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NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

JAN 1 6 1990

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. Name of Property

historic name: Fenner, Thomas, House

other name/site number: _____

2. Location

street & number: 43 Stony Acre Drive

not for publication: N/A

city/town: Cranston vicinity: N/A

state: RI county: Providence code: 007 zip code: 02920

3. Classification

Ownership of Property: Private

Category of Property: Building

Number of Resources within Property:

Contributing	Noncontributing	
4	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
4	0	Total

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

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

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.

N/A See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official — Date: 3 Jan 1990

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:

X	entered in the National Register ____ See continuation sheet.		3/2/90
____	determined eligible for the National Register ____ See continuation sheet.		
____	determined not eligible for the National Register		
____	removed from the National Register		
____	other (explain): ____		

for Signature of Keeper — Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic:	DOMESTIC	Sub:	single dwelling
	DOMESTIC		secondary structure
	AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTENCE		agricultural outbuilding
Current:	DOMESTIC	Sub:	single dwelling
	DOMESTIC		secondary structure

7. Description

Architectural Classification:

COLONIAL/Postmedieval English
COLONIAL/Georgian

Other Description: N/A

Materials: foundation STONE roof WOOD/Shingle
walls WOOD/Weatherboard other N/A

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: national

Applicable National Register Criteria: A & C

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): N/A

Areas of Significance: ARCHITECTURE
EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT

Period(s) of Significance: 1677 ca 1835

Significant Dates: 1677 ca 1835

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.

9. Major Bibliographical References

X 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:

X State historic preservation office
____ Other state agency
____ Federal agency
____ Local government
____ University
____ Other -- Specify Repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: 2.55 acres

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
A	19	4629340	293210	B			
C				D			

____ See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description: ____ See continuation sheet.

The nominated property is coextensive with City of Cranston Assessor's Plat 37-2, lot 6.

Boundary Justification: ____ See continuation sheet.

The nominated property encompasses the remaining acreage of the Fenner farmstead and includes all surviving buildings which were historically part of the property.

11. Form Prepared By

Name/Title: Robert Owen Jones, Senior Historic Preservation Specialist

Organization: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission Date: Oct 1989

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

City or Town: Providence State: RI ZIP: 02903

Description

The Thomas Fenner House, the oldest part of which dates from 1677, is one of very few surviving examples of Rhode Island post-medieval "stone-ender" construction, with additions and alterations dating from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. As it stands today, the house is a two-and-one-half-story timber-frame structure with a fieldstone foundation and a wood-shingle saltbox roof with an early twentieth-century shed dormer on the long slope. The facade, with a central entrance flanked on each side by two windows on each floor, is symmetrically arranged, though the openings are not evenly spaced. Exterior walls are covered with clapboard, except for a massive, exposed stone chimney which takes up most of the north end wall. A smaller interior end chimney of brick rises from the south end. The house, facing east, stands south of Plainfield Pike (RI Route 14) on a tract measuring approximately two and one-half acres. It is set on sloping ground that declines to Stone Pond, at the southwest edge of the property. The old lane leading from Plainfield Pike to the house still survives, but a new driveway running from Stony Acre Drive is now used as the principal approach. The grounds comprise grass lawns dotted with informal plantings of trees and shrubs, and some clumps of undergrowth skirting sections of the pond's shore. These surroundings, though much smaller in extent than the historic limits of the farmstead, help to buffer the house from what is now a rather densely built-up suburban neighborhood, providing a setting remarkable for its pleasant and quiet country ambience. The property also contains a late nineteenth-century barn with vertical-board sheathing, located south and east of the house; a vertical-board shed south of the barn; and a privy east of the shed.

The Fenner House has been known and appreciated as a historic landmark at least since the 1880s. It has been described in two important architectural studies: Norman M. Isham's and Albert F. Brown's Early Rhode Island Houses (1895) and Antoinette F. Downing's Early Homes of Rhode Island (1937). As these authors observed it, the Fenner House was an accretion of several phases of construction, with a number of original features changed or covered by later alterations or additions. In their book Isham and Brown outlined a theory of the house's structural evolution and a conjectural restoration of its original appearance. However, a number of features, some only recently uncovered during an ongoing restoration undertaken by the house's present owners since 1981, seem to contradict earlier analyses of the development of the house's plan and massing.

The exterior of the Fenner House is dominated by the exposed chimney on the north end, constructed of fieldstone laid in shell lime mortar. By

the 1890s, as shown in old pictures, the chimney had been coated with whitewash, with the date "1677" painted on it, and topped out in brick, with pilastered sides and some projecting courses near the top. The present owners have removed the whitewash and painted date and constructed a stone top which encases the brick stack. The form of this stone top was modeled after the brick one found in place here and on stone chimneys of other surviving and restored seventeenth-century dwellings in the region. It is articulated with a projecting water table, pilasters, and a projecting crown.

Over the years the house's fenestration was changed. The early parts of the house must have had small casement windows. A single small, square garret window on the north end, filled with later sash, may survive as an example of the original fenestration. The windows must have been enlarged at least once, possibly twice, and were refitted at different times with different types of double-hung sash. Some window openings have the tall, narrow proportions commonly used during the first half of the eignteenth century, while most have proportions which suggest that they date from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The present window openings are fitted with heavy mortise-and-tenon, pegged frames with flat-board caps. Until recently these frames were filled with double-hung sash, most with six-over-six lights, except for some narrower windows on the west and south elevations with nine-over-nine lights. The present owners have installed new sash, with nine-over-nine or nine-over-six lights in the narrow windows and twelve-over-twelve or twelve-over-eight lights in the windows which formerly contained six-over-six sash. The dormer contains modern single and paired windows with six-over-six and six-over-one lights.

On the south end of the house, a gabled bulkhead near the west corner contains a door and stairway leading to the cellar. An entrance on the south end near the east corner was closed up by the present owners. Entrances on the east and west elevations have plain frames and plank-and-batten doors.

The main entrance on the east opens directly into the great room or fire room of the original part of the house. This room measures eighteen and one-half feet square, a bit larger than the sixteen- or seventeen-foot bay characteristic of post-medieval construction in New England. Until recently the great room appeared as it had been renovated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with cased timbers and plastered walls and ceiling; a closet with a two-panel door and a smaller brick fireplace, both constructed during the mid-1700s within the opening of the original stone fireplace; and a pantry in the small area east of the chimney, probably the location of the original stairway to the chamber. A nineteenth-century

drawing showed this pantry with a two-panel door, which was not in place when the present owners acquired the property. The present owners have selectively restored the great room by removing some later elements. The massive, hewn corner posts, girts, and summer beam are again exposed to view. The chimney girt, end girt, back girt, and summer have chamfered edges with lambs' tongue stops; on the end and chimney girts, the chamfering stops short of the summer on each side, and does not run the full length of the beam under the junctions with the summer. The original stone fireplace has been reopened, and measures approximately ten feet wide, three feet nine inches deep, and five feet eight inches high. The opening is spanned by a chimney tree seventeen inches high, with a wide, complex molding on the bottom edge composed of cyma recta and quarter-round sections separated by a bead of right-angle section (Photo #6). The fireplace has splayed side walls and a blind arch below a recessed panel in the back wall. Next to the fireplace, a new plank door opens into a closet occupying the space which had been a pantry. The east and west walls, covered with plaster, are of stud construction, while the south wall is of plank construction; the latter form is more typical of timber-frame domestic building in the Providence area. The planks of the south wall and joists and planks of the ceiling are now exposed. The west wall contained two doors: the one leading to the present kitchen remains, while the one to the northwest corner room has been closed up. A door in the south wall leads to the southeast corner room. The floor of the great room is composed of wide planks of hard pine, most very old, if not original, with a few newer replacements. The planks are cut and fitted so that there is a straight break running across the room from a point just north of the main entrance. Along this break, six pockets, now filled, are cut into the floor as if to hold the balusters of a railing, though the pockets are not of uniform shape or size. An unusual feature of the great room is the graffiti in eighteenth-century script found on the chimney tree and south wall planking when the later walls covering these elements were removed. The graffiti includes the initials "J" and "R," and the phrase "six days of sin" inscribed near the west end of the chimney tree. The great room is now furnished with late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century antiques and handsome reproductions made by one of the owners.

