



# THE MONOGRAPH SERIES

RECORDS OF EARLY AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE  
AS SOURCE MATERIAL

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## VOLUME XXI

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### MONOGRAPH FOUR

## The Houses and Villages of North Smithfield, Rhode Island

BY M. S. FRANKLIN

*Research and Measured Drawings by Frank Chouteau Brown*

*Photographs by Arthur C. Haskell*

Following up the valley of the Blackstone River—at one time agriculturally fertile; but during the last one hundred years even more fertile in the close crowding mills and villages that line both its steep-pitched boundaries—from the Bay head at Providence toward the north; one comes finally to that point where it passes from the present state of Rhode Island over the Massachusetts boundary, at Woonsocket. Woonsocket itself is a busy mill-community, unevenly perched upon these same steep, slippery banks; its area covering hardly even the present populous and built-up sections of the place, which is spilling over its limits into the neighboring townships for much of its residential suburbs.

Of the surrounding territory, the largest part of that most conveniently adjacent, is now called North Smithfield—although both the Smithfields (and a considerably larger area besides)—were all once part of a single considerably larger township. To the East, the township of Cumberland—once itself a small part of a former populous section of Massachusetts, that early in 1800 lacked only one vote of providing the site for the State Capitol; but now incorporated into Rhode Island—also takes part of this same population overflow. But the several village centers still to be found in this area owe nothing to this recent upstart of the northern boundary, but had their origins in, and still remain to testify to, the early growth of industrialism in this portion of New England.

Of these villages, the three most northern ones are situated upon a tributary to the Blackstone, known as

Branch River; that, along with its tributary, the Chepachet, is fed by the many large lakes or ponds contained within the northwestern townships of Rhode Island, of which only those along the extreme edge of the state toward Connecticut drain westward into the Quinebaug River, which in its turn flows down into the Thames. These villages—along with Glendale, Mohegan and Nasonville; all in the township of Burrillville, just to the west—are Slatersville, Forestdale, and Union Village.

Possibly, too, the little village of Manville—hardly a mile over the eastward boundary of North Smithfield into Lincoln—should almost be included within this group, geographically. It resembles them in age, is laid out with a semblance of *arranged* disposition of its units (what would today be termed “Town Planning”—with two capitals, at least!) around a small central Green, and has its Church placed as an important central element of its plan. If anything, despite the steep inclination of its site toward the swift-running Blackstone River, it possesses perhaps more general relation to the idea of “planning,” that has within only the last dozen years come to be accepted on this Continent—whence it was derived from the European Mill Villages and Industrial Communities, that began to develop in England from about forty years ago—than its sister community of Slatersville; with which we are the more immediately concerned in this issue.

But to turn first to the consideration of “Union Village”—which cannot even be found upon the offi-



cial State "Highway Map"! Although now being developed—not to say "overwhelmed"—as merely one of the residential suburbs of Woonsocket; Union Village was one of the comparatively early settlements made in this region, at a time when it was not yet evident that a large part of the population of the section was to derive a living from the early industrial demands of New England, and the power that was to be supplied from the Blackstone River. So it is found located upon a slightly hilltop; with its few remaining old houses divided by the busy thoroughfare of a modern concrete roadway; over which the hurried traveler might easily pass without the realization that the locality possessed any age or interest derived from early associations or settlement.

Its oldest "Tavern" still stands; with openings boarded—a huge hulk, at one end of the village, frowning north along the road; but unless some worthy use is soon found for it, it may not much longer succeed in defying conditions imposed both by weather and economy.

Aside from the old Arnold Tavern, the exterior of the Judge Carpenter house retains some of its original appearance; although changing ownerships and conditions have effected their accustomed results upon the interior. The Walter Allen house, near by, is one that retains the interior in better state of originality than is usual; although the work, dating from 1802, is expressive of the thinner and more delicate character that is usually found in woodwork of a dozen or fifteen years later. Not far away from the Allen house, down the side street, and a little to its rear, is the building that was the first Bank of the region—now made over into a small dwelling. It originally stood on the corner of the main street, from which position it has been removed to its present location. The change in use, has naturally also resulted in considerable changes in structure—both inside and out—and it now presents little evidence of its former usefulness.

