

# JASON RUSSELL HOUSE



## TOUR GUIDE MANUAL

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## ***Introduction: How to Use this Manual***

This manual is specifically intended to help tour guides learn about the Jason Russell House, its history, and its contents. It will always be a “work in progress” as new information is uncovered and as objects in the house are from time to time rearranged in order to better tell the story of Jason Russell and his family.

***The Manual contains considerable detail, which you are not expected to memorize or cover in a single tour.*** Rather, it should be used as a reference to help you answer questions visitors might raise. But as you become more experienced, you may decide to include in your tours additional details about the house that you find interesting.

***To insure that you cover the essentials, you should consult the “Tour Outline,”*** which highlights points that are historically important and of likely interest to a range of visitors. The words printed in red in the outline correspond to text printed in red within each room description

***It would be wise to skim the Manual frequently during the touring season*** in order to become increasingly familiar with the content and to possibly enliven your tours with fresh information.

***The short passages in the text printed in blue*** are special instructions or precautions for guides.

Finally, ***at the back of the Manual are several appendices,*** which help to explain or to supplement the principal text. Again, these should function as references, not material to be memorized.

## ***Tour Outline***

**This room-by-room description emphasizes those items that are important to our visitors' understanding and enjoyment of the house. Guides should attempt to include as many of these as they can in their tours. Those printed in red can be used to highlight two themes: 1) the story of April 19, 1775; 2) the house and its contents as a reflection of every day life in Colonial Arlington. These items are correspondingly printed in red within the text.**

A suggested order for visiting the house is as follows: 1) Assembly Room to discuss the Battle painting; 2) Kitchen; 3) Front entry area and upstairs hall; 4) Upstairs, children's bedroom; 5) Upstairs, the parlor chamber, or "best bedroom;" 6) Downstairs, parlor; 7) Assembly Room exhibition for more about Colonial life in Old Menotomy (visitors are on their own, with the guide available to answer questions)

### 1) Assembly Room

**Painting** of the Battle of Menotomy

### 2) Kitchen

**Musket ball holes in stairs.** Tell the story of the Beverly men in the basement.

**Musket and powder horn.** Typical Colonial weaponry.

**Architectural features.** Conflicting theories about dating the house. Uniqueness of ceiling  
**Fireplace** and cooking implements and/or **spinning wheels, weasel, niddy noddy** for discussion of women's work in Colonial times. Choose your favorite items.

### 3) Halls, downstairs and up

**Musket ball hole** in post at the bottom of the stairs

**Adams family clock.** Looting on April 19. Also japanning as a decoration

**Fire bucket.** Colonial "fire prevention."

Upstairs hall: peek at **attic** and "**secret hiding place**" for valuables

### 4) Children's Room

**Rope bed, chamber pot, foot warmer and bed warmer.** "Comforts" of colonial life.

**Children's graffiti above fireplace**

### 5) Best bedroom (Parlor chamber)

**Adams chest and cradle.** Tell story of the confrontation of Mrs. Adams and her children with the British; the theft of the silver.

**Musket ball hole** high and to the right of the door.

### 6) Parlor (downstairs)

**Federal décor (1790-1815)** The era of Jason's son Noah and his family (wallpaper, paint)

**Samuel Whittimore teapot.** The only remaining piece from a tea set, the remainder of which was melted down for bullets. The story of old Samuel's near death experience.

**Tea table, writing desk, and serpentine front chest**—Chippendale (1750-80)

**Bow front chest and folding card table**—Federal (1780-1820)

This furniture illustrates the range of furniture styles that once filled the house. Also, the social activities in the parlor.

7) Assembly Room exhibition. Self-guided. Further illustrates 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> C. life in the house and town.

# ***Jason Russell: A Menotomy Farmer and His Family***

## **1. Jason's Farm**

Two hundred and fifty years ago, if you were standing in Jason Russell's bustling Menotomy farmyard, you would see wagons drawn by oxen or dray horses loaded with farm produce or lumber rumbling down the rutted dirt road, known as the County Road or Concord Road, today's Massachusetts Avenue. As Menotomy was a crossroads town, much of this traffic came from outlying counties and towns, heading to markets in Boston. In winter, sleds, cutters and sledges traveled along the same road, the snow packed down for easy movement. Across the road was Stephen Cutter's sawmill, one of several mills operating at the time along Mill Brook.

Compared to many of his neighbors Jason Russell was fairly well off, owning more than 100 acres of farmland in Menotomy including pasture, meadow and upland, orchard and woodlot. This acreage was not contiguous, but rather, scattered among different locations within the town precinct. However, the plot of land on which the house stands extended all the way to what is now the Unitarian-Universalist Church on the corner of Pleasant Street and well up the hill behind the house. Jason also owned a substantial barn, worth £40 when he died, and in the yard in front of the barn, much of the daily work would have been done: the threshing, repairs to vehicles, and wood splitting, lots of wood! A large house like the Russell's would have used about 25-30 cords of wood each year for heating and cooking. Various domestic chores also would have been done in the barnyard nearer to the house, e.g. laundry, soap making, animal slaughter, and some cooking. In addition, Mrs. Russell would have carefully tended vegetable and herb gardens, the harvest from the latter being used for cooking and medicinal purposes.

## **2. Jason's Family**

*(Also, see Appendix I, "Jason Russell Family Tree and House Occupants")*

Jason's *great grandfather*, **William** (1605-1661) emigrated from England before 1640 with his wife Martha, settling in an area within Cambridge Town known as West Cambridge, or Menotomy, as it was called by local Native Americans. One of his sons, also called **Jason** (1658-1736), who would be "*our*" Jason's *grandfather*, built a house in the vicinity of the present house around the time he married his wife Mary Hubbard (1684); in 1699 he was granted a significant additional parcel of land known as the Great Pasture. Grandfather Jason's second son **Hubbard** (1687-1726) would become the *father* of "*our*" Jason; when Hubbard died at the age of 40, "*our*" Jason and his sisters went to live with their grandfather Jason. Nine years later Grandfather Jason died, and young Jason inherited his grandfather's house and substantial land holdings. Jason's grandfather's 1684 house no longer exists. It was probably taken down and some of its timbers re-used when Jason built the current dwelling.

