

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

historic name: Morris Brown House

other name/site number: _____

2. Location

street & number: 317 Rochambeau Avenue

not for publication: N/A

city/town: Providence

vicinity: N/A

state: RI

county: Providence

code: 007

zip code: 02906

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: Private

Category of Property: Building

Number of Resources within Property:

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

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

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4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

___ See continuation sheet.

Frederick E. Williamson
Signature of certifying official

27 June 1991
Date

State Historic Preservation Officer

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):

Beth A. Swage

8/22/91

for Signature of Keeper

Date
of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic: DOMESTIC

Sub: single dwelling

Current: DOMESTIC

Sub: single dwelling

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7. Description

Architectural Classification:

COLONIAL

Other Description: _____

Materials:	foundation	<u>CONCRETE</u>	roof	<u>Slate</u>
	walls	<u>Weatherboard</u>	other	<u>ASPHALT</u>

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

X See continuation sheet.

8. Statement of Significance

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

Applicable National Register Criteria: C

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): _____

Areas of Significance: ARCHITECTURE

Period(s) of Significance: ca. 1793-1930

Significant Dates: ca. 1793

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Unknown

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

X See continuation sheet.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet.

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 # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository: collection of Nancy Sherren

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: Less than 1 acre

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	<u>19</u>	<u>301230</u>	<u>4635300</u>	B	_____	_____
C	_____	_____	_____	D	_____	_____

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description: See continuation sheet.

The nominated property coincides with lot 211 on Providence Tax Assessor's Plat 7.

Boundary Justification: See continuation sheet.

The boundary includes the Morris Brown House and its surrounding land.

11. Form Prepared By

Name/Title: Michael A. Hebert, Consultant/Robert O. Jones, Sr Hist Pres Spec

Organization: R. I. Historical Preservation Commission Date: March 1991

Street & Number: 150 Benefit Street Telephone: 401-277-2678

City or Town: Providence State: RI ZIP: 02903

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Description

The Morris Brown House is a good example of a vernacular farm house type that was popular throughout Rhode Island during the eighteenth century. This one-and-one-half-story, gambrel-roofed, brick center-chimney dwelling is situated on the south side of Rochambeau Avenue in a well-maintained, largely residential neighborhood composed primarily of early twentieth-century dwellings. It is sited on a 9,048-square-foot lot, which is average for the area. The main structure is set back approximately 25 feet from the sidewalk. An unpaved driveway enters the property immediately west of the house and curves behind it to the rear attached two-car garage. Large mature trees and shrubbery shade the front yard, somewhat obscuring the building from view except in winter. The house itself has had some additions and alterations, but most of its exterior and many of its interior finishes remain. The Morris Brown House thus retains integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

The Morris Brown House is a one-and-one-half-story frame building with a post and beam structural system. The main structure is dated 1793 according to documentary evidence, but certain structural features suggest a possible earlier construction date. The main block is four by three bays and measures 26 feet 6 inches by 21 feet 6 inches. To the rear is a later 18- by 8-foot ell connecting to an early twentieth-century, one-story, two-stall garage measuring 18 by 26 feet. Above the ell a 6- by 8-foot screen porch has been enclosed to provide additional space. Attached to the southeast corner of the original part of the house is a 24- by 27-foot, one-story, wood-frame addition built in 1950, which contains a separate dwelling unit.

The entire structure is sided with clapboards. The main part of the house is roofed with slate shingles. The house is set on a rubblestone foundation that has been surfaced on the exterior and interior with concrete, and reinforced with steel "I" beams in the cellar. The addition rests on a concrete foundation.

On the exterior, the house has beaded cornerboards and a simply molded cornice. Most window openings are uniform in size and have the narrow rectangular proportions found in early eighteenth-century dwellings, but some are slightly smaller or larger, the latter probably enlarged in subsequent renovations to bring more light into the house. First-story windows are set just below the cornice line and have slightly projecting caps. Most of the first-floor windows are 9-over-6 double-hung sash with narrow muntins. These were probably installed during a restoration in

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1931-31, for a photo dated ca. 1900 shows Victorian 2-over-2 sash in these windows. Second-floor windows are 9-over-6 and 12-over-12 double-hung sash.

