

Willowmere
the
Joseph Reynolds House



Bristol, Rhode Island

Republished electronically by –

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For the

Reynolds Family Association



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Called "Willowmere" from a very early date, the Joseph Reynolds house at 956 Hope Street in Bristol is famous as the headquarters of General Lafayette during his stay in Bristol from September 7 to September 22 in 1778. Historically it is, except for the much altered Deacon Nathanael Bosworth House, also on Hope Street, the oldest house now standing in the town.

Family records show that this almost unique early transitional Massachusetts plan house was built in 1698-1700 by Joseph Reynolds on land owned by his father Nathaniel Reynolds, who had moved from Boston in 1680 to settle in the new town of Bristol, then part of Massachusetts. A mansion in size for its time, Joseph's house easily met the requirements laid down in the town ordinance that all houses must be two stories high with two rooms on each floor; it is three stories high and five bays wide and is ornamented across the front with an original plaster cove cornice now a rare survivor following late seventeenth century English precedents. A wooden structure built of brace-framed stud construction and sheathed with clapboard-clad wide vertical boarding, the house is set on a fieldstone foundation and is covered with a gable roof which internal evidence and family records both indicate once had a steeper pitch but has sloped down in a long salt-box line at the rear for a long time. It is now laid out on an old Massachusetts center-hall, two-interior chimney, four-room plan, the framing for which is clearly intact in the front part but shows evidence of modification in the rear east rooms. Throughout the house the structure is exposed internally and the corner posts, plates, girts, and summer beams are all cased in the major front rooms. The lower and upper front north parlor and parlor chamber rooms have always been finished with an unusual amount of what is now very rare massively scaled early bolection molded paneling with its original marbleizing which survived untouched until the 1940's when it was painted white. The parlor paneling, damaged by fire in 1976, has now been reproduced. There is also evidence of old painted decorative finish on the beams in the downstairs southwest room now the dining room. Much of the trim, such as door casings and the two panel doors is original as is much of the hardware which is worth special note of itself.

A gable roofed *two-story* ell of two room center-chimney plan, probably as old as the house itself, extends at right angles from the rear. Internal framing evidence shows that this ell was once only one-and-one-half stories high. Family papers indicate that about 1790 the ell roof was raised to two full stories and the whole ell was extended some six feet to the east. Probably at this time space was taken from the main house kitchen to allow for a stairway leading directly into the upper rooms of the main house and the ell.

Over its 285-year existence in the Reynolds family ownership from 1698 until 1927 the house has undergone a number of other changes, in spite of which enough of the basic structure and the early trim have survived to supply authentic information about the late seventeenth century stylistic character of the building. Internal evidence indicates that the windows have been heightened at the top. (The six-over six sash are later). The present handsome fanlight pedimented doorway of about 1800 replaces an earlier and perhaps wider entrance.

On the interior, as noted above, the house plan may have been altered at the rear, but more study will be required before the earliest configuration is understood. The house certainly originally consisted of a central stair hall set between the two front rooms; each had its own chimney and fireplace located on what is now the mid-wall of the house. This front part also

retains much of its original trim. The rear framing suggests that an ell for the kitchen may have extended in the south part of the rear under a long salt box leanto. The framing of the northeast room is not clear see plan. However, there is an extant girt with empty stud pockets for exterior wall construction between the front north downstairs parlor and the north rear room which suggests that the north half of the house originally stopped at the post for what is now the mid-wall.

The older divisions in the rear establish a south room (the old kitchen) into which the stairway to the ell was later introduced and a north room, formerly used as a store room and now converted into a study from which space for a bathroom has since been taken (see plan).

During a modernization early in the nineteenth century, (family records say about c. 1820,) the south chimney and its large kitchen fireplace were dismantled and a new smaller one built to allow, with a smaller fireplace, the introduction of an entry from the southwest room and a new side hall at the south end leading to a new south exterior doorway. This doorway, in the Greek Revival style, exists today (see plan).

The old chimney in the north part of the house was also taken down a long time ago, (although no records of this change are known) so that all the original chimney information is missing. Here careful study is needed to establish the first configuration between the front and rear north rooms. (It is at the corner post between these north rooms that the exterior wall framing remains.) When the present north chimney was rebuilt it was probably relocated as well, since it now stands in space taken from the northeast room where it is closed in behind an added partition wall which was finished with an old paneled mantelpiece in the 1970's see plan. The relocation allowed moving the parlor mantel east five feet to the house mid-wall thereby increasing the parlor itself to its present size of 17 X 21 feet. This alteration changed the normal upstairs/downstairs chimney wall relationship since the dimensions of the upper chamber (17 X 16) remained unaltered.

These changes appear to be the chief structural alterations. In the 1950s, however, new owners converted the house into apartments. At this time all the woodwork was painted white, including the unique and hitherto untouched marbleizing of the early bolection paneled work in the north (left hand) parlor and the parlor chamber above. Fortunately however, Frank Chouteau Brown had made measured drawings in 1935 of these two mantel walls for an article on Bristol architecture, (published in the White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs) in which he indicated the marbleizing patterns and recorded the colors used. In addition, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Downing, 1937) included black and white photographs of the paneling in its original condition.

The next owners, Mr. and Mrs. Robert Zexter, who bought the house in the 1960s, returned it to a single family residence, and began to clean off the white paint and restore the marbleizing, working particularly in the upper room. Unfortunately, in 1976 a bad chimney fire damaged both the upper and lower north rooms and almost destroyed the downstairs paneling. Based on the measured drawings, this paneling has been reconstructed but the remarbleizing still remains to be done. The parlor chamber paneling is intact and its original marbleizing has been

retrieved. Mrs. Zexter, a decorator, also stenciled the walls of several upper rooms using early nineteenth century stencil patterns.

