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COLONEL JOSEPH NIGHTINGALE HOUSE  
257 Benefit Street  
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND.

HABS NO. RI-164

HABS  
RI,  
4-PROV,  
7-

PHOTOGRAPHS

District of Rhode Island

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

## COLONEL JOSEPH NIGHTINGALE HOUSE

HABS  
RI,  
4-PROV,  
7-

Address: 357 Benefit Street, Providence, Providence  
County, Rhode Island.

Plat 16, lot 420; this lot was 189 Benefit Street  
in 1824.

An addendum to  
Colonel Nightingale House  
257 Benefit Street  
Providence, Rhode Island  
in HABS Catalog (1941)

Present Owner  
and Occupant: John Nicholas Brown

Present Use: Residence.

Brief Statement  
of Significance: This house was built for Colonel Joseph Nightingale,  
wealthy partner in a Providence shipping firm, and  
has been owned by the Brown family since 1814.  
Built in 1791, this large, three-story frame build-  
ing is one of the most elegant houses in Providence.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History

## 1. Original and subsequent owners:

1791 Land owned by Joseph Nightingale.

1814 Elizabeth Nightingale subscriber in Mss. tax  
descriptions in the Rhode Island Historical  
Society, Providence, for the 1814 Providence  
direct tax to the federal government:

## Property listed:

E by Mr. Carrington...200'  
S by Williams Street...170'  
W by Benefit Street...290'  
N by Powers Street...216'

## On the above are:

1 House 52' front and back...3 stories  
1 Outhouse 36' x 26'...2 stories  
1 shed 55' x 17-1/2'...1 story  
1 barn 36' x 24'...2 stories

The outbuildings are old and out of repair. 1 lot fronting on Benefit Street measures 53' front and back to land of Williams Thayer 80', measuring on said Thayer's lot 53', occupied as a garden. All the above buildings are of wood.

1814 Elizabeth Nightingale et al sell to Nicholas Brown Esq., a certain lot of land with other buildings... Deed Book 36, page 18, in Providence City Hall.

In the Brown family since 1814.

2. Date of erection: 1791
3. Architect: The architect is thought to be Caleb Ormsbee, who built the First Congregational Church of 1795 (burned in 1814). Caleb Ormsbee became the owner of Joseph Brown's copy of James Gibbs' Book of Architecture, 1728, after Brown's death in 1786.
4. Notes on alterations and additions:
  - 1855 Stables were built and designed by Thomas Tefft. Drawing by Tefft dated 21/4/5/ in the John Hay Library Collection of Tefft drawings (Brown University)
  - 1862 Library wing built in 1862 for John Carter Brown to accommodate his collection of Americana, now the basis of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.
  - 1880 Addition on south built.
  - 1923 Panelling in the dining room was installed in 1923. It is English, from the Old Chantry House, Newark. The house dates back into the 16th century. This panelling was installed in the Old Chantry House c 1730.
5. Important old views:
  - 1961 Old view of the House dated c 1814 (?) now owned by John Nicholas Brown. (Large watercolor).
6. Sources of information: Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, 1937) pp. 269, 296, 298-301, 304, 317, 350, 352, 382.  
Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., Rhode Island Architecture (Providence: Rhode Island Museum Press, 1939), p. 26.

Norman Morrison Isham, "Providence," White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs, Vol. IV, No. 3 pp. 7-10. Great Georgian Houses of America (Architects' Emergency Committee, New York, 1933, 1937).

Richard Pratt, The Second Treasury of Early American Homes (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1954), Vol. II. Providence Magazine, Board of Trade Journal, December 1914, p. 788. (In Rhode Island Historical Society).

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), p.35.

Prepared by Antoinette F. Downing and Elvira Gowdey  
for the Providence Preservation Society  
August 1961.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This large, three-story frame house is one of the most elegant mansions in Providence.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

### B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: 52' (five bays) x 52' main block, three stories high plus cellar, facing west. About 30' x 36' library addition, one story high, at the northeast corner. Addition along the south side of the main block, 12' deep, two stories high. 30' x 20' kitchen wing at the southeast corner, two stories high.
2. Foundations: Regular ashlar limestone.
3. Wall construction: Probably frame covered with clapboards, with heavy wood quoins.
4. Porches: One-story entrance porch with Doric columns at the corners, full Doric entablature and roof balustrade. Porch floor up four steps.
5. Chimneys: Four brick chimneys in main block.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doors: The main entrance is in the center bay which is stepped out slightly and marked by quoins. The

door is paneled with four rectangular panels in the upper half and a diamond shape in the lower half. The door is in a pilastered frame with side lights and a semi-circular top light. The stepped out center bay has a Palladian window at the second floor level above the entrance porch, and a pediment at the top.

