

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Nightingale-Brown House

other names/site number Nicholas Brown House

2. Location

street & number 357 Benefit Street

n/a not for publication

city, town Providence

n/a vicinity

state Rhode Island code RI

county Providence

code 007

zip code 02903

3. Classification

Ownership of Property

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>1</u>	<u> </u> buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u> sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u> structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u> objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:
N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 1

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official

Date

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register.
 See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register.
- removed from the National Register.
- other, (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

DOMESTIC/single dwelling

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/museum

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

COLONIAL/Georgian

LATE VICTORIAN/Italianate

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY

REVIVALS/Colonial Revival

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE

walls WOOD/Weatherboard

BRICK

roof METAL/Copper

other _____

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

Built in 1791 for Colonel Joseph Nightingale, the Nightingale-Brown House was the third of five monumental residences constructed on Providence's College Hill in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The John Brown House (1786), the Thomas Poynton Ives House (1806), and the Edward Carrington House (1810) were built of brick; after the loss by fire in 1849 of the John Innes Clark House (1789), the Nightingale-Brown House has traditionally been accepted as the largest wood frame house surviving from eighteenth-century America.

Historically associated with the family of Nicholas Brown, the Providence merchant and community leader who purchased it in 1814, it has long been recognized as one of the finest houses from America's early national period. In 1918 the Nightingale-Brown House was illustrated as the frontispiece for the White Pine Series monograph "Providence and Its Colonial Houses", in which Norman M. Isham described it as "the best wooden house in Providence and one of the best in the Colonies...."¹ Describing the house in the context of Providence's historic architecture, Isham wrote:

The house has a fine front porch with the usual brown-stone steps and platform, all in front of a central mass which projects slightly from the main body of the facade. The door has a toplight and sidelights, one of the earliest instances of the use of them. Over the porch is a Palladian window, while the window over this again, in the third story, is plain like the others on that floor. Above the cornice of the projecting central motif is a pediment the tympanum of which is filled with glass. There are heavy bevelled quoins at the corners, and the windows have them also, with rusticated voussoirs in their flat arches above

¹Norman M. Isham, "Providence and Its Colonial Houses," The White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs 4, No. 2: 7-10.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D NHL Criteria (1) and (4)

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Period of Significance

Significant Dates

ARCHITECTURE
COMMERCE
ECONOMICS
INDUSTRY
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

1792

1792
1853

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

NHL Theme XVI: Architecture
B: Georgian

Significant Person
Nicholas Brown

Architect/Builder
Caleb Ormsbee, architect and builder

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The significance of the Nightingale-Brown House lies primarily in its architectural history. It was built in 1791 for Col. Joseph Nightingale, an entrepreneur in the American China Trade who, like many of his contemporaries, committed much of his fortune to building a monumental residence on a scale essentially without precedent in America. Architecturally, it is one of the finest Georgian houses in America. In style, it summarizes and concludes that period of late Georgian architecture in Providence. In size and quality it is distinguished even among its neighboring structures, which Antoinette Downing has called "one of the great groups of early post-Republican houses in the country."¹

The Nightingale-Brown House also has an important social history. It is the ancestral home of the Brown family of Providence, who purchased it from the heirs of Joseph Nightingale in 1814 and inhabited it continuously thereafter until 1985. One of the few American families prominently associated with a family seat for over 170 years, the Browns' history is closely intertwined not only with the cultural and economic development of Rhode Island, but of the nation as well. The Browns were among the first settlers of Rhode Island and were business and community leaders there from the seventeenth century onwards. They hastened the spread of the Industrial Revolution to America

¹Antoinette F. Downing, "John Brown's House," in Joseph K. Ott, The John Brown House Loan Exhibition of Rhode Island Furniture (The Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, 1965), p.xix.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # 1937, 1961
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

Rhode Island Historical
Preservation Commission

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property about 1 acre

UTM References

A

1	9
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3	0	0	4	7	0
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4	6	3	2	4	9	0
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Zone Easting Northing

B

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Zone Easting Northing

C

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D

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Providence, Plat 16, lot 202.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire city lot that has historically been associated with the property.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jean A. Follett and Robert P. Emlen

organization John Nicholas Brown Center

street & number 357 Benefit Street

city or town Providence

date November 8, 1988

telephone 401-272-0357

state Rhode Island zip code 02903

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which are moulded cornices. The main cornice is very well profiled and is in good proportion to the whole height. Even the fronts of the Palladian modillions are carved.