The floor plan of the Fenner House published by Isham & Brown in 1895 shows two rooms east of the great room, separated by a passage leading to the rear entrance, and three rooms in the south end of the house. The northwest corner room was entered from the great room. The west end of the stone chimney, abutting this room, had been walled over. From the passage, a short flight of steps led down to a half cellar set slightly below grade, lit by a window in the west wall set lower than the other first-floor windows, as shown in an old photograph. Another short flight led up to a

half chamber over the half cellar, tucked under the long slope of the saltbox roof. The south end of the house was partitioned into one room on the east, with enclosed staircases down to the cellar and up to the second floor, and two rooms on the west. The brick end chimney, built on a modified triangular plan with truncated corners, stood between the southeast and southwest corner rooms, and contained corner fireplaces in both rooms and an oven in the southeast room.

When the present owners purchased the house, they found that the half cellar had been eliminated and a floor put in at the same level as the rest of the first story. The space was outfitted as a kitchen, with cabinets and fixtures dating from the 1920s or 1930s. The partitions dividing the south end into three rooms had been removed to make two rooms separated by the corner fireplaces. These two rooms connected through a broad archway of dark-stained pine with half-height bookcases topped by square pillars, typical of the finish found in early twentieth-century bungalows.

The present owners closed up the door from the great room into the northwest corner room, cut a new door in the room's south wall, added a closet in the corner room, and removed the wall covering the stone chimney. This room has been made into a lavatory. Corner posts on the north wall and the massive back girt, cased with flat boards, are visible.

The owners renovated the kitchen with new cabinets and fixtures in a galley layout. A new fixed-sash window with twenty small lights has been installed in the west wall. A doorway in the west wall leads out to the yard. The owners also removed a partition at the south end of the old kitchen. A pair of cased posts marks the location of this removed partition. During renovation the owners found pockets in the northernmost of these posts and a timber on the opposite wall which showed where the framing had been for the floor of the half chamber above the old half cellar. The massive cased back girt is visible along the west wall of the kitchen.

The owners removed the early twentieth-century archway adjoining the south chimney and rebuilt the room partitions taken out when the archway was installed. The locations of the reconstructed partitions were established by evidence in the framing: the remains of a ceiling timber, which had been partially cut away to make it smaller, found when the archway was removed, and a break in the casing of the back girt, which showed the point of intersection of the perpendicular wall. The south end is again subdivided into three spaces: a southwest corner room, a southeast corner room, and a small dining area opening off the south end of the new kitchen.

In the southeast corner of the dining area, the eighteenth-century closet removed from the great room fireplace has been installed. Opposite this cupboard, the southwest corner post and portions of the external surface of the great room's end girt and plank wall are exposed. A molding is nailed below the lower edge of the girt, and there are ghost marks of plaster on the planking which appear to indicate the presence of a staircase here at one time.

The southwest and southeast corner rooms are both now used as sitting rooms, the latter larger than the former. The walls of both rooms are plastered, and are of stud construction on the exterior perimeter of the house. In each room the corner chimney breasts are formed of two planes set at an angle [see plan]. The fireboxes, each measuring about four by three feet, are untrimmed. Above each is a fascia and mantel shelf trimmed with moldings whose profiles suggest a mid- to late eighteenth century date. In the southwest corner room, a recessed cupboard is set above the mantel in the narrow side wall of the chimney breast. The southwest corner post and back girt, both cased, are visible. In the southeast corner room, there is a recessed cupboard above the mantel over the firebox, and the narrow side wall of the chimney breast contains an oven with an iron door. A cased post in the south end wall of this room, adjacent to the fireplace, is original. Casings of the southeast corner post and ceiling timber along the west partition wall are replacements put in by the present owners. They mark the location of timbers which at some point had been cut back so that they did not protrude into the room.

At the north end of the southeast corner room, walled off from the room and reached through a board-and-batten door, a single-run staircase with winders at the bottom leads up to the second floor. On the north side of the staircase, the external surface of the great room end girt and wall planks are visible, as is the molding along the girt visible in the kitchen dining area, described above. This molding apparently continues along the entire length of the girt, covered by the plaster wall at the north end of the southeast corner room.

Upstairs, there were two chambers separated by a narrow hallway before construction of the dormer in 1939 created added headroom for three rooms across the back of the house. In the second-floor hall, a cased diagonal brace protrudes from the wall, marking the limit of the southwest corner of the great room chamber.

The great room chamber, like the room below it, is eighteen and one-half feet square. However, the framing here is slightly different, with the summer running parallel to rather than perpendicular to the chimney

girt. The use of the transverse summer, found in some Massachusetts houses, is rare in Rhode Island. The overall framing configuration that it creates here, with lower- and upper-story summer beams oriented perpendicular to one another, is also far less common in Rhode Island than in Massachusetts (other examples in the state include the Eleazer Arnold House in Lincoln and the Wilbour House in Little Compton, the latter town originally part of Massachusetts). In the eighteenth century a smaller fireplace and oven were built within the chamber's original fireplace, and a partition was erected across the room under the summer in 1889 [date inscribed on partition, found by present owners]. South of this partition, a transom window was at some point cut in the west wall, opening into the adjoining space. The present owners have removed this later partition under the summer, removed the transom window in the west wall and plastered over the opening, and reopened and partially rebuilt the original stone fireplace, but have left in place the wall and ceiling plaster and the casings enclosing the massive timbers. During renovations, the owners were able to get into the summer casing from the attic above, and discovered shreds of newspaper dating from 1812-14. After reconstructing the original stone fireplace, the owners replastered the wall around the firebox, following ghost lines visible from an earlier plastering job, and lined the plaster edge with narrow lath trim. In front of the space once occupied by the original staircase, east of the fireplace, the floor boards have pockets cut into them which probably once held balusters. The former stair well is now a closet lined with beaded matchboard, but within it the uncased northeast corner post with gunstock profile is visible. A shallow closet occupies space on the west side of the fireplace. A door in the west wall opens into an adjoining chamber within the dormer. This room connects to the hallway and the northwest corner chamber, the latter also in space opened up by the dormer. This northwest corner chamber is now outfitted as a modern bathroom.

The dormer also created additional room for a southwest chamber. A cased post is visible on the south end wall. The eighteenth-century two-panel door now hanging in the doorway from the hallway into this chamber was found in the house, and is probably the door which was originally between the great room and the pantry, shown in an early drawing mentioned above.

The southeast chamber, reached through doorways from both the hallway and the southwest chamber, has a cased post visible in the southeast corner, and a corner fireplace in the south end chimney, with a recessed cupboard above the mantel over the firebox. From this chamber, an enclosed single-run staircase with winders at the bottom leads up to the attic. In the attic stair well, portions of the timber frame are visible: the front

plate, the corner post and girt at the south end of the great room chamber, and a diagonal brace.

The attic stairs come up along the south edge of the girt that marks the south end of the great room chamber below. The attic floor north of this beam is even with the top of the beam; the floor to the south is aligned with the bottom of the beam. On the south side of this beam, the bottom edge is chamfered, and pockets for joists are cut along the top edge. The roof is supported by ten sets of hewn rafters and collar beams mortised and pegged together. Incised Roman numerals are visible on some of these timbers, as was common with this type of construction to guide the housewright's assembly of the parts. As noted by Isham & Brown in their 1895 publication, the three sets of rafters centered over the north portion of the house are cut off above the collar beams; no explanation has yet been found for this unusual feature. Thinner, later members sistered to the lower parts of these rafters now extend to the roof peak to support the roof sheathing. The stonework of the chimney's flue stack and the shoulder walls of thinner section on each side of it are visible at the north end of the attic.

