The Colony House

157 North Main Street
Providence, Rhode Island
Providence County

HABS No. 18

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RI,
4-PROV,
24-

PHOTOGRAPHS

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

HABS
RI,
4-PROV,
24-

THE COLONY HOUSE
157 North Main Street
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

Owner:	State of Rhode Island
Date of Erection:	About 1760 to 1762
Architect:	Unknown
Builder:	Unknown
Present Condition:	Good
Materials of Construction:	Stone basement--1-2 stories brick, brownstone quoins--wood trim, pitched roof.
Other Existing Records:	Recorder of Deeds Office, Tax Assessors Plat & Records, City Hall, Providence, R. I. Owners & Occupants of the Lots, Houses and Shops in the Town of Providence, R. I. 1798 also 1759, by Henry R. Chace, printed in 1914. W.P.A. Guide to Rhode Island, Pages 57, 458--printed 1937. Reference. Early Homes of Rhode Island-Downing. Reference P.95, drawing P.110, from a Map of Providence County, 1851, by Henry F.Walling, Showing original exterior appearance. From the Rhode Island Historical Society Collections. Photograph-1763, P.118, interior Judges' Room. Reference P.157 Providence Journal, photograph, May 24, 1936--exterior view.

The Providence Plantation for 250 years 1636-1886 by Welcome A Greene, printed in 1886. References, pages 52-53-54-55-99-101-124.

Old Providence, published by the Merchants National Bank. P.30-photograph, exterior view. Ref. PP.30-31.

Providence in Colonial Times, G.S. Kimball, reference PP.211-212. Photograph P.212, exterior view,from a photograph taken in 1911. References pages 213-215-218-220-221.

Additional Data:

Until 1690 the General Asembly seems to have had no fixed place for its sessions--meetings were held at the homes of citizens and in taverns. The first House for Legislative, County and Town uses was finished in 1731. Roger Williams presided during his life. The structure was burned on Christmas Eve, 1758.

Letter concerning additional data received from Francis Chiaverini, Chief, Division of Public Buildings. Quote: "The First Colony House was built in Providence 1729 and occupied in 1731. This building was destroyed by fire December 24, 1758. A new Colony House was ordered built. The "Old State House" was built in 1761 and first occupied in 1762. It was in this building popularly known as "Rhode Island's Independence Hall" that a Declaration of Independence was passed on May 4, 1776, two months before the Declaration passed in Philadelphia. The General Assembly met in this building until the completion of the New State House on Capitol Hill in 1901. The Building is now more commonly known as The Sixth District Court House." (From records in the State Library)

In 1762 the building was finished at a cost of over 51,500 pounds, a sum far above all estimates.

In 1851, tower on west side added by Thomas Tefft, Architect.

About 1873, addition to the east side was added by Alfred Stone, Architect.

After 1901, the building was remodeled for the Sixth District Court, Small Claims Court, Juvenile Court, the architects were Banning and Thornton.

The original building built in 1760-1762 had a hip and ridge roof with a gable towards the west and the whole building was patterned after the Colony House at Newport, R. I. In the second story is the original Council Chamber, the only original interior work left, the rest changed.

Philip D. Creer

Philip D. Creer
District Officer for
Rhode Island.

TRW 10/17/40

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY HABS No. RI-18

COLONY HOUSE

HABS
RI,
4-PROV,
24-

Address: 155 North Main Street, 150 Benefit Street, Providence, Providence County, Rhode Island.

Plat 10, Lot 80.

An addendum to
Colony House
157 North Main Street
Providence, Rhode Island
in HABS Catalog (1941)

Present Owner: State of Rhode Island

Present Occupant: Sixth District Court

Present Use: Court house

Brief Statement of Significance: This building is one of the two eighteenth century colony houses in Rhode Island, the other being in Newport. It was one of the seats of Rhode Island government from 1762 until the erection of the present State House which was put into use in 1901. The Colony House is one of the early brick buildings in Providence, and preserves interesting interior finish.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: "The erection of a new Colony House, to replace that County House that had been destroyed by fire in 1758, was undertaken in 1760. A lot was acquired 'northward of that whereon the meeting house of the people called Quakers, stands'(John Russell Bartlett, editor, Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, (Providence, 1856-1865) VI, 207) extending from the Towne Street (N. Main) to Benefit Street. A committee consisting of Allen Brown, William Smith and David Harris, was appointed to procure materials for a brick building with the understanding that the timber required would be furnished by Obadiah Brown at cost. (John Russell Bartlett, editor, Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, (Providence, 1856-1865), VI, 196, 209). In June, 1762, the General Assembly appointed Daniel Jenckes and William Wheaton a committee 'to complete the outside ...so far as to keep it from taking damage,

