

Portsmouth Athenaeum

Introduction to Researching Your House in Portsmouth

The City of Portsmouth has a large historic district that encompasses the South End, the Waterfront, the central core of the city (the compact part of town on the 1813 map), and the West End. Within these areas there are numerous eighteenth and nineteenth century houses. The buildings in the downtown are made of brick, usually three to four stories high. They were all built following the three major fires of 1802, 1806 and 1813, following the decree of the Brick Act.

In the seventeenth century the South End was the spiritual and civic core of Portsmouth. There was a Meeting House in 1659, located below Pickering's Mill; the first schoolhouse was located nearby, as was the first armory. When Portsmouth's early congregation split into the South and North parish, the first North Church was built on Market Square in 1712. Thus began the shift of people from the South End towards the center of town.

Originally there were four major landholders in early Portsmouth. John Pickering owned most of the South End. Because this area was spared from any major fires, the footprint of the little lanes created in the 1600s still exists. But the dwellings date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some are Georgian style vernacular structures with three to five bays and large central chimneys; some are New Englanders, built after mid-century. Many of these buildings had large gardens and one or two outbuildings. Today some of these former small barns or carriage houses still exist and serve as apartments or garages. Mechanic Street still has some waterfront businesses today.

Sources

- City Directories from 1820 to the present (Street numbering changed between 1912 and 1914)
- Street files compiled in the 1970s
- Vertical files, including family and subject files
- Registry of Deeds at Rockingham County Courthouse (on line for the last 20 years)
- Genealogies
- Census Records (first in 1790)
- Tax Records
- New England Historical and Genealogical Society
- MAPS of Portsmouth: 1813 Hale map, 1839 Plan of Portsmouth, 1850 Brewster map, 1877 Bird's Eye View, 1904, 1910, 1920 Sanborn Insurance maps
- *New Hampshire Gazette* advertisements
- James Garvin: *An Exterior Architectural and Historical Survey of the South End of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1972.*
Garvin: *Academic Architecture and the Building Trades in the Piscataqua Region of New Hampshire and Maine, 1715-1815.*
Richard Candee: *Wooden Buildings in Early Maine and New Hampshire: A Technological and Cultural History, 1600-1720.*
Candee: *Building Portsmouth*