

Outdoor Tour of Jason Russell House

Suggested Narration for Guides, 2021

General Introduction

(Visitors are facing the corner of the house, which is to the right of the front door, with their backs to the Mass Ave/Jason St corner)

The Jason Russell House, built in about 1740, is one of the few pre-Revolutionary houses in Arlington preserved largely in its original state. It is therefore a good example of 18th Century vernacular, or, “everyday,” New England architecture. After the last members of the Russell family sold the house in the 1890’s, it became rental property and stood, largely forgotten until 1923, when it was threatened with demolition. Coming to the rescue, the Historical Society purchased and restored it employing the best preservation methods known at the time. Fortunately, the Society was able to furnish it with pieces from its collection of historical furniture and artifacts.

We are now facing the original façade of the house. The façade around the corner to our right that faces Massachusetts Ave, is not part of Jason Russell’s original house but was added in about 1860 by his granddaughter to expand her personal living space. The barn-like structure on the left is the Smith Museum, which was constructed in 1980 to suggest the form of an attached Colonial barn. It houses local history exhibitions.

Besides illustrating aspects of domestic life of the Colonial period, this house is uniquely interesting because it was also the site of the bloodiest single encounter between the Colonists and the British on April 19, 1775. It was here that Jason Russell and eleven of his compatriots died when the British, in retreat from their battles at Lexington and Concord, marched through town on their way back to Boston. Tired, angry, and defeated after their unexpectedly difficult encounters with Colonists in Lexington and Concord, many of the British lost control and went on a rampage, pillaging, burning, and killing at will. Mortality numbers for Arlington relative to all those recorded during the entire day are striking. Of the total of 73 British deaths on April 19th, 40 occurred in what is now Arlington; and of 49 Colonial deaths, nearly half occurred in Arlington. *Even more remarkably, the majority of the Colonials’ deaths took place here at the Jason Russell House.*

Before continuing, we need to pause for a moment and consider the matter of nomenclature. At the time that Jason lived here, the town was officially a precinct of Cambridge, but it was commonly referred to as "Menotomy," likely from a Native American word. But in 1807, the village was officially incorporated as West Cambridge, and that it remained--until 1867--when the name was changed to Arlington.

Jason's House and Farm

Jason built this house around 1740, the year in which he married Elizabeth Winship. He used locally cut wood, but also seems to have thriftily used left-over timbers from the demolition of an older house, perhaps that of his grandfather, also called Jason, who died in 1736. Scientific analysis of these timbers identified several that can be dated to the 1680's and even earlier.

Jason's original house had four rooms, two on the first floor and two matching rooms directly above. A simple staircase, which wrapped around part of the center chimney, connects the two floors. On the first floor, to our left as we face the house, is the kitchen; to the right is the parlor. Above are the chambers.

The kitchen, situated on the sunny side of the house in order to capture warmth in the winter, was the family's principal living space and always a beehive of activity. Dominated by a large fireplace, it was the main source of heat for the entire house. Other rooms had small, largely ineffective, fireplaces. A unique feature of this kitchen is its rare spot-painted ceiling, a form of decoration more common in 17th than in 18th century houses and happily preserved here. The kitchen was where meals were cooked and eaten and family life took place: sewing and mending; spinning; candle making; children's school work; Bible reading; and visits from neighbors; and much more. In fact, just about everything except sleeping, happened in the kitchen, and even so, sometimes a servant might have slept here. We know that there were servants and at least one enslaved person in the household -- Katy, who is listed in church records as "Jason's Negro Child" and elsewhere referred to as "a gift to Jason." The kitchen might have been her sleeping quarters.

The parlor, more elegant than the kitchen, would have been used for family rituals such as weddings, funerals, and other formal entertaining, but in this small farmhouse it probably functioned also as sleeping quarters for Jason and his wife as was the custom at the time. The second floor rooms are similar in overall dimensions to those on the lower floor. Elizabeth would

give birth to nine children, six of whom that would live to adulthood. At the time of the Revolution only two of these children, Elizabeth and Noah, both teenagers, were still living at home.

In the farmyard where we are now standing there would have been a large kitchen garden, a barn--perhaps attached to the house as is our barn-like museum building today—maybe some other out-buildings, including of course a privy, enclosures for animals and so forth. During the day it would have bustled with activity as much farm work and even some domestic tasks such of soap making, food preservation, butchering, etc. would have taken place here. The herb garden, like the one planted near the house by our local garden club, would have provided seasoning for cooking, and perhaps most importantly, medicine for every imaginable ill. We know that Jason planted an orchard near the house, as the Arlington Historical Society has a photograph which shows it.

Jason Russell would die on April 19, 1775, along with other Patriots in the Battle of Menotomy, but after his death two more generations of Russells continued to live here with their families: first, Jason's youngest son Noah and his wife Eunice then Noah's daughter Lydia, who would marry Thomas Teel and raise her family here. The last Russell to occupy the house probably left around 1892 when the house was sold to a local man who converted it into rental property.

