



THE MONOGRAPH SERIES

RECORDS OF EARLY AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE
AS SOURCE MATERIAL

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MONOGRAPH FIVE

Some Old Houses of Warren, Rhode Island, Part I

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In the light of present-day tolerance, the first founders and settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colonies appear to have been unduly severe and bigoted in their requirements for admission to communal fellowship. No individual was allowed a vote in the temporal affairs of the community unless he had first been accepted as a full member of the Church organization. In that entire area there was no distinction made between Church and State; but the two were fused together, and so continued for many years.

Possibly it might be claimed that the various settlements were all experiments toward achieving a Christian commonwealth; in which the individuals controlling the social and economic direction of the group were dominated by a common community of spiritual belief. Even those dissenting on what may appear to us today to be the most trivial points of the theology established in these new settlements, were severely treated by the community; not permitted any voice in the temporal affairs of the Colony; and often banished or transported from within the limits of its jurisdiction.

This explains the considerable number of dissenters, who left Massachusetts Bay or Plymouth, either singly or in groups, during the early years of the history of that region. It was also to be expected that the substitution of a new system of land ownership—the transmitting of property by inheritance, instead of the Old World feudal system of land control—must have gradually worked toward a wider and more democratic distribution and holding of land.

Within the area of Rhode Island, and the Providence Plantations, however, a spirit of wider tolerance was

established and maintained from the very first years of the settlement of its earliest colonies. This tolerance was further upheld by the class of settlers who traced their way through the dense wilderness separating Boston and Plymouth from Narragansett Bay, in order to express their disagreement with the beliefs or practices upheld by the strict churchmen and their congregations along the shores of Massachusetts Bay.

Among the earliest and best known of these were Roger Williams, William Blackstone, and Anne Hutchinson. Mistress Hutchinson believed that people were saved by their "faith," while the General Court of Massachusetts—upheld by the rigid religious tenets that permeated the church members of which it was composed—declared that people could only be saved "by their works."

Of course Roger Williams was perhaps the first of these remonstrants to remove himself from the dictates and control of the Massachusetts Colonies. And after he had first established himself on a site that he believed to be outside that province, a year later he again removed to the other bank of the Blackstone River, in order to avoid any possible doubt as he had found that Plymouth colony had made certain claims to the region to the north and east of this same narrow waterway.

Thus, while the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth Colonies had been founded in the first place by dissenters from the beliefs of the Church of England, in search of a land where they could find freedom of religious thought and liberty in its expression—yet they had so little consideration for those others who happened not to think exactly as they did themselves, that

the records of the early years immediately succeeding the establishment of these settlements are filled with the names of individuals and groups who—not content with the limited “freedom” they found there in this New World—were inspired to move elsewhere.

So it was that, in 1638, John Clarke and William Coddington, with Anne’s husband William Hutchinson and a few others, set sail for Delaware; but the roughness of the ocean off Cape Cod caused them to land and travel overland to Providence, where Roger Williams secured for them from the Aquidneck Indians the Island then called “Rhode Island,” and so the second settlement was made in Portsmouth, on what is now known as “Newport Island.” A year later Anne Hutchinson came, and shortly after—in that same year—Clarke and Coddington and eleven others, disagreeing with the Hutchinsons, moved further along the Island, and so Newport itself came to be the third settlement established in that region.

Then Warwick on Greenwich Bay became the fourth, when in 1643 Samuel Cotton and eleven other Providence families settled there. The fifth was Westerly, founded in 1661 and incorporated in 1670; while New Shoreham (Block Island) was settled in the same year. North Kingston was settled in 1641 and incorporated 1674, and Conanicut Island (Jamestown) was settled in 1657 and incorporated in 1678.

As the land where the town of Warren now lies was not at that time a part of Rhode Island, its name does not appear in the list of early settlements named above. The whole matter was so confusing and long-drawn-out a process that it would seem best to reserve its explanation to another place. Suffice it for the moment to state that a portion of its present area was purchased from the Indians in 1644, when the Rev. Samuel Newman, with part of his congregation, removed from Weymouth to take up house lots along this eastern side of Narragansett Bay; at the confluence of two peaceful landlocked bodies of water—now known as the Barrington and Warren Rivers.

The land was greatly fertile; the surrounding waterways abounded in fish and shellfish. The selected site provided ample and protected harborage, near a considerable body of open water upon which other settlements were being established opening easily out into the ocean a bare twenty miles to the south.

Yet the growth of this community seems to have been comparatively slow. By 1746—nearly one hundred years later—the population of Warren was recorded as being only 4767; of whom 4196 were whites, 343 blacks, and 228 were of Indian blood. By 1711 shipbuilding had become an important industry in this region. In Westerly ships had been built since 1681. In Portsmouth and Newport, on Newport Island; and in Providence at the head of the Bay, the industry was flourishing. Other shipyards were estab-

lished at Bristol next door where it continues down to the present day. Undoubtedly, much of the delicacy and individuality of the interior woodwork still to be found about this region derives from the skill of these early craftsmen in shipbuilding—just as the especial beauty of the carving shown about the over-light in many a Warren doorway came from the dexterity acquired in the handling of wood by others who had had their training in this same thorough craft of shipbuilding.