Hall

The central entrance hall, extending to the midwall of the house, contains the stairway which is set at the back of the hall and continues unchanged through the upper floors. It rises in three runs for each floor with platform rests at each turn. The risers are set in a closed string course ornamented with a huge early torus molding into which turned balusters of squat heavy profile are fitted. These- re capped by a hand rail, molded on the outer face only, that butts directly into square newel posts which are capped by turned hail-shaped ornaments set on short necks. Half balusters butt against the posts in the early manner and the posts are finished with acorn shaped pendant drops of an early profile. All these elements are transitional in style and indicate a turn- of- the-seventeenth- century date. Part of the original painted stepped riser line has been exposed with the removal of later wall paper. In the first floor hail a bolection molded two panel door gives access to the second story rear of the house. The fully finished stairs continue into the garret and now butt against the roof itself so that credence should be given to the family tradition that the roof pitch was lowered long ago.

Northwest Parlor

The great northwest parlor (17 X 21) feet was known in family records as the library; it is one of the two rooms originally finished .with the marbled and massively scaled bolection molded paneling for which the house has always been noted. In this room the marbled bolection work included the entire mantel wall, the two-panel doors, and the wainscoting on the three remaining walls; posts, plates and the room's two summer beams are all marbled. As said in the resume of alterations, the present mantel wall is a reproduction constructed after the fire of 1976 from the 1935 measured drawings made by Frank Chouteau Brown. The unusual room size, 17 X 21 feet, probably the result of an enlargement when the chimney was rebuilt, is mentioned in several late nineteenth-century accounts. John Post Reynolds 1850 - 1915 wrote that he thought the paneling in the room originally came from England but there is no documentation for this tradition, and it should probably be discounted. The fireplace itself has been closed since the 1976 fire, but nineteenth-century drawings and photographs taken as late as 1936 show that it was an open working fireplace for many years.

Southwest (Dining) Room

The southwest downstairs room, now the dining-room, is plastered and has intact exposed structural beams, all of which are cased and beaded, while the plates, girts and fine heavy summer beam are finished with wide early cornice moldings. These beams have faint evidence of what Abbott Lowell Cummings suggests may be a very early and unusual form of painted decoration worthy of further study. The present one-story mantel, of a heavy late Greek Revival form, was evidently installed sometime after the old chimney was dismantled and rebuilt. It is fitted with a cast iron grate insert of the same style. Wainscoting made from church pew doors had been installed by the 1960's when the Zexters bought the house and the room now has a simply patterned parquet floor. Internal evidence indicates that the room once had two corner cupboards.

Rear Rooms

As said above, the framing scheme at the east (rear) of the house is not clear. The beams, which including the joists are all exposed and uncased, indicate that the house may have had from the first an ell on the south side. The use of the southeast room has been changed, perhaps as long ago as when the chimney was rebuilt. The present Fireplace (which is not for a kitchen) has a plain Federal style one-story mantelpiece. Other modifications include the construction of the stair hall for an entrance to the ell as described earlier, and a partition has been removed to enlarge the room. It is at the mid-wall in the north rear room (known as a store room and now used as a study) that exterior wall construction remains, and it is in this room that space for the rebuilt chimney was taken. The partition constructed to conceal this chimney (see plan) contains a closet behind an old door and now has an eighteenth century mantel breast (installed in the 1970's) taken from the John Brown cottage formerly at Bullocks Cove in Warren.

Second Floor

The second floor rooms, all finished with plastered walls, have exposed cased framing beams. On this floor the center hall was formerly divided into a small stair hall proper and a small front hall room, the partition for which has now been taken down. Here removal of recent wall paper has exposed an old form of decorative black banding painted directly on the plastered wall. It outlines the original doorway locations closed when the front room partition was removed and new entrances to the north and south chambers were installed. The window also has this painted outlining. According to Abbott Cummings, the window frame has very early molding detail and, except for about eight inches in height added at the top, may be original.

The Northwest (Parlor) Chamber

The parlor chamber, best known locally as the Genera Lafayette room, has survived almost unchanged. One of the front windows in this room is finished with the same lamp black banding found in the hall and this and other windows in the room are also pieced out at the top. This could mean that the size of the windows, except for the increase in height, remains unchanged. It is this room where the bolection molded and marbleized paneling of the same type as that in the parlor below is located--here restricted to a mantel section and the two-panel bolection molded doors on either side of the mantel. This paneling, which 'survived the fire and has been cleaned of the white paint, now reveals the original marbleizing; it is a key document in the history of the house. Other doors in the room are bolection molded and have two panels. The walls are plastered, there is a molded chair rail and the exposed framing--posts, girts, plates and the summer beam--are all cased and beaded. As said above, except for the 17 X 21 foot size of the parlor below where the mantel wall is some five feet further east, the measurements of this room relate normally to the framing pattern of the house. The fireplace is now closed although photographs taken in 1935 and 1936 show an operating Franklin stove of early Victorian vintage fitted into the fireplace opening. Its relation to the present chimney is not clear.

Southwest Chamber

The southwest chamber, which has retained its original configuration with plastered walls, exposed and cased framing including summer, and a plain molded chair rail, now has a simple mid-nineteenth century one-story mantelpiece.

Southeast (Kitchen) Chamber

The southeast room above the old kitchen space. is the most intact of the upper rear rooms. It has plastered walls, four-panel doors, a plain molded chair rail, molded cornice and a simple one-story early to mid-nineteenth century mantelpiece. Mrs. Zexter, a decorator, was responsible for the present stenciled wail treatment of this and other rooms.

Third Floor

The third floor, which typically has a lower ceiling, has cased gunstock framing posts and retains its wide floor boards. The floor plan follows the same center-hall plan with a small stairhall and small front hail room now removed as that on the second floor – There were two rooms on either side of the hall and another room is fitted into each north and southeast corner the latter now made into a bath room making an original plan of seven small rooms in all. All the framing is cased; it may have been modified, and cannot be studied at this time.

