

Before Beacon Hill:
The Nichols Family in the Warren House, 1869-1885



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Introduction

On the inside cover of one of his journals, Arthur Howard Nichols pasted a clipping from the *London Magazine* titled “The Argument for a Diary”:

There must be a richness about the life of a person who keeps a diary, unknown to other men. And a million more little links and ties must bind him to the members of his family circle, and to all among whom he lives. Life to him, looking back, is not a bare line, stringing together his personal identity; it is surrounded, intertwined, entangled with thousands and thousands of slight incidents, which give it beauty, kindliness, reality.¹

Arthur saw himself as inseparable from the interactions and relationships that imbued his life with purpose. Such webs of significance extended both outward in his own time, but also extended backward in time, connecting him with past events and people. Between 1869 and 1885, before moving to Beacon Hill, Arthur and his family lived at 130 Warren Street in Roxbury. Referred to as the “Warren House,” this Gothic Revival mansion was actually designed as a memorial to Revolutionary War general Joseph Warren by his nephew—a counterpart to the Bunker Hill Monument. During the formative years of their adult lives, Arthur and Elizabeth raised their family in this remarkable building that, by virtue of the house’s history, placed the Nichols family at the heart of their Roxbury community and entwined them in its cultural heritage.

Part One of this paper will explore the Warren family and the history of the house, as one cannot understand the early years and trajectory of the Nichols family apart from the Warrens and the Warren House. Part Two will focus on the Nichols family’s life there, centering on how they related to the themes commemorated by the Warren House.

Part One: Warren

The Warren House, still standing at 130 Warren Street in good condition, sits on a fraction of the land that once belonged to the Warren family. The Warren homestead stretched from Warren Place to Moreland Street across seven acres of land. This farmland had been in the family since 1687, when Joseph W. Warren, a housewright and grandfather of General Joseph Warren, purchased it from John Leavens.² In 1720, the patriarch housewright built a saltbox farmhouse on the portion of the property where the Warren House now stands, and it was in that house where the future Revolutionary War general and his three siblings were born between 1741 and 1753 (Figure A).³

The Warren homestead might have otherwise achieved historic designation as the place of origin of the Roxbury Russet apple if not for the martyrdom of Joseph Warren at the opening of the Revolutionary War. During the Siege of Boston, British soldiers occupied barracks on the Warren homestead, chopping down 123 of these apple trees on the property for military purposes.⁴ Meanwhile, Joseph Warren, by then a successful physician and zealous patriot as well known to Bostonians as Samuel Adams and John Hancock, fought at the Battles of Lexington and Concord before the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts promoted him to major general ahead of the Battle of Bunker Hill. Atop Breed's Hill on June 17, 1775, he served as a volunteer private below his rank as a commanding general, opting to fight in the line of heaviest fire and remaining at his post past the fatal point when the militia ran out of ammunition. His death on Breed's Hill, following a bullet wound in the head from the musket of a British soldier, reverberated throughout the colonies after the smoke cleared in Charlestown. General Thomas Gage of the British Army remarked his death alone was worth the death of 500 men, given the

defiant speeches he gave against the Crown and the toll his death would take on the spirits of the colonists—in reality, his death turned him into a powerful martyr to the cause.⁵

Joseph Warren, referred to in orations and plaques as either “General Joseph Warren” or “Dr. Joseph Warren,” stressing the heroism of both his military and medical accomplishments, claimed a sacred spot in the hearts and minds of Americans following his death. Although less famous now than the other patriots who lived to become Founding Fathers, Joseph Warren’s memory continued to shine bright in the national conscience well into the nineteenth century, his life an example of selfless dedication to the revolutionary spirit. John Trumbull’s *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill, June 17, 1775*, originally commissioned by the Warren family but afterward requested by several other patrons seeking their own copies of this dramatic scene, became one of the most famous depictions of the Revolutionary War (Figure B). Counties, towns, and schools all over the new country named themselves after him.⁶

Citizens of Boston, Charlestown, and Roxbury, above all other locales, dedicated themselves to preserving Joseph Warren’s memory in visible forms. Although voted on in 1783, in 1794 the King Solomon’s Lodge of Freemasons of Charlestown erected the first monument to Joseph Warren over the ground where he fell on Breed’s Hill (Figure C).⁷ The masonic monument was one of the first public monuments to enshrine the memory of any Revolutionary War event or individual in the country.⁸ Monuments to the martyred general continued to rise through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, while Independence Day parades and centennial celebrations invoked his memory—particularly his bravery, devotion to liberty, and good nature—at every rehashing of the war. I will discuss further the 1875 Roxbury Celebration of the Centennial of the Battle of Bunker Hill in Part Two of this paper.

Grander in size than all other Revolutionary War, Bunker Hill, or Joseph Warren monuments, the Bunker Hill Monument remains the most conspicuous memorial on the Boston landscape. In 1822, the land on which the masonic Joseph Warren monument stood came up for auction. To prevent the sacred ground from the development plaguing the surrounding neighborhood, Joseph Warren's nephew, John Collins Warren, purchased three acres of land, including the top of Breed's Hill, with the intention of erecting a monument to commemorate the battle and his uncle. He, along with several other influential men, raised a significant amount of money by subscription and took advantage of the Marquis de Lafayette's visit to Boston to lay the corner stone in 1825. As chairman of the building committee, John Collins Warren devoted a substantial amount of time and labor to the work, all the while devoting the bulk of his time to the practice of medicine in the footsteps of his uncle and father.⁹

John Collins Warren maintained a full and influential career as a surgeon, having been born in 1778 into a family of doctors. His father, John Warren, studied medicine under his brother, Joseph, and served as a senior surgeon for the Continental Army before founding Harvard Medical School in 1782. John Collins Warren succeeded his father as a professor of surgery and anatomy at Harvard Medical School, teaching there until his retirement in 1847. He also founded *The New England Journal of Medicine and Surgery* in 1812. The two crowning achievements of his life were as a co-founder of the Massachusetts General Hospital in 1811, where he assumed the role as the first surgeon, and as the first surgeon to operate using ether as an anesthetic in 1846.¹⁰

It may be because of the influence his father and uncle had on his life path that John Collins Warren committed himself to preserving their memory. As he protected the site of his uncle's valiant act in Charlestown, John Collins Warren stepped in a second time to preserve a

family heritage site—this time opting to save the old house from demolition. He inherited the homestead in 1803 upon the death of his youngest uncle, but having never resided on the property himself and allowing it to fall into disrepair, offered it up for sale in 1833.¹¹ However, after the purchasers sought to divide the property into lots, John Collins Warren reserved the site of the old house. The building sat there unoccupied for a decade before he considered what ought to be done with it.

While Joseph Warren's memory lived on by the 1830s in connection with the Battle of Bunker Hill, his childhood home lacked that high degree of reverence, even to the town of Roxbury. At the Second Centennial Anniversary of the Settlement of Roxbury in 1830, the mayor boasted that "here were born Generals Warren and Heath;—Warren! That immortal patriot, that eloquent advocate of the rights of man, that dauntless soldier, that first great martyr of American Liberty."¹² But "at the mention of his venerated name," instead of turning to the Warren homestead nearby, "we involuntarily turn towards that consecrated battleground where he offered up his life in his country's cause." Naturally, the battleground where Joseph Warren and hundreds of other soldiers died at the opening of the Revolutionary War invoked more intense feelings for the public than his birthplace. And yet, for at least one family member, Joseph Warren's birthplace held a more intimate kind of significance worth commemorating.

Originally, the main question centered on whether to preserve the old house on the property or build a new one in its place. John Collins Warren began the process in August of 1845, sending a man to inspect the building. He reported back that the house could "easily be repaired" but would cost as much money as building a new house.¹³ Two months later, John Collins Warren drove to Roxbury to see the "old Warren house" for himself.¹⁴ By May of 1846, he had decided to build a new house rather than restore the old one. There are two questions to

consider for why he might have chosen to raze the family home in favor of designing a new residence—excluding the financial implications, since it cost the same amount to restore and to build. First, why not preserve the old house? And then, once he decided to start afresh, why did the Warren House turn out looking the way it did? Since the second question has a more straightforward answer, I will tackle that one first.