The town plan is of the simplest and most natural arrangement possible. Most of the old houses are to be found upon the two principal streets, running almost exactly parallel and north and south, and named obviously enough as “Water” and “Main” Streets; and the half-dozen short connecting streets that run at right angles in between. At one end, these east and west streets usually continue down to the water front, which lies directly back of the houses along the western side of Water Street, and connect with some old pier, dock, shipyard, or storage sheds; while the greater majority of them stop against Main Street, on their eastern end. The fact of the matter is that both Warren (and Bristol, directly to its south) are built along a narrow peninsula between these two bodies of water, which is separated from Newport Island (still further to the south) by a wide and deep channel.

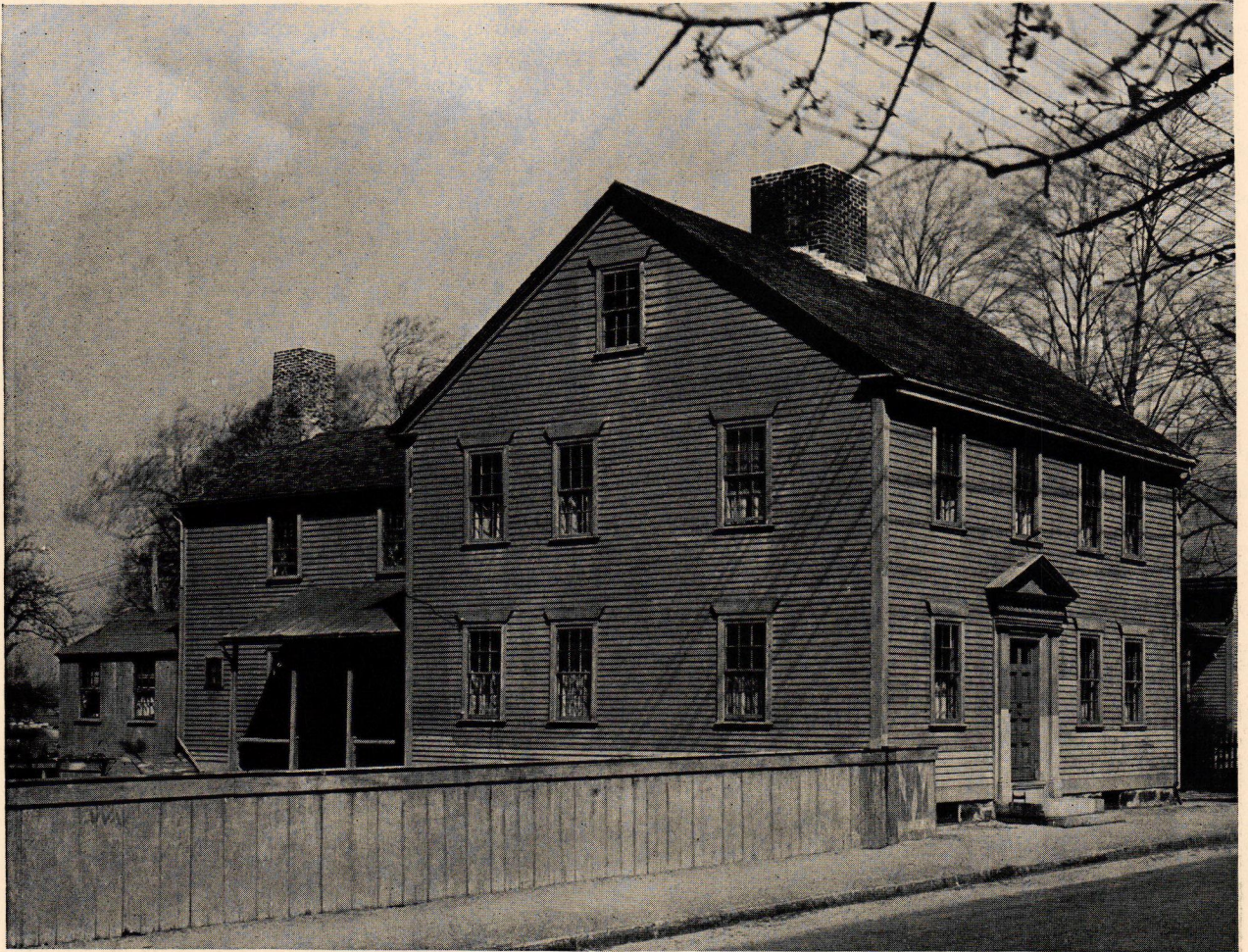
Most of the dwellings characteristic of Warren are of three—or possibly four—types. The region still contains a number of story-and-a-half cottages, some with gambrel roofs, remaining from its earlier period. Besides these there are to be found a considerable number of simple yet capaciously comfortable dwellings, with four windows spaced across the front of the second story, and the entrance doorway set off the center of the front, under one of the two central openings. An excellent example of this sort of front may be found on page 68, in the house at 211 Water Street. This house also shows the uneven fenestration of the end elevation on the narrower half of the front, that is often found as a part of this arrangement. Sometimes the narrow corner space is a small room; sometimes part of a rather spacious stair hall. The other example, which may be found in the house from 582 Main Street, on page 72, had originally the same fenestration upon the street front (although in this instance accompanied by an even spacing of the end windows upon the wider end). The end extension—in the nature of a bay added to the further end of the dwelling—was a later addition, made at some time in order to enlarge the small room found in this house at the right of the entrance doorway.

