

THE UNION VILLAGE HISTORIC DISTRICT

Proposal submitted to the Town Council
of the Town of North Smithfield by
the Historic District Commission

January 1975

The Historic District Commission, Town of North Smithfield

Norman Langelier, Chairman
Malcolm Andrews
Gilbert Moore
Woodworth Carpenter