The off-center front door is four paneled and is simply framed with flat boards and five transom lights. A second door is located at the rear in the west side of the ell. The rebuilt center chimney is of brick; the date "1763" in sheet metal characters is affixed to the front.

The interior retains most of its original floor plan and much of its original finish. The plan is somewhat unusual, being a modification of the standard center-chimney, two-room plan found in many eighteenth-century dwellings. Here there are two small entry halls rather than the usual single entry hall: one on the north side and the other on the south side of the chimney, the latter now enlarged to occupy space in a portion of the rear ell. The staircase to the second floor is located in the south hall. This arrangement leads to speculation as to which side of the house the original builders and occupants considered the front: staircases are usually placed in the front hall, but eighteenth-century farmhouses were often oriented facing south, without regard for the house's relationship to the nearest road. There is a single room east of the entries and the space west of the entries is divided into two rooms. All corner posts are encased and beaded; door and window architraves have simple moldings. Six original four panel doors with beveled raised paneling, H-L hinges, and Suffolk latches remain.

The east room, running the depth of the original house, is the original kitchen or keeping room. It has plastered walls, wide pine flooring, and wainscoting consisting of two wide horizontal boards topped with a single bead. The keeping room has a large fireplace with a bake oven over a storage area to its right side. The original surround on this fireplace is intact and consists of flat boards, a simple narrow mantel shelf with a molding beneath, and a paneled door covering the oven and storage space area. The plastered ceiling has been removed, leaving the joists exposed. At the south end of the room are two doorways: one in the south wall providing access to the addition, and one opening west into the enlarged rear entry hall.

In the northwest corner, opening off the north entry, is a parlor, which retains its original Federal-style cornice molding; fireplace mantel with architrave surround, frieze board, and molded mantel shelf; base board molding topped with a single bead; and plastered walls and ceilings. The original wide pine flooring was replaced in 1931-32 by narrow oak boards. This room opens into the present kitchen in the southwest corner, which was

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remodeled in 1931-32 and contains a Colonial style corner china closet and raised-panel cabinetry with butterfly hinges. The two window sashes have been replaced with short, narrow contemporary style windows. However, the beaded and enclosed corner posts remain. A doorway on the east opens into the south hall.

The present rear entry hall comprises the original south entry and an extension in the rear ell. The enclosed, narrow, three-run stairway with winders leading to the second floor has late 19th-century tongue-and-groove wainscotting. A paneled door under the stairs, which once provided access to the basement stairway, now opens into a closet. The basement stairs were relocated to the opposite end of the entryway during the renovations of 1931-32. There is a rear entrance on the west side.

On the second floor, a bedroom on the west runs the entire depth of the house. This room also has cased and beaded cornerposts and a four-panel door with raised-field paneling. Joists here, as well as in the adjoining bedroom, are cased with plain pine boxing probably dating to the mid- to late nineteenth century. Walls are plastered and floors are of narrow oak boards. One sash is original, a second is 12-over-12 which was installed at a later period. The east side of the house is partitioned into two rooms and a small corridor, a division which appears to be original. The southeast room, now converted into a bathroom, retains its original door with four raised-field panels, doorway framing, and window sash; the original floor may be concealed under the present raised floor with linoleum covering. The northeast bedroom also contains its original door and doorway as well as cased and beaded cornerposts. The original floor and sash have been replaced with narrow oak boards and anderson-style windows. From the hallway, a straight-run staircase ascends to the attic. The attic has a particle board ceiling which conceals the roof framing.