Garret

The staircase to the garret, which is fully finished with turned balusters, molded handrail and acorn drops, almost butts against the sloping roof so that anyone entering the garret must proceed on hands and knees, lending support to the tradition in the Reynolds family that the roof pitch was originally steeper. The garret itself contains evidence of having been used; in here are divisions with wail paper fragments, and some door posts with hooks and hinges attached. Former owners also reported finding indications that the rooms had once been used for weaving.

The Site

The Joseph Reynolds house stands on what was once ten acres of land, a portion of one of the thirty-two parcels first laid out in 1680 for the new Massachusetts town of Bristol and owned by Joseph's father, Nathaniel Reynolds, a town founder. On Nathaniel's death in 1708 he gave Joseph the ten acre lot, a tanyard, a Bark Mill and "all other buildings and appurtenances-- belonging to said land. According to family records, by that date Joseph had already built his own mansion, the tannery and the town's first gristmill which was still in operation as late as 1891. In the course of time, other outbuildings were built, including a barn, dam, wells, mill pond and three ice houses. The property has now been reduced to less than one-half acre and none of the outbuildings remain but some wells and millstones do. The house, formerly shielded by stately elms, is now situated close to a busy highway.

In 1927, "Willowmere" was sold out of-family ownership and the owner of the 1950's, who converted it into apartments and painted all the woodwork, let it fall into disrepair. When the Robert Zexters acquired the house in the 1960's they returned it to a single residence, began the restoration of the marbleizing on the woodwork, and, after the fire of 1976, had the parlor

paneling reproduced - The current owners, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Anderson, who have undertaken major necessary structural and other repairs, are continuing with the research and restoration with the intent of returning the building as much as possible to its seventeenth and eighteenth century appearance.

Except for the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House a National Historic Land mark October 15, 1966 in Newport, the 1698-1700 Reynolds House is, in spite of the loss of the original chimneys and some interior finish, the most important and best preserved Early Transitional house in the State. It is also one of the best to be found in Massachusetts, the colony to which Bristol belonged politically until 1747, and the house belonged stylistically. The only known early three-story upright structure in Rhode Island at such an early date, the house presently has a central-hall, four-room plan with two interior chimneys for which the framing of the front two rooms and hall is intact and clearly original. However, if this two-room configuration is original, it would give the two chimneys an unusual location on the outside rear wall. In addition, the cellar and foundation walls extend under all four rooms with no evidence of change, so that, until the framing of the east rear part of the house is better understood, this extraordinary early appearance of such a spacious four room plan cannot be discounted. In any case, the basic formula of the house, whether widened originally or limited to two rooms, is unknown at this date 1700 in Rhode Island and remarkable for Massachusetts until later; the Reynolds house may now be the earliest wooden structure of its form standing in New England.

In addition to its size, the house is also the most elaborately finished of any of the known early houses. Its up-to-date plaster cove cornice, one of two remaining examples in Rhode Island the other is that of the 1695 Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House , is similar to those appearing in England at the end of the seventeenth century and published in 1700 in Moxon's Mechanick Exercises. Of special interest, also is the fact that the windows, except for an increase of some eight inches in height at the top, seem never to have been altered--a conclusion reached because the second story hail window still has its original, very old casing with eight additional inches pieced in at the top, and is outlined with lamp black banding as a window in the northwest chamber also still is the sash are all later. Thus, the house, with its height, its cove cornice and the symmetrical arrangement of its spacious windows, fully reflects the emerging academic taste of the day. The classic pedimented fanlight doorway of 1800 which replaces an earlier wider entrance fits easily into the new formula.

The up-to-date character of the finish is even more completely expressed on the interior. The staircase, an outstanding example of this early transitional period, is comparable to the fine stairway in the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard house and has marked similarities. Both 'have squat turned balusters and a closed string course with run moldings of the massive scale associated with transitional work--a huge torus molding in the Reynolds house, one of ogee profile in the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard house. The other Features for both stairs are equally early, but the fact that the Reynolds house stair is completely finished for three full stories and into the garret makes it one of the most remarkable early New England stairs known today.

The special feature of the Reynolds house, however, is the amount and quality of the bolection paneling with its marbleized finish, one of the earliest, as well as one of the best documented, most elaborate and most extensive in the state; its late Stuart character, evidenced

in the massive scale of the panel moldings, the short flat pilasters set between fireplace framing and the cornice, and the early marbled treatment, help date the American break from seventeenth-century tradition.

Taken together with the intact framing for a three-story house, the comparatively unaltered exterior with its cove cornice, the fine staircase and the rarity and quality of the paneling in the north rooms, this house is 'significant as a now almost unique and fine example of early transitional building style.

History

The history of the family who took part in the settlement of this newly formed Massachusetts town, and built a house where the same family lived for more than two hundred and twenty-five years, goes back to England and early Boston. Joseph Reynolds' American forebears, Robert and Mary Reynolds, arrived in Boston in 1632. A shoemaker and leather worker by trade, Robert acquired land and built a stone house at the corner of High (Washington) and Milk Streets, and acquired other property. His son Nathaniel, who was born in England in 1627, continued the family trade and took an active part in town life serving as Grand Jurymen, Sealer of leather, Selectman and Committeeman. He inherited his father's estate in 1659. In 1680 he moved to Bristol, then Massachusetts, where as one of the town founders, he received a thirty-second part of the town land, ten acres of which Joseph I (1676-1759) inherited in 1708. Here Joseph had already built his extraordinarily fine house as well as a tannery, wells, and the town's first gristmill; he continued the family trade of shoemaker and tanner while he farmed his land, ran the mill and took part in local affairs and augmented his holdings.

His son, Joseph II (1719-1789), was elected delegate to the General Assembly of Rhode Island. It was during Joseph's occupancy that the Marquis de Lafayette was quartered in the family mansion, chosen, no doubt, because it still was one of the town's most imposing buildings.

