

Historic Names of Providence's Waterfront and College Hill

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Abstract

The names of streets and institutions in the waterfront and College Hill areas of Providence, Rhode Island, reflect the influential families who have played important roles in the history of the city, the state, and the nation. The most significant names include *Williams*, *Hopkins*, *Carter*, *Tillinghast*, and of course *Brown*.

The waterfront and College Hill in Providence, Rhode Island, have a long history, and this history can be recorded through the names of those who shaped its development. In 1636 Roger Williams and his little group, exiles from intolerant Salem, stopped at the cove off the Seekonk River in search for a home where they could find religious freedom. Upon their arrival, a group of Indians approached Williams with the greeting "What cheer, Netop," which he immediately understood as a gesture of welcome, for *Netop* is the Narragansett Indian word for "friend."

The cove and rock on which these Englishmen landed took on a series of names. Very early the area had held the Indian name "Ashocomack" (Chapin 17). To commemorate the greeting, "What cheer, Netop," settlers first called the land *Whatcheer*, and this name appears in a 1641 parchment deed (Gleeson 39). As further reminders of the greeting, records show *What Cheer Cove*, *What Cheer Field*, and *What Cheer Rock* (Gleeson 482). The rock has also been called *Roger Williams Rock* and *Slate Rock* (Gleeson 372).

Now there is a monument built on the site with some of the original slate rock built into it. On one side of this monument we see in Roger Williams' own words the naming of this friendly place and surrounding area: "And having of a Sense of God's merciful providence unto me in my distress called the place PROVIDENCE. I desire it might be for a

shelter for persons distressed for conscience.” Although in his letters Williams often called it “New Providence” (Brigham 19), *Providence* became the accepted name for the area, which now includes the whole city. The name *Providence Plantations* was used as the “official name of the Colony of Rhode Island from 1643–1663” (Chapin 348). Even a couple of years after Roger Williams named Providence, he still showed his gratitude for God’s “providence” to him by giving the name *Providence* to his first son, born in the autumn of 1638, “the first white male child in the settlement” (Greene 30).

The place where Roger Williams and his little band arrived in 1636 is no longer a cove on the shore of the Seekonk River, for that part of the river is filled in with man-made land. And the monument which marks the site is on the corner of Roger and Williams Streets, streets obviously named for Roger Williams.

Way back in 1636, after the Indians welcomed Williams and his companions at this spot, they told the newcomers where they could find a fresh water spring. So the group sailed from the Seekonk River into the river that was then called the *Salt River* or the *Great Salt River* (Brigham 19). Today it is called the *Providence River*. After they sailed a short distance along this river, they found the spring. Williams and his friends must have rejoiced as they refreshed themselves with this water. The little band gradually made preparations to build their homes near the spring.

Later on, long strips of land were apportioned to the early settlers from the waterfront to the lane, which was called the “head of the Lotts” (Miner 3). On a map of Providence of about 1650 showing the original home lots, we find the names of Roger Williams and those who arrived from Salem with him: William Harris, John Smith, Francis Wickes, and Thomas Angell. We also find the names of others who helped shape the history of the little town and its waterfront, such as Chad Brown, Nicholas Power, and Thomas Hopkins (Fig. 1).

The waterfront, where these early settlers had their homes and where their home lots began, later became known as *the town street*, “because the town was there, on this street: the Colony House, the shops, the market, the inns, the mill—and everything!” (Simister 23). But this was not the first use of “the town street” as a thoroughfare; long before the coming of the white settlers the Indians had so used it, and