Houses of a little later period were usually built after the more conventional arrangement of the central doorway with two windows spaced upon each side. The older examples of this class are usually those



THE SYDNEY DEAN HOUSE, GREEN STREET, WARREN, RHODE ISLAND

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HOUSE AT NUMBER 211 WATER STREET, WARREN, RHODE ISLAND

having the old type of gambrel roof so consistently found throughout the entire state of Rhode Island. An example typical of this group may be seen at the foot of page 69. Finally, there are the more nearly square houses—dating usually in this locality from about the turn of the century—of which the house on the corner of Water and Washington Streets, placed on page 77, may serve as sufficient illustration.

The town and its environs also boasts of a few examples of brick dwelling architecture, one or two of which appear to suggest that they may have been veneered over an earlier wooden house design. One of these brick dwellings is the simple but well-proportioned Monroe House, reproduced on page 64 (August), built by a mason for his own use about 1820. This house now possesses a most glorious blend of color from the mellowing of the old bricks under the influence of sunlight and weather. Unfortunately most of the other brick dwellings in the town have been coated heavily with paint, so that they now do not possess this particular charm.

But most of the important dwellings of the town show what seems to be the more favorite gable-end treatment that, in some of the later and more elaborate examples, such as the Sydney Dean house, formerly located on Main Street, but now removed to an inconspicuous location near the easterly end of Green Street, provides an opportunity to carry the full cornice from the main frontage of the structure up along the rake of the end gable, with all the elaborateness of dentiling or bracketing that has been established for the principal elevation. The same treatment is consistently maintained for the sloping cornices of the door pediments over the inevitable semicircular toplights, to which about all the more elaborately designed doorways conform.

Of this type the two best examples are those shown from 582 Main Street (page 71) and the two doorways on page 78—of which the one with the carved eagle, from 395 Water Street, is probably the most beautiful example now to be found in the town.

Another unusual example, of fine simplicity and

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proportions, and undoubtedly earlier date, is the double-width doorway from 25 Washington Street (page 70). All these examples show the favorite local treatment of the addition of a pair of blind doors, hung on heavily offset hinges, so that on a hot summer day, these outer blind doors may be closed and bolted and the solid inner door left open to allow the breeze from the bayside to draw through the central hallway.

The illustrations contained within this issue display two of the most interesting and characteristic of the mantels now to be found in the Warren town houses. With the single exception of the Waterman house mantel (which may be seen also on page 80) they are the most elaborate of those now remaining *in situ*. Exception may be taken to their characteristic proportions. All show a rather high shelf, with an unusual height of frieze over the fire opening, and a correspondingly short pilaster bounding the wide panel of the over-mantel. While these rooms are all of comfortable height—about nine feet in the clear—in order to provide room for the desired treatment of the mantel top,

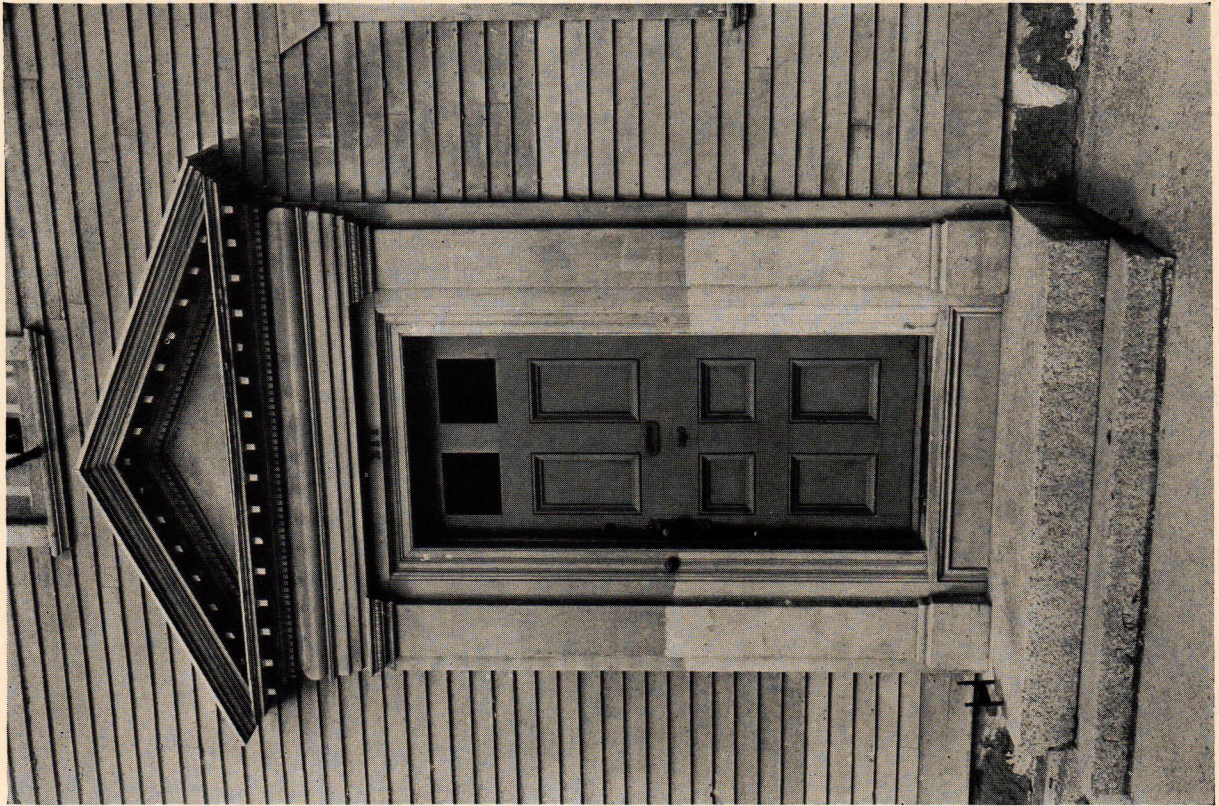
the upper mantel cornice has to be kept well below the bottom of the room cornice above, with the attending somewhat awkward and stunted effect that may be noted upon these upper plasters.