Later members of the family also served in public office. The next heir to the estate, Joseph Reynolds III (1748-1818), was appointed Associate of the Court of Common Pleas and in 1787 was made Chief Justice of the Court. Samuel Godfrey Reynolds (1801-1381) who grew up in the house, distinguished himself as an inventor of some note. His career--which included the invention of a machine for making wrought iron nails, a corn grinding machine, a spike machine, a wire cutting machine, a pin machine and a machine for making horseshoes--took him to Providence, New York and on to Paris and England. He returned to Bristol c.1845, where he lived the rest of his life in the family mansion. The last continuous inhabitant of the house in the family, John Post Reynolds (1850-1915), a Brown graduate and scholar, served as Probate Judge and then for thirty years as Superintendent of Bristol schools. In addition, he ran an ice business for which the three icehouses formerly on the property were built.

The Reynolds House during the Revolutionary War

The most notable historic event associated with the Reynolds house occurred during Joseph Reynolds II occupancy. In 1778, the Marquis de Lafayette, in command of the ports

around the Island of Rhode Island, was entrusted with the care -of Warren, Bristol and the eastern shore. His principal Corps was stationed at Bristol and from September 7 to September 23 General Lafayette himself had headquarters in the Reynolds' house, where the north (parlor) chamber is still known as Lafayette's room. The story that has been passed down since that time, however, refers to September 7th, the day Mrs. Reynolds was awaiting the arrival of her distinguished guest. An hour before he was expected, a young Frenchman rode up to the house, dismounted, tied his horse to a tree, and on being greeted, asked for something to eat. Accordingly, Mrs. Reynolds seated him at the table prepared for the General where he stayed so long that she felt obliged to tell him she must prepare for Lafayette's arrival. Whereupon, her visitor replied, "Madam, I am Lafayette." He was twenty-one at the time.

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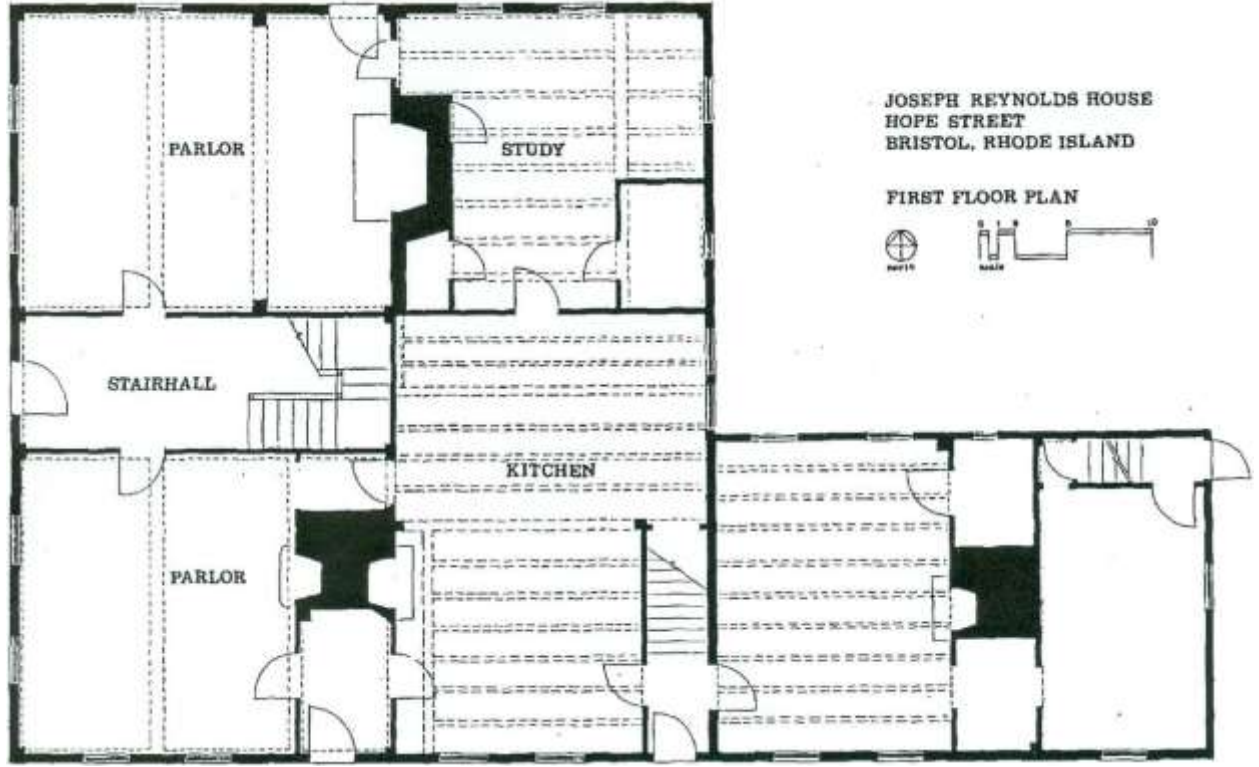
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Tingley, Henry F., Jr.: A Brief Account of One Line of Descendants of Robert and Mary Reynolds of Boston (1630 - 1981) Providence, R. I. 1981 Photos: 1 ext. nd, 4 int. (1937)

Beautiful Bristol. Bristol Phoenix Souvenir Supplement (Bristol, R. (1903)

Historic American Buildings Survey Inventory, RI5 #157; Catalog, 1941; Supplement (1959); RI Catalog (unpublished) 1972. (RI-70) NR1972. Photos: 1 ext.(nd), 4 int. (1937), 9 sheets.