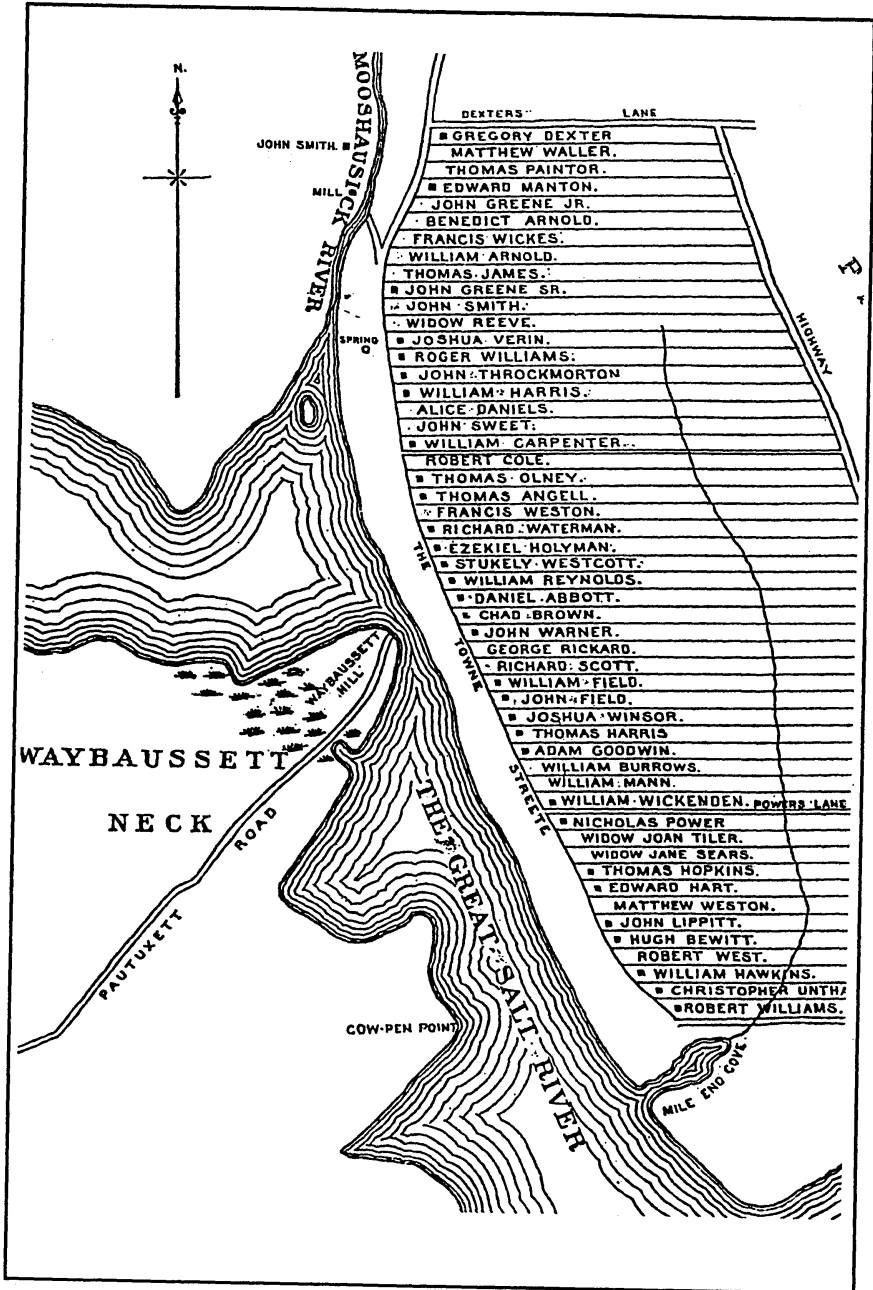


Fig. 1. Providence, about 1650, showing original layout of Home Lots.

“the Pequot path was there met by other paths” (Greene 127). Perhaps the English settlers marked it out with a little more precision. John Cady describes it in the time of Roger Williams as “a highway laid out c. 1638 between the present Wickenden and Olney street” (*Highroads* 7). Since the home lots of both the Wickenden and Olney families appear on the early home-lot map, these streets are most likely named for them or for one of their descendants.

The “town street” was the first of many names given to this waterfront highway. The history of the Colony and the significance of the street are reflected in its series of names. Before the Colony had serious disagreements with the Mother Country, the town paid tribute to the British King and Prince by naming streets after them. But after the American Revolution, when all ties with King and Prince were broken, there was a move to rid the Colony of names that reminded the people of either. An 1806 document decrees that “The streets formerly called Water Street, King Street, William Street . . . and part of Prince Street . . . be altogether called Main Street” (Gleeson 482).

Although the people of Providence had gradually severed ties with the Mother Country, they still cherished the memories of some of the places they had left behind. And, as a result, they tended to name places here after places there. The shopping district near the Market House on the former town street was one of these, taking the name *Cheapside* “after that commercial section in London which so many of the settlers remembered” (Simister 29). This part of the old town street of Providence is no longer called by this name, but the word *Cheapside* can be seen today engraved on the stone of a large building which stands at the site. This building belongs to the Rhode Island School of Design.

