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The Landmarks of Federal Hill: How Federal Hill was named

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The Landmarks of Federal Hill

By Comm. Joseph R. Muratore (C) 1979

Over the years, I have received many inquiries as to how Federal Hill got its name. There are a few theories, but to date no one really has documented one. Consequently, during my research on matters other than Federal Hill, which has carried me into many books and sources, I have always been looking for information that would lead to a possible explanation for the title Federal Hill.

The following information is the most logical and probable reason that the area surrounding Atwell Avenue became known as Federal Hill.

According to material researched, it appears that in the mid-1700's, several homes were built in areas surrounding Atwell Avenue that were of federal type architecture.

The earliest style homes built in this area were the earliest style homes built in this area.

They preceeded many of the 20th century Italian Renaissance Revival homes, the late Victorian-Queen Anne houses, the early 20th century Beaux Arts Classical structures or the Greek Revival style homes which were built along Almy Street, Atwell Avenue and Broadway.

Some of the best examples of these federal homes include: the residence at 7 Cargil St., which was built about 1820 (This was one of the few federal style homes that were left); another was at 150-152 Carpenter St., the S.A. Winaor house, which was also built around 1820; and the Burrington Anthony House on Atwell Avenue, where today Route 96 is located.

As was the custom, it was a habit, usage, people's names or activities on a street or in an area that would give a name to a particular street, neighborhood or area.

On the basis of this theory and strengthened by the events of the Dorr Rebellion of 1842, we are led to a conclusion that is quite convincing about how Federal Hill got its name.

These theories are further supported by the following events which took place during the period between 1760 and 1845.

The working people of the areas surrounding Broadway played a prominent role in the Dorr Rebellion.

The ruling and the beliefs of the Jackson Party helped spark the activity of that era and brought about political change.

It was after the Revolution that Rhode Island had not yet adopted a new state constitution and still operated under the Colonial Charter granted by King Charles II in 1663.

Although this Charter, guaranteed religious liberty, it also allowed the General Assembly to limit voting and representation, having it governed by the ownership of a given amount of real estate. (In some instances, if as little as four dollars was paid as a tax, they would qualify to vote.)

This system of voting and representation made for unequal representation in the legislature from the rural areas and many times declining towns had no Bill of Rights.

There were no provisions for amendment or change to the Charter.

This condition created extreme frustration and unrest in a state which had been founded on freedom of religion by a people who were seeking representation and expression of their philosophy and conduct of government.

Many attempts to change matters were led by the very successful lawyer Thomas Dorr, but he and his friends became more frustrated.

Despite the opposition they met by many local groups, much of Dorr's support came from the under-represented laborers of areas surrounding Atwell Avenue and Broadway.

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Dorr and his followers, frustrated in their attempts to amend or change the Charter, banded together and formed another political party based on the rights and sovereignty of the people.

They acted and carried on their activities outside of the framework or the limits of the Charter.

Hostilities between Door, his followers and the state forces, were constantly smoldering.

Consequently, Dorr established a headquarters in the "Burrington Anthony House" on Atwells Avenue.

On his return from numerous New York rallies, Dorr was welcomed by a very enthusiastic crowd of his supporters.

Some were armed, and escorted him to the Atwells Avenue headquarters.

Meanwhile, the State Militia was being assembled in the local Armory which was located in a mill on Cranston Street near where the present Dexter Training Ground are today.

On May 17, 1842, Dorr and his followers attacked the Armory using cannons which failed to fire.

The attack was stopped and the rebels were scattered.

A few days later, Dorr fled Rhode Island to save his life.

The result of this attack was a new Constitution which contained a Bill of Rights, a reapportionment of the Lower House of the legislature, fairly distributed representation for the growing industrial areas surrounding Atwell Avenue and Broadway and a representative for each town in the Upper House.

Representation and voting privileges were given to native-born, adult, white men, however naturalized citizens could vote only if they owned an inter-
The Messer Mansion, the corner of Cranston Street, Superior Street, and Wendell Street, was the location of the Messer Mansion, which was built between 1799 and 1800, on a triangular parcel of land, which became the famous 2 story Federal Mansion; originally built by Samuel Snow on 30 acres of land. The property later passed to John Innes Clark in 1807. Later, it was bought by Asa Messer, who was President of Brown University from 1802 to 1826. This home was occupied until 1862 by Mrs. Messer, and later it was demolished.

Where Route 95 today crosses it. This home was demolished in 1800. This was the home that Dorr and his followers met at, and marched from on their famous Dorr Rebellion. This home probably was the strongest influence in giving the name “Federal Hill” to the areas between downtown Providence and Olneyville, due to its location “on the hill,” surrounded by “Federal” Troops, where “Federal Troops” stopped the attack.

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