The house has a full cellar under the great room and the south end. There is only a crawl space under the kitchen and lavatory, probably representing the floor level of the old half cellar which formerly occupied the kitchen space. The internal staircase to the basement enters the cellar under the southern portion of the house. Here brick piers hold timbers which support the south end chimney, with diagonal beams marking the line of the hearths above. One hewn joist supporting the floor above has a quarter-round molded edge. Such finish is unusual for a cellar, and the beam does not appear to be related to any other structural feature of the house; it is possible that the timber is reused. Stone is built to a great thickness along a portion of the wall between the south cellar and the north cellar and crawlspace. Isham states that this was done simply to give a smoother finish to a wall face which was not originally intended to be exposed. On the south side, west of the south chimney supports, steps in an areaway lead directly outdoors through the bulkhead. A door on the north near the internal staircase opens into the north cellar, the floor level of which is a step higher than the floor level of the south cellar. The massive stone foundation walls here are pierced by a tiny window on the east, and small niches are set in the west foundation wall and in the immense base which supports the stone end chimney. The most remarkable feature visible here are the joists supporting the floor of the great room. These joists are heavy hewn beams running east-west, varying from eight to twelve inches in width and set on average only five inches apart. Such

massive construction is unknown in any other timber-framed dwelling in Rhode Island.

Although no archaeological investigations have been made of the house's surroundings to date, it is likely that the property contains the buried remains of outbuilding foundations and artifact deposits which could provide invaluable information on over three hundred years of human occupation and use of this site.

Analysis

According to Isham's analysis of the evolution of the Fenner House, the original structure was built on a single-cell plan a full two and one-half stories high, with the stonework of the chimney stack exposed on the north and also on the west on the first story. The dwelling originally comprised only the present great room and great room chamber, with the cellar below and attic above them. Then a one-story lean-to was added on the west side, probably at an early date, for the framing of a window measuring 18-3/4 by 13 inches was found in the west wall in 1893 and uncovered again by the present owners in the 1980s, evidence that the house originally had small casement windows typical of seventeenth-century construction. The house and lean-to were then lengthened on the south. In one of Isham's manuscript notebooks [vol. R. I. 2], there is a brief note stating that the south addition of the Thomas Fenner House was built before 1751, but the deed cited by Isham as evidence for this statement actually refers to the Arthur Fenner House, which once stood nearby. In any case, the south addition was "rebuilt in 1835," according to a description of the house printed in a genealogy of the Fenner family [Root, 1887], or "pulled down and replaced by the present south end about 1837" [Isham & Brown, 1895]. A long shed dormer, added on the west slope of the saltbox roof above the lean-to in 1939, was the final change to the external massing of the house.

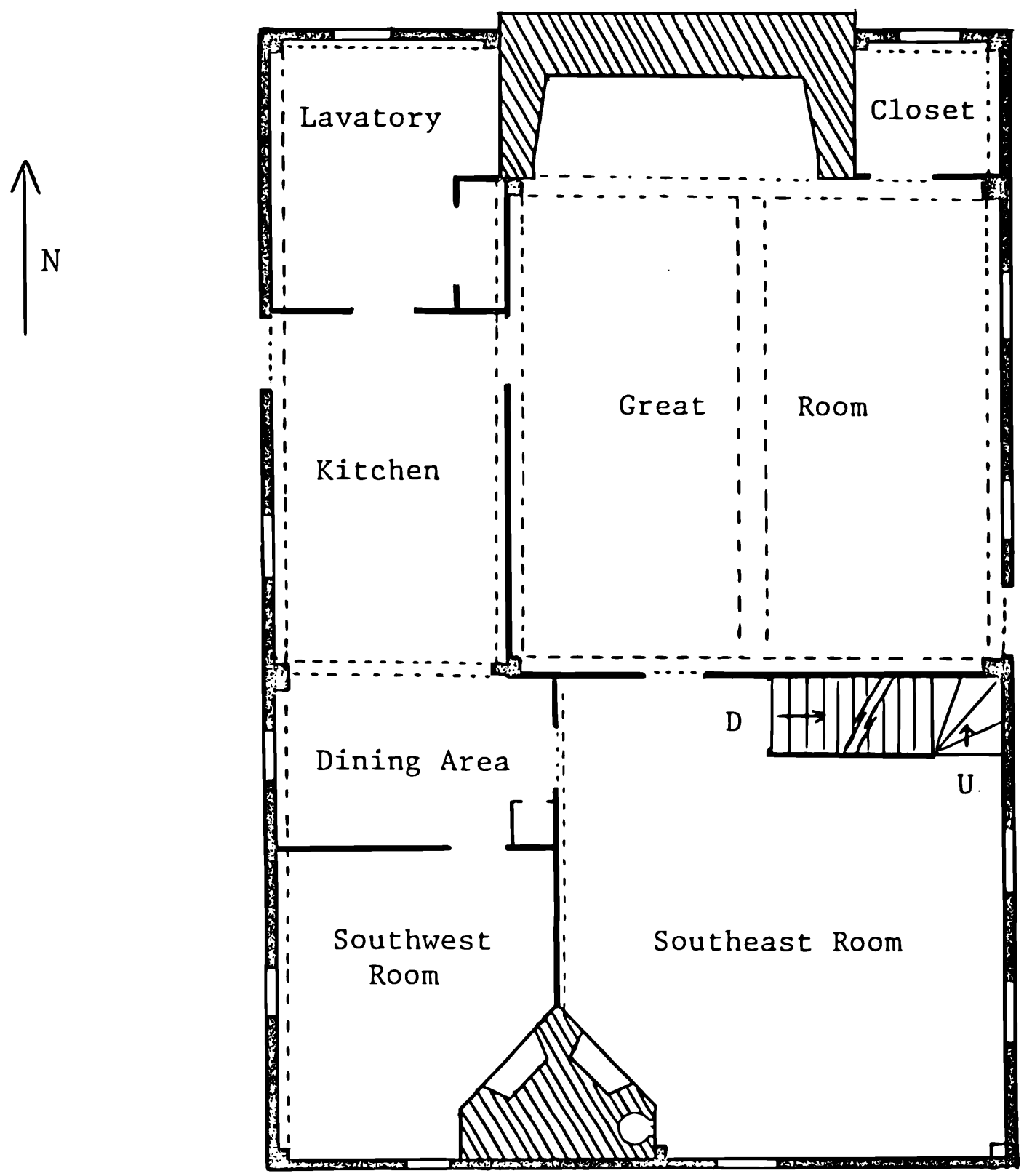
In general the position and dimension of visible framing members seem to support this analysis of the building's structural chronology. The arrangement of posts appears to indicate that the great room, the lean-to, and the end south of both the great room and lean-to were framed as separate units. The size of timbers in the lean-to indicate a construction date in the late seventeenth century, or first quarter of the eighteenth century at the latest, while those of the south end are smaller, indicating a construction date after 1720-25. This is especially evident along the west wall, where the cased girt visible in the lavatory and kitchen measures fifteen and three-quarter inches by six and one-half inches, while

that in the dining area and southwest corner room measures six inches by six and one-half inches.

However, a number of features contradict this analysis. The external surfaces of the original post and sheathing at the southwest corner of the great room, which are now visible in the present dining area off the kitchen, show no evidence of nail holes. If this had been at one time an exterior wall, it would have been covered with clapboards, and the holes left by the nails used to attach the clapboards should remain even though the clapboards themselves do not. Also, the east and west walls of the great room are of stud construction while the south wall is not. These facts suggest that the west wall was once an outside wall and the south wall was probably not an exterior wall but instead an internal partition. The molding along the south lower edge of the great room end girt, visible in the dining area and stairwell, show that at one time this wall was exposed as an interior partition, later plastered over. However, the fact that the molding is separate from the beam suggests that it was added later. If the house originally had been constructed with a room south of the great room, the girt most likely would have been chamfered on both sides while it was being hewn. Upstairs, the end girt of the great room chamber, though cased in the chamber, is visible uncased along the attic floor. This timber is chamfered along the lower edge on the south side and cut to receive floor joists along the top. The configuration of this beam suggests that the original house consisted of two rooms laterally arranged on each floor, but the treatment of the beam in the same position on the floor below, with chamfering on the north side only, seems to contradict this possibility.

