

**PPS RECORDS FOR
23 VASSAR AVENUE
PLAT 7, LOT 44**

**JOSEPH W. AND ANNE RESS HOUSE
Built 1937
Built by Joseph Charpentier**

DESCRIPTION:

A 2-story wood frame house with hipped asphalt roof (with front dormer), wood shingle siding, and a slightly raised brick foundation; there are two bays across the façade, with paired windows to the left of a projecting front entrance enclosure (which appears to be original). The front door has leaded glass sidelights and a wood "fanlight" trim above it. A matching 1-car garage, built by 1941 but likely contemporary with the house, is one story tall with a hipped roof and wood shingle siding; it stands at the rear southwest corner of the lot.

The house stands on a 4,000 sq.ft. lot on the south side of Vassar Avenue, between Morris and Elmgrove Avenues. The lot has about 40 feet of frontage and measures 100 feet deep.

HISTORY:

Joseph Charpentier, who owned this property from 1936-1956 but never lived here, apparently built this house in 1937 as an investment, leasing it to a series of tenants during that 20-year period. The house's first occupants were Joseph W. and Anne Ress; Mr. Ress was a secretary in two wholesale grocery businesses in Providence. [In Providence directories of the 1930s, the term "secretary" typically referred to an officer of a corporate board of directors, not a clerical position.] They lived here for ten years, 1937-1947, and then were succeeded by several other renters. Mr. Charpentier sold the house in 1956 to Abraham and Anne Abelson, who were its first owner-occupants; they lived here until 1971. The house has had five subsequent owners, most recently Kristen and Michael Barclay, who purchased it in 2005.

Note: this house is named after its first occupants, since its original owner never lived here.

DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT:¹

From Providence's founding in 1636 until well into the 19th century, the northeast part of the city was remote and relatively inaccessible, being several miles from the settled center of town and occupied by two large areas of wetlands known as the Cat Swamp

¹ Jones, Robert O. *"Historic and Architectural Resources of the East Side, Providence."* R.I. Historical Preservation Commission, 1989.

and the Great Swamp. By the late 18th century, a few roadways had been cut through the swamps to provide access to a handful of farmhouses and country estates, as well as to Swan Point and to nearby Pawtucket. Early streets included parts of today's Morris Avenue, Rochambeau Avenue, Sessions Street, and Cole Avenue; approximately 80 acres of farmland enclosed by these four roadways belonged to Phineas and Phoebe Brown, who were both descended from some of Providence's first settlers. (Their house still stands at 287 Rochambeau Avenue, as does their son Morris Brown's house at 317 Rochambeau; both dwellings have been substantially modified over time). This land passed down through five generations of Brown descendants before any substantive development occurred here.

Beginning in the 1840s and 1850s, transportation improvements allowed easier access to those parts of the East Side that had previously only been sparsely settled. As the city's population grew, particularly after the Civil War, the exponential demand for new housing induced many East Side property owners to subdivide their former farmlands and plat them for residential development. The introduction of municipal water and sewer services beginning in the late 19th century made these areas even more attractive, and the pace of development continued to increase until World War II.

By 1895, a descendant of Phineas and Phoebe Brown called John M. Willey owned a tract of land containing nearly 500,000 sq.ft. on the east side of Morris Avenue, north of Sessions Street. By 1911, Willey's land had been purchased by Mary T. Cass of Woonsocket and Anne Autran of Providence (who were land speculators, together owning some 85 house lots in the vicinity), and recorded as a plat called "Pembroke Villa." Vassar Avenue was one of several new cross streets introduced between Morris Avenue and Elmgrove Avenue (although it did not actually connect those two streets until the 1930s). House lots within the Pembroke Villa Plat were sold with deed restrictions as to the size and placement of new dwelling houses, as well as how much they should cost and how many units they could contain: clearly an effort to attract middle-class buyers to the neighborhood.

The Pembroke Villa Plat developed fairly slowly – by 1918, seven years after the plat was recorded, there were only 4 houses in the block where 23 Vassar Avenue now stands – possibly because municipal water and sewer services were not available to most of the plat until the 1920s-1930s. The house at 23 Vassar, one of the last to be built in its block, was erected in 1937 as a rental property.

DESIGNATIONS

This house is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places, nor in a local historic district overlay zone designated by the City of Providence.

RECORDS (All Records were found in Providence City Hall unless otherwise noted).

Maps and Atlases (All in Archives unless otherwise noted)

1798: "A Map of Owners of Lots in Providence," compiled by Henry B. Chace in 1912: Plate VIII shows the future site of 23 Vassar Avenue within a large tract of land owned by Phineas Brown, bounded by "West Lane/Old Road to Pawtucket" (now Morris Avenue), "Cat Swamp Lane to Swan Point or Neck Road" (an L-shaped alignment, now Sessions Street and part of Cole Avenue), and "Herrenden's Lane to Pawtucket and Swan Point" (now Rochambeau Avenue). Phineas Brown's house and several outbuildings are shown near the northwest corner of this tract (now 287 Rochambeau), the only buildings standing in this large property at this time.