The new Warren House, completed in October of 1846, lacked any resemblance to the wooden saltbox cottage Joseph and John Warren grew up in. John Collins Warren and an anonymous architect designed the Warren House as an early neo-Gothic cross-wing mansion built of Roxbury puddingstone displaying an entryway porch with gingerbread trim and a balcony above, a high-peaked central gable with a diamond window below the overhanging eaves, and a side piazza (Figure D). Not only was this a spacious, fashionable residence befitting a well-to-do tenant, but it was also incredibly modern. Although the Gothic Revival looked to the medieval past for inspiration, this movement, which stressed the picturesque over the symmetrical and orderly neoclassical style, had only recently started flourishing in the United States. Any traditionalist architect or patron would have been wary to break with the prevailing building traditions of the first half of the century. The newness of this style in the United States is evident in the symmetrical front elevation of the Warren House, a sign that the architect still grounded himself in the neoclassical while adopting neo-Gothic forms.

The fashionable style of the Warren House reflected the personality of the man who helped design it. In his medical career and with his hobbies, John Collins Warren sought after progress and reveled in modernity. Even before the famous ether operation, he published the first monograph on heart disease in the United States and was among the first American surgeons to treat a strangulated hernia, cataracts, bone tumors, and aneurysms (Figure E).¹⁵ The ether

operation, known around the world as the day the medical world finally defeated pain, occurred on October 16, 1846, only four days before John Collins Warren “went to see my new house at Roxbury” for the first time since its completion.¹⁶ In addition to his full operating schedule, he set aside most afternoons for other matters. He consistently acquired skeletons and other biological oddities for the Warren Anatomical Museum, founded in 1847 and originally housed on North Grove Street before moving to Harvard Medical School’s Countway Library of Medicine. His prized possession was a mastodon skeleton, a specimen he arranged to purchase while he was overseeing the Warren House construction and one of his numerous side projects that lent him an air of eccentricity. He even willed his body upon his death to be taken to Harvard Medical School to be “examined or dissected [and] any morbid parts . . . carefully preserved.” He also stipulated that his bones were to be “whitened, articulated, and placed in the lecture room of the Medical College, near [his] bust” as “a lesson useful . . . to morality and science.”¹⁷ John Collins Warren tirelessly pursued knowledge with the goal of advancing his and future medical students’ understandings of the body, both human and animal.

In analyzing the Warren House, I operate under the assumption that John Collins Warren had a hand in its design. There is ample evidence to suggest he was involved in the process. Namely, he exhibited an interest in architectural design in other parts of his life. He helped design the Warren Anatomical Museum, directing the architect to have “the windows in the upper story . . . coincide with those in the principal story. There should be a sky-light to the Anatomy lecture room, no sky-light to the Museum.”¹⁸ His scrupulousness with all of his projects also led him to submit “more exact directions for the Mastodon building.”¹⁹ He also instructed another cottage to be built for his family’s use in Brookline, but when the architect submitted unsatisfactory plans to him, he requested to see another set.²⁰ And although he would

have started reading after the building process had already begun, on August 29, 1846 he purchased Andrew Jackson Downing's 1842 book *Cottage Residences*, an influential book notable for popularizing and promoting the Gothic Revival in America.²¹ The Warren House closely resembles the "Ornamental Farmhouse" design in *Cottage Residences* (Figure F). Given that the two surviving plans for the Warren House both feature elements that ended up being part of the final design—one has the diamond window and the other has the side piazza—yet neither plan features the defining steeply-pitched center gable that featured so prominently in Jackson's designs, it is possible that John Collins Warren requested the gable after reading Downing's book (Figure G, H). Even if this was not the case, the two plans for the Warren House in John Collins Warren's papers suggest he reviewed them at one point and made changes for the final design.

The two plaques on the front elevation are the one part of the house leaving no question as to who thought to place them there. Together they offer more insight into the significance of the Warren House than any other design detail, daybook entry, or letter. Set into the wall between the first- and second-story windows on the left and right sides of the front elevation of the house, they read:

On this spot stood a house erected in 1720, by Joseph Warren of Boston, remarkable for being the birthplace of General Joseph Warren, his grandson, who was killed on Bunker Hill, June 17, 1775 (Figure I).

John Warren, a distinguished physician and anatomist, was also born here. The original mansion being in ruins, this house was built by John C. Warren, M.D., in 1846, son of the last named, as a permanent memorial of the spot (Figure J).

We know he wrote the inscriptions himself in the third person because, on July 11, 1846, he wrote in his daybook that he "had a conference with Mr. Cotting on the subject of an inscription on the Roxbury house—and also a fire proof building for the Mastodon."²² As the right

inscription states, John Collins Warren built the Warren House to be a “permanent memorial of the spot” his father and uncle were born. Although the plaque explains that he rebuilt the Warren House due to the “original mansion being in ruins,” the man he had sent out to the Warren homestead to assess the state of the original house had found it could be “easily repaired.”²³ Had John Collins Warren been committed to saving the old house, he could have. Rather, he *chose* to construct a place marker of past events rather than preserve an actual relic. He was not unaware of the power of relics: when he “visited the Old Warren House for the last time” before he tore it down, he “fixed on some relics to preserve”²⁴ and had a model of the old house built using these original materials.²⁵ Despite his respect for relics, he had other plans for how to commemorate this site that did not include restoring the old house.

The Warren House constituted one endeavor in John Collins Warren’s lifelong pursuit to memorialize his family. He was accustomed to erecting memorials to do so, as his contemporaries would have done. In this period, it would not have been intuitive to preserve a historic building. The first public effort to preserve a historic building, New York’s acquisition of George Washington’s Headquarters at Newburgh, did not get underway until 1850.²⁶ Widespread private preservation campaigns to save historic structures and landscapes would not proliferate in earnest until the last two decades of the nineteenth century. To commemorate people and events, Americans of the Early Republic Period built memorials—and John Collins Warren had spent the previous two decades doing just that. Since the 1820s he had set his sights on erecting the Bunker Hill Monument as a governing member of the Bunker Hill Monument Association. His work continued after the dedication in 1843: in addition to discussing plans for a marker over the spot of the original breastwork, he pressed for a monument explicitly in honor of Joseph Warren beside the Bunker Hill Monument. He launched his campaign to erect a statue

of Joseph Warren in February of 1846; however, he would not live to see the statue's dedication on June 17, 1857,²⁷ a year after he died of pericarditis. The Warren House was the then-unrealized memorial John Collins Warren had sought to erect for his uncle. In March of 1847, an engraver finally began work on the Warren House plaque inscriptions after John Collins Warren "directed Mr. Templeton to put into my Roxbury house black marble instead of white slabs."²⁸ It is unclear why he preferred black marble, but the sculptor of the Joseph Warren statue also used black marble for the pedestal, suggesting that John Collins Warren not only directed both of those material choices, but also saw the Warren House as a memorial of the same caliber (Figure K).

And yet, as a memorial, the Warren House served a different purpose than the rest on Breed's Hill. This was a memorial of a more personal nature: one that paid tribute to his father and his father's grandfather in addition to his martyred uncle. It marked events relevant to the Warren family instead of events that played out on the national stage. And it stood not on Breed's Hill for all to see and emulate, but rather tucked away in Roxbury. Accordingly, it is important to note that John Collins Warren chose Roxbury puddingstone as the building material, repeatedly referring to the Warren House as "my new stone house."²⁹ This choice in material anchored the new house to the fabric of the town by creating it with the ubiquitous local rock resembling pudding for which Roxbury was named. While I have noted that the nascent Gothic Revival was in keeping with John Collins Warren's taste for modernity and innovation, the emphasis on the picturesque at the heart of the Gothic Revival may have also appealed to him. As promoted by Downing, the picturesque emphasized the connection between the home and its surroundings. Constructing the Warren House using Roxbury puddingstone connected the built environment with the natural environment in the most quintessential expression of the

picturesque. Downing argued that a home built in this manner would create an environment which would foster morality and virtue—not unlike the effect a monument was thought to have on its beholders.³⁰ In function and form, the Warren House was a memorial—uniquely, one that accommodated residents.