Most alterations to the Morris Brown House occurred in 1931-32 under the ownership of Phebe Parker. Upon purchasing the property in 1931, she had Norman M. Isham, noted historic preservation architect and author, advise her on its restoration. At that time the house had fallen into decay and lacked plumbing and central heating. Major structural repairs included the rebuilding of the chimney, facing the foundation walls with poured concrete and the placement of "I" beams and lally columns in the basement for added support. Other improvements include the installation of a modernized kitchen and baths, a slate roof, replacement of window sash and deteriorated flooring, and the addition of a two-car garage. This garage, though more than fifty years old, is not a contributing element of the building, which is significant primarily for its Colonial and Federal fabric.

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The addition on the southeast corner of the house was built in 1950. Though physically connected to the eighteenth-century house and the early twentieth-century garage, it is essentially a separate structure. The addition has clapboard sheathing and simple architrave trim around door and window openings. The main entrance is located on the north side. Though slightly larger than the original house, the addition is visually inobtrusive thanks to its set-back, offset placement and the dense vegetation of the house lot. The addition has no significant exterior or interior architectural features or exceptional historical associations. As a structure less than fifty years old, it is a non-contributing element of the building.

Rehabilitation and additions notwithstanding, the eighteenth-century portion of the Morris Brown House retains much of its original character and integrity. Visually it still reads as a Colonial dwelling, and it is readily perceived as a historic house by neighborhood residents.

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Significance

The Morris Brown House is significant as one of the very few surviving early farmhouses in Providence. The house's 1793 construction date is based on a statement in a deed from Phinehas Brown to his son Morris, conveying the one-half acre lot "where said Morris Brown is now building a house on...." This date is unusually late for some of the house's architectural features, which are more characteristic of mid-eighteenth century construction. The house is architecturally significant for its uncommon floor plan, and is also historically important as an indicator of neighborhood development patterns prior to suburbanization of the area in the early twentieth century.

There are not many one-and-one-half-story, gambrel-roofed farmhouses extant in Providence. The Morris Brown House is typical in form and finish, with features such as four-panel, raised-field doors; handmade H-L hinges and Suffolk latches; cased and beaded cornerposts; windows with narrow muntins; and a fireplace surround with a wide frieze board. The nearby Jeremiah Dexter House (c. 1754) at 957 North Main Street [National Register] and the Betsy Williams House (c. 1773) at Roger Williams Park [National Register, Roger Williams Park Historic District] have affinities in overall form and interior finishes; however, the Brown House is smaller, measuring approximately 26 by 21 feet, compared to the 31 by 26 feet of the Jeremiah Dexter House and the 30 by 25 feet of the Betsy Williams House. Of greater significance is the unusual two-hall, three-room floor plan of the Morris Brown House, which differs from the traditional center-chimney, five-room plan common in Colonial and post-Colonial dwellings. This variation from the norm makes the Morris Brown House important as an example of non-standard house planning during the Colonial and Federal eras, a topic which has been little studied and which is virtually ignored in the literature on early Rhode Island domestic architecture.

This relatively small, modestly appointed dwelling also reflects the socio-economic status of its occupants. Morris Brown (1767-1817) worked on the adjoining 80-acre homestead of his father Phinehas Brown (1719-1805). Morris' dwelling and Phinehas' homestead farm were situated on rural Herrenden's Lane (now Rochambeau Avenue), a country road running from the Providence-Pawtucket highway (now North Main Street) east to Swan Point and the Seekonk River. Much of the terrain in this area consisted of poorly drained soils and wetlands and was marginally suited for agricultural purposes. Morris Brown also supplemented his income by serving as a hired laborer. That his financial situation was at times strained is suggested by an 1805 Providence County Superior Court case filed by a creditor,

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accusing him of defaulting on the payment of \$112.00 for household merchandise.

