

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

PH0669601

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DATE ENTERED DEC 22 1978

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

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

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC THE SIGNER'S HOUSE AND MATTHEW THORNTON CEMETERY  
AND/OR COMMON

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER 5 of Merrimack on U.S. 3  
(Rte. 3) approximately 2 mi. south of the center of  
West and East sides of Daniel Webster Highway NOT FOR PUBLICATION Merrimack  
CITY, TOWN \_\_\_\_\_ CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT \_\_\_\_\_  
Merrimack \_\_\_\_\_ VICINITY OF \_\_\_\_\_ First  
STATE New Hampshire CODE 33 COUNTY Hillsborough CODE 011 ✓

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE <input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL <input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL <input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SITE	<b>PUBLIC ACQUISITION</b>	<b>ACCESSIBLE</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT <input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT <input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL <input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> OTHER Cemetery

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME Charles J. Murch  
STREET & NUMBER 148 Nashua Street  
CITY, TOWN Milford STATE New Hampshire 03055  
VICINITY OF \_\_\_\_\_

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. Hillsborough County Registry of Deeds  
Hillsborough County Courthouse  
STREET & NUMBER PO Box 370, 19 Temple Street  
CITY, TOWN Nashua STATE New Hampshire 03060

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE None  
DATE \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_FEDERAL \_\_\_\_STATE \_\_\_\_COUNTY \_\_\_\_LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS \_\_\_\_\_  
CITY, TOWN \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_

# 7 DESCRIPTION

## CONDITION

\_\_\_EXCELLENT  
GOOD  
\_\_\_FAIR

\_\_\_DETERIORATED  
\_\_\_RUINS  
\_\_\_UNEXPOSED

## CHECK ONE

\_\_\_UNALTERED  
ALTERED

## CHECK ONE

ORIGINAL SITE  
MOVED DATE 1976  
(stables)

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### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Signer's House and Matthew Thornton Cemetery are important components of the Town of Merrimack and the State of New Hampshire historically, architecturally, visually, and culturally. Both are important as indications of 18th century life and values.

The structure's main block rests on a cut granite foundation. It is a two-story, clapboard-sheathed building with five-bay front (east) facade and center entry. Its gable roof is punctuated by two interior chimneys on the ridge. Windows are six over six sash with architrave-trim. Side elevations are four bays in extent with eaves terminating in cornice returns which appear to be 19th century modifications. The north elevation includes a six-panel door with rectangular transom. It is framed by Tuscan pilasters supporting a molded cornice.

The main block's most noteworthy feature is its front (east) door treatment and finely detailed portico. The six-panel door is flanked by rectangular side lights on panels and crowned by a semi-elliptical fan light with lead tracery. The small portico with hipped roof rests on a cut granite stoop and is carried by pilasters and columns with Scamozzi Ionic capitals. Thornton's sophistication and familiarity with high style architectural prototypes may well be responsible for the structure's unique maturity of design and ornament.

An addition extends westward from the rear (west) elevation of the main block; it is believed to date from the late 19th century. In 1976 the stables, part of which date from the time of the house's construction, were moved slightly southeast and joined to the rear addition.

The Signer's House is planned as a "double" house, with a central hallway and a symmetrical arrangement of rooms on each side of the hall's axis. The woodwork throughout the building is of a very high quality and reveals a number of unusual, and possibly unique, variations on the Federal style. The two parlors at the front (east) of the house are the most elaborately finished rooms. Both have flat wooden wainscoting with delicate chair rails and finely-moulded baseboards. Their doorway and window architraves are of the "double" type, marked by complex median and backband mouldings of a semi-elliptical or ovolo profile. The mantelshelf in the southeast parlor is supported on flat fluted pilasters and is composed of delicate and deeply-cut Federal mouldings. The frieze of this mantelpiece includes two rectangular end tablets with incised urn designs and a central tablet with incurved corners and an incised compass-derived design reminiscent of Prince-of-Wales feathers. The mantelpiece in the northeast parlor is supported on pairs of attenuated reeded pilasters which are separated by bands of carved ornament derived from the bead-and-reel.

The two rear (west) rooms of the house share similar woodwork, including baseboards and chair rails separated by plaster dadoes and simple mantelshelves supported by cavetto mouldings. Both fireplaces originally incorporated ovens at their sides (the one in the northern chimney survives), and both rooms appear to have served as kitchens.

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DESCRIPTION (Continued)

The central hallway is marked by a single-run stairway with elaborately scrolled stringer brackets. The handrail, of a delicate Federal profile, terminates in a vertical volute which is supported on a simple newel post and which echoes the volutes of the Ionic capitals of the entrance portico.

The two front (east) chambers are the most elaborate second floor rooms, containing plaster wainscoting and simple mantelshelves supported on fluted pilasters similar to those in the southeast parlor. Most of the window sash throughout the building are original, and have delicate muntins of a characteristic Federal profile. The western (rear) chambers within the original house are less highly ornamented, but contain simple mantelshelves composed of a series of thin curved mouldings of an elliptical section, similar to those used on the door and window casings of the first floor. Door and window casings of the second floor are simple single architraves with ovolo backband mouldings. Original interior doors survive on the second floor and are of a characteristic six-panel Federal style, having flat panels surrounded by quirked ovolo mouldings on their faces, and raised panels with no bordering mouldings on their reverse sides.

