

PPS RECORDS FOR
55 GROTTO AVENUE
PLAT 41, LOT 218
MAYOR JOSEPH H. GAINER HOUSE
Built by Quality House Co., 1914

Summary: The block bounded by Grotto Avenue, President Avenue, Loring Avenue and Channing Avenue, originally part of the Moses Brown Farm, was first surveyed and platted for residential development as part of the Blackstone Park Plat in 1862. Fifty-two years later, in 1914, a real estate company built the single-family house at 55 Grotto Avenue. The house was sold in 1915 to its first occupants, Providence Mayor Joseph H. Gainer and wife Christina, who would live here with their family for the next 30 years. Gainer was elected Mayor in 1912 and served from January 1913 to January 1927. After an unsuccessful run for Governor of Rhode Island in 1926, Gainer returned to his law practice in the Providence firm of Hart Gainer & Carr for another two decades. After Mayor Gainer's death in 1945, his widow continued to live in the house until 1957. The house has changed hands seven times since then, most recently in 2000 when it was sold to the current owners, Susan L. Mitchell and Jane G. Linden.

In 1998 the house was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of the Blackstone Park Plat Historic District. The NR inventory lists the property as the Joseph H. Gainer House and gives a construction date of 1915.

Chronology:

1770-1800

Moses Brown, great-great grandson of Chad Brown (one of the original settlers of Providence), acquired a large parcel of previously undeveloped land on the East Side of Providence. The boundaries of Brown's estate, known as Elm Grove Farm, extended north from today's East Manning and Pitman Streets, to what is now Laurel Avenue, and east from present day Arlington Avenue, Lloyd Avenue, and Hope Street to the Seekonk River. Brown's country house (1772, demolished), sited near what is now the intersection of Humboldt and Wayland Avenues, eventually became his year round residence. (*RIHP&HC, Historic and Architectural Resources of the East Side, Providence, 1989*)

A Map of Owners of Lots in Providence in 1798, compiled by Henry B. Chace in 1912: Plate V shows Moses Brown's farm occupying over 300 acres north of today's Angell Street (then called "Moses Brown's Road to the Central Bridge"), between what is now Hope Street and the Seekonk River. (*Archives*)

1836

Deed Book 140, Page 401: On February 9, 1836, Moses Brown willed to his granddaughter Anna Almy Jenkins, wife of William Jenkins, his homestead farm in Providence Neck. Anna was to have a life tenancy, and after her death the property was to pass to her son, Moses Brown Jenkins (born two days earlier), provided he should attain the age of 21, marry, and have a child. (*PPS Records for 257 President Avenue*)

1856-1862

Anna Almy Jenkins died and left her father's homestead farm to her two children, Anna A. Hoppin and Moses Brown Jenkins. Mrs. Jenkins' trustee was Samuel Boyd Tobey. Moses, who was 21 at the time, took the portion of the homestead north of Angell Street. (*PPS Records for 257 President Avenue*)

Moses B. Jenkins had his share of the inheritance surveyed and platted for residential development. In about 1861 Jenkins laid out the Blackstone Park Plat on a section of the Moses Brown Farm east of Butler Avenue and north of Angell Street (now South Angell Street). Unhappy with a conventional grid plan, in 1862 Jenkins hired surveyor Charles E. Paine to redraw the plat along the most advanced precepts for a garden suburb, with winding roadways, generously sized lots, and public open space. (*RIHP&HC, Historic and Architectural Resources of the East Side, Providence, 1989*)

The Blackstone Park Plat, surveyed and platted by Charles E. Paine in 1862, recorded in Plat Book 2, Page 20-1/2 and copied on Plat Card 64. "Section S" of this Plat is bounded by Grotto Avenue on the west, President Avenue on the north, Beacon Avenue (later Loring Avenue) on the east, and Channing Avenue on the south. Section S is divided into 12 lots, numbered 199 through 210 inclusive, each approximately 10,000 square feet (Lots 209 and 210 are a bit larger). None of these lots have street addresses. Lot 200, at the corner of Grotto and President Avenues, has 100 feet of frontage on Grotto; this would later be subdivided into two lots, one of which would become 55 Grotto. (*Registry of Deeds*)

