House Stories – 32 Charles Street – The Haunted Charles Street Schoolhouse

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30	22-51		Ca 1845-1865	Greek Revival Italianate	C
32	**22-**	**The Haunted Charles Street Schoolhouse**	**Ca 1842-1844**	**Greek Revival Cottage**	**C**
34-36	22-		Ca 1920	Two-decker	C

Location

32 CHARLES ST

MBLU

22/ 50/ / /

Owner

GARAND JOSEPH R & HELEN E L/I

Assessment

$763,700

PID

1089

Building Count

1

Current Value

Assessment

Valuation Year	Improvements	Land	Total
2025	$349,600	$414,100	$763,700

Owner of Record

Owner	GARAND JOSEPH R & HELEN E L/I
Co-Owner	RONALD GARAND
Address	32 CHARLES ST NEWBURYPORT, MA 01950
Sale Price	$0
Certificate	
Book & Page	24142/0337
Sale Date	04/05/2005
Instrument	1A

Ownership History

Ownership History

Owner	Sale Price	Certificate	Book & Page	Instrument	Sale Date
GARAND JOSEPH R & HELEN E L/I	$0		24142/0337	1A	04/05/2005
GARAND JOSEPH R-HELEN E TE	$0		4008/0268		

Building Information

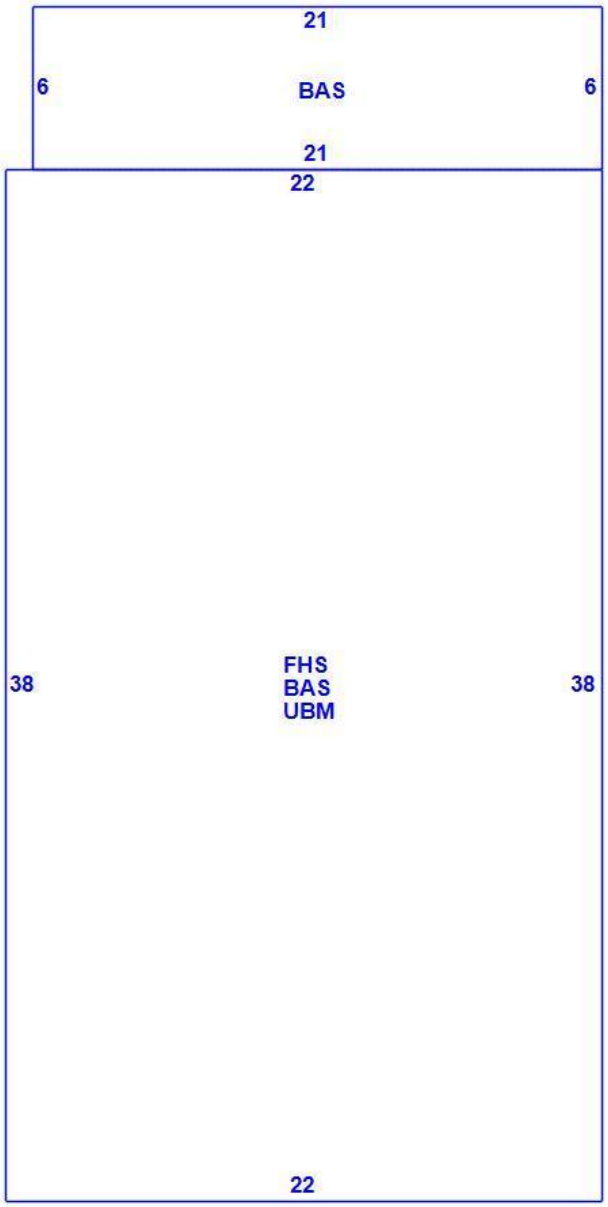
Building 1 : Section 1

Year Built:	1842-44
Living Area:	1,380

Building Attributes

Field	Description
Style:	Conventional
Model	Residential
Grade:	Average +10
Stories:	1 1/2 Stories
Occupancy	1
Exterior Wall 1	Wood Shingle
Exterior Wall	
Roof Structure:	Gable/Hip
Roof Cover	Asph/F Gls/Cmp
Interior Wall1	Plastered
Interior Wall	
Interior Flr	Hardwood
Interior Flr 2	Vinyl/Asphalt
Heat Fuel	Gas
Heat Type:	Forced Air-Duc
AC Type:	None
Total Bedrooms:	3 Bedrooms
Total Bthrms:	1
Total Half Baths:	0
Total Xtra Fixtrs:	
Total Rooms:	6 Rooms
Cndtn	
Num Park	
Fireplaces	
Fndtn Cndtn	
Basement	

