

John Carter House, "Shakespeare's Head"
21 Meeting Street
Providence, Rhode Island

HABS No. 1

HABS
RI,
4-PROV,
17-

PHOTOGRAPHS

Historical American Buildings Survey
Philip D. Creer, District Officer
11 Waterman Street, Providence, R. I.

JOHN CARTER HOUSE
(Known as "SHAKESPEARE'S HEAD")
21 Meeting Street

PROVIDENCE, Providence County, RHODE ISLAND

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RI,
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Owner: Estate of James M. Stockard
c/o Rhode Island Hospital Trust Company
Providence, Rhode Island.

Date of Erection: About 1769-1771.

Architect: Unknown.

Builder: Unknown.

Present Condition: House in very poor condition. Portion of first floor rented. Rest of house practically open to public. Porch on side and addition on back have been removed.

Number of Stories: Basement and three stories above.

Materials of Construction: Foundations are of stone; exterior walls clapboarded; interior floors of wood; interior walls plastered; old wood shinglee on roof covered with tar paper; center chimney of brick with hipped roof.

Other Existing Records: Measured drawings made by students at Rhode Island School of Design. Description and Photographs in pamphlet entitled "OLD PROVIDENCE" issued by Merchants National Bank (now Providence National Bank) in 1918. Copy at Rhode Island Historical Society and Providence Public Library. Article by John Hutchins Gady, entitled "SHAKESPEARE'S HEAD - A Pre-Revolutionary Relic", in Community Art Project Calendar, November 1935. Other data at Rhode Island Historical Society, 68 Waterman Street, Providence, Rhode Island.

Additional Data: The earliest historical reference to "SHAKESPEARE'S HEAD" appears to be in connection with the printing of the first weekly newspaper published in Providence, the "PROVIDENCE GAZETTE". The founder and first publisher was William Goddard who printed the first issue on October 20, 1762, at his printing office on Towne Street (now North Main Street) near the Court House.

The printing of the "GAZETTE" was removed to the store of Judge Jenckes near the Great Bridge and published at his (Goddard's) Book

Shop just above it at the sign of "SHAKESPEARE'S HEAD" on July 9, 1763. This location is also presumed to be on Towne Street or North Main Street as it is now called. Publication was here continued until May 11, 1765. when the STAMP ACT and falling subscriptions caused Goddard to suspend operating the newspaper.

Shortly after resumption, Mr. Goddard removed from Providence and the paper was continued by his mother under the name of "SARAH GODDARD and COMPANY". In September 1767, Sarah Goddard and Company dissolved and the printing was continued by Sarah Goddard and John Carter.

John Carter, an apprentice of Benjamin Franklin, came to Providence in 1767 from Philadelphia, and when Franklin became "Postmaster General, he made Carter "Postmaster of Providence". (Ref.-"Providence in Colonial Times" by Gertrude Selwyn Kimball.) On May 14, 1769, John Carter married Almy Crawford, daughter of John Crawford, who owned the "SHAKESPEARE'S HEAD" property. (Biography of John Crawford-P. 210 - R. I. Biographies -- in Rhode Island Historical Society or John Hay Library.) Almy Crawford Carter received the property from her father and in the same year, 1769, she and her husband, John Carter, placed a mortgage on the property with John Updike, their next-door neighbor who had married a sister, Anne Crawford. Presumably, this mortgage was to build a new house on the property, for, in 1772, in the Providence Gazette there is reference to the "new house opposite the Friends' Meeting House on Meeting Street." So that the date of erection of this house may most accurately be placed as 1769-1771. Altho some authorities place it as early as 1763.

John Carter became sole owner and publisher of the "PROVIDENCE GAZETTE" in 1768 and continued publishing until February 1814. He sold then to Hugh H. Brown and William H. Wilson. The house was a general meeting place for influential settlers, and, so legend has it, dungeons in the cellar were used in the famous "underground system" of aiding slaves to escape to Canada from bondage of the South.

Records at Providence City Hall show:-

That in 1854 the John Carter heirs sold the property to Stephen O. Metcalf, who, in turn, sold to the N. Y. N. H. & H. R. R. Company in 1906. The property was bought from the railroad by James S. Stockard in 1925, whose estate still own the property. PLAT No. 10 - LOT No. 65.


PHILIP D. CREER,
District Officer for Rhode Island.

JOHN CARTER HOUSE, "SHAKESPEARE'S HEAD"

Address: 21 Meeting Street, Providence, Providence County,
Rhode Island.