The roof is hipped, as is the case with all the houses of this type, and is surmounted by a small curb which is roofed with gables, of which that in the front, at least, has a glazed tympanum. The balustrade of the main roof has regular balusters with top and bottom rails and posts capped with well-shaped urns. The upper roof has a balustrade of Chinese pattern; that is, with plain sticks between the rails, intersecting in a pattern.²

The only known illustration of the Nightingale-Brown House in its original form is a watercolor drawing made by a schoolgirl around 1802, showing the house as a buff-colored building of three stories with a symmetrical facade five bays wide.³ There is no evidence that the appearance of the property was changed until 1853, when John Carter Brown engaged the Providence architect Thomas Alexander Tafft to design a new stable for the estate, the first of several alterations to the property. A recent study of these changes reports that:

The carriage building was constructed directly behind the main house, probably replacing the old outbuildings. Made of brick and designed in a Romanesque fashion, the new structure had little in common with the wooden, Georgian mansion. This is unusual, for Tafft normally matched his style to the site. But shortly afterwards, several changes were made to the main house which tied it to the carriage building's contemporary appearance.

Sometime around 1858, a two story addition was built on the south side of the house, expanding the first floor kitchen and dining rooms, and creating a loggia between them which covered the side entrance. Constructed of wood and with rusticated lintels and quoins, the addition matched the overall appearance of the mansion. However, the arcade

²Ibid.

³This drawing is now in the collection of the John Nicholas Brown Center, Providence, RI.

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in the central loggia was composed of three round arches, essentially identical to Tefft's carriage house windows, which created a visual rhyme uniting the two structures.

Although stylistically related to the carriage building, it is not known whether Tefft designed the new addition...He may have also planned the brick and brownstone wall probably constructed at this time along Benefit Street. The wall is typical of Tefft's style, being conservatively designed with only a few embellishments, such as dentitioned brownstone capitals on the gate posts; and resembles several of his known designs for gravestones.⁴

A landscape plan of the property, unsigned, but dated 1861, shows a formal garden with rare ornamental planting, statuary, and a geometric system of paths.⁵ In the following year Richard Upjohn designed a library wing for the main house.⁶ The John Carter Brown Library was connected to the northeast corner of the building, and enclosed the north side of the court formed between the rear of the main house and the stable. Like the southern addition, the new one-story wing resembled the main house, having clapboards, quoins, and a balustrade along its hipped roof. In addition, a triple-arched window originally opened into the courtyard, repeating the motif appearing on the stable and the loggia.

Though construction of the library wing between 1862 and 1864 doubtless interrupted the new landscaping, at least some elements of it were eventually completed. They appear on a survey of the property prepared by William G. Temple in 1890, when Frederick Law Olmsted was engaged to design another

⁴Demian Hess, "A Review of the Nightingale-Brown Estate" (Independent Study, Brown University, 1988), p.6.

⁵This plan is in the collection of the John Nicholas Brown Center

⁶Letter from David Chase to Robert P. Emlen, May 13, 1986, quoting entries for July 1, 1862, November 13, 1864, and December 2, 1864 in the Richard Upjohn Account Book at the Avery Library, Columbia University.

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landscape scheme for the property. Today the grounds still reflect Olmsted's design, though with some modifications.⁷

"On the interior," wrote Antoinette Forrester Downing in 1937, "the house was laid out according to the typical colonial plan of rooms flanking a central hallway. Probably because of the wood construction, the earlier colonial scheme of two interior chimneys was retained."⁸ At the rear of the house two more chimneys are built into the original back or eastern wall. A probate inventory prepared in 1809 to record Joseph Nightingale's personal property gave descriptive names to each room, including, on the first floor, an entry, parlor, dining room, kitchen, bedroom, and back dining room.⁹ The configuration of these rooms--three to the north side of the hall, and on the south, two more separated by a secondary staircase--was originally repeated on the upper two stories, with fireplaces in each of the five rooms on each level.