In his will, probated in 1805, Phinehas Brown left his estate to his wife Phebe Brown (1728/9-1809) for life and stipulated the disposition of the homestead farm after her demise. Following Phebe's death, Phinehas Brown's homestead farm was divided. Morris Brown received a nearly rectangular 15-acre tract surrounding his half-acre house lot (Providence Will Book 9:512). Brown continued farming until his death in 1817. Some indication of the productivity of the Brown farm can be gleaned from the 1817 inventory of his estate, which lists 1 cow, 20 bushels of corn, 10 bushels of potatoes, 4 tons of hay, a wagon, and 2 plows. (Providence Will Book 12:443½). Brown's wife, named Armilla or Priscilla, was his sole survivor. The Browns were childless.

The property was sold to satisfy the numerous debts against the estate: the probate court lists some 51 creditors. During the Browns' ownership and occupancy of the house, it is probable that the second floor was never finished or utilized for anything other than storage space, for the 1798 federal district tax records indicate that the first floor was used for living space. The relatively small number of household furnishings identified in the 1817 probate inventory of Morris Brown's estate is a telling indicator of how the couple lived here during their ownership.

The property was auctioned in 1818 and purchased by David Howell for \$850.00 (Deed Book 42:109-111). Howell (1747-1824), a faculty member at Brown University and one-time Attorney General of Rhode Island, was one of Brown's creditors. Howell never occupied the dwelling and apparently rented or leased the farm. One of Howell's children and heirs, Sarah Eddy (1781-1859), sold the property in 1825 to Stephen Dexter (1795-1832) of North Providence. Dexter, a son of Jeremiah Dexter (1730-1807), had been raised at his father's homestead [957 North Main Street, referenced above] one-half mile to the west of the Morris Brown House. According to a Dexter family genealogy, Stephen resided in the Morris Brown House [Newman, p. 59]. Upon his death, Stephen Dexter left a one-third interest in his real property and two-thirds of his household goods to his widow Phebe Ann and "all the residue and remainder of estate real and personal" to his minor son Charles H. Dexter (1829-), following the sale of certain property in North Providence, the proceeds of which were to pay off debts, with the remainder invested to provide maintenance and support for Charles and a small annuity for Phebe Ann. Stephen's will also stipulated that if Charles died without heirs, the real property devised to Charles was to be divided among Stephen's brother and sisters. It is unknown what happened

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to Phebe Ann and Charles H. Dexter; it seems likely that Stephen's widow is the same Phebe A. Dexter who married Frederick Winslow in Providence in 1842, but there is no other mention of Phebe A. (Dexter) Winslow or Charles H. Dexter in Providence records. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the Morris Brown farm appears in records as property of the "heirs of Stephen Dexter." By the 1890s these included relatives in Michigan and Washington state, as well as Anna Emerson Morris (1830-1909), Edward D. Emerson (1831-1897), and Ezekiel Emerson (1834-1898), the children of Stephen's sister and brother-in-law, Freelove Dexter Emerson (1796-1837) and Ezekiel Emerson. The heirs apparently rented out the former Morris Brown property throughout most of the nineteenth century. The federal census schedules and the Providence house and street directories indicate that the majority of the subsequent occupants were tradesmen. Later occupants included Otis Corbin, a stone cutter, in 1850; a silver polisher in 1875; a butcher in 1890; and a teamster in 1895. For a time the arable portion of the property was leased to Elizabeth Morris Smith (1813-1872), a sister of John Morris (see below), who lived next door in the homestead of her great-grandfather Phineas Brown. Throughout this period the number of farms on the East Side steadily decreased as the neighborhood grew in popularity as a suburban residential district, and farmland gave way to subdivisions. The 1850 federal census lists eight large working farms on Providence's East Side; by 1895 the number had fallen to three, including the Brown-Dexter property.