Part Two: Nichols

The legacy of the Warren family, spanning four generations, permeated every facet of Arthur Howard Nichols' life as a student at Harvard Medical School in the 1860s: he studied at the institution founded by John Warren; witnessed surgical operations under the Ether Dome at MGH, where the memory of his son John Collins Warren hung heavy in the air; sat through lectures taught by *his* son Jonathan Mason Warren; and formed a lasting friendship with *his* son John Collins Warren, Jr. In their last year of medical school, Arthur and “Collins,” as his friends and family called him, served as surgical assistants at MGH where they worked under Collins Warren's father. From J. Mason Warren Arthur “[received] especially courteous treatment, and was asked upon several occasions to dine with his family on Saturday evenings.”³¹ J. Mason Warren and his family lived at No. 2 Park Street, the lavish townhouse belonging to John Collins Warren until his death in 1856. Arthur would have entered the library to find a portrait of Joseph Warren by John Singleton Copley over the mantel and, above it, two cross swords, one carried by him at the Battle of Bunker Hill and the other belonging to John Collins Warren as a surgeon of the Cadet Corps [Figure L].³² Years before he moved into the Warren House, he was surrounded—and no doubt influenced—by this famous family of doctors.

While Arthur and Collins Warren were traveling and studying medicine together in Europe from 1866 to 1868, Collins Warren mentioned the Warren House might be a suitable place for Arthur to live and set up his medical practice after returning to America. He had inherited the

house after his father's death from cancer in 1867, which Arthur "had long been fearing of."³³ Writing to his mother from Vienna, Arthur asked if his father could "take a look at the old 'Warren House'" on his next walk through Roxbury, as it "belongs to Collins Warren who would let me have it at a very reasonable rate and as I am well acquainted with that area, it would not be a bad place for me to settle. Is there a large garden and what is a fair rent?"³⁴ Despite his early interest in the Warren House, upon returning to Boston in 1868, Arthur moved into his parents' house to open his first practice as he considered where to locate permanently. Meanwhile, he worked to establish himself professionally by attending meetings of medical societies, making frequent visits to the hospitals, and calling on the prominent physicians.³⁵

Arthur's engagement to Elizabeth Fisher Homer in October of 1868 accelerated his search for a place where they could set up Arthur's practice and begin their lives together. After considering other options, they agreed that "no more promising location could be found than the stone cottage at 130 Warren Street, Roxbury, built as a memorial to Gen. Joseph Warren." Whereas Arthur had originally considered the Warren House more than a year ago for its fair rent, familiar location, and—he hoped—large garden, he now acknowledged its historic significance as a notable attribute, particularly for his chosen profession. Having secured from Collins Warren "an eligible office" for \$1,200 a year "in a central locality with no other physician on the street or in the vicinity and in a historic building, it was decided that our marriage should be no longer postponed."³⁶ While Arthur, writing his reminiscences in 1888, remembered his hunt for a house primarily as a search for "an eligible office," the Warren House would also serve Arthur and Elizabeth well as a home for their growing family.

These two separate yet intertwined uses of the space—for the practice of medicine and the nurturing of a family—would together realize the essence of the Warren House as inscribed

on its walls. For, as previously noted, the Warren House memorialized the birthplace of a family and John Warren's achievements in medicine as much as it did Joseph Warren's sacrifice to country, an event sufficiently commemorated in Charlestown. While Arthur frequently celebrated the historic nature of his home over the years with displays of patriotism, he and his family also honored the significance of the Warren House less self-consciously in their daily lives. I will focus on the three themes of family, medicine, and patriotism as the ways the Nichols family formed a connection with their memorial house.

Settling at 130 Warren Street, Arthur and Elizabeth lived only a 15-minute walk away from Arthur's parents at 55 East Springfield Street and a mere five minutes from Elizabeth's at 59 Winthrop Street. Soon after hosting Arthur and Elizabeth's wedding at their home on November 11, 1869, the Homer's "were present to greet us" upon the newlyweds' return from their honeymoon. And it appeared that "they had not been idle while waiting, for our seating parlor furniture, ornaments had been set in order also as to make the most effective display."³⁷ When Elizabeth contracted an illness while Arthur was away at his summer practice at Rye Beach, New Hampshire, both Mary Ann Nichols and Mary Elizabeth Homer tended to her for weeks.³⁸ In addition to providing monetary assistance, both sets of parents maintained a constant presence in the lives of their children while they lived in Roxbury, no doubt facilitated by their proximity.

The comfort afforded by having family around increased after Arthur and Elizabeth began having children of their own. Rose Standish Nichols was born on January 11, 1872 in the "small rear chamber" of the Warren House,³⁹ followed by Marian Clarke Nichols on December 31, 1873 in the same room, Sidney Homer Nichols on November 29, 1875 in the north chamber, and finally Margaret Homer Nichols on October 30, 1879, also in the north chamber. On

Sundays, the children walked to the Homer residence through the cow pasture behind their house where they were treated to “nice apples from Grandpa Homer, also sweetcorn and plums.”⁴⁰ They would then journey to their paternal grandparents’ home to find a “cookie and a piece of sucky candy” waiting for them.⁴¹ Often the children traveled there in Sidney’s dogcart, capable of fitting four people, pulled by Jack the St. Bernard.⁴² The frequency with which the grandparents saw each other and their grandchildren is best exemplified in a letter from Elizabeth to Arthur from when Rose was seven months old. Elizabeth writes, “Your father brought Rosie out yesterday afternoon and my father happening to be here at the same time, they went off together, inspected father’s garden, took a walk, and your father took tea at Winthrop St.” The next day, Elizabeth’s mother went to see about a Mrs. Robinson and asked Arthur’s mother to join her.⁴³

Such interactions between relatives resulted from the central location of the Warren House rather than its physical fabric. Yet, for Arthur, Elizabeth, and their children, their home formed an ever-present part of their lives—a welcomed sight at the conclusion of a summer vacation spent at Rye Beach, a site of play for the children, a malleable structure to alter according to their needs, and the only home Sidney, who died of diphtheria at five-years-old, ever had. John Collins Warren never lived in the Warren House himself, residing instead at either No. 2 Park Street or in Brookline during his lifetime. His son also leased it to tenants after he died. Although another family had likely occupied the house in the two decades before the Nichols family moved in, for the 16 years the Nichols family lived there they imbued the rooms with life, transforming the Warren House from an empty memorial into a space with real memories.

At the end of a long summer in New Hampshire, the children were especially excited to

come home and “renew acquaintance with their old playthings.”⁴⁴ Arthur wrote to Elizabeth in 1878 recounting a touching moment before returning to Roxbury from Rye Beach: “Marian made a rather queer noise last evening while I was out, and the ladies thinking she was frightened, went in to quiet her. They were informed, however, that she ‘was trying to sing.’ ‘She was so happy, because she was going home in two days, that she couldn’t sleep.’”⁴⁵ Arthur was similarly prone to sentimental statements about his house. He thought it a “great luxury to get back to our spacious mansion, as neat without and within as a Dutch farmhouse. . . . I have never seen vegetation so bright and fresh in September, and the lawn in front of our house does credit to the genius of our gardener, Mr. Seitz.”⁴⁶

The Warren House also served as a favorite spot to play among the neighborhood children, who would venture over daily to see if the Nichols siblings were home. The long, straight bannisters of the front staircase provided an exhilarating ride for those looking for a thrill. Rose and Marian had repeated success, but other children were not as lucky. Marian’s friend Daisy Edson was “sliding down our bannisters when over she went and came down so hard that we all heard her.”⁴⁷ A few years later, Margaret landed head-first and dented her skull after sliding down in a precarious manner. Luckily, Arthur saw her unconscious body on the floor as he was sending off a patient and went to her rescue.⁴⁸ There were happier memories associated with other parts of the house. When Rose was a baby, she spent most of her days crawling around in the kitchen.⁴⁹ When she was a bit older, she would run in and out of the house with Marian and Sidney, playing on the side piazza outside of Arthur’s office window.⁵⁰

From redecorating to building new walls, the Nichols family adapted the house to conform to their needs and tastes. Ten years into living in the Warren House, Arthur and Elizabeth “thoroughly overhauled both inside and outside.”⁵¹ Outside, they enclosed the front

porch and built steps into the front stone wall so that passersby could walk up to the house from Warren Street rather than from the driveway (Figure M). This change corrected an orientation issue stemming from when John Collins Warren built the new Warren House facing west toward Warren Street rather than south, as the 1720 house had before Warren Street existed. He reoriented the house on the property while maintaining the same direction of entry to the front entrance, a sign of the past that had the uninviting effect of alienating visitors and patients who could not approach the house as easily. In 1883, two years before they moved out, Arthur and Elizabeth were still working diligently toward making “the lower part of the house substantially complete” with the purchase of an “elegant” new desk for Arthur’s office—the same desk that would grace his next office at 55 Mount Vernon Street.⁵² Along with other furnishings purchased purposefully for the Warren House, the desk would serve as a relic of the family’s early years spent in Roxbury.