Structural analysis of the south end of the Fenner House is also hampered by inconsistencies that make it difficult to ascertain the dates and sequence of construction. In stone-enders enlarged by lengthening the house on the end away from the original chimney, the addition often contained a triangular-plan chimney with corner fireplaces [Isham & Brown]. Triangular-plan chimneys appear in Providence-area dwellings as early as ca 1730 and were most common through the mid-eighteenth century. The profile of the moldings on the mantels of the corner fireplaces in the Fenner House indicate a mid-eighteenth century date of construction. These facts are consistent with the ca 1750 date given by Isham for the initial construction of the south addition to the house. However, corner fireplaces do appear in houses built as late as ca 1790. The ones in the Fenner House therefore could have been built well after 1750, though probably not as late as the 1830s, when this part of the house was reportedly reconstructed. The south chimney is not supported by a large mass of stone in the cellar; it rests instead on brick piers. Massive

stone chimney foundations are commonly found in dwellings constructed from the seventeenth through the early nineteenth century. The use of brick piers to support chimneys is less common and is usually found in dwellings built in the early nineteenth century. The evidence thus seems to indicate two possibilities: that the south chimney and its foundation were built in the early nineteenth century, using a relatively newer mode of construction for the foundation and an older form for the chimney itself; or the eighteenth-century chimney was kept when the south end was "rebuilt" in the early nineteenth century, and its original foundation was replaced with a newer one. Neither explanation is entirely satisfactory. Despite the presence of an oven in the chimney breast of the southeast corner room, the size of the fire box is much smaller than that of a typical cooking fireplace, which makes it seem unlikely that this room was ever used as a kitchen. One fact that does seem to support the statement that the south end was "rebuilt in 1835" is the evidence that framing members in the southeast corner room were cut down in size. Through the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the dimensions of posts and beams typically used in timber-framed domestic buildings became increasingly smaller until eventually the members were small enough to be hidden within the walls. The cutting away of the beams in the southeast corner room of the Fenner House could be plausibly explained as an early nineteenth-century alteration of an earlier structure done to make the interior look more up-to-date.



FENNER, THOMAS, HOUSE
Cranston, Rhode Island

First floor plan
Sketch -- no scale

Significance

Summary

The Thomas Fenner House is architecturally significant as a very rare surviving example of colonial postmedieval construction of the "stone-ender" type peculiar to Rhode Island, and is also important for the evidence of changes made over the years which illustrate how such houses were adapted for use in subsequent periods. The house reflects the migration to and survival of the European Gothic building tradition in the American colonies, and later evolution of a classical colonial style. Historically, the Fenner House is important as an artifact of early European settlement in the Providence hinterlands some 310 years ago. It is a landmark of great importance in a neighborhood overlain with development spawned by nineteenth-century industrialization and twentieth-century suburbanization. Further study of documentary sources and testing for archaeological resources associated with the property could yield important insights into patterns of settlement and occupation of the seventeenth-century frontier and the evolution of rural household life over a period of three centuries.

Documentary History

Located today near the Cranston-Johnston town line just over four and one-half miles from the center of Providence, the Thomas Fenner House lies within the part of the Providence Plantations known as Neutaconkanut. Arthur Fenner, father of Thomas, was one of the earliest settlers in this area.

Arthur Fenner (1622-1703) came to Providence some time before 1649 and purchased his first property in 1650. In 1652 he bought most of the lands allotted to John Lippitt (who had moved to Warwick), including property at Neutaconkanut. Fenner increased his holdings at Neutaconkanut in 1654, and in 1659 purchased the so-called What Cheer property, east of the Providence home lots bordering the Seekonk River. Fenner bought more land at Neutaconkanut in 1673; eventually the property encompassed 218 acres. Here Arthur built his "house in the woods," its date variously given as circa 1655 [Isham & Brown] or 1662 [Root]. Documentary evidence suggests that Arthur Fenner was living at What Cheer in 1664, but that he had moved to Neutaconkanut before 1675 [Narragansett Club Publications, cited in Root]. During the Indian war of 1675-76 Arthur Fenner, captain of the militia, and his son Thomas were among the men who remained in a garrison house in the compact part of Providence. A letter of Roger Williams mentions that

Fenner's house at Neutaconkanut was burned by the Indians [cited in Root]. Following the war Arthur Fenner rebuilt his dwelling at Neutaconkanut and erected a new house for his son Thomas between one-quarter and one-half mile southwesterly of his own.

Thomas Fenner (1652-1717/8), aged twenty-two at the outbreak of King Philip's War, married his first wife, Alice Relph, about that time. A record refers to the birth of a son to Thomas Fenner "first month 1676" [Root]. The war ended in the fall of 1676; it therefore seems plausible that Arthur Fenner erected a new dwelling for his young son's family the following spring. Thomas Fenner married his second wife, Dinah Borden (1664-1761), in 1682, and subsequently fathered four daughters and six sons: Mehitabel, Freelove (b. ca 1678 or 80), Thomas, Mary (1692-1759), Joseph (1693-1779), Richard (1695-1773), Sarah (b. 1698), Arthur (1699-1788), Eleazer (1702-1723), and John (1705-1725). Interestingly, the graffiti uncovered in the great room of the house includes the initials "R" and "J," possibly for Richard and Joseph or John. Thomas Fenner served as a justice, holding court "in his new house in Providence Woods." He was also a deputy in the General Assembly in 1683, 1691, 1695, 1697, 1699, 1704, and 1705; an assistant in the Governor's Council in 1707, 1708, 1709, 1710, 1711, 1712, 1713, 1715, 1716, and 1717; and frequently a member of the Town Council between 1698 and 1706. In 1712 he was commissioned "Major of the Main," and he often appears in later records as Major Fenner. Thomas must have added land to his farmstead, for later records make it apparent that his descendants inherited property in excess of the 218 acres reportedly owned by Thomas' father Arthur Fenner. Thomas Fenner died 27 February 1717/8. In his will, among other bequests, he left his wife Dinah "the old parte of my dwelling house Dureing her Life...;" his son Thomas 150 acres of land and "my half of the Houseing which my Honrd ffather Gave to mee by his Last Will and Testament..." (i.e., a half-interest in the Arthur Fenner House); and his four sons Richard, Arthur, Joseph, and John "all the Rest of my Esstate...to geather with my houseing..." to be divided equally among them. The will made provisions for the care of "my poore helpless Child Eleazer."

Important changes to the Fenner House must have been made during the first half of the eighteenth century. Though the inventory of Thomas' estate offers no clue to the number or arrangement of rooms in the house at the time of his death, the reference to the old part of the house in Thomas' bequest to Dinah suggests that the dwelling had both an original section and a newer addition completed before Thomas' death. The nature and extent of this supposed addition is unknown; however, it would have to have been something other than the rear lean-to, which, with its half-cellar, did not contain enough living space to serve as a separate dwelling

area. By the time of Thomas' death, his children Mehitable, Freelove, Thomas, and Mary had been married and moved away; it appears that his widow Dinah; Joseph Fenner, his wife Wait, and daughter Mehitable; Richard Fenner, his wife Abigail, and daughter Abigail; Arthur Fenner; Eleazer Fenner; John Fenner; and possibly Sarah Fenner were living in the family homestead.

Richard Fenner married in 1716/17 and eventually built a dwelling northeast of his father's house in present-day Johnston, near the site of the later Simmons House [Root]. Arthur Fenner probably remained at home until either 1721, when his brothers conveyed to him their father's properties on the east side of Providence, or 1723, when he married; Arthur then took up residence on the east side. Eleazer and John probably lived in the family homestead until they both died, young and unmarried.

The Thomas Fenner House became the property of Thomas' son Joseph Fenner (1693-1779). Joseph first married Wait Harris (b. 1694) about 1716 and had six children: Mehitabel (1717/8-1744), Thomas (b. 1719), Phebe (b. 1725), Joseph (b. 1728/9), Wait (b. 1733), and Asahel (1737-1767). He then married Amy Kinnicut (1715-1782), widow of Roger Kinnicut, in 1758. As his father before him, Joseph served as a deputy in the Assembly and as an assistant (1736-40) in the Governor's Council. He was also a lieutenant in the militia (1725-26) and a justice.

