

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

For NPS use only

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**1. Name**

(Headquarters House)  
historic William Hickling Prescott House

and/or common Headquarters House (William Hickling Prescott House)

**2. Location**

street & number 55 Beacon Street \_\_\_\_\_ not for publication

city, town Boston \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of 8th Congressional District

state Massachusetts code 025 county Suffolk code 025

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name National Society of the Colonial Dames in America in the  
Commonwealth of Massachusetts

street & number 55 Beacon Street

city, town Boston \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of state Massachusetts

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Suffolk Registry of Deeds

street & number Suffolk County Court House, Somerset Street

city, town Boston \_\_\_\_\_ state Massachusetts

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title Inventory of Historic Assets has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date in progress \_\_\_\_\_ federal  state \_\_\_\_\_ county \_\_\_\_\_ local

depository for survey records Massachusetts Historical Commission

city, town Boston \_\_\_\_\_ state Massachusetts

## 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 Hickling Prescott House (William H. Prescott House) is the western unit in a pair of four-story, bow-fronted brick row houses constructed c. 1806 from designs generally attributed to Asher Benjamin. Though some of the exterior details have disappeared from the eastern unit, the original relation of the houses as mirror-images is still obvious. The two stand on the northern side of Beacon Street--William Hickling Prescott House is numbered at 55--with a sweeping view of the adjacent Boston Common. The historic setting of the buildings has been effectively protected through their inclusion in the Beacon Hill Historic District (also a national historic landmark district) established by special act of the Massachusetts legislature.

The current name is derived from William Hickling Prescott, the historian, who lived in the house from 1845 to 1859. The exterior of the Federal style house is essentially unaltered. The entrance, located in the eastern bay, consists of a paneled doorway with fan and sidelights. A one-story porch, supported on attenuated Doric columns, covers the entrance and extends across the facade, following the line of the bow. A cornice with dentil band and a railing with alternating paneled and balustraded sections mark the roof line. Pilasters with elaborate capitals extend from the porch to the cornice on either side of the bow. Windows are 6/6 double-hung sash except on the second floor where triple-hung sash mark the location of the original Federal parlor.

At the time of William Hickling Prescott's residence there, the house contained an oval dining room, kitchen and service area on the first floor; double parlors and library on the second; a sitting room, bedrooms, and the historian's study (rear) on the third; and additional bedrooms on the fourth. Alteration of interior architectural elements appears to have occurred in three major stages. The first, preceding Prescott's ownership, resulted in the partial replacement of Federal by Greek Revival wood trim and the addition of marble mantels in some rooms. During the second, carried out by Prescott, dark woodwork and other early Victorian details were added, notably in the dining room and the study. Finally, the Dexter family, who owned the house during the late 19th century, installed Georgian Revival elements, particularly evident in the first floor hall and main staircase. The rectangular skylight between the third and fourth floors also dates from this last period.

The Society of Colonial Dames has chosen to maintain the interior detail of the William Hickling Prescott House as it was when they acquired the building rather than return it to one specific period. Certain changes in use have been made. The dining room is now a library. The kitchen and service area have been converted to caretaker's quarters. Prescott's library is now a dining room with new kitchen facilities added at the rear (north). Fourth floor rooms serve as offices and the attic space

# 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 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** c. 1806; 1844-59      **Builder/Architect** Asher Benjamin

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

This four-story, bow-fronted brick house at 55 Beacon Street in Boston, Massachusetts, was from 1844 until 1859 the principal home of William H. Prescott. An accident suffered while he was a student at Harvard College left Prescott virtually blind, but despite that handicap he was determined to pursue a career in literature. Writing with the aid of a device known as a noctograph, Prescott produced several large-scale works, notably the History of the Conquest of Mexico (1843) and the History of the Conquest of Peru (1847), which rank him as one of America's leading historians.

The house which Prescott purchased on Beacon Street had been constructed c. 1806 from designs by Asher Benjamin. In the present century, the house became the headquarters of the National Society of the Colonial Dames in America in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the use from which its present name derives. The exterior of the building is essentially unaltered and Prescott's study at the rear of the third floor has been fully restored; both the exterior and interior are in excellent condition. The house is open to the public on Wednesdays from 1 to 4:30 and at other times by appointment.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

William Hickling Prescott was born in Salem, Massachusetts, on May 4, 1796. Prescott's family had been prominent in Massachusetts history--his grandfather, Col. William Prescott, commanded the American redoubt at the Battle of Bunker Hill--and was well off financially. In 1811 Prescott entered Harvard College; where, during a commons brawl, he was struck in the left eye by a hard bread crust. He lost the sight of that eye altogether and subsequent infection weakened the right eye, leaving him virtually blind. Prescott managed to graduate with his class in 1814, traveled abroad to consult eye specialists, and returned in 1817 to his parents' home in Boston. In 1820 he married Susan Amory, by whom he was to have three children.

