

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICENATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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DATE ENTERED

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS**1 NAME**

HISTORIC

William C. Nell Residence

AND/OR COMMON

William C. Nell Residence

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER

3 Smith Court

CITY, TOWN

Boston

VICINITY OF

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

Eighth

STATE

Massachusetts

CODE

25

COUNTY

Suffolk

CODE

025

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY

☐ DISTRICT☒ BUILDING(S)☐ STRUCTURE☐ SITE☐ OBJECT

OWNERSHIP

☐ PUBLIC☒ PRIVATE☐ BOTH

PUBLIC ACQUISITION

☐ IN PROCESS☐ BEING CONSIDERED

STATUS

☒ OCCUPIED☐ UNOCCUPIED☐ WORK IN PROGRESS

ACCESSIBLE

☐ YES: RESTRICTED☐ YES: UNRESTRICTED☒ NO

PRESENT USE

☐ AGRICULTURE☐ COMMERCIAL☐ EDUCATIONAL☐ ENTERTAINMENT☐ GOVERNMENT☐ INDUSTRIAL☐ MILITARY☐ MUSEUM☐ PARK☒ PRIVATE RESIDENCE☐ RELIGIOUS☐ SCIENTIFIC☐ TRANSPORTATION☐ OTHER**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

Kenneth Keniston (617) 723-9294

STREET & NUMBER

3 Smith Court

CITY, TOWN

Boston

VICINITY OF

STATE

Massachusetts

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTIONCOURTHOUSE,
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC

Registry of Deeds, Suffolk County Court House

STREET & NUMBER

Pemberton Square

CITY, TOWN

Boston

STATE

Massachusetts

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

National Register of Historic Places

DATE

1966

☒ FEDERAL ☐ STATE ☐ COUNTY ☐ LOCALDEPOSITORY FOR
SURVEY RECORDS

National Register - 1100 L Street, Northwest

CITY, TOWN

Washington

STATE

D.C. 20240

(59)

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION

☐ EXCELLENT

☐ GOOD

☒ FAIR

☐ DETERIORATED

☐ RUINS

☐ UNEXPOSED

CHECK ONE

☐ UNALTERED

☒ ALTERED

CHECK ONE

☒ ORIGINAL SITE

☐ MOVED DATE _____

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The William C. Nell House is a center entrance, three story Federal style house of three bays (facade) by one bay (depth) timber frame construction, with ells attached to both its east and west end walls. The three story main block is built on a brick foundation, which, to the east of the entrance, is exposed by a cutaway in the yard and has two six pane windows; elsewhere, the basement wall lies beneath grade level and is not visible. All walls of the structure and its ells are of wood covered with clapboards (painted pale yellow) except as noted. All corners and fascias are cased with plain boards and have no decoration. The rear wall of the main block is of brick laid up in a common bond with iron tie rod anchors visible at the second and third floorlines; there are no windows in this wall. There are two chimneys built into this rear wall; they are arranged symmetrically about the center hallway. The main block of the house as well as both east and west ells is covered by a low sloping roof which rises from south to north, is covered with asphalt sheets and is only partially visible from the street. On the main block, the brick rear wall rises slightly above its junction with the roof, forming a low parapet.

Fenestration of the main block is symmetrical with five windows across the facade at each floor except the first, where the entrance occupies the center position. All window frames throughout the house, unless otherwise noted, are of plain boards without decoration of any type. The third floor windows are of three over three sliding sash with one window centered on each end wall. The first two floors have windows on the facade only. They are six over six sliding sash. All sash appears to date from the mid or late nineteenth century.

