



Late-nineteenth-century view of the Macy house on Liberty Street

GPN2044

Macy-Christian House

In the early eighteenth century, the town of Nantucket developed near the Great Harbor, where wharves were built as launching sites for Atlantic whaling voyages and for trading voyages to towns along the eastern seaboard.

The island community — descended from the first English settlers and augmented with the families of tradesmen and mariners — had grown to almost one thousand when land was set off in 1723 to Thomas Macy, a grandson of one of the original settlers of the same name, in an area called the Clay Pits, between Walnut Lane on the east and Winter Street on the west. Macy's land bordered the south side of the Wesco Acre Lots, Nantucket's first residential neighborhood, laid out in 1678. The early use of the clay pits is not documented, but it may have been a site for collecting material for brick-making or pottery.

Thomas Macy probably built more than one house in the area, but only one survives, a dwelling on the corner of Walnut Lane and Liberty Street that he deeded to his youngest son,

ADDRESS

12 Liberty Street

CONSTRUCTED

circa 1745

DISTANCE FROM

WHALING MUSEUM

.3 miles



Nathaniel (1717–83), in 1745. According to the deed of sale, Nathaniel was already living in the house, which may have been unofficially given to him when he married Abigail Pinkham (1722–1810) in 1741, or built by him sometime in the early 1740s, or, as some sources suggest, moved from the older settlement west of town and situated facing north on Liberty Street. The neighborhood was lively when Thomas and Abigail set up housekeeping in their modest one-and-a-half story house. Other early houses were scattered throughout the Wesco Acre Lots, along with barns and workshops, which added layers of noise and activity and the scent of animals and nearby oil refineries to the neighborhood. Next door to the Macys, on the corner of Winter Street (in a house no longer standing), Walter Folger and his wife, Elizabeth, were beginning their large family of exceptional children, and Abigail's uncle, Barnabas Pinkham, lived just down the street at what is now 5 Liberty.

Physical evidence reveals that the much-altered center-chimney house originally featured two rooms on the first floor, plus two small chambers on the second level. As his family rapidly grew, Nathaniel enlarged the house, adding the lean-to kitchen that extends across



Historic American Buildings Survey drawing of the west elevation of the Nathaniel Macy House

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the south side of the house and elevating the front facade to a full two stories, creating the profile that exists today. Abigail was occupied with a household that would eventually include ten children and Nathaniel was busy on a number of fronts as a merchant, or trader. His estate inventory dated 1787 reveals that he owned parts of two wharves and a ropewalk, several houses, seventy-six sheep commons and seven cow commons, and his livestock included twenty-nine sheep and lambs, two horses, and two cows. What's particularly interesting, however, is the record of his household furnishings. For a man of property and a family that at one time included twelve people, the furnishings seem meager. Tables and chairs (one round chair, six black chairs), two beds, a pair of drawers (dresser), and a looking glass were the most valuable items, along with two additional beds, six blankets, a calico quilt, five pillow cases, andirons and other fireplace tools, kitchen equipment – tea kettles, six pewter plates, twelve teaspoons, pots, basins, trammels, a coffee pot, and a spice mortar – and a small assortment of tools. No rugs, books, or paintings are listed



Fireplace in the lean-to kitchen

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in the sparsely furnished house that was dominated by the huge walk-in fireplace in the long, cozy kitchen and keeping room on the south side of the house.

Nathaniel's and Abigail's youngest child, Abishai, purchased half of the house from his mother in 1808 – the northwest room (front right parlor), the chamber above it, and rights to the kitchen. He was a mariner, married to Phebe Worth, with three children. He died the next year, followed by his mother in 1810; and his sons sold the house in 1827 after their mother died.

Three generations of Macys had lived in the house, much as many of their neighbors had resided in family houses that were passed down time and again, with family furniture and heirlooms intact, whaling logbooks in the attic, and hundred-year-old china in the cupboard.



**Silhouette of Frederic F. Macy,
grandson of Nathaniel and
Abigail Macy, circa 1845**

1941.16.1



Liberty Street view from the early 1900s P8790



The Reverend George P. Christian and his dog

A65-25



The NHA's newly acquired Macy-Christian House, 1970s JOHN MCCALLEY PH7-80

The Macy house changed hands a number of times in the nineteenth century, remaining a residence for almost a hundred years after the Macy family sold it, but in 1925 it became the property of the Monnahanit Girls Club, and in 1929 of St. Paul's Church for use as a parish house. In 1934, George P. Christian, an Episcopal minister from New York City, and his wife, Ruth, purchased the property for their summer residence and began a long process of restoration and renovation that included uncovering the original fireplaces, removing partitions, adding a kitchen on the southeast side of the house and bathrooms on the second floor. Careful to retain the eighteenth-century character of the parlor and keeping room (original kitchen) on the first floor and the two front bedrooms upstairs, the Christians embraced the history of the house and filled it with antiques they collected throughout New England, creating a romantic interpretation of New England colonial life.

Ruth Christian bequeathed the Macy-Christian House and furnishings to the Nantucket Historical Association in 1971. For many years it was open seasonally as a house museum, with a portion of the dwelling providing rooms for NHA staff and interns. The house is slated for restoration as the NHA executive director's residence, an appropriate fit for the Liberty Street homestead in the town's oldest neighborhood.