Despite his handicap and though his private means made work unnecessary, Prescott was determined to pursue a career in literature. Encouraged by his friend, George Ticknor, who was to become his biographer, Prescott took up the study of Spanish history. He employed research assistants in Europe who obtained copies of thousands of books and documents and had these resource materials read to him by a secretary. Much of his work was done with the aid of a noctograph, a tablet equipped with brass wires to guide his hand and with an "inked material", serving like carbon paper, on which he wrote with a stylus.

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

(See Continuation Sheet)

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name \_\_\_\_\_

Quadrangle scale \_\_\_\_\_

### UTM References

A 

1	9	3	2	9	6	0	0	4	6	9	1	2	1	0
Zone	Easting				Northing									

B 

Zone	Easting				Northing									

C 

Zone	Easting				Northing									

D 

Zone	Easting				Northing									

E 

Zone	Easting				Northing									

F 

Zone	Easting				Northing									

G 

Zone	Easting				Northing									

H 

Zone	Easting				Northing									

### Verbal boundary description and justification

(See Continuation Sheet)

### 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 Polly M. Rettig, Historian, Landmark Review Project; original form prepared by J. Walter Coleman, Historian, 12/6/62

organization Historic Sites Survey, NPS

date 4/12/76

street & number 1100 L Street, NW

telephone 202-523-5464

city or town Washington

state D.C. 20240

# 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.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title \_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

4/3/84

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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has been finished and climate-controlled for storage of the Society's extensive costume collection. None of the original furnishings have returned to the house; all furnishings used have been given by the members.

In 1968 the Society completed a thorough restoration of Prescott's study, based on plans of the room drawn for the historian (located in the Boston Athenaeum) and a contemporary sketch (found in the archives of the First Church in Boston). The furnishings include a Davenport (small writing desk), a Victorian armchair, side chairs, couch and bookcases. A device for the sight-impaired to use for writing called a noctograph is displayed on the desk. An unusual feature is the large bay window with sliding triple shutters in vertical frames, which the near-blind historian used to control the amount and direction of light in the room.

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It took Prescott ten years to complete the three volumes of his first study, the History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic. Published in 1837, the work received enthusiastic reviews in Europe as well as in the United States. His History of the Conquest of Mexico, issued in 1843, received even greater acclaim and eventually became one of the most-read histories in the English-speaking world.

In 1844 Prescott purchased a house at 55 Beacon Street, Boston, which was to be his principal home for the remainder of his life (he also maintained a summer cottage, "Fitful Head," at Nahant and inherited the ancestral farm at Pepperell, Massachusetts). There he began his next study, the History of the Conquest of Peru, working for six hours a day, broken into small units by rides, walks, and talk with family and friends. After Peru was published in 1847, Prescott was forced to abandon his writing for a year, because his remaining eye was so weakened that he could use it for only one hour a day.

By July, 1849, Prescott was sufficiently recovered to begin work on a comprehensive study of Spain's Philip II. The next year he visited England; there he was lionized in London, received an honorary D.C.L. from Oxford, and was entertained by the Earl of Carlisle at Castle Howard, where fellow guests included Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. The first two volumes of the History of the Reign of Philip the Second, King of Spain were issued in 1855. Prescott then took time to write a concluding volume to William Robertson's Reign of the Emperor Charles V. The third volume of Philip the Second appeared in 1858, after the author had had a stroke. He recovered rapidly and began work on the fourth volume in the series, but it was not completed. On January 28, 1859, Prescott suffered a second stroke at his Beacon Street home and died the same day.

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Morison, Samuel Eliot. "Prescott, the American Thucydides," Atlantic Monthly  
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Munro, W.H., ed. ~~The Works of William H. Prescott~~ (22 volumes, 1904).

Putnam, Ruth. "Prescott and Motley," Cambridge History of American Literature  
(Volume II, 1944).

Ticknor, George. Life of William Hickling Prescott (1864).