The main entrance is approached from a brick path leading to one step made of a rectangular block of hammered granite (probably original). The entrance consists of a rectangular frame onto which is set pilasters and a cap surrounding the door. The pilasters are set on nearly square bases capped by concave mouldings from which the pilasters rise with a slight convex curve to their moulded capitals. The pilasters support a plain architrave which is separated from the frieze by a band of concave moulding. The frieze is undecorated except for a small "S" profile bracket centered above each pilaster. The brackets are capped by a projecting section of the convex moulding which forms the top of the frieze. (These brackets are of a type used in Boston in the mid-nineteenth century.) Above the frieze is a boxed cornice cap which extends laterally to the edge of the entry frame. The door is of six panels, and the bottom four are raised rectangular panels; the top two are nearly square and are filled with "bull's eye" panes. This door is a replacement of uncertain age.

To the west of the main block of the house is a two story ell set on posts which are concealed by wooden framing with two six pane windows on the south, by a brick wall on the west, and by paving in the alley to the north. The south wall of this ell is flush with that of the main block and separated from it by a board which used to case the original corner of the main block. It has one six over six sliding sash window on each floor of the facade. Centered on

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD		AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
☐ PREHISTORIC	☐ ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	☐ COMMUNITY PLANNING	☐ LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	☐ RELIGION	
☐ 1400-1499	☐ ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	☐ CONSERVATION	☐ LAW	☐ SCIENCE	
☐ 1500-1599	☐ AGRICULTURE	☐ ECONOMICS	☒ LITERATURE	☐ SCULPTURE	
☐ 1600-1699	☐ ARCHITECTURE	☐ EDUCATION	☐ MILITARY	☒ SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
☐ 1700-1799	☐ ART	☐ ENGINEERING	☐ MUSIC	☐ THEATER	
☒ 1800-1899	☐ COMMERCE	☐ EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	☐ PHILOSOPHY	☐ TRANSPORTATION	
☐ 1900-	☐ COMMUNICATIONS	☐ INDUSTRY	☐ POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	☒ OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		☐ INVENTION			

Afro-American History

SPECIFIC DATES William C. Nell (1816-1874) BUILDER/ARCHITECT William Lancaster/Benajah Bringham
Residency (1851-1856)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

An ardent believer in the true meaning of democracy and in the necessity to preserve one's history, William Cooper Nell was a black man of the nineteenth century who published the first history of black Americans in 1855 entitled: The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution. This book exhibits Nell's appreciation and historical concern for the support black Americans had traditionally given in the Revolutionary War and in the War of 1812. He was a firm advocate of universal brotherhood, the abolishment of slavery, participation of Afro-Americans in the Civil War, and he was the first black to hold a Federal position as postal clerk of the city of Boston. He also proved to be an active and successful leader in the effort to desegregate the Boston public school system. In essence, William C. Nell fought for the realization of the ideals upon which this nation was based in order to secure those rights for Americans of African descent.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Boston on December 20, 1816, William C. Nell learned of the black man's struggle for freedom from his father, William, an associate of David Walker. Walker was the militant black abolitionist, who wrote the infamous David Walker's Appeal, which was banned in several Southern states because it encouraged slaves to revolt in order to secure their freedom. Nell was a charter member of the Massachusetts General Colored Association, an organization founded in 1826 for the purpose of encouraging racial uplift and the abolition of slavery. He experienced his first major confrontation with discrimination and racism in 1829 as a student at the Abiel Smith Negro School, the separate city supported grammar school for blacks. Nell was awarded "(T)he highest award of merit," granted by the Board of Visitors for his academic achievement.

Customarily the Franklin Medal was awarded, however, this award was given only to white recipients. Nell, the only black recipient, was given an order from a local bookstore for the book The Life of Benjamin Franklin. Moreover, the mayor of the city, Harrison Gray Otis, invited all of the white recipients to dinner at Fanueil Hall. Angered but determined, Nell attended the dinner as a waiter, replacing one of his friends. During the dinner a member of the Board of Visitors which had selected the outstanding young students, recognized him and suggested that he join the other students. The entire experience left a deep impact upon Nell. Years later he remarked, "The impression made on my mind...deepened into a solemn vow that, God helping me, I would do my best to hasten the day when color of the skin would be no barrier to equal school rights."¹ The rest of Nell's life was devoted to carrying out this vow.