While most of the mouldings used in these mantel-pieces are ornamented; the ornamenting is of the simplest handcut type; and usually of a nature that could be produced by the use of about a quarter-inch half-round gouge chisel; as may be seen by referring to the measured drawings. These mantel designs are also remarkable for the very small—not to say minute—size of some of the mouldings employed; many being of only one-eighth and three-sixteenths inch dimension; a matter that has made these drawings appear both more crowded and “busier” than the mantels actually appear in reality. It should be noted also that the interest of the wood treatment is not confined solely to the mantel, but is carried with equal consistency entirely around the rooms; along the dado and cornice—about the doorways and windows, and even upon the decorative treatment of the cased corner posts!

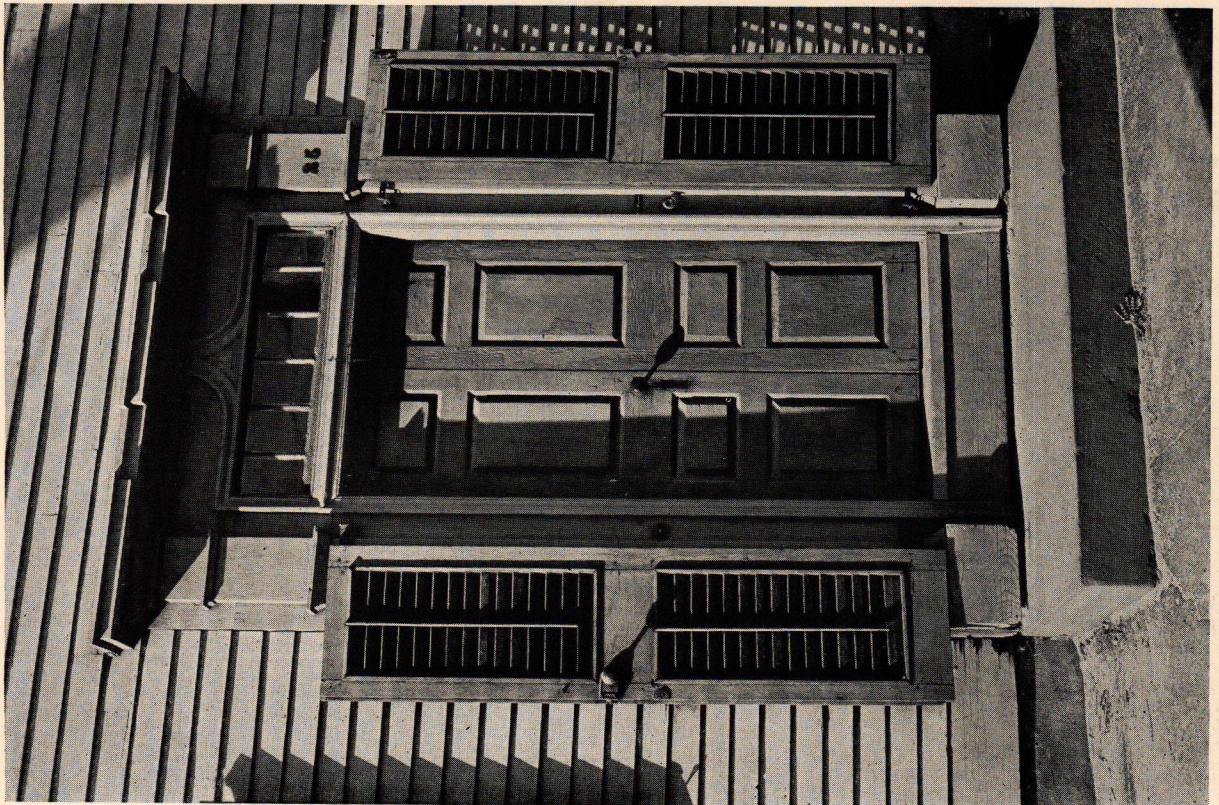


HOUSE AT NUMBER 25 WASHINGTON STREET, WARREN, RHODE ISLAND

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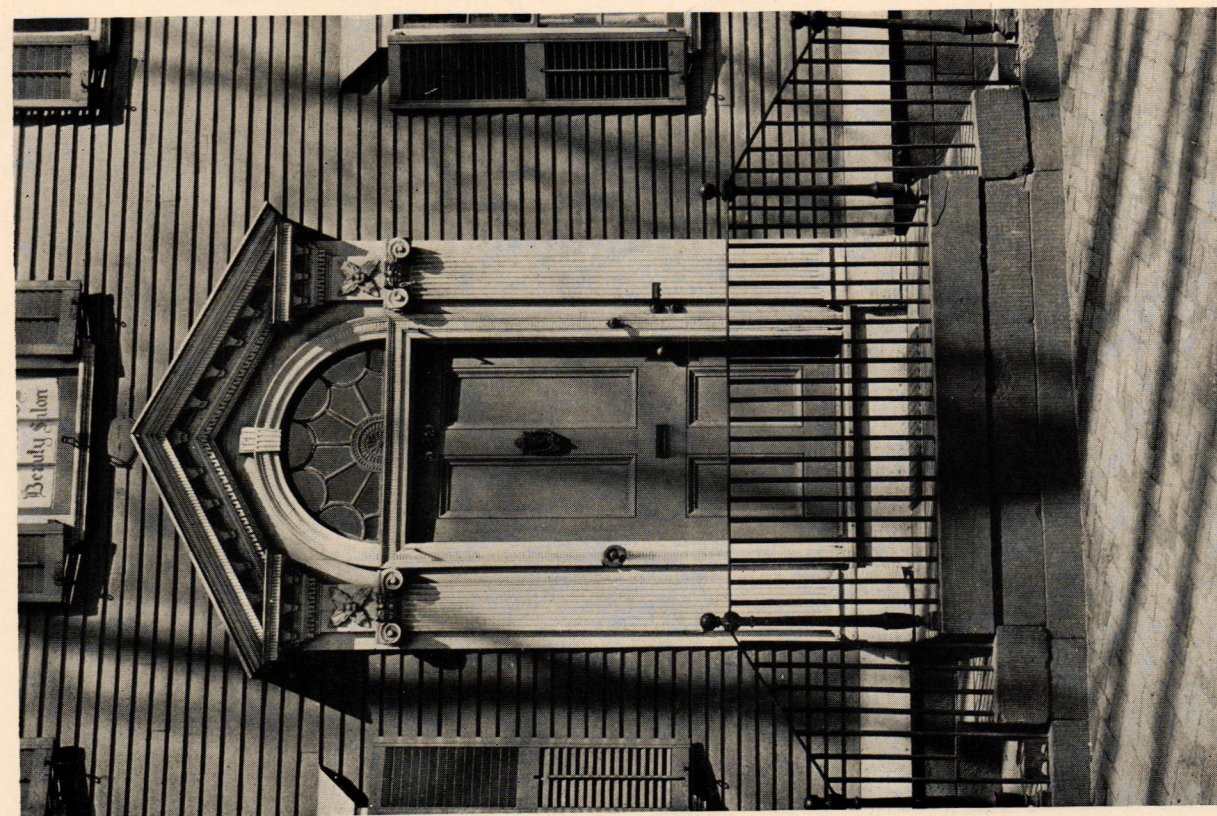
Number 211 Water Street