Modern Providence has a number of markers which still preserve the name of its founder. The site of the spring which supplied water to Roger Williams and his companions is surrounded by a little park with a stone well pointing out the spot of the original spring. At the entrance to the park there is a large sign with the name “Roger Williams National Memorial.” Directly across the street from where the spring was is a large white stone building holding a plaque telling that this edifice is on the site of Roger Williams’ home.

A short distance south of this building we find Waterman Street, named for Richard Waterman, who “built within the present lines of that

highway” (Cady, *Civic* 11). On the north corner of Waterman Street facing North Main stands the church founded by Roger Williams. The plaque at the side of the entrance keeps its name and the name of its founder before us with the words:

The First Baptist Church
Founded by Roger Williams, A.D. 1638
The Oldest Baptist Church in America

On the opposite corner of Waterman Street, Roger Williams’ name appears again on a large brick building, where we see a tablet which reads: “On this lot stood The First Town House of Providence. Here from time to time Roger Williams Presided over the Freemen from 1644 to 1647.” Yes, the markers are still here on the former town street (now North Main) where Roger Williams carried on his social, religious, and political activities for the Colony.

The street along the north side of the First Baptist Church, Thomas Street, preserves the name of Thomas Angell, one of the original settlers who came with Roger Williams. In the beginning the road was called “Angell’s Lane.” Later,

...when the [Baptist] Meeting House was built it became important and the deeds began to call it “The lane north of the Baptist Meeting House.” One deed called it Angell Street, and one used our old name, Angell’s Lane...; in 1805, the town was to preserve Thomas Angell’s memory by officially naming the lane “Thomas Street,” and the continuation up the hill from Benefit “Angell Street.” (Miner 49)

On Benefit Street, the street east of North and South Main, are two houses which show the name “Angell.” At number 30 Benefit Street the home holds a tablet reading: “William B. Angell House, Alpheus Morse arch. 1869.” And at number 48 the plaque reads: “Elisha Angell House. Bet. 1799–1810.” Kenneth Angell, well known to the people of Providence as Auxiliary Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Providence, is a descendant of Thomas Angell.

Although Chad Brown did not arrive at the same time as Thomas Angell and Roger Williams, he was the owner of one of the original home lots. Brown’s family name lives on more prominently than any other on Providence’s waterfront and College Hill. What is now

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known as "College Street"

began life as a footpath to the family burial plot of Chad Brown's family. Later it became "the lane to the Congregational Meeting House." In 1793, when the town of Providence bought the Congregational Meeting House and turned it into the "town house," the street was called Rosemary Lane for a while and then renamed Hanover Street. (Simister 111)

Finally, in 1823 it was named *College Street* because the first building of Brown University stands at its summit. The University accounts for the naming not only of this street but of also the whole East Side of Providence, which has become known as *College Hill*.

A short distance south of College Street we find Power Street, which Cady tells us

was laid out c. 1638, extending from the Towne street [now South Main] easterly to the Highway at the Head of the Lots (Hope St.). It was named for Nicholas Power whose home lot adjoined it to the south. (*Highroads* 45)

Nicholas Power's daughter Hope married Captain James Brown, who was a descendant of Chad Brown. The sons of James and Hope were Nicholas, Joseph, John, and Moses Brown (Cady, *Civic* 29). These four brothers, who belonged to the fifth generation after Chad Brown, were strongly instrumental in preserving the family name. Their achievements were many. Joseph, the architect of the area, built some of the beautiful edifices we still see today. His own home at 50 South Main Street is recorded in history as the oldest architect's home in the country. Cady informs us that

French officers were quartered in the house during the Revolution [and] it was the Headquarters of the Providence Bank 1801-1929, and since the counting house of Brown & Ives. On its site stood the Field Garrison house where the inhabitants of Providence withstood an attack by the Indians. (*Highroads* 36)

Joseph's name is kept before us by the plaque which reads: "Built by Joseph Brown [and] Joseph Brown, Arct." Over the front door, we see the name of "The Providence Bank," the bank founded by Joseph's brothers, John and Moses. Joseph was also the architect of the present building of the First Baptist Church (1773) and of the John Brown House (1786), the home of his brother at 52 Power Street. John Quincy Adams visited the John Brown House and described it as "the most beautiful

and elegant private mansion that I have ever seen on this continent” (*Benefit Street*). In addition to his interest in architecture, Joseph also had an interest in science.

