soil and leaves are all that are left of the house (See Illustration No. 4). Sections of stone walls enclosing the property are also in evidence. The existing landscape has no known historical significance.

B. Architectural Artifacts

Items which have been removed from the cellar and surrounding area include the following: 1) charred timbers, 2) whole and broken brick and 3) one andiron. Each of these items were tagged and stored for future reference. Because of the long exposure to the weather, the remaining timbers were badly decayed. In the process of removing the loose brick, the outline of a remaining first floor fireplace became evident; so as not to disturb this any further, it was recovered with loose soil until such time as a more complete study may be undertaken.

V. ARCHITECTURAL DATA AVAILABLE FROM EARLY PHOTOGRAPHS

A. Exterior

1. Roof Finish

The equal gable roof was covered with wood shingles; twenty-nine courses of which are visible on the front slope. The edge of the roof was finished in a moulded wood cornice which does not appear to return against the gable ends of the house. There is no gutter or downspout visible in any of the photographs (see Illustration Nos. 1 & 2).

2. Chimney

The house had a central brick chimney; that portion above the roof peak rising eighteen courses and having a corbeled brick chimney cap. Both the front and rear faces of the chimney had a single projecting brick drip course at the roof line. Brick recovered from the site average 1-3/4" x 3-1/2" x 7-1/2".

3. Wall Finishes

The south and east walls had wood clapboards; forty-two courses of clapboards are visible on the south elevation. (See Illustration Nos. 1 & 2). The outline of what may have been a vertical wood corner board is visible at the west end of the house. The house was set close to grade and had a wood baseboard below the bottom course of clapboards.

4. Main Entry

The entry faced south and consisted of a six panel, wood door, the upper two panels of which appear to have had

glass at the time the photograph was taken. The door was flanked by a projecting frame and a pedimented head, which has moulded trim. The door sill consisted of a wood threshold above one granite step (see Illustration No. 2). The granite step shown in the photograph remains at the site.

5. Windows

The south elevation had five double hung windows, one to either side of the main entry and three on the second floor. With the exception of the center, second floor window, which had 6/6 lights, all the others had 8/12 lights. The frames appear to project beyond the face of the wall and each of the window heads had a moulded cornice, those of the second floor windows being integral with the base of the roof cornice. The east elevation had three windows, one on each of the two floors and one in the garret.⁴ Mr. W. N. Nelson stated that the north elevation had no windows.

B. Interior

1. Framing

From the large number and size of the charred timbers remaining at the site following the fire (see Illustration No. 3) and the local construction practices, it would seem likely that the house was framed with hewn, mortise and tenon wood framing members.

⁴ Hersey, Frank Wilson Cheney, Heroes of the Battle Road, 1775, Boston, 1930. Photograph taken by George Nelson showing gable end of the house.

2. Plans

Although no documentary data has been found at the time of this writing regarding the interior plans, it would appear from the photographs available and the scale of the visible remains of the cellar as compared with other local examples of houses that the house was one room deep with one room to either side of a central brick chimney. At this point it is not clear whether the house had a full or merely a half cellar under the east portion of the house. Mr. Nelson recalls no all to the rear.

3. Fireplaces

If the chimney construction followed the general local pattern, it is likely that the central brick chimney consisted of four fireplaces, an oven and a meat chamber. The corner of the corbeled brick hearth for the second floor east room is visible in one of the photographs, (see Illustration No. 3).

4. Stairs

Evidence visible in the photograph taken following the burning of the house clearly shows the location of at least one set of stairs that would have been found within the house. The outline of a stair carriage is visible on the front face of the chimney, showing both the risers and the treads. It is likely a triple run wood stair was situated in the space between the front door and the central brick chimney (see Illustration No. 3).

5. Room Finishes

The west surface of the brick chimney appears to have a plaster finish at the second floor level (see Illustration No. 3). Mr. Nelson recalls one of the rooms having wood paneling on the fireplace wall.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the completion and approval of both the Architectural and Historical Data Sections, Part I Reports, it is recommended that an archeological investigation be conducted at the house site to determine the extent of the foundations and to expose the central brick chimney remains. Following this investigation, it is recommended that the cellar foundation walls be stabilized for future interpretive use.

ILLUSTRATION NO. 1

View from southeast, prior to 1908.

Note: First floor east gable window visible behind tree, character of stone wall construction. Photo copies from photograph in possession of Mr. and Mrs. W. Newton Nelson, Lincoln, Massachusetts.

Photo: George A. Nelson
Copy Neg. No. EODC 3899



ILLUSTRATION NO. 2

View from south, prior to 1908.

Note: corbeled brick chimney cap, shingle roof covering, lack of corner boards, moulded window head cornice, pedimented head of main entry, west end of barn visible at right side of picture.

Photo copied from photograph in possession of Mr. and Mrs. W. Newton Nelson, Lincoln, Massachusetts.

