

# A House for Widow Brown:

Architectural Statement and Social Position  
in Providence, 1791

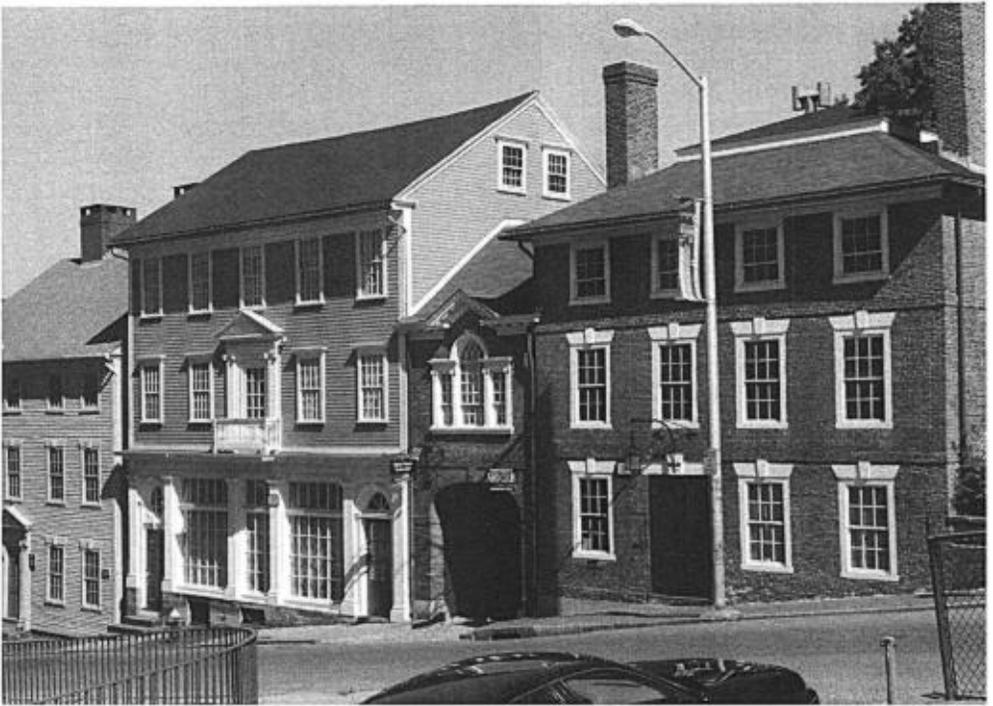
*Built for an artisan and shopkeeper, the interior of the Seril Dodge house was embellished to a high standard for the widow of one of Providence's leading merchants.*

In the middle of picturesque Thomas Street, on College Hill in Providence, Rhode Island, stands a house built about 1786 by the silversmith Seril Dodge (1759-1802) (fig. 1). While typical in size of many wood-frame houses built in Providence in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, the Seril Dodge house is unique among these modest structures in the elegance and extraordinary detail of its interior finish work. Although it has attracted the notice of architectural historians since at least 1934, when it was one of the first buildings in Rhode Island to be recorded by the federal Historical American Buildings Survey, no explanation has been offered as to why such an ordinary house should boast such extraordinary interiors. Recent research into the history of the building now reveals the reasons for the incongruity of this elabo-

rate, large-scale detailing in a middling Providence residence and illustrates the way in which architecture was used as a statement of social distinction by the leading family of postwar Providence.

Seril Dodge chose to build his house next to the new meetinghouse of the Charitable Baptist Society, built in 1774-75 on land occupied by the descendants of Thomas Angell. The lane that passed through the Angell descendants' home lots, just north of the property they sold to the Baptists, was originally known as Angell's Lane. In the nineteenth century it became the town road known as Angell Street, with the exception of the first block which, through a misreading of the legend on a survey, was named Thomas Street.<sup>1</sup>

Construction of the Baptist meetinghouse on Angell's Lane began in 1774. Designed to hold fourteen hundred



*Fig. 1. Thomas Street in Providence, 1999. The Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house is in the middle of Thomas Street, halfway down the hill. In 1906 the house was raised one story to make space for a grocery store at street level. Photograph by the author.*

people, fully one-quarter of the population of Providence of that time, the new church dominated the hillside overlooking the Providence River when it was completed a year later. Based on designs in James Gibbs's 1728 *Book of Architecture*, the meetinghouse has been described as "the outstanding architectural work of the pre-Revolutionary period" in Providence.<sup>2</sup> A symbol of Providence's emergence in the 1770s as a cultured and dynamic town, the new meetinghouse was the subject of the first view of Providence ever to be published, an engraving in the August 1789 number of the *Massachusetts Magazine* (fig. 2).<sup>3</sup>

In the last quarter of the eighteenth

century both the Baptist meetinghouse and the Seril Dodge house were associated with the Brown family of Providence, who had a hand in developing Thomas Angell's homeshare lots. By the end of the colonial period no one enjoyed a more elevated position in the cultural, civic, and business life of Rhode Island than the brothers Nicholas, Joseph, John, and Moses Brown. They had established one of the great trading and manufacturing firms in colonial America and were founders of the university that would ultimately bear their name. For five generations the family had been prominent members of the Baptist Society. It was architect Joseph Brown who, after travel-



Fig. 2. "A S.W. View of the Baptist Meeting House, Providence, R.I.," engraving by Samuel Hill from the August 1789 issue of *Massachusetts Magazine*. Courtesy Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, Rhi (x3) 851.

ing to Boston to study the great churches, adapted a plate published by Gibbs for the Providence meetinghouse design. The

merchant Nicholas Brown served as a director of the lottery to raise funds to build the church, and his younger brother

John took charge of its construction.<sup>4</sup> Although their youngest brother Moses left the Baptist Society in that year to join the Society of Friends, he recognized the value of the undeveloped land adjacent to the new meetinghouse. In 1786 he purchased the part of the Thomas Angell homeshare lot that fronted on Angell's Lane, to the north of the church.<sup>5</sup> Soon thereafter Seril Dodge, a young clock-maker and silversmith who had recently moved to Providence, built his house on this lot. Possibly the artisan's means were so limited that he built first and intended to buy the land later, when his fortunes improved. In Samuel Hill's 1789 engraving (see fig. 2) the new house can be seen facing the church, standing on the land still owned by Moses Brown.

According to *Angell's Lane: The History of a Little Street in Providence*, the Seril Dodge house was constructed in 1786.<sup>6</sup> When Moses Brown purchased the property in that year from the Angell family the deed makes no reference to any structure standing on it, and Dodge likely started building as soon as the property changed hands in April. It is clear that the building was finished in 1789; in addition to its being pictured in the Samuel Hill engraving of that year, the house is identified in a deed of sale. In September 1789, when Moses Brown sold the land beneath the house to Seril Dodge, Brown's deed to the silversmith identifies the property as "the House Lot being the same whereon said Dodge has built a Dwelling House in which he now lives."<sup>7</sup>

The new wood-frame house was designed with a central hallway flanked by

two rooms on each side and with two interior chimneys, one on each side of the hall (fig. 3). In the wave of building that followed the conclusion of the war, many houses were constructed on nearby Benefit Street, though most of these conformed to the old central-chimney plan. Seril Dodge's house was laid out according to a newer style, in which separate chimney stacks permitted individual fireplaces to be built in each of the side rooms and allowed daylight and fresh air to pass the length of the house through an open central hall, like the houses in the neighborhood being developed across the Providence river on the Weybosset, or west, side of town. Two-and-one-half stories high and measuring thirty-six by twenty-nine feet, Dodge's house was smaller in dimension and shorter by a story than the thirty-seven-by-thirty-five-foot house Deacon Edward Taylor was building at the same time on the adjacent lot (see figs. 1, 3 & 4). With his income as an artisan and shopkeeper, perhaps it was all that Seril Dodge could afford at the time. Prospects must have soon improved for Dodge, for in 1790 he purchased the second of Moses Brown's building lots on Angell's Lane and began construction of a three-story, brick-clad house for his growing family (fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> When he vacated the first house the following year, he sold both building and land back to Moses Brown, in whose family it would remain for the next 116 years.

In May 1791 Nicholas Brown, partner in the mercantile house of Brown and Benson, died at the age of sixty-one, leaving behind his wife, Avis Binney

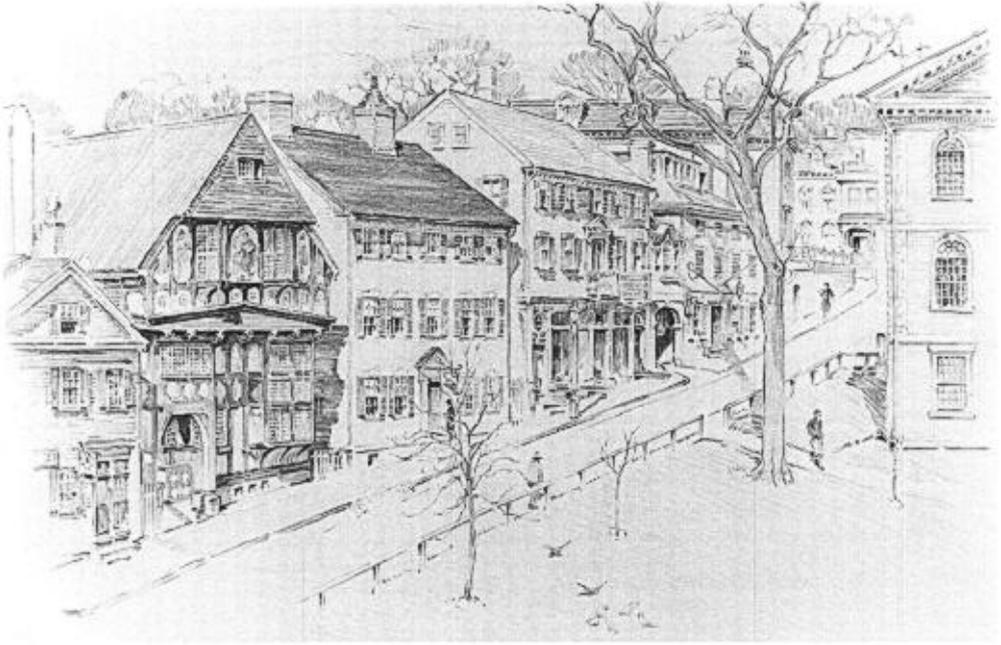


Fig. 3. “Thomas Street 1932,” pencil drawing on paper by Helen M. Grose. In this drawing the original doorway of the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house is shown fifteen feet above the street. Courtesy the Providence Art Club.