Building Layout



Building Sub-Areas (sq ft)Legend

Code	Description	Gross Area	Living Area
BAS	First Floor	962	962
FHS	Half Story, Finished	836	418
UBM	Basement, Unfinished	836	0
		2,634	1,380

Extra Features

Extra FeaturesLegend

No Data for Extra Features

Land

Land Use

Use Code	1010
Description	SINGLE FAM

Land Line Valuation

Size (Acres)	0.11
Depth	0
Assessed Value	$414,100

Outbuildings

OutbuildingsLegend

Code	Description	Sub Code	Sub Description	Size	Value	Bldg #
FGR1	GARAGE-AVE			260.00 S.F.	$4,200	1

Valuation History

Assessment

Valuation Year	Improvements	Land	Total
2024	$319,100	$376,400	$695,500
2023	$319,100	$327,300	$646,400
2022	$293,400	$272,800	$566,200

History of the House

Architecture: Greek Revival Cottage

Built: 1842-44

History of the House

(The City Assessor claims that the building was built in 1800 which would be impossible since Greek Revival trends did not even exist at that time. The only possibility is that it was heavily modified into Greek Revival from a vernacular structure.) The National Register of Historical Houses in 1984 correctly posted 1842-1844.

The Famous Charles Street Haunted Schoolhouse in Newburyport



The schoolhouse was a small drab building, appearing desolate with marred weatherboards, broken fence and bare yard. The classroom and entry way were stuffy. There were no closets. There were no mirrors and no place to create echoes. It was an ordinary simple schoolhouse. It was a boy's primary school in a New England small town seaport and Miss Lucy Perkins was the teacher. Rumor or truth had it that a pupil was beaten and heaved into the cellar in the 1850s.

In 1870, people became aware of strange things occurring in the Charles Street schoolhouse. A loud knocking sound would begin on the floor while the boys were reciting their prayers. It would resonant from the wall, then near Perkins' deck.

Other strange phenomena began. There were knockings on the outer door, but no one would be there.

There was a stove in front the of pupil's desks. Sometimes, the lid would be lifted off of the stove, suspended in air, then lowered in place. Finally, the custodian refused to enter the building if he was alone. The weird things got to be too much for him. He would often find the stove was moved and its utensils and fuel, scattered.

One of the bells on Perkins' desk would ring by unseen hands. The wooden ventilation valve in the attic would be open or shut without human hands.

Sometimes the room was filled with an eerie yellow glow. During the darkness of storms, the room would be illuminated by a soft light. The building was buffeted when there were no gusts of wind.

Perkins was thoroughly examined and cross-examined. The students were threatened and bribed to no avail. It was said the Oliver Wendell Holmes tried to bribe Amos Currier to confess to a hoax, but this did not work.

The papers publicized all of the events. Loring of Boston published a pamphlet about these.

Some people wanted to close the school down and, perhaps, demolish it. Others took their boys out of the school. The phenomena ceased in 1875. It remained a school for years until it was reconstructed into a house. The homeowner, in the 1970s, said nothing strange happened while he lived there.

Years later, Amos Currier claimed he was responsible for the phenomena and it was a hoax.

The knockings, wind and moving objects are typical poltergeist phenomena while it is unusual for one to create light. Generally, the phenomena start and end spontaneously. Theoretically, a part of the human survives death of the body. There is intelligence. Psychokinesis, PK, is the ability of the mind to affect matter. This type of poltergeist is the entity agent poltergeist.

It would not be possible for a person to produce all of the events at the schoolhouse by manipulation, especially not in the presence of witnesses.

Holmes tried to bribe Currier into admitting that he perpetuated a hoax and, years later, he said he did. Could Currier have been a human agent poltergeist? The profile of the human agent is one who is having very unpleasant feelings. Emotions are repressed and come out subconsciously in the form of PK. The phenomena only happen when the person is present. For the most part, people, unless they are told they are a poltergeist agent, do not know they are subconsciously causing the phenomena.