Woodwork in the rear wing, which connects the main house to the stables, is of a characteristic mid-to-late nineteenth-century style.

The roof system of the building is highly unusual in design. Composed entirely of sawn members, it consists of four pairs of large principal rafters located above the wall posts of the house frame. These rafters support single 7" by 8" purlins located about one-third of the distance up from the eaves on each slope of the roof. The purlins, in turn, support a number of 2-3/4" by 4-1/2" common rafters which meet at a small ridge piece and to which are nailed horizontal roof boards.

The building was used as a tavern through much of the 19th century, and as a residence in the early 20th century, and in the 1930's as a small inn. Later it was converted into apartments and continued in multi-family use until 1976.

During the 20th century the Signer's House was altered considerably. The most salient modification, constructed c. 1930, was a full-width, one-story, enclosed porch sheathed in asbestos shingles (as was the entire structure). In the course of this change a door was cut into the south front room and the granite stoop was moved forward to the porch entrance. In addition, at least two picture windows were installed and interior spaces partitioned off for multi-family use.

In 1976 the structure was purchased for conversion into a restaurant. The porch and asbestos shingles were removed, revealing the portico and door treatment. Missing woodwork - interior as well as exterior - was painstakingly reproduced.

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DESCRIPTION (Continued)

Modern interior partitions were removed and the original floor plan recovered. Picture windows were replaced with sash matching the original. Paint colors were selected on the basis of samples found on existing woodwork. All work was done with respect for the building and a desire to rehabilitate it sympathetically.

The cemetery, once part of the original land holding, located east of the house, is now on the east side of the Daniel Webster Highway. Stones date from the middle of the 18th century and include excellent examples of rough cut, local fieldstone markers bearing only initials, age at death, and year of death.

The first two rows of stones, as one faces east, were moved to the east during the widening of the highway in the late 1950's. The remainder of the cemetery, as determined by archeological excavation, appears undisturbed although there are gaps and collapsed graves which may indicate missing stones. The cemetery retains the traditional east-west alignment of the period and three sides of the stone wall enclosure.

The graves of Matthew Thornton and many of his immediate family are here - his wife, Hannah, their children, and grandchildren. The grave of Sarah Lutwyche, mother of Edward Lutwyche, a well-known and active Tory during the Revolution, is also here. The Lutwyche Family came to Merrimack in 1760 and soon after obtained the rights to operate a ferry across the Merrimack River. The Lutwyche holdings were confiscated during the Revolution and later acquired by Matthew Thornton. The ferry was legally righted to him in 1784.

This cemetery has an unusually good concentration of Merrimack Valley grave-stones, especially those types associated with several members of the Park family, stonecutters of Groton, Massachusetts. One of the most striking of the earlier stones in the cemetery, dated 1757, bears the characteristic death's head, wording, lettering, and geometric and floral border ornamentation associated with William Park.<sup>1</sup> Many other grave markers, more fluently and deeply carved, bear the hallmarks of work attributed to William Park's sons, John and Thomas,<sup>2</sup> and represent a virtual catalogue of the diverse designs produced by these prolific brothers.

A monument to Matthew Thornton was erected at the north end of the cemetery in 1885 to commemorate his contributions to the town, the state, and the nation.

<sup>1</sup>Harriette M. Forbes, Gravestones of Early New England and the Men Who Made Them (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1927), pp. 71-75.

<sup>2</sup>ibid., pp. 75-77.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

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

SPECIFIC DATES                      c. 1770                      BUILDER/ARCHITECT                      Unknown

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Signer's House and cemetery are of considerable significance in several areas, particularly history, architecture, and archeology. They are irreplaceable resources which provide a tangible link to the formative years of our state and nation. They may yield vital information regarding the lifestyle and technology of the 18th and 19th centuries.

The building and cemetery derive their names from Matthew Thornton, signer of the Declaration of Independence, who purchased the property in 1780. Thornton, born in Ireland in 1714, came to this country at the age of four. The family eventually settled in Worcester, Massachusetts, where Matthew studied medicine. He opened a practice in Londonderry, New Hampshire, in 1740. Thornton was active in civil matters, serving in town government and as a legislator and a judge.

"He was chosen President of the First Provincial Congress in 1775. Later he was elected to the Committee of Safety, the war-time executive authority of the young State. He was a member of the legislative body equivalent to our modern State Senate. He served also as a militia colonel. He was active on the committee which wrote the first constitution for the State of New Hampshire, and aided in its adoption in January, 1776. He was an Associate Justice of the Superior Court of the State from 1776-1778. And he was one of New Hampshire's delegates to the Continental Congress during that same period."<sup>1</sup>

From an architectural standpoint, the house represents the only example of the late Georgian style in Merrimack and is additionally important because of its association with Thornton. As a leader in state and national government, Thornton frequented the major cultural centers of the country and was a sophisticated gentleman familiar with high style tastes in architecture.