What follows is a description of the Russell family when the armed fighting of the American Revolution began:

**Jason Russell** (1716/17-1775) and **Elizabeth Winship** (1721-1786) were married in 1740.

Jason, the patriot, was killed by the British (Regulars) April 19, 1775. Their children, most of which were grown up by the time of the Revolution, were:

1. **Jason** born March 7, 1741/2 (**age 33 in 1775**) → lived in Mason NH (he married Elizabeth Locke)
2. ~~**Elizabeth** born December 27, 1743 died March 29 1751~~
3. **John** born August 4, 1746 (**age 29 in 1775**) → lived in Mason NH
4. **Hubbard** born March 25, 1749 married Sarah Warren of Weston published March 31 1774 → lived in Mason NH

5. **Thomas** born July 22, 1751 (**age 24 in 1775**) → stayed in Menotomy, storekeeper
6. ~~**Noah** born July 15, 1753 died October 13 1754~~
7. **Elizabeth** born July 3, 1756 married Jonathan Webber March 12 1778 (**age 19 in 1775**)
8. ~~**Mary** died 1762, aged 11 months~~
9. **Noah** born March 8, 1763 (**age 12 in 1775**) stayed in Menotomy (inherited the farmstead)

**Thus, only two Russell children, Elizabeth and Noah, were still living in the house with their parents at the time of the Revolution.**

There may have been one more person living in Russell household in 1775, namely, **Kate** (1753 or 1754-?). Known as “Jason Russell’s Negro Child,” she was baptized on 17 March, 1754. The Rev. Cooke recorded in his journal that she was a “gift” to Jason. Menotomy assessors noted in 1770 that Jason Russell owned one slave (presumably Kate). There is no information regarding her death date.

After the Revolutionary War, three more generations of Jason’s descendants occupied the house (*See Appendix I, “Jason Russell’s Family Tree and House Occupants”*). The last generation known to have been born here were his six great-grandchildren, the offspring of his granddaughter Lydia Russell Teel. One or more of these six probably lived in the house as adults and may have even born children here, but so far, specific information regarding this is unavailable. What is certain is that Lydia Russell Teel gave the house and outbuildings to her son George W. Teel when she divided her property among her children in 1884. She died in 1886. George Teel never lived in the house, and he sold it to Mr. James A Bailey in 1892. It is likely that by then the last Russell descendant had been gone for several years.

### ***Events of April 19, 1775, at the Jason Russell House***

*(See also Appendix II, “April 19, 1775, Timeline,” and Appendix IV, “A Walk Through Revolutionary Menotomy”)*



The Jason Russell House played a significant role in the so-called Battle of Menotomy, the series of skirmishes that took place in present-day Arlington in the late afternoon of April 19 during the British retreat to Boston.

During the night of April 18, 1775, British Lt. Colonel Francis Smith (1723-1791) led some 700 unseasoned Regulars (soldiers serving the British Crown) from Boston to Concord, where they had been ordered to secure three rebel canons and a large store of ammunition rumored to be hidden at James Barrett’s farm. They passed across the Charles River, through Charlestown, Cambridge and Menotomy

along the Concord Road (now Massachusetts Ave) and arrived in Lexington, where, on the village green, they exchanged the first shots of the Revolution, which killed eight Americans and three British.

The British troops continued toward the North Bridge in Concord, which they needed to cross to get to Barrett's farm. At the Bridge they encountered nearly a thousand Colonial militiamen, who, having heard about the action at Lexington had come from miles around to defend Concord. Seeing fire rise from the liberty pole in the town center—and thinking that houses had been set on fire—the Colonial troops fired on the Regulars, beginning the engagement that would last until the 1100 relief troops led by General Huger Percy met the retreating Regulars in Lexington on Munroe Hill.

Why had these relief troops been summoned? It was due to Smith's perception as he had passed through Cambridge and Menotomy in the early morning hours that the surrounding countryside had been dangerously alerted; thus, early in the day, he had requested reinforcements from his Boston commander, General Thomas Gage.



After about two hours' rest at Munroe's Tavern--Smith's men had been walking for 17 hours at this point—they set out under Percy's command, on the treacherous march back to Boston carrying their dead and wounded. As soon as they descended into Menotomy they ran into trouble. Accounts by surviving soldiers indicate that as they passed the Foot of the Rocks (near today's Dunkin Donuts on Arlington Heights) and approached the plain below, the Colonials began to attack from the rear and from behind buildings, trees and walls, harrying the British all the way. The "bloodiest battle of the first day of the American Revolution" had begun.

Anticipating such trouble, Percy had placed Smith's imposing grenadiers in the front of his column and his inadequately armed field canons near the rear while the main body of troops boxed in the wounded. Moreover, wherever possible, he posted flanking units, composed of fresh, well-armed soldiers, out of sight in the woods on either side of Concord Road. But even this clever strategy did not prevent the frightened, exhausted and poorly disciplined Regulars from burning, pillaging and breaking into taverns to quench their thirst and fortify their courage. Thus they became even less effective fighters and more vulnerable to the fear and rumors running up and down the line.

During the day, most of the Menotomy men living near Concord Road, including Jason Russell, had sent their wives and children to safer farmsteads in the hills behind. Meanwhile some 2000 troops had assembled in Menotomy coming from as far away as Beverly, Danvers, Lynn, Salem, Dedham, and Needham. Many of them deployed themselves around **Jason Russell's house** and outbuildings, training their guns on the approaching column of Redcoats, which arrived at the house between 3 and 4 p.m. This made the Colonials easy targets for the British flanking units posted so effectively by Percy in the hills behind: in short, many were trapped between the two British ranks.

Scattering, some ran into the house. Jason Russell himself was shot and bayoneted on his doorstep as he tried to escape, and eleven other men were killed in the house and yard. Eight Beverly men, however, managed to hide in the basement and survive. Two Lynn men, Timothy Munro and Daniel Townsend, weren't so lucky, making it only as far as the kitchen. Townsend jumped through a window and was shot to death; Munro followed him and ran for his life, miraculously surviving with only a leg wound and, allegedly, 32 bullet holes in his hat and clothing.