Joseph Fenner's children all married, except his son Joseph. Asahel Fenner married Rhobe Sarle in 1759. In 1762 Joseph gave Asahel a thirty-one-acre lot of land, but it is unclear whether Asahel built a house on the property and lived there. Asahel was survivived by his father, his wife, and four children: James (1759-1799), Phebe (1760 or 61-1809), Penelope (1763 or 64-1848), and Joseph (ca 1766-1835). The Rhode Island colony census of 1774 enumerates the households of Joseph Fenner and Robe [sic] Fenner, widow of Asahel:

<u>Joseph Fenner</u>

2 males over age 16 [Joseph himself and probably a hired hand]
2 females over age 16 [Amy Fenner and probably a servant]
1 Indian

<u>Robe Fenner</u>

2 males under age 16 [James and Joseph]
2 females under age 16 [Phebe and Penelope]
1 female over age 16 [Rhobe herself]

It is unclear from the records whether the two households occupied separate dwellings or shared the Fenner homestead.

All of Joseph Fenner's children died before he did, as did two of his grandchildren. He left his estate to his eight surviving grandchildren and the heirs of one deceased grandchild, and made provisions for the financial and material support of his widow Amy and his daughter-in-law Rhobe (Sarle) Fenner, widow of Asahel. The inventory of Joseph's estate does not explicitly identify the rooms in the house at the time of his death.

Joseph Fenner bequeathed his homestead farm to his grandsons James Fenner and Joseph Fenner, the sons of his deceased son Asahel and the only heirs to carry the Fenner surname. At the time of their grandfather's death James was about twenty years of age and Joseph about thirteen. There is no record of appointment of a guardian for James; Israel Gorton was appointed guardian of Joseph (as well as his sister Penelope). In March 1780, after his fourteenth birthday, Joseph chose his mother's uncle Richard Sarle to be his guardian. In September of that same year, James was adjudged non compos mentis by the Cranston Town Council, and Richard Sarle was named guardian to oversee his business affairs. This action probably took place at the time of or shortly after James' twenty-first birthday.

Public records offer no clues to the occupation of the Fenner House for the twenty-year period following the death of Joseph Fenner in 1779. Although it seems likely that Joseph's daughter-in-law Rhobe Fenner resided here with her sons, who were heirs to the property, and her daughters, possibly together with Joseph's widow Amy, the Rhode Island colony census of 1782 contains no listing for either Rhobe Fenner, Amy Fenner (who died that year), or James Fenner (who would have been twenty-two or twenty-three years of age that year) as heads of household. At the same time, the enumeration of people in the Richard Sarle household does not include individuals in the proper age brackets to account for the presence of Rhobe Fenner or her children in that household. Rhobe Fenner's name does not appear in any subsequent censuses of Cranston. Though the dates of Rhobe's birth and death are unknown, it seems plausible to assume that she was born circa 1740 (considering that her deceased husband had been born in 1737) and that consequently she died circa 1810 (assuming a life span of seventy years). Cranston records include the probate of a will for a Rhobe Fenner who died in 1810, but the will names as the decedent's only heir her daughter Prudence Fenner, and as far as is known Asahel and Rhobe Fenner never had a daughter Prudence.

An agreement to divide the Fenner homestead property must have been made soon after Joseph reached the age of twenty-one, circa 1787. No record has been found of the partition of the estate, but other land records indicate that Joseph later owned a tract west of the present Stone Pond, on which stood a house which he probably erected after taking possession of the property. James received the Fenner House together with property encompassing the site of Stone Pond and extending eastward from the dwelling.

James Fenner married Sarah Remington (1766 or 67-1849), probably in 1790 or 1791, though he does not appear as a head of household in the federal census of 1790. In 1791 Richard Sarle resigned his charge as guardian of James Fenner, and James' first cousin once removed, Arthur^{4} [Arthur^{3} Thomas^{2} Arthur^{1}] Fenner (1745-1805), Governor of Rhode Island (1790-1805), was appointed as his guardian. Of the children born to James and Sarah (Remington) Fenner, two sons survived: Thomas Fenner (1792-1824) and Asahel Fenner (1795-1846). James Fenner died intestate in 1799, leaving his sons as heirs. James' widow Sarah was made administratrix of his estate. In 1800 or 1801 Sarah married Job Sheldon (1778 or 79-1825), who was appointed guardian of Thomas and Asahel Fenner on 28 March 1801. Neither Sarah Fenner, widow of James, nor Job Sheldon appear as heads of household in the federal census of 1800. Job and Sarah (Remington Fenner) Sheldon had one son, born and died in 1801, and one daughter, Sarah A. Sheldon (1802-1847).

The Court of Probate of the town of Cranston ordered two inventories of James Fenner's estate, one at the time of his death and another following his widow's marriage to Job Sheldon (the latter to protect the interests of James Fenner's sons, both minors unable to oversee their own affairs). These inventories include partial enumerations of items by room, offering some clues to the internal arrangement of the Fenner House, but the evidence is contradictory. The following table shows the rooms mentioned in each document:

Inventory of 1799	Inventory of 1801
Northwest bedroom	Northwest corner bedroom
Half Chamber	Half chamber bedroom
	Northwest corner chamber
Great Room	Great Room
Closet in the Great Room	Closets
Closet east of the fireplace	
Kitchen	
Kitchen closet	
Cheese Room	
Large chamber	
Cellar	Cellar
	Half Cellar

The 1799 inventory lists the size of the farm as 212 acres.

The mention of a kitchen separate from the great room in the 1799 inventory suggests the presence of a south addition to the house by that date, since the kitchen could not have been located in the rear lean-to, which contained the northwest corner bedroom and half cellar. However, it would be unusual for a new kitchen to be located in the addition, for in most old houses the great room or keeping room usually became the kitchen as house plans and room uses evolved through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A separate kitchen is not mentioned in the 1801 inventory, and items listed in the kitchen and kitchen closet in the 1799 inventory appear in the 1801 inventory as items in the great room or half cellar. The cheese room mentioned in the 1799 inventory may be the half cellar, for the two inventories list identical or similar items in those two spaces. The 1801 inventory contains a list of items whose location is not specifically identified; this list includes items identical or similar to those listed for the kitchen, cheese room, and large chamber in the 1799 inventory. Though not specifically identified in the 1801 inventory, the large chamber over the great room certainly existed; this suggests that there may have been a separate kitchen too which was not specifically mentioned. The northwest corner chamber named in the 1801 inventory does not include a bed, and the nature of the items listed there suggest that it was used only as a storage area off the large chamber. The mention of two closets in the great room, one specifically identified as east of the fireplace, suggests that by 1799 the smaller firebox and closet had been constructed within the original great room fireplace, and that the original staircase had been removed from its position east of the fireplace.

According to the federal census of 1810, the household of Job Sheldon consisted of one white male aged 10 to 16 [stepson Asahel Fenner], one white male aged 16 to 26 [stepson Thomas Fenner], two white males aged 26 to 45 [Job Sheldon and probably one hired hand], one white female under age 10 [daughter Sarah A. Sheldon], and one white female aged 26 to 45 [wife Sarah Remington Fenner Sheldon].

Thomas Fenner reached the age of twenty-one in 1813 and married Mary Alice Olney (1800-1850) in 1814. They had five sons: James M. (1814-1875), Thomas R. (b. 1816), Joseph (1818-d. before 1849), Alexander W. (1819-1885), and Edwin E. (b. 1821). Asahel Fenner turned twenty-one in 1816. The two brothers released Job Sheldon from his obligations as their guardian in 1820.

The federal census of 1820 enumerates the households of Thomas Fenner and Job Sheldon, as follows:

Thomas Fenner

4 white males under 10 [sons James, Thomas, Joseph, and Alexander]
1 white male 26 to 45 [Thomas himself]
1 white female 16 to 26 [wife Mary A. Fenner]

One member engaged in agriculture

Job Sheldon

2 white males 26 to 45 [Job Sheldon and probably Asahel Fenner]
1 white male over 45 [probably a hired hand]
1 white female 16 to 26 [probably Sarah A. Sheldon]
1 white female over 45 [Sarah Remington Fenner Sheldon]

Three members engaged in agriculture

Both households occupied the Fenner House.

