

Israel Whitney House (1830)



A View of Central Avenue, painted by Timothy Newell Smith around 1860.

The Israel Whitney House is typical of the architecture of colonial Needham. Four front rooms (two on the first floor, two on the second) were joined by a stair, with an ell to the rear for kitchens and workshops. Shifting the working areas to the back of the house kept them out of more public view, and minimized the always-high risk of fires in the main structure. This type of house was prevalent in Needham from before 1730 to about 1850, and several examples are featured in this History Walk.

Israel Whitney (1774-1846) was a cobbler and a teacher at the Center School. He held several town offices, among them Treasurer, Assessor, Selectman, Moderator, member of the School Committee, Justice of the Peace, and Postmaster. As Postmaster, he is said to have had a casual approach to the job: "Israel Whitney, who was Justice of the Peace and who cobbled our shoes, would bring the mail from his house close by down to the school yard in his leather apron, with his specs on the end of his nose, which was fairly long, and the children would collect around him. He would then distribute the mail to the children who in turn would take it where it belonged when they went home."

A view of Central Avenue from near Bess Road, painted in the 1860s by local artist Timothy Newell Smith, shows the Davis Mills House and barn (far right), and the Whitney House to its left. In the distance behind the trees are the Center (Brick) School, Revere Hall, and (at the far left edge) the Church.