Above all else, the Warren House held a sentimental place in the memories of the family because it was the sole home of their deceased son Sidney. Just as John Collins Warren memorialized the birthplace of his father and uncle by building the new Warren House on the spot, the Warren House would hold a similar significance for the Nichols family for being the birthplace of their beloved son. Besides being his birthplace, the Warren House hosted Miss Sanford’s kindergarten for two winters, which Sidney attended with his closest friend and neighbor, “Tommo” Clarke.⁵³ He enjoyed ice cream and riding around the property in his dogcart, in the fall picking up leaves with his friends John and Tommo and dropping them at the barn behind the house.⁵⁴ A doting mother to Sidney, Elizabeth catered to his wish to keep mismatched wallpapers up in his bedroom when she had the children’s rooms repapered because he liked “the variety and so [was] very well contented to sleep there alone.”⁵⁵ When Sidney died

of diphtheria at home on July 6, 1881, Rose was in Plymouth. Notifying her of her brother's passing, Elizabeth assured Rose that "after a while we shall become accustomed to not seeing Sidney about us and shall think of him as our happy little boy who always enjoyed so much and never had anything to really trouble him."⁵⁶ Tied up in the Warren House were painful memories of Sidney's fatal illness, but more importantly, fond memories of his short, happy life.

It might have also been his historic residence that "awakened" Arthur's interest in his family genealogy. In 1879 Arthur "succeeded in tracing our pedigree to Richard Nichols, immigrant ancestor" and eventually discovered the cellar of his former homestead in Wakefield, MA. His interest piqued by the first discovery, he soon "found the mansion of Timothy Nichols in fair preservation in this town."⁵⁷ Over the course of the summer, he repeatedly visited these two spots in Wakefield, bringing Marian and Rose along for the trip. Between 1880 and 1887, Arthur compiled a "Historical Sketch of Some of the Descendants of Richard Nichols of Ipswich." Under his entry, Arthur described himself as occupying "for over sixteen years the historic mansion on Warren St., Roxbury, known at the Warren House."⁵⁸ Having lived a decade in a house built as a memorial to John Collins Warren's ancestors, it is no surprise that Arthur would have wondered about his own family history.

Arthur complemented his education under the tutelage of Warren doctors by launching his career as a physician out of the front right room of the Warren House. Mounting a sign beside the front door indicating his practice within, Arthur added his name to the list of celebrated doctors inscribed on the façade (Figure N, O). Arthur's lifelong friendship with Collins Warren, from whom he rented the house, further bestowed the blessing of the Warren family on Arthur's career. Following in the footsteps of his family, Collins Warren led a successful career as a surgeon and professor of surgery at Harvard Medical School. He was an early advocate of Joseph

Lister's antiseptic procedures and in 1889 became the first surgeon to perform intra-abdominal surgery at MGH.⁵⁹ Arthur and Collins Warren occasionally collaborated on special cases for which Arthur sought the talented surgeon's expertise. Yet when they first started out, the two doctors found themselves equally puzzled by cases they had never seen before. In his first year working out of the Warren House, Arthur traveled out to join Collins Warren on a difficult case in East Boston. They set to "tapping a bulging abscess of the liver in an Irishman who had given up to die." Their operation seemed to fail at first, the two young doctors having never tapped a hepatic abscess in school nor during their studies abroad. It seemed a miracle to them that "when a poultice had been applied, the pus found its way to the opening made by the trochar, and escaping in large quantity afforded speedy and decided relief to the patient who made a good recovery."⁶⁰ This was one of Arthur's first major successes as a young physician in the days when his clientele was limited.

Arthur saw Collins Warren more frequently at the meetings of their Dinner Club. Arthur and a slew of his colleagues from Harvard Medical School started the Dinner Club when they all returned from studying medicine in Europe in the late 1860s. The all-male club convened on the last Wednesday of each month at the members' houses for an extravagant dinner and festivities. A key member of the group, Arthur attended or hosted nearly every month for the entirety of his adult life. In 1872, Elizabeth wrote to Arthur, "I have just been to see Dr. Warren. He depends upon you for his club. I suppose you did not think of that when you spoke of our going [to Rye Beach] on the 15th."⁶¹ The Dinner Club even met the night before Arthur and Elizabeth's wedding. Four members attended the ceremony the next day—Drs. F. B. Greenough, Collins Warren, W. F. Munroe, and J. Orne Green. Collins, by far the wealthiest of the bunch, gifted Elizabeth a pair of gold earrings.⁶² Sadly, at one Dinner Club held at the Warren House in 1874,

Dr. Munroe “observed to fall asleep at the dinner table. He soon after evinced signs of mental derangement which developed into general paralysis from which he died.”⁶³ Most dinners, however, were jovial, highly anticipated affairs.

In addition to his fellow medical school alumni, Arthur associated with the other doctors in the neighborhood, of which there seemed to be many. Arthur received a major boost to his practice upon moving into the Warren House from the most influential physician in Roxbury at the time, Dr. Benjamin E. Cotting, who attended Arthur and Elizabeth’s wedding. Although he maintained a practice for many years after Arthur and his contemporaries arrived in the area, he “always contrived to transfer a portion of his clientele to his younger confreres.” Writing in 1888, Arthur felt he was “now indebted [to him] for many professional courtesies.”⁶⁴ After another physician in the vicinity retired in 1871, Arthur became installed as the regular family physician of several of the “old and influential families in the area, whose good will I was able to retain during my residence in Roxbury.”⁶⁵ The well-wishes of these established doctors, combined with the credibility conveyed upon him by the Warren House, embedded Arthur in the community early on in his career.

A sense of comradery existed between the younger doctors in the Dudley Square neighborhood. They tended to each other’s families and participated in local societies and clubs. Their wives and children spent time together as well—the rambunctious Daisy Edson being the daughter of Dr. Ptolemy O’Meara Edson of 36 Elm Hill Ave. When Elizabeth developed an illness while Arthur was in Rye Beach, Dr. George J. Arnold, who lived at 175 Warren Street, saw her repeatedly.⁶⁶ He was also able to recommend names of competent nurses to her who could take care of Rosie. Together with Drs. Arnold and Cotting, Arthur was a leading member of the Roxbury Medical Society, serving as secretary for a number of years.⁶⁷ In February of

1882, a wintry curse seemed to strike the local medical community as a series of incidents incapacitated doctor after doctor. First, Arthur fell on a patch of ice and hurt himself severely. Then, Dr. Wadsworth fell on the sidewalk and fractured his patella.⁶⁸ Tragically, Dr. Edson had to have his leg amputated after 50 pounds of ice fell on him after attempting to jab at some ice overhanging his house from on top of his piazza. Afterward, he pronounced himself “the darnedest fool in all of Roxbury.”⁶⁹ Concluding the disastrous month, Arthur wrote, “Arnold is having a relapse and looks bad. Warren St. doctors are having poor luck.”⁷⁰

Arthur excelled as an allopathic doctor capable of handling the breadth of health problems brought to him by his patients. A variety of cases came his way, ranging from a smallpox outbreak in 1871, which brought hoards of patients to his office and “served to extend my acquaintance among the Roxbury residents” seeking vaccinations,⁷¹ to a woman who came to him for an onset of “nostalgia,” then considered a serious psychological disorder often affecting women and war veterans.⁷² Every so often, a horse car accident would occur near his house and Arthur would rush out to help. Once, “a horse upset a buggy,” throwing out a man and his daughter. Arthur brought the wounded daughter into his office, then went home with her to Brookline to make sure her health did not decline further.⁷³ Aside from such emergencies, many of Arthur’s patients in Roxbury were frequent visitors to his office who came in repeatedly with persistent problems. He treated entire families and their servants, continuing to make house calls in Roxbury for years after moving to Beacon Hill. Some patients stayed with him for decades, even after Arthur thought it was no longer necessary for them to return to see him. Mrs. Edwards was one of those perpetual patients: in 1888, Arthur thought it a “strange circumstance that this patient has been continuously under my care until the present time,” having been one of his first patients in Roxbury.⁷⁴ Elizabeth found herself in repeated contact with patients who would drop

in while Arthur was away at Rye Beach and passed on medical questions to him as well as complaints of his absence.⁷⁵ Arthur made his own requests to Elizabeth, once asking her to bring him “chloric-ether” to Rye Beach for his troubling ear.⁷⁶ Arthur consistently used ether on his patients, which by 1878 he could purchase easily for 75 cents.⁷⁷ He did not take ether for granted, however, and attended the annual Ether Day ceremonies at MGH over the years.⁷⁸

