

Joseph Brown House
50 South Main Street
Providence , Rhode Island
Providence County

HABS No. 53

HABS
RI,
4-PROV,
4-

PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey
Philip D. Creer, District Officer
14 College Street, Providence, R. I.

JOSEPH BROWN HOUSE

Address: 50 South Main Street, Providence, Providence
County, Rhode Island.

An addendum to Joseph Brown House
50 South Main Street
Providence, Rhode Island
in HABS Catalog (1941)

Present Owner: Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

Present Occupant: Various business firms.

Present Use: Office building.

Brief Statement
of Significance: This house is one of the designs of the amateur
architect, Joseph Brown. Built originally as Brown's
own house, the building was later used for over a
century as the office of the Providence Bank.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Originally owned and occupied by Joseph Brown. Occupied by the Providence Bank, 1801-1929. Subsequently owned by the Counting House Corporation who deeded the building to the present owners in 1954.
2. Date of erection: 1774
3. Architect: Joseph Brown
4. Sources of information: John Hutchins Cady, The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950 (Providence, Rhode Island: The Book Shop, 1957), pp. 9, 50-51, 62, 188.

Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, 1937), pp. 236, 247, 271, 275, 279-285, 391.

Federal Writers' Project, Rhode Island, A Guide to the Smallest State (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1937), pp. 284-285.

The Georgian Period, Part XII (Published by American Architect and Building News, 1902), Part XII, Plate 39.

HABS Inventory prepared by John Hutchins Cady, November 31, 1956.

Henry Russell Hitchcock, Jr., Rhode Island Architecture (Providence: Rhode Island Museum Press, 1939), p. 23, plate 14.

Old Providence. A Collection of Facts and Traditions Relating to Various Buildings and Sites of Historic Interest in Providence, (Providence, Rhode Island: The Merchants National Bank of Providence, 1918), pp. 34-35.

- B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: Joseph Brown, (1733-1785) was the second of the four prominent Brown brothers, Nicholas, Joseph, John and Moses. Joseph Brown was an amateur architect, and according to his inventory, owned James Gibbs, Book of Architecture (1728) and Abraham Swan, Designs (1745). Besides his own house, his known works include University Hall, Brown University (1770), the First Baptist Church (1774-1775), and the house for his brother John Brown (1786), all in Providence. He was also interested in astronomy, and was a professor of experimental philosophy at Brown University. The Providence Bank, which occupied the house from 1801 to 1929, was the first financial institution in Providence. It was organized by John and Joseph Brown, and opened October 10, 1791, following its incorporation by the General Assembly.
- C. Supplemental Material: The following information on the sources of the design of the house are extracted from Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, 1937), pp. 280, 285:

...Again he went to earlier sources for his inspiration. The end of the house is turned towards the street, and the gable is treated as an ogee pediment. Such a baroque scheme for the exterior was rare even in English building, and harks back to Sir Christopher Wren and the first years of the eighteenth century; Colin Campbell, in his Vitruvius Britannicus of 1717, published an engraved plate of a house similar to Brown's, with the gable end treated as a broken scroll. Originally the main entrance to the Brown House was at the second story level; a double flight of steps led to a fine doorway with a pediment which repeated, according to an old drawing, the ogee lines of the gable above. . . . [on the interior], the bracketed arch seen in earlier hallways has given way to a fine low arch supported on Ionic

columns, here doubled on either side. Similar treatments of the hallway were in use in smaller English houses of the early eighteenth century. In 1729 John Harle built his home, Rainham Hall, in Essex. The stair hall has stairs of two-run plan with twisted balusters and a ramped rail, and is spanned by a low hallway arch supported by doubled piers; the hall markedly resembles that of the Joseph Brown House. . . .