Brown, and two children—his son and namesake Nicholas Brown II and his daughter Hope. He also left behind a considerable fortune, the bulk of which he bequeathed to his children. He had been married to Avis only six years, and, as his second wife and the stepmother of his children, Nicholas Brown evidently did not expect her to share equally in the Brown family fortune. In fact, he intended his son and business partner Nicholas to become the new master of his brick mansion house on Main Street, where the family firm had its counting house and wharf. He planned for Avis to move to a smaller house of her own.<sup>10</sup>

When he displaced his widow and left the Main Street mansion to his namesake, Nicholas Brown was acting accord-

ing to a long-established practice of insuring that the family homestead descended in the male line of the family. Perhaps he was aware that in the fall his son Nicholas would be married to Ann Carter, who would eventually become the new mistress of his brick house. But the language and terms of his will indicate that he also had great affection for his wife and that he meant to support her in appropriately comfortable circumstances. “I give and devise to my beloved Wife Avis Brown for and during the term of her natural life my House, together with the lot whereon it Stands & the out Houses and Appurtenances situate in Providence and on the west side of the Great Bridge nearly opposite to the Long Wharf which Estate lately belonged to Metcalf Bowler deceased; &

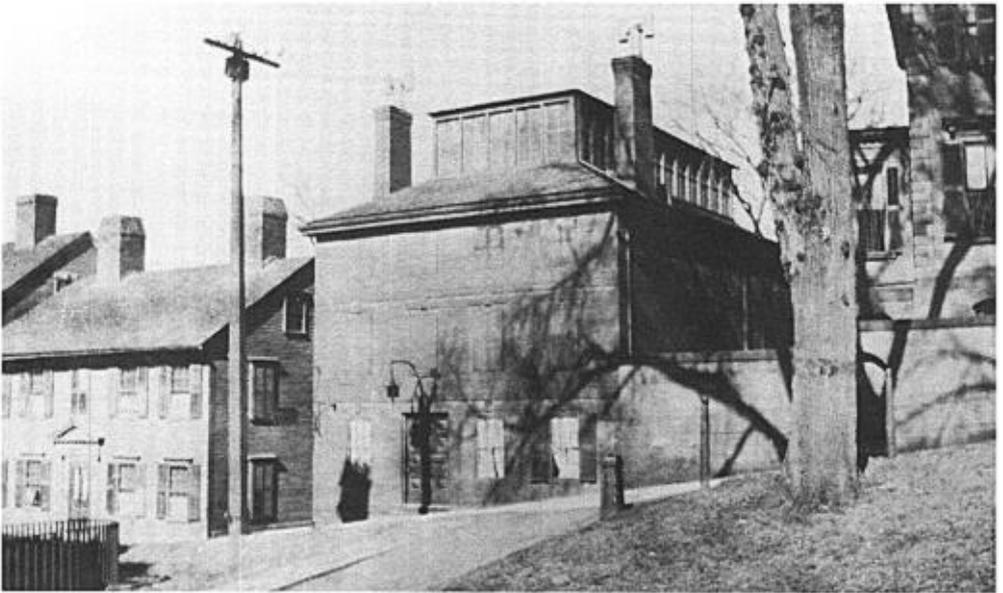


Fig. 4. *The Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house of about 1786 and the Seril Dodge house of 1790, photograph before 1909. This image was made before the first house built by Seril Dodge, on the left, was raised one story. Courtesy Rhode Island Historical Society, Rhi (x3) 425.*

order that the same may be put in Suitable repair soon after my decease by my Executors.”<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Brown owned extensive real estate holdings, ranging from tracts of undeveloped land to individual town houses, and it was his wish to grant Avis the lifetime use—though not ownership—of one of these properties.

The Bowler house was located in the new residential neighborhood being developed on the Weybosset side of the Providence River, away from the increasingly commercial environment of Main Street (fig. 5). For a century and a half the residents of Providence had lived next to their wharves and shops along the waterfront, but the rise of commercial activity in the town was making the old neighborhood a less and less desirable place to live. Five years earlier Nicholas’s brother John

had built a grand new house and moved up to the hillside overlooking the town from the east. Nicholas evidently felt that a life similarly removed from the bustle of the counting house would also be desirable for his widow and his eighteen-year-old daughter. He directed that his estate provide the money to prepare the Bowler house for Avis and to support her in her new life he provided her with an outright bequest of two thousand dollars and thereafter an annuity of two hundred pounds in silver.

Nicholas Brown seems to have felt some urgency in writing his will. Apparently he sensed his health was failing, and he was contemplating the brevity of life.<sup>12</sup> And, after a few weeks’ reconsideration, he apparently felt that the terms of his will did not reflect sufficiently the love and

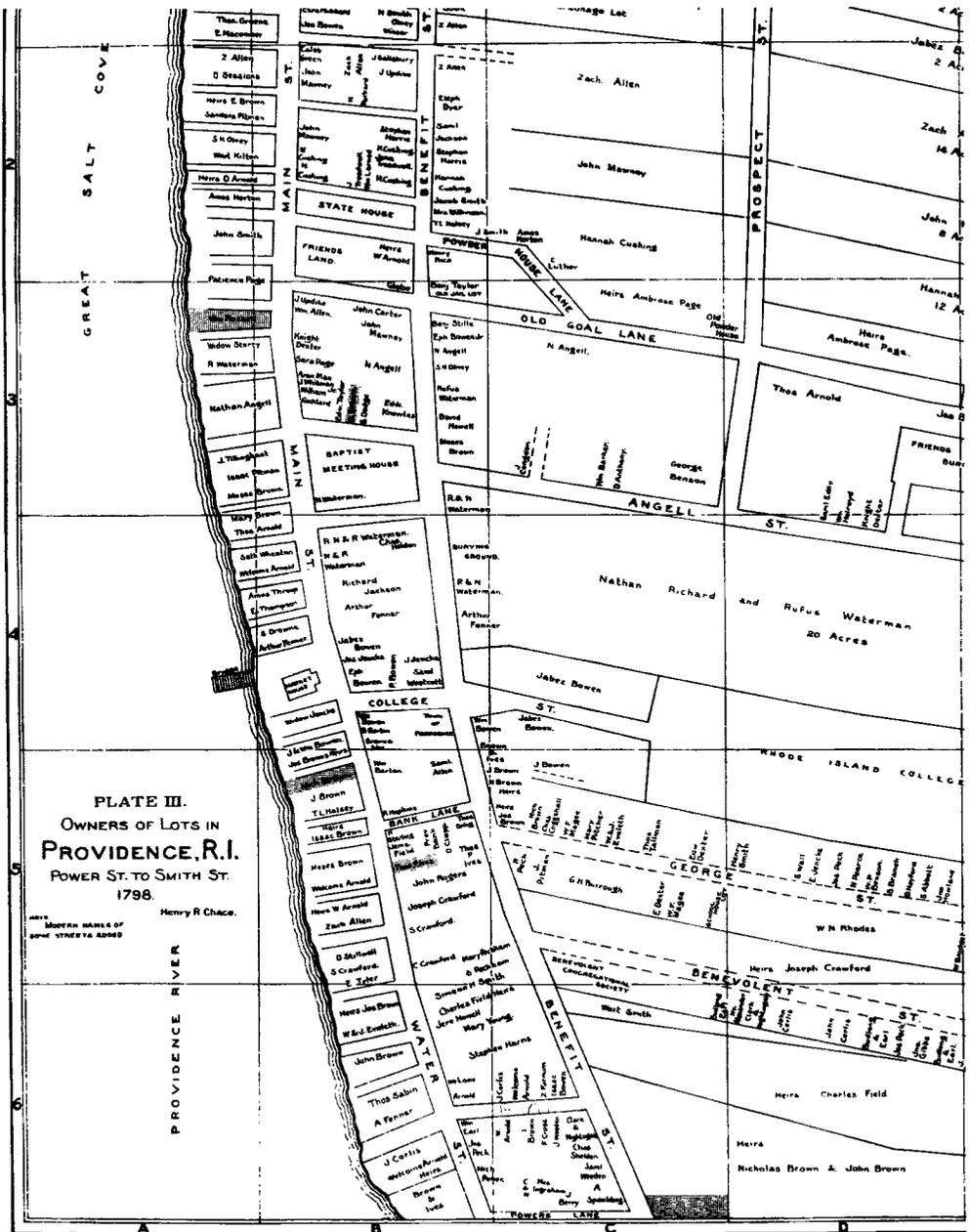


Fig. 5. "Owners of Lots in Providence, R.I., Power Street to Smith Street, 1798," plate III from Henry R. Chace, comp., Owners and Occupants of the Lots, Houses, and Shops in the Town of Providence, Rhode Island in 1798 (Providence, 1914). The locations of the houses of William Russell, Seril Dodge (marked N. Brown), and Nicholas, Joseph (marked Thos. P. Ives), and John Brown are indicated.

devotion he felt for his wife. In February he wrote a long letter to his children in which he urged them to show Avis the love and respect they had shown him, to provide well for her after his death, and to hold the family together. In this letter he explained that he had made

some Additions to what I then gave to my most Affectionate & beloved Wife, who after me will be your best friend on Earth . . . and Accordingly, upon my most Mature Considerations have most voluntarily & cheerfully made considerable additions and Explanations in my said Codicil than what is contained in my aforesaid will.