In attending Ether Day, Arthur consciously celebrated an historic event connected to both his profession and his house. Arthur and his family also celebrated the other, more pronounced event commemorated by the Warren House with acts of patriotism ranging from attending exhibitions of Revolutionary War relics to commissioning the largest American flag Arthur had ever seen. Arthur never fought in the Civil War, reminiscing years later that at the time the war broke out “it seemed wise to complete our collegiate course” rather than join the fighting as a few of his classmates did. He elaborated, “The petty contest in regard to class officers absorbed our interest fully as much as the Great War, which many at first assumed would be a ‘walk over’ on the part of the North.”⁷⁹ Whether he was trying to compensate for his lack of patriotism during the Civil War years or was merely inspired by the nation’s centennial celebrations and the spotlight on the Warren House at that time, Arthur exhibited a real interest in American history and patriotic behavior while living in Roxbury.

In preparation for the centennial of the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775, Arthur made arrangements to buy the double-masted flagstaff formerly attached to the lantern of the old State House (Figure P, Q).⁸⁰ The flag-staff was the Nichols family’s contribution to the elaborate display the city had arranged to grace the front of the Warren House in honor of Joseph Warren (Figure R). Recently annexed in 1868, Roxbury belonged to Boston proper at the time of the centennial, and the city took advantage of the opportunity to decorate all corners of its newly-

annexed territory. Collins Warren also loaned a marble bust of the general as the *pièce de résistance*. The night before the centennial celebration, the Dinner Club dined at the Warren House. A crowd of onlookers “collected during the evening in front of the house who made some noise but did not interfere with the festivities within.”⁸¹ Along with the State House flagstaff draped with flags and the marble bust, the curious crowd would have beheld a sign reading “*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*,” the words Joseph Warren allegedly uttered upon deciding heroically to fight in battle below his rank.⁸² The city also recognized the two memorial plaques already set into the wall, draping flags over John Collins Warren’s two inscriptions.

The city’s stewardship of the Warren House for the centennial and the people gathered outside, as if this were a public space, draw attention to the Warren House as a memorial. The Warren House was a point of pride for the Dudley Square community, Roxbury, and Boston overall as the marker of the birthplace of Joseph Warren, John Warren, and by 1875, John Collins Warren. The Nichols family claimed the inside of the Warren House as their private residence, but the façade with the plaques acted as memorial for all to behold. The architectural historian Vincent Scully argued that the interior of a private building belongs to the owner, but the exterior defines the streetscape and therefore belongs to the town as a whole.⁸³ The Warren House, as a unique combination of residence and memorial, adds another dimension to Scully’s statement.

The day of the Battle of Bunker Hill centennial, his “house gay with bunting and ensigns,” Arthur viewed the procession on Columbus Avenue in the South End, where the marching began.⁸⁴ Afterward, he attended the Bunker Hill Monument Association’s services on Breed’s Hill encircling the Bunker Hill Monument.⁸⁵ Back in April, he had also journeyed to Concord for centennial processions commemorating the skirmish on the North Bridge.⁸⁶ On June

21, Arthur visited the Exhibition of Revolutionary Relics at 56 Beacon Street. He had loaned a painting of the old Warren House to the exhibition to complement the handful of relics loaned by Collins, including Joseph Warren's sword, daybook, Copley-painted portrait, and photographs of his skull showing the bullet hole. Another man had loaned the actual bullet taken from Joseph Warren's body.⁸⁷

Every Fourth of July before leaving for Rye Beach, the Nichols family decorated the front porch with flags. The Independence Day falling on the centennial year was a particularly impressive display even though they had allowed the creeping ivy to grow over the left plaque memorializing Joseph Warren (Figure S). An 1884 letter from Arthur to Elizabeth stresses that the decorating was ordinarily a full family affair. Arthur lamented, "Tell Margaret I want to see her very much, and am afraid there will be no one here to help me fold up the flags on Friday, when I shall hoist every flag that we own."⁸⁸ Over the years, Arthur had developed a special interest in American flags, which intersected with his uncharacteristic political participation in the 1880 presidential election. He joined the Republican Club of Ward 11 and helped organize the voters in support of Garfield. For the the campaign, he commissioned a 34 by 26 foot American flag, "the largest American flag that I have seen."⁸⁹ Following this brief foray into politics, he returned to a largely apolitical lifestyle. Yet his inclination toward patriotism, as expressed by his affinity for American flags, remained a facet of his character.

Around the time of the 1880 election, Arthur and Elizabeth noticed that the "character" of the Roxbury population was changing. Looking back on their reasons for leaving the Warren House, Arthur stressed the shifting demographics of his neighbors. As the wealthy residents moved to Back Bay and later to Brookline, "their places were taken by more economical people," by which he likely meant the Irish Americans moving into Roxbury in noticeable

numbers.⁹⁰ This might have factored into Arthur's decision to suddenly rally around the Republican platform in 1880. When Arthur and Elizabeth arrived at 130 Warren Street, they were surrounded by single-family houses. When they left, the Warren House stood in the middle of multi-unit apartments. Their issues weren't so much with the architecture of the buildings— Arthur commented that the rising second story of the apartment across the street “shows a course of russet brick laid in red mortar, the effect of which is excellent”—as the type of people moving into them.⁹¹ In 1889, Arthur stated his official reasons for moving to Beacon Hill:

We were influenced to make this removal for many reasons. The central situation afforded better schools and more congenial companions for the girls, it was more convenient to the Court House and the lawyer's offices, and offices of the railway companies, where much of my work was now done. It brought me nearer by nearly one hour to Rye Beach. I was thus enabled to answer more promptly calls from Rye and other out-of-town places; while in summer I could keep appointments at my office more easily than if obliged to cross the city and ride out to Roxbury.⁹²

Despite their desire to leave Roxbury, the family's removal to 55 Mount Vernon Street in November of 1885 “did not at once rupture our relations with Roxbury.”⁹³ Arthur continued to ride out daily in the horsecars to see patients and served as a trustee of the Roxbury Latin School; Marian had to finish the academic year at Miss Curtis' School; Rose and Marian attended Miss Bertha Carroll's dance class; and some members of the family maintained seats in the Homer pew at the First Church in Roxbury. Even though Arthur resigned his membership in the Roxbury Medical Society in February, he accepted the society's wish that he “participate in its meetings whenever it is convenient for him to do so,” attending one that June.⁹⁴

The effects of living in the Warren House continued to reverberate 23 years after the family's removal to Beacon Hill. On June 17, 1908, Collins Warren nominated Arthur to become a member of the Bunker Hill Monument Association.⁹⁵ Unsurprisingly, Collins Warren's nomination succeeded in getting him elected: he was president of the association at the time.

Along with upwards of 550 other members, Arthur took on the responsibility of caring for the Bunker Hill Monument and surrounding memorials on Breed's Hill.⁹⁶ Arthur and his family had stewarded one memorial for sixteen years. In his old age, Arthur took up the task of stewarding another, having been deemed worthy by his lifelong friend. However, to simplify the family's relationship to the Warren House as a stewardship role would be to neglect a major part of it. The three themes memorialized by the house—family, medicine, and patriotism—came to life as Arthur and Elizabeth raised their family, practiced medicine, and celebrated the country's early history. Built by John Collins Warren as a memorial to mark the spot of past events, the Warren House itself lacked any trace of that history. The Nichols family elevated the Warren House from a memorial to a relic by simply going about their lives. It was also a mutually beneficial relationship: for a young family first getting its footing, the Warren House offered a sense of stability and heritage not to be forgotten in later years.