The Capt. Daniel Arnold House, built in 1714, was among the earliest of those left from the first dozen or so dwellings in the Village group. While the original structure dates from that year; the present appearance of the building hardly indicates that fact. It has been added to, or rebuilt, at various times; and while some of the early work remains incorporated into the present house; the porch itself must date from one of the later reparations, probably about 1800.

This porch is representative of an unusual and individual local treatment of the entrance doorway feature, quite different from any other type that has been as well and thoroughly developed in this region of New England.

In Union Village itself may be found at least four examples of this distinctive and well marked type. All

are very much alike; differing only in the handling of their detail. Each has a porch of ample depth, and rather wide spacing of the corner columns. Each has a plaster ceiling, of spacious arch segment section. In each case the house wall, inside the porch wall pilasters, is rusticated—in contrast to the remainder of the front wall surface, which is clapboarded after the usual and conventional fashion. In more than one case these porches now appear on dwellings that are themselves obviously of dates much older than the classical lines of these porches would seem to suggest.

That one which has been chosen for one of the measured drawings in this Monograph is a case in point. The house itself dates back originally to 1714, being perhaps the third oldest now to be found in the existing group. The details of this particular example seem more *naïf* and interesting than any of the others. For that reason it has been chosen for detailed illustration. The same reasons suggest that it may be the earliest local example of the type; and that the others—or some of them—at any rate—may have later been modeled upon it. Certainly the more sophisticated molding sections and treatment of the Allen doorway, along with the much smaller scale of the quoining, would suggest it as likely to have been of a later and more definitely classical school than the varied sections and ornament of this more sturdy and forceful example. Even the proportions of the paneled door itself are unusual; while the sectional projected caps that crown the two side architraves of the doorway are found in many other local examples, and the section through the keystone, along with its proportions and treatment, also recur elsewhere in the region; a similarity being traceable even in the key found in the other doorway detail, from the adjoining village of Slatersville, three miles away.

The original owners and builders of the Slatersville group were John and William Slater, who started the manufacture of cotton in the United States, beginning with a mill at Pawtucket, which is still standing—then shortly after establishing another upon the site of Slatersville. At that time, the problem confronting these mill builders was much the same as that faced by the Manufacturers who built Bournedale and Port Sunlight. The location of the mill was more or less controlled by the availability of power and adjoining site—but it was necessary also to provide habitations for the factory help that were requisite to the success of the project. And so, in addition to the new mill, they built dwellings for their factory foremen and workers; and churches—and schools, too, for their children—along with the required stores, village center, hall and other necessities that were essential to secure the happiness and health of their employees, and make for the final success of the whole enterprise.





*Porch and Doorway*

THE WALTER ALLEN HOUSE—1802—UNION VILLAGE, RHODE ISLAND

[ 51 ]



Slatersville itself—an unusual and charming mill village—contains the one individual and almost unique example of doorway that appears in the other measured drawing in this Monograph. Nothing else of a similar design is now to be found either in these sections of northern Rhode Island, nor in those adjoining them over the border of Massachusetts. The whole handling of the doorway is obviously local and rough in workmanship. The carving along the inner member of the architrave framing the entrance is roughly done, as though by a carpenter with only a gouge chisel for tool. The overwide pilasters are not in conformation with any classical proportions; just as their treatment—partly fluted; partly paneled, in height; and the final absurdity of cutting a glazed sash for a sidelight out of their very bosom, so to speak!—entirely defies the conventions, at nearly every point.

The rough and unusual sectioned capital and base moldings are also unconventional, though well proportioned to their variation of customary precedent. But the final touch is the decoration contained in the upper panel of this pilaster—what would normally be regarded as the frieze of the composition. Here is located a crudely turned half-urn outline, again ornamented by grooved gouge chisel cuttings, to which have been appended unmistakable wings, with the feathering again suggested by the same instrument! Nothing else anything like this particular piece of detail can be recalled, except on some early headstones, where flying hourglasses or deaths heads, with similar crudely delineated pairs of wings, may sometimes be found. And these urns are here topped again with a sort of Spanish comb!