Number 25 Washington Street

DOORWAYS IN WARREN, RHODE ISLAND

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Number 582 Main Street

DOORWAYS IN WARREN, RHODE ISLAND



Number 41 State Street

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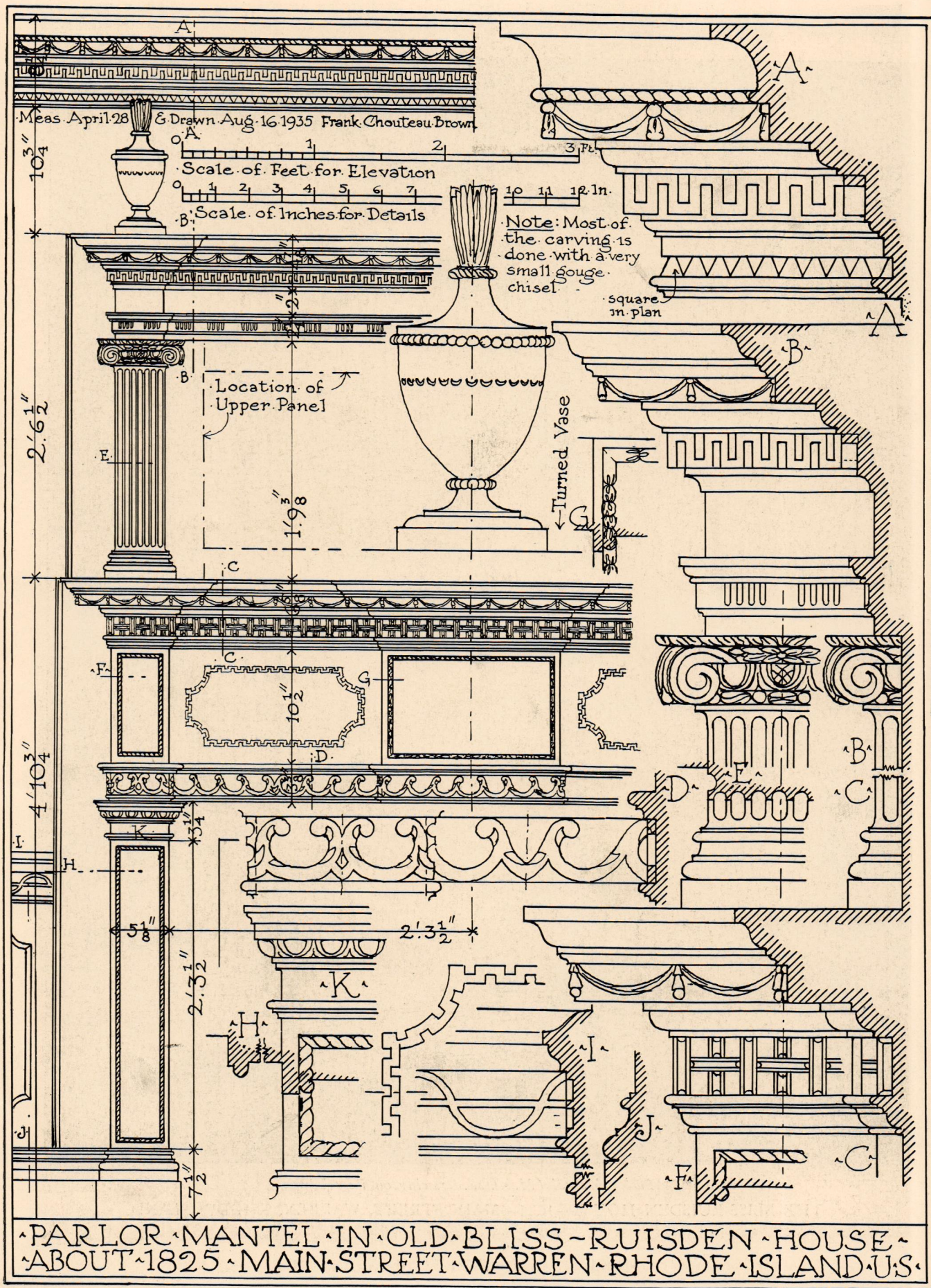