lay the floors, build the stairs, and complete two rooms in the chamber, suitable for the General Assembly to sit in.' (John Russell Bartlett, editor, Record of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, (Providence, 1856-1865), VI, 327). The Colony House (also known as the Court House) as completed late in 1762, was about 40' x 70' in area, having two stories and a basement, with a hipped roof and balustraded deck surmounted by a tower. (See: Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, 1937), p. 110, for illustration of appearance before alterations). The basement walls were of coursed-stone and the walls above were brick with rusticated stone trimmings. A new collection of books was purchased and installed in replacement of the library which had been burned. The building was financed, partly by lotteries, partly by grants from the general treasury. (John Russell Bartlett, editor, Record of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, (Providence, 1856-1865), VI, 215, 236, 237, 252, 270, 327). It was enlarged and altered in 1850-1851 by the addition of a front projecting entrance and tower with a wood belfry and a long flight of stone steps, designed by Thomas A. Tefft. The interior also was altered, except the northwest room in the second story which retains its original character. An addition at the east end, facing Benefit Street, was constructed later from plans by Alfred Stone." John Hutchins Cady, The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950 (Providence, Rhode Island: The Book Shop, 1957), pp.37-39.

2. Architect: Alfred Stone was born in East Machias, Maine, July 29, 1843, and died in Providence, September 8, 1908. He received his early architectural training in Boston offices and entered the office of Alpheus C. Morse in 1859. A few years later he commenced private practice, and entered into partnership with Charles E. Carpenter of Pawtucket in 1873. Edmund R. Willson was taken into the firm in 1882. Mr. Stone was a fellow of the A.I.A., its secretary 1893-98 and president of the Rhode Island Chapter for thirteen years. Thomas A. Tefft (1826-1859) entered the office of Tallman and Bucklin in 1845, and retained his connection with that firm while a student at Brown, from which he was graduated in 1851. He maintained his own office during the next five years, then went to Europe where he died, in Florence, in 1859.

3. Important old views: Marginal drawing from a Map of Providence County, 1851, by Henry F. Walling, in the Rhode Island Historical Society Collections, reproduced in Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, 1937), p. 110.

4. Sources of information: Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, 1937), pp. 95, 110, 118, 157.
John Hutchins Cady, The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950 (Providence, Rhode Island: The Book Shop, 1957), pp. 37-39, 41, 100, 194.

B. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated: Allan Forbes and Paul F. Cadman, France and New England, 3 vols. (Boston: State Street Trust Company, 1925-1929).

C. Supplemental Material: The following is from 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. 30, 31:

THE OLD STATE HOUSE
Known as the Independence Hall of Providence

The Old State House on North Main Street was built in 1761, was first occupied the following year, and was used as a "Court and State House by the Colony and State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations" until 1900. In the historic old building--appropriately called the Independence Hall of Providence--an act was passed on May 4, 1776, "constituting Rhode Island the first free and independent Republic in America and asserting her absolute independence of England, two months before the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia."

Memorable events have occurred in this Hall of Independence, the history of which is so closely woven with that of this nation. Washington probably visited the Old State House on each of his trips to Providence. When he came in March 1781, en route from Newport, where he went to consult General Rochambeau on military affairs, he was given a dinner at the Old State House, at which thirteen toasts were drunk. It was during this visit that the men, women, and children, who thronged the streets, pressed so close to his carriage that he was obliged to stop every few minutes.

Count Dumas, who accompanied General Washington to Providence, says in his memoirs that Washington was very much affected by these demonstrations, and that, pressing Count Dumas' hand, he said, "We may be beaten by the English: it is the chance of war; but behold an army which they can never conquer!" The army referred to was a group of children carrying torches, and eagerly calling out to the Father of the Country, whose coach they completely surrounded.

Again, in August, 1790, in the Old State House a dinner was served in honor of Washington. There were two hundred plates laid; and, as nine years before, thirteen toasts were drunk.

"The Congress of the United States" was the first; "The President of the United States," the second; "The Governor of the State," the third; "The King and National Assembly of France," "Lafayette," "The Fair Daughters of America," and "The Town of Providence" followed. When the town of Providence had been pledged in "Good Old Providence Rum," the President and his party left the State House and hastened to the New York boat, on which they sailed at four o'clock.

