

I. Previous Study of the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House

As a local landmark and the headquarters of the Cambridge Historical Society, the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House in Cambridge has been studied and written about by antiquarians and historians for well over a century. The most recent scholarly architectural history of the property was undertaken by Anne Grady and Sarah Zimmerman while they were students in the Boston University Preservation Studies Program in 1981.¹ Their assignment was apparently similar to this one in that they used both documentary and physical evidence to analyze the building's change over time.

In their 154-page report, containing 74 illustrations, Grady and Zimmerman were especially thorough in documenting physical evidence which was visible prior to the building's restoration in 1982. With the help of noted architectural historian Abbot Lowell Cummings, they took up floorboards, looked at walls where plaster had been removed, and viewed many parts of the structure which are no longer visible. They compiled detailed drawings and photographs to document their observations. They also relied in large part on Dr. Cummings' opinion and interpretations of the structure because of his expertise in Massachusetts first-period buildings, and also because he had been involved with the study and restoration of the building since it became the property of the Cambridge Historical Society in 1957. Because their documentation of the physical evidence was well-recorded in text, photographs, and illustrations, I have not attempted to re-create the same level of detail and I refer the reader to their work.

Grady and Zimmerman also used many important primary and secondary sources as documentary evidence. They accurately transcribed several important Hooper family

¹ Anne Grady and Sarah Zimmerman, "The Hooper-Lee-Nichols House," unpublished paper, Boston University Preservation Studies Program, 1981. Available with all illustrations and appendices at the Cambridge Historical Society.

probate documents. However, they did not attempt to compile a complete chain of title, or thoroughly research the owners of the house and their connections to one another and to the community. In order to expand on their work, I have focused on compiling as many of the deed and probate documents related to the property as possible. Finding and reading the legal documents in conjunction with historical sources has helped to clarify the history of ownership and the evolution of the structure's use within the landscape.

II. Description of the Property

The Hooper-Lee-Nichols House is a three-story wood frame building located in a residential section of Cambridge in the historic Brattle Street neighborhood. The present headquarters of the Cambridge Historical Society, it is situated on a lot of approximately 18012 square feet on the north side of Brattle Street, approximately one mile west of Harvard Square in Cambridge.² [See Fig. 1] There was a house constructed on this site between 1685-1690, but it was significantly enlarged and altered in 1716 and throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The house grew from what may have been a simple two-room structure to a three-story double-pile building with a two-story ell. Over time, the lot associated with the house was enlarged and reduced according to the property's function as a small farm, as a gentleman's country estate, and as a suburban home.

Until 1754, when the boundary between Cambridge and Watertown was moved westward, the land on which the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House was built was part of Watertown. Today's Brattle Street follows the path of very early roads connecting

² City of Cambridge, Assessment Department. *Parcel Sheet Tile Quad 20.4*, New Map 753962, Old Map 238. Print date: December 28, 1999. The building address is 159 Brattle Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 02138.

Cambridge with Watertown. [See Fig. 2] When the west end of Cambridge was laid out in 1634, the section of road from present-day Brattle Square to Mason Street was called the “Highway to Watertown.” The section from today’s Mason Street to Fayerweather Street – in which the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House is situated – was the old “Path to Watertown,” in existence before the founding of Newtowne (Cambridge) in 1630.³ The Cambridge town boundary until 1754 was at present-day Sparks Street, but after that date it was extended to what would become Mt. Auburn Cemetery. Cambridge thus annexed the Hooper-Lee-Nichols property and several other farms.⁴

The Hooper-Lee-Nichols House itself is more representative of its evolution over time than of any single period. From the exterior, it presents a somewhat awkwardly-proportioned façade, appearing too short for its width despite the addition of a third story. [See Fig. 3a-3c] The very low-pitched roof is ornamented with balustrades at the front and rear eaves. The façade is flat except for the entryway, and contains five window bays which are approximately symmetrical. The front door is projected in a single-story entry pavilion topped with a gabled roof, and with a small window on the east and west walls of the pavilion. The façade of the entry pavilion comprises a pediment which rests upon two pairs of pilasters which resemble bulging Doric columns. The exterior is sheathed in clapboards except for the west wall of the main house block, which is covered in roughcast. The windows, each with a pair of louvered exterior shutters, are 8-over-12 sash windows on the first and second floors of the main house block, and 8-over-8 sash windows on the third floor. Window size and placement varies somewhat on the sides and rear of the house and the ell.