The cornice returns to something more akin to precedent—although oversight for its purpose here, in comparison with the wide and sturdily molded wall-pilasters. But its wide projection, its delicately cut late mutules, and arched repeats with turned pendants (most of which vary widely in their turning, by the way!) along with its delicate crown mold, all suggest a date in the early eighteen hundreds for this portion of the design, at least. It is, of course, quite probable that the whole design is now the result of several fragmentary alterations or adaptations—which, nevertheless, does not in the least detract from its unusual architectural interest!

And the double house next door; between the one with this unique doorway and the Village Church, has a doorway of another—though more familiar—type, in this case one already widely shown from the region roundabout; and illustrated in other variations in the several examples from the Angell Houses of Smithfield, published in the June Monograph, 1935. It, too, possesses its own individual instance of local *naïveté*! Usually, this doorway with the semicircular toplight can only be placed in the small house, with its normal modest story height, by means of reducing the thickness of the floor joists over the hallway itself, or sometimes—when even that is not enough—by curving up the first floor hall plaster ceiling in a segment of an arch, fitted to meet the upper part of the rounded toplight frame. Sometimes this curve is car-

ried out to the back of the wooden gallery board around the stair well; sometimes it is gradually worked down and out into the flat ceiling of the rest of the hallway. Occasionally—as in the “Half-way House” doorway from Ashton; on page 25 in the April Monograph—the space arched upon the exterior of the wall, is *not* opened through into the hallway and fitted with glass at all; but filled in, as was the case in that instance, by a flat wood panel, treated with a slat cut-pattern; or still another type of design, that usually simulates in form something suggesting the muntins of a possible glass toplight pattern.

In this house, the builder frankly accepted his established limitations, and shows enframed within the arch itself, a glass glazed sash that keeps below the set ceiling height at the same time that it cannot therefore conform to the height of the exterior arched portion of the design! This house has also been widened, by a wing at either side, into a “double house.”

Of the houses shown, these are the only two from School Street, which is now the principal highway passing along eastward to Forestdale—another old Mill village, established only a bare mile away; also having its own old mill cottages—although not grouped—nor so well and consistently maintaining any established type, as is the case at Slatersville. It is also lacking in the Green, so appealing at Slatersville.

The houses and doorways fronting upon the Green are attractive at first glance, because of an unusual success in grouping. They possess a considerable similarity of effect. Any closer study shows them to also contain, as markedly, differences in detail and treatment that give them the variety and individuality that we unconsciously require to avoid monotony. Some of them, individually, are more successful than others. All have been given covered living porches—placed usually at the sides or ends of the structures. Every architect knows how difficult it is to arrange such “modern necessities” so that they will not be a jarring note in the integrity of the Colonial house design!