Scrap Book III, pp. 235-239: (Unidentified newspaper clippings) "Bristol's Early Settlers" (May 17, 1891) "Where LaFayette Wrote" (ca. 1891)



First Floor



Joseph Reynolds House, west façade, showing pedimented fanlight doorway, c. 1800, Photographer: John Shotwell



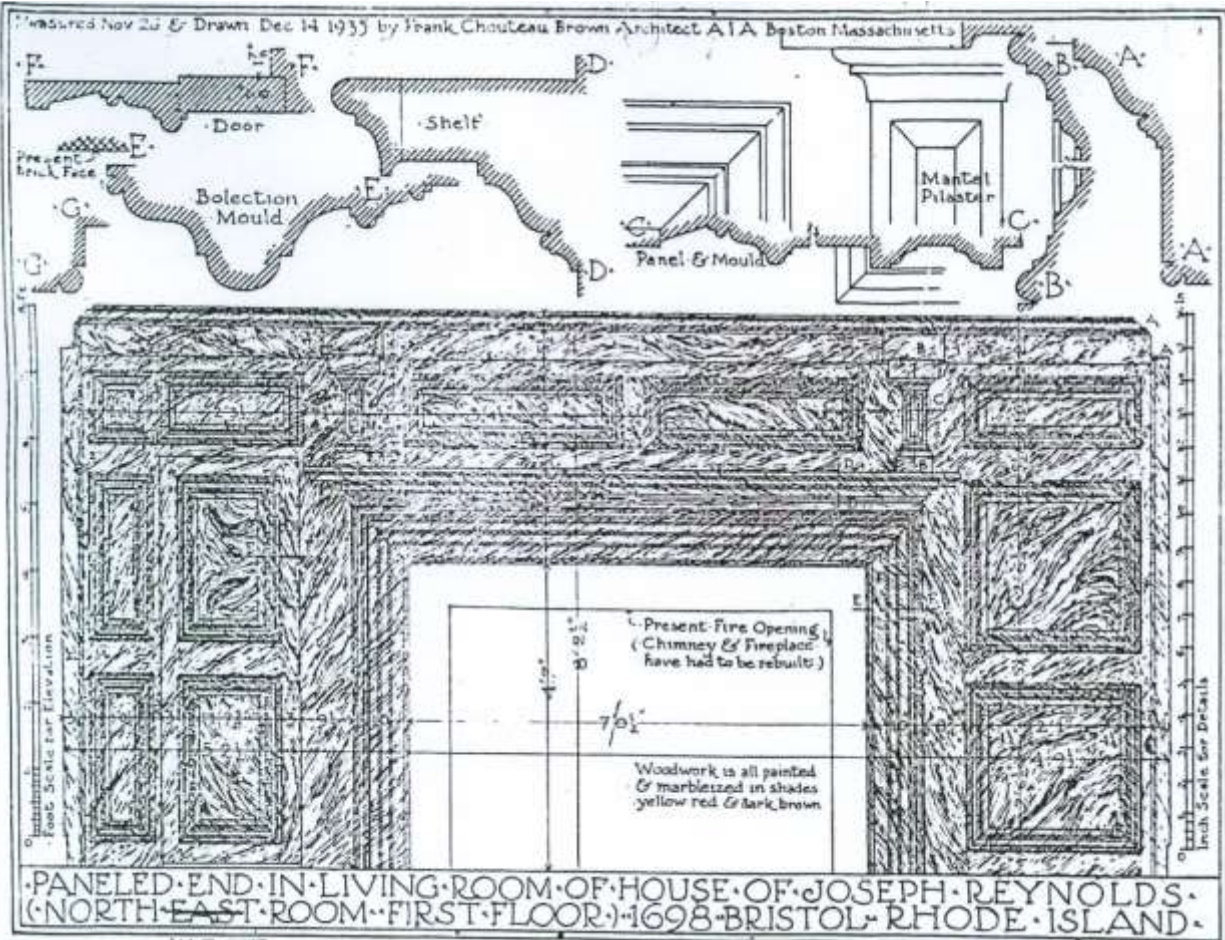
Entrance (west) front.



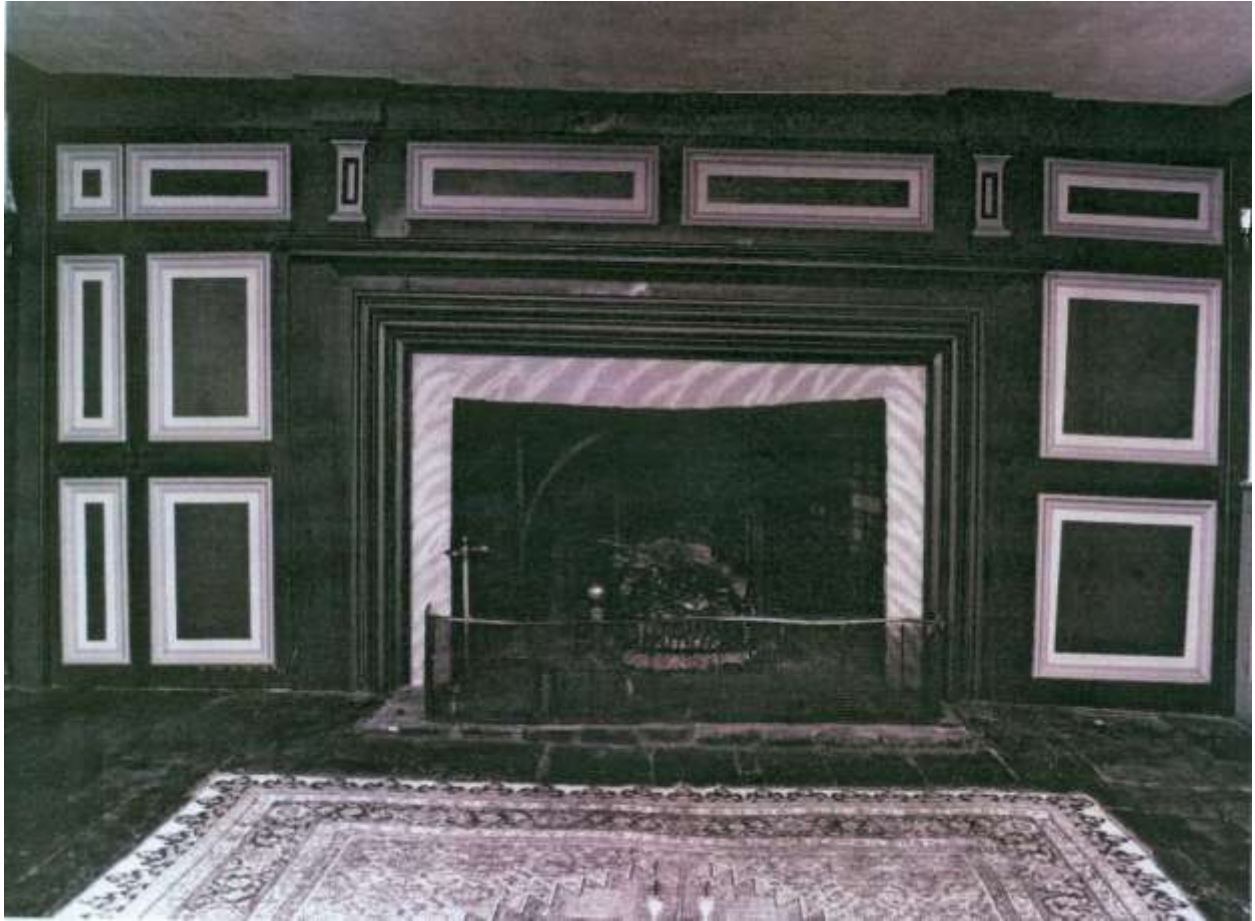
Joseph Reynolds house, west front detail showing cove cornice and old window. Photographer John Shotwell



