

HISTORIC OTTERBEIN

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The Needham House: 604 S. Hanover Street

by David Safier

When Joan and I moved into 604 S. Hanover Street in 2020, Covid was raging and the neighborhood, like the rest of the country, was in lockdown. We were isolated in our new house, in a new city, in a new part of the country far from Tucson, Arizona, which had been our home for almost twenty years.



When we bought the house, I was intrigued by the plaque hanging next to the front door: “Needham House: 1829.” Who was Needham, I wondered, and what was the neighborhood like when the house was built almost 200 years ago?

With the pandemic, I couldn’t knock on my neighbors’ doors and ask questions. The Baltimore Historical Society and the government offices were closed to the public, so I couldn’t expect much help there either. My only reasonable option was to open my laptop, let my fingers do the walking through the internet and see what I could find.

What I found was a treasure trove of information about the house’s original owner, Asa Needham, and a wealth of information about the neighborhood’s homes and residents, all literally at my fingertips.

This is a short history of Asa Needham and the house which bears his name. Most of my information comes from a few online sources: Maryland Land Records, Baltimore City Directories, archives of the Baltimore Sun and other local papers, census records and genealogy records. Since the historical records at my disposal are filled with gaps and I’m sticking close to the facts, my narrative has holes in it, but it paints a surprisingly rich picture of Asa Needham and his times.

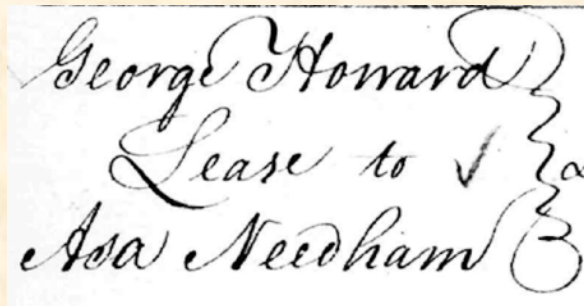
Asa Needham: Birth and Early Years in Baltimore

Asa Needham was born in Massachusetts in 1791, the third of five children. It is not clear what brought him to Baltimore or the year he arrived, but I know he was married to Ann Eliza Lynch in 1820 in a ceremony held in Baltimore’s First Methodist Episcopal Church. The 1822 Baltimore Directory lists him as a partner in Parran and Needham Grocers on the Light Street Wharf near Conway Street. The 1827 city directory has him living on Sharp Street just south of Conway — where the Federal Reserve Bank stands today — a short walk from his grocery on the Wharf.

In 1829 Needham bought a 70-by-90 foot plot of land on the southwest corner of Hanover and Lee, which now holds four houses on Hanover as well as houses immediately behind them. He bought it from the sons of John Eager Howard, one of the prominent citizens of Maryland at the time.

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John Eager Howard was a colonel and war hero in the Revolutionary War. President George Washington offered Howard the position of Secretary of War in 1795, which he declined. Howard went on to become the Governor of Maryland, a State Senator, a U.S. Representative and a U.S. Senator.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "George Howard". Below the signature, there is a line of text that appears to be "Lease to J. & A. Needham". The handwriting is elegant and characteristic of the late 18th or early 19th century.

From the 1829 Lease contract

The Howard family owned a large expanse of land stretching from the Mount Vernon area as far south as Federal Hill. John Eager Howard subdivided the land into plots and was in the process of selling them (to be accurate, most of the transactions were 99 year leases) when he died in 1827, leaving the land to his sons William and George.

The 604 S. Hanover house was the first to be built on the land Needham purchased, most likely in 1829 or 1830. It was built in the Federalist style which was typical of small houses of the time: two full stories plus a smaller living area on the third floor under a steeply sloped, peaked roof. Two houses on Lee Street, also on the plot of land Needham purchased, use the same Federalist style, which suggests they were built soon after.