¹ In Arthur Howard Nichols, professional receipts and personal and family expenditures, Oct. 1870-1879, Nichols Family Papers (Vol. 2), Nichols House Museum (NHM).

² I refer to all members of the Warren family by their full names throughout the paper, since referring to them by only their first or last names would be too confusing for the reader. I refer to all members of the Nichols family by their first names—following their introduction into the narrative—due to the familiarity of the reader with the members. For all non-Warren and non-Nichols characters, I follow the normal pattern of full names at first mention followed by last names thereafter—except for children, who I refer to by their first names.

³ Francis S. Drake, *The Town of Roxbury* (Roxbury, MA: Self-published, 1878), 212. Arthur purchased a copy of this history of Roxbury for \$3.50 the year it was published. In it, he would have read about the history of the Warren House.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁵ Samuel A. Forman, *Dr. Joseph Warren: The Boston Tea Party, Bunker Hill, and the Birth of American Liberty* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2012), 304.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁷ William Haliburton, *Biographical Sketch of Gen. Joseph Warren* (Boston: Shepard, Clark & Brown, 1857), 71.

⁸ Forman, *Dr. Joseph Warren: The Boston Tea Party, Bunker Hill, and the Birth of American Liberty*, 324.

⁹ Howard P. Arnold, *Memoir of John Collins Warren, M.D.* (Historical and Genealogical Register, 1865), 8.

¹⁰ Arnold, *Memoir of John Collins Warren, M.D.*, 1-14.

¹¹ Edward Warren, *The Life of John Warren, M.D.* (Boston: Noyes, Holmes, and Company, 1874), 9.

¹² H. A. S. Dearborn, "An address delivered on the viii of October, MDCCCXXX: the second centennial anniversary of the settlement of Roxbury," Roxbury Historical Society Collection (Gray Box 52), Northeastern University.

¹³ A. Cotting to John Collins Warren, Aug. 14, 1845, John Collins Warren Papers (Box 12), Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS).

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¹⁵ Stefan C. Schatzki, "John Collins Warren," *American Journal of Roentgenology* 188, no. 4 (April 2007): 887-1153.

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- ²¹ *Ibid.*, Aug. 29, 1846.
- ²² *Ibid.*, Jul. 11, 1846.
- ²³ A. Cotting to John Collins Warren, Aug. 14, 1845, John Collins Warren Papers (Box 12), MHS.
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- ²⁵ Drake, *The Town of Roxbury* (1878), 213.
- ²⁶ Richard Caldwell, *A True History of the Acquisition of Washington's Headquarters at Newburgh, By the State of New York* (Middletown, NY: Stivers, Slauson & Boyd, 1887), 20-37.
- ²⁷ John Collins Warren, Daybook, Feb. 10, 1846, John Collins Warren Papers (Vol. 82), MHS.
- ²⁸ John Collins Warren, Daybook, Mar. 25, 1847, John Collins Warren Papers (Vol. 83), MHS.
- ²⁹ John Collins Warren, Daybook, Sep. 9, 1846, John Collins Warren Papers (Vol. 82), MHS.
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- ³¹ Arthur Howard Nichols, Personal Reminiscences 1862-1875, written 1888, pg. 65, Arthur Howard Nichols Papers (Carton II), MHS.
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- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
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- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Sep. 3, 1878.
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Figures



Figure A: N. Currier, *The house in Roxbury, Mass: (as it now stands, August, 1840.) in which General Joseph Warren was born in the year 1741*, c. 1835-1856.



Figure B: John Trumbull, *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker Hill, 17 June, 1775*, c. 1851-1831.



Figure C: First monument to Joseph Warren, 1794, in William Haliburton, *Biographical Sketch of Gen. Joseph Warren* (Boston: Shepard, Clark & Brown, 1857), 80.



Figure D: Thomas Mickell Burnham, *View of the Gen. Warren House, Roxbury*, 1852.



Figure E: Gilbert Stuart, *John Collins Warren*, c. 1812.

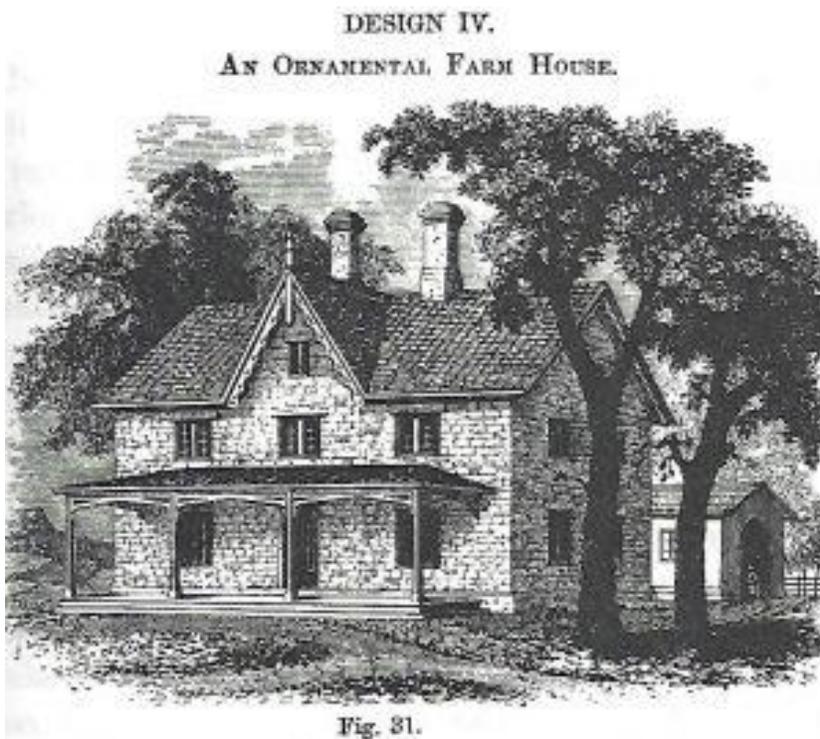


Figure F: A design for an ornamental farm house in Andrew Jackson Downing, *Cottage Residences* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1842), 79.



Figure G: Sketch of the new Warren House I, 1846, Plans and drawings for the Warren Estate, Roxbury, Mass, MHS.

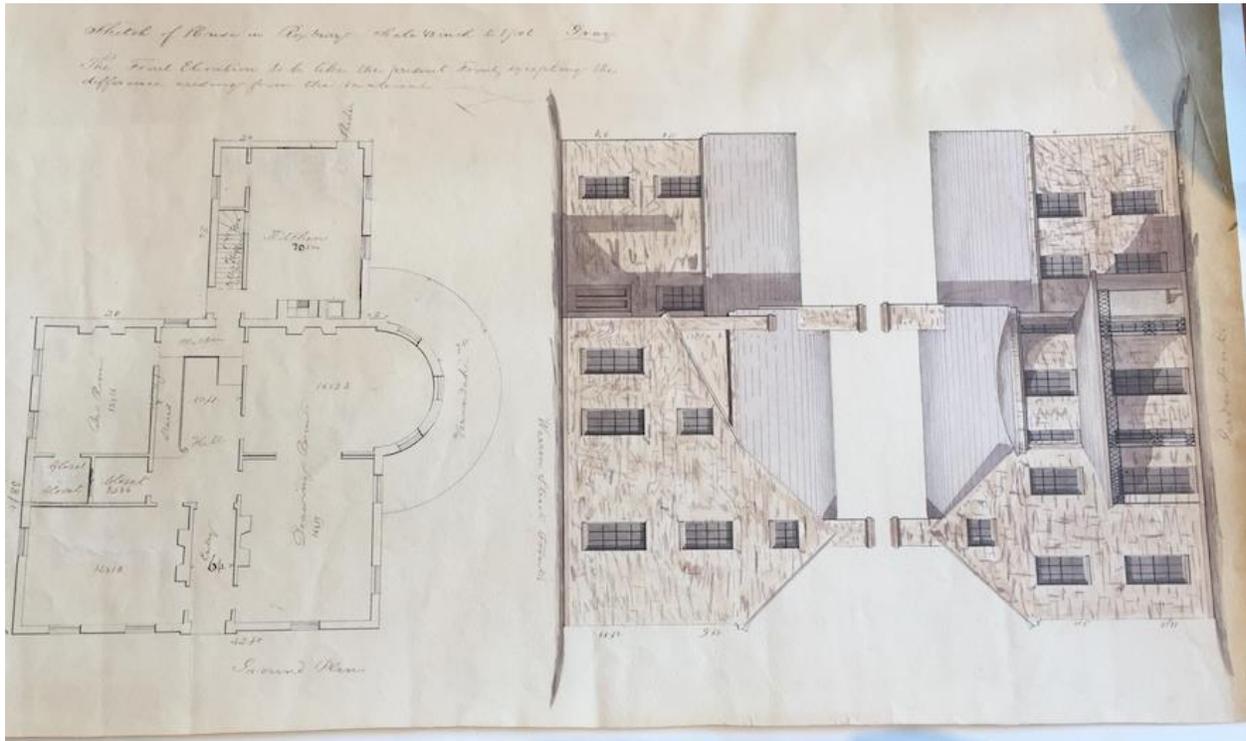


Figure H: Sketch of the new Warren House II, 1846, Plans and drawings for the Warren Estate, Roxbury, Mass, MHS.

