

# FORM B – BUILDING

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
MASSACHUSETTS ARCHIVES BUILDING  
220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Assessor's Number USGS Quad Area(s) Form Number

28/92/50	Westford		CLM.87
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**Town/City:** Chelmsford

**Place:** (*neighborhood or village*): West Chelmsford

## Photograph



**Address:** 203 Main Street

**Historic Name:** John Farwell/Christopher Roby House

**Uses:** Present: single-family dwelling

Original: single-family dwelling

**Date of Construction:** 1823

**Source:** deed research

**Style/Form:** Federal

**Architect/Builder:** unknown

**Exterior Material:**

Foundation: stone

Wall/Trim: wood clapboard/wood

Roof: asphalt shingle

**Outbuildings/Secondary Structures:**

Attached barn and addition

**Major Alterations** (*with dates*):

1972: barn addition

1987: addition to barn

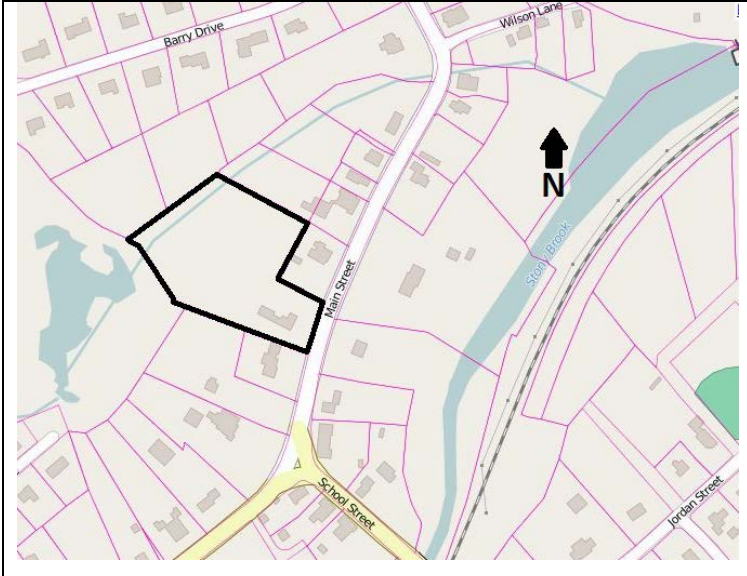
**Condition:** Fair

**Moved:** no  yes  **Date:**

**Acreage:** 3 acres

**Setting:** The building is located approximately 60' west of Main Street. An asphalt drive is located along the south side of the building and leads to the rear additions. A wood rail fence is along the south side of the drive. Granite fence posts are along the front of the lot, but rails are not extant. The lot is flat and grassy with mature trees and shrubs.

## Locus Map



**Recorded by:** Jennifer Burden, Gray & Pape, Inc.

**Organization:** Chelmsford Historical Commission

**Date** (*month / year*): June 2016

# INVENTORY FORM B CONTINUATION SHEET

CHELMSFORD

203 MAIN STREET

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

220 MORRISSEY BOULEVARD, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02125

Area(s) Form No.

CLM.87

Recommended for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

*If checked, you must attach a completed National Register Criteria Statement form.*

*Use as much space as necessary to complete the following entries, allowing text to flow onto additional continuation sheets.*

## ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION:

*Describe architectural features. Evaluate the characteristics of this building in terms of other buildings within the community.*

The 2.5-story building has a granite foundation, walls clad in wood clapboard with wood trim, and an asphalt-shingled gable roof with gable returns. An internal chimney is located on the rear slope of the roof near the north gable end. A historic photograph shows that another chimney was located on the rear slope near the south gable end, but this was removed some time after 1973. A dentil molded cornice runs the width of the primary (east) façade. The gable ends have raked molding. Most windows throughout the historic portion of the building appear to be historic, wood, two-over-two, double-hung sash windows with operable shutters. The window openings feature molded lintels with dentil details. The primary façade is five symmetrical bays wide with single windows in each bay except for the center bay of the first story. Windows on the second story are slightly smaller than those on the first story. The main entry in the center bay has a wood surround topped with a dentil molded hood like that of the window opening lintels. The historic portion of the house is one bay deep with single windows centrally located on each story. Window openings on the half story are topped with arched, louvered vents with keystone details. The south wall features a one-story open porch with a flat roof, dentil molding, and is supported by square columns. Historic photographs of the building show that the porch originally included decorative scrollwork.

The building features a 1.5-story rear wing on its south half. At least a portion of this wing appear to be historic as this footprint appears on the 1875 and 1899 maps of West Chelmsford and is shown on a ca. 1890 photograph of the house. The wing features two wall dormers on its south wall. The east dormer has a molded pediment and the west dormer has a shed roof. The barn additions to the west of the wing were added in 1972 and 1987.

The building is an altered example of an early nineteenth century residence that retains historic integrity of location, setting, materials, feeling, and association.

## HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

*Discuss the history of the building. Explain its associations with local (or state) history. Include uses of the building, and the role(s) the owners/occupants played within the community.*

The inventory form completed for this resource in 2004 offers an ownership history of the building as well as dates of alterations. The house was owned by two of the proprietors of the scythe, and later sword, factories located across Main Street from this address. Deacon John Farwell began the scythe factory and erected this house for his own use in 1823. Farwell (1775-1855) arrived in West Chelmsford from Fitchburg to start the factory. Also arriving with him were brothers, George and Elias Messenger, who also built houses on Main Street (CLM.87 and CLM.84, respectively). The scythe factory produced approximately 1500 to 2000 dozen scythes per year and its success led to the development of what was then called the "Scythe Factory Village," now known as West Chelmsford. In 1844 Farwell sold the factory and house to his son John T. Farwell (1803-1866). The younger Farwell retained the properties for two years before selling them to Lincoln Drake, who in turn sold the properties to Christopher Roby (1814-1897) that year. The Farwells, and before them the Messenger brothers, left West Chelmsford and all eventually returned to Fitchburg. The reasons for the relocations was not discovered.

Christopher Roby was engaged in the scythe factory business with Fredrick Sawyer and Asa Farwell; although, they withdrew from the business by the early 1850s. Roby increased production to approximately 2000 to 2500 dozen scythes per year. The factory, however, experienced difficult time as it had to be rebuilt due to a fire in 1851, and then the southern market for scythes was closed off due to the onset of the Civil War. To recoup the losses, Roby manufactured swords for Union forces during the war. During the war years, the factory produced an average of 1000 swords every two weeks. Roby ceased operations at the close of the war, and filed for bankruptcy in September 1867 when he sold the factory, mill site, and water rights (the house was not sold at this date) for \$2,000.

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The factory was eventually purchased by the Hiscox File Company which manufactured files and machine knives until the late 1880s. In 1894 George C. Moore, owner of mill operations in North Chelmsford purchased the factory property for the water rights. The factory buildings are no longer extant, although ruins of the mill site are still visible. The mill pond was drained by the mid-twentieth century.

As noted in the previous inventory form, the house was sold several times in the twentieth century. In 1915 Carl Nelson purchased the property. Nelson (1867-1924, born in Sweden) was a stone cutter in a quarry. His son August, also a stone cutter, and his family resided in the house next door at 197-199 Main Street (CLM.86) from 1919 until 1946.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY and/or REFERENCES

Beers, F.W. *County Atlas of Middlesex, Massachusetts*. J.B. Beers & Co., New York. 1875.

Drury, Jane.

Personal collection of building history materials for 203 Main Street. Currently kept in private collection.  
Massachusetts Historical Commission Inventory Form, "Farwell/Roby House." CLM.87. 2004.

Geo. H. Walker & Co. *Atlas of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*. Geo. H. Walker & Co., Boston, MA. 1889.

Hurd, D. Hamilton. *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*. 3 vols. Philadelphia, 1890.

Parkhurst, George Adams. *Biographical Sketches of 20 Extraordinary People of Chelmsford, Massachusetts*. Pickens Printing Company, Inc., North Chelmsford, MA. 1998.

Perham, Henry S. *A Sketch of the History of Chelmsford, Massachusetts*. Philadelphia, PA, J.W. Lewis. 1890.

Waters, Dr. Wilson. *The History of Chelmsford, Massachusetts*. Lowell, Mass., 1917.



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203 Main Street, facing southwest. November 2015.



Early twentieth century photograph of 203 Main Street from Jane Drury Collection.

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## National Register of Historic Places Criteria Statement Form

Check all that apply:

- Individually eligible       Eligible **only** in a historic district
- Contributing to a potential historic district       Potential historic district

Criteria:     **A**     **B**     **C**     **D**

Criteria Considerations:     **A**     **B**     **C**     **D**     **E**     **F**     **G**

### Statement of Significance

The building is individually eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A at the local level for its association with the scythe and sword factory that led to the development of West Chelmsford. As only ruins of the mill site are extant, this building is only remaining building associated with the factory. Two of the factory owners, including original proprietor Deacon John Farwell and sword factory proprietor Christopher Roby, lived in this house. Although the building currently features rear additions that date to the mid/late twentieth century, these do not adversely affect the property's overall historic integrity.

The area of West Chelmsford is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places as a locally significant historic district under Criterion A for the development of this area around the Roby Manufacturing Company and Chelmsford Woolen Mills as well as under Criterion C for its intact examples of mid-nineteenth through early twentieth century residential architecture. The boundary of the proposed district would include resources built during the period of significance along Main Street from approximately Loiselle Lane in the north to the Westford Town Line, as well as resources along School Street between Main Street and Graniteville Road. This building at 203 Main Street would be a contributing resource to that district since it was Christopher Roby's house and it retains some historic integrity.