Asahel Fenner first married Hannah F. Knight (1803-1838), probably in 1821, since they had sons who were born and died in 1822 and 1823. Of the nine children born to Asahel and Hannah F. Fenner, three survived: Leander (1824 or 25-1903), Ann Maria (1828-1909), and Mary Jane (1832 or 33-1912). After Hannah's death, Asahel married Marcelia Fisk Fenner (1811-1885), widow of William A. Fenner, in 1842, and they had one son, James H. Fenner (1842-1854).

On 21 October 1824 Thomas and Asahel Fenner partitioned their father's estate. Asahel received the eastern part of the farm, measuring just over seventy-seven acres; Thomas the western portion, just under seventy-five acres, with the family homestead. Asahel Fenner probably continued to live in the Fenner House with his family until he built a residence on his allotment, probably shortly after 1824 (this house, located on what later became Yeomans Avenue, reportedly stood until at least the early 1940s, but no longer survives).

About two weeks after the partition of his father's estate, Thomas Fenner died intestate, on 6 November 1824. He was survived by his wife Mary, his five sons, his mother Sarah, and his stepfather Job Sheldon. Mary A. Fenner's brother, William P. Olney (1788-1856), a prominent Providence businessman, was named guardian of the five boys. Though the inventory of Thomas's estate does not list items under specific room headings, it includes references to two pairs of andirons, one of brass and one of iron "in the kitchen." From this it can be inferred that the house had a parlor and a kitchen, the former containing the better brass fireplace equipment.

Job Sheldon died in 1825. Mary A. Fenner and her five sons moved to Providence that year and are enumerated as residents of Providence in the 1830 federal census. While it is possible that Sarah Sheldon remained in the Fenner House, she is not listed as a head of household in the federal census of 1830. At the same time, it does not appear that Sarah moved into the household of her daughter and son-in-law, Sarah A. and Andrew Knight (1803 or 04-1841), who were married circa 1824. The sons of Thomas and Mary A. Fenner were heirs at law to the Fenner homestead, but the property was subject to right of dower and power of thirds claims by Sarah (Remington Fenner) Sheldon and Mary A. (Olney) Fenner.

In 1828 William P. Olney sought permission from the Cranston Court of Probate and the Rhode Island General Assembly to sell the interest of his wards in certain real estate and invest the profits for their benefit. Olney received authorization to proceed from the Assembly in 1830 and from the Court of Probate in 1831. On 14 March 1832, in accordance with negotiations approved by the Court of Probate, William P. Olney, guardian of the heirs of Thomas Fenner, conveyed to Samuel Joy of Cranston "A tract of land...with a Dwelling House, Barn & Crib thereon standing, being the westerly part of the Home Farm (so called)...of James Fenner Grandfather of the said heirs." The transaction included compensation for Sarah Sheldon and Mary A. Fenner, who released their interests in the property.

Samuel Joy (1764 or 65-1842) owned a large farmstead south of the Fenner Home Farm, fronting on the road known today as Scituate Avenue. Joy was related to the Fenner family through his marriage to Freelove[6] [Samuel[5] Daniel[4] Thomas[3] Thomas[2] Arthur[1]] Fenner (1770-1849), a third cousin of the late Thomas Fenner. Samuel and Freelove (Fenner) Joy had four daughters and five sons: Amey (1791-1847), George (1792-1829), Rachel (1795 or 96-1878), William (1797-1873), Samuel Fenner (1802-1881), Freelove (1804-1873), Job (1806-1876), Thomas (1808-1884), and Julia Ann (1812 or 13-1858). George Joy died before his father, and Rachel Joy married George P. Hazard (1809 or 10-1887) in 1832. None of the other Joy children married. William, Job, and Thomas worked their father's farm, and Samuel F. Joy took over the Fenner homestead originally erected by his great-great-great-grandfather. Over the years the household of Samuel F. Joy included a succession of hired hands and housekeepers, as shown below:

1840 federal census

Samuel F. Joy, head of household
1 male aged 20 to 30 [hired hand]
2 males 30 to 40 [Samuel F. Joy and hired hand]
1 female 40 to 50 [housekeeper]

Three persons engaged in agriculture

1850 federal census

John O. Fenner, 52, farmer
Elizabeth Fenner, 42
George Fenner, 22, laborer
John Fenner, 16, laborer
Samuel F. Joy, 47, farmer & property owner

This entry is curious in placing John O. Fenner first, in the place usually reserved for the head of household, though it is apparent that the property is owned by Samuel F. Joy. Also, Cranston land records indicate that in 1850 John O. Fenner resided on and leased the farm of the late Joseph Fenner, then property of his son Fidelio Fenner, which was the property next west of the Fenner House on Plainfield Pike.

1860 federal census

Samuel F. Joy, 58, farmer & property owner
Chloe Gorton, 69
William Whitaker, 27, farm laborer
Joseph Penno, 18, farm laborer

1865 state census

Samuel F. Joy, 63, farmer & property owner
William C. Whitaker, 30, farm laborer
Henry Whitaker, 22, farm laborer
Anna Proctor, 37, housekeeper *
Anna C. Proctor, 5

* possibly Samuel's fourth cousin Ann Maria (1828-1909), daughter of Asahel Fenner, who married Lemuel S. Proctor (1824-1890) in 1847.

1870 federal census

Samuel F. Joy, 68, farmer and property owner
Patience S. Robinson, 55, housekeeper
William Whitaker, 38, farm laborer

1875 state census

Samuel F. Joy, 73, farmer and head of household
Eliza Howard, 64, housekeeper
William C. Whitaker, 41, hired man

1880 federal census

Samuel F. Joy, 78, farmer
William C. Whitaker, 48, laborer
Frank Silva, 21, laborer
Amey Silva, 19, boarder
Frederic Silva, 1, boarder
Harriet Blanchard, 60, housekeeper

Samuel F. Joy died intestate on 25 June 1881, leaving as heirs his brother Thomas Joy and the children of his deceased sister Rachel Joy Hazard: George Joy Hazard (1836 or 37-1899), Samuel Anthony Hazard (1839 or 40-1916), and Mary Hazard (1843 or 44-1929). The Hazard children's father, George P. Hazard, was appointed administrator of Joy's estate. The

inventory of real and personal property identifies the following spaces in the farmhouse: cellar, garrett [sic], attic chamber, south chamber, north chamber, north attic, kitchen bedroom, two kitchen closets, milk room, and south room. Items listed in the south room indicate that it was used as a parlor or sitting room, and though not specifically identified, it appears from the inventory that the great room was used as the kitchen. In January and May of 1882, William A. Whitaker billed the Samuel F. Joy estate for "farm labor and care of farm," indicating that he probably still resided on the property.

Thomas Joy continued to live in the Joy family homestead on Scituate Avenue, Cranston [already listed in the National Register] until his death on 1 May 1884, whereupon George J., Samuel A., and Mary Hazard inherited full interest in both the Fenner and the Joy farmsteads. However, the Hazards continued to reside in Providence. According to the 1885 state census, the Fenner House was occupied by two former hired help of Samuel F. Joy: Harriet Blanchard, age 65, listed as head of house and house-wife, and William A. Whitaker, 55, listed as boarder and farm laborer.

George P. Hazard died 18 September 1887, and a little less than a month later his sons and daughter reached an agreement to divide their inheritance. Samuel A. Hazard received full interest in the former Fenner farm, then sometimes called the Sam Joy place. Samuel Hazard remained a resident of Providence and leased the former Fenner property to tenants. With no federal census records surviving for 1890, the next enumerations of occupants of the former Fenner property are the federal censuses of 1900 and 1910:

<u>1900 federal census</u>

Frank Silva, 42, head of house and farmer
Amey Silva, 39, wife
Frederick W. Silva, 21, son
Annie Silva, 16, daughter
Amey Silva, 5, daughter
Stephen Rogers, 27, boarder employed as farm laborer
Samuel Williams, 24, ditto
Manuel Prazilli, 30, ditto
William A. Whitaker, 66, boarder employed as a house carpenter

Frank Silva and William Whitaker had both been employees of Samuel F. Joy on this farm, the latter since at least 1860.