1864

Deed Book 169, Page 473: On October 3, 1864, Moses B. Jenkins sold to Edward A. Cutler, for \$100, nine sections of the Blackstone Park Plat, including all of Section S, containing Lot 200. (*Archives*)

1866

Deed Book 173, Page 183: On February 23, 1866, Edward A. Culter sold to Thomas Wilson Chace of Providence, for \$15,306.72, twelve lots of land in the Blackstone Park Plat, being all of Section S including Lot 200. (*Archives*)

1872-1875

The Moses Brown Farm Plat as surveyed and platted by the Cushing Company in 1872 (recorded in Plat Book 11, Page 10, copied on Plat Card #286). This plat includes the land area previously mapped as the Blackstone Park Plat by Paine in 1862. The block bounded by Grotto, President, Beacon and Channing Avenues is divided into the same 12 lots as shown on the 1862 Blackstone Park Plat map, now numbered 469-480. Lot 480 is at the corner of Grotto and President Avenues. (*Registry of Deeds*)

Deed Book 243, Page 519: On October 1, 1873, Thomas Wilson Chace of East Greenwich sold to James Hanley of Providence, all of Section S in the Blackstone Park Plat of 1862, including Lot 200. Section S is described as bounded by President Street on the north, Beacon Avenue on the east, Channing Avenue on the south, and Grotto Avenue on the west. The deed refers back to the previous sale recorded in DB 173, Page 183. (*Registry of Deeds*)

City Atlas of 1875 by G.M. Hopkins, Vol. 1, Plate J, pages 44-45 shows the block bounded by Grotto, President, Beacon and Channing Avenues divided into the same 12 lots as shown on the 1862 plat map, with the same numbering system. (The map references the Blackstone Park Plat.) Lot 200 is at the corner of President and Grotto Avenues. All lots in the block are vacant. (*Archives*)

1882

City Atlas of 1882 by G.M. Hopkins, plate 4, shows the block bounded by Grotto, President, Beacon and Channing Avenues divided into the same 12 lots as shown on the 1875 city atlas, with the same numbering system. Lot 480 is at the corner of Grotto and President Avenues. (However, the map references the "Blackstone Farm Plat.") The map indicates that James Hanley owns the entire block. All lots are vacant. (*Archives*)

1895-1903

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that the Providence County Savings Bank owned the property as of November 15, 1894. This is the first entry on the card. The deeds do not confirm this, however. The next entry is a note that the lot was "transferred to Plat 40 Lot 286" as of May 1, 1903. The 1902 assessor's map indicates that Plat 40 (which bounded Plat 41 at President Avenue) did not contain a Lot 286, so it is not clear what this note on the 1903 plat card means. (*Assessor's Office*)

City Atlas of 1895 by Everts & Richards, Plate 6 (pages 32-33) shows the block bounded by Grotto, President, Loring (formerly Beacon) and Channing Avenues divided into the same 12 lots as shown on all previous maps. On this map, however, none of the lots are numbered, nor is an owner name shown. All lots are vacant. The lot at the corner of Grotto and President Avenues still measures 10,000 square feet. (*Archives*)

Assessor's Plat Map #41 shows the block bounded by Grotto, President, Loring and Channing Avenues divided into the same 12 lots as shown on all previous maps. The numbering system has returned to the original from 1862: Lot 200, measuring 10,000 square feet, is at the corner of Grotto and President Avenues. (*Archives*)

1908

City Atlas of 1908 by L.J. Richards (plate 9) shows the block bounded by Grotto, President, Loring and Channing Avenues divided into the same 12 lots as shown on all previous maps. The map does not indicate lot numbers, but all lots in the block belonged to James Hanley; all are still vacant. The lot at the corner of Grotto and President Avenues still measures 10,000 square feet. (*Archives*)

1913-1915

Deed Book 543, Page 74: On March 20, 1914, the RI Hospital Trust Company, trustee under the will of James Hanley, deceased, sold to the Quality House Company, for \$100, a lot of land on the east side of Grotto Avenue, approximately 50 feet south of President Avenue, being the southerly half of Lot 200 on the Blackstone Park Plat of 1862. The lot measured 50 by 100 feet (5,000 square feet). Deed restrictions included: (1) only one residence could be constructed; (2) only residential uses (and related private garage) were permitted; (3) the house must cost at least \$4,500; and (4) all new construction must be set back 20 feet from Grotto Avenue. The neighboring property owners had the right to enforce these restrictions. (*Registry of Deeds*)