During the 1870s, the study of psychic phenomena and Freudian psychology was embryonic. It was not until the 20th century that the poltergeist was studied, investigated and researched as being theoretically linked to psychology.

Bibliography:

Mysterious New England, Austin N. Stevens, ed., (Yankee Inc., 1977)

It all started in the fall of 1870. Back then, one of the buildings on Charles Street served as a schoolhouse for boys. According to reports of the day, the school was bleak and bare, its tiny, single classroom smelly and unpleasant. Apparently, it also housed a ghost.

This poltergeist first made its presence known by banging on the floorboards whenever the students began their morning prayers. This banging, described as “thunderous,” would then be heard coming from behind the classroom walls, and sometimes from the teacher’s desk itself. At first, the teacher blamed the noises on the wind, or the frost, or even rats. But these excuses did little to calm the fears of her students.

More ghostly things began happening as the school year progressed. One time a young boy’s hand was seen pressed against an outside window, disappearing as soon as the teacher went for closer inspection. Another time the class saw a young boy’s face pressed up against the same window, looking in at them, again, only to vanish when the teacher tried to get a better look. Soon enough, hats and coats hung on hooks by the students in the morning would later be found thrown on the floor. And no matter how many times they were put away, brooms and dustpans stored in a stairway would be found, scattered everywhere.

On more than one occasion, the lid of the school's heat stove elevated in front of the entire class. The school's doors would open and close mysteriously, even with the teacher and some of her larger students trying and failing to stop them from moving. The bell on the teacher's desk would frequently ring on its own when no one was around. It was also reported that the schoolhouse would be buffeted by high winds even in the calmest weather. During real storms, the classroom would be lit by an eerie yellow glow.

The teacher during these strange times was Miss Lucy Perkins. According to an 1873 pamphlet titled "The Haunted Schoolhouse of Newburyport," she was in her early 20s, was "strongly framed and full of vigor," and did not believe in spiritualism, a fad of the times. Sober and straightforward, through all this, Miss Perkins' behavior showed nothing but courage and concern for her students.

Yet it was she who had the most frightening encounter with the ghost. One day a student saw someone in the school's vestibule, staring in at the class. On investigation, Miss Perkins discovered a pale, slight boy standing in the far corner of the entryway, "the picture of death on his face." She said his clothes were in "evident preparation for burial." In other words, he looked like a corpse.

The boy noiselessly glided past her and began ascending the stairs to the school's loft, looking over his shoulder, keeping her in sight at all times. A brave woman, the teacher followed him into the attic where, after a while, he simply melted from her view. As it turned out, Miss Perkins and her students would see this boyish vision many more times over the next two years.

All this became too much for the locals and soon enough parents were pulling their kids out of the haunted school. Even the janitor was affected, refusing to go into the schoolhouse alone. Reports of the Charles Street ghost made it into the local newspaper, then into the Boston media and soon enough, people across the country were reading about the young phantom of Newburyport.

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Proving that nothing really changes, the Newburyport city fathers decided to form a committee to see if the Charles Street ghost was real.

The committee included a selectman, a deacon and a newspaper editor, but right away, people questioned its motives. No less than The New York Times reported that while the selectman and the deacon wanted to prove there were no supernatural events, the newspaper editor was most likely "reluctant to spoil a fruitful theme of thrilling paragraphs by metaphorically slaying the ghost that laid such entertaining journalistic eggs."

It was said that the school's students were pressured to admit the whole thing was a hoax. Even the esteemed poet Oliver Wendell Holmes got involved, supposedly attempting to bribe one student to admit he was the source of the strange happenings. Years later this student did in fact confess, but a lot of the evidence, eyewitness and otherwise, discounted that the Charles Street Schoolhouse haunting was some elaborate prank. As supernatural expert Jill Stefko wrote of the case: "It would not be possible for one person to cause all the events at the schoolhouse."

After some hemming and hawing, the committee eventually declared that no ghost existed. But its findings convinced no one and were immediately discounted. Public sentiment remained with Lucy Perkins and her students, simply because so many people had seen evidence of the haunting with their own eyes.

In 1875, the weird happenings stopped just as quickly as they began. The ghost went wherever ghosts go and things in the schoolhouse returned to normal. The old building was later converted to a residential house and latter day owners reported no unusual goings-on within.