1910 federal census

Charles H. Stone, 36, head of house, operator of dairy farm and milk dealer
Evelina V. Stone, 36, wife
Dolly M. Stone, 15, daughter
Ruth A. Stone, 13, daughter
Raymond H. Stone, 11, son
Ethel H. Stone, 9, daughter
Charles Fifield, 72, boarder and farm laborer
James Lynch, 48, boarder and laborer

Samuel A. Hazard died in 1916, leaving as heirs his sister Mary and the three children of his deceased brother George. Under the terms of his will, the Fenner farmstead went to Mary Hazard. In May 1918, Mary Hazard sold the farm to Charles H. Stone and John C. Smith.

Charles H. Stone (1873-1946) had rented the Fenner farm since at least 1910. He resided there with his wife Evalina V. (Corey) Stone (1874-1957) and their children Dolly May (1894-1979), Ruth Adeline (b. 1896), Raymond Howard (b. 1898), and Ethel Helen (1900-1973) at the time that he and Smith purchased the property from Mary Hazard, the last Fenner descendant to own it. Stone had formed a partnership with Smith with the intent of operating an ice business, but Smith died before the business was started [interview with Stone's granddaughter Helen Nantais Janis]. After Smith's death, Stone owned the farm jointly with two other individuals in succession, and finally acquired full interest in the property in 1928 [Cranston tax assessor's records].

Stone operated a dairy farm, producing milk and ice cream. He apparently proceeded with his plans for an ice business, for Stone Pond, then encompassed by the 147-acre farm and now bordering the present 2.5-acre lot containing the Fenner House, was created at this time by damming a stream running across the land. Stone also began the process of subdividing the farm into house lots. The first subdivision, the Hazard Homestead Plat #1, was made in 1918, followed by the Hazard Homestead Plat #2 in 1919 and another plat in 1924. However, it appears that widespread development of the area did not occur at that time. In addition to these pursuits, Stone also served in the Cranston City Council for a number of years beginning in 1910, the year the Town of Cranston was chartered as a city.

Charles H. and Evalina V. Stone continued to live in the Fenner House with their unmarried daughter Dolly. Their daughter Ethel and her husband Stanford Nantais (1894-1980) also resided here following their marriage in 1922, together with the four children born to them: Helen (b. 1922), Elizabeth (b. 1924), Charles (b. 1926), and Richard (b. 1931). From 1928 to 1945, Stanford Nantais' occupation is listed as iceman in Cranston city directories. In addition to these residents, hired help lived in the house together with the family [interview with Helen Nantais Janis]. After Charles Stone's death in 1946, his widow Evalina made other subdivisions of the property in 1956 and again only a few days before her death in January 1957.

After Evalina Stone's death, title to the Fenner House passed to her three daughters, Dolly Stone, Ethel Nantais, and Ruth Taylor. Dolly Stone and Ethel and Stanford Nantais resided in the Fenner House. Beginning about 1956, Stanford Nantais' occupation is listed as farmer and later as market gardener, until his retirement in the early 1960s. Ruth (Stone) Taylor, a schoolteacher, lived for some time in the Meshanticut section of Cranston. Mrs. Taylor was widowed about 1956, and built a new home for herself near the Fenner House on a lot set off from the farm. The sisters further subdivided the farm several times in 1960 and 1961. Some time in the late 1950s or early 1960s the Nantais' unmarried son Charles moved back into the house. In 1968 Ruth Taylor relinquished her interest in the Fenner House, leaving her sisters Dolly and Ethel as co-owners.

Ethel Nantais died in 1973. Her sister Dolly Stone, husband Stanford Nantais, and son Charles remained as residents of the Fenner House. Dolly Stone died in 1979, leaving as heirs her nieces and nephews, the Nantais children. Stanford Nantais died in 1980 and his children Richard S. and Charles Nantais, Helen M. (Nantais) Janis, and Elizabeth G. (Nantais) Martel inherited the Fenner House. In December 1981 the Nantais children sold the Fenner House to the present owners, Myron L. and Maureen E. Taplin.

Analysis

Historically the Thomas Fenner House represents the push to settle the Providence outlands that occurred after the Indian war of 1675-6, known as King Philip's War. Located today near the Cranston-Johnston town line just over four and one-half miles from the center of Providence, the property lies within the part of the Providence Plantations known as Neutaconkanut, not far from one of the bounds mentioned in the original deed from the Indians. The grant to Roger Williams and his associates by the sachems

Canonicus and Miantonomi, confirmed in a written deed of 1637, encompassed "the land and meadows upon the two fresh rivers, called Mooshausick and Wanasquatucqut...from the river and fields at Pautuckqut, the great hill of Notaquonckanet [Neutaconkanut]...and the town of Maushapog [an Indian village, not an English town]...." In 1639 Miantonomi confirmed the deed and gave the settlers "...up the streams of Patuckett and Pawtuxet without limits,...for...use of cattell." This grant was reconfirmed in 1659, setting the bounds of the town of Providence to correspond with what is today all of Providence County west of the Blackstone River.

The nucleus of the English settlement of Providence was established at a place the Indians called Moshassuck. The original home lots were laid out on the west side of Providence Neck, within an area bounded by the present Olney Street (N), Hope Street (E), Wickenden Street (S), and South and North Main Streets (W). "Out lots" were laid out to the southeast of the home lots on the Neck and to the west in the area bounded by the Moshassuck and Woonasquatucket Rivers. Weybosset, site of the present central business district, was a common for pasturage of cattle, and the remainder of the town was held in common by the proprietors for future subdivision. The areas to the north and west were known as the Providence Woods. As population expanded, additional home lots were established northerly along the trail to Pawtucket [the present North Main Street].

While most of the immigrants built on their home lots, creating a linear village strung out along Towne Street [today's Main Street], it appears that by the 1650s and 1660s a number of people had erected houses beyond the home lots. Some were apparently used as temporary abodes by men during hunting expeditions into the countryside or by families cultivating the plots allotted to them in outlying areas; others appear to have been permanent residences.

Arthur Fenner (1622-1703) was among those who early established outlying residences. He owned property at Neutaconkanut and also east of the home lots bordering the Seekonk River (the latter tract later known as the What Cheer estate, for it included the landing spot of Roger Williams where, according to tradition, the Indians greeted the colonists with the English salutation "what cheer"). At Neutaconkanut Fenner built his "house in the woods," its date variously given as ca 1655 [Isham & Brown, p. 25] or 1662 [Root]. Documentary evidence suggests that Arthur Fenner was living at What Cheer in 1664, but that he moved to Neutaconkanut before 1675 [Narragansett Club Publications, cited in Root, pp. 4, 5]. The house at Neutaconkanut was destroyed during King Philip's War.

Following the defeat of the Indians in King Philip's War, the colonists faced no serious obstruction to their occupation of the countryside. They rebuilt homesteads destroyed during the war and moved into areas previously uninhabited by Europeans. Arthur Fenner rebuilt his dwelling at Neutaconkanut and erected a new house for his son Thomas between one-quarter and one-half mile southwesterly of his own. The construction of these two dwellings (of which the Thomas Fenner House is the lone survivor) in what was then a remote area reflects crucial aspects of seventeenth-century colonial history: the increasing pressure to inhabit and develop new lands, which had led to the conflict between the whites and the natives, and the subsequent European occupation of areas beyond the old settlements in the post-war period. These were the inevitable outcome of the existing agrarian socioeconomic system, which required the clearing and allotment of more and more farmland as immigrants came and younger members of families reached maturity and established families of their own, swelling the population of the colonies. The Thomas Fenner House, built for the son of an immigrant proprietor of the colony during the phase of postwar expansion in Providence Plantations, survives today as a relic of these patterns and an important indicator of early settlement in this vicinity.