In 1895 the City of Providence put the Morris Brown farm up at auction for non-payment of taxes. Through this auction and a series of complex transfers among the Dexter heirs, John Morris (1828-1906), a great-great-grandson of Jeremiah Dexter's sister Susannah and grandnephew of Morris Brown, acquired full title to the Morris Brown farm. John transferred ownership to his wife Anna Emerson Morris (1830-1909), a granddaughter of Jeremiah Dexter and niece of Stephen Dexter. The Morrises occupied Jeremiah Dexter's homestead at 957 North Main Street. Anna Morris' brother Ezekiel Emerson (1834-1898) and his second wife Bridget J. (Burns) Emerson (1857 or '58-1926) moved into the Morris Brown House in 1895 or 1896. After Ezekiel's death, his widow Bridget remained at 317 Rochambeau with their son Frederick Emerson (1879-), daughter and son-in-law Josephine Emerson Callahan (1880-) and Owen C. Callahan (1868 or '69-1918), and a widowed sister-in-law, Mary Emerson. After Anna Morris' death in 1909, the property's ownership devolved equally to her six surviving children: Edward D. Morris (1855-1911); Anne D. Morris Stewart Pepler (1858-1947), wife of Charles H. Pepler; Phebe E. Morris (1861-1940); Mary M. Morris Almy (1863-1922), wife of Leon F. Almy; Edith A. Morris Nevin (1870-1913), wife of William H. Nevin (1865-1935); and Emma A. Morris Swift (1871-1943), wife of Augustus T. Swift.

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After about 1920 agricultural activities on the Morris Brown property ceased. By the time of Bridget Emerson's death in 1926, three of Anna Morris' children had also died. Anne D. Pepler, Phebe E. Morris, and Emma A. Swift; the estate of their sister Edith A. Nevin; and Howard S. Almy, son of their sister Mary M. Almy, all held interests in the property. In 1927 the family, probably induced by J. Benjamin Nevin (1896-1975), son of Edith A. Nevin and a Providence realtor, platted out the 15-acre farm as Elmgrove Gardens, a subdivision of house lots along Fosdike and Woodbury Streets. The Morris Brown House, then occupied by Josephine Emerson Callahan, was left on a 9,048-square-foot parcel. A large 19th-century barn, one of the farm's outbuildings, located on the adjoining house lot to the east, was removed at this time.

In 1931 Phebe Parker, a librarian at Brown University, purchased the Morris Brown House. Reportedly with advice from Norman M. Isham, Rhode Island's foremost restoration architect, Parker restored the house, installed central heating and plumbing, and constructed a small rear addition and garage on the south. Isham believed that the house dated to the mid-eighteenth century based on its architectural style. After restoration, Parker had the date "1763" inscribed on the chimney; however, it is not known how this date was arrived at. Parker sold the property in 1946 to Edward and Ruth Donovan. The Donovans added the large rear addition in 1950. This addition is practically a separate structure and despite its size is visually inobtrusive. As a building less than fifty years old, it is not considered to be a significant, contributing element of the property. The present owner of the property is Nancy Sherren, who purchased the premises in 1989.

As one of the few extant early farmhouses in Providence, the Morris Brown House stands as a reminder of the East Side's historic use as agricultural land. It is also significant as a dwelling embodying elements both typical and atypical of eighteenth-century vernacular domestic architecture.

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Major Bibliographical References

Newman, S. C. Dexter Genealogy, Being a Record of the Families Descended from Rev. Gregory Dexter. Providence, 1859.

Notes on the Brown, Dexter, Morris, and Emerson families compiled from genealogies, vital statistics records, and gravestones. Manuscript. Collection of Robert O. Jones.

