

# Thomas Rundle, Housewright

By RICHARD RADIS

STUDENT, AMERICAN AND NEW ENGLAND STUDIES PROGRAM,  
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

VERY little is known of Thomas Rundle, housewright,\* (1779?-1841). The name Rundle is not common and appears only once (in 1730) in the published vital records of Boston area towns. The name does appear in the "Heads of Families" listing of the 1790 Census, but only in connection with Albany, Columbia, Dutchess and Orange counties in New York State. It does not appear in any other state's listing.<sup>1</sup>

An architectural rendering signed "Thomas Rundle Boston," among the plans for a house in Medford, would appear to be the first document verifying Rundle's Boston existence.<sup>2</sup> He was not born in Boston, but probably came to the city before 1809, seeking the opportunities increasingly available at that time. The rendering just mentioned has an 1804 watermark, which would, at the very least, place him in the area within several years of that date.

The next mention of Thomas Rundle is in 1809, when he was about thirty

\* A large part of the material used in this paper comes from the records (particularly the *Journal*) of the Associated Housewrights Society, kept at the Massachusetts Historical Society. The Probate Records and Registries of Deeds of Suffolk and Middlesex Counties were also helpful. *The Constitution of the Associated Housewrights* (1812), the 1800 *Rules of Work*, and the *Constitution* and book list (1809) of the Architectural Library are all kept in THE SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NEW ENGLAND ANTIQUITIES' library.

years of age, in connection with the sale of land in Cambridge.<sup>3</sup> The Middlesex County Registry of Deeds records that Rundle purchased approximately one quarter-acre of land near the Common from William Ireland for five hundred dollars, and refers to him as "Thomas Rundle of Boston, housewright." Rundle did not build upon this land and, in fact, returned it to Ireland in 1816 for one dollar as the result of a "breach of covenant" on the latter's part.

In 1810 he married Hannah Dickson of Cambridge, and apparently they lived in her house in Cambridge until 1813. In March of 1812 he purchased for the sum of one dollar a lot containing seventeen-hundred square feet from Jeremiah Gardner. Gardner was also a housewright, and it is possible that Rundle worked for him before this date and was being paid in land. Several months later Rundle mortgaged this land on Warren Street (now located in Roxbury, off Washington Street) for two hundred dollars, and in 1813 he is listed for the first time in the *Boston City Directory* as "Thomas Rundle, housewright, 4 Warren Street." Between 1813 and 1821 he is mentioned only once in connection with a land transaction; doubtless, he was active, but this would not appear unless he was connected with the sale of land or a mortgage. In 1821 he joined the "Associated Housewrights in Boston," an organization of master housewrights which provided economic

assistance to its members in times of need and "promoted improvements in the craft of carpentry."<sup>4</sup> Rundle remained an active member of the Associated Housewrights until its dissolution in 1837.<sup>5</sup>

Also in 1821 Rundle purchased land in East Cambridge from the Lechmere Point Corporation in an area now bounded by Gore and Sciarappa Streets. In 1825 he mortgaged the holding for six hundred dollars, and then, sometime between 1826 and 1832, he built upon this land. In 1832 he took out another mortgage for one thousand dollars, the transaction listed "a parcel of land with five dwelling houses thereon," and these five houses, or tenements are mentioned in later sales (up to 1853). It is likely that two houses presently standing within the bounds of Rundle's land were built by him. The housing built in this area of East Cambridge was largely for workers attracted by newly opened factories, and the two houses just mentioned may have been speculative ventures. The two-story structure on Sciarappa Street is rather nondescript and has been largely made over. The larger building on the corner of Gore and Sciarappa Streets is what Professor Bainbridge Bunting calls, rather wistfully, late Georgian,<sup>6</sup> and is completely lacking in decorative detail, with the exception of a faint suggestion of a broken cornice on the gable ends.<sup>7</sup>

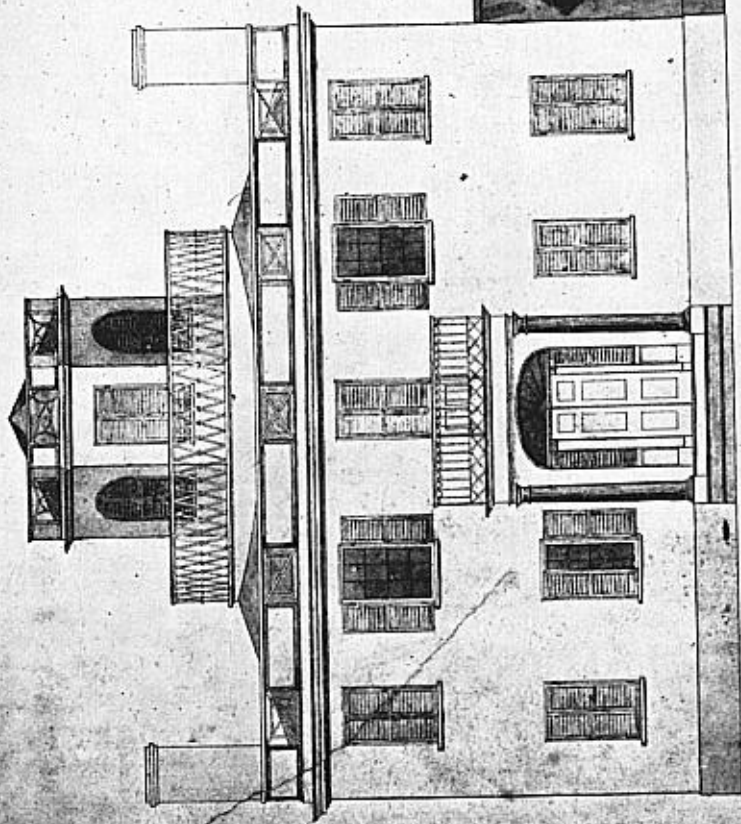
In 1826 Rundle was connected with the building of several houses in Malden. Two Malden farmers took out mortgages with Rundle for land described in the original transaction as open pasture. One farmer failed to pay off his mortgage, but, five years later, when he bought his land back, it was listed as containing several buildings and a dwelling