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This is a large, brick house, built in 1774, designed by the amateur architect, Joseph Brown. Notable features include the unusual ogee gable on the front of the house, and the stairway and mantels on the interior.
2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: Rectangular main block facing west about 45' square, five-bay front, two stories on an elevated ground floor basement. Large modern rear wing added 1920's.
2. Foundations: Brownstone ashlar.
3. Wall construction: Brick, Flemish bond on front, common bond on sides. Brick belt course, four courses high, between stories.
4. Porches, stoops, etc.: Entrance originally located directly above the present entrance at the main floor level, approached on the exterior by a double flight of stone steps, marks of which still show on the foundations; view of the building showing this entrance appears on old Providence Bank certificates. One of the original stone flights of exterior stairs may be the present interior stairs leading from entrance to main floor.
5. Chimneys: Inside brick chimneys.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Present main entrance, with Ionic brownstone frontispiece, at ground level. Original entrance at main level with double flight of stairs on exterior. Line of original stairs visible in stone foundation.
- b. Windows and shutters: Six over six light double hung wood windows - brick openings with flat arches, louvered shutters.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gable roof with narrow balustraded deck at the peak. Ridge of roof perpendicular to front.
- b. Cornice: Curved ogee brick parapet on front gable end with three circular windows. Large, wood modillion cornice with denticulated bed mold; balustrade on sides.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Central hall plan, originally with four rooms on each floor around two inside chimneys. South chimney now removed and southwest rooms enlarged; location of original chimney apparent in attic framing. Store-rooms and vaults on ground floor. Bathrooms and closets in original northeast rooms. Second floor ceilings 10'-3" high. First floor ceilings 12'-6". Central hall 9'-0" wide. Main interior walls 9" thick separating central hall from main rooms, of brick.
2. Stairways: Main stairway from main floor to second floor at rear of central hall, U-shape with landings, long straight first run with shorter top legs, open string, open well, large twisted balusters and newels, scrolled ramped handrail, shadow-rail with matching scroll turned vertically against the wall, heavy molded rail, shaped newel pendants with scrolled flame. Window at stair landing with broken, semicircular pediment on a pulvinated frieze. Sawn, drilled step end, scroll ornaments. Treads 12-3/4", risers 7-1/2", stairs 44-1/2" wide. Side stairway, at center of north side against chimney, U-shape with winders, closed string, turned newels and balusters. Later stone stairway from entrance to main floor with Greek Revival details.
3. Flooring: Board floors; partly covered with linoleum.

4. Trim: Northwest room on main floor: Raised paneling throughout, bolection chair rail. Six-panel doors. Paneled interior shutters. Crossetted, double molded door and window architraves. Denticulated ceiling cornice. Wooden ceiling slightly lower than other rooms. Window seats. Two-story wood mantel, crossetted molded marble facing; overmantel with fluted, Ionic pilasters, raised panel, pediment with denticulated cornice.
- Central Hall on main floor: High paneled wainscot. Raised panels with square stepped tops or semicircular tops. Large cornice with double row of dentils. Hall divided front and rear by archway, paneled soffit, molded key block, paired Ionic colonettes at each side. Paneling, closing off this archway, added c. 1885. Stone, Carpenter & Willson, architects; now removed.
- Large room at southwest on main floor: Raised paneling to the ceiling, ceiling cornice with Greek key on fascia, dentil bed course. Original door closed to central hall. Original interior partition and chimney removed making room larger.
- Mantel in later back office on second floor: Moved from original location in front part of house; two-story wood mantel, mantel shelf on pulvinated frieze; overmantel panel with scrolls at the sides, and a broken pediment supported by scroll brackets and decorated with a large carved shell. This mantel is a simplified form of one shown in James Gibbs, Book of Architecture (London, 1728), plate 91, which Joseph Brown owned according to the inventory of his estate.
5. Hardware: Later Greek Revival knobs, hollow glass, silvered on the inside.
6. Lighting: electric.

D. Site

General setting and orientation: House faces west, on the sidewalk line, business district, narrow alley on north side, narrow walk to adjoining building on south side, deep lot slopes up towards the rear.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
National Park Service
April 1962.