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, an industrial village known as Simmons Lower Village, later Thornton, grew up near the Arthur and Thomas Fenner Houses. This mill village was later surrounded by and interspersed with twentieth-century suburban development. The Arthur Fenner House, after serving as the residence of Arthur^{2} (Arthur^{1}) Fenner (), eventually became the property of Thomas^{3} (Thomas^{2} Arthur^{1}) Fenner (), and passed to his descendants. Last occupied in 1861, it was used as a barn thereafter and fell into ruins. The final remnants were pulled down in 1886. Construction associated with the industrialization and suburbanization of the neighborhood has obliterated the site of the Arthur Fenner homestead, leaving only fragmentary remains of the family burial ground on Britton Street and the Thomas Fenner House as evidence of the area's early settlement.

The celebration in 1886 of the 250th anniversary of Providence's founding focussed attention on both the Arthur Fenner and Thomas Fenner houses as historical relics. Both were illustrated in The Providence Plantations for 250 Years (Welcome Arnold Greene, ed.; Providence, 1886) and featured in the landmark study Early Rhode Island Houses published by Norman M. Isham and Albert F. Brown in 1895. Isham and Brown's book pioneered the scientific study of American colonial architecture through careful observation, measurement, and analysis of structural elements. For their discussion of the Arthur Fenner House, the authors had to rely on

sketches and notes made before the house's demolition and examination of its as yet undisturbed foundation and cellar hole and a few remaining artifacts. Isham and Brown made two visits to the Thomas Fenner House in March 1893 to examine and measure the structure. Their observations, and conjectural restoration of the appearance of the original single-room dwelling, provided the basis for the discussion of the house in Antoinette F. Downing's Early Homes of Rhode Island (1937), and still inform our knowledge and appreciation of the house today. The present owners used Isham's restoration drawings as a guide for their recent work.

The original portion of the Thomas Fenner House is of the type classified as a Second Period house by Isham and Brown, characteristic of the period from the end of King Philip's War to 1700. First Period houses were one-room plan "stone-enders" either one or one and one-half stories high, with a garret chamber under the gable slopes. Second Period houses, among other slight differences, were more often constructed a full two stories high, as was the original portion of Thomas Fenner's house. Some features of the Fenner House--the one-room plan, heavy chamfered timbers, stone chimney, and plank walls--recall the First Period, while others, such as the massive members supporting the first floor, exceptionally large fireplace, the complex molding of the chimney tree, different orientation of the first- and second-story summers, and the cut-off rafters in the attic, are unusual. Together these elements all make the house an invaluable document of both typical and atypical seventeenth-century construction techniques.

The house is also important for its later additions, which show how such early houses were adapted to later functional and aesthetic considerations. The subsequent construction of the lean-to and lengthening of the house to the south, with an interior end chimney in the south addition, illustrate methods of enlarging "stone-ender" type dwellings often used in Rhode Island, that is, by addition next to the chimney or onto the far end, rather than addition onto the opposite side of the chimney to create a center-chimney dwelling. The use of the internal triangular end chimney with corner fireplaces is common in end additions opposite the original chimney [Isham and Brown]. Probably all such dwellings underwent enlargement of windows in the eighteenth century to let more light into the interior; the casements that currently exist on houses of this period are all replacements made as part of restoration. The later fenestration pattern of the Fenner House, with door near though not exactly in the center, flanked on each side by two window bays to create a five-bay facade, shows a move toward emulation of the classical symmetry and regular disposition of elements seen in the eighteenth-century Georgian style.

Of the five First Period and fifteen Second Period houses listed in Isham and Brown's 1895 study, only one First Period and seven Second Period houses are known to remain [a few others have yet to be identified]. Of the existing Second Period houses, two--the Clemence-Irons House in Johnston and Eleazer Arnold House in Lincoln (both National Register properties)--have undergone extensive twentieth-century restoration; one--the Richard Smith House (Cocumscussoc) in North Kingstown (a National Register property)--is not a "stone-ender" but a center-chimney house of a type commonly found in Massachusetts; one--the John Greene, Jr. House (Occupessuatuxet; later Spring Green) in Warwick--was extensively enlarged in the late eighteenth century and no longer retains any exterior trace of its seventeenth-century appearance; and one other--the Samuel Gorton, Jr. House in Warwick (listed on the National Register as part of the East Greenwich Historic District)--also has extensive eighteenth-century additions.

In 1937 Antoinette Downing characterized the Thomas Fenner House as "the best example of a two-story one-room stone-end house remaining in the state." The house remains so today, even more so after the selective restoration of the great room undertaken by the present owners. Removal of the timber casings and later fireplace have revealed features unobserved by Isham in the 1890s or Downing in the 1930s, such as the chamfering of the hewn beams and immense size and distinctive stonework of the original great room fireplace. The elaborate molding along the bottom edge of the fireplace's chimney tree was perhaps the most remarkable discovery. In <u>Early Rhode Island Houses</u>, Isham shows a detail of the molding from the chimney tree of the Arthur Fenner House, which he calls "...the most elaborate moldings of the colony." Removal of the eighteenth-century fire room fireplace in the Thomas Fenner House has uncovered the same molding on that chimney tree, invisible to Isham when he conducted his study ninety-six years ago. Now that the Arthur Fenner House is gone, the chimney tree molding in the Thomas Fenner House is the only extant example of this type of workmanship in the state. This and other period features make the Thomas Fenner House an invaluable resource for the study of the history of colonial domestic architecture in Rhode Island.

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FENNER, THOMAS, HOUSE
43 Stony Acre Drive
Cranston, Rhode Island

Photographer: Myron L. Taplin
Date: August 1988
Negative filed at: Myron L. Taplin
127 Dorrance Street, 3rd floor
Providence, RI 02903

Exterior view of the house facing west-southwest, showing the main (east) facade.
Photo #1

Photographer: Robert O. Jones
Date: September 1988
Negative filed at: R. I. Historical Preservation Commission
150 Benefit Street
Providence, RI 02903

Exterior view facing northeast, showing the house, barn, and shed.
Photo #2

Photographer: Myron L. Taplin
Date: 1982
Negative filed at: Myron L. Taplin
127 Dorrance Street, 3rd floor
Providence, RI 02903

View of fire room before restoration facing northeasterly, showing the north wall.
Photo #3

Photographer: Myron L. Taplin
Date: 1982
Negative filed at: Myron L. Taplin
127 Dorrance Street, 3rd floor
Providence, RI 02903

View of fire room facing northerly, showing eighteenth-century fireplace within seventeenth-century fireplace during removal.
Photo #4

Photographer: Myron L. Taplin
Date: 1987
Negative filed at: Myron L. Taplin
127 Dorrance Street, 3rd floor
Providence, RI 02903

View of fire room after restoration facing northeasterly, showing the north wall.
Photo #5

Photographer: Myron L. Taplin
Date: 1987
Negative filed at: Myron L. Taplin
127 Dorrance Street, 3rd floor
Providence, RI 02903

Detail view of molded edge of the chimney tree of the fire room fireplace, facing northeasterly.
Photo #6

Photographer: Paul Williams
Date: June 1987
Negative filed at: R. I. Historical Preservation Commission
150 Benefit Street
Providence, RI 02903

View of fireplace in the southwest corner of the southeast corner room, facing southwesterly.
Photo #7

Photographer: Myron L. Taplin
Date: 1982
Negative filed at: Myron L. Taplin
127 Dorrance Street, 3rd floor
Providence, RI 02903

View of fire room chamber before restoration of the fireplace, facing northerly.
Photo #8

Photographer: Myron L. Taplin
Date: 1987
Negative filed at: Myron L. Taplin
127 Dorrance Street, 3rd floor
Providence, RI 02903

View of fire room chamber after restoration of the fireplace, facing northerly.
Photo #9

Photographer: Paul Williams
Date: June 1987
Negative filed at: R. I. Historical Preservation Commission
150 Benefit Street
Providence, RI 02903

View of fireplace in the southwest corner of the southeast corner chamber, facing southwesterly.
Photo #10