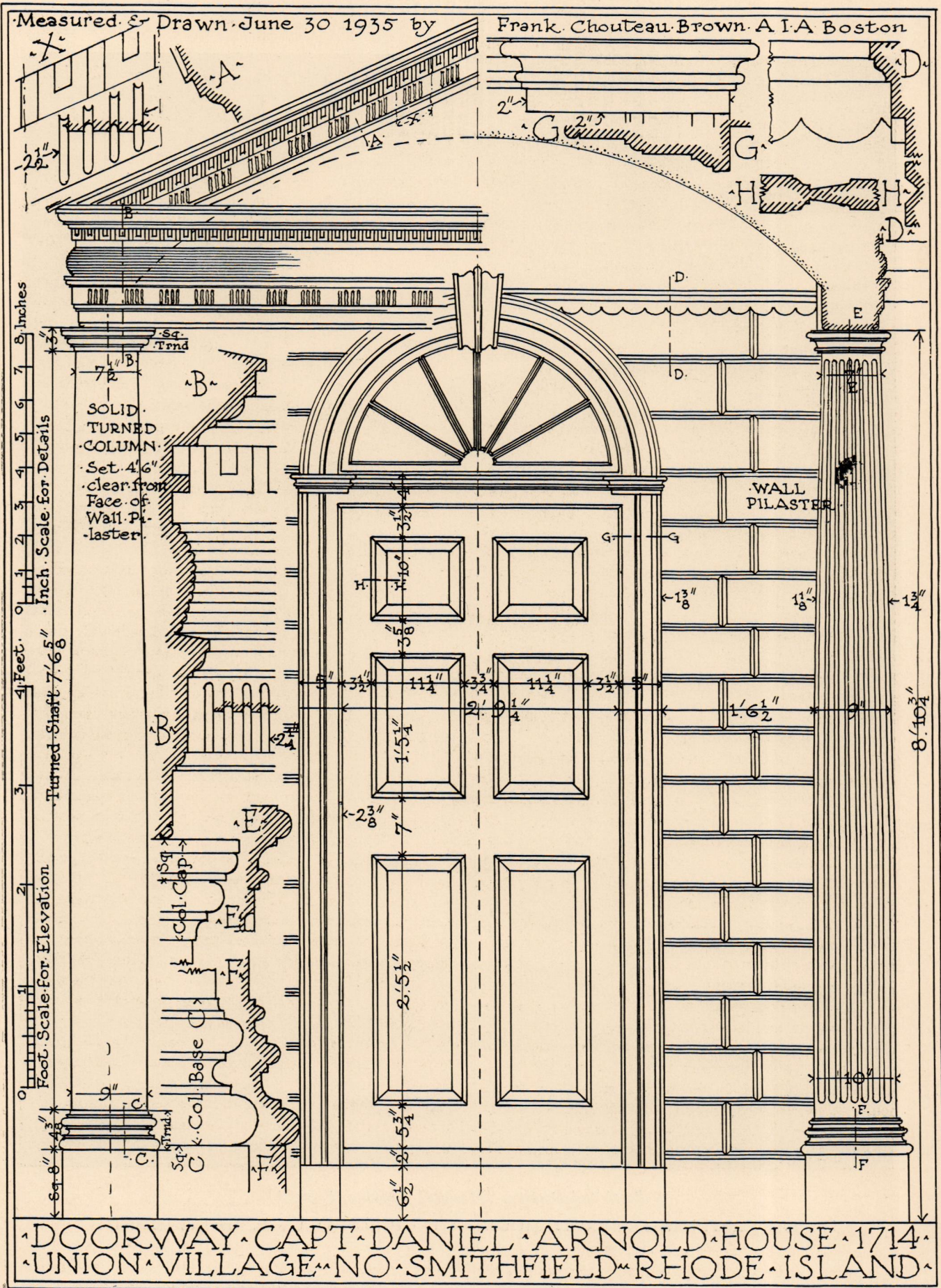
Each reader may judge for himself, from the group photograph of the three houses shown in one view, as to the success of this venture, as it has been incorporated into the Slatersville group. Of course, in some examples the result has been more successful than in others. Perhaps, in the opinion of the writer, at least, the end porch added to the house with the vestibule (House “F” upon the sketch plan, page 55) appears to be about the best of them all.

With the entrance porches, or doorways, the same thing may also be said, though with more reservations. In the group of three houses, for instance, shown on page 55, the porch in the nearest seems among the least successful (again, of course, that is only the opinion of the writer!), while the house with the recessed doorway, with the suggestion of the slatted oval toplight, again fails in reproducing the best Colonial tradition! The entrance porch with pediment (House “E”) would appear to be far more successful; while the projected vestibule, with the double pilastered front, belongs authentically in the proper tradition, even if it is not entirely the entrance that may have