The Battle of April 19, 1775, at the Jason Russell House

[Remind them that neither Jason St. or Mill St. would have existed in 1775—only Mass Ave, then called the Concord Rd., which linked Boston to Concord and points west.]

Few residents of Menotomy got much sleep on the night of April 18-19, 1775. The community had been on edge during the preceding weeks and days due to threatening British troop movements around Boston. Thus, the Americans were stockpiling weapons at various locations, some of it in Concord; and Patriots Samuel Adams and John Hancock had taken refuge in Lexington. In the early hours of April 19, Paul Revere had ridden through town calling out warnings. Citizens sat up cleaning their guns and gathering ammunition; others saddled up their horses and rode through the neighboring countryside to further spread the word of the British threat. Men in this community would take their wives and children to the homes of neighbors far from the main road for their safety. In fact, all of this activity was so apparent to Lt. Colonel Francis

Smith as he led his initial contingent of about 700 British Regulars toward Concord that he sent word back to Boston asking General Gage for reinforcements. Gage would respond by sending an additional 1100 men under the command of Gen. Hugh Percy to give support to the initial force. Percy's troops, too, would pass through Menotomy--at around noon--on their way to join Smith in Lexington—thus further arousing the populace.

At about three in the afternoon, after the historic clashes in Lexington and Concord, the two British contingents met up at the Munroe Tavern in Lexington, a mile or so from the Menotomy town line, to rest before their march back to Boston. The British already had suffered much greater losses than they ever could have foreseen. The battles at Lexington and Concord had taken a grievous toll, thus the British were carrying scores of dead and severely wounded comrades. Those still on their feet were thirsty, hungry, and unimaginably tired, and they faced a brutal slog back through the agitated countryside. Especially threatening was the prospect of passing through the crossroads town of Menotomy with its angry citizens and nearly 2000 armed men who had arrived during the day from far flung communities.

The British leaders' fears were not misplaced. All along the road from Lexington they were the target of Colonial snipers relentlessly besieging them with armed fire from behind walls and inside houses. Discipline had withered among the British regulars, and some began to menace the residents by looting, setting buildings afire, and invading taverns to quench their thirst even as they were on the run. This continued with increasing intensity as they neared the center of Menotomy, where dozens of fighters had gathered here in the farmyard of Jason Russell's House. What these fighters did not know was that General Percy, anticipating sniper attacks on the main column, had sent out flanking troops, who established themselves out of sight in the surrounding woods. Thus, while the Patriots' attention was focused on the British column marching down the road in front of them, they were being approached from behind by British marksmen.

At the Russell House, this led to disaster. The Colonists in the farmyard, realizing that they were trapped, ran for the house. Jason Russell was among them hoping to defend his house. He was 58 years old and lame, and he perhaps tripped. At any rate he was shot dead with two bullets and bayoneted multiple times. Others made it into the house, trying to take cover. Two men from Lynn, finding no place to hide, tried jumping through a kitchen window. One survived; the other was mortally wounded by broken glass and gunshot. A group of eight men from Beverly were

lucky enough to find the stairs to the cellar and to barricade themselves there. The gunfire was ferocious. Try to imagine the clamor, the confusion and the terror that must have filled this small house that day. Today, the walls of every room are still riddled with musket ball holes, some easily spotted in the living quarters, others in the attic and basement, and more difficult to see.

When the shooting stopped, Jason Russell and eleven other men, all probably killed inside or near the house, were laid out on the floor of the kitchen, where Mrs. Russell found them upon her return late in the day. In her later testimony before local authorities, she said that the blood was ankle deep on her kitchen floor. All of these men were buried the next day in the Old Burying Ground, where their common grave is now marked with an obelisk. Nearby a separate stone marker honors Jason with this inscription: **Mr. Jason Russell, was barbarously murdered, in his own House, by Gages bloody Troops on the 19th of April 1775. His body is quietly resting in this Grave with Eleven of our friends, who, in Like manner, with many others, were cruelly Slain on that fateful day.**

After Jason's death, the house and most of the land would ultimately go primarily to his youngest son Noah. Jason's wife Elizabeth was given half the house and the land in front of the house, where she lived until her death in 1786. Jason's farm was ultimately sold in parcels or subdivided among his descendants. We are fortunate that this historical site has survived because it can help us to picture life as it was once lived here, and at the same time remind us of the sacrifices made here on the first day of the Revolution.

[N.B. If guests are hungry for more (and no one else is waiting for a tour), guides could talk about other events that took place in Menotomy on April 19. These are briefly described in the Manual and also in Samuel Abbot Smith, West Cambridge 1775: Coopers Tavern incident and, Old Samuel Whittemore (Manual p.16); Adams Family ordeal (Manuel, p. 18)]

Written by Doris Birmingham (May 2021)