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The Landmarks of Federal Hill: Amos Atwell, businessman and leader

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**The Landmarks of Federal Hill**

By Comm. Joseph R. Muratore (c) 1979

In the 1780's, most of Federal Hill was still open fields—a place for the common grazee, overlooking the great salt cove to the north and the east, and south, (now, South Providence), to the west. The wild open spaces were a source of wealth and work in the growing competition from the native-born citizens.

In 1792, the Woonasquatucket Bridge, from 26 feet to 50 feet, a stronger link was established between the West side of Providence and the rest of the city.

The 1798 Providence street list for the West side of Providence included Abbott's or Tan Yard Lane (Dean Street), Williams Lane (Battey Street), Arnold's Lane (America Street), Whiteman Street (Knight Street), and Dexter Lane (Parade Street).

In the meantime, a new highway (Massacre Street) had been cut between Plainfield Street and Cranston Street. In 1803, as part of a network of road improvements throughout New England, the Norwich and Hartford Turnpike was established along the Plainfield Road and Hartford Avenue, and in 1809, a 60-foot road which began the basis for today's Atwell Avenue was laid out from Aborn Street to the North Providence border at the Woonasquatucket River. This road was extended the following year as the Woonasquatucket Turnpike.

The 1798 maps show that, although there were still several large farms in the West side, Broadway, area more intense development was occurring in the downtown area near the Dean Street tanyard on Cranston Street. As the 18th century closed, the West side of Providence was populated not only by farmers but by village craftsmen producing for the local market.

Daniel Anthony's 1803 map of Providence still showed the built up area, west of the Providence River as primarily confined to today's downtown area. Only two homes to the west are shown on the map, neither of which exists today.

Christopher Olney (for whom Olneyville was named) owned a 94-by-98 foot lot on the Woonasquatucket River on which he built a grist mill and paper mill; his house was in Olneyville.

The Dexter Estate itself was located on Cranston Street where Bridgham Street is today. In 1808, Atwell gave the town of Providence a tract of land on Atwell Avenue, now Bradford Street, for public use.

This small park has since been named after Benjamin Franklin and later bath houses were erected and, as many would remember, recently those public bath houses were demolished and this park was renamed Garabaldi Park.

A bust of Garabaldi has been moved to this area, benches have been erected and general use for the park has been created.

Another map by Anthony in 1823, shows a substantial expansion of the highway system with a built up area now extending westward to Arnold Lane (Dean Street) and to the north-east slopes of Federal Hill overlooking the old Cove.

Of the five now widely scattered, remaining federal houses on the so-called West side of Providence, the best preserved are those of G.A. Cole and S.A. Winsor.

The Cole house at 1205 Westminister Street is an excellent example of the federal type which was popular in Providence during the 1820's and was designed by architect John Holden Greene; the other house is the Winsor House at 150-152 Cranston Street which, in the 1820's representing another type, then current in the city.

In 1832, with a population numbering 17,000, the town of Providence voted to approve a city charter.

At that time the West side of Federal Hill was incorporated and became Ward 6 and was separated from downtown by Ward 4, by Dean Street; by 1835 extensive development was underway with development between Cranston Street and Broadway which had the previous year been laid out and designed from Sabin Street to just below Dean Street.

Although most of the commercial and industrial activities took place on the borders of the Federal Hill area, along the river and downtown there were some industrial uses in the so-called West side of Federal Hill. There was a foundry on Burgess Street, a coal yard on Carpenter Street and several small machine and jewelry shops.

The Providence Manufacturing Company, chartered in 1847, located one of its several gas holders on Federal Street.

The J.H. Clark mill occupied a site on Carpenter Street (now between Grant and Carpenter Streets); later the Hebron Manufacturing Company erected some industrial uses in the so-called West side of Federal Hill.

The Irish community was the first of successive waves of immigrants who had a deep affect on the life of Providence. They were moved by the long-standing and political unrest in their own country and by the potato famine of 1840, many came to America.

When they arrived in Providence, they settled into concentrated areas, especially on the West side of Federal Hill.

The 1854 census shows that, of Providence's 41,513 residents, 8,333 had been born in Ireland.

By the time Irish immigration began in 1830s the West side of Federal Hill had a very strong concentration of Irish people.

The largest group, the men, were chiefly employed in the textile and base metal industries which lined the Woonasquatucket River and concentrated around the village of Olneyville.

The Irish women were employed in domestic services.

The Irish community was religiously and socially distinct from the native-born citizens. Many were unskilled.

After the initial stages of industrial development, few factories required skilled craftsmen. Thereafter, industrial employers hired replacements for native-born citizens. Therefore, industrial employers after replaced their skilled craftsmen with less skilled Irish immigrants.

Social segregation was not as prevalent as differences between the Irish community and the native-born citizens. The church was a focal point for the immigrants and the Irish Catholics were
The first Catholic church in Providence, Saints Peter and Paul, was built near the West side of Federal Hill on Westminster Street in 1838. It was enlarged in 1847 to become the cathedral of the Diocese of Hartford when Bishop William Tyler moved to Providence in 1844. It was later demolished to make way for the present cathedral.

In 1853, the first Catholic parish was established in the general area of Federal Hill under the leadership of their Irish-born pastor John Quinn. The parish, Saints Peter and Paul, was located on Barton Street. It originally was a young ladies academy, Sacred Heart Convent and a convent and a primary and secondary school.

The parochial school was continued until 1957 when the present cathedral of the Diocese of Providence was built.

In 1855 an anti-Catholic mob surrounded and threatened the Sisters of Mercy convent on Broad Street until reasoning minds prevailed and the mob was dispersed.


Franklin Park bathhouses. The land which was donated by Amos Atwell in 1869 was named Franklin Park until 1920. This park was demolished and a new park built.

The James F. Johnson House, built about 1870. This is a 2½ late Victorian house with mansard roof. The entrance has bracketed hood, a transom light and with interesting details.


The James F. Johnson House, built about 1870. This is a 2½ late Victorian house with mansard roof. The entrance has bracketed hood, a transom light and with interesting details. Johnson is listed in the Providence Directory for the corner of Carpenter and Marshall Streets.