1857: "Map of Providence," by H.F. Walling: Page B5 shows a large, unplatted, vacant tract of land on the east side of "Olney Street" (now Morris Avenue), owned by William Morris.

1875: "Atlas of the City of Providence," by G.M. Hopkins Co., Vol. 1: Plate I shows a 457,380 sq.ft., unplatted, vacant tract of land on the east side of "Olney Street" (now Morris Avenue), owned by Phebe B. Willey.

1882: "Atlas of the City of Providence" by G.M. Hopkins Co.: Plate 4 shows a large (size not indicated), unplatted, vacant tract of land on the east side of Morris Avenue, owned by Phebe B. Willey.

1895: "Atlas of the City of Providence" by Everts & Richards: Plate 1 (pages 12-13) shows a 457,380 sq.ft., unplatted, vacant tract of land on the east side of Morris Avenue, owned by "Jno. M. Willey."

1902: Assessors Plat Maps: Plat 7 shows Lot #6, measuring 457,380 sq.ft., on the east side of Morris Avenue. No buildings are shown, and owner names are not indicated.

1908: "Atlas of the City of Providence" by L.J. Richards Co.: Plate 6 shows the J.M. Willey Heirs owning two large tracts of land on the east side of Morris Avenue, north and south of Savoy Street. The north tract measures 236,058 sq.ft. and includes a house with outbuildings at its northwest corner (now the corner of Morris and Vassar); the remainder of the land is unplatted and vacant. (The Willey parcel south of Savoy Street measures 195,500 sq.ft.)

1911: "Pembroke Villa, Providence, R.I." surveyed and platted by C.A. Thayer, February 1911, recorded in Plat Book 31, Page 49 and copied on plat card 982. This plat stretched from Morris Avenue east to Elmgrove Avenue, including the new cross streets of Savoy Street, Sargent Avenue, and Vassar Avenue. The future site of 23 Vassar is Lot #82, on the south side of the street 5 lots east of Morris, measuring 40 feet wide on the street and 100 feet deep (4,000 sq.ft.). (*Registry of Deeds*)

1918: "Atlas of the City of Providence" by G.M. Hopkins Co.: Plate 24 shows Vassar Avenue, extending from Morris Avenue eastward only as far as a house lot at 41 Vassar; the remaining land between 41 Vassar and Elmgrove Avenue is part of an unplatted tract extending north to Rochambeau Avenue and south to the Metcalf Botanical Gardens (now Brown Stadium) at Sessions Street. On the south side of Vassar, the 5th lot east of Morris is a vacant, 4,000 sq.ft. lot owned by J. Patterson. Water and sewer lines are shown on Morris Avenue only, and there are only 4 houses at that end of the block. The map references the Pembroke Villa Plat (no plat card number indicated).

1926: "Atlas of the City of Providence" by G.M. Hopkins Co.: Plate 24 shows Vassar Avenue only partially extended between Morris and Elmgrove Avenues (as on the 1918 map). On the south side of Vassar, the 5th lot east of Morris is a vacant, 4,000 sq.ft. lot owned by J. Patterson. Water and sewer lines are shown on Morris Avenue only, although there are now several more houses in this block. The map references the Pembroke Villa Plat on plat card #982.

1937: "Atlas of the City of Providence" by G.M. Hopkins Co.: Plate 24 shows Vassar Avenue extended completely between Morris and Elmgrove Avenues, and most of this block built out, except for two vacant lots between houses at 19 and 31 Vassar, on the south side of the street. The future site of 23 Vassar is still an undeveloped 4,000 sq.ft. lot owned by J. Patterson. Water and sewer lines now surround the block. The map references the Pembroke Villa Plat on plat card #982.

1941: "Insurance Maps of Providence," by Sanborn Map Co., Vol. 2 (1921 with addenda 1941, 1948, 1951, 1955): Plate 86 shows the house at "25" Vassar Avenue, on the 5th lot east of Morris Avenue, as a 2-story wood dwelling with an enclosed entrance at the northwest front corner and a 1-story garage at rear.

Deeds (Registry of Deeds)

Deed Book 522, Page 355: On September 27, 1911, Mary T. Cass of Woonsocket and Anne E. Autran of Providence sold to James Patterson of Providence, for \$10, a lot of land identified as Lot #82 on the Plan of Pembroke Villa made by Charles E. Thayer dated February 1911; recorded in Plat Book 31 Page 49. Deed restrictions (to terminate on January 1, 1931) included: all new buildings must observe a minimum 10-foot setback from the street; any new dwelling house must cost at least \$3,000 for a single-family and \$4,500 for a two-family, and its maximum height could be 1-1/2 stories. [Note: these restrictions had expired by 1937, when 23 Vassar Avenue was built.]