But the Charles Street ghost did put Newburyport on the map back then, and on the lips of newspaper readers across the country. As another report put it, no citizen of Newburyport could travel anywhere in the United States for years afterward without being asked about the Charles Street ghost.

Which got us thinking. In these times of woeful economic uncertainty, with sky-high gas prices possibly reducing the number of travelers visiting our fair city, maybe recruiting another poltergeist wouldn't be a bad idea, if just to keep the tourist trade humming.

For as The New York Times concluded back in 1873: "Newburyport enjoys the sudden notoriety which it has achieved. Visitors are gathering in hopes of sharing the privilege of gazing upon the schoolhouse ghost. Newspapers are making the name of the quiet New England village familiar all over the continent. And Newburyport, proud of its sudden fame, hugs the youthful spectre to its bosom and will not lightly listen to any scheme that would deprive it of its precious spook."

Gil Gillis is a local writer and longtime resident of Newburyport.

Bibliography:

Tales of the City: Strange doings on Charles Street, By Gil Gillis / Tales of the City, Sat Jul 26, 2008

The Little Haunted Schoolhouse

The volunteer at the Newburyport library was sure the case had been a hoax. Older people in town knew of the haunted house, or knew the old story of the dead child and class tortured for month by the odd winds, the voices and the floating arm. The children had all seen the ghost of a boy in their classroom, but it had been disproved over one hundred, thirty years ago. The case had been closed and the hoaxer had become infamous, but there was still a lingering doubt.

In 1873, a twenty cent book was published entitled **Expose of Newburyport Eccentricities, Witches and Witchcraft** by someone calling himself H.P. The small pamphlet included a story about a the ghost of a murdered boy who had come back to haunt the children of the school, and after its publication, the well known haunt became an open and closed case. The truth, however, tells a slightly different story, and sometimes proving a fraud means having to ask more questions.

By 1872, the Charles Street Schoolhouse had become a black spot of sorts for the community in Newburyport. The building was falling apart and should have been remodeled decades before. The heating system was ancient and the floors creaked when students thought about moving. The drab color stuck out against the changing neighborhood, and most wished that it could be torn down.

The school was a weigh station for the unwanted, “untidy”, students of the town and the leftovers from other communities. They were the wayward urchins and the special needs kids of their time. The sixty-three desks were always filled, rotating as pupils dropped out to work or because they had become bored.

Lucy Perkins, the young teacher who accepted the job of instructing them, was known as an intelligent but sad woman. She had worked at the school for two

years, but when she was hired she was not told about the teachers before her. The school committee kept why several teachers had quit suddenly.

The children knew why.

“The enemy to their public peace was supposed to be in the air, invisible, intangible and malignant, irregular but certain in its visits, and positive in it disturbances. “

The schoolhouse was haunted. In about 1860, a child had committed some “horrible” act in the school and had been given the appropriate punishment. He was severely beaten and locked in the basement of the building. He was left there the entire day and students were ordered to ignore his cries and moans. When the school day ended he was helped home and died later that night. The teacher, well within his rights as a disciplinarian, suffered no repercussions.

While it is impossible now to say what the inhabitants of the school experienced in the next few years, the rumors say it was well known the place was haunted well before Ms. Perkins was hired. She taught for two years without recording any negative instances, but late in 1871 things changed.

The class was often made to suffer through 2-3 hours of knocks on the walls. They came from the floor, from the ceiling, from the back wall and their own desks. They often became so loud the students could not work. A loud banging could be heard some days on the front door. Several times Lucy tried to catch whoever was distracting her class, but there was never anyone there. One days she opened the door and felt a person brush by her. The children in the room also felt something enter the room and go by their faces.

Doors would open and close by themselves. A frustrated Lucy would lock the offending doors, but they would swing back open after she turned her back. Clothes hanging from hooks in the back of the room would fall off. Students suffered bad headaches and noises in their ears as atmospheric conditions in the room would changes dramatically from moment to moment. A large vent located in the middle of the classroom was used to allow in fresh air. It had a manual latch so heavy Lucy had to use all her strength to open it. Sometimes the vent would open

on its own or refuse to move no matter how she struggled.