Photo: George A. Nelson
Copy Neg. No. EODC 3900



ILLUSTRATION NO. 3

View from southwest, taken after fire
of 1908.

Note: projecting drip courses on front and rear
face of chimney, corbeled brick hearth on east
face of chimney, outline of stair carriage on
south face of chimney, charred framing timbers
around site, west end of barn visible behind
chimney. Photo copied from photograph in possession
of Mr. and Mrs. W. Newton Nelson, Lincoln, Mass.

Photo: George A. Nelson
Copy Neg. No. EODC 3901



ILLUSTRATION NO. 4

House site, view from south, 1962.

Note: mound to left of picture is chimney base remains, depression to left is east portion of cellar remains, picture taken prior to clearing of vegetation cover.

Photo: Jack E. Boucher, 1962
Copy Neg. No. EODC 3902



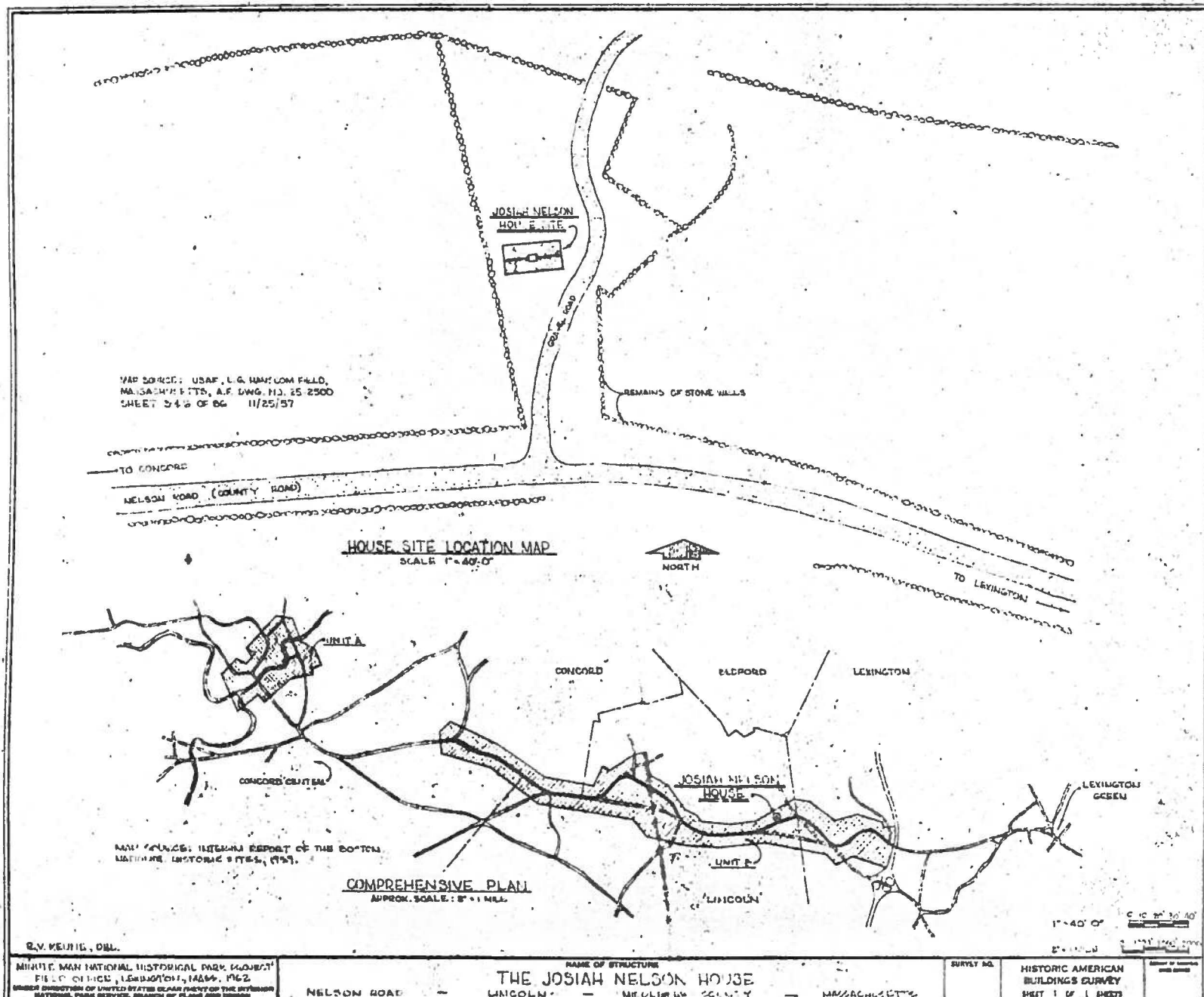


ILLUSTRATION NO. 5

Location plan, 1962

Delineator: Russell V. Keene, 1962