Reynolds house, exterior, south view, showing ell. Photographer John Shotwell



Measured drawing by Frank Chouteau Brown, 1935. Published in Pencil Prints: Bristol, RI 1935, Northwest parlor paneled fireplace wall



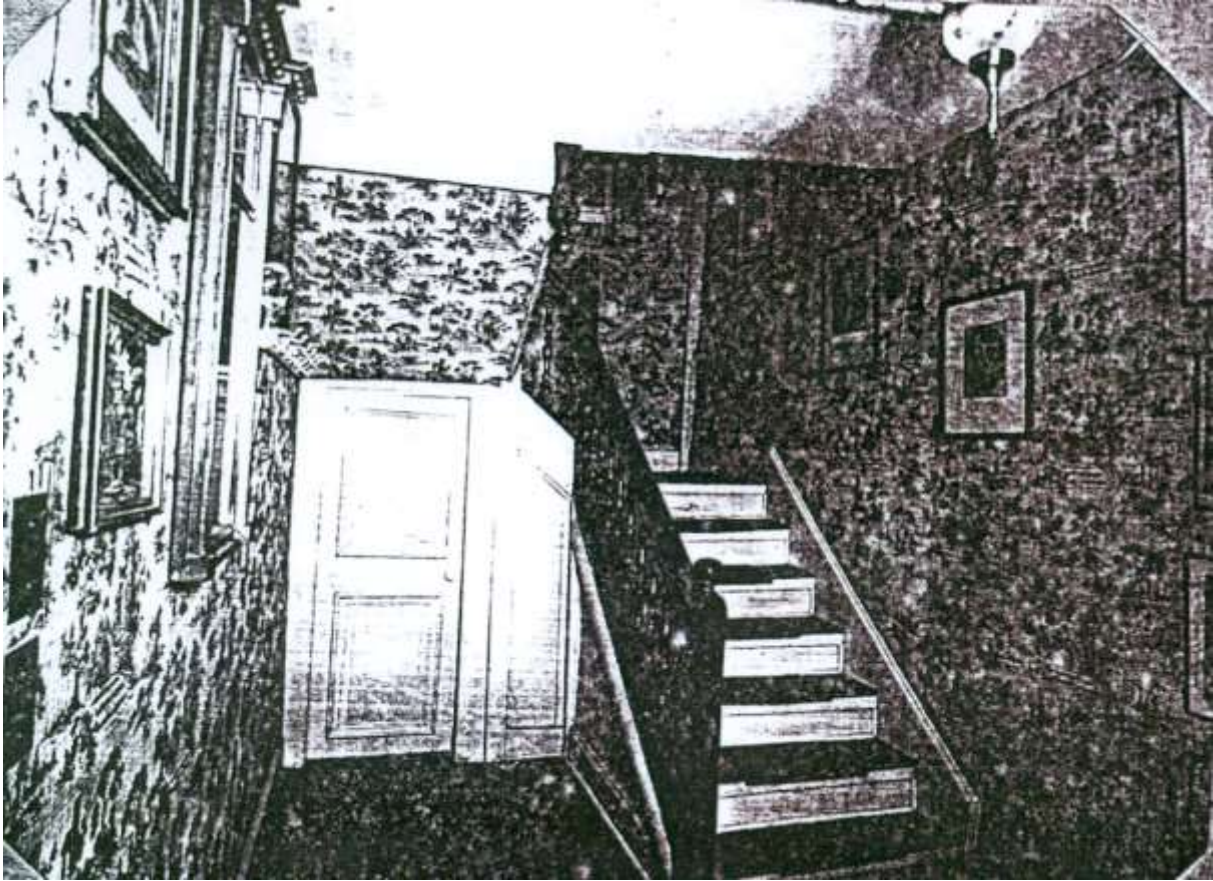
Joseph Reynolds house, northwest parlor, showing paneling as reconstructed from measured drawings made by Frank Chouteau Brown in 1935 with ground painting, waiting application of marbling. Photographer: John Shotwell



Stairway, first floor hall, showing two-panel door into rear room. Painted riser line showing above riser board.
Photographer: John Shotwell, 1982



Detail of stairway in first-floor from hall and doorway to kitchen passage. Original sent with Joseph Reynolds house nomination to National Register – Entered May 31, 1972



Stairhall, first floor (Xerox submitted to the National Park Service by Richard Anderson for the Joseph Reynolds House National Landmark nomination application).