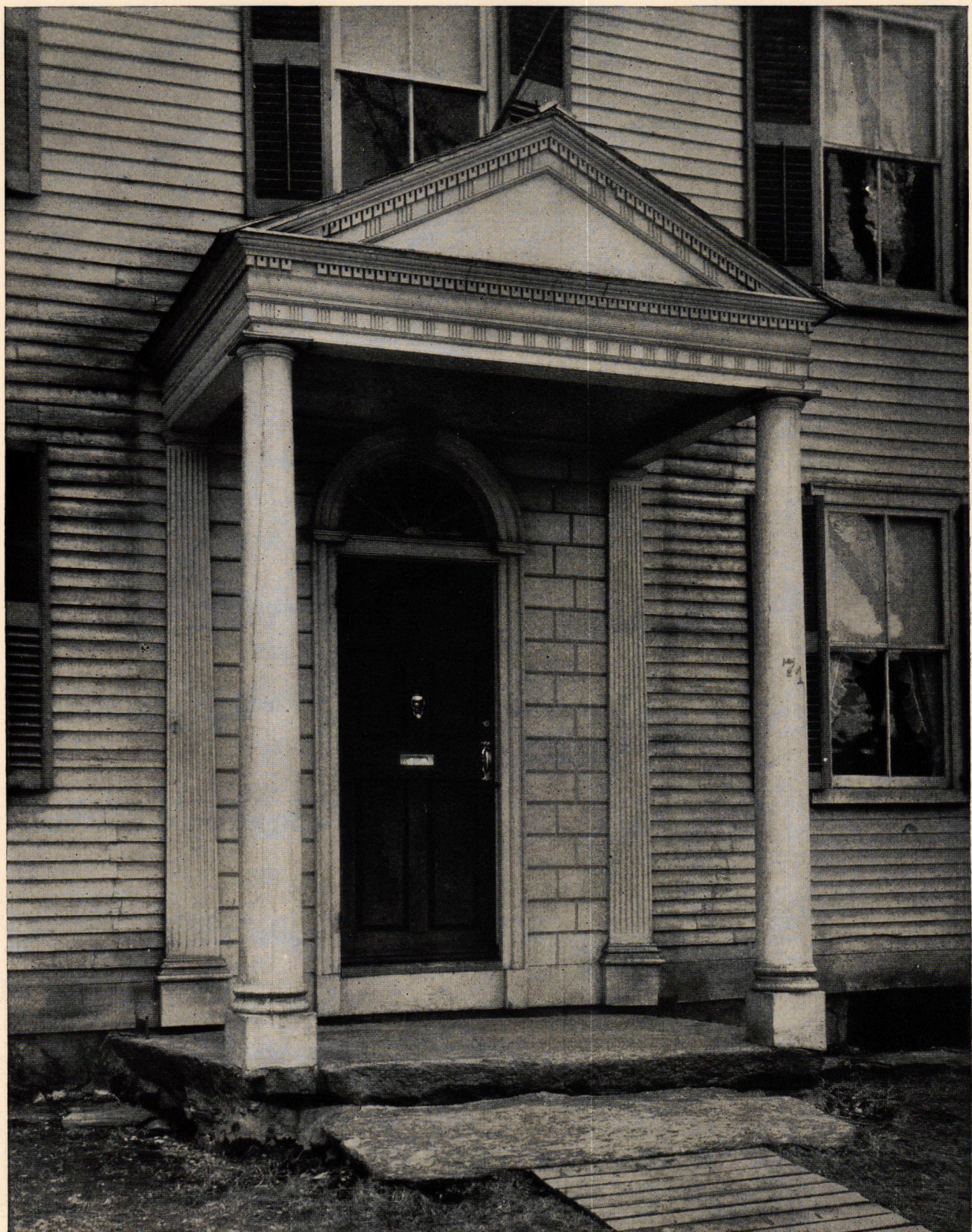


Frank Chouteau Brown. A.I.A. Boston

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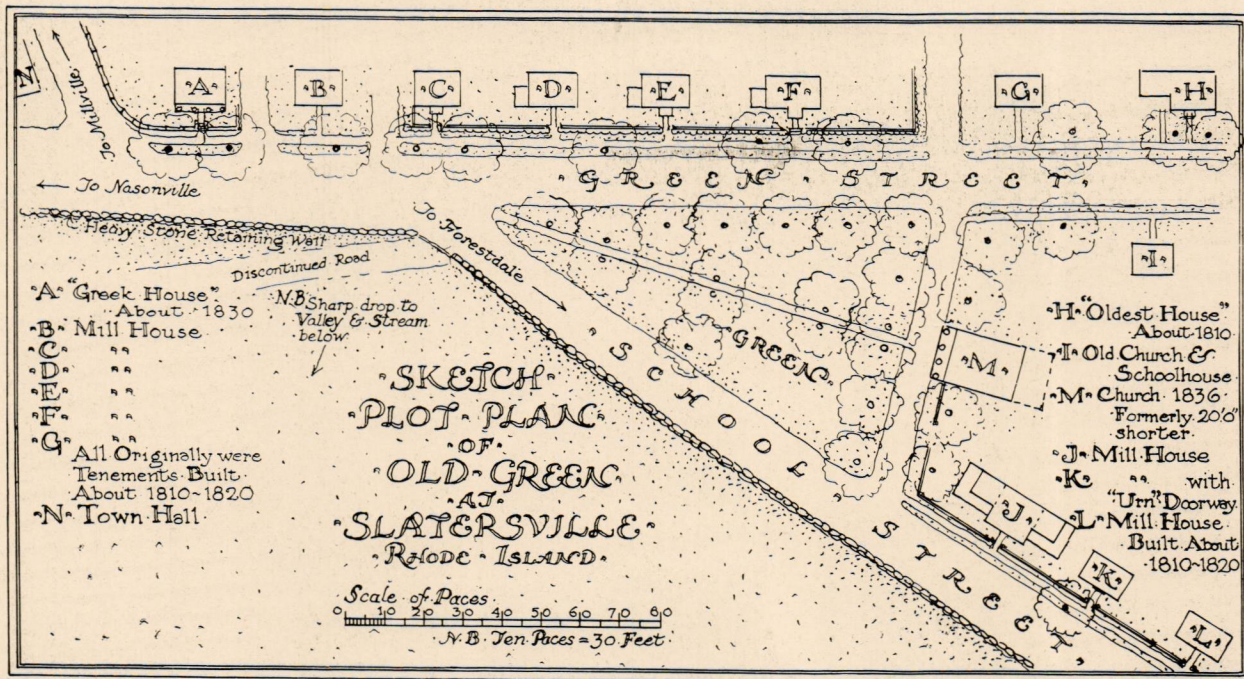


*Porch and Doorway (Measured Drawing, Page 53)*

THE CAPT. DANIEL ARNOLD HOUSE—1714—UNION VILLAGE, RHODE ISLAND

[ 54 ]





been originally upon the house as it was first erected!

As to Slatersville itself, at this late day there exists no one to prove that it may have been planned of intention. Possibly it comes within the same descriptive category as Topsy—who “jest grew!” The Church, which heads the Green, was built in 1836. The land contours being what they are, and the northern roadway—now known as Green Street—being the earlier in date; it would seem probable that

the diagonal path toward the church may have gradually established itself—and then later, when the need for continuing School Street toward the West, to carry the increasing traffic coming from the South, became apparent—perhaps the existing heavy retaining walls were made or strengthened, and the present elms were planted, so as to make the Green more balanced.

Originally most of these houses were Mill tenements, containing four families each; and therefore



VIEW OF GREEN STREET, SLATERSVILLE, SHOWING HOUSES “C” (left), “D,” “E,” and “F”



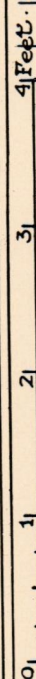


*Detail of Doorway (Measured Drawing, Page 57)*  
HOUSE "K"—SCHOOL STREET, SLATERSVILLE, RHODE ISLAND

[ 56 ]



1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Inches
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[ 57 ]





HOUSE "K"—SCHOOL STREET, SLATERSVILLE, RHODE ISLAND

[ 58 ]





HOUSE "F"—GREEN STREET, SLATERSVILLE, RHODE ISLAND

[ 59 ]





*Vestibule*

HOUSE "F"—GREEN STREET, SLATERSVILLE, RHODE ISLAND

[ 60 ]