Soon after graduation, Nell was attracted to the abolitionist movement and to abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison. He often said that Garrison's newspaper, the Liberator was an inspiration because

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Bell, Howard H. Minutes of the Proceedings of the National Negro Conventions, 1830-1864.
New York: Arno Press, 1969.

Nell, William C. The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution. New York: Arno Press,
1968. (continued)

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY Less than 1 acre

UTM REFERENCES

A 19 329960 4691340
ZONE EASTING NORTHING
C

B
ZONE EASTING NORTHING
D

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The William C. Nell House sits at 3 Smith Court, just off Joy Street in Boston, Massachusetts. The property is bounded and described as follows: beginning southerly by a passageway twenty (20) feet wide and leading westerly from Joy Street, called Smith Court, fifty-nine (59) feet; thence easterly by a line parallel to and 35 feet distant westerly from Joy Street, twenty-nine (29) feet; thence northerly fifty-nine (59) feet; and thence, westerly twenty-nine feet to the original point.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY (continued)

NAME / TITLE

Lynne Gomez Graves, Historical Projects Director

ORGANIZATION

Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation

DATE

3 February 1976

STREET & NUMBER

1420 N Street, Northwest

TELEPHONE

(202) 462-2519

CITY OR TOWN

Washington

STATE

D.C.

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION
ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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CONTINUATION SHEET William C. Nell ITEM NUMBER 7 PAGE Two
Residence

the west end wall is one immobile, six pane window at both stories. The rear wall (north) is covered with shingles painted the same color as the house. This ell of the house seems to have been added in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century and has no chimney.

To the east of the main block is another two story ell of slightly greater length along the facade. Its south wall is flush with the main facade. The rear wall is of brick in common bond with a chimney centered on its interior side. This brick wall is set approximately 3" further north than the rear wall of the main block. A change in brick color, but not bonding, at the second floorline indicates that this ell might have begun as a one story addition. The chimney of the ell rises to a height of four stories to clear the neighboring building which is attached to the east wall of this ell. The chimney is secured by two iron rods, one set into the neighboring building, the other into the roof of the ell. At the first floor of the facade is one pair of six over six windows set west of center. East of center, a one story ell projects at right angles to the facade.

At the second floor are two six over six windows set in frames with Victorian mouldings; They are spaced symmetrically about the center line of the ell. An iron ladder is bolted to the wall between these two windows and extends to the first floor to provide a fire escape. At the roof is an iron railing with decoration in the center of a pair of "S" scrolls. This railing is undoubtedly of twentieth century origin.

Extending from the kitchen of the eastern ell is a one story entrance shed which extends to the sidewalk of Smith Court. It has a slightly off center door next to which (moving northward) is a six pane window. The roof is covered with metal sheets and rises from west to east, it has a metal gutter, while the rest of the house has wooden gutters with lead flashing.

All facade windows have two paneled, louvred shutters painted gray/black. The shutters appear to be new within the last ten years. In front of the house along the street is a modern fence of vertical slats set into frames of 2" x 6" boards. Most of the yard is paved with bricks, except for planting beds along the fence which are set apart by railroad ties. All of these fittings are of modern origin.

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CONTINUATION SHEET William C. Nell
Residence ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE One (Reference Notes)

1. Liberator, December 28, 1855.
2. William C. Nell, The Colored Patriots (New York: 1968), p. 344.
3. Ibid, pp. 346-7.
4. Ibid, p. 359.
5. Ibid, p. 9.
6. Ibid, pp. 378-381.

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William C. Nell

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it "unmasked the hydra-headed monster, Colonization, and secured an audience for the colored man who heretofore could hardly utter his thoughts."² Nell became very active in the anti-slavery movement: arranging meetings, giving lectures to black and white audiences, contributing articles to the Liberator, and collecting historical information. Interested in the collection of facts from the past, he became an avid collector of documents and information regarding blacks. He soon acquired a reputation for fidelity of research and accuracy of facts.