Stair, second to third story, showing old painting defining riser behind the later stair casing. Photographer Mrs. Richard Anderson, 1982



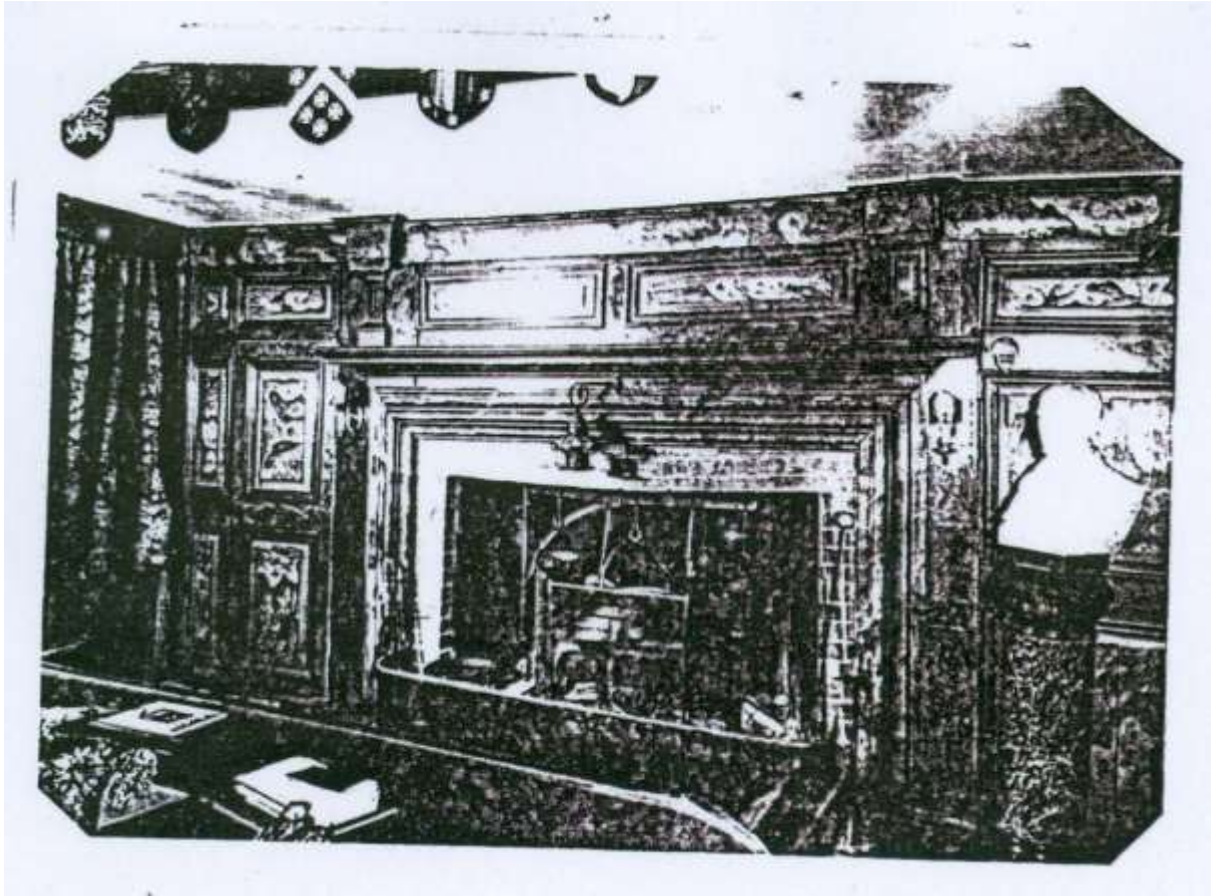
PLATE 20. Joseph Reynolds House, 956 Hope Street, Bristol, stairs, showing half balusters abutting the posts, and the hand rail moulded on the outer edge only.

[75]

From Early Homes of Rhode Island by Arthur LeBoeuf for Downing, Stairway from second to third floor