When Elizabeth Russell returned at the end of the day, she found her husband and the eleven other dead men lying next to one another in pools of blood on the kitchen floor. According to some accounts the floorboards were not replaced until years later.

At the end of this first day of the Revolutionary War, the British suffered heavier losses than the Colonials and heavier losses in Menotomy than anywhere else:



The total numbers killed and wounded on April 19, 1775:

- British 73 dead; 174 wounded
- Colonials 49 dead; 41 wounded

Numbers killed in Menotomy alone

- British 40 killed; 80 wounded
- Colonials 25 killed; 11 wounded

## ***The Jason Russell House: Construction and Dating***

*(See Appendix III for “Timber Frame Construction and House Plan” drawings)*

### **1. Construction**

Carpentry was a trade in the Russell family; hence Jason most likely oversaw the building of his house. He constructed it of solid oak timbers, perhaps from trees that grew on his own extensive property. The timbers were sawn not by hand but in a sawmill, two of which were only an oxcart ride away: Cooke’s Mill at Mystic Dam and the Winship Mill, owned by the family of Jason’s wife, Elizabeth Winship, for several generations.

The post and beam frame covered with wood sheathing was typical for the period in New England. (*See Appendix III, “Typical timber frame construction”*) The exterior with its symmetrical arrangement consisting of a central doorway flanked by two sets of windows above and below and the roof capped by massive center chimney were typical everywhere in New England at this time. Since Jason’s 18<sup>th</sup> C. doorway was obscured in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century by the projecting entryway built by his granddaughter Lydia, we do not know if that original door was framed by any decorative elements such as pilasters or a simple triangular pediment like those found on many Colonial doorways. The house was probably left unpainted, with the possible exception of the front door.

The floor plan consists of one room upstairs and another down on each side of a small central hallway—only four rooms total. At some point, Jason, like many of his neighbors, may have added a lean-to at the back of his house. This would have been a single story addition used for various purposes, e.g. summer kitchen and extra sleeping or storage space. (*See Appendix III for a “Typical 18<sup>th</sup> C. house plan”*) Today’s Assembly Room, a lean-to constructed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, may have replaced such an earlier lean-to.

Nomenclature for the interior rooms varies, but in Colonial times, the room we now call the kitchen was called the “hall,” while the more elegant living room was known as the “parlor.” The upstairs rooms were referred to as “chambers”—the hall chamber and the parlor chamber. In this Manual we will maintain the words “parlor,” and “chamber,” but substitute the word “kitchen” for “hall.”

Like every old house, the Russell House has seen many changes during its lifetime. Originally there was a door leading to the cellar from the entry hall—a common design. But by 1775 Jason had closed that off and opened a door from the kitchen to the basement—a fateful modification, as it turned out, since it was perhaps this departure from the norm that on April 19 confused the Americans entering the house in search of cover. Only the eight Beverly men found that door and were able to hide in the basement from enemy bullets.

More changes occurred after the Revolution. In the Federal Period (c. 1790-1820) when Noah invited his newly married daughter, Lydia, and her groom, Thomas Teel, to move in, the projecting enclosed entryway was built and a number of modifications were made to the parlor. The ceiling timbers may have been plastered over at this time. The Russell/Teel family had the walls papered with Federal style paper and the Georgian period paneling around the fireplace painted to match. A paint analysis done in

1985 revealed that the paneling in Jason's era was finished with a dark oily stain. Moreover, Jason's walls would have been whitewashed, not papered. During his era, wallpaper had to be imported and was very expensive, therefore rare in a simple farmer's house.

Further changes made in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century left the house much as we see it today. Lydia and Thomas Teel, who had six children, sealed up a south door from the kitchen to the barnyard. In the 1860's they also added the lean-to, which we now call the Assembly Room, and the 'el' that today functions as the caretaker's cottage.

The Historical Society purchased the house in 1923, by which time it had become exceedingly derelict. Using the best advice available, the Society restored the house, balancing practical and financial concerns with the most scientific restoration techniques known at the time. It was proudly opened to the public in 1924. Since that time, little has changed except when mandated by either maintenance or cosmetic concerns.

The Smith Museum, built to house the Historical Society's collection of artifacts and archives, is a 1960's structure sited approximately on the site of the old barn.

## **2. Dating of the Jason Russell House**

The dating of the house has often been disputed. A sign next to the Smith Museum, erected in 1930 by the Massachusetts Bay Centenary Commission, states that the house was built in 1680 by Martha Russell, widow of William (the first Russell in America). Early 20<sup>th</sup> C. accounts often repeat this date, but the facts do not support it. First, the land on which the house stands did not come into Russell hands until 1689. Secondly, Lydia (Russell) Teel, the granddaughter of Patriot Jason and possibly the last Russell to live for any extended period in the house, told interlocutors that family tradition had always maintained that the house was constructed in one campaign around 1740.

In 1964, architectural historian Robert Harrington Nylander, in an extensively researched article, decisively rejected the 17<sup>th</sup> Century dating but suggested that the house had been built in two stages, the first in 1740, the second in 1750. Nylander believed that Jason first constructed only the south half of the house—the kitchen and children's room, in 1740, the year of his marriage to Elizabeth Winship. The house therefore would have been asymmetrical and just half the width of today's structure. The stairs to the upper room would have been on the north side of the house. Not until about 1750, according to Nylander, did Jason add the north half of the house in order to accommodate his growing family, thereby transforming it into the symmetrical edifice we see today.

Nylander bases his argument on the fact that two-stage construction like this was common in Colonial times as a way of economizing until the owner's family had grown large enough to need more room. By 1751, Jason and Elizabeth had four children, and there would be five more to come, so it is not surprising that they would expand their dwelling. But other than describing this practical rationale for a two-phase construction, Nylander offers little more to support his hypothesis.

Nylander's theory has now been challenged by research conducted in 2012 by the Dendrochronology Laboratory of Oxford University, England. This study proposes the possibility of a single 'building campaign, during which the entire house was built as we presently see it save the Federal period porch and the mid-19<sup>th</sup> C. lean-to and el.