Though the plaque calls this the Needham House, records indicate that he and his family never lived here. Baltimore directories of the time have him living on Hanover near Barre starting in 1829, then in a house on the northeast corner of Charles and Lee in the early 1840s. Needham most likely rented out 604 S. Hanover until he sold it in 1836.

Asa Needham: Businessman

Needham prospered in the years following his 1829 purchase from the Howard brothers. He continued his grocery business on the Light Street Wharf, but the Parran name was dropped from the establishment. He ran regular ads in the Baltimore Sun: "OLD HAVANA & PRINCIPE SEGARS for sale." Soon he was listed in city directories as a Commission Merchant as well as a grocer, meaning he acted as a middle man between people who exported their goods — mainly growers and manufacturers — and shippers transporting their goods to purchasers. In 1833 he bought a four story warehouse at Light Street and Barre with access to the harbor in front of the warehouse. I didn't find any records of Needham owning ships to transport the goods, but it is likely he did.

Asa Needham: Citizen

Needham became a prominent member of Baltimore's business, cultural and political worlds. He helped create the Maryland State Bible Society and a literary society. He was on the Board of Regents of Newton University which opened in 1845 and closed in 1859. He was a director of the Farmers & Merchants Bank and the Eutaw Savings Bank. He served as a school commissioner.

Needham was also an active member of the Whig Party and took a stand against the practice of slavery — in principle if not always in practice. During the 1844 presidential election,

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Needham and other Whigs objected to the pro-slavery Democrats hanging banners for their candidate, James Polk, on the outside of the tall Phoenix Shot Tower at East Fayette near President Street (the only Baltimore shot tower still standing) making them visible to large areas of the city. At the time there was another shot tower on Eutaw Street where Camden Yards stands today. Needham joined with others to buy the Eutaw Street shot tower with the purpose of drawing business away from the Phoenix Shot Tower.



Then in 1862, early in The Civil War, he and other businessmen split off from the Corn and Flour Exchange they were part of because of its secessionist leanings. They started their own exchange and required everyone who was part of it to swear a loyalty oath to the United States.

Also in 1862, Needham's son George, who was part of his father's renamed business, Needham & Sons, contacted Maryland Governor Thomas H. Hicks about a way to stop pro-Confederacy Marylanders from using the Chesapeake Bay to send information to rebels in Virginia. The governor sent a letter to the Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles: "Dear Sir," the letter read, "My friend George F. Needham, esq., of the old and well-established firm of Needham & Sons, has suggested to many persons here a plan for suppressing communication between the Maryland rebels and those in Virginia...that is daily going on and by means of which the rebels are receiving information of all our movements." George offered to command a steam tug "near the mouth the Potomac" which would send out smaller boats to act as a night police. The Secretary of the Navy didn't take George up on his offer, but he did send out a number of ships on the Potomac "in the hope of effectually putting a stop to the transmission of information and supplies to the enemy."

However, though Needham and his family were pro-Union and anti-slavery, they were not averse to profiting from the business of slavery. Needham had an enslaved woman living in his home during the 1830s and 1840s, probably working as a servant. And when a slave owner posted a notice in *The Sun* that one of his enslaved men had run away and he was offering a hundred dollar reward for the man's capture and return, the notice said to the potential captor, "Application may be made to Capt. A. NEEDHAM, No. 28 LIGHT STREET WHARF" to receive his reward.

At the end of the Civil War, Asa Needham was 74 and a wealthy man. He had moved out of the city, and put his son in charge of most of the family business. He died in 1874 at age 83 and is buried in Baltimore's Green Mount Cemetery.

Ownership History of 604 S. Hanover Street

The Needham House at 604 S. Hanover Street has changed hands over a dozen times since it was built. The city purchased it in 1972 and planned to demolish it along with all the other houses in the neighborhood, until the city decided to sell the houses for a dollar each to people willing to restore and renovate the properties. Albert and Ann Sisson bought this "Dollar

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House” in 1980 and completed the original renovation. Joan and I are the third owners since the Sissons sold the property in 1997.