

**PPS RECORDS FOR
135 BENEFIT STREET
PLAT 10, LOT 200**

**JOHN MAWNEY HOUSE
Built ca. 1764**

**Previous addresses:
83 Benefit, from 1850-1855
87 Benefit Street, from 1857-1866**

NOTES

This house was originally researched for PPS in 1961 by Antoinette Downing and Elvira Gowdey; they also contributed to a Historic American Building Survey report about this house in 1963. Their research could not confirm a construction date for the house through primary source documents. The Gowdey report includes an entry, "1764 House listed here by Cady" (apparently a reference to John Hutchins Cady records at the R.I. Historical Society Library), and that date has been associated with this house ever since. The HABS report indicates that an estimated date of "about 1765" was based on the house's architectural style.

Since the property was owned by John Mawney, a physician, from 1747-1784, he is credited with building the house. It was one of the first houses built on Benefit Street after that roadway was completed in 1758. Dr. Mawney may have used the basement level, with its entrance on Benefit Street, as his medical office; in the early 19th century apparently a store occupied that space. The second owner was Stephen Harris; primary sources do confirm that the house was standing as of 1785. The Harris family continued to own the house until the early 20th century.

In addition to being listed on the National Register of Historic Places (see "Designations," below), this house is mentioned in *Providence: A Citywide Survey of Historic Resources*, by Edward F. Sanderson and Wm. McKenzie Woodward (1986), and in the *PPS/AIAri Guide to Providence Architecture*, also by Woodward (2003). In both books the house is identified as the "John Mawney House, ca. 1764." According to Woodward's *Guide*, the late-18th-century-style, south-facing, pedimented front entrance, which was installed in the 1970s, was modeled after that at Shakespeare's Head, 21 Meeting Street (1772). The basement was the setting for the evil presence in H.P. Lovecraft's short story, "The Shunned House" (1927).

DESIGNATIONS

135 Benefit Street is a contributing building within the College Hill National Historic Landmark District (listed on the National Register of Historic Places); it is identified in the inventory as "John Mawney House, ca. 1764."

The house is also located within the local College Hill Historic District, designated by the City of Providence.

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

Chain of Title Cards (Assessor's Office)

Note: all chain of title cards have recently been scanned, and their images transferred into an electronic database. Unfortunately the scanning did not always capture a complete image of the cards, so some information is illegible. The original cards are in storage and can no longer be viewed by the public.

AP 10, Lot 200 – BENEFIT STREET:

Sarah H. Harris etals owned the property as of March 16, 1885.

Sophia C.H. Babbitt and Sarah H. Harris Estate owned the property as of June 16, 192[illegible].

George H. Babbitt and Sarah H. Bullock owned the property as of January 1929.

Elizabeth C. Babbitt and Sarah H. Bullock owned the property as of January 1930.

Sarah H. Bullock owned the property as of June 1933.

Jacqueline C. Brassard owned the property as of April 16, 197[illegible]. The card refers to Deed Book 1161/Page 374.

Timothy T. More and wife Rebecca S. More owned the property as of May 11, 1971. The card refers to DB 1161/711.

According to the Assessor's computerized data base, the building is currently owned by Rebecca S. More, since September 2011 (DB 10091/165).

Maps and Atlases (Archives and Registry of Deeds)

Maps indicate that the house was standing by 1857.

1798: "Owners of Lots in Providence in 1798," by Henry R. Chace (1912), Plate III, shows Stephen Harris as the owner of property on the east side of Benefit Street, a short distance north of Powder House Lane (now South Court Street) and the former R.I. State House (now 150 Benefit Street). The house's footprint is not shown, but Henry Chace's *Index of the Owners and Occupants of Lots, Houses and Shops in the Town of Providence in 1798* indicates that Stephen Harris owned a house on this site (as well as 9 other parcels of land in the vicinity, some of which were leased to tenants). Other property owned by John Mawney (from whom Stephen Harris purchased this house lot) is shown on [North] Main Street and on two large lots to the east of the Harris property, totaling more than 8 acres. (*Archives*)

1827: A "Plat of the Lot of Land and Buildings Thereon Standing, set off to the Widow of the late Stephen Harris, deceased," surveyed and platted by Benjamin Lockwood on

November 3, 1827 and recorded in Deed Book 54/Page 246 (see “Deeds,” below). This small map shows an L-shaped lot on the east side of Benefit Street containing two houses sited adjacent to the street and standing 12 feet apart. The northern of these houses is 30 feet wide on Benefit Street, and 40 feet deep (this is 129 Benefit, today). The southern house is 29.4 feet wide on Benefit Street and 38 feet deep, with a small ell at the rear northeast corner measuring 15.1 feet by 19 feet (this is 135 Benefit, today).

1857: “Map of Providence, R.I.” by H.F. Walling, shows a building on this site, with the same footprint as the present house, owned by A. H. Mann. (Abby Harris Mann was one of Stephen Harris’s daughters.) Lot size and street address number are not indicated. The footprint is the same as that of the southern of two houses shown in the 1827 plat map. (*Archives*)

1875: “City Atlas of Providence,” Vol. 1, Wards 1, 2, and 3, by G.M. Hopkins, Plate M, shows the house standing on a 14,260 sq.ft. lot owned by G.J. Harris and others, with the address 135 Benefit St. (George J. Harris was a son of Stephen Harris.) This lot and the one immediately to the north, together, comprise the lot shown on the 1827 plat map, and the footprint of this house matches that of the southern of two houses on that plat map. (*Archives*)

Family Records

The *Index of Births, Marriages, and Deaths, 1636-1850*, does not list Stephen Harris’s birth or death (so those events did not happen in Providence), but he was apparently married twice: first to Hannah Mawney, on January 23, 1775, and then to Abigail Cushing on July 25, 1792. Abigail Harris is listed in the death index; she died at age 72 on October 9, 1841.