Dendrochronology is the leading and most accurate scientific dating method for wood-constructed buildings, and it is based on a combination of biology and statistics. Based on tree rings and other features of the wood a precise date, nearly to the month, can be determined for the felling of a tree. The framing beams of buildings were generally built with newly felled trees so that the frame would bind together tightly as the wood seasoned; thus a felling date is generally synonymous with a building date. However, older re-used wood could be used for non-structural members, e.g. ceiling and floor joists.

Finally, to confirm the date of a beam these wood samples are compared with samples from structures in the same small geographical area of known date.

The core samples taken from the Russell House present an intriguing picture. Twenty-one timbers were sampled, all but one of which were interior non-supportive members (e.g. joists), not principal structural beams. The one structural sample was a tie beam in the attic above the kitchen and children's room. Testing of the joists showed them to have been felled at different dates in the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century. On the other hand, the tie beam in the attic indicated a date between 1740-45. The lack of precision here is due to the fact that this beam had lost some of its features that would have lent more precision to the dating.

What does all this mean? According to the Oxford investigators, it suggests that the entire house was built between 1740 and 1745, using recently felled trees for the frame and wood salvaged from several earlier buildings for the non-supporting members—a striking example of New England frugality. However, the scientists consider this merely a tentative conclusion stating that the testing of more structural members would be necessary to confirm their hypothesis.

## ***Touring the Jason Russell House***

### **Assembly Room**

The Assembly Room, as it exists today, was not part of Jason's original house. Architecturally termed a **lean-to**, this room (originally divided into two) was constructed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps to replace a similar structure built in Jason's time. Lean-tos, common additions to many New England houses, increased the living and working space of a dwelling. The name "Assembly Room" seems to date to the early years of the Society's ownership of the house (1923) when the organization used this space for its meetings and events.

The south end of the Assembly Room has been recently repurposed to form a small exhibition space, which will be the site of changing exhibitions. Visitors may wish to complete their house tour by spending some time viewing the displays.

The **square piano** on display in this room has no Russell connection, but it is similar to many such instruments owned by well-to-do 19<sup>th</sup> century Arlington families who wished to educate their daughters in the arts considered appropriate to 'ladies.' The square shape was developed in this era in order to fit more easily than a grand piano into small New England rooms. Certainly these were luxury items. Purchased in 1832, this piano cost \$300 and was made by the Chickering Company in Boston, one of the country's most prominent piano makers.

The centerpiece of the Assembly Room is the large 1976 [painting](#) by Ruth Perry, titled *The Battle at the Jason Russell House*, which was commissioned by the Historical Society for the U.S. Bicentennial. [[Here the guides should summarize the events of April 19, which are described above.](#)]

### **Kitchen**

#### **1. A scene of mayhem on April 19, 1775**

The kitchen was the site of intense drama during the battle at the Russell House. It is the room from which the men from Beverly fled to the safety of the basement, while others tried to do that and failed; it was through its south window that Timothy Munro and Daniel Townsend of Lynn jumped as they tried to escape from the British; finally, it is the room where Mrs. Russell, at the end of the day, found the cold bodies of her husband and eleven other Colonial fighters laid out on the floor. Visitors may want to spend a few minutes here contemplating the horror of that first day of the Revolution. In the basement entry area

they can view two of the **musket ball holes** left from the exchange of fire between the British and the Beverly men below, and they can mentally reconstruct the past as they view the now intact south kitchen window and the floor, once soaked in blood. The current floor is a 19<sup>th</sup> century replacement of the stained original.

On the wall above the blanket chest hangs a **powder horn and a musket** of the kind that Colonial troops would have been using as they fought for their lives in this room. The musket is a French-made Charleville .69 caliber **smoothbore flintlock musket** from 1763, a weapon widely used by the Americans and their French allies during the Revolution. (Note that this musket was so ubiquitous that Americans then tended to call *all* muskets Charlevilles.) This model, weighing about 10 pounds, was awkward to shoot, so in 1777 the Charleville company made a slightly lighter version. The “1763,” as it is sometimes simply called, could shoot 2-3 times per minute and was accurate to about 50 yards. Both the bayonet and the walnut “cow’s foot” stock were useful in hand-to-hand combat. The hand-made musket balls in the pewter porringer on the chest are typical of the projectiles fired from this type of weapon.

It is interesting to recall some common expressions inspired by flintlock muskets, including: “lock, stock, and barrel;” a “flash in the pan” (a backfiring gun); and “skinflint.”

## 2. Center of Colonial life

The kitchen, called the *hall* in Colonial times, is on the south side of the house, a common location for this room since it was the main living space and would have benefited from the additional warmth of the winter sun. Originally the room had a south door to the farmyard, but this was closed off by a later generation of Russells. *[See Appendix III for the typical Colonial house floor plan]*

Although several features of the room are not original but reconstruction, sometimes based on guesswork, e.g. the fireplace and mantel and the wooden wall paneling, the room maintains an authentic aura of antiquity and accurately presents several **18<sup>th</sup> C construction techniques**. Visible, and original, are the heavy oak chamfered summer beam spanning the ceiling from the outer wall to the fireplace and the strong wall and chimney girts, all of which structurally tie the house together. Between these massive members are the smaller ceiling joists that support the floor above. *[See Appendix III for an illustration of Colonial Timber Frame Construction]*



The unique ceiling decoration, a dark spotted pattern on a whitewashed ground is a rare feature, surviving in few homes of this period. The black spots are applied on a whitewashed background with lampblack or another black material, using a sponge, a rolled up rag, or even the end of a corncob. Our ceiling was fortunately preserved owing to the fact that a Russell family member, or perhaps even a later owner, chose not to paint over it but to cover it with a plaster sheathing, which protected it until the Society began its 1923 restoration.

The kitchen was the all-purpose living space in every Colonial house. It may have been the only room that was consistently heated in the winter. It was here, of course, that most food preparation and many other domestic activities took place; where children would have studied their letters and numbers; where the family would have informally entertained neighbors; and where some people might have slept, e.g. a slave, servant, or even some of the older children.