The cemetery is the oldest in Merrimack; the earliest stones date from 1742. It has significant archeological potential and may yield information regarding 18th century social structure. In addition, the stones reflect contemporary artistic, literary and theological developments. The house site also offers important archeological potential.

<sup>1</sup>J. Duane Squires, "Matthew Thornton - Portrait of a Patriot," NH Echoes.

# 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Squires, J. Duane, "Matthew Thornton, Portrait of a Patriot," NH Echoes, Aug. 1974, New Hampshire Historical Society.

Wrenn, Tony P., "The Honest Man--Matthew Thornton of New Hampshire," Pioneer America, July, 1969, The Pioneer America Society.

See Continuation Sheet #5.

# 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY approx. 2 acres

QUADRANGLE NAME Nashua North

QUADRANGLE SCALE 7.5'

UTM REFERENCES

House	A	10	296360	4745820	B			
		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
Com.	C	10	296420	4745820	D			
	E				F			
	G				H			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

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

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

# 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Anne Giesecke, Archeologist

ORGANIZATION

Archeological Research Services

DATE

May 1, 1978

STREET & NUMBER

Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology, University of NH 603-862-1547

TELEPHONE

CITY OR TOWN

Durham

STATE

New Hampshire 03824

# 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

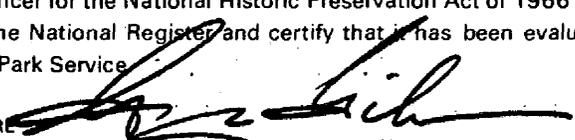
NATIONAL XX

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

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE



TITLE Commissioner, Dept. of Resources and Economic Development  
NH State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE 5-11-78

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

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE 12-22-78

ATTEST

CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

DATE 12/12/78

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SIGNIFICANCE (Continued)

Archeological potential also exists at the house site. Glass and ceramic artifacts recovered from grading of the present parking lot are 19th century, but a very old stone-lined well and other evidences of foundations and out buildings were carefully covered and are preserved for future archeological investigation. This is of particular importance because very few sites remain in the rapidly developing Merrimack Valley of New Hampshire which may tell us about rural life in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The location and patterns of the buildings and the association to the river and roads may yield information about land use, the relation of man to his environment, and even more, the locational patterns and artifacts recoverable from the area may tell us about early taverns, trade, building technology and domestic habits. The structure relates closely to the history of transportation in southern New Hampshire. From its earliest days, this building was a tavern serving both river and stagecoach traffic; the ferry across the Merrimack River was operated by the owner of the tavern. As a restaurant, it continued in appropriate use since, with the advent of the automobile, the need for taverns has vanished. It remains a useful, unique and visually pleasing component of the cultural landscape.

The Signer's House, in addition to its many other fine characteristics, is in excellent structural condition. As such, it is an extraordinary resource for continued active use. It would be impossible to construct anything of such quality today, particularly in this time of vanishing energy and material resources.

For a time, Matthew Thornton's association with the "Signer's House" was not clear. Tony P. Wrenn, in an article which appeared in Pioneer America in 1969, presented evidence that Thornton resided at the property, though Wrenn was unable to examine the intrinsic architectural evidence and thus to ascertain whether its construction postdated Thornton's presumed occupancy.<sup>2</sup> Wrenn noted that one of Thornton's sons, also named Matthew Thornton, could have built the house. However, subsequent deed research has revealed that Thornton, the "Signer," purchased the property in 1780 and sold it to his son James in 1797. This corroborates Ezra Stearns, as quoted by Wrenn, "Hannah Thornton, a daughter

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<sup>2</sup>Tony P. Wrenn, "The Honest Man--Matthew Thornton of New Hampshire," Pioneer America, 1:2, 30-39.

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SIGNIFICANCE (Continued)

of James Thornton ... married Col. Joseph Greeley, and their son, James Bonaparte Greeley, M.D., now owns the Matthew Thornton farm at Thornton's Ferry, and occupies it as his summer home!"<sup>3</sup>

Together the house and cemetery preserve the only significant remnant of Merrimack's 18th and 19th century environment. Thornton's residence in the nearby town of Derry, New Hampshire (where he lived from 1740 to 1779) was designated a Registered National Historic Landmark in 1972. The "Signer's House," and its associated cemetery in which Matthew Thornton is buried, are equally worthy of landmark recognition.

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<sup>3</sup>Ezra Stearns, Proceedings of the New Hampshire Historical Society, Volume III, June 1895-June 1899, NH Historical Society, Concord, 1902, pp. 76-108, as quoted by Tony P. Wrenn in Pioneer America (The Pioneer America Society: Virginia, 1969), 36.

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MAJOR BIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES (Continued)

Deed Search conducted by J. Bishop and J. Kilbourn, 1976. Copies on file at the New Hampshire Historic Preservation Office, Concord, New Hampshire.

Interview with Ruth Greely, May, 1977.

Interview with Charles Murch, May 1, 1978.