

Helen E. James School
16 MAIN STREET

In 1695, the General Court granted to the Proprietors of Hatfield, a tract of eighteen square miles known as the “three-mile-extension” or “Hatfield Woods.” It remained common land until actually portioned out among the proprietors of Hatfield in a drawing of lots in 1750. At last, the Lots were laid out by Surveyor Elisha Hawley, in 1752, revealing where each and everyone’s holdings were, on the ground. This land at 17 Main Street, was a part of the original Lot #10, containing more than 100 acres granted to Ebenezer Dickinson, but there appears no mention of anyone by this name ever again in the records of the district.

At the town’s beginning, a large block of land came into the hands of one of the largest and most influential families ever in Williamsburg, the Bodmans, sons of Samuel and his wife Martha Warner of Hatfield.

The three brothers first appeared in town records when in 1772 William Bodman was twice mentioned; in 1774 Samuel was chosen as a Selectman and William, an Assessor and in 1778, Joseph was paid for highway work. They acquired land on the original Lots No. 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14, which amounted to 522 acres. This block stretched seven tenths of a mile from Depot Road on the east to a line along South St., Main Street and North Street on the west. From the Pharmacy Bridge and the top of South Street Hill on the south it stretched northerly 5,938 feet to a point some distance north of O’Neil Road, more than a mile. Samuel, a tanner, owned all of Lot 10 and built #2 South Street as a home for himself and his wife Susannah Allen. He operated a horse-powered tannery north of his house where is now the Parsonage at #14 Main St. William built his home at a location near where the Crockers live at #49 Nash Hill and Joseph, Sr. made his home somewhere just north of Nash Hill Place no longer extant. Samuel and Susannah were unsuccessful in their attempts at raising a family, but the others had large families who had large families.

November 9, 1798, Samuel Bodman set his hand and seal [HCRD 30/149] for \$500 from Deacon Joseph Bodman, Jr. an acre clearly described at the southeast corner at the intersection of South Street and Main Street, where Capt. Bodman soon built a fine house.

On the 1831 map there was a schoolhouse marked at 17 Main Street, across Main Street from the James School. No record has been found of it being built or removed and very few references to it even being there. There was no further need for it when in 1850, the schoolhouse was built at 10 Main St., later the Grange Hall. Perhaps the town still held title to the vacant lot shown on the 1903 map at 17 Main Street.

The house at 17 Main Street although built at 1 South Street was moved in 1913 to make way to build the school given by Helen E James. Photos exist showing it there at 1 South St.

Helen E. James School was built to the plans of E C & G C Gardner Architects commencing in 1913¹ Although the Assessors place the Schoolhouse on Main Street, where it has its greatest visibility, it could be argued that it is at 1 South Street where the Bodman house stood for vehicular traffic enters the property.

Elizabeth Spelman was the spinster daughter of successful button manufacturer, Oswald Gross Spelman. When she died in 1924, she left funds for the town some of which were used to build the Spelman Anex onto the back of the James School. In 1937, the school committee with R. F. Burke, chairman, proposed an annex to the James School, and it was designed by Architect Frank M. Mahoney.²

Ralmon Jon Black - 2005
Williamsburg Historical Commission

¹ Mass. Dept. Public Safety, Inspection Plan Records, Wmsb., Case B, rack 5, apart. 24, #11840, 8/19/1913.

² Mass. Dept. Public Safety, Inspection Plan Records, Wmsb., Case B, rack 3, apart. 16, #40281, 9/30/1937.