The items in the kitchen reflect the hard labor required of the Colonial wife: cooking, baking, preserving food, carrying water, and filling the larder with staples such as butter and cheese. Others relate to the making of textiles.

Some of the **fireplace tools** date to Jason Russell's era, but many of these came to the house through the generosity of the heirs of Elijah Cutter (1788-1885) a local blacksmith. The **iron three-footed skillet** (called a "spyder" in the probate inventory) **did belong to Jason Russell**. Also displayed:

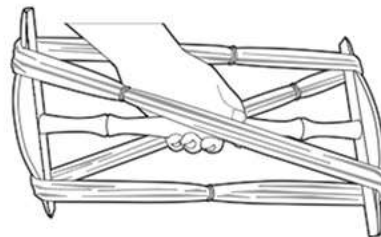
- Wrought iron fork
- Wrought iron toaster
- Wrought iron rectangular broiler (5 bars)
- Circular trivets
- Square wrought iron broiler (11 bars, 4 legs and long handle)
- Tin Dutch oven -wrought iron spit and one skewer
- Wrought iron and pierced brass skimmer.
- Crockery for slow cooking items like soups and beans

The table is partially set with pewter ware, common in Colonial homes, but it is possible that Jason's family, like many early settlers, ate from wooden plates and porringers. Other items in the kitchen used in food preparation are the **butter churn, carrying yoke for water buckets, a bread rising bowl, and on the chest in the corner, a rolling pin, made by Jonathan Harrington, a young fifer for the Lexington militia.**

Notice the two spinning wheels, a large "**walking**" **spinning wheel for spinning wool** and a much smaller **wheel for spinning flax**. Spinning was an essential task for every Colonial woman. She would always have needed to spin to help in the manufacture of ordinary fabrics, if not fancier material, but the task would have become even more pressing when New Englanders began to boycott imported British textiles just before the Revolution. While spinning was done at home, weaving was generally the responsibility of a local weaver serving multiple households.

Two more tools in this room helped the Colonial woman in her yarn production--the **weasel, or clock reel**, which produced evenly-measured skeins of wool. The circumference of the wheel is about two yards, and the gear ratio of the cogged wheel mechanism that produces the popping sound is usually 40:2; thus when the wheel pops it will have measured a skein of 80 yards. [\[Please, guides, do not turn the wheel!\]](#) The "weasel" is possibly the source for the popular nursery song, "Pop Goes the Weasel:"

*All around the mulberry bush, The monkey chased the weasel, The monkey thought it was all great fun, POP goes the weasel.*



Another yarn measuring tool is the **niddy-noddy**, resting on the large chair on the opposite side of the room. The woman held the shaft in her hand and twirled the tool like a baton as she wrapped the yarn and counted each manual turn. The niddy-noddy had a counting song to help its user keep track of the turns:

*Niddy-noddy, niddy-noddy, Two heads and one body. Tis one, 'Tain't one, be one soon.*

The square-back **great chair** on which the niddy-noddy rests is an early 20th Century reproduction of the Carver type of 17<sup>th</sup> C "Pilgrim" chair. According to Jason's probate inventory, he owned a great chair, which he seems to have inherited from his grandfather Jason; possibly it was similar in design to this one.

## Front Entry Hall

The stairs and entryway are simple and unadorned. In Jason's time, this area would have been considerably smaller since the section that now extends beyond the facade of the house was not built until around 1815. The staircase rises in three wide, steep runs with a simple handrail and no balusters.

There is a **musket ball hole** near the top of the stairway post and two more on the stair risers (the same two that are visible from within the basement entry). There are many other holes in the walls and stairs, but keep in mind that this is an old house, and not all holes came from musket balls—some are simply knotholes. (A knothole is smooth in front and back; a musket ball hole would only be smooth on the entry side, although generations of visitors have put their fingers in these holes, tending to smooth even the bullet holes.) Visible in the adjacent photo of the stair is the extreme wear from the feet of the Russell Family and many modern visitors. [*Guides, please warn people when climbing the stairs to be careful not to bump their feet against these fragile old risers. They should place their feet sideways coming up and down. Also, remind them not to touch either bullet holes or knot holes.*]



Hanging in front of the stairs is a **fire bucket** marked "T Russell -W.C.F.S. 1830." Thomas was the grandson of Jason and Elizabeth, and following in the footsteps of his father, also Thomas, he ran a highly regarded store nearby on Concord Road (Mass Ave). The initials stand for West Cambridge Fire Society. Every homeowner would subscribe to such an organization or risk not having the bucket brigade come to his aid when needed. Fire fighters carried other items as well: a wrench with which they could disassemble the highly valuable bedstead if necessary, and a fire bag to quickly gather valuables and documents.

The names "West Cambridge" and "Menotomy," the latter being the name the Native Americans used for this area, were used interchangeably during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. (The boundaries of Cambridge Town, which was settled in 1635, actually extended all the way to the Concord town line.) "West Cambridge" became the town's *official* name in 1807, but that was changed to "Arlington" in 1867 to commemorate the Civil War dead in Arlington (Virginia) Cemetery.

The **tall clock**, which originally belonged to Jason's neighbor Deacon Joseph Adams bears its own mortal wounds from April 19. The interior works and face were stolen by the British and probably melted down for ammunition. Looting was rife during the British retreat and many businesses and homes, including the Russells,' suffered great losses. Jason's probate inventory in fact lists a "broken clock" among his possessions—possibly it had met the same fate as this clock.

English-made and dated about 1720, the clock case is unique in its japanned decoration, a technique invented in Europe and practiced in Boston from about 1712 onward to imitate Chinese lacquer. Japanning was used only on the most elegant pieces made in 18<sup>th</sup> Century America and would have been very expensive. A clock such as this was possibly the most costly item in the Adams household and therefore proudly displayed in the parlor or front entryway. We can assume that the "broken clock"



listed in Jason's inventory also would have been a tall clock, but of simpler design, and displayed in the parlor, as Jason's tiny entryway could not have accommodated it.