And lastly my desire and Expectation is that my Beloved Brother Moses Brown and son Nicholas Brown who are mentioned as my Executors in my Will that they treat my beloved Wife and Widow with Respect & Regards and that everything towards her Happiness be extended as far as their lawful reach in the most friendly Way that it be reasonably Constru'd as tho they was acting for me personally present with them, and that by all they keep up love & friendship for each other as long as they live.<sup>13</sup>

Between January 1791, when he wrote his will, and May, when he died, Nicholas Brown's fortunes improved substantially. In the spring of 1791 the public securities he had owned for years began to appreciate substantially, though he did not live long enough to see their value fully funded.

In the spirit of the letter that he had written to his children in February, Moses Brown and Nicholas Brown II, acting as executors of the estate, saw to it that

Widow Brown's circumstances were elevated with the appreciation of her husband's estate. Evidently they felt that they could now provide her with a fine residence in a more desirable and convenient location than on the Weybosset side. Six weeks after her husband's death Moses purchased Seril Dodge's first house for her.

In an agreement filed with the probate court in Providence, the executors and heirs petitioned the court to redistribute the estate of the late Nicholas Brown. They reviewed the provisions that Nicholas had made for his widow, noted that subsequently his estate had grown in value, and conjectured that

had the said Testator lived to redraw his Will, which he proposed and put his Codicil and Original will in one, and known the Value his Estate has come to, he would have made further Provision for his said Widow. . . .

And it is further Covenanted that the house lately purchased of Seril Dodge by Moses Brown & the said Nicholas Brown as Executors of the said Testator be occupied, possessed, and enjoyed by the said Avis after handsomely finished and papered so long as she may please to live in it without charge of Rent by the said Heirs, Executors, or Guardians.<sup>14</sup>

Purchasing the Seril Dodge house for the Widow Brown made good sense. Not only would it allow Avis and her stepdaughter Hope to continue to reside together in the central part of town near their friends and former neighbors; it also placed the family across the street from the Baptist meetinghouse where they

worshiped and with which the family was so prominently identified.<sup>15</sup> In the judgment of the executors the Dodge house would provide Avis a better home in which the family could honor Nicholas Brown's wish, as expressed in his will and in his last letter to his children, that the family be held together.

It is unlikely that Nicholas Brown II ever lived with his stepmother and his sister in the Seril Dodge house. The executors could not commence their extensive improvements to the house until July, when they purchased it, and by November Nicholas had married and was master of the homestead on Main Street. The terms of the will itself also may have hastened Hope's departure from home. Concerning his eighteen-year-old daughter Nicholas Brown wrote, "My will is that my Estate remain undivided till my daughter Hope arrives to the age of Twenty one years or her day of Marriage which shall happen first."<sup>16</sup> In other words, unless she married, neither Hope nor her brother would come into their inheritances for three years.

As it turned out, Avis and Hope did not live together in the Dodge house for long. In March 1792, in the front parlor, Hope Brown wed Thomas Poynton Ives, a promising young man who had lived with the Browns while serving his apprenticeship as a clerk in their counting house and who was soon to become a partner in the family firm.<sup>17</sup> Under the terms of the will it was to her financial advantage to marry sooner rather than later, and ten months after her father's death she did so, thereby inheriting her fortune the week after her

nineteenth birthday.

In the autumn following his death, the heirs of Nicholas Brown began spending their inheritance on household furnishings. One of their first purchases was expensive, imported goods. On September 30, 1791, their London agents Thomas Dickason and Company wrote to confirm that they were "sending the watches, chandelier and pianoforte you ordered." By the end of October these goods had arrived in New York. Nicholas Brown, who was to be married on November 3, evidently wanted the chandelier in Providence in time for his wedding, and the family firm of Brown and Benson arranged for the coastal sloop *Peggy* to run to New York to pick up the shipment. In New York harbor the *Peggy* approached the oceangoing freighter and received the crates directly over the side to avoid waiting for them to be hoisted onto the wharf and then turned around and immediately headed back for Providence, where the chandelier was prominently installed in the Baptist Church. On January 9 the firm wrote with thanks to their agents in London. "The Chandelier arrived in good order and is truly Elegant. The Society feel and express the most perfect satisfaction in it. The family are no less pleased with the watches and pianoforte."<sup>18</sup> It is not known if the purchases arrived in time for Nicholas Brown's wedding, but the local paper noted in March of the following year that when Hope Brown was married in the parlor of her stepmother Avis's house the wedding party could see the chandelier through the window of the meetinghouse across the street, with all

sixteen candles lighted in honor of the new couple.<sup>19</sup>

The pianoforte was to go into Avis Brown's new house, but not until the executors of the estate had the place "handsomely finished and papered." This provision in the heirs' agreement had great implications for the house they had bought from Seril Dodge. The language did not necessarily mean that the house had been purchased in an uncompleted condition. The building may have been as much as five years old when it was purchased by the Browns in 1791 and had been inhabited since at least 1789. In carpenter's parlance the term "finish" meant decorative woodwork, and with this small phrase the executors were directing that the interiors of the rooms be fitted with wallpapers and with architectural woodwork of a quality and style to which the Widow Brown was accustomed. Possibly Seril Dodge had never installed his own woodwork, or possibly the rooms as the silversmith finished them were not up to the standards of the Brown family. In either case the heirs intended something bigger and better for Widow Avis Brown.

Avis Brown continued to live in the mansion house on Main Street while the new house was being finished and papered.<sup>20</sup> Throughout the fall of 1791 the firm of Brown and Benson was arranging with its Boston agent Head and Amory for the purchase from Boston artisans of household furnishings, including looking glasses, chintz, andirons after a pattern by John Cutler, furniture by George Bright, and wallpaper supplied by Moses Grant and Appleton Prentiss.<sup>21</sup> In

November the Newport, Rhode Island, silversmith Daniel Rogers (1753-92) wrote to inquire about the suitability of the silver tablespoons he had made for Mrs. Brown. Because both Nicholas's new wife Ann Carter Brown and his stepmother Avis were establishing themselves in their new houses that fall, it is unclear which Mrs. Brown Rogers meant to indicate; however, the day books of Brown and Benson confirm that Rogers's tablespoons, dozen coffee spoons, and a silver cream pot were all purchased for Avis, along with two china teapots and six coffee cups. The disposition of the wallpaper is not so clear, though given the provision in the heirs' agreement that Avis's new house would be handsomely papered, it can be safely assumed that at least some of it was to be installed in the house on Thomas Street.<sup>22</sup>

When renovations on the new house were completed the two front parlors and the central stair hall boasted elaborate mantelpieces and cornices. Even the chair rails and baseboards were embellished with detailed mouldings (fig. 6). Of the four rooms on the ground floor, the parlor facing the south east was the largest, and it contained the most elaborate woodwork. The centerpiece of this room was a two-story mantelpiece with Ionic columns supporting an entablature forming the mantel shelf; above that, two pairs of fluted pilasters with Corinthian capitals flank a fielded panel and support a triangular dentiled pediment (fig. 7). Though only eight feet tall, this spectacular mantel dominates the space, reaching the full height of the wall to touch the cornice at

the ceiling.

The mantelpieces in Avis Brown's little house were as refined as any woodwork in the great houses of Providence. In *Rules for House-Carpenters Work in the Town of Providence*, a 1796 price guide to how much Providence carpenters should charge for their work, these two-story mantelpieces

cost more than any other single element of interior woodwork mentioned.<sup>23</sup>

Running around the ceiling of the southeast parlor of the new house was a compound cornice carved with modillion blocks, dentils, and a fretwork frieze to match the fireplace. The Providence *Rules for House-Carpenters* described this style as