- b. Windows: six over six light double hung wood windows. Rusticated wood frames on the first and second floors with denticulated cornices. Simple molded frames on the third floor. Adjustable louvered shutters on all three floors.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Hip roof with gable-roofed monitor; covered with standing seam metal roof.
- b. Cornice: Modillion cornice with denticulated bed mold on main roof; denticulated cornice on monitor. Balustrade with turned balusters on main roof; Chinese Chippendale balustrade on monitor.

C. Technical Description of Interior

- 1. Floor plans: Originally the plan was a central hall, four room, two interior chimney plan, with two chimneys on east exterior wall.

Parlor: (northwest room) Walls and ceilings plastered. Main doorway: Similar to hall--broken scroll with modillion and dentil course, pedestal and bust frieze, flat carved Adam detail. Other doorways and windows: crossettes at top, curved base, moldings carved with classic motives. Doors are later four paneled. Windows have shutters in reveals and are recessed to floor--no window seats. Cornice reeded, with modillions below and then narrow band of fret. Wainscoting paneled, recessed; chair rail with band of paterae and fluting, and beaded below that. Two-story mantelpiece with Adam frieze, broken scroll pediment, modillion, dentils; pedestal and bust as in doorway; marble hearth, marble facing. Floors--probably hard pine about 6" board.

Dining Room: (southwest room) Pine paneled room, Georgian, English, 1730 from Old Chantry House, woodwork installed in 1923. Full paneling around entire room, recessed. Cornice molded--with dentil course; chair rail reeded. Doorways with flat cornice top, egg and dart variant in one molding; eared molding richly carved, acorn and oak

leaf carved swag below the ears. Six panel doors, egg and dart variant on molding around recessed panels. Very good shell cupboard between windows on west wall, with broken scroll above, supported on consoles. Two-story mantel repeats broken scroll of cupboard, oak and acorn swags of doorway; engaged columns on top story supported on brackets; eared molding around fireplace, carved. Floors same as hall and parlor and southeast room.

Southeast room of main block: Little detail left. Plaster walls (papered modern). Molded cornice (plaster). Molded window and door frames, probably original. Doors, later, four panel mahogany. One-story marble mantel with Adam detail installed at east end of room, away from original chimney; black marble hearth edged with white marble.

Library: Built on, at northeast corner, in addition c 1862. Very fine Victorian room. Rectangular room with recessed, coved, oval in ceiling framed with classic carved moldings, of plaster. Walls hung with red silk damask. Black walnut bookcases and woodwork. Plain molding for doorways and window framings and chair rail; smooth unpaneled black walnut wainscoting. One-story black walnut carved mantel at east end flanked by round-headed bookcases with carved moldings; diamond wire in front of glass. Room cornice of plaster with classic garland molding and boss molding. Floors--oak in short herringbone pattern. **Crystal chandelier.**

Central stair hall: Hall runs through center of house.

Stairway (main) set at back of hall; two runs with landing across back wall. Round-headed landing window--molded key block. Stairway rising two flights; three slender spiral balusters to each step, each with different twist, cut scroll decoration on step end, string course finished with reeded member. Rail scroll around newel post, newels and posts are in form of Roman Doric colonette. Rails ramp over posts; shadow rail on wall.

Two large brass case locks for hall doors with keys. Original doors eight panel. Hall doorways have broken scroll pediments, Ionic cushion frieze, dentil course below. Frames are mitred with crossettes at top and mitred curve at base. Doors are later four panel mahogany. Front door with Palladian side lights and lunette has broken pediment to allow for lunette. Lunette has plain key block. Side lights have three panel shutters.

Cornice in hall molded with guilloche and reeded below. Chair rail is reeded; wainscoting wooden with slender raised molding marking it into panels.

Second floor plan: Central hall plan, similar to first floor, two rooms deep with the two south rooms enlarged by the addition on the south side of the house; closets and baths between the rooms. Flooring--wide board flooring.

Third floor: Similar to second but with simpler trim and without the chair rail.

2. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster walls and ceilings; walls papered, painted or hung with fabrics. Reeded, fretted and other types of ceiling cornices throughout.
3. Doorways: Six panel doors with raised panels. Doorways with double molded architraves and dog-eared tops and flared bottoms.
4. Trim: Reeded chair rail and wainscot throughout.
5. Hardware: Silver plated hardware throughout.
6. Lighting: Electric.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces west on a large lot with gardens and yard on the south, west, and north sides, and with service yard and buildings on the east .
2. Enclosures: Brick wall with limestone trim at the west and south sides with wooden gates on the south for the automobile entrance, and on the west leading to the main entrance of the house. Wood fences around other parts of the house.
3. Outbuildings: A two-story brick garage is east (behind) of the house.
4. Walks, driveways: Brick, except at the front and south sides, large brown flagstones.
5. Landscaping: The enclosed yard is eight steps above the sidewalk at the west (front) side and slopes up slightly to the rear. The garden is informally landscaped with shrubs, trees, flowers, and lawn.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect  
National Park Service  
and Antoinette F. Downing  
for the Providence Preservation Society  
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