**Drop-leaf Tavern Tables** such as this were used in many local taverns, including Menotomy's famous **Cooper's Tavern**. The oval top of this example has been replaced, but the legs are original to the early 18<sup>th</sup> C. On April 19, Cooper's Tavern was the site of horrific violence as described in the following accounts:



*"The British entered the store on their retreat through Menotomy, looted it, leaving molasses and liquor taps open."* Two of the tavern's patrons, Jabez Wyman and Jason Winship, had their "brains out on the floor" most probably because they were drunk on "flip" celebrating the birth of Winship's first surviving son, and insensible to the approaching British troops: "They died like fools." Cooper's Tavern also figures in the saga of eighty-year old **Samuel Whittemore**. Taking a brace of pistols "uptown," from his home near the Alewife River, he fired on a British flanking party killing two soldiers. The dead men's fellows shot and bayoneted the old man, and left him for dead. Taken to Cooper's Tavern, he recovered and lived another 18 years. *(Above, the site of the old Cooper's Tavern, now Mass. Ave. and Medford St.)*

The pine **bootjack** was used to help remove the long boots commonly worn by men in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. A man would put his heel in the "V" shaped notch and stand on the long tail of the jack to remove a boot.

Both of the chairs in entryway date from the William and Mary period (1690-1725) and therefore predate the house, but we must remember that that families did not throw away outmoded furniture. Good pieces like these would have been used for several generations, especially in rural areas. Notice the so-called "Spanish" or "brush" feet on both chairs. *[For more on the characteristics of William and Mary style chairs, see Appendix V]*

## Upstairs Hall

On the second floor level, a door conceals the stairs to the **attic** or garret. The attic would have been used for storage and drying foodstuffs, such as corn and beans, during the long winter months. During the dendrochronology study, some attic floorboards were lifted and beneath one there was found a cache of corncobs of unknown date. At times, the attic might also have served as sleeping quarters for servants and children. *[Note to guides: it's okay to open the attic door to peek, but the public is not allowed to go up there]*

To the right of the attic stairs there is a "**secret cupboard**" with a sliding door, which may have been used to hide important documents and valuables. *[Guides, please wear gloves if you open the sliding door—you can see the staining effect of too much touching over the years.]*



The upstairs hall is a good place to view the hand-hewn nature of the walls, nearly all of which are original. Jason Russell built his house of lumber, mostly oak, cut on his own property. Between 1680 and the Revolution certain trees belonged to the King. For instance, species of tall pines over 24 inches in diameter were needed as masts for the British Navy. These special trees were marked with the King's broad arrow, and anyone cutting them (even if they were on his property) could be prosecuted. Other trees were protected by local custom, such as those shading roads or marking property

boundaries. The Town officials kept close watch on such resources, so we can assume that Jason used his trees wisely.

## Children's Room (Kitchen chamber)

Directly over the kitchen, this room is similar in character to the kitchen with its wall paneling (here again, mostly original) and its exposed beam ceiling. Although various members of the household may have slept here at different times, judging from the **scratched graffiti** above the fireplace it is evident that the room at some time functioned as children's sleeping quarters. Various objects in this room convey further information about life lived in the house.



Dominating the room is the **bed and bedstead**. In Colonial terminology, “**beds**” are what today are called mattresses: the ticking that holds the stuffing—or, for the fortunate, the padding—upon which people slept. Stuffing materials included feathers (saved over many years from the family's geese, ducks, and chickens); wool; cornhusks, or straw (changed with some regularity by good housekeepers). Many beds were rolled up during the day and spread out on the floor at night for sleeping; others were placed on a **bedstead**, or wooden frame, like the one you see here. This bedstead (dated around 1790-1820) has a rope support for the mattress; on the chest at its foot is a tool for tightening the ropes when they got loose. The entire structure folds up against the wall like an early version of a **Murphy bed**. *(Above, a photo of a Murphy-type bed from another Colonial house.)* The hinges are on the side rails of the frame about three-quarters up toward the head. In a small house, all rooms were multi-purpose, and being able to put away a bed meant that you could do other work in the room during the day, like spinning, needlework, visiting friends, teaching the children, etc. *[Guides, please do not lift the delicate “bed” or its woven coverlet to show the features of the bed. The museum staff will try to keep a corner lifted so you can show the rope “springs”]*

The blue wool in the overshot double weave coverlet was dyed with indigo, a slave-grown product, and like sugar, a common everyday item in Colonial and Early Republican life. This dye, incidentally, came in a hard cake and required dissolving in a bucket of urine to make a useable coloring for textile fibers. This type of coverlet is most commonly formed from two wide woven strips, sewn together in a center seam.

Comforts were few, especially in winter, in Jason's house. Fires were rarely lit in the bedchambers unless a family member was sick, or there was an important guest sleeping there. The tiny fireplace did little to warm the room anyway, so **bed warmers** were helpful. One type of bed warmer, displayed on the hearth, is a rectangle of soapstone that dates to about 1800. After being heated up near a fire, it would be placed between the layers of bedding to take the chill off (much like we might use a hot water bottle today).



This room also contains two forms of Colonial “plumbing:” a **chamber pot** beneath the bed and a casein-painted 19<sup>th</sup> C. **washstand** to the right of the fireplace. Anyone sleeping in this room would have favored the chamber pot over a visit to the outdoor privy in the middle of the night. Equally Spartan were the washing facilities. Plenty of diaries and letters from the pre-central heating days account water frozen in pitchers in bedrooms, and snow piled up in the corners of windows.

Displayed near the soapstone bed warmer is another device used to stave off winter's chills, a pierced tin **foot warmer**, used to carry hot coals to church, where the building was unheated and sermons were long, or to warm one's feet when the fire was low.

*[Guides: please do not touch or try to lift the bed warmer or the foot-warmer, which are both very fragile]*



Virtually all of the toys in the room are from the post-Revolutionary period and belonged to other Arlington families—the Russell children’s toys, if they had any, have not survived. Most of these playthings date from the 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The elaborately furnished **dollhouse**, undoubtedly the prized possession of some lucky little girl, dates to the late 1800’s. Few, if any, Colonial children would have owned such a large number of toys. It is important to keep in mind that children, especially in an agricultural household like the Russells’, would have had little time for play. From a very early age they would have been expected to work and contribute to the welfare of the family.