Deed Book 548, Page 187: On March 3, 1915, the Quality House Company sold to Joseph H. Gainer, for \$10, a lot of land with buildings and improvements thereon, on the east side of Grotto Avenue 50 feet south of President Avenue. The deed notes that this is the same lot conveyed to the grantor by deed recorded in book 543, page 74. (*Registry of Deeds*)

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that the Quality House Co. owned the property as of May 1, 1914, and that Joseph H. Gainer owned it as of April 1, 1915. (*Assessor's Office*)

Intent to Build Permits, 1914-1915: No record was found of a permit being issued to build a house at 55 Grotto Avenue. (*Archives*)

Tax Records, 1913-1915: In 1913, the RI Hospital Trust Co., trustee for James Hanley, was assessed \$3,000 for the value of the land in Lot 200 in Plat 41. By 1914, the Quality House Company owned Plat 41, Lot 218 (Lot 200 had been subdivided), which was assessed \$1,500 for land and \$2,500 for buildings, so apparently the house was substantially built, if not finished, that year. In 1915, Joseph H. Gainer was assessed \$1,500 for land and \$3,200 for buildings at 55 Grotto Avenue, Plat 41 Lot 218. (*Archives*)

Providence City Directories, 1914-1916: The 1914 and 1915 directories list Joseph H. Gainer, Mayor of Providence, with offices at both City Hall and the law firm of O'Shaughnessey Gainer & Carr in the

Grosvenor Building, living as a boarder at 112 Metcalf Street. The 1916 directory lists him as residing at 55 Grotto Avenue. (*Archives*)

Providence House Directories, 1913-1918: In the 1913-14 directory, no listing for 55 Grotto Avenue appears. In the 1915-1916 directory, 55 Grotto is listed as a vacant lot. In the 1917-1918 directory, 55 Grotto is listed as the home of Mayor Joseph A. Gainer (note the error in middle initial). (*Archives*)

NOTE: Joseph H. Gainer was born in Providence 1878. He graduated from LaSalle Academy in 1895, from Holy Cross College in Worcester, Mass. in 1899, and from Catholic University law school in Washington, DC in 1902. Admitted to the Rhode Island bar that same year, he practiced law (with a succession of partners) for 40 years until his death. In 1902 he also began his long career in public service by serving on the Providence School Committee from the 3rd Ward (at the time he lived off Branch Avenue). He was also Ward 3 Alderman from 1908-1911. In 1912, as a 34-year-old Democrat, he ran for Mayor and defeated a 4-term incumbent, thus earning the distinction of being the youngest man ever elected Mayor of Providence (until Vincent A. Cianci, Jr., who was first elected at age 33). He married Christine McPherson in 1915 – the same year he moved to Grotto Avenue - and they eventually had three children.

Mayor Gainer served for 14 years (also a record that remained unbroken until Mayor Cianci came along), and was so popular that in 1918 both the Democratic and Republican parties endorsed his candidacy for re-election. Among his accomplishments in office were the development of the Port of Providence near Fields Point; the enactment of Providence's first zoning ordinance; the establishment of a new city water supply at the Scituate Reservoir; and the modernization of the city's public school system. In 1926, Mayor Gainer announced that he would not seek another term as Mayor; instead, he was nominated as the Democratic candidate for Governor. Upon losing that election to Aram J. Pothier, Gainer went back to his law practice with the firm of Hart, Gainer and Carr, and remained a leader in Rhode Island's legal and civic affairs until his death in December 1945.