During his active participation in the abolitionist movement, Nell was to see some concrete changes toward integrating the movement. In 1833, the black abolitionist society, of which his father was vice president, requested membership in the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (later the New England Anti-Slavery Society), and was accepted. Black and white abolitionists decided that "complexional Anti-Slavery Societies, as such were absurdities ... and hence, such distinction soon melted into thin air."³ The two groups were joined into a truly integrated anti-slavery organization. Blacks as well as whites were members and held positions of authority.

When the abolitionists split into the Garrisonian and the anti-Garrisonian factions, Nell sided with Garrison. In March 1840, he issued a joint statement along with several other blacks which reaffirmed their faith in Garrison. During this period Nell became more involved in work on the Liberator. He ran the paper's Negro Employment Office, wrote articles on the advancement of Boston's black population, and organized mass anti-slavery meetings on subjects ranging from equal educational rights to Southern imprisonment of foreign and northern black sailors.

In 1838 he was among the founders of the Adelpic League and twelve years later, in 1846, he helped to establish the Young men's Literary Society of Boston. Interracial in their composition, both of these organizations had as their purpose, the personal development of individuals through self-improvement by exposure to outstanding speakers and stimulating conversation. In 1845 he continued his fight against prejudice and caste by joining other blacks in the founding of the "Freedom Association," with the objective of assisting fugitive slaves.

In 1847 Nell continued his involvement with the anti-slavery movement and assisted in the realization of a truly integrated anti-slavery society. He and Frederick Douglass were named delegates from the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society to the National Colored Convention in Troy, New York, October 1847. They attended the meeting only after the call for the convention had been changed to the National Convention of Colored People and Their Friends. There can be little doubt that Nell played a significant role in the title change which attempted to broaden the convention's appeal. As Nell stated:

The feeling, at that time, among prominent white and colored anti-slavery friends was that, exclusive(ly) colored conventions belonged to the past, and their resurrection was not desirable. The great question was that of abandoning as soon as possible, all separate actions, and becoming part and parcel of the general community.⁴

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Consequently, Nell's skepticism about several proposals which were called for at the conclusion of the convention is understandable. The Troy meeting called for the establishment of a colored college, a national Negro Press, and the continuation of black conventions. It was his conviction that such separate black organizations were not in the best interest of the race.

Nell's abhorrence of segregation led to his attack upon the segregated Boston Public School System. In 1848, he, along with Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and other abolitionists began the campaign by petitioning the city government to eliminate the segregated school system and to grant blacks the right to attend schools on an equal basis with whites. A series of rejections, investigations, and court cases followed. In 1849 a petition bearing 202 signatures called for the elimination of separate schools.

Although Nell led the fight to integrate Boston's public schools, he was initially unsuccessful. As a result of Nell's agitation, the city school board, continued to support the maintenance of a dual educational system, however, it sought to improve the black school by hiring a new black teacher. Such action was met by the determined resistance of Nell and other blacks who were totally opposed to segregation. Nell proposed a boycott of black schools which continued inspite of the often violent physical reaction by whites. Temporary schools for black children were opened, causing a serious drop in the enrollment and the boycott proved to be successful. The intense agitation which Nell had persistently organized, coupled with the changing national temper of the pre-Civil War period, led to the abolition of the segregated educational system on April 28, 1855. On that date a law was enacted prohibiting the exclusion of any child from any school of the city because of his race, color, or religion. This was a long awaited victory. However, Nell was not completely satisfied. He wanted the black school, the last vestige of segregation, to be closed down permanently. Finally, in 1864 this action was realized. Continuous pressure by Nell and his followers, along with the cooperation of parents and students, decreased the enrollment at the school. This action resulted in the total integration of Boston's public schools.