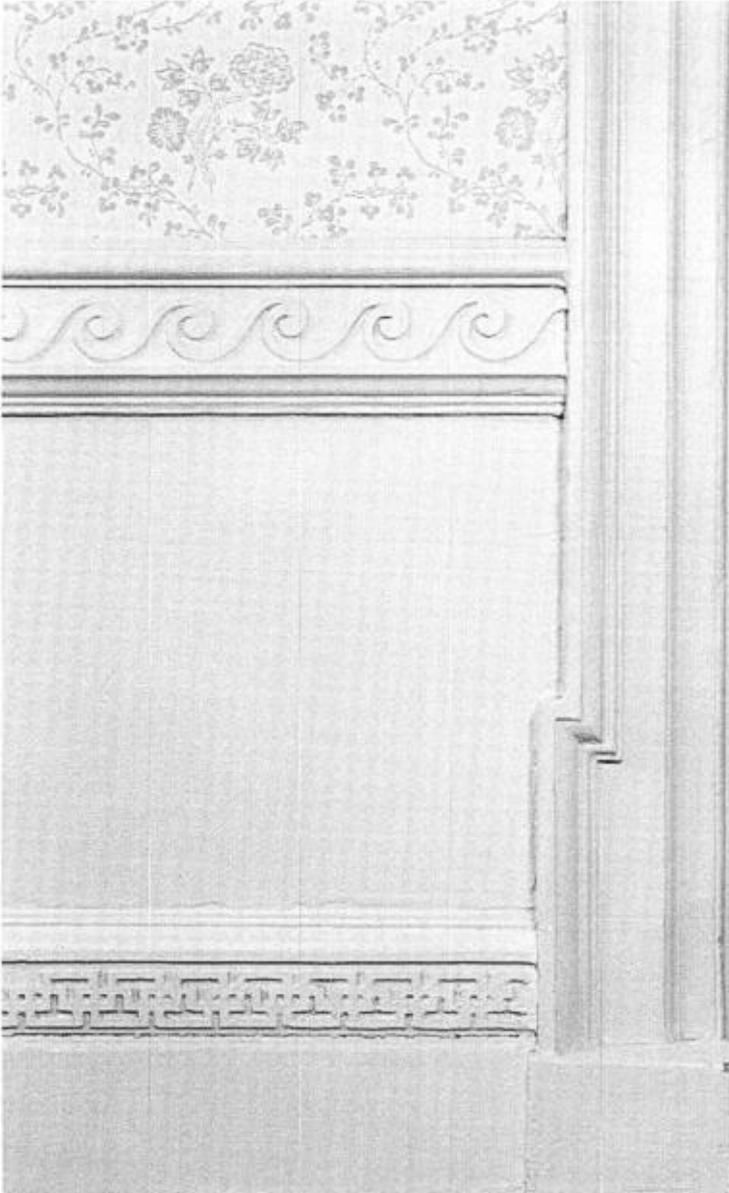


Fig. 6. *Vétruviian* molding, characterized by wavelike scrollwork, on the chair rail; *Chinese* molding, characterized by interlocking fretwork, on the baseboard; and compound planed molding on a door casing in the southeast parlor of the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house. Photograph by the author, 1999.

a “double cornice . . . with modillions and dentiles . . . with plain fret on fasciae.”<sup>24</sup> At the bottom of the wall was wainscot paneling capped by a chair rail with applied Vitruvian scrollwork, all set on a baseboard with applied Chinese fretwork. Added to all this finish work were paneled shutters mounted on hinges inside each of the windows. All in all, the amount and the richness of architectural detail in the southeast parlor gave the room a visual complexity almost out of keeping with its modest dimensions (fig. 8).

Across the hall in the southwest parlor the architectural finish—also a two-story mantelpiece, a compound cornice, a carved and molded chair rail and baseboard, and paneled shutters on all three

windows—was only slightly less detailed than the trim in the southeast parlor. The central hallway between the two parlors was the public entry to the house, and it too was decorated as a formal space. Its woodwork, which was equal to the parlor finishes in richness of detail, ran the length of the hallway and up the stairs to the second floor. Not only were the handrail and balusters boldly carved and turned, but the stringer ends of the stairs were decorated with elegant rococo ornament of leaves and flowers (fig. 9).

The source of the specific designs for the mantelpieces in Avis Brown’s house is indicated in *Rules for House-Carpenters*, where mantels like these are listed as a “Chimney-piece according to



Fig. 7. Southeast parlor of the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house, 1997. Photograph by the author, 1999.

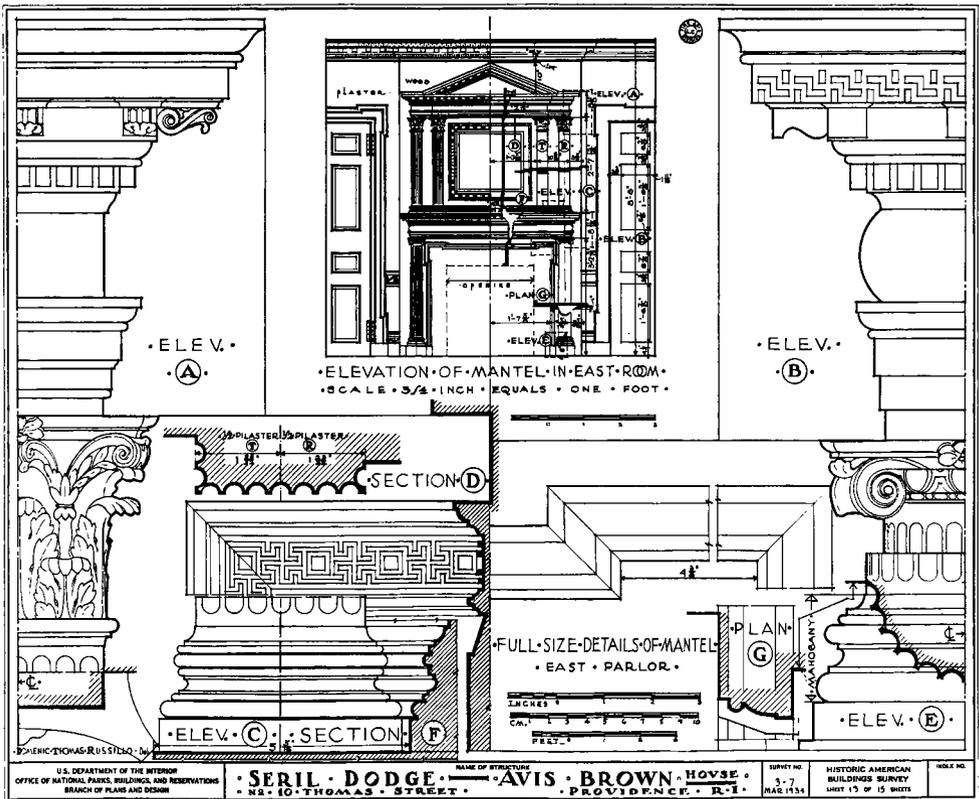


Fig. 8. "Elevation of Mantel in East Room," ink drawing on linen by Domenic T. Russillo for the Historic American Building Survey, March 1934. Courtesy Library of Congress.

plate H in the London Art, with single column," and a "Chimney-piece according to plate I in the London Art, double columns."<sup>25</sup> "London Art" was William Salmon's architectural pattern book *Palladio Londinensis, or the London Art of Building* (1738), one of several architectural pattern books Providence house carpenters at the end of the century are now known to have owned. The most expensive mantelpieces built in Providence in 1796 were modeled on plates H and I (fig. 10). The two-story fireplace mantels in Avis Brown's house are clearly derived from these engravings, and the

kind of applied fretwork on the fascia of the chair rails and baseboards resembles the illustrations in plate M in *Palladio Londinensis*, entitled "of certain ornaments called Frets."<sup>26</sup>

With the design source for this architectural woodwork identified, the larger question remains: what inspired the executors of Nicholas Brown's estate to fill the rooms of Widow Avis Brown's modest new house with such high-style moldings? This profusion of paneling, molding, and carving now seems to be quite a lot for the relatively small spaces of Avis Brown's new parlors. It seems likely

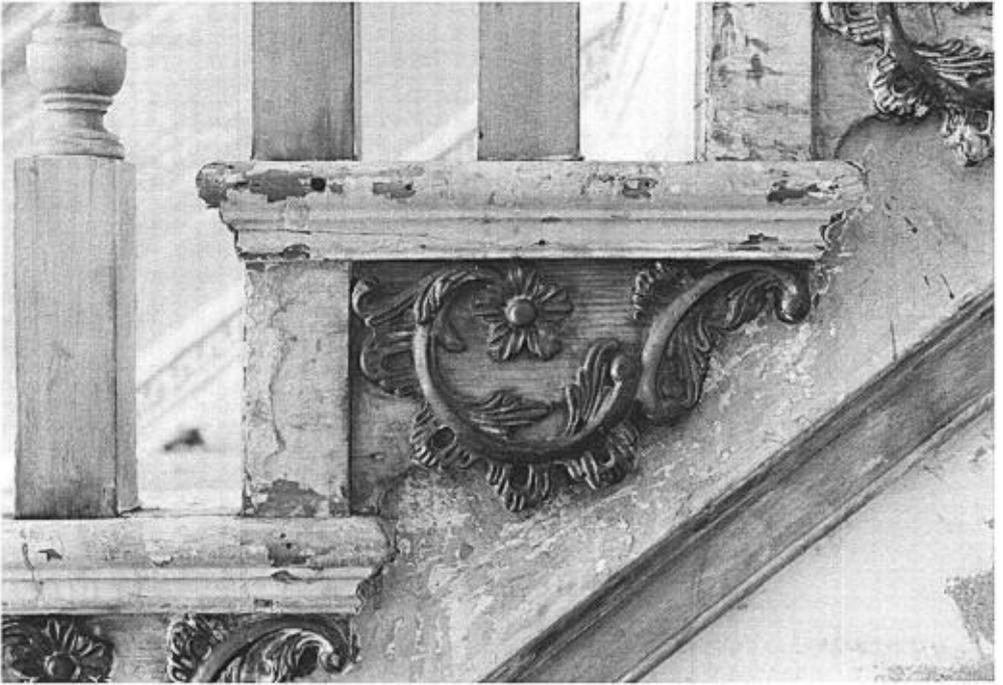


Fig. 9. Applied ornament on the stringer ends of the main stairs, Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house. When the paint was stripped from the staircase this moulding was revealed to be cast metal. Photograph by the author, 1990.

that the family was trying to recreate for Avis Brown on a smaller scale the grandeur and ambiance of the mansion house of her late husband, and of the houses of his brothers and their peers in the community.

Between 1766 and 1774 Nicholas, Joseph, and John Brown built themselves brick houses on their ancestral land along the waterfront of the Providence River. The only one of these three still standing is the forty-seven-by-forty-four-foot house Joseph Brown designed for himself in 1774. Though it was converted to business use in 1791, its parlor retains its pedimented two-story mantelpiece of the style illustrated in Salmon's *Palladio Londinensis*.