³ Bainbridge Bunting and Robert H. Nylander, *Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge, Report Four: Old Cambridge* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge Historical Commission, 1973) 55.

⁴ Bunting and Nylander, *Survey*, 19.

The interior of the house reflects its evolution from a central-chimney hall-and-parlor plan to a much larger house. The house faces south, as is typical of First Period buildings in New England. The front door opens into a small entryway, enlarged by the addition of the entry pavilion to create a lobby. [See Fig. 4b] A flight of winding closed-string *front stairs* with turned balusters rises from the entryway to the third floor. On the left as one stands in the entryway and faces the stairs is a large, low-ceilinged room called the *west room* (sometimes also called the west parlor), which has cased beams, plastered and wall-papered walls on three sides, and a paneled fireplace wall. On the right is a smaller room called the *east room*, with cased beams, plastered and painted walls, paneling on part of the fireplace wall, and a partition along the east end of the room. The partition, which runs along the west side of a transverse beam, contains an arched pair of double doors leading to a narrow *pantry*.

The pantry also serves as a passageway to the *kitchen*, which is at the northeast side of the main building. A set of *service stairs* rises from the northwest corner of kitchen to a passage above. *Cellar stairs* descend from the southwest corner of the kitchen. Behind the kitchen is the *laundry* which extends in an ell. Both the west room and the east room have doors near the central chimney which lead to a rear room, two steps lower than the front rooms. This room, probably part of an early lean-to, was heavily restored by Joseph Everett Chandler in 1916 to a conjectured First Period appearance. It has served different functions over time, but is today commonly called the *library* according to its post-1916 use. An exterior porch wraps around the northwest corner of the library. A set of stairs, which I will call the *west stairs*, rises from the west end of the library to the passage above.

On the second story, the plan is similar to the ground floor. [See Fig. 4c] The front stairs continue through the central chimney bay. The *west chamber*, with plastered and wallpapered walls, is located over the west room. Unlike the room below, two sets of partitions have been added at the southwest and northwest corners of the room to create a pair of small closets. The *east chamber*, with plastered and painted walls and a partly-paneled fireplace wall, is located over the east room of the first floor. Unlike the room below which has a full partition all along the transverse beam creating the pantry, in this chamber there is only a set of partitions at the northeast corner of the room enclosing a bathroom.

The rear section of the second floor, used today for the administrative functions of the Cambridge Historical Society, is more complex in plan than the first floor. The west stairs from the first floor library rise to a narrow passageway behind the central chimney block which connects several rooms: the *northwest chamber* (present-day office), a bathroom, the *north-center chamber* (present-day copy room), and the *northeast chamber* (present-day research library). A small room, now used for storage, is located above the first-floor laundry ell and is accessible through the northeast chamber. From the eastern end of the passageway, the service stairs descend to the kitchen, and a set of stairs rises to the third floor.

The third floor consists of many small rooms, closets, bathrooms, pantries, and passageways, obviously reconfigured many times. [See Fig. 4d] Only at the front of the house do the rooms conform to the basic plan of one room on either side of the main chimney block, with the front staircase rising to a landing in the central chimney bay

between the two front rooms. Today, the third floor is used as two rental apartments, as well as collections storage for the CHS.

Because of the way the third story was raised into the attic space, creating a very low-pitched roof, there is no attic floor today. [See Fig. 4e] Instead, there is a crawl-space attic accessible from a set of stairs in front of the central chimney block on the third floor. By looking into the crawl space, one can view the roof framing system. This contains some fragments of early roof-frame members as well as evidence of the roof's change over time, as described in the Grady/Zimmerman report.⁵ The cellar, which is accessible from the cellar stairs in the kitchen, shows evidence of numerous alterations and enlargements at various times, and is also described in detail by Grady and Zimmerman.⁶ [See Fig. 4a]

III. The First Period of the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House: Circa 1685-1733

Although the Hooper-Lee-Nichols House site was originally part of Watertown, the likely first private owner of the site was an early settler of Cambridge, Robert Holmes, who bought a house and two acres of land in Cambridge in 1639.⁷ Holmes, who probably lived on the south side of what is now Brattle Street near the present Appian Way, was apparently a well-respected member of the Cambridge community. In 1641 he helped John Stedman build the town well near the current intersection of Brattle and Mt. Auburn Streets, and a 1642 town survey showed that he held several parcels of land in

⁵ Grady and Zimmerman, *Hooper-Lee-Nichols*, 27-29.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-17.

⁷ RTC, 62.