

**Local Historic Property Nomination
Thomas Lyman House
105 Middlefield Rd.
Durham, Connecticut 06422**

Prepared for the Durham Historic Properties Study Committee

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by

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The Thomas Lyman House is of historic significance for its unusual, distinctive, architecture, as well as for the entrepreneurship, and the political and religious non-conformism, which at times had a state-wide impact, of the man who built it and lived in it for more than forty years.

The Builder, Thomas Lyman (1746-1832)

The house stands on land purchased by Thomas Lyman when he settled in Durham in 1710. His great-grandson, also named Thomas, was born in February, 1746, likely in an earlier house on this site that had been built by the first Thomas.

In 1761, when Thomas was just 15, his father died. He and his brother took ownership of the house from their mother in 1768. Thomas married Rachel Seward in 1771.

Thomas and Rachel's first child, a son named George, was born in 1776. Their last, a daughter named Sophia, was born in 1788. Rachel Lyman herself died in 1797 at the age of 46.

Thomas was a farmer as well as a merchant and trader. He achieved a significant level of prosperity, of which his ownership of a slave, considered something of a "luxury item" in eighteenth-century Connecticut, was evidence.¹

In the late 1700s and early 1800s, Connecticut was undergoing major transformation as the long-entrenched religious and political structure began to weaken in the face of new ideas fostered by the American Revolution. Thomas Lyman was a free-thinker and sometime rebel against the status quo, at times at the forefront of these changes.

Thomas Lyman was a member of the Ethosian Society organized around 1787 by some residents of Durham and Middlefield "to obtain knowledge, encourage industry, and the moral

¹Connecticut House Histories, LLC, *Thomas Lyman House c. 1790, Durham, Connecticut, Historic Documentation Report Prepared for the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation*. (September, 2013), 1-9.

virtues, and to make good members of society” by reading books from the Society’s library and discussing topics and issues. Despite its high-minded statement of purpose, the “freedom of thought” in the Ethosian Society’s readings and discussions was such that “some well meaning men in Durham became alarmed,”² according to nineteenth-century Durham historian William Chauncey Fowler. “Some odium was cast upon the society and the Library, as if they were infidel in their character.”³

In 1793 a complaint was made against Thomas Lyman with the Durham Congregational Church, accusing him of haying on a Sunday. Connecticut law at the time forbade working on the Sabbath. Although enforcement of the prohibition had grown less stringent, Durham had a reputation for enforcing the letter of the law. Thomas Lyman acknowledged that he had indeed labored on the Sabbath, but failed to appear when he was summoned to answer for his offense. At last the church gave up trying to hold him accountable, and Lyman was dismissed from membership.⁴

Also in 1793, an unmarried Durham woman named Ruth Dunn claimed that Thomas Lyman was the father of her illegitimate child. At a special town meeting on February 21, 1793, it was voted to begin legal action against Thomas Lyman for support of the child. It was also voted for a committee to investigate how to proceed with prosecuting Lyman. Lyman denied paternity and sued Ruth Dunn successfully in the Superior Court of Errors in Hartford. Dunn brought the same suit against Lyman in New Haven County Court, then in 1795 retracted her claim that he was the child’s father.⁵

Thomas Lyman became a Jeffersonian Democrat – a supporter of Thomas Jefferson of Virginia in his successful bid for the Presidency in 1800. That put him at odds with the Federalist Party, which considered Jefferson a dangerous atheist and libertine, which at that time dominated Connecticut politics and would continue to do so for nearly two decades.

Thomas Lyman was one of Durham’s two delegates to a convention in 1818 that wrote a state constitution to replace the Royal Charter granted by King Charles II under which Connecticut had been governed since 1662. Lyman was a member of the committee that drafted the new constitution, which among other significant changes removed the Congregational Church as the established religion of Connecticut. Lyman was elected one of the Durham’s two representatives to the Connecticut House of Representatives in 1819.⁶

Thomas Lyman died in Durham in 1832, at the age of 86. His obituary in the June 13, 1832, issue of the *Middlesex Gazette* declared that, “Mr. Lyman has long been known by a numerous and respectable acquaintance, as a man of uncommon strength of intellect, and very extensive information. . . . [He] has been frequently called to fill the most important offices in his

²William Chauncey Fowler, *History of Durham, Connecticut, From the First Grant of Land in 1662 to 1866*. (Hartford: Wiley, Waterman & Eaton for the Town, 1866), 106.

³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴ CT House Histories, *Thomas Lyman House*; 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁶ Fowler, *History of Durham*, 239-240.

town, and has been a prominent member of the legislature. He was for a long period the leader of the Democratic Party in Durham, and has always been distinguished as an active and ardent advocate of religious and political liberty.”⁷

The House and Its Architecture

The house is believed to have been built between 1787 and 1798, most probably no later than 1792, based on land and tax records.⁸

The house is a late Georgian structure, “a foursquare central block with a double-hipped roof, and a one-story ell.”⁹ “This grand house straddles the divide between the Baroque of the River Gods such as Seth Wetmore and the mid-century clergy (Durham’s Rev. Elizur Goodrich, c.1763; 79 Main St.), and the more classical Georgian favored by the emerging post-revolutionary merchant elite. The overhangs and bulky double-hip roof look back to the former, the lower roof pitch, classically-proportioned entry porch, and center-passage plan to forward the latter,” notes Chris Wigren, deputy director of the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation.¹⁰

How and why Thomas Lyman came to build a house in this particular style is unknown. According to Wigren, historian Peter Dobkin Hall sees his house as “a self-conscious statement of his [Thomas Lyman’s] dissent from the Standing Order.”¹¹ According to architect Michael Glynn, the house “was built for a wealthy man and executed by a master builder who knew precedent and had the requisite pattern books.”¹²

The house’s design is unusual for late-eighteenth-century Connecticut, although not unique. Both Glynn and Wigren cite similar structures at various locations in Connecticut. Flynn has theorized that “itinerant carpenters and joiners” may have spread the styles as they traveled throughout Connecticut and beyond.¹³

Thomas Lyman lived in the house until his death in 1832. It descended in the family through blood and marriage until 1949, when it was purchased by Mary Studebaker Winder of Middletown, Connecticut. Mary’s husband Frank Winder, an architect by profession, supervised repairs to the building and updating of facilities to make it serve as a weekend getaway for the family.¹⁴

⁷ *Middlesex Gazette* [Middletown, Connecticut], 13 June 1832.

⁸ CT House Histories, *Thomas Lyman House*; 7- 9.

⁹ Michael Glynn, Memorandum on Thomas Lyman House, 30 August 2013, in Connecticut House Histories, LLC. *Thomas Lyman House c. 1790, Durham, Connecticut, Historic Documentation Report Prepared for the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation*, (September, 2013), 21.

¹⁰ Christopher Wigren in e-mail to Diana Ross McCain, 3 May 2016.

¹¹ Peter Dobkin Hall, “Durham, Connecticut: History and Architecture,” typescript (September 1984), quoted in Wigren e-mail to McCain.

¹² Glynn, Memorandum, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ CT House Histories, *Thomas Lyman House*, 16-20.

Mary Studebaker Winder transferred ownership of the property to her sister Lillian Studebaker Hardy in 1997. In 2013 Lillian Hardy donated the house to the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation.¹⁵ The Trust sold it in 2015 to its current owners, Frank L. and Rose O. Tomaszewski.¹⁶

SOURCES

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¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁶Town of Durham, Connecticut. Residential Property Record Card for 105 Middlefield Rd.