Interior architectural ornament is represented in a succession of styles in a combination of wood mouldings and carvings, plaster mouldings, and cast gesso. The parlor boasts an elaborate two-level mantel, whose broken-scroll pediment is repeated above the doorway. The carved wood mouldings of this room reflect the lingering Georgian rococo taste, while the applied gesso ornament is cast in a lighter and later neo-classical style, suggesting that the room was updated by the Browns after they acquired the house in the early nineteenth century. In the twentieth century English pine panelling from the c. 1730 Old Chantry House in Newark, Nottinghamshire, was added to the dining room. Other architectural woodwork, including broken scroll pediments in the central hallway and

⁷The Brown/Olmsted relationship is documented in the Frederick Law Olmsted Papers in the Library of Congress and described in Demian Hess, "A Review of the Nightingale-Brown Estate."

⁸Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Garrett & Massie, Richmond, 1937), p.301.

⁹"Schedule of Furniture etc., in and about the house of the late Joseph Nightingale deceased." Providence Probate Records 11/469.

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twisted balusters on the front stairs, were introduced to the house at this time.¹⁰

Though the timber frame of this wood structure is concealed within the walls of the house, parts of its massive system of interlocking trusses can be seen in the attic loft. At floor level the attic is illuminated by the pedimented window surmounting the projecting central bay; eleven feet above the floor a catwalk leads to a pair of gabled windows providing a view of the riverfront. Carved on the handrails of the catwalk are the ancient graffiti "1792" and "IT", "IA", and "TR", probably the initials of eighteenth-century house carpenters as yet unidentified.

¹⁰The original woodwork can be seen in a portfolio of room portraits taken of the Nightingale-Brown House in 1883.

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with the initiation of textile manufacturing on these shores.² They were responsible for the establishment in Providence of a great university which ultimately bore their name. In the Nightingale-Brown House were formed two great collections: the John Carter Brown Library in the nineteenth century and the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection in the twentieth century. The holdings of both these libraries are unsurpassed anywhere in the world.

This prominent social history has helped preserve the architectural distinction of the Nightingale-Brown House. Because of its unbroken chain of ownership, the house was never greatly altered or restored to some theoretical appearance, and bears the patina of continued use. It is now owned and operated by the John Nicholas Brown Center for the Study of American Civilization, in keeping with the Brown family's intention that it be preserved not only in appearance but maintained in its traditional use.

²The principal study of the Brown family's significance in America is by James B. Hedges, The Browns of Providence Plantations (The Brown University Press, Providence, 1968), Vols. I & II.

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NIGHTINGALE-BROWN HOUSE
357 Benefit Street
Providence, RI

Photographer: Barnaby Evans
Date: 1985
Negative filed at: John Nicholas Brown Center

Photo #1: west (front) facade facing Benefit Street.

Photographer: Richard Cheek
Date: 1983
Negatives: In possession of photographer

Photo #2: entry hall, facing east.

Photo #3: entry hall, facing west.

Photo #4: first floor parlor, facing southwest.

Photo #5: first floor parlor, facing southeast.

Photo #6: first floor dining room, facing north.

Photo #7: first floor dining room, facing southeast.

Photo #8: first floor drawing room, facing northwest.

Photo #9: first floor drawing room, facing southeast.

Photo #10: first floor library, facing southeast.

Photo #11: first floor library, facing northwest.

Photo #12: first floor pantry, facing northeast.

Photo #13: southeast corner of study, second floor.

Photo #14: northwest corner of office, second floor.

Photo #15: east view of office, second floor.

Photo #16: southwest corner of master bedroom, second floor.

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Photo #17: northeast corner of master bedroom, second floor.

Photo #18: northwest corner of guest bedroom, second floor.

Photo #19: southwest view of bedroom, third floor.

Photo #20: northeast view of bedroom, third floor.

Photo #21: attic loft, facing west.