A century ago, when the house was pictured in the *American Architect and Building News*, the dining room mantelpiece was also intact (fig. 11).

Nothing is known today of the interior of John Brown's riverfront house; by 1788 he had moved up the hill to the new fifty-by-fifty-five-foot brick mansion designed for him by his brother Joseph. Fitted with elaborate woodwork, including spectacular two-story mantelpieces on both the first and second floors, John Brown's new house soon became renowned for the splendor of its interiors. When she came to dine in 1789 Abigail Adams declared it "one of the grandest I have seen in the country." She

added, "Everything I have seen in and about it wore the marks of magnificence and taste."<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, nothing is known about the original interiors of the mansion house where Avis lived during her marriage to Nicholas Brown from 1785 to 1791 (fig. 12). Demolished in 1929, the building had been used for commercial purposes since 1814, when Nicholas Brown II moved his family up the hill to the mansion house he had purchased from the heirs of Colonel Joseph Nightingale, across the street from the house built by his uncle John Brown.<sup>28</sup>

But in 1785, when Avis Binney married Nicholas Brown following the death of Rhoda Jenckes, his first wife and the mother of his children, the finest houses in Providence were still on Towne Street, later named Main Street. It is reasonable to assume that the architectural woodwork in the brick mansion where Avis lived and reigned with her husband was as fine as that of its neighbors. In any event, it is certain that its first-floor ceilings were high enough to accommodate the carved mahogany desk and bookcase, nine feet, five inches tall, that stood in the parlor.<sup>29</sup>

In the absence of any physical evi-

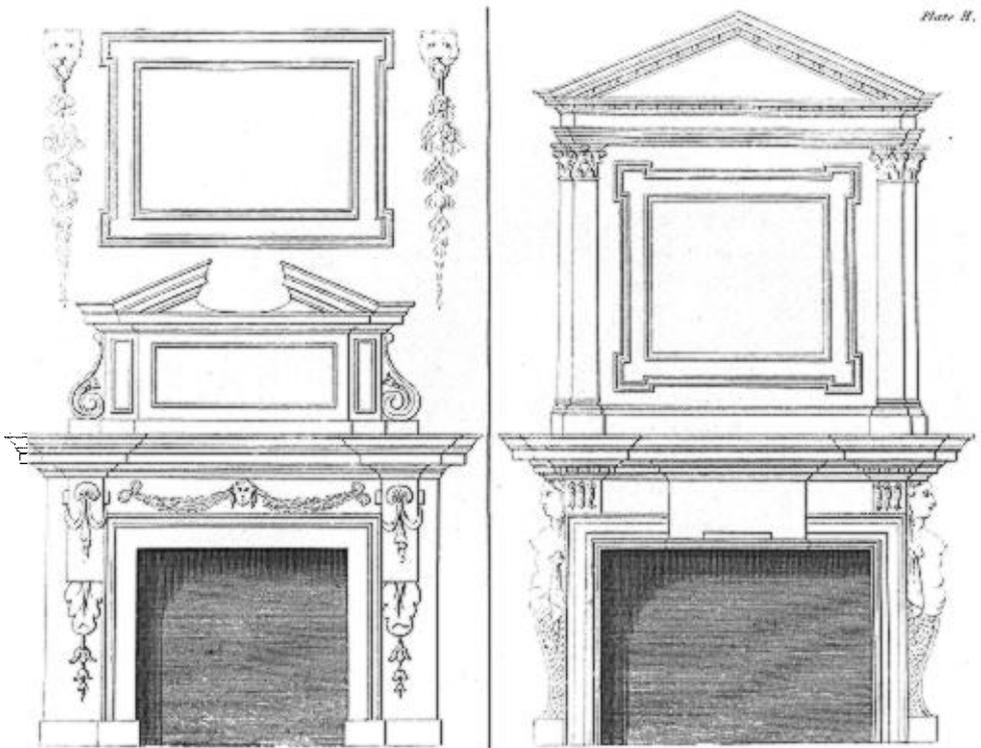


Fig. 10. "Chimney Pieces," Plate H from William Salmon, *Palladio Londinensis* (London, 1748). The interpretation of these designs by eighteenth-century American artisans tended to be more restrained than those of their British counterparts. Courtesy John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.

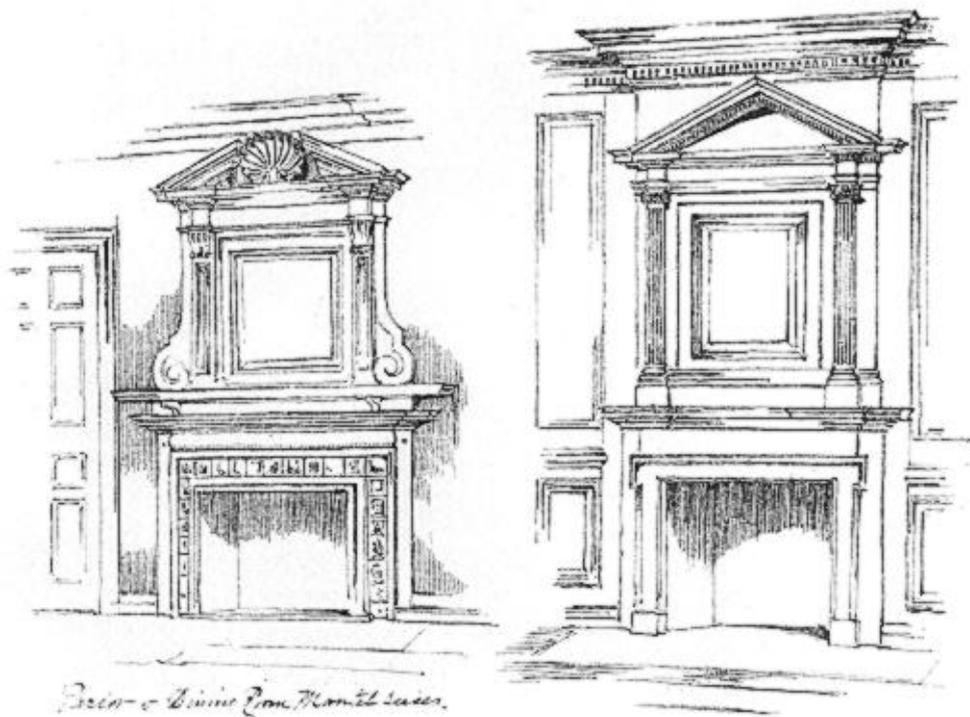


Fig. 11. "Parlor and Dining Room Mantel Pieces," detail from D. Eldon Deane, "The Old Providence Bank Building," *American Architect and Building News* (September 3, 1887). Courtesy John Hay Library, Brown University.

dence documenting the interiors of the Nicholas Brown house, the woodwork from the forty-one-by-thirty-eight-foot William Russell house can be used as a surrogate. The fourth of the large, three-story square brick dwellings built in pre-Revolutionary Providence, it is still standing a few hundred yards north of the Nicholas Brown house, and just around the corner from Avis Brown's new house (fig. 13). Similar to the Nicholas Brown house in design, size, age, and material, the Russell house was considered slightly more valuable—it was appraised in the Providence direct tax assessment of 1798 at \$4,300 compared to Nicholas Brown's

considerable \$4,000—possibly because of its more favorable location.<sup>30</sup> The two houses were also similar in plan: the inventory of Nicholas Brown's personal estate, taken after his death in 1791, reveals that his mansion house, like the Russell house, had two front parlors, each with its own fireplace, flanking a central entry hall.<sup>31</sup> Unlike the Nicholas Brown house, whose interior woodwork disappeared without a trace, the Russell house woodwork enjoyed some celebrity. In 1920 Luke Vincent Lockwood purchased the paneling from both front parlors and the central entry hall for display at the Brooklyn Museum, which subsequently

sold the southwest parlor to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the stair hall to the Denver Art Museum.<sup>32</sup>

Although no building records have survived by which the craftsmen responsible for the interiors in the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house can be identified, the consistency of style and quality in the two-story mantelpieces made for this house and the neighboring William Russell house suggests that the same shop may have been responsible for much of the high-style woodwork made in Providence

during these years. The town was still too small to support a large number of skilled craftsmen—in 1790 its population numbered just 6,380, as compared, for example, to Boston's 18,300—and there was not much call for finish carpenters capable of producing work of this quality. One Providence craftsman who could have produced such sophisticated work was Martin Seamans, who inscribed in his copy of *Palladio Londinensis* "Martin Seamans His Book Bought in Boston in the year 1773 in June . . . in the same year



Fig. 12. *The 1766 brick mansion house of Nicholas Brown, about 1923, photograph from Howard W. Preston, "Rochambeau and the French Troops in Providence, 1780-82," Rhode Island Historical Society Collections (January 1924). Courtesy Rhode Island Historical Society.*