An addendum to
"Shakespeare's Head" (Carter House)
21 Meeting Street
Providence, Rhode Island
in HABS Catalog (1941)

Present Owner: Shakespeare's Head Association

Present Occupant: Junior League of Providence, and The Rhode Island
Federation of Garden Clubs.

Present Use: Club House

Brief Statement
of Significance: This restored early house was the printing office
of the Providence Gazette, the first newspaper in
Providence which was printed at the sign of
Shakespeare's Head.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners:

1767 Eve Burnon, single woman, sells for 50 good Spanish milled Dollars to John Crawford, mariner a certain lot of land bounded: N by Jail Lane 190'; E by Gideon Crawford 100'; S by John Agnell 190'; W 100'. - Deed Book 18, page 226, in Providence City Hall.

1769 DISCHARGE: John Carter, printer, and Anne Carter his wife give for 111E, one shilling, 7 pence lawful money to John Updike, merchant, ...being part of the Estate which belonged to John Crawford, and set off to Ann (Crawford) Updike whose land it now is...And I John Updike hereby acknowledge full satisfaction for the within deed and hereby discharge the same from my demands. - Deed Book 18, page 349, in Providence City Hall.

1906 Heirs of John Carter sell to Stephen O Metcalf a certain lot of land bounded: N by Meeting Street 203'; E by Benefit Street 118.3'; S by City of Providence and State of Rhode Island, formerly Martin W Thurber 219'; W by City of Providence 118.3' and is known as the John Carter Estate. - Deed Book 478, pages 269 to 270 and 279, in Providence City Hall.

1906 Stephen O Metcalf quit claims the above property

to the N Y, N H and Hartford Railway Company. - Deed Book 481, page 195, in Providence City Hall.

1925 New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad Company quit Claim to James M Stockard a certain lot of land meaning to convey all that portion or parcel of land deeded to grantor by Stephen O Metcalf in 1906 except that portion conveyed to Rhode Island (Deed Book 481, page 196) with a 20' roadway privilege (See map). - Deed Book 668, page 401, in Providence City Hall.

1938 Peirce H Brereton and R I Hospital Trust Company, Administrators of the Estate of James M Stockard sell to Shakespeare's Head Association that parcel of land with all buildings and improvements on the S/ly side of Meeting Street being portion of premises conveyed to James Stockard by the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad Company in 1925, bounded: E by other land of James Stockard; S by N Y, N H, and Hartford R R Company and the City of Providence 68.92'; W by Peter J Woolf 105.78'; N by Meeting Street 107.41' the E boundary being 95' from the corner of Benefit and Meeting Streets. - Deed Book 807, page 229, in Providence City Hall.

2. Date of erection: c. 1772.

3. Notes on alterations and additions: When the building was condemned by the Inspector of Buildings in 1938, the present owners acquired the property and had it restored; John Hutchins Cady and Philip D. Creer, associated architects for the restoration.

4. Sources of information: 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. 10.

John Hutchins Cady, The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950 (Providence, Rhode Island: The Book Shop, 1957), pp. 41, 42.

Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, 1937), pp. 233, 266-268.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This is an early frame house in restored condition.

2. Condition of fabric: Good

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: 37'-3" (five-bay north front) x 35'-3", three stories on sloping lot with cellar at ground level in the rear.

2. Foundations: Fieldstone

3. Wall construction: Heavy timber frame, clapboards, corner boards with beaded edge.

4. Stoops, porches, etc.: Small stone entrance stoop, double flights of brownstone steps, restored railing; restored porch to second floor on east side.

5. Chimneys: Large central chimney.

6. Openings:

a. Door and doorways: Restored panel door, top light, pedimented frontispiece with fluted Doric pilasters.

b. Windows and shutters: Double hung windows, restores eight and twelve light sash.

7. Roof:

a. Shape: Hip roof

b. Cornice: Modillion cornice

B. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Central chimney type plan.

2. Stairways: U-shape stairs in front entrance hall, winders, closed string, molded outside stringer, molded rail, turned balusters and newels.

3. Flooring: Board floors.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster, some paneled wainscot.

5. Doorways and doors: Paneled doors, eight panels in principal doors. Double molded, mitred architraves.

6. Trim: Molded ceiling cornices.

7. Hardware: Some early hardware, brass knobs.

8. Lighting: Electric

9. Heating: Central heating, restored fireplaces, wood mantels and paneling.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces north on a medium-sized lot which slopes down to the rear and down from east to west.

2. Enclosures: Restored wood fence.

3. Gardens: Restored formal garden in the rear, 18th century style, maintained by the Rhode Island Federation of Garden Clubs.

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