HOUSE AT NUMBER 125 WATER STREET, WARREN, RHODE ISLAND



HOUSE AT NUMBER 582 MAIN STREET, WARREN, RHODE ISLAND

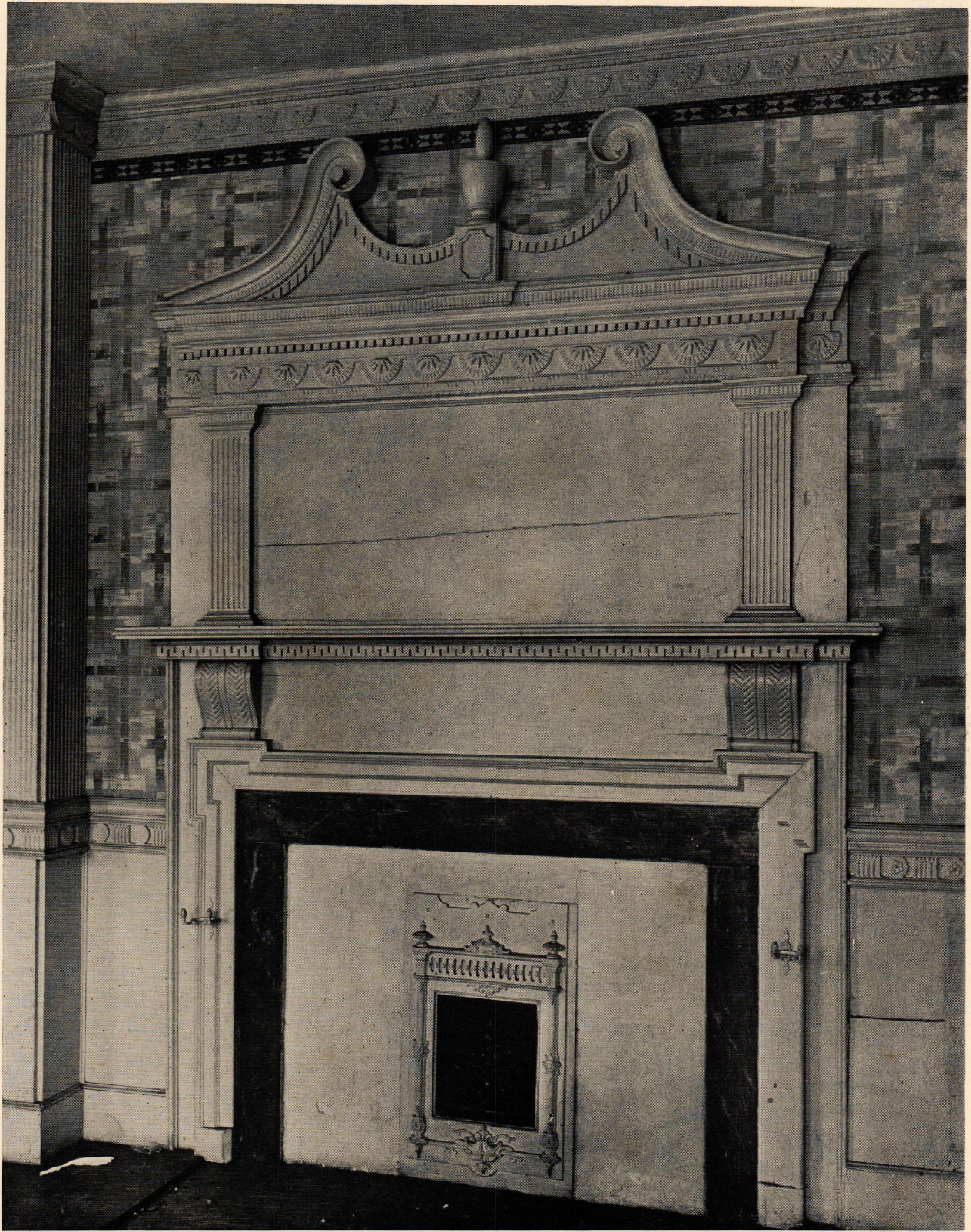