## Parlor Chamber (Best Bedroom)

This room is considerably more elegant than the Children’s Room. Its walls and ceiling are plastered (it is unclear as to when), and the fireplace wall is covered with painted wood paneling typical of mid- and late 18<sup>th</sup> century houses. The hole in the paneling high and to the left of the fireplace may be a **musket ball hole**. This room became Elizabeth Russell’s home, literally and legally, after the death of her husband. At the settling of Jason’s estate, Elizabeth and her youngest son, Noah, each received half of the house and land—17 acres for Elizabeth. She also got as part of her widow’s thirds: *“half the Dwelling House the Northarly end with half the selar and Libberty to ues the oven when wanted and Half the well and to ues the Previledge Land Before the House to the gate”*

Two items in this room, like the tall clock downstairs, belonged to the Deacon Adams family and played a dramatic role in the events of April 19, 1775. These are the Adams family **blanket chest** and the **cradle**.



Deacon Adams, as a leading church official, was charged with safeguarding the parish’s communion silver, so he kept it at his house in this old 1720’s blanket chest. As the British approached Menotomy, Deacon Adams, as a namesake and distant relative of the fiery Boston rebel, Sam Adams, feared for his life and fled to Reverend Cooke’s hay barn. There, despite the Redcoats’ attempts to flush him out with pitchforks, he successfully eluded capture.

Unlike his close neighbors, who, before the British arrived had accompanied their wives and families to the safety of friends living in more remote locations, Adams opted to leave his family at home. He believed it would be safe because his wife Hannah was confined to bed, having recently given birth to a daughter, Ann. The Deacon, thinking the British would not dare harm a woman in her condition, felt it safe to leave her at home and in the care of his five young sons.

When the British burst into the house and began their looting, the boys hid under the bed until the British approached the blanket chest, at which point nine year-old Joel cried out, “Don’t you touch them ‘ere things! Or my Daddy’ll lick you!” Resenting this brazen intrusion, the soldiers ordered the entire family outside and set the house afire as they ran away with the communion silver. The house was spared as the boys managed to quench the flames with water and home-brewed beer. The British pawned the silver, but an alert Boston silversmith recognized it

and contacted the Deacon. After the British evacuation of Boston he and another deacon redeemed it at their own expense.

The **cradle** at the end of the bed is the one in which baby Ann Adams slept. She grew up to marry James Hill and lived to be a very old lady. Their story is told in the Smith Museum exhibit, *Family Ties*.

The early Federal Period bow front chest and the Bible on top of it remind us of the importance of the Locke family, which played a major role in April 19 events and also had connections to the Russell family. Benjamin Locke (1738-1791) led Menotomy's Minutemen into battle on April 19, 1775 and fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill; moreover, he was a leader in the town's First Baptist Church, founded in 1790. Members of the Locke family married members of the Russell family and brought some of them into that church. The Bible belonged to Mrs. Hannah Locke. In it she recorded family births, marriages, and deaths, from her marriage in 1806 until the last recorded death—Henrietta Locke in 1881.

Other items of interest in the room are the brass **warming pan** at the right of the fireplace, which was filled with coals and rubbed between the sheets on frigid nights prior to bedtime, and the **chair-on-rockers** (c.1820) an example of Yankee ingenuity and thrift. Possibly the original owner needed a rocker for an aging family member. Rather than purchasing a new one, he decided to craft the rockers and attach them to an old, disused chair whose legs may have been worn down.

The bed, like the one in the children's room, has a rope support and similar coverings, but it is not a Murphy-style bed. The painted chest at its foot was a **tea chest**, camphor-lined to repel vermin on the cross-Atlantic journey.

Hanging to the right of the bed is a copy of an essay that Rebecca Russell of Charlestown wrote as a school exercise. Note the exquisite penmanship and the lovely decorative border. In 1804, Rebecca married Amos Whittemore, Jr. of Menotomy, whose family story is also told in the Smith Museum. Below is a transcription of the text. The content reflects ideas in the early American Republic about childhood innocence, the virtues of young womanhood, and the transience of life.

**1797 Address:** Give ear, O ye daughters of Beauty, attend to the voice of your sister, for experience has taught her wisdom and length of days, virtue, and understanding. My father was the Brother of Tenderness, my mother was the Sister of Love. As the rosebud opening to the morn, as the dew on the lily so was the loveliness of my youth. I awoke at the rising of the dawn; my salutation was that of joy and gladness; Pleasure beckoned me forth, and, I sported in the sun-shine of Plenty. The hours were swift and ran smiling away but the lightness of my heart out-lived the going down of the sun. The day departed with the mildest breeze, and the night but invited me to bed or repose. My pillow was the softest down, my slumber attended with golden dreams. Thus one day passed away, and the morning passed of the next found me happy! Happy are the hours of artless innocence! Happy the days of virgins simplicity, where the bosom is stranger to deceit, and the heart in conscious of the painful sigh. Oh that I could overtake the wings of Time! O that I could recall the pleasures of my youth!



## The Parlor

### 1. History

This is probably the room in which Elizabeth and Jason slept when their house was crammed full of children, but as was common in 18<sup>th</sup>-century America, the parlor was also the room for important family rituals--weddings, funerals, and christenings--as well as various forms of social interaction, e.g., entertaining important visitors, having tea, and playing cards with friends.

As noted earlier, recent research suggests a date of 1740-1750 for the construction of the entire house. In its basic style the parlor, in contrast to the kitchen, seems in accord with those dates. As in the chamber upstairs, the fireplace wall is faced with elegant decorative paneling. The other three walls of both rooms were simply plastered. In Jason's era these walls would have been whitewashed, not papered, because wallpaper was then very expensive and affordable only by the very wealthy. The wallpaper here is a 19<sup>th</sup> C. addition.

In contrast to the exposed beam ceiling in the kitchen, the ceiling here is plastered, resulting in a more refined effect. However, the actual appearance of the original 1740 ceiling is impossible to determine. In 1985, a preservationist from SPNEA (now Historic New England) discovered that Jason's original ceiling had been modified, perhaps more than once, and that the "summer beam" now visible is actually a false one (literally a wooden box) hiding the mangled original above it.