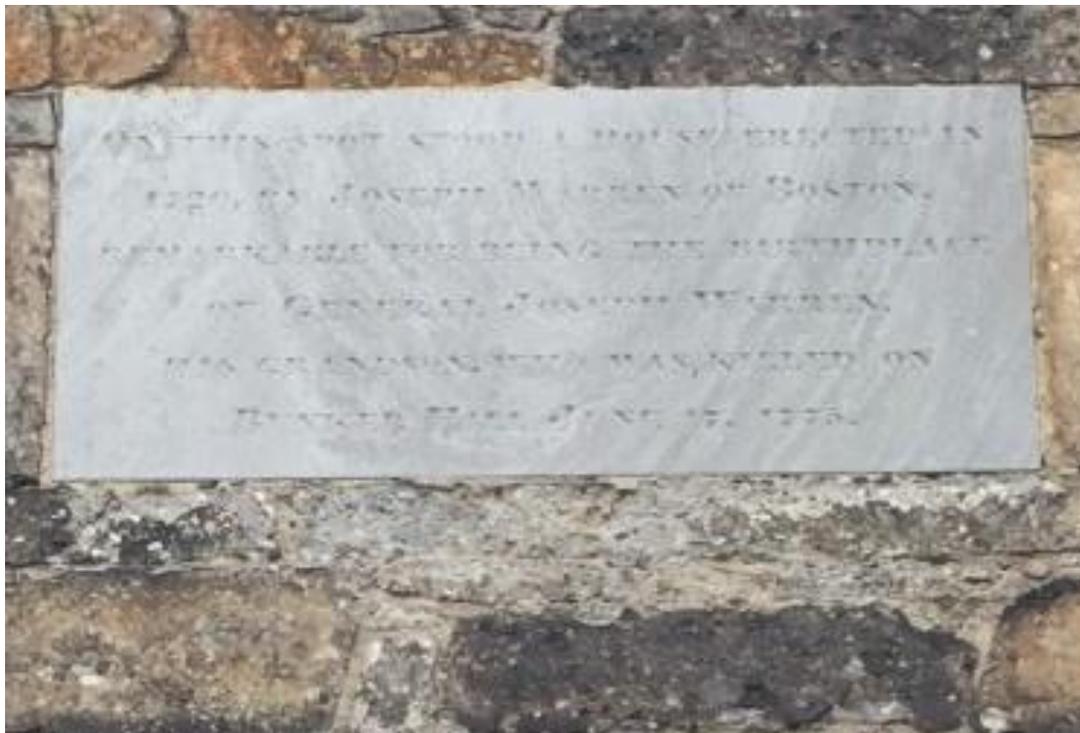


Figure I: Left inscription, Warren House.

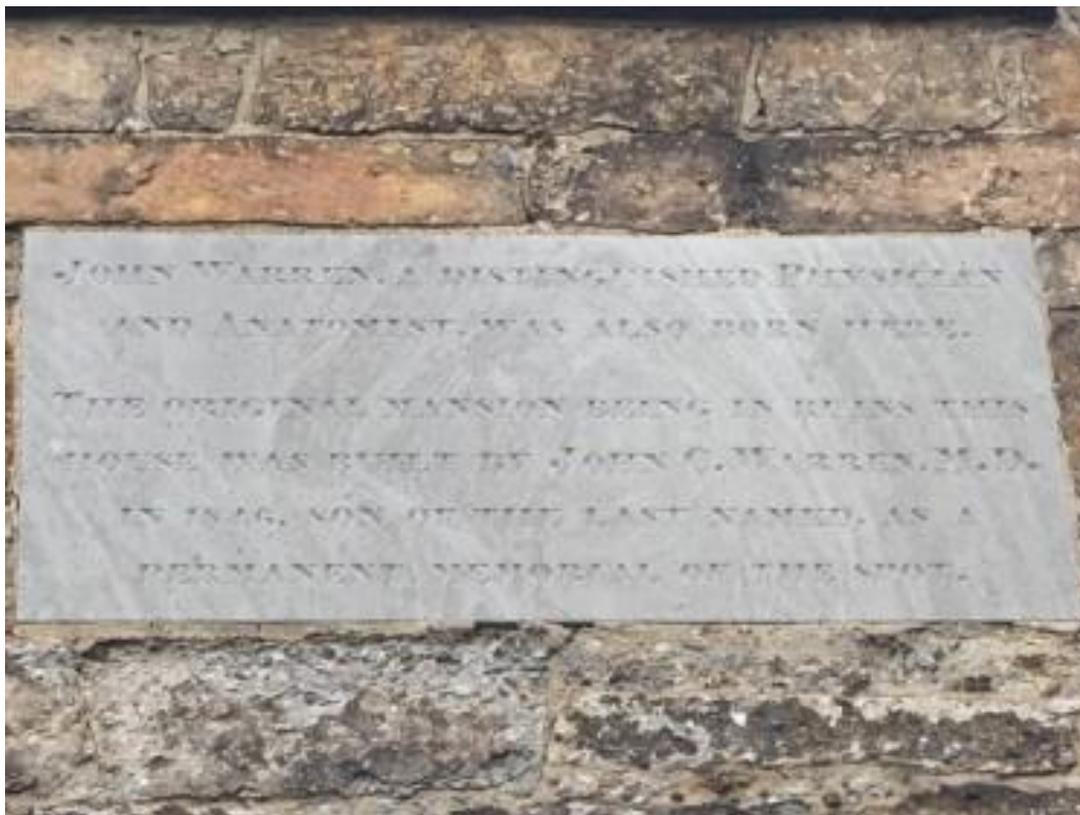


Figure J: Right inscription, Warren House.



Figure K: Henry Dexter, *Statue of General Joseph Warren, Charlestown, 1857.*



Figure L: Black & Co., *Library of No. 2 Park Street, c. 1867-1872.*



Figure M: Warren House, 1887.



Figure N: "Dr Nichols" sign on the Warren House, 1876.



Figure O: Sign from the Warren House, Nichols House Museum (1961.67).

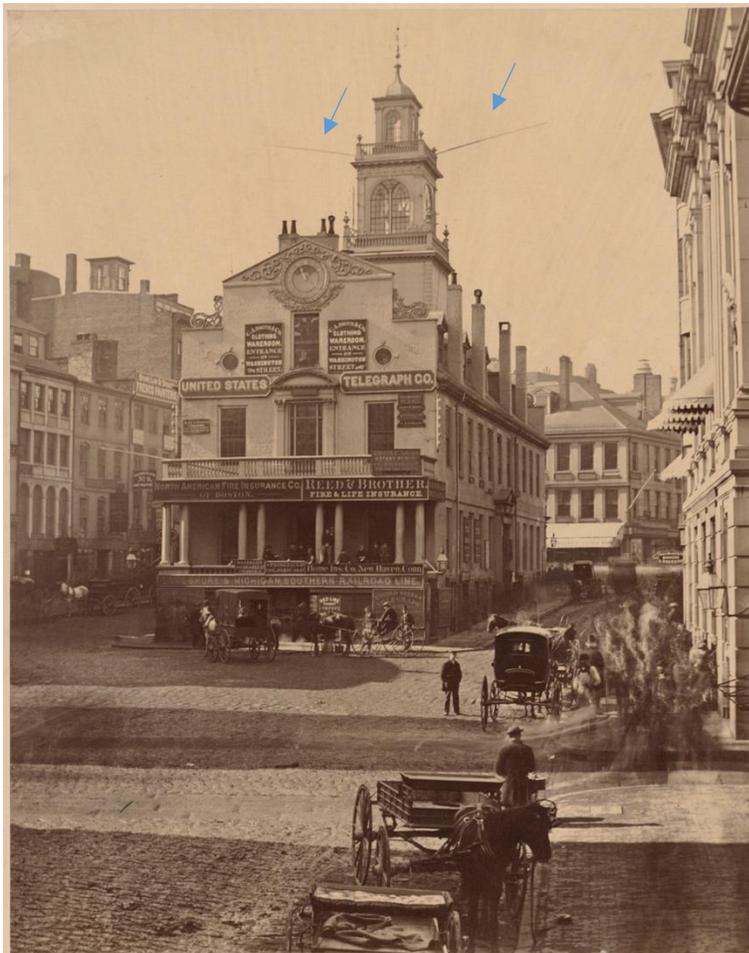


Figure P: Old State House showing double-masted flagstaff (arrows added), c. 1860.