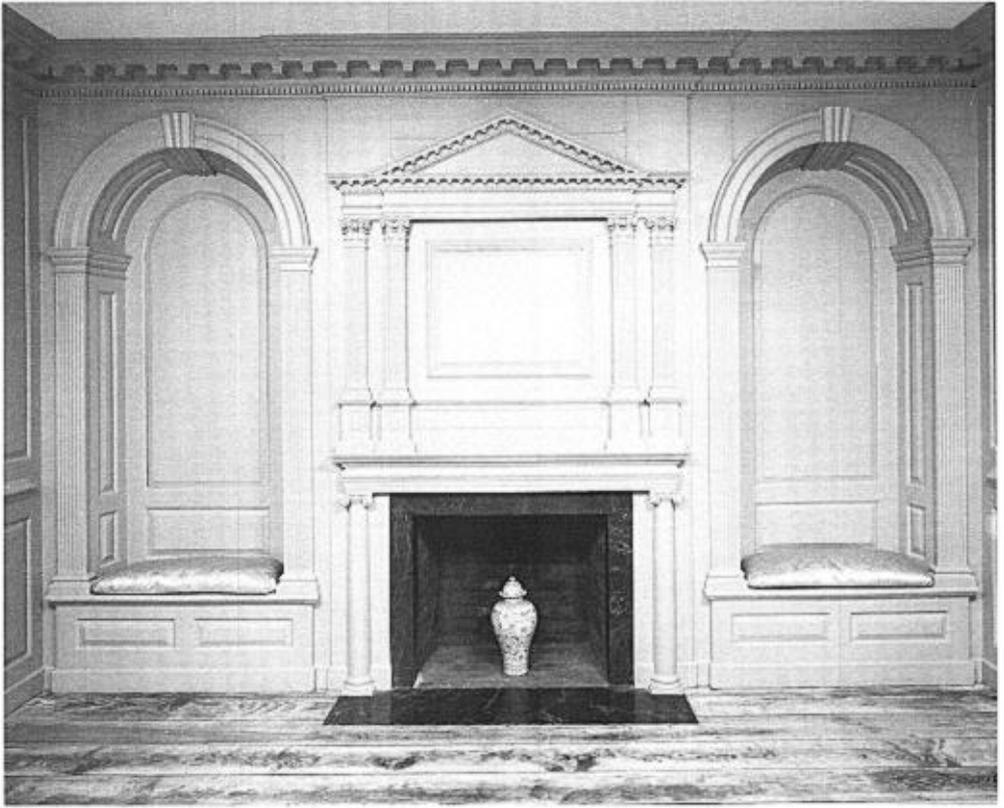


Fig. 13. *Architectural woodwork from the northeast parlor of the William Russell house, about 1772, as installed in the Brooklyn Museum of Art during its 1980 renovation. Courtesy Brooklyn Museum of Art.*

the Jos Brown's hous was bult."<sup>33</sup> If Seamans or someone like him had produced the finish work for the Russell house or the houses of the Brown brothers, he would have been the man to finish the new house for Avis Brown. Whoever made her fireplace mantels was familiar with the local practice of setting off the painted pine woodwork with architectural elements of carved and molded mahogany. At the John Brown house the carpenters used mahogany for the Ionic columns and the double pilasters; at the Avis Brown house the astragals below the columns were turned from mahogany.

The taste for sumptuous carving, complex moldings, and the highly wrought two-story mantels introduced by William Salmon in *Palladio Londinensis* in 1739 lingered in Providence at least until the end of the eighteenth century. The architect Joseph Brown thought them appropriate for his brother John's great mansion in 1786, and a decade later a price was still being quoted for them in the *Rules for House-Carpenters Work in the Town of Providence*. Thus they would have been considered still in vogue in 1791, when the Dodge house was being fitted out for Avis Brown.

In the absence of any surviving building accounts that could date the construction of the finish work, the possibility must be considered that these elegant architectural interiors were installed by Seril Dodge before he sold his house to the Browns. For this to have been the case, that artisan/shopkeeper must have had both the inclination and the means to ape the houses of the finest families of Providence. But the woodwork he installed five years later in the larger house he built next door was more modest than the finish now found in his first house. In his second house the molding on the fireplace mantels, door casings, chair rails, and baseboards was plain by comparison and lacked carving altogether. This style of ornament was also consonant with his social position in Providence and his financial means. Given that it was the Browns' stated intention to "handsomely finish" the first house in 1791, it seems likely that the original woodwork for the house Seril Dodge built in 1786 was no more sumptuous than that of the house he built in 1791. Instead, it seems most likely that the "handsome finish" was introduced to Avis's new house during the summer and fall of 1791, inspired by the family's desire to provide her with a stylish abode and to recreate for her, though on a scale more suitable to a woman who would eventually be living alone, the familiar appearance of the grand house she would be vacating. By intentionally creating an architectural environment in this style they were respecting the intentions of the deceased to provide a good home for his widow, honoring a woman

for whom the entire family felt great affection, and making a public statement about the social position their family occupied in Providence.

Avis Brown was forty-three years old when she was widowed. Nicholas Brown anticipated that his wife would maintain an active life for many years after his death, and in his will he made the provisions that would allow her to continue to live not only comfortably but stylishly, and in harmony with the stepchildren she had helped to raise. First he stipulated that she should have "all the Furniture & Books she brought to me on our inter-marriage, meaning also to replace to her the Bedding & Furniture that was accidentally consumed by fire." Then, along with the house he intended for her, he left the funds to renovate it to her liking. And finally, the outright bequest and the annuity he left her was substantially increased by his children. Clearly she had the means to furnish the new house in style.

The way in which Avis Brown furnished her new home suggests that she was a socially active woman with a taste for modern belongings. The inventory of her personal estate, prepared after her death in 1807, reveals that she furnished the house with specific functions for each room and new kinds of furniture reflecting this specialized use (fig. 14). She used the southwest parlor as a dining room, with a mahogany sideboard and a matched set of eight dining chairs. She had enough wine glasses to serve nineteen people and enough silver teaspoons for twenty-one. Across the hall in the southeast parlor she kept her pianoforte

and stool. In the corner was a mahogany bookcase large enough to hold ninety-eight of her books. Judging from the objects she owned and the way she arranged them, the formal rooms of her house were well suited for entertaining.<sup>34</sup>

And, although she lived alone after her stepdaughter was married in 1792, Avis apparently did not lack for company. A long obituary in the *Providence Gazette* helps to support the image of an interesting and engaging woman whose parlors were frequently filled with visitors: "Her acquaintance with books was very extensive, and her taste for literature exquisite and refined. The precision of her judgment was discovered in her correct and copious powers of expression . . . and has afforded great Satisfaction and improvement to her intimate friends. . . . Such was her natural animation and vivacity, that she seemed all intelligence; . . . she was capable of the most sincere and ardent friendship . . . and was susceptible to the strongest attachments of kindred and numerous friends."<sup>35</sup>

The heirs of Nicholas Brown continued to own the house for almost a century after Avis's death. As it passed from generation to generation it was used for lodging unmarried family members or was let to other genteel tenants of limited means.<sup>36</sup> In 1841 Nicholas Brown II bequeathed the house to his own son Nicholas III with the provision that Amey Ann Stelle, the maiden sister of his late wife, be given life tenancy there.<sup>37</sup> One consequence of this long-term, nonresident ownership was that the family put into the house only those few improve-

ments necessary to maintain the building and added a coat of paint now and then to brighten up the interiors for their relatives. As a result the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house passed into the twentieth century with much of its historic fabric intact. In part through admiration for the fine woodwork installed for Avis Brown, and in part through the inertia of absentee landlords, the family property was well preserved for more than a century.

The opening years of the twentieth century brought significant changes to the old house. In 1906 all the property along the north side of Thomas Street was purchased by the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad Company, which ran a rail line through the back yards of all six houses on the street. Before selling the house, John Carter Brown Woods, the great grandson of Nicholas Brown II who then owned the property, removed the fine two-story mantels from both front parlors and had them reinstalled in his daughter's house. In 1934, when architects from the Historic American Buildings Survey came to Providence to record the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house, they had to travel to East Greenwich, Rhode Island, fifteen miles to the south of Providence, to draw its most notable features. Their drawings record them as if they were in situ, with a terse note that they were "restored" in the drawing, the only clue that the mantels were in fact removed from the house.<sup>38</sup> Three years later, when she described the house in *The Early Homes of Rhode Island*, Antoinette Downing published a photograph of the mantel from the southeast parlor in its

Inventory of the Personal Estate of Mrs. Avice Brown, Deceased.		199
North West Parlor		
1 Sofa	25	
1 Mahogany Folding Chair	5	
6 Glass Bottom Seats	9	
1 Round Table and Stool	70	
1 Mahogany Pembroke Table	14	
1 Looking Glass 34 by 47	2	
1 Mahogany Book Case	25	
2 1/2 doz. Mathematical Sundry Books	2	151
6 Vols. Dr. King's Family Calendar	12	
5 D. Middle Elements of History	10	
4 D. Hunters Sacred Geography	5	
2 D. Lighthe on Plea	3	
2 D. Baines Lectures	3	
2 D. Horn in the Realm	3	
1 D. Perriens Dictionary	1	37
4 D. Oakes Various Subjects	32	70
2 D. Thomas This edition of the Bible in boards	8	
1 D. Gutheridge Grammar	1	
21 D. Oakes, Union	8	10
6 D. D.	2	21
1 Singing Book	60	
1 Floor Carpet (Common)	6	58 95
South West Parlor		
1 Pembroke Table	4	
1 Sofa	10	
1 Mahogany Side Chair	12	
1 Looking Glass 16 by 27	6	
3 Dining Chairs (Blue Upholstery)	6	
1 set plated Candle Sticks with Snuffers and Tray	2	
1 doz. Brass Sconces	1	41
1 floor Carpet	7	
2 doz. Brass Hand Saws	7	
2 Marble top Wood Stands	1	51

Fig. 14. "Inventory of the Personal Estate of Mrs. Avice Brown, Deceased," August 22, 1807, Archives of the City of Providence. Photograph by the author.

new setting and clarified the fact that it could no longer be found in the building where it originally stood.<sup>39</sup>