The wide floorboards, on the other hand, are original; likewise, the **musket ball hole** penetrating the paneling to the left of the fireplace.

The room today probably looks much as it did at the height of the Federal Period in 1814, when Noah Russell's daughter (Jason's granddaughter) Lydia married Thomas Hall Teel and the young couple started making improvements to the house. These included the following:

- The Federal style (1790-1820) blue wallpaper, which is an exact replica of the oldest layer of wallpaper discovered when the room was studied prior to substantial redecoration in 1985. Society members were delighted to find that a Boston merchant still carried the pattern, which was likely chosen by Lydia Russell Teel and her new husband.

- The paint color on the trim—called light Prussian blue—is authentic to the Federal period as determined by the SPNEA expert. She believed that the paneling in Jason’s time was not painted at all but merely oiled.
- Federal period moldings were added to the window frames and around the fireplace.

In the fireplace, are two of the rare objects in the house originally belonging to Jason Russell--the **fireplace crane** and the **andirons**. The crane is inappropriate for a parlor fireplace since its purpose was to support cooking pots! Apparently, its installation here resulted from some confusion at the time of the 1924 house restoration.

## 2. Parlor Furnishings

*[For more detail about the furniture in this room and throughout the house, see Appendix V]*

The sophisticated, and eclectic, furniture collection in the parlor has come to the Society as gifts from various Arlington families. None of these items has an immediate association with the Russells; however, they represent the various periods of American furniture fashionable during the family’s long occupancy of the house. While several articles in this room are of the Federal style (1790-1840) and are therefore harmonious with Lydia and Thomas Teel’s decorative scheme, there are also some fine Chippendale pieces (1755-1790), which date from Jason’s era. Finally, there is the Victorian sofa that might have easily been used when the last members of Lydia Russell and Thomas Teel’s family were still in residence (1880-1892).



The mahogany **Chippendale chest of drawers** is perhaps the most sophisticated piece of furniture in the house. Like the Adams family clock in the entry hall, it is an item that would have been proudly displayed in the parlor or other prominent location, even if it stored blankets or items of clothing used in a bedroom. With its serpentine front and ball and claw feet this chest is a classic example of Chippendale, the most fashionable furniture style in America from 1755 to 1790, and it would have been found only in the

the most wealthy New England homes. Note the brass handles on each side intended to facilitate the quick removal of the chest from the house in case of fire.



The west side of the room is dominated by a massive mahogany **sideboard** which was purchased in 1814 by Amos Whittemore (1759-1858) from its maker, Abel Whitney, and passed down through the generations and recently donated to the Society. Further research is necessary on Whitney, but he may be the same Abel Whitney (1778-1853) who was a cabinetmaker active in Cambridge through the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The sideboard, with its fluted tapered legs, is a fine



example of the Sheraton style of the Federal period. Its original, more diminutive brass drawer pulls have been replaced by wooden knobs that are quite out of keeping with that style.

On the sideboard there is a **wine cooler** or **knife box** of about 1710, which was a wedding present to Lydia Russell when she married Thomas Teel in 1814.

Arranged around the room are a variety of “country” Chippendale chairs, some with ladder backs, others with openwork splat backs. Their rush seats, straight legs and relative unrefined craftsmanship are what make them “country” rather than high style Chippendale pieces. Jason’s inventory lists numerous chairs, and it seems quite likely that he would have owned several much like the ones in this room.

Adjacent to the fireplace is a closet where part of the Society’s collection of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century **pottery and porcelain** is displayed. The presence of these ceramics shows how West Cambridge citizens were partaking of the wider Atlantic trade, and purchasing expensive luxury items from across the globe.



Hanging over the fireplace is a **Mourning Painting** made by Sophia Cutter in 1810. Painted on velvet, it is a stark reminder of the omnipresence of death in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, where disease was rife and medicine was at best primitive. Works such as this were often produced, usually in memory of a family member, by young women who were sent to “female seminaries” to acquire an education appropriate to young women, and where instruction emphasized primarily the ‘feminine arts’ of needlework, painting on cloth, music, and penmanship. This piece therefore may have been a class exercise. Mourning pieces could be embroidered as well as painted. The images are seldom original—the teacher often drew the design and the student filled in the colors. As a result, many mourning images contain similar, highly stylized imagery.

The Hepplewhite **card table** between the windows has a ‘fold-over’ top in burl wood and elegant



inlays of other precious woods. Its inlays, delicate proportions, curved top, and tapered legs mark it as a sophisticated Federal period piece (1790-1820). The exposed top has been recently restored by Arlington-based restorer, Melissa Carr, who has observed that many of its features suggest that it was made by John or Thomas Seymour, a father-son team of highly regarded Boston cabinetmakers in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

A card table was a furniture item that no 19<sup>th</sup> C. family, if it had any means or pretensions, could do without: playing cards and gaming were at the heart of male socializing (along with the consumption of large quantities of drink). The pressed glass vessels here are from ca. 1830 but they look similar to glasses from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and would have been used for drinking port or Madeira, common wines of the period. Reproduction playing cards of the period are displayed, courtesy of former guide Paul Hogman.

On the elegant Irish Chippendale tea table sits a humble **pewter teapot**, the one probable relic of April 19, 1775, in the room. The story is that it belonged to old Samuel Whittemore, who melted down the other pieces of his tea set to make musket balls. The wife of his great, great grandson generously donated this treasure to the Society. We will recall that Mr. Whittemore was left for dead after being shot and bayoneted multiple times in front of the Cooper Tavern, but that he survived to live to the age of 98!

This brings us to the close of our tour of the Jason Russell House. The last members of the Russell family to live in here left sometime between 1884 and 1892, when George W. Teel, a son of Lydia and Thomas Teel, sold the house to a local gentleman, James A. Bailey. In Mr. Bailey's hands, the house remained reasonably intact until the Arlington Historical Society heroically marshaled the resources and support to purchase it 1923 and to preserve it as a historical and architectural landmark of the town and a reminder of Arlington's role in the first day of the American Revolution.



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