Figure Q: J. W. Black, Old State House without flagstaff, June 17, 1875.

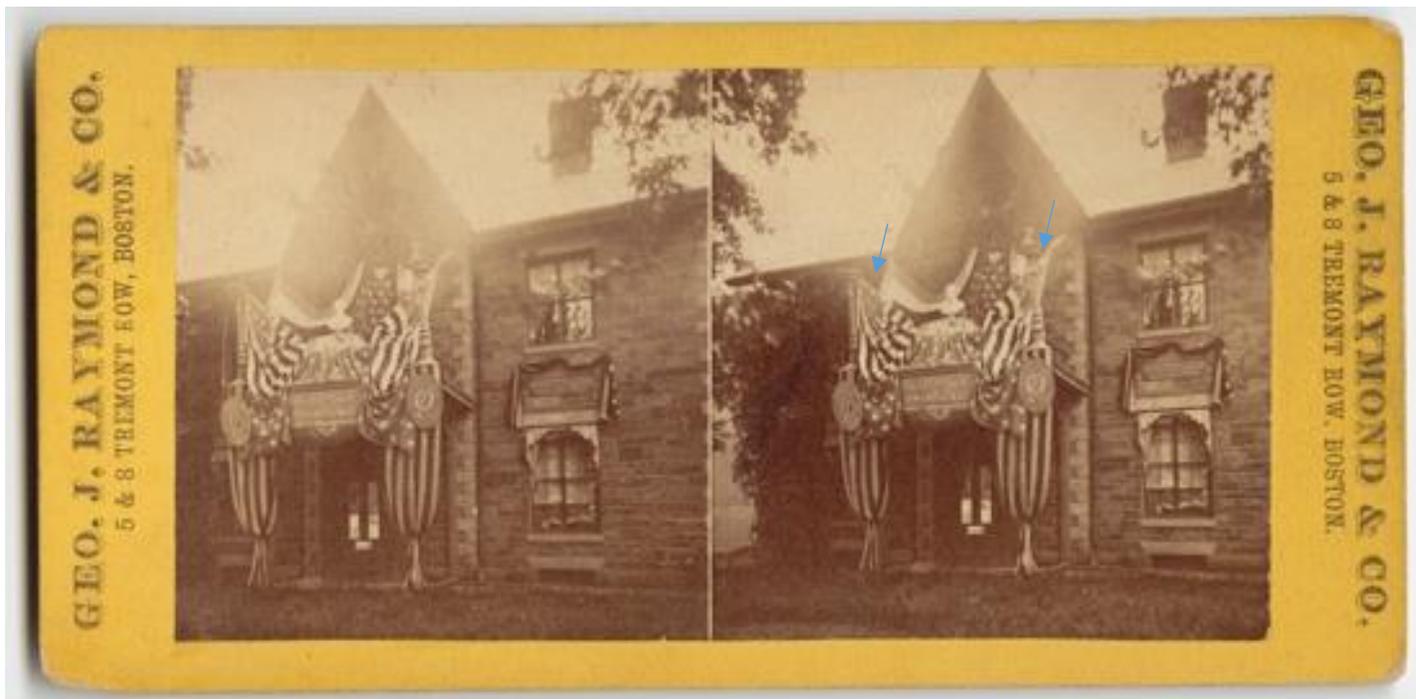


Figure R: George J. Raymond & Co., Warren House (arrows added showing flagstaff), June 17, 1875.

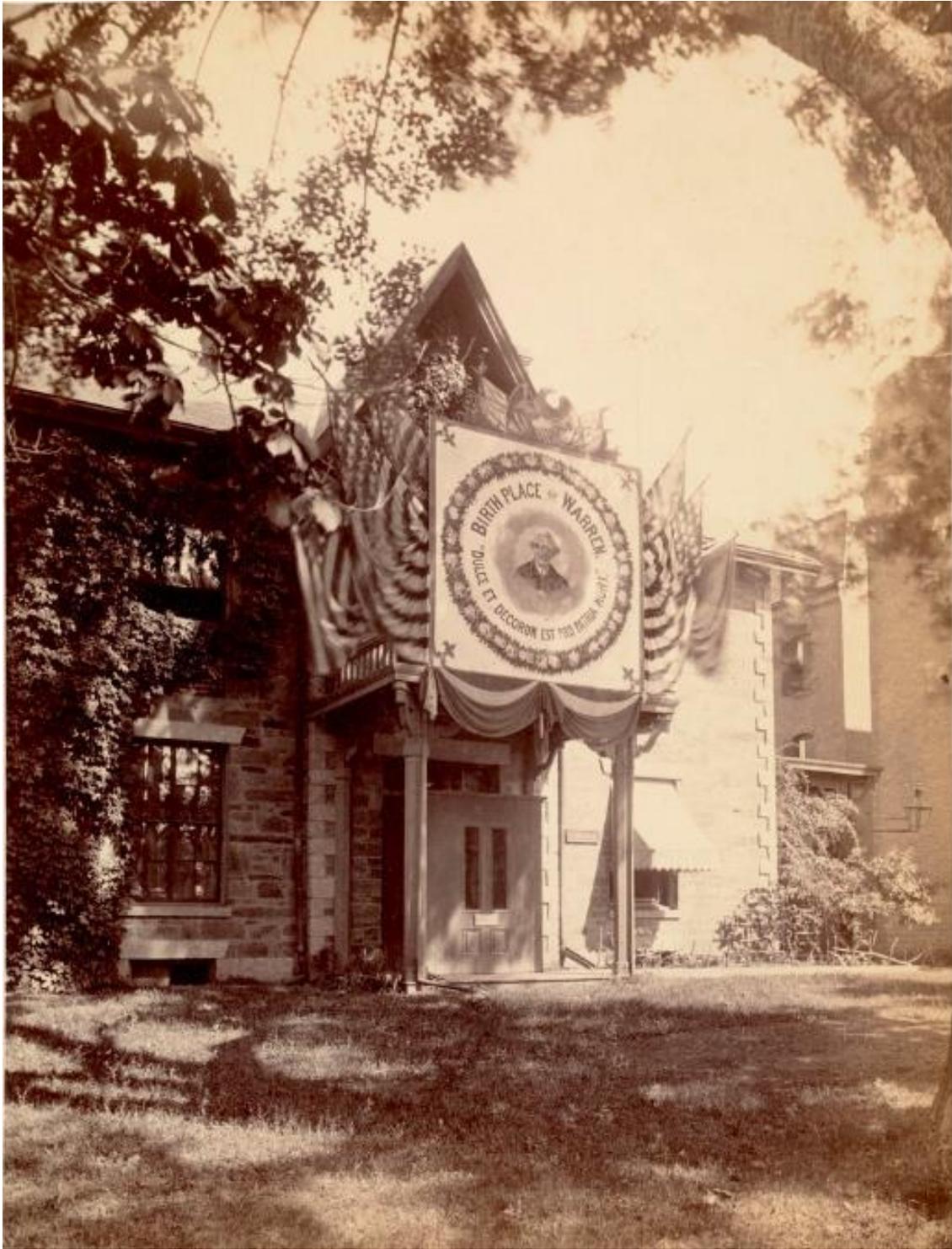


Figure S: J. W. Black, Warren House, July 4, 1876.