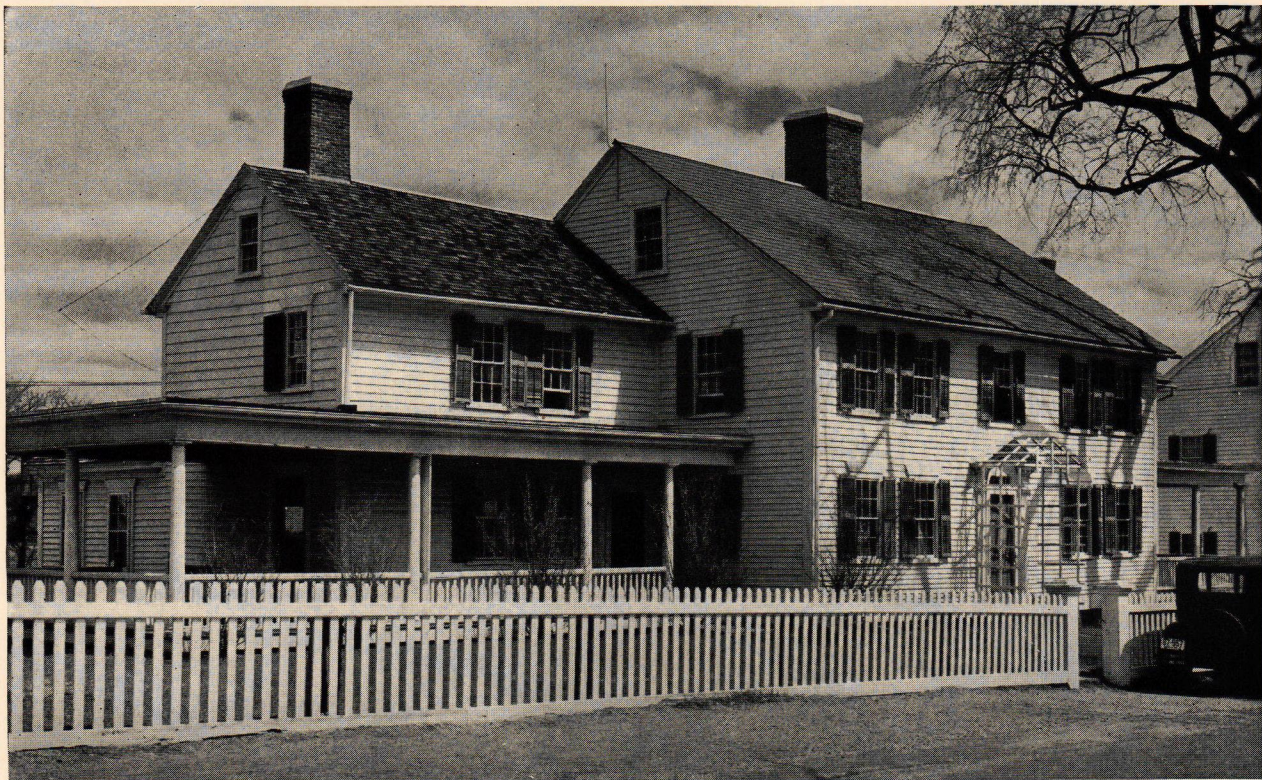


*Detail of Doorway*

HOUSE "H"—PARSONAGE—GREEN STREET, SLATERSVILLE, RHODE ISLAND

[ 61 ]





HOUSE "J"—SCHOOL STREET, SLATERSVILLE, RHODE ISLAND



HOUSE "H"—PARSONAGE—GREEN STREET, SLATERSVILLE, RHODE ISLAND

[ 62 ]



they probably never possessed any interior finish of any great value. Within comparatively late years they have been improved and made over into single family dwellings; and in most cases the old doorways were retained, or were but slightly changed in appearance. The problem of changing levels of the site was met by the stone wall topped with a wooden fence, of various heights along these lot frontages; the informality of which contributes something to the charm of the whole.

Still further along Green Street, facing upon the side of the Church, is the house now used as the Rec-

into its present use as a two-family dwelling were not done in as good taste as the other changes in the group.

The Church appears in any general photograph of the group to far less advantage than it does in reality. While the distances are not great the camera lens makes its location seem very remote, in some cases—while in others the foliage serves to conceal the structure in large part. But seen from almost any point along the retaining wall that bounds the southern roadway upon the verge of the steep slope dropping down to the stream and mill in the valley below, these