Weinhardt, Carl J., Jr. The Domestic Architecture of Beacon Hill, 1800-1850  
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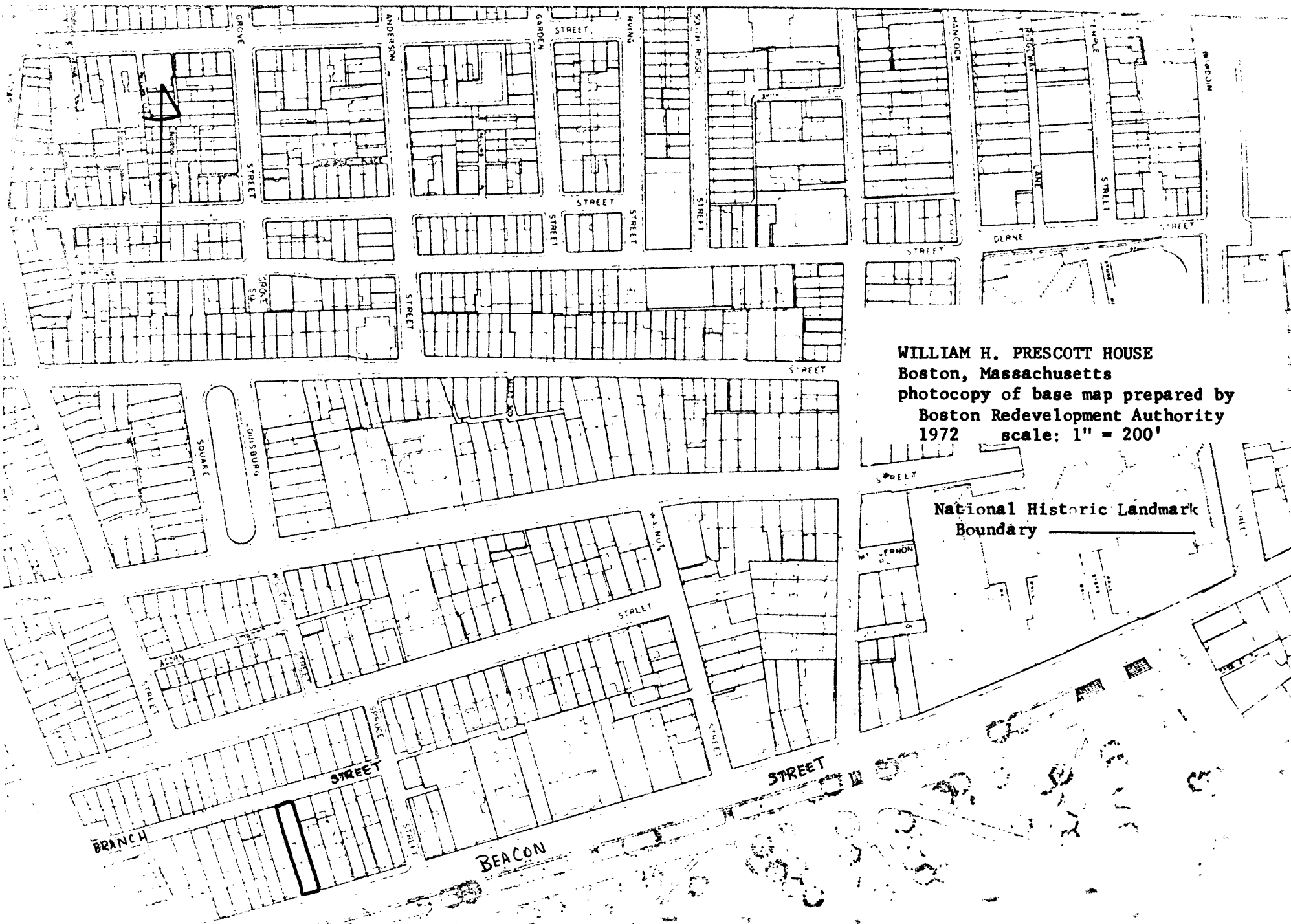
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The boundaries of the national historic landmark designation for the William Hickling Prescott House are those of the rectangular city lot (numbered at 55 Beacon Street) on which the building stands. Specific lines (shown in red on the accompanying sketch map) are defined as follows; beginning at the intersection of the northern curbline of Beacon Street and the eastern line of the property at 56 Beacon Street; thence, northerly by said eastern line, 150 feet more or less, to the southern curbline of Branch Street; thence, easterly by said southern curbline, 32 feet more or less, to the western line of the property at 54 Beacon Street; thence, southerly by said western line, 150 feet more or less, to the northern curbline of Beacon Street; thence, westerly by said northern curbline, 32 feet more or less, to the point of beginning.





**WILLIAM H. PRESCOTT HOUSE**  
Boston, Massachusetts  
photocopy of base map prepared by  
Boston Redevelopment Authority  
1972 scale: 1" = 200'

National Historic Landmark  
Boundary