Lafayette was received at the State House, August 23, 1824. The gallant Frenchman was met several miles out of Providence by a delegation of citizens, and was at once escorted to the State House, where, bowing low to the people who had gathered outside to greet him, with tear-dimmed eyes he paused at the door. Just as he was about to enter, he saw near him Captain Stephen Olney, who had served with him during the Revolution. Lafayette folded the old soldier in his arms, and pressed a kiss on either cheek.

After meeting Governor Fenner and the guests assembled in the State House, Lafayette came out of the building, and shook hands with hundreds of persons who had waited to meet him, and among them were many women and children who had waved handkerchiefs and scattered roses when he entered the town.

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

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: Built 1760-1762, the Colony House is one of the early brick buildings in Providence. Previously, most buildings, public and private, had been built of wood. The judge's chamber, second floor southwest room, is little changed, and shows a late use of full bolection paneling from floor to ceiling with Ionic pilasters and modillion cornice.

2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: The original building was rectangular, two stories, five bays wide (about 65') x three bays deep (about 36'), on a sloping lot with an elevated basement on the west side. The tower, added in 1850-1851, projects about 12' from the west side of the building

and is about 15' wide. The east wing, added c. 1875, is two stories high, about 30' x 50'.

2. Foundations: Dressed ashlar granite.

3. Wall construction: Red brick laid in common bond; brownstone rusticated quoins, window openings, and belt course between stories, and brownstone water table.

4. Chimneys: Three brick chimneys: in the end walls of the main block and in the east wing.

5. Openings:

   a. Doorways and doors: The main entrance in the 1850-1851 tower approached by a flight of fifteen steps of dressed stone with a wrought-iron rail with cast-iron newels. Brownstone Doric frontispiece with full entablature with modillion cornice, and with rusticated columns. Two stage, wood, square tower above the second story, roof cornice line.

   b. Windows and shutters: Windows in original building are double hung, six light over six light sash, 16" x 22" lights. Window openings have low segmental arches with keystones with molded faces.

6. Roof:

   a. Shape, covering: Original roof visible in the attic: hipped gambrel with sawn shingles. The upper part of this roof which was originally surrounded by a balustrade is 16' wide. This upper part of the roof was apparently rebuilt at some time with a slightly steeper pitch, parts of the original lower roof show under this with sawn wood shingles. The present roof, which covers the earlier roof and presumably dates from the addition of the east wing c. 1875, is a wood-framed, T-shaped, gambrel roof, shingled.

   b. Cornice: Modillion cornice

   c. Dormers: Dormers in later east wing only.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: Most of the first floor of the original building is one large assembly room, now used as a court room; a narrow section, one bay deep, at the north end of the first floor is divided into three small offices and is separated from the assembly room by lighted partitions. Second floor: the north three-bay section is a large assembly room, the southwest room is a large judge's chamber, the southeast corner is divided into three small offices. The cellar has been rebuilt with men's and women's cell blocks and a furnace room. The later east wing has court rooms and several offices.

2. Stairways: Location of the original stairs is not known. Main stairs in 1850-1851 tower: H-shaped, open string, with turned balusters. Other metal stairs in later east wing.

3. Flooring: Floors covered with modern asphalt tile or linoleum.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: plaster.

5. Doorways and doors: Original doors are eight panel with molded, dog-ear trim.

6. Trim: Original interior windows have paneled jambs, inside louvered shutters, window seats, and molded, dog-ear architraves. Tower window trim is similar but without paneled jambs or shutters. Wood pews or benches in the assembly rooms have board seats 15" deep x 18" high, and paneled backs 42" high. The deeply coffered ceiling of the first floor assembly room is divided into twelve large panels with a full Ionic entablature, with denticulated modillion cornice, and with the soffits of the beams enframed with a beaded molding; the three main cross beams are supported by scrolled brackets heavily carved with enfoliated ornament. The second floor assembly room has a coved ceiling with large modillion cornice. The judge's chamber, second floor southwest room, has full bolection paneling from floor to ceiling on all four walls, with Ionic pilasters, and with a modillion cornice.

7. Hardware: There does not appear to be any original hardware .

8. Lighting: Combination gas and electric fixtures.

9. Heating: Modern central hot air heating with both an

oil furnace and earlier coal furnaces in the basement. The fireplace in the judge's chamber has apparently been rebuilt.

D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces west at the east end of a narrow lot the full length of the block between North Main and Benefit Streets.

2. Enclosures: Early simple iron fence surrounds the yard west of the building.

3. Landscaping: The yard on the west side of the building slopes down toward North Main Street, and is planted with lawn and trees.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
National Park Service
July 1961.