Of the brothers, Joseph and Moses displayed the greatest intellectual curiosity. Together they took part in the first important astronomical observations made in the colony during the transit of Venus across the sun in 1769, an account still commemorated by Transit Street. (Corbett 37)

“Nearby are East Transit and Planet Street, both of which were named for the phenomenon which was observed there” (Simister 57).

Of the four brothers, John was the most interested in trade. He carried on much of his business in the waterfront area of Tockwotten Street, a street with an Indian name. This name went through a series of earlier versions, such as “Tuncwotten, Tuncowoden, Tuncowsden, Tuncowollen” (Chapin 440). John Brown “erected shops and warehouses for the trade which he established with China and the East Indies, giving the spot the name of India Point” (Cady, *Civic* 61). And he called the ships that were engaged in this trade “Indiamen.”

Each of the four brothers had his own interest, and it was primarily in Moses’ pursuit of his interest—education—that the name *Brown* became more widely known. In 1814 he “proposed to give in trust to the Friends of New England, forty-three acres of land,...for a permanent institution of education” (Greene 172). The school built there on the East Side of Providence has been in operation since 1819, and today it is called the Moses Brown School. His interest in furthering education in Providence also inspired him when “as a member of the General Assembly, [he] first brought forward Providence as a competitor for the college against Newport.” As the result of his efforts, “on the old home lot of Chad Brown, the corner stone of the first building (University Hall) was laid on March 27, [1770] by John Brown...” (Richman, *Rhode Island* 166). The name *Brown* was thus prominent in the history of the college’s first building: it was built on the former lot of Chad Brown; Moses Brown was instrumental in having Providence chosen as its home; John Brown laid the corner stone; and Joseph Brown later taught at the college.

Nicholas, the oldest of the four brothers, devoted his time to the family firm known as Nicholas Brown and Company (Corbett 37). It was his son, Nicholas, Jr., who was responsible for bringing the family name to Rhode Island College. When the college was first established, it was

decided that “the Trustees and Fellows at any time...[give] such more particular name of the College in honor of the greatest and most distinguished benefactor” (Simister 115). Nicholas Brown, Jr., was considered to be “the greatest and most distinguished benefactor” because of his donation in 1804 of five thousand dollars (Richman, *Rhode Island* 166). So Rhode Island College was given the name *Brown University*.

In addition to the honor of having the university named for him, Nicholas Brown, Jr., was also given the privilege of naming two of the buildings because of further donations. For the second building he chose *Hope College*, in honor of his sister (Cady, *Civic* 87), and for the Greek-style structure between Hope College and University Hall he chose *Manning Hall*, in honor of Brown University’s founder, Reverend James Manning. Mr. Manning became the college’s first President, an office he held until 1791. Today his name is before the eyes of faculty and students on the plaque of Manning Hall and on the nearby sign, “Manning Street.”

Another well known name in the area was that of John Carter. He came from Philadelphia, where he had been apprenticed as a printer to Benjamin Franklin. Because of his experience, he was prepared to take over the editorship of the *Providence Gazette*, which had been published by others with little success. “Since the *Gazette* was most successful under Carter and since he enjoyed such a fine reputation, we have come to connect Shakespeare’s Head with his home on Meeting Street” (Simister 61). “Shakespeare’s Head” was the trade name of the early publishers of the *Gazette*, Providence’s newspaper. When John Carter took over the business, he also adopted the name for his own place of printing, which was his home. In those days the sign with the words “Shakespeare’s Head” was used to identify the place where a newspaper was printed, or where books or stationery were sold. Today the plaque on the house keeps the names of the owner and the business before us with the words: “John Carter House, Shakespeare’s Head. 1771.”

John Carter’s family soon became connected with the Brown family through marriage. His daughter Ann married Nicholas Brown, Jr. Their son, John Carter Brown, is well known because of his extensive Americana Collection up to the year 1800. John Carter Brown’s son, John Nicholas Brown, continued the collection. In order to preserve this precious collection and make it available to research scholars, John

Nicholas Brown left it to Brown University with an endowment to erect a Greek Revival library for it. The beautiful Indiana limestone building, which now holds the Americana Collection, faces Brown Street on the College Green. Carved on its pediment over the front entrance is the name "John Carter Brown Library." And above the ornamental gate near the building, we see the name of the donor "John Nicholas Brown" worked into the design.