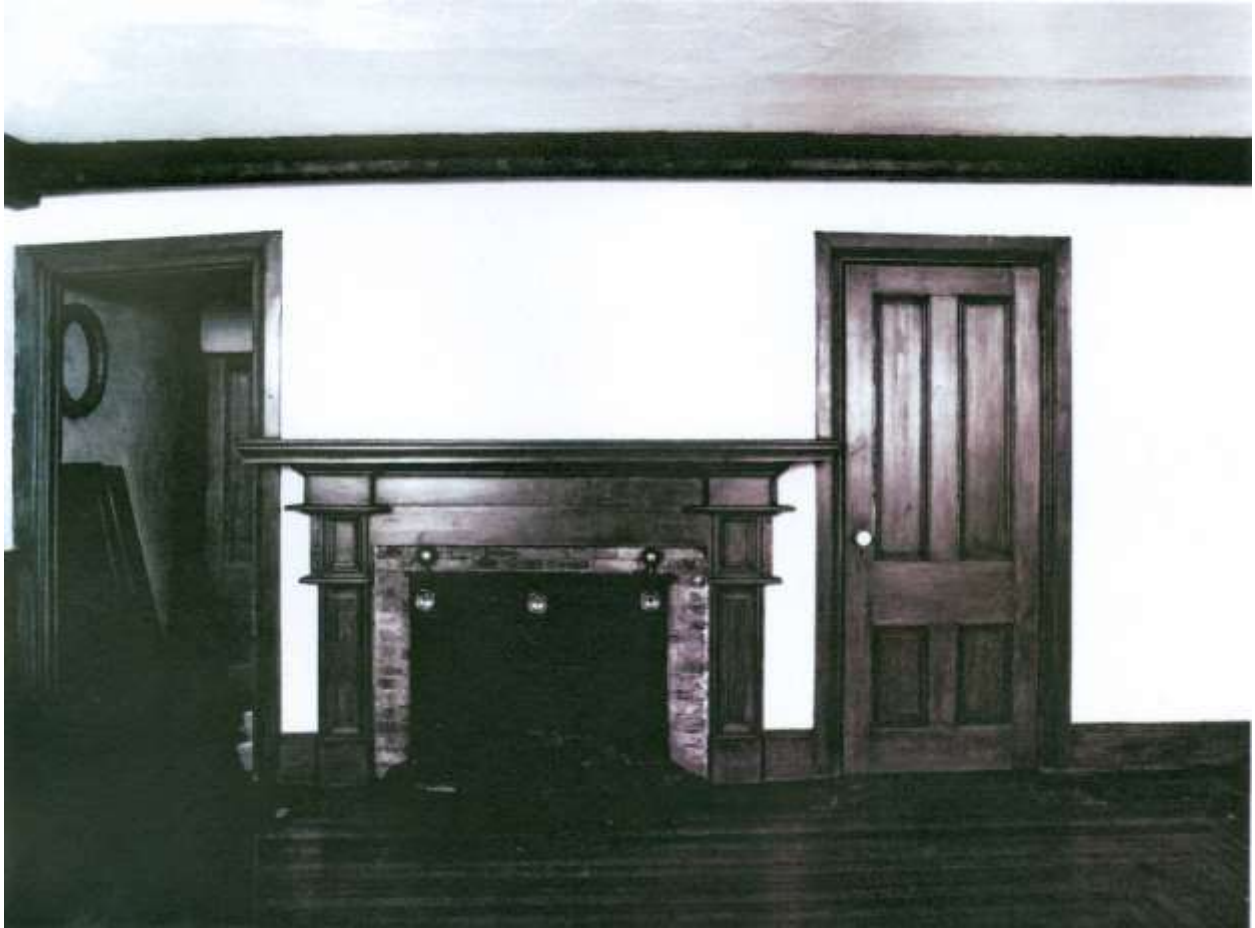
Clifford M. Renshaw, III photograph of the Joseph Reynolds house 1971, Exterior from the south-west.



Northwest parlor mantel wall with original marbleizing. Photographer: Arthur A. LeBoeuf



Fully finished stairway from third floor into garret, showing rafters of roof at banister height, Photographer: John Shotwell, 1982



Southwest (dining) room. Showing mantel piece; hall into southeast part of the house, doorway at right leading into south hallway. Photographer: John Shotwell, 1982



Southwest (dining) room, showing ceiling framing with cased beams and cornice detail. Photographer Mrs. Richard Anderson, 1982



Southeast room (old kitchen) showing mantel, old batten door at left, framing for partition, now removed, entrance into hall to southeast room. Photograph: John Shotwell, 1982

[23]

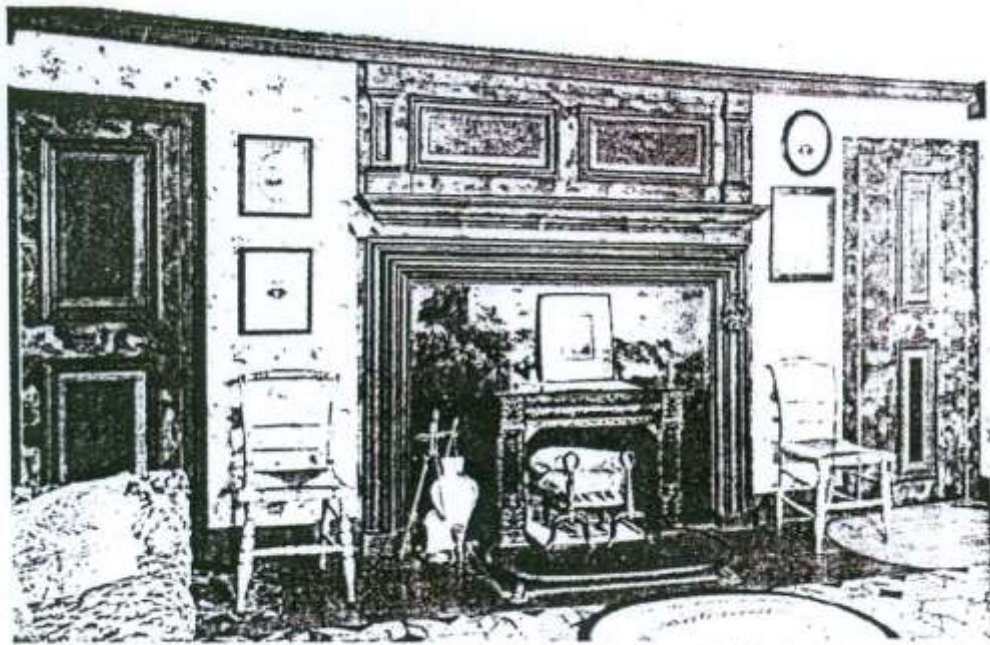


PLATE 19. Joseph Reynolds House, 956 Hope Street, Bristol, 1698, fireplace wall of the keeping room chamber.
Lafayette's room.

Northwest chamber "Lafayette Room" paneled fireplace wall. (Xerox submitted by Richard Anderson to the National Park Service for National Historic Landmark application.)



Northwest chamber (Lafayette Room) showing mantelpiece with bolection paneling, restored marbleizing, two panel doors, still sainted and to be restored. Photographer: John Shotwell, 1982



Fireplace wall of north-west room (Lafayette bedchamber) on second floor, with paint of 1950's applied over original marbled trim, which is to undergo restoration. Photograph: Robert H. Zexter and Nancy Zexter, 1971



Southwest chamber, showing one story mantel-piece, two-panel close door, four-panel door into upstairs south hall, cased summer beams. Photographer Mrs. Richard Anderson, 1982



Photos taken on visit to the Joseph Reynolds house by Larry "Joe" Reynolds on June 20, 2013



RFA President Larry “Joe Reynolds at the Joseph Reynolds House, Bristol, RI