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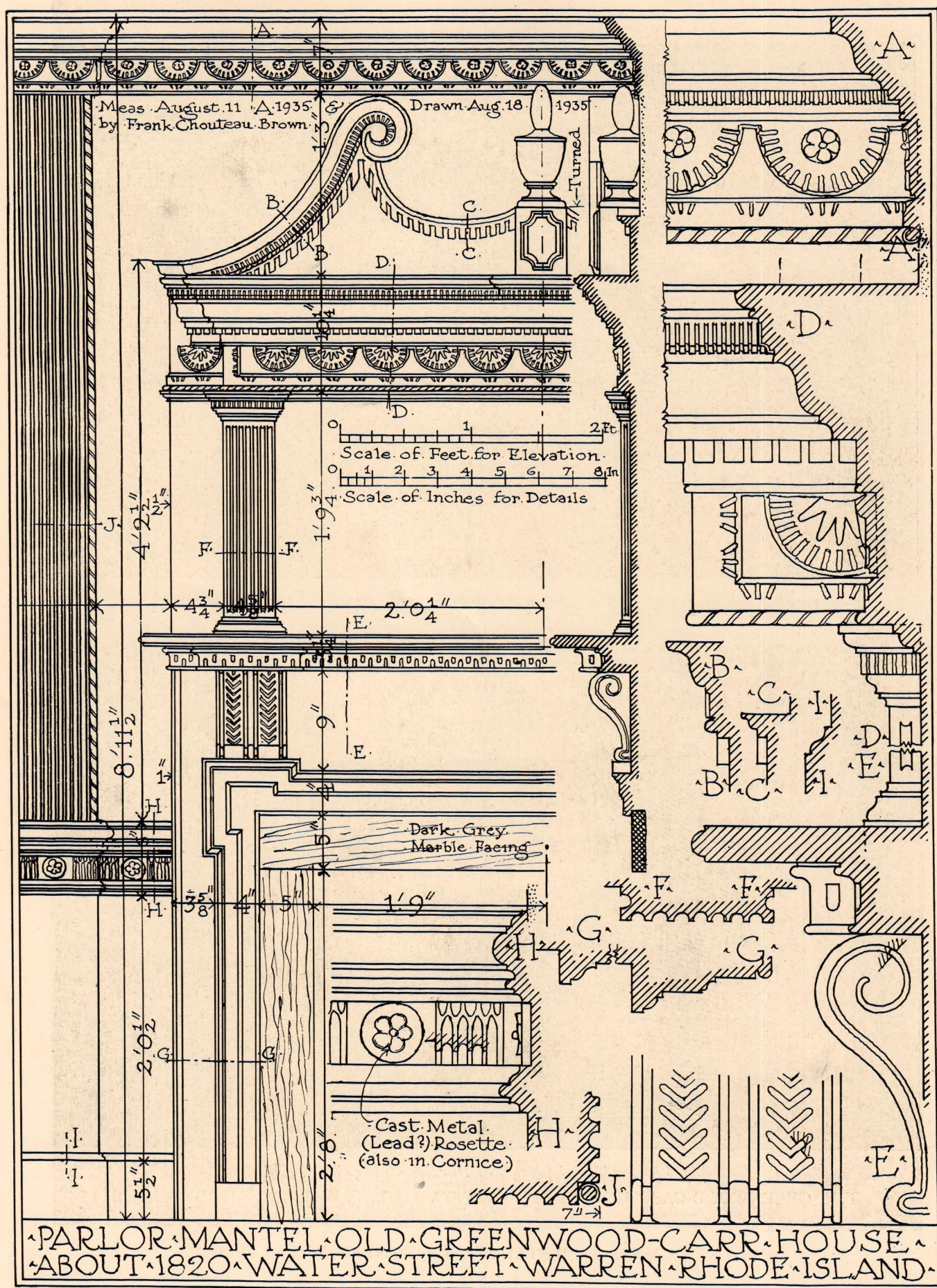
Parlor Mantel (Measured Drawing on Page 73)
 THE BLISS-RUISDEN HOUSE—1825—MAIN STREET, WARREN, RHODE ISLAND