Lucy kept two bells on her desk to announce class and breaks throughout the day. The bells would often ring by themselves in perfect time and in tones the bells should not have been able to make. One time, during an outside break, one bell rang so loud all the kids lined up to reenter the building. Lucy, outside and confused, unlocked the schoolhouse door to find the bell still on her desk and the room empty. The children laughed, and she decided to start telling people what was going on.

The school committee refused to hear her and most of the people in town believed she was crazy. The story, however, was starting to attract attention to the town.

Things intensified when the lights started. While Lucy was conducting her class, a bright yellow light would appear through the window and remain shining "like the sun" for hours. The light would come through almost everyday, even when the sky was overcast and there was no way the sun could be reflecting into the room.

Once while Lucy was conducting her lesson, there were loud rappings from the attic. She armed herself with a stick and took one of the young boys up with her to investigate. The rapping was replaced by laughing as they climbed the stairs, but when they reached the top they found nothing. As they searched the attic, they began to hear the same laughter below them on the bottom floor. Running back down the stairs to try and nab the culprit, they found no one nearby and again heard the laughing upstairs.

Until now the ghost had seemed playful and taunting but never really caused anyone harm. It was a nuisance, but the class pressed on. Then in 1872, the ghost finally took form. The children began to see an oddly dressed boy standing outside looking in at them. No matter how many times Lucy ran outside, she could never catch him. The boy's arm then started to appear inside of the room. No one ever touched it, but they could see it floating in midair; the hand, arm and upper shoulder of a boy their age.

In October things reached their peak. The boy had already made several appearances to the children, but Lucy was finally able to see him for herself. She described him as a boy of about thirteen with blue

eyes and a sad mouth. His clothes were of an older style and were brown and faded.

Later that winter, the school committee finally decided to do something. The whole town knew of the boy who had died fifteen years earlier and there was no silencing Lucy or redirecting the attention the town and its dilapidated schoolhouse was receiving. They held séances over the next few months to try and contact the murdered boy and put him at ease. The hauntings stopped, but most doubt it was communicating with the dead that caused peace to fall to the school.

Historical research can be a tricky feat. Old words can be translated and slang can be made understood, but euphemism is sometimes harder to nail down. A prostitute becomes a woman of ill repute. Alcoholism becomes a blackening of the gall bladder. Lost to history is what people really thought of Edward De Lancy and his family.

Edward lived near the haunted schoolhouse and his family was described as being eccentric and of "retired habits." He was said to be unsociable but with a good sense of humor and of "little sympathy with his local associates." Edward had received as a gift from a family member living in Europe some type of glass projection machine that could throw object far distances by catching the sun and then shining the trapped light. He fiddled with smaller object before hearing of the odd noises in the school and the murdered boy. He decided to project the image of a desolate schoolchild directly into the classroom, all the time laughing at the children down below.

When the news came to light, Edward would entertain anyone who arrived at his house by throwing ghosts into the classroom and explaining the methods behind his practical joke. The town considered the haunting solved, and as the author of the pamphlet writes, "Thus has Science given the world another proof of its power over the superstitions of the day." Nothing is said of what happens to the children or sad Lucy Perkins, but the case was lost to a locked file cabinet in the Newburyport Public Library. The school is now a private residence and the latest owners report no loud noises, no odd laughter and no arm of a murdered boy hovering in their dining room.

Questions still remain, however, and while Edward's antics explain the most intense aspect to the haunting, they do not clarify all that happened in that schoolhouse. While the atmosphere of the old building could have easily activated the imagination of the more undesirable students of the town, there was still Lucy Perkins and the other teachers who had quit the post. There was no way Edward could have faked all of the haunting and never admitted to ever going near the school. Rather the legend of the ghost and the murdered boy already existed and acted as his inspiration. Someone might have been outside pounding on the walls when they heard it, but what about the laughing in the attic and mysterious bells that rang behind a locked door.

What happened in the schoolhouse will never be fully explained. Since the first unexplained cold spot, the town swept things under the rug and kept the truth locked inside the building. People of the time did not want to face what might have been left behind by a boy beaten and left to die, but the story remains. The school was once described as "dismal at best, and if built by the spectral-loving fraternity themselves for their special accommodations, it could not answer their purpose better." But the schoolhouse was more than just a prop or the backdrop to a story of tragedy, and if tragedy never rest, the murdered boy of the Charles Street Schoolhouse may never truly find peace.

Jessica Gill and the staff at the Newburyport Public Library