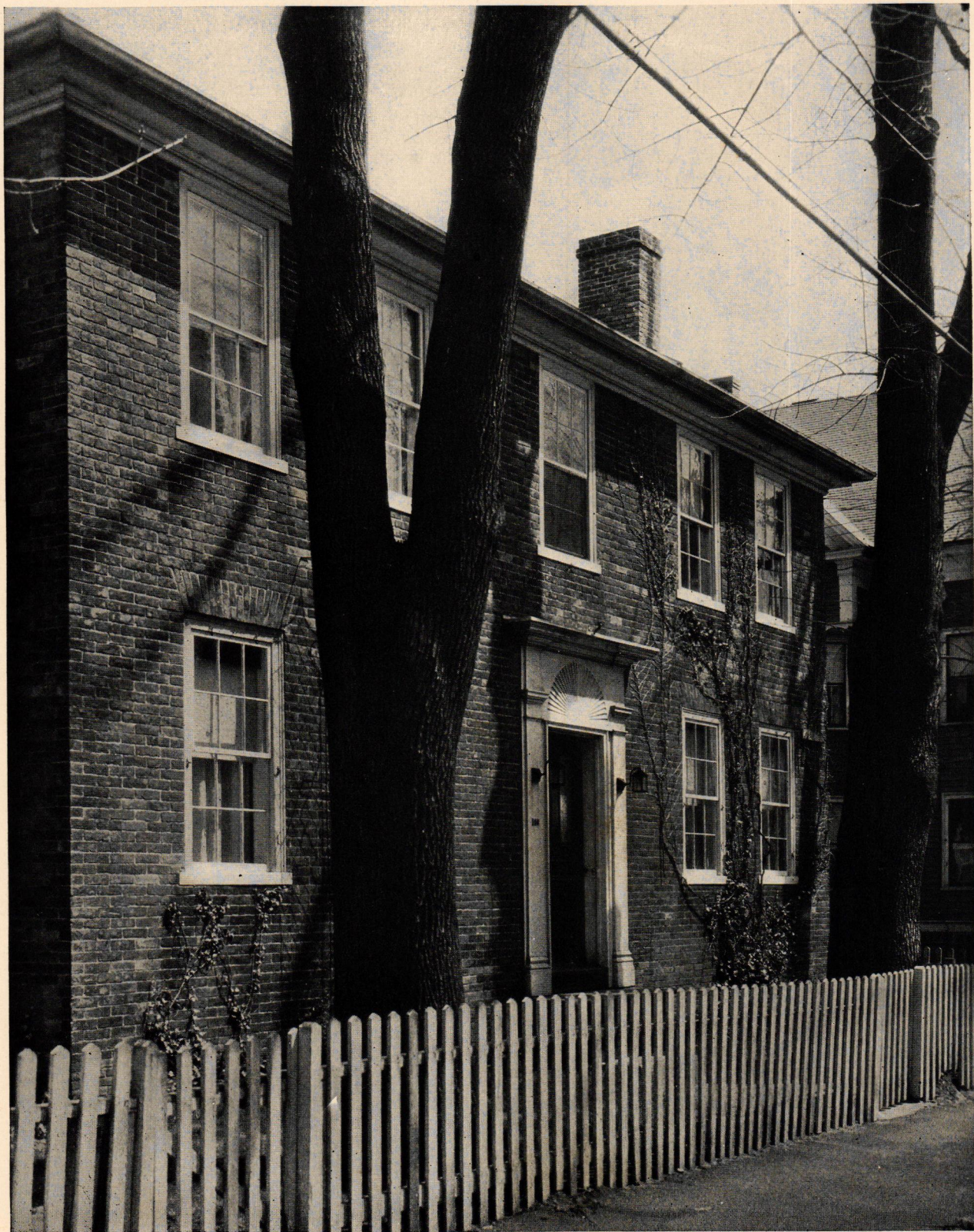
HOUSE "D"—GREEN STREET, SLATERSVILLE, RHODE ISLAND

tory; the doorway of which—here enframed in reeded pilasters—is representative of still another type, of which examples may be found in a number of villages scattered over a considerable area. The interior of this building retains three or more mantels, the old Dutch ovens, a winding staircase, and the old doors. Across the street from it stands the building that was originally used as a combined church and schoolhouse. The second Sunday School in the United States is believed to have been started in this structure. Unfortunately, the changes made in turning the building over

houses and their setting do much to prove that something was understood—however unconsciously—even at a date at least as early as 1800, of the possible beauty of combinations of house-grouping with open space and fences, and of shrub and tree planting, within the boundaries of old New England itself—and that precedents of Mill Village groups may be found indigenous to this country, that are at least as possible of latent charm and local color values as anything that can be garnered and adapted to the purpose from redigested precedents produced abroad.

[ 63 ]





THE MONROE HOUSE—116 CHILD STREET, WARREN, RHODE ISLAND

[ 64 ]

Monograph Five—Volume XXI—"Some Old Houses of Warren, Rhode Island"