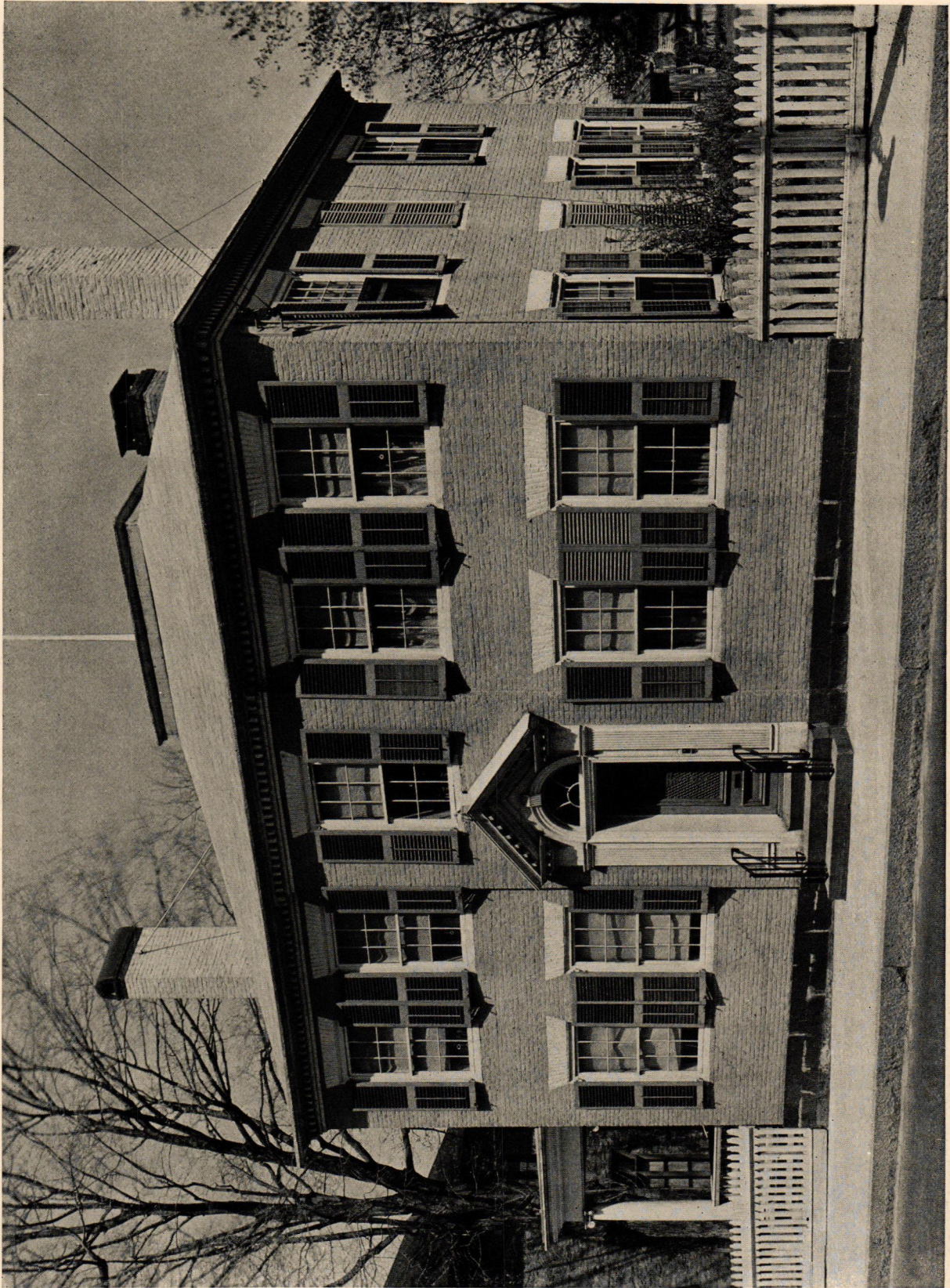
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Parlor Mantel (Measured Drawing on Page 76)
 THE GREENWOOD-CARR HOUSE—1820—WATER STREET, WARREN, RHODE ISLAND

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HOUSE AT NUMBER 382 MAIN STREET, WARREN, RHODE ISLAND

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Mantel and Doorway Detail
 THE WATERMAN HOUSE, WARREN, RHODE ISLAND
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