Nell began his struggle for an integrated school system sixteen years earlier. It had included seven petitions, two law suits, a major boycott, and innumerable articles, speeches, and meetings. In December, 1855 Nell was honored for his work in desegregating the Boston Public School System. The wealthy black barber of Boston, John T. Hilton presided, and anti-slavery leaders Garrison, Phillips, and Robert Morris praised Nell's accomplishments at the dinner given for him. Flowers were presented to Nell on behalf of the school children of Boston while the adults presented him with a gold watch. His friend, Harriet Beecher Stowe,

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who was unable to attend, sent Nell an autographed copy of her book, Uncle Tom's Cabin. The successful, although long awaited, victory of school integration by Nell was noted throughout the nation by abolitionists. The state of Rhode Island sought Nell's advice in its schools' desegregation struggle. Nell's persistence and determination became models which other desegregationists looked to for inspiration and guidance in their various struggles to desegregate.

Throughout the period while Nell was involved with school desegregation, he also found time to write and have published the first history of blacks in America written by a black American. The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution was published in 1855 and was an enlarged and revised edition of an earlier work of Nell's, a thirty-five page pamphlet, Services of the Colored American in the Wars of 1776 and 1812 which had been published one year earlier. Nell's purpose, in researching and writing this book was, to "rescue from oblivion the name and fame of those who . . . had warm hearts and active hands in the times that tried men's souls".⁵ With his background in journalism, and his reputation for accuracy and the thorough compilation of facts, Nell showed qualities of research and scholarship which made him a pioneer in the field of black history. Nell engaged in basic, painstaking research. He recorded oral accounts, visited cemeteries "to rescue and save all that may be gleaned from 'their fast disappearing record,'" and read numerous newspapers and official documents. Pension records, payrolls, muster rolls, discharge papers, legal and judicial proceedings, manumission papers and convention papers were used. Eighteen chapters were devoted to specific states presenting and explaining the role of blacks in those states during the first years of the nation's history. Later chapters were devoted to a general commentary on the national black experience in a historical context. In his conclusion, Nell stated that the Revolution of 1776 and the subsequent struggle in the nation's history were aided in a honorable proportion by black Americans, who "have yet left the necessity for a second revolution necessary to regenerate public sentiment in favor of Universal Brotherhood. . . . The extent to which Colored Americans work to hasten that day they will validate a claim to the title of Patriots of the Second Revolution."⁶ History can say that Nell, himself, was at the head of this revolution's army.

While writing the book, Nell continued to spend time in his crusade for the abolition of slavery and the integration of American society. In response to the Dred Scott decision of 1858, Nell participated in the staging of the first Crispus Attucks celebration and his address warned of the growing despotism in the United States and its threat to free government. The following year he continued his attack in an article which he wrote for the newly

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published Weekly Anglo-African. He climaxed his attack by petitioning the Massachusetts legislature to declare the Dred Scott decision unconstitutional. Nell's efforts, however, were unsuccessful.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1860 started Nell on a crusade for the equal participation of blacks in the war effort. In that same year, he was appointed postal clerk by the Boston Postmaster John G. Palfress becoming the first black to be appointed a position in the Federal service and retaining that distinction until his death. He welcomed and commended the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and reminiscently watched the termination of the Liberator in December, 1865. Its termination came as a fitting gesture to the accomplishment of his raison d'etre the abolition of slavery. Accordingly, for the last edition of the anti-slavery newspaper, Nell wrote a moving two-page appreciative statement for Garrison.

After December, 1865 little is known about Nell except for a few scattered pieces of correspondence and the fact that he married in April, 1869 and died in 1874.

William C. Nell had made his impact upon American society as an outstanding abolitionist, a determined integrationist, and a scholarly historian. In his struggle for equality, Nell had advanced the perception and meaning of the concept of democracy in the United States.

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Report of the Primary School Committee, June 15, 1846, on the Petition of Sundry Colored
Children With the Solicitor's Opinion. Boston, 1846.

Quarles, Benjamin A. Black Abolitionists. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.

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Residence

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