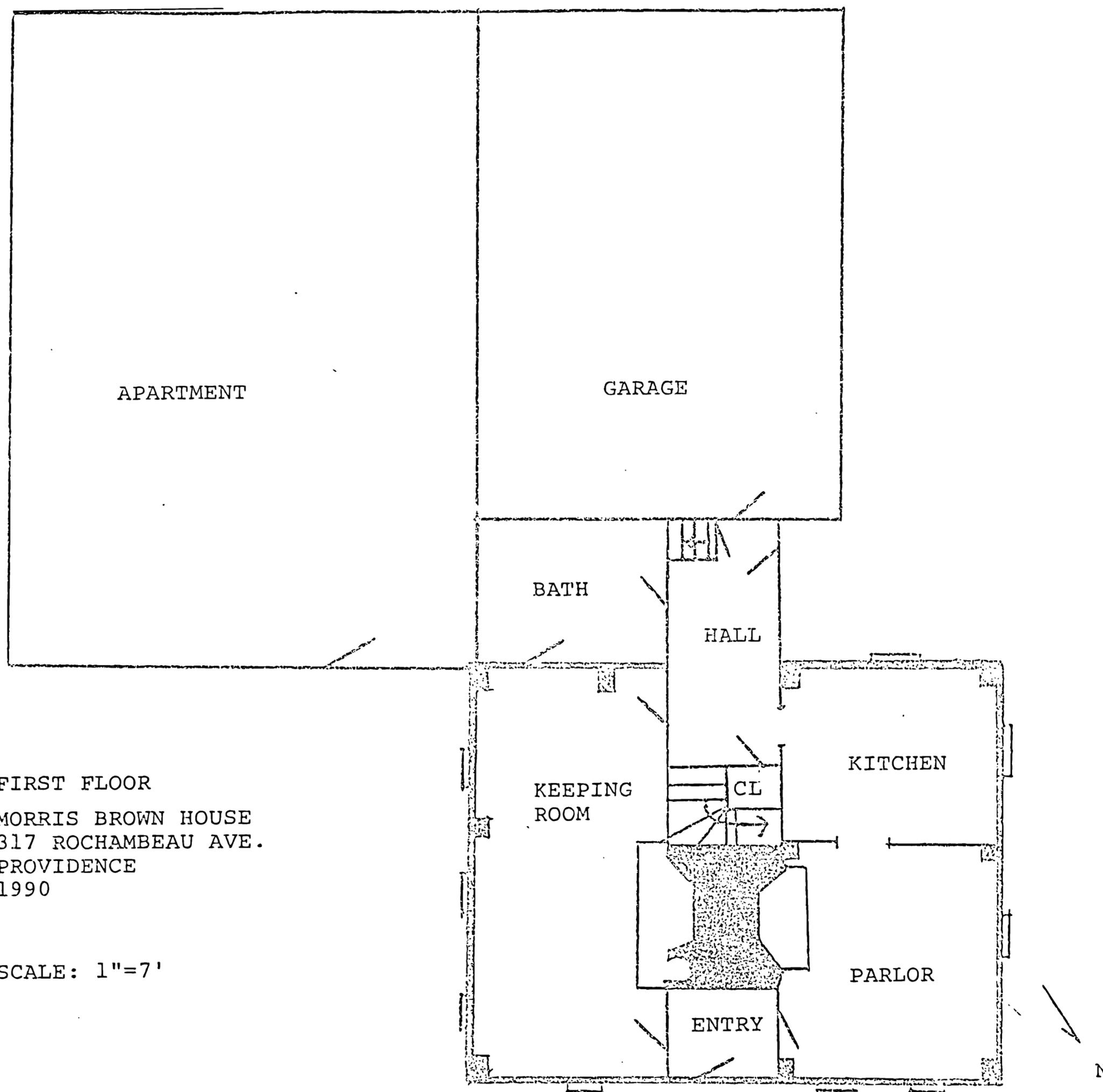
Providence, City of. Land Evidence Records.

_____. Will Books.

Providence Directory, 1824-1931.

