

Walker House, ca. 1890

### **Philip Walker House**

Located at 432 Massasoit Avenue in East Providence, Rhode Island, the Philip Walker House is an exceptional example of an early Rhode Island house. The complexity of the structure's architectural history – built during the transition from First Period to Georgian architecture and then undergoing numerous building campaigns – makes Walker House a prime candidate for field study. The house is particularly useful to teach students how to “read” a non-standard structure and understand its history and building evolution through architectural evidence. exceptional

The purpose of the orientation is to provide background in advance of a field visit. Once onsite, the features of the house will give students insight as to how the house evolved over time. Clues to its evolution can be found in its construction materials, craftsmanship, and design. Students will benefit from first-hand observations of architectural features informed by historical research and site-specific analysis.

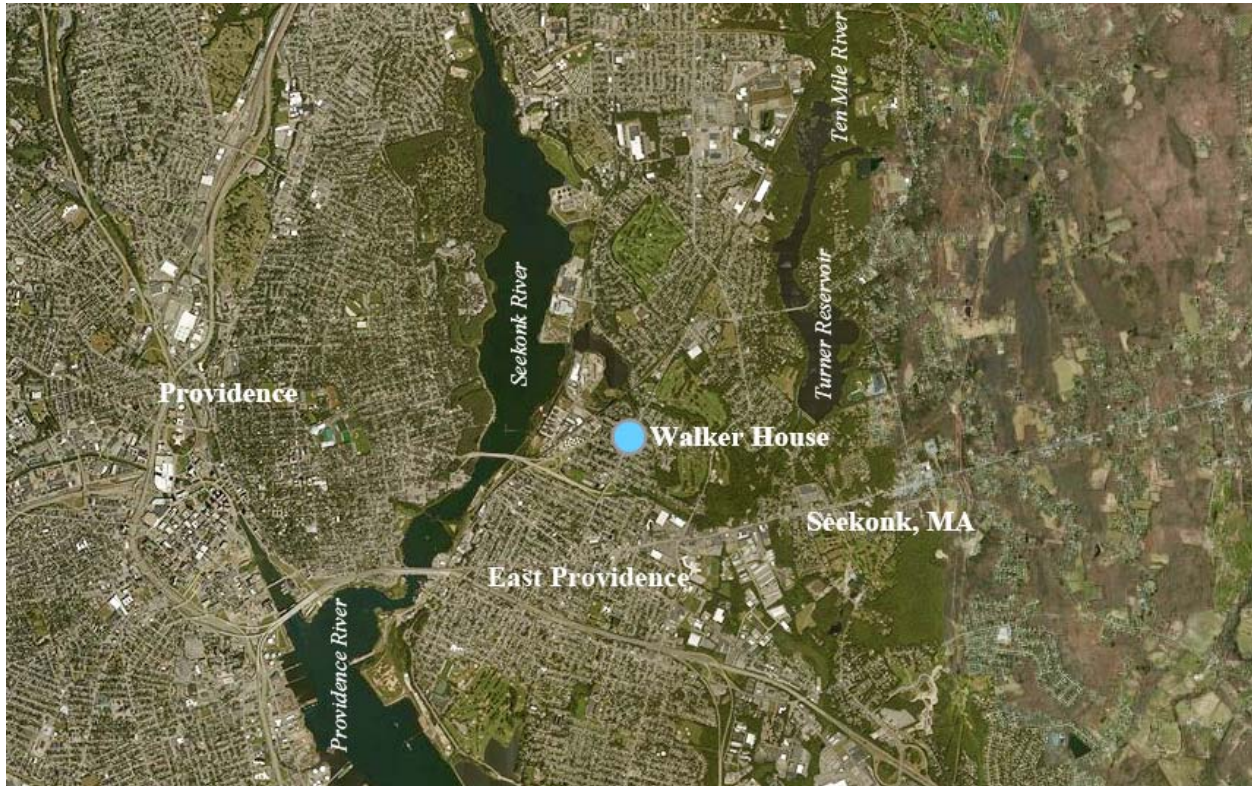
### **Preserve Rhode Island**

Preserve Rhode Island is the statewide advocate for historic places and owner of the Walker House. Beautiful historic and unique places define the character of our towns and cities. Preserve Rhode Island advocates for these special places to make sure they remain today, and for generations. Preserve Rhode Island is also a steward of historic places, demonstrating best practices in preservation at our properties.