The *Probate Index* indicates that Stephen Harris died in 1817, but his estate was not probated until November 1827, apparently because he left no will. (See Deed Book 54/Page 246, below.)

Abigail Harris’s will, dated April 4, 1837 and presented for probate on October 19, 1841, is recorded in Will Book 14, Page 413. Her will names five children: George J. Harris, Edwin W. Harris (executor), Abby Harris, Sarah O. Green (wife of Samuel Green of Smithfield), and Benjamin C. Harris.

Tax Records (*Archives*)

Prior to 1854, Providence tax records only identified the name of the taxpayer and the amount of tax paid – not the location of the taxable property, nor whether it was real estate or personal property. In 1854 the City of Providence Tax Assessor began using a system of plats and lots to identify individual parcels of real estate. Tax records from the latter half of the 19th century are indexed by plat number, and recorded in a series of ledgers labeled “A” through “E.” These records indicate that the house at 135 Benefit Street was standing as of August 1, 1854.

Tax Ledger A4/Page 149: Plat 10, Lot 200, was owned by George J. Harris, Sarah O. Greene, and Abby Mann as of August 1, 1854. (*Archives*)

Deeds (*Archives*)

Deeds first mention a house standing on the property in 1785, when it was owned by Stephen Harris.

Deed Book 12/Page 159: On August 25, 1747, Josiah Cotton of Woburn, Mass., clerk, sold to John Mawney of Providence, merchant, for "4,000 pounds in bills of public credit," a lot of land in Providence containing about 10 acres, which Cotton had purchased from Peleg Williams by deed dated November 5, 1729. This lot was bounded by Towne Street (North Main Street) on the west, by a highway (Hope Street) on the east, and by lands owned by Gabriel Bornon on the north and Benjamin Cushing on the south. This deed mentions a house, which apparently was located on Towne Street and no longer exists. The purchase also included another lot of 6 acres on the Woonasquatucket River.

DB 19/526: On January 29, 1784, John Mawney of Providence, physician, sold to Stephen Harris of Providence, for "120 pounds current money of the State of Rhode Island," a parcel of land 50 feet wide by 180 feet long, sited "on that street now called Back or Pleasant Street" (Benefit Street). This deed does not mention any buildings, but according to its architectural style, the house at 135 Benefit had been built as of about 1764.

DB 21/261: On June 23, 1785, Benjamin Cushing of Providence sold to Stephen Harris of Providence, for "7 pounds 10 shillings silver lawful money," a small parcel of land 10 feet by 95 feet, located "a little northward of the State House on the east side of Back or Benefit Street." The boundary description mentions the "Harris House Lot," which is the first reference to the existence of a house in deeds for this property.

DB 23/270: On September 4, 1792, John Mawney of Providence, yeoman, sold to Stephen Harris of Providence, gentleman, for 160 pounds, an L-shaped lot of land on the east side of Benefit Street, measuring approximately 180 feet deep, with a water privilege to be shared with Mawney, and a "leading way" for Mawney to gain access to his adjoining land [to the east].

DB 54/246: Disposition of the real estate of Stephen Harris, deceased, presented to the Court of Probate on November 12, 1827 and recorded November 26, 1827. This document mentions "the mansion house occupied and improved by the said Stephen Harris at his decease, and the new house now occupied by the said Abigail Harris, and a lot of land on which said houses stand in Providence on the east side of Benefit Street," measuring about 117.4 feet on the street and extending back east to "the head of the garden fence," where it measured about 147 feet wide. A hand-drawn plat map on p. 248 of this deed book, entitled "Plat of the Lot of Land and Buildings Thereon

Standing, set off to the Widow of the late Stephen Harris, deceased,” surveyed and platted by Benjamin Lockwood on November 3, 1827, shows the two houses standing about 12 feet apart on an L-shaped lot. The southern of these houses is 135 Benefit Street. This map is consistent with the 1857 and 1875 atlases of Providence.

Directories (Archives)

The house first appears in city directories in 1850, with the address 83 Benefit St.

Providence City Directories were published beginning in 1850. For the first 4 decades, these volumes contained a street directory (listing all existing streets), and a residents' directory organized alphabetically by last name. Residents' professions and business addresses (if any) were noted before home addresses. From 1892-1894 city directories also included a section listing residential buildings by street address, which was later separately published as a House Directory (1895-1935). The notation “(h)” indicates a head of household; “(b)” indicates a boarder.

- 1850 Harris, Edwin H., 83 Benefit St.
 Harris, Otis G., 83 Benefit St.
 [No Sarah O. Greene, Abby Mann, or George J. Harris listed.]
- 1852-1853* Harris, Edwin H., 83 Benefit St.
 Harris, George J., Charles [St.] “just over the line”
 Harris, Henry W., tinman, 50 Canal St, 83 Benefit St.
 Green, Sarah “A.,” widow of Samuel, Courtland St.
 [No Abby Mann listed.]
- 1856 Harris, Henry W., tinman, 50 Canal St., 80 Benefit St.
 [None of the others are listed as Providence residents.]
- 1857-1860 Mann, Mrs. Abby H., h. 87 Benefit St.
 Harris, Henry W., tinplate worker, 50 Canal St., (b) 80 Benefit St.
 Harris, George J., gunsmith, r. 35 Weybosset St., (h) at Olneyville
- 1865 Mann, Mrs. “Abbey” H., (h) 87 Benefit St.
- 1866 Mann, Mrs. “Abbey” H., (h) 135 Benefit St.

*Archives does not possess a directory for 1851.