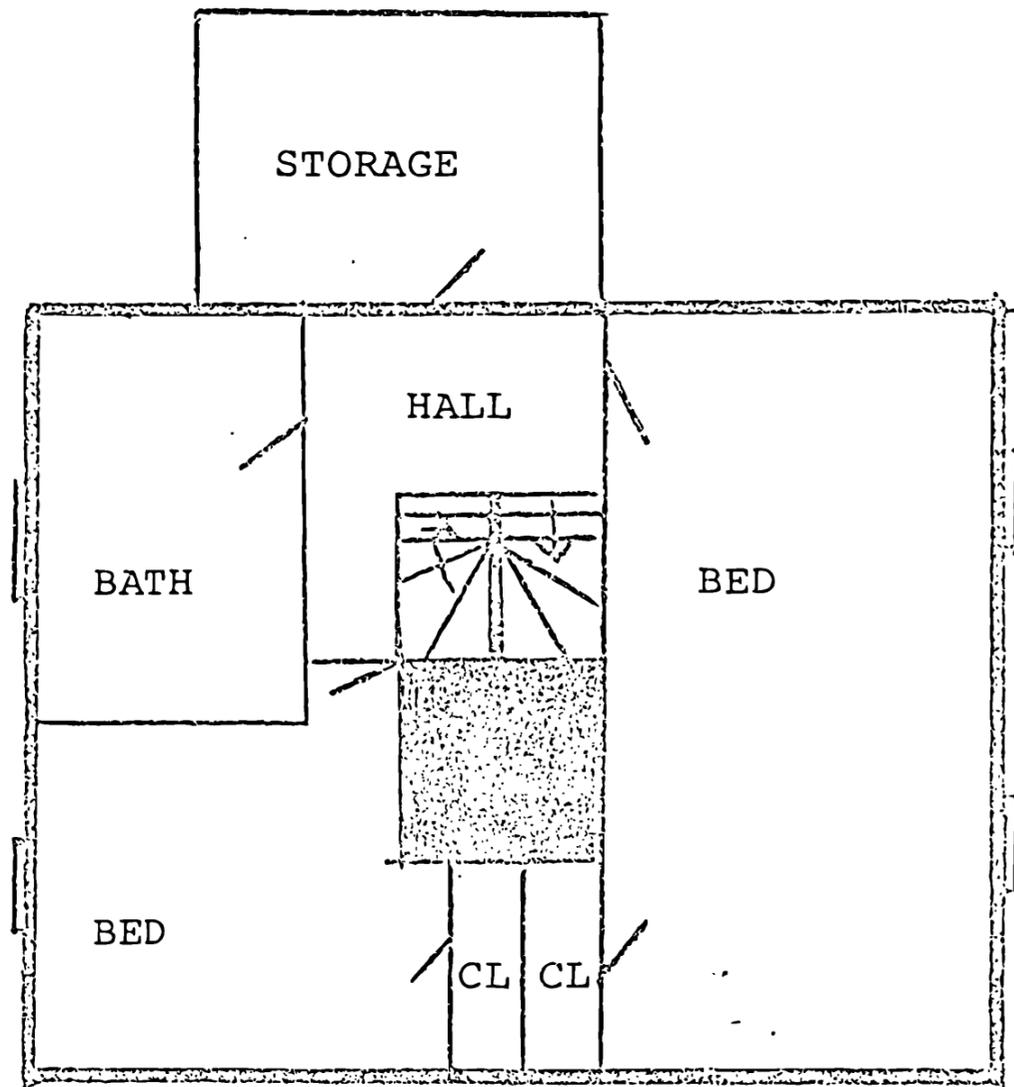
Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. Historic and Architectural Resources of the East Side, Providence: A Preliminary Report, by Robert Owen Jones. Providence, 1989.

Snider, Rebecca. "Final Project--Gambrel Roofed House at 317 Rochambeau Ave." Term paper, Brown University, 1976. Typescript photocopy on file at the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission.



FIRST FLOOR
MORRIS BROWN HOUSE
317 ROCHAMBEAU AVE.
PROVIDENCE
1990

SCALE: 1"=7'



SECOND FLOOR

MORRIS BROWN HOUSE
317. ROCHAMBEAU AVE.
PROVIDENCE
1990

SCALE: 1"=7'