With a busy rail line now running through their back yards, the six houses along Thomas Street no longer formed an attractive residential community. Gradually they were adapted to other uses. In 1906 the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house was purchased by Sidney Adams, a grocer who planned to open a store on the ground floor and live above the shop. Deciding that the arrangement of four small rooms around a central stair hall did not lend itself to this new commercial use, the new owner engaged the Providence architects Stone, Carpenter and Sheldon

to design a more efficient space for a grocery store. Instead of gutting the first-floor rooms to suit the new owner's commercial needs and then building a additional upper floor to replace the residential space lost to renovation, the architects raised the entire building one story, thus preserving the original two floors of residential space while creating an efficient new shop on the street level (fig. 15). When they lifted the house they demolished the two interior chimneys to create a wide-open space on the new ground floor. Although the mantelpieces were gone from the parlors and the chimneys were gone from the rooftop, the remaining architectural finish work of the



Fig. 15. *The Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house of about 1786 and the Seril Dodge house of 1790, 1908-19, photograph by John Hess. This view was made after the first Seril Dodge house had been raised one story but before 1920, when the two buildings were connected with a second-story bridge. Courtesy Rhode Island Historical Society, Rhi x3 6404.*

historic interiors was preserved.<sup>40</sup> The architects convinced the owners that it would be easier save the woodwork than to rip it out.<sup>41</sup>

After the death of Sidney Adams in 1919 the old house was purchased by the Providence Art Club, which owned Seril Dodge's brick house next door and needed room to expand. The Art Club connected the two houses with an archway across the alley that passes between them and used the complex of buildings as its clubhouse and studios while renting the ground floor back to the Adams Market until 1940. Today the Providence Art Club owns four of the six buildings on the street and maintains an exhibition gallery on the new ground floor of the

Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house.

In 1985, after completing extensive structural repairs to the building, the members of the Providence Art Club set out to repaint and paper the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house in an effort to regain its late eighteenth-century splendor. A study commissioned from the SPNEA Conservation Center confirmed that the usual palette of colors known to late eighteenth-century Providence was originally used to paint the woodwork in putty, cream, and olive.<sup>42</sup> When the woodwork was stripped in preparation for repainting in original colors the full details of the mouldings, which had been obscured under many layers of paint, were revealed (fig. 16).<sup>43</sup> The most surprising

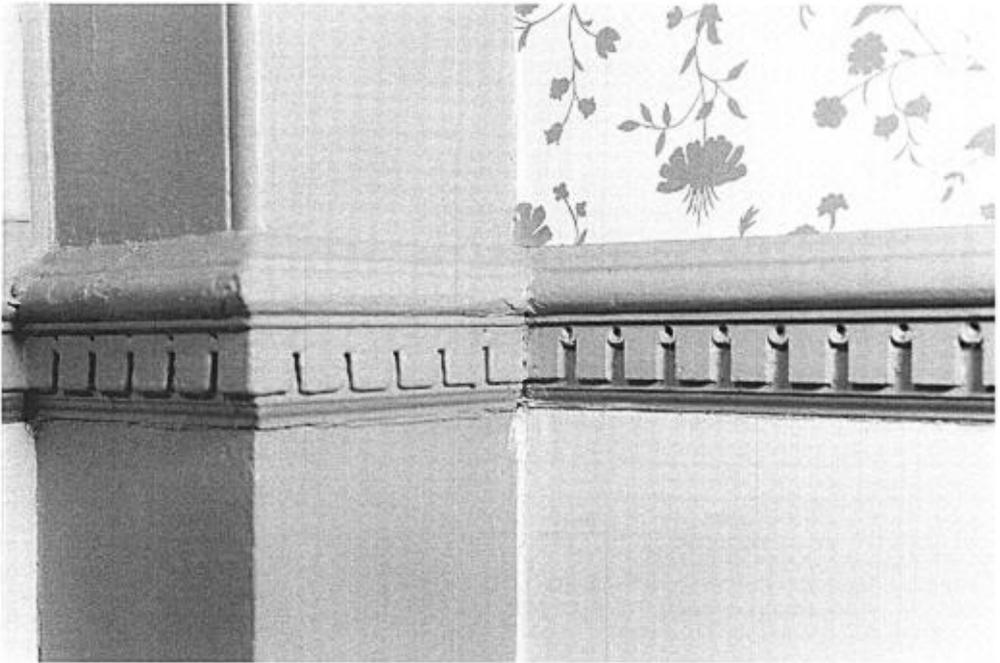


Fig. 16. *Chair rail in the southwest parlor, Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house, August 1990, with molding stripped and repainted on the right and with its cumulative coats of paint on the left. Photograph by the author.*



Fig. 17. *Serge Hasagawa stripping paint on the main stairs of the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house, June 1990. Photograph by the author.*

discovery was the composition of the rococo ornament of vines, leaves, and flowers applied to the stair ends, one of the decorative details that caught the eye of the architects from the Historic American Buildings Survey. When workers removed the paint from this molding (fig. 17) they found that it had been cast from a soft metal much resembling pewter—a feature discovered in only one other eighteenth-century Providence house. The triglyphs of the cornice frieze in the Joseph Baker house on Arnold Street on College Hill, built not far from and at about the same time as the Seril Dodge-Avis Brown house, were made of the same material.

Encouraged by the interest shown by the Historic American Buildings Survey in the historic architecture of the

old house, the Providence Art Club had made inquiries about reproducing the two-story mantels that had been removed by the last of the Brown family owners. As it turned out, in the depths of the Depression the club was unable to raise the funds to make new copies of the old mantels. It did, however, secure a promise from the Brown family descendant who owned the two houses then containing the mantels that if the descendants of Nicholas Brown ever ceased to have a use for them they might one day return them to the house where they originally stood.<sup>44</sup> That day came in 1990, when Mrs. John Carter Brown Washburn, widow of the great-great-great-grandson of Nicholas Brown II, bequeathed the original mantels to the Art Club, which was then in the conclud-

ing stages of renovating the house. When they were carried back into the rooms they had left some eighty-four years earlier, they were set in place with only a little fitting required to accommodate the settling

of a building that had lost its chimneys, had been raised fifteen feet off the ground, and had been structurally reinforced several times in their absence (fig. 18).

Now restored to their historical

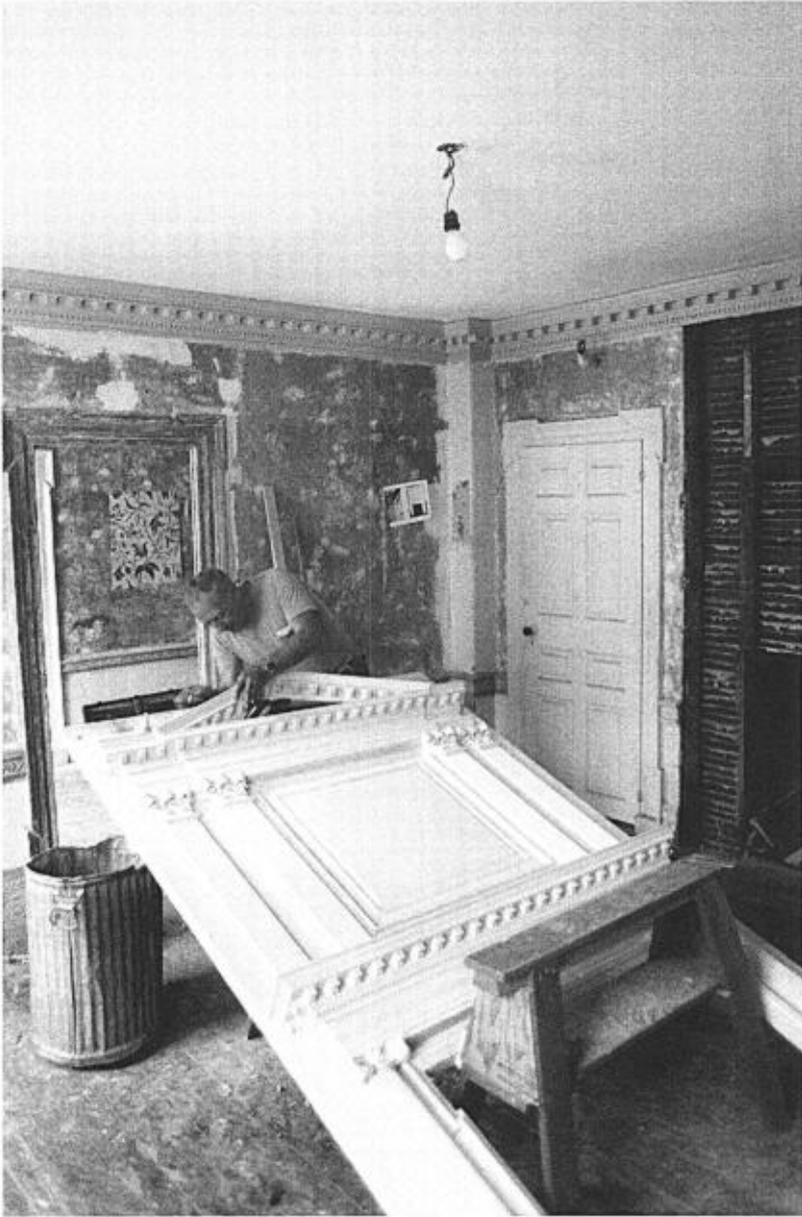


Fig. 18. *Joseph Gauch fitting the mantelpiece in the southeast parlor of the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house, August 1990. Photograph by the author.*

appearance, the formal rooms of the Seril Dodge house once again suggest the sense of the grandeur and formidable presence that was intended for the new residence of Avis Brown in 1791. Though smaller in scale than the woodwork in the mansion houses of eighteenth-century Providence, the “handsome finish” here dominates the room from floor to ceiling. Even today it conveys the message that, although she lived a small house, there could be no question about the social position and economic status of the woman for whom it was designed. ❀

*Robert P. Emlen is University Curator and senior lecturer in American Civilization at Brown University and teaches in the Department of Art and Architectural History at the Rhode Island School of Design. He is past president of the Providence Art Club, where he directed the recent restoration of the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house.*

## NOTES

I wish to thank Thomas S. Michie and William McKenzie Woodward for their assistance with my research for this article and their helpful comments on an early draft of the manuscript, and Denise Bastien for her lengthy search for the accounts of Nicholas Brown’s estate in the Brown Family papers.