1918

City Atlas for 1918 by G.M. Hopkins, plate 21, shows the block bounded by Grotto, President, Loring and Channing Avenues has begun to be further subdivided and developed. Along Grotto Avenue now are four lots; the second one south of President Avenue now measures 5,000 square feet. On this lot appears a house numbered 55 Grotto, owned by J.H. Gainer. (*Archives*)

1924

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that Joseph H. Gainer owned half the property and his wife Christine M. Gainer owned the other half, as of November 1, 1924. (*Assessor's Office*)

1926

City Atlas for 1926 by G.M. Hopkins, plate 21, shows the block bounded by Grotto, President, Loring and Channing Avenues has begun to be further subdivided and developed. The house numbered 55 Grotto, on a 5,000 square foot lot, is still owned by J.H. Gainer. (*Archives*)

1937

City Atlas for 1937 by G.M. Hopkins, plate 21, shows the block bounded by Grotto, President, Loring and Channing Avenues has begun to be further subdivided and developed. The house numbered 55 Grotto, on a 5,000 square foot lot, is still owned by J.H. Gainer. (*Archives*)

1944-1946

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that Joseph H. Gainer and wife Christina M. Gainer owned the property as of January 1944, and that Christina Gainer, widow, owned it as of June 1946. *(Assessor's Office)*

City Directory, 1946: Joseph M. Gainer, of Hart Gainer & Carr (office 15 Westminster Street, home 55 Grotto Avenue), died December 15, 1945. *(Archives)*

1957

Deed Book 1071, Page 22: On October 23, 1957, Christina M. Gainer, widow of Joseph H. Gainer, sold the property to James K. Mullaney and wife Ruth Patricia Mullaney of Providence. *(Registry of Deeds)*

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that James K. Mullaney and wife Ruth P. Mullaney owned the property as of December 1957. *(Assessor's Office)*

1980

Deed Book 1223, Page 848: On August 22, 1980, James K. Mullaney of Milford, Mass. sold the property to his former wife, Ruth Patricia Mullaney of 55 Grotto Avenue. *(Registry of Deeds)*

Deed Book 1223, Page 849: On October 22, 1980, Ruth Patricia Mullaney (who described herself as unmarried) sold the property to Eugene D. Ruth, Jr. and his wife Jeanette W. Ruth. The deed notes that the lot was subject to the restrictions outlined in DB 543, Page 74. *(Registry of Deeds)*

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that Eugene D. Ruth, Jr. and wife Jeanette W. Ruth owned the property as of October 22, 1980. The card refers to Deed Book 1223, Pages 848 and 849. *(Assessor's Office)*

1985

Deed Book 1308, Page 726: On September 16, 1985, Eugene D. Ruth, Jr. and Jeanette W. Ruth sold the property to Carolyn K. McGrath of Providence, subject to the deed restrictions outlined in DB 543, page 74. *(Registry of Deeds)*

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that Carolyn K. McGrath owned the property as of September 17, 1985. The card refers to Deed Book 1308, Page 726. *(Assessor's Office)*

1986

Deed Book 1382, Page 43: On May 28, 1986, Carolyn K. McGrath of Providence sold the property to Jan G. Fensterer of 55 Grotto Avenue. *(Registry of Deeds)*

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that Jan B. Fensterer owned the property as of May 29, 1986. The card refers to Deed Book 1382, Page 43. *(Assessor's Office)*

1993

Deed Book 2817, Page 182: On August 31, 1993, a mortgagee's deed was recorded transferring the property from Jan G. Fensterer to Citizens Savings Bank. Ms. Fensterer had defaulted on her mortgage (Mortgage Book 1382, page 44, dated May 28, 1986) and Citizens Bank was the highest bidder at a public auction of the property, paying \$137,000. *(Registry of Deeds)*

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that Citizens Bank owned the property as of September 16, 1993. The card refers to Deed Book 2817, Page 182. *(Assessor's Office)*

1994

Deed Book 2906, Page 302: On February 16, 1994, Citizens Savings Bank sold the property to Daniel Gorriaran and Cynthia L. Gorriaran of 35 Twelfth Street in Providence. (*Registry of Deeds*)

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that Daniel Gorriaran owned the property as of February 18, 1994. The card refers to Deed Book 2906, Page 302. (*Assessor's Office*)

2000

Deed Book 4522, Page 263: On November 28, 2000, Daniel Gorriaran and Cynthia L. Gorriaran sold the property to Susan L. Mitchell and Jane G. Linden. (*Registry of Deeds*)

Assessor's Plat Card for Plat 41, Lot 218 indicates that Susan L. Mitchell and Jane G. Linden owned the property as of November 28, 2000. The card refers to Deed Book 4522, Page 263. (*Assessor's Office*)

*Research compiled by Kathryn J. Cavanaugh
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