house. No evidence of these buildings has yet been found.

The last land transaction in the Boston area in which Rundle took part before his death was the purchase of a plot of land in Chelsea from the Winnesimit Company in 1834. He later built, or had built, a wooden shop on this land with money obtained from a mortgage. This shop is no longer standing, as the area has been extensively renovated.

Rundle died in Boston on January 5, 1841. From probate records it can be seen that he had not amassed a great fortune in his career as housewright and builder. His debts, consisting of notes due and various bills, came to \$3,900. The sale of his land, with the exception of the house and shop at 21 Warren Street, barely covered what he owed. Personal goods in the house totaled \$232, and "various sundries" in the workshop such as tools, lumber, and, most interesting, a "drawing board and lot of drawing squares (10)" came to \$392. Rundle had apparently been sick for some time before his death. The doctor bills listed in the probate records are quite large, and for this reason there probably is no mention of money due him for services rendered as a housewright, since he had not been working for several years.<sup>8</sup>

Such are the sketchy details of Thomas Rundle's life. The drawing mentioned earlier is the only clue which indicates that Rundle did have some skill, and that he was designing buildings rather than merely constructing them. Where he could have received instruction in drafting is simply conjecture. If he was taught in the Boston area, there were several possible sources, for Charles Bulfinch was practicing in Boston at this time, as was Peter Banner. A more probable



*Designed by Thomas Rundell Boston*

DRAWING FOR HOUSE IN MEDFORD BY THOMAS RUNDLE

teacher is Asher Benjamin. Perhaps Benjamin was operating a school in Boston similar to the one he proposed in Windsor, Vermont, in 1802. This elusive school in Boston has been mentioned, though never documented. The following is Benjamin's advertisement in the *Windsor Gazette*, January 5, 1802:

To young carpenters, joiners and all others concerned in the art of building: The Subscriber intends to open a school of Architecture . . . at which will be taught the Five Orders of Architecture, the Proportions of Doors, Windows and Chimney pieces . . . Plans, Elevations and Sections of Houses, with all their Ornaments. The art of drawing Plans and Elevations, or any other figure perspective will also be taught if required by Asher Benjamin.<sup>9</sup>

It is diverting to think that such a school was being conducted by Benjamin in Boston, and the drawing tends to give some support to this. Perhaps a description of it is in order at this point.

The rendering (see illustration) is a large front elevation, signed by Rundle. There is also a notation on the sheet suggesting that Rundle was either a student of Benjamin's or working in cooperation with him. One minor point that would

indicate Rundle was not completely proficient in drafting at that time was the round-arched windows on the belvedere. These were drawn rather crudely in perspective, though drawing curves in perspective is difficult without some practice or a template. Otherwise, the elevation is well drawn. There is an attached one-story wing to the side of the house, all windows are shuttered (this destroys the effect of an unbroken wall surface), and Rundle added detailing such as a balustrade around the belvedere, metal grillwork on the portico and latticework.

Exterior detailing is sparse, and the overall simplicity of the design is characteristic of a Federal-style house of the period. No indication is made whether construction was to be of birch, masonry or wood.

The connection between Rundle, the suggested "school of architecture" in Boston, and the Associated Housewrights is quite tenuous at present and bears further study. Perhaps, as more information comes to light, the life and contributions of Thomas Rundle to early American architecture will be made clear.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rundle was a member of the Hollis Street Church, Unitarian, in Boston. The records of this now-defunct church, not available at this time, might indicate his origins.

<sup>2</sup> Folio kept in THE SOCIETY FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NEW ENGLAND ANTIQUITIES' library.

<sup>3</sup> Suffolk County and Middlesex County Registry of Deeds.

<sup>4</sup> *Constitution of the Associated Housewrights Society in the Town of Boston* (Boston, 1812).

<sup>5</sup> *Journal of the Associated Housewrights* (1804-1837). At Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>6</sup> Cambridge Historical Commission. *Survey of Architectural History in Cambridge: East Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1965), pp. 72-73.

<sup>7</sup> Rundle's lot was 62 x 100 feet, and extended 100 feet north on Sciarappa Street from the corner of Gore and Sciarappa Streets, and 62 feet west on Gore from this same corner. The house numbers are 25 Sciarappa Street and numbers 83-85 Gore Street. The latter house is a gray, three-story, two-family dwelling.

<sup>8</sup> Suffolk County Probate Records.

<sup>9</sup> "Our First Architectural School." *American Institute of Architects Journal*, XII (March, 1950), pp. 139-140.