Another name that enters into the history of Providence's waterfront and College Hill is Pardon Tillinghast, who came to Providence around 1645 and "asked for and received a little piece of land opposite his home on the Towne Street," where he built a "store house and a wharf" (Simister 35). His plan met with great success as "Gideon Crawford and others were rivalling Pardon Tillinghast's largest enterprises in the West Indies and other foreign commerce" (Greene 49). Today on the site where he built his first wharf we find the home of Captain Joseph Tillinghast, Pardon's great grandson, who married Rebecca Power, the daughter of Nicholas Power (Simister 35). Across the street, at 402 South Main Street, is the home "built by the Captain for his son, John, shortly after the Great Fire of 1801" (*Providence Waterfront* 13). These two houses, facing one another, still hold the plaques with the name "Tillinghast."

The original settler of this family, Pardon, was generous with the wealth he gained from his business enterprises. We see an example of this in his gift to the First Baptist Church, the church founded by Roger Williams. Until the time he became pastor, the members of the congregation met in private homes. Then "Pardon Tillinghast...the sixth pastor...erected at his own expense, 1700, the first meetinghouse occupied by the church, and in 1771 deeded it to the church" (King 2). Of course, this first building did not have the beauty of today's steepled meetinghouse. It "was called the 'haycap' Church because it resembled a haystack" (Appleton 5).

Pardon Tillinghast and his descendants went on contributing to the history of the area for many years. Like other early settlers, some of them moved their homes from the old town street, which had become crowded with business buildings, to the next street up the hill. This street was called the "back street" because it was in back of the town street. As the years passed, the early families buried their dead in lots beside their

homes. Before long the zigzag, muddy street around the family burial lots made travel difficult. In order to remedy the situation, the North Burial Ground was established and the remains from the back street family lots were moved there. "The hillside street was then straightened and improved for the 'benefit' of the people who lived along the way, and that became its name" (Corbett 39–40). So the back street became Benefit Street.

When the remains from the family burial lots were moved, the town decided that the Tillinghast cemetery should be left intact, because the family had been so active in the community. Today we see the little graveyard with one very large stone displaying the name "Tillinghast." "Here lie the remains of Pardon Tillinghast, and his descendants for generations" (Greene 361). Diagonally across from the little burial lot we find a house with the plaque "Jeremiah Tillinghast," another reminder of the Tillinghast name.

A name very well known in the history of Providence is that of Stephen Hopkins, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and descended from Thomas Hopkins, who had come to Providence about 1638 as an associate of Roger Williams. He later was a member of the General Assembly (Richman, "Hopkins" 219). We find the name of Stephen's ancestor, Thomas Hopkins, on the original home-lot map of Providence. Of all Thomas' descendants, Stephen has done the most to bring honor to the family name. In 1762 he helped found the *Providence Gazette*, which was so successfully continued by John Carter at Shakespeare's Head. Among the offices that he held, we find that he was "governor of Rhode Island 1755–57 under the Royal Charter, member of the Continental Congress" (Cady, *Highroads* 36–37), and, later, "ten-time Governor of Rhode Island, Chief Justice of the Superior Court, and first Chancellor of Brown University" (*Benefit Street*).

His home still stands at 15 Hopkins Street, a street stretching from South Main Street to Benefit. It was "erected c. 1747 on the Towne street [and] moved part way up the hill to the north side of Hopkins St. 1809, and again moved to the present location 1928" (Cady, *Highroads* 37). Before Hopkins' home was moved there, the street had been called *Bank Lane* after the Providence Bank, which was first established there by the brothers John and Joseph Brown.

The names of Providence's waterfront and College Hill reveal some

of those who played vital roles in the history of the area. The name of Providence's founder is on the Roger Williams National Memorial, on the plaque of the First Baptist Church, and on Williams Street, where he first landed. Providence's signer of the Declaration of Independence and ten-time Governor, Stephen Hopkins, is commemorated by Hopkins Street and by the plaque on his home there. The name of the Brown family, "which pervades the city's history more than any other" (Corbett 37), is honored by Brown Street, Brown University, and by the University buildings and memorials named for members of that family.

Brown University
Providence, Rhode Island

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