## Location

Walker House is an early 18<sup>th</sup> century transitional (English Post-Medieval to Georgian architecture) dwelling house situated on a large lot of roughly one and a half acres in an otherwise heavily built up neighborhood of both residential and commercial buildings at the corner of Massasoit Avenue and North Broadway. The house is the oldest surviving in East Providence and a familiar local icon. Occupying one of the few remaining large green spaces in the area, Walker House is a tangible reminder of the historic rural character of this now urban setting.





## Significance

While the structure was once thought to have been constructed in 1679, replacing Philip Walker's residence that was burned during King Philip's War in 1676, dendrochronology (a method of dating through tree ring analysis) conducted in 2003 authenticates a more probable construction date of 1724. With this revised construction date, Walker House is significant to Rhode Island's architectural heritage as one of the few surviving examples of domestic architecture from this transitional period when the Classical forms of Georgian architecture were just being introduced. Many early-Georgian interior features remain, including the chimney breasts, panelled doors and door frames, mantelpieces, and period finish materials, such as plasterwork and flooring.

Suggesting the importance of the Walker family's lucrative sawmill, the framing of Walker House exhibits reciprocating saw marks, making it a rare early example of a structure with a completely sawn timber frame. Sawmill carriages long enough to hold timbers the length of posts and beams, as observed at Walker House, were not readily available in New England saw mills until the mid-to-late 18th century, making the 1724 date noteworthy.



Early Rhode Island houses were typically organized as center-chimney plans, such as Smith's Castle in North Kingstown, or as traditional stone-enders, such as the Eleazer Arnold House and Valentine Whitman House in Lincoln. However, the oldest part of Walker House is an early expression of the square-house plan. These plans were an alternative design developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, evolving from the four-room stone-ender. Square-house plans were similar to stone-enders in regards to their two-room-deep plan and framing of three posts per wall, but differed by placing the chimney in an asymmetrically central location rather than at an end wall. This plan was a cheaper alternative because it permitted greater flexibility in the number and size of heated rooms in a compact house, while still providing the two-room-deep or double pile plan favoured in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Dated to 1724, Walker House appears earlier than the George Thomas House in Wickford (c. 1734) that has been cited as Rhode Island's earliest square-house plan.

While dendrochronology dispelled the belief that Walker House was built immediately following King Philip's War, the structure remains significant for its critical connection to local history; its architectural expression as an early Georgian transitional structure when the stylistic traditions of post-medieval architecture were fading; for its status as one of the earliest known square-plan houses; and for its exceptional level of preservation.

## Social History and Context

Walker House was built on Watchemoket Neck, a fertile stretch of land overlooking the Seekonk River. Originally part of Plymouth Colony and later the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, this area was ceded to Rhode Island in 1862 to settle a boundary dispute, later becoming East Providence. In 1641, settlers from Weymouth and Hingham, Massachusetts led by the Reverend Samuel Newman founded a new village in the wilderness, removing themselves from Puritan limitations. Newman, a non-conformist minister, founded Rehoboth when he purchased an eight mile square tract of land from Massasoit, head of the Wampanoag tribe, which occupied the area around the head of the Narragansett Bay.

A house was built by Philip Walker on land deeded in 1652, along the road that crossed the India Bridge from Providence on its way to Barrington, near the centre of the settlement known as the “Ring of the Town” or the “Ring of the Green.” Isolated and exposed to attack, the area was destroyed during one of the bloodiest battles of King Philip’s War on March 28, 1676 when 30-40 houses and 30-80 barns and other buildings, primarily located around the Ring of the Green, were burned. Philip Walker’s house was amongst those destroyed in the attack.



A saw-mill was the first building that Philip Walker rebuilt following the attack, likely to aid in the community rebuilding effort. Archival records indicate that Walker had begun rebuilding his house on the old foundation upon his death in 1679.

Three hundred yards to the rear of the house, covered by trees, were numerous small hills that were postulated to have been corn hills where the Wampanoag had planted corn, supposedly present when Walker acquired the land in 1655. The Walker property originally extended from the ‘The Ring’ down to the Seekonk River. By 1891, when the Providence Journal, capturing nostalgia for the past, published an article on the Walker House, the farmland associated with the antique dwelling was 96 acres. The Providence Journal article noted that “during the summer may be seen fields of weaving corn, and the pastures dotted by shady trees, about which cattle graze” and called attention to the “old-fashioned well, with its long sweep, its well-kept lawn and close-trimmed hedges, and its ancient appearance,” opining that “everything about the house seems to have been constructed with a view to durability, and at the time of its erection it was considered a marvel of architecture.” North of the house were apple orchards and outbuildings, including a barn, shed, carriage house, and chicken house.