Deed Book 792, Page 461: On September 23, 1936, Mary B. Patterson, Mary E. Patterson, and James M. Patterson, all of Providence, sold to Joseph Charpentier of Providence (for an unspecified sum) a lot of land with buildings and improvements thereon on the "west" side of Vassar Avenue, being Lot #82 in the Pembroke Villa Plat,

the same premises conveyed to James Patterson by deed from Mary T. Cass and Anne E. Aufran dated September 27, 1911, recorded in DB 522/355. "The said James Patterson deceased May 4, 1924, leaving the above grantors his widow and sole heirs at law."

[Notes: the reference to the "west" side of Vassar is an error; the lot is on the south side of the street. Despite the reference to buildings on this deed, tax records indicate no assessment for buildings in 1936, and a building permit was issued for this house several weeks after this deed was executed. While it's possible that the Pattersons started construction before they sold this property to Charpentier, the house apparently was not completed in 1936.]

Deed Book 1048, Page 373: On March 14, 1956, Joseph Charpentier of Providence sold to Abraham Abelson and wife Anne Abelson of Providence, for \$1, a lot of land with buildings and improvements on the south side of Vassar Avenue, being Lot #82 on the Pembroke Villa Plat.

Intent to Build Records (Archives)

Permit #38583, issued October 3, 1936 to Joseph E. Charpentier, per Rocco Croce, to build a house at 25 Vassar Ave. [Note this address is shown on the 1941 Sanborn map as well, but contemporary directories only refer to 23 Vassar.]

Tax Records (Archives)

Tax records are available from 1827 to the present. Prior to 1854, tax records were published in a book listing the property owner alphabetically by name, the total assessment for any real and personal property (without specifying where real estate was located), and the total tax due. Beginning in 1854, the city kept ledgers (organized by property owner name) indicating the plat and lot number of any real estate and the assessed value and taxes therefor.

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| 1936 | Plat 7, Lot 44 was owned by James Patterson of 23 Poplar Avenue; the real estate was valued at \$1,200 for land and \$0 for buildings. |
| 1937 | Plat 7, Lot 44 was owned by Joseph Charpentier; the real estate was valued at \$1,200 for land and \$7,200 for buildings, indicating that the house had been constructed. |
| 1938 | Plat 7, Lot 44 was owned by Abraham Abelson of 23 Vassar Avenue; the real estate was valued at \$1,200 for land and \$7,200 for buildings. |

Directories (Archives)

Providence City Directories contain a street directory, noting all existing streets, and a residents' directory organized alphabetically by last name; these also included a house directory, listing residential buildings by street address, from 1892-1894 and again since 1937.

1938 First listing for 23 Vassar Avenue: home of Joseph W. and Anne Ress. Joseph Ress was the secretary of United Public Markets at 299 West Exchange Street, as well as secretary of Albert Inc. (a grocery company) at 120 Eddy Street.

[Notes: In 1937, Joseph Ress lived on 6th Street. The 1936-1938 directories list two Joseph Charpentiers (see tax records), one a salesman living in Pawtucket, the other in the lumber business living on Lorimer Ave. Directories from 1938-1957 do not ever list a Joseph Charpentier living at 23 Vassar Avenue.]

1947 23 Vassar Avenue: home of Joseph W. Ress and David Friedman.

1948-1956 23 Vassar Avenue: occupied by various tenants.

1957 23 Vassar Avenue: home of Abraham Abelson [1st owner-occupant].

Assessor's Chain of Title Cards (Assessor's Office)

PLAT 7, LOT 44 – VASSAR AVENUE

Mary T. Cass and Anne E. Autran owned the property as of June 10, 1911.

James Patterson owned the property as of November 1, 1911.

Joseph Charpentier owned the property as of December 1956.

Abraham Abelson and wife Anne Abelson owned the property as of December 1956.

Masatodu Nei and wife Nobuko Nei owned the property as of May 25, 1971

(reference Deed Book 1161/Page 908).

Thomas Swindells and wife Elizabeth Anne Swindells owned the property as of October 6, 1972 (ref. DB 1170/554).

Robert J. Aneyci and wife Nancy M. Aneyci owned the property as of May 19, 1978 (ref. DB 1205/387).

[Note: the current owners, Kristen and Michael Barclay, bought the house in 2005; however, they are not named on the chain of title card, nor noted in the assessor's data base (checked on 1/10/06). The database lists the property owner as Anne W. Ertel, who bought the house from the Aneycis in 2004; she likewise is not listed on the chain of title card.]