1. The principal source for the history of Thomas Street is George Leland Miner, *Angell’s Lane: The History of a Little Street in Providence* (Providence: Akerman-Standard Press, 1948). According to Miner, the Angell family were Anglicans and could bring themselves to sell the land directly to the

Charitable Baptist Society only through an intermediate buyer acceptable to both parties. Miner, *Angell’s Lane*, 47.

2. John Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence* (Providence: The Book Shop, 1957). See also Norman M. Isham, *The Meeting House of the First Baptist Church in Providence: A History of the Fabric* (Providence: The Charitable Baptist Society, 1925), 2, and Christopher P. Monkhouse, “Evidence and Use of Architectural Drawings in Rhode Island,” in William H. Jordy and Christopher P. Monkhouse, *Buildings on Paper: Rhode Island Architectural Drawings, 1825-1945* (Providence: Brown University, The Rhode Island Historical Society, and the Rhode Island School of Design, 1982), 6.
3. *Massachusetts Magazine* 1, 7 (August 1789).
4. James B. Hedges, *The Browns of Providence Plantations: The Colonial Years* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1968), 198; Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 50.
5. Miner, *Angell’s Lane*, 40.
6. *Ibid.*, 86.
7. Deed from Moses Brown to Seril Dodge, Providence Deeds 21/638.
8. Though many houses on the north end of Benefit Street are still standing today, the 1780s houses on the Weybosset side of the Providence River have all been demolished. Their appearance about 1824 was illustrated by Francis Read about 1870-80 in a series of drawings now in the Graphics Collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society and reproduced in *Westminster Street, Providence, As It Was about 1824* (Providence, The Rhode Island Historical Society, 1917) and in *The Providence Magazine*, April 1917, 213. The author is indebted to William

- McKenzie Woodward, chief planner for the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, for sharing this observation.
9. Deed from Moses Brown to Seril Dodge, Providence Deeds 21/699.
  10. For Nicholas Brown's mansion house see Howard W. Preston, "Rochambeau and the French Troops in Providence in 1780-81-82," *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections* 17, 1 (January 1924): 13. See also Providence Direct Tax Assessment of 1798, Book A, 116, Rhode Island Historical Society, where the inventory of taxable real estate lists both a store and a wharf on the mansion house property. See also Henry R. Chase, comp., *Owners and Occupants of the Lots, Houses, and Shops in the Town of Providence, Rhode Island in 1798* (Providence: for the author, 1914).
  11. The Last Will and Testament of Nicholas Brown, Providence Wills 7/249. When he prepared his will he left the real property to be divided between his two sons Nicholas and Moses, but Moses died a month after the will was written. Nicholas Brown died without rewriting his will but knowing that Nicholas Brown II was his only male heir.
  12. A bill from N. Gladding and Sons to the estate of Nicholas Brown "for shaving Mr. Brown February 4th to May 25" 1791 suggests that Brown was physically incapacitated for the last four months of his life. Brown Papers, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.
  13. "A Copy of Instructions from Nicholas Brown to his Children," February 1791, Nicholas Brown Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society.
  14. Providence Wills 22/352.
  15. Seril Dodge described Angell's Lane as "the central part of town" in his advertisement in *Providence Gazette*, Aug. 27, 1797.
  16. Last Will and Testament of Nicholas Brown, Providence Wills 7/251.
  17. For the chronology of partners in the family business see Hedges, *Browns of Providence Plantations: The Colonial Years*, 20
  18. Thomas Dickason and Co. to Brown and Benson, Sept. 30, 1791; Brown and Benson to Thomas Dickason and Co, Jan. 9, 1792; John E. Mumford and Co. to Brown and Benson, Nov. 4, 1791, Brown Papers, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University. The chandelier is illustrated in Jane C. Giffen, "Chandeliers in Federal New England," *Antiques*, March 1972, 528-29.
  19. *Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, Mar. 10, 1792
  20. "I hereby desire and recommend to my said wife and all my children," wrote Nicholas Brown in his will, "that they keep up the Family together as hereafter so long that the same may be agreeable"; Providence Wills 22/250.
  21. For information about George Bright, see Walter Muir Whitehead, ed., *Boston Furniture of the Eighteenth Century* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1974). On Appleton Prentiss, see Richard C. Nylander, *Wallpaper in New England: Selections from the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities* (Boston: SPNEA, 1986), 15-16.
  22. Correspondence and invoices concerning wallpaper, looking glasses, andirons, furniture, and chintz can be found in Head and Amory to Brown and Benson, Oct. 10, 11, 20, 28, and 29, 1791; Nov. 8 and 10, 1791; Dec. 2 and 31, 1791. Correspondence and invoices concerning silver can be found in

- Daniel Rogers to Brown and Benson, Nov. 14 and 30, 1791. Correspondence concerning the pianoforte can be found in Day Books of Brown and Benson, Nov. 1, 1791 and Feb. 2, 1792, Brown Papers, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.
23. Providence Carpenters, *Rules for House-Carpenters Work in the Town of Providence* (Providence, 1796), 23.
  24. *Rules for House-Carpenters Work*, 25.
  25. *Ibid.*, 23.
  26. See Monkhouse, "Evidence and Use of Architectural Drawings," 5-9. See also Timothy T. More, *Architectural Pattern Books in Eighteenth-Century America* (Providence: John Carter Brown Library, 1990).
  27. Quoted in Antoinette F. Downing, "John Brown House," *Antiques*, May 1965, 562. Three of the house's finest mantelpieces are illustrated in this article.
  28. For the old mansion house on Main Street, see Preston, "Rochambeau and the French Troops in Providence," 13. The interior woodwork may have been altered early on: in his will, written in 1838, Nicholas Brown II mentioned that the house was then occupied by the Blackstone Canal Bank. Last Will and Testament of Nicholas Brown II, Providence Wills 14/397-413. On the demolition of this house, see *Providence Journal*, Dec. 17, 1929.
  29. The desk and bookcase is recorded in the "Inventory of the Personal Estate of Nicholas Brown, Esquire, Deceased, November 7 1791," Providence Wills 7/257, and is illustrated in "The Magnificent Nicholas Brown Desk and Bookcase," sale no. 6844, lot 100 (New York: Christie's, 1989), n.p.
  30. Providence Direct Tax Assessment of 1798, Book A, 116, 119, Rhode Island Historical Society.
  31. Inventory of the Personal Estate of Nicholas Brown, Esquire, Deceased, Nov. 7, 1791, Providence Wills 7/257-264.
  32. Donald C. Peirce and Hope Alswang, *American Interiors: Period Rooms at the Brooklyn Museum* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1983), 22-28.
  33. Seamans's copy of *Palladio Londinensis* is in the collection of the John Hay Library, Brown University.
  34. Inventory of the Personal Estate of Mrs. Avice Brown, Deceased, August 22 1807," Providence Wills 10/199-202.
  35. "Deaths," *Providence Gazette*, Aug. 22, 1807.
  36. See, for instance, Seebert J. Goldowsky, ed., *Yankee Surgeon: The Life and Times of Usher Parsons (1788-1868)* (Boston: Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine in cooperation with the Rhode Island Publications Society, 1988), 171-72, for the letters of Mary Holmes Parsons, the sister of Oliver Wendell Holmes, who in 1822 described their boarding in the house then occupied by Dr. Levi Wheaton while her husband lectured in the medical department of Brown University.
  37. Last Will and Testament of Nicholas Brown II, Providence Wills 14/397-413.
  38. "The Seril Dodge/Avis Brown House Providence R.I.," drawing by Domenic Thomas Russillo, Mar. 19, 1934, Historic American Buildings Survey, Library of Congress.
  39. Miner, *Angell's Lane*, 103; and Antoinette F. Downing, *Early Homes of Rhode Island* (Richmond, Va.: Garrett and Massie, 1937), 303-4.
  40. Period photographs showing curtains in

- the windows suggest that the folding interior shutters were gone before 1906. Their presence is documented only by the outlines of butt hinges formerly fastened to the window casings and is inferred also by the absence of window curtains in Avis Brown's probate inventory.
41. Kenneth Young, "Dodge-Brown House Providence, Rhode Island," Historic American Building Survey (HABS 3-7), 1934. Over the years Martin Seamans's copy of *Palladio Londinensis* was owned by a succession of architects and builders. By 1907 it was in the possession of architect Alfred Stone, whose firm was employed to raise the Seril Dodge/Avis Brown house.
  42. Sara B. Chase, "Seril Dodge House, Providence, Rhode Island: Study of Original and Early Paints" (Typescript, SPNEA Conservation Center, 1985), Providence Art Club Archives.
  43. In each room a floor-to-ceiling section of woodwork with the cumulative layers of paint was left undisturbed during the renovations of 1990.
  44. Antoinette Downing, Chairman, the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, interview with author, March 1985. See also letter from Helen F. Washburn to Antoinette Downing, Oct. 20, 1935, Providence Art Club Archives.