As farming declined and the wider vicinity became densely populated, land was sold off and developed. The well sweep and the massive moss-covered elm trees that stood in front of the house were destroyed in

the Hurricane of 1938. By 1960, the land associated with the house had been reduced to the existing one and a half acres. The barns and sheds, which had been in existence until the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were gone and a two-car garage was built. Today Walker House remains on an oversized parcel of land in densely-populated East Providence.

### Walker Family

In 1643, **Widow Walker** (her given name is unknown) and her son, **Philip Walker**, settled in Rehoboth. Widow Walker was the first individual on the list of proprietors when the land was divided, with an estate valued at £50. Her name disappears from the record in 1646.

The details of Philip Walker's early life are sparse. He was born in 1628 in Norwich, Norfolk, England and appears in the records at the age of fifteen when the settlement in Rehoboth was founded in 1643. Philip Walker appears in Rehoboth's records on a deed dated September 9, 1652 (or 1653) bearing his signature, and on three subsequent occasions: on May 17, 1655 he was one of the Grand Inquest on a jury; on June 6, 1655 he was propounded for freedom; and on June 1, 1658 he took the oath of fidelity.



In 1654, Philip married Jane Metcalf, (born 1632, St. Edmondsbury, Suffolk, England), the daughter of Michael Metcalf (later of Dedham). Together they had ten children, six of whom survived into adulthood. Two of Walker's children died accidental deaths during childhood and were the subject of inquests: Elizabeth (1661-1664) accidentally drowned in the river "on her way to school" and Michael (1667-1677) fell through the floor of the saw mill "upon the water wheel or just by it, when it was going, and was carried away with the stream under the ice."

Walker worked as a farmer, weaver, sawmill proprietor, deacon of the church, surveyor in 1657, a constable in 1658, and a selectman and Deputy to Plymouth in 1669. He was also a writer and a poet, with two poems and a prose article written in 1676. By 1671 Walker had amassed a sizeable estate, estimated to be worth £387. His half-ownership in a sawmill contributed to his wealth – particularly in the busy rebuilding years following King Philip's War. Of seventy-eight estates in Rehoboth, only two exceeded this amount.

Philip Walker died on August 20, 1679 and was buried in Old Hunt's Cemetery in a grave marked "P.W 1679." His estate, appraised in October 1679, was valued at £685 – a large amount considering the average was nearer £150 at the time. Only one other estate, out of eighty-three in Rehoboth, was valued



higher. Walker's estate held considerable land, with eighteen parcels of land covering 177 acres. In 1684, Philip's widow, Jane, married John Polley and moved to Roxbury, living there until her death in 1701.

When Philip Walker died in 1679, he was in the process of rebuilding the house. Plymouth Colony "granted his widow, Jane Metcalf, and eldest son, Samuel Walker, permission to finish the house using funds from his estate." This record led historians to conclude that Walker House dated from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

**Samuel Walker** (1655 – 1712) continued to operate the saw mill and maintained the family's position as one of the leading families in Rehoboth as he acquired real estate worth £1,708 by the time of his death.



Samuel Walker's son, **Timothy Walker** (1687 – 1745) is believed to be responsible for constructing the extant Walker House, given the dating by dendrochronology. Timothy Walker received a "substantial inheritance," which included the "100-acre homestead land with the house and the barns." At his death, Timothy Walker had accumulated real estate worth £2,243 and a personal estate of £500.

Timothy Walker's son, also **Timothy Walker** (1718-1796), was a prominent citizen, representing Rehoboth in the General Court of Massachusetts in the 1750's and acted as a colonel during the American Revolution. This Timothy Walker is believed to have been the owner when the house was enlarged to the south by a two-room addition.

Walker House remained in the family, passing from father to eldest son, until 1812 when it became the joint property of five daughters, two of whom had married a pair of brothers from the Dexter family and remained at the Walker farm. The house passed down through these daughters and remained occupied by the Walker descendants until the house was donated to Preserve Rhode Island in 1984.

### **Architectural History**

Walker House was originally thought to have been constructed in 1679 on the foundation of the house burned during King Philip's War, largely on the strength of the record from Plymouth Colony that granted Philip's widow and eldest son permission to finish the house using funds from his estate. But in 2003, dendrochronology determined that the main portion of the current house was most likely constructed in 1724. The date of the building's foundation is unknown. No account explains the forty-five year gap between 1679, when a building on site was apparently in construction, and 1724, when the extant house was built.

Even before the dendrochronology results, despite the historical documentation indicating the house was 17<sup>th</sup> century, there were many inconsistencies in the architectural evidence that raised questions about the construction date. The basic architectural evolution of the house is relatively straightforward: the house began in the 1720's as an early example of a square-house plan with the construction of the northern three bays centred around an asymmetrically located central chimney, potentially constructed on an earlier foundation. The southern two bays were added in approximately 1780. Some alterations occurred throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including: a small appendage on the south end of the structure; a large screened porch that replaced this southern appendage at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and a kitchen ell added to the north elevation in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No major alterations subsequently occurred until repair and restoration projects undertaken in 1990 and 2008.



## **Preservation**

Walker House was listed in to the National Register of Historic Places in 1972 for its noteworthy architectural features, period building techniques, and associated with one of East Providence's oldest families. The house was inhabited by descendants of Philip Walker until Faith Shedd Potter deeded the property to Preserve Rhode Island in 1984. Preserve Rhode Island decided to use the property both for housing for its Property Manager and as a "study house" for in-depth architectural history study.

1990 Restoration: Under a guiding philosophy of restoring the house to its 19<sup>th</sup> century appearance as documented in early photographs, the exterior restoration was overseen by Clifford Renshaw Architects. Later period shingles were removed and clapboards restored to the front and rear elevations, windows were replicated (9-over-9 to 9-over-6), and the later front porch was removed. The exterior clapboard was painted, sills repaired, and the first-floor system augmented with dimensional lumber and metal joist hangers. The side porch was re-enclosed and the chimneys repointed.

2008 Structural and Interior Rehabilitation: This project restored habitability through introduction of new plumbing and HVAC systems, updated kitchen and bathroom, and updated finishes. Kitchen and bathroom demolitions revealed rotted sills on the north elevation that had not been repaired as part of the 1990 restoration. The demolition further revealed cracked chimney girts and second floor joists where the chimney had taken on the weight of the structure as it settled on the rotted sill.

The structure was lifted approximately 4” through the use of bottle jacks situated on custom A-frame supports that were placed through door and window openings of the north elevation, with the jacks lifting directly against the beam/girt. This allowed for installation of a new sill and replacement wall studs to re-support the structure and take the load off the chimney. The cracked chimney girts were reinforced by sistering on each side with C-channel steel. As the structure had settled and was hung up on the chimney, the frame had twisted due to ineffective diagonal bracing in the original framing plan. To provide shear resistance from further twisting of the frame, 5/8 plywood was applied to the exposed first floor interior walls of the north elevation. On the second floor, 3” wide by ½” thick steel straps were cut diagonally into the exterior sheathing and secured at each end to the structural beams to provide further shear resistance of the second floor framing. The straps were then clapboarded over. Several sections of interior walls were left exposed to aide students in understanding construction and architectural details that are usually covered by plaster.

New Systems in a Historic Structure: In order to be used for a modern residence, a forced air heat and AC system was installed. The high-velocity, small-duct UNICO system was chosen for its ease of installation via small, flexible ducts and the need for only one return air duct per zone – as opposed to one return air duct per room in a traditional forced-air system. This system both minimizes the size of holes needing to be cut in floors and ceilings for the supply and return vents, and cuts the amount of rigid duct-work necessary in the basement and attic spaces in half. The modular supply system was easily introduced to the attic and basement spaces without the need for modifications to make them fit.

### **Areas for Future Study**

Many questions remain unresolved and require further research in order to gain a better understand of the history, evolution, and significance of the property. Some suggested areas for future study include:

- The landscape evolution of the Walker property, including changing uses over time, outbuildings, and important landscape features (i.e. the well-sweep).
- Further research on the 17<sup>th</sup> century panelling installed in the upstairs room.
- The relation of changes in the structure to the inhabitants who initiated those changes.
- Graphically documenting the evolution of the floor plan, drafting or CAD.
- More research/analysis on decorative interior treatments.
- Significance of the house as a square-house plan, documenting its relationship to other square-house plans, and how this relates to its structure, floor plan, and features.
- History of the Walker Family, including the family members responsible for the extant house and its building evolution.
- Role of the Walker family in the early agricultural and industrial activity of the town.



## Bibliography

This orientation was compiled using “A Synthesis of Preserve Rhode Island’s Records to inform a curriculum of study for the Walker House, October 2014” by Dylan Peacock. This document is on file at Preserve Rhode Island and includes citations for the bibliography below.

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Susanna Prull  
Program Manager  
957 North Main Street, Providence, RI 02904  
[sprull@preserveri.org](mailto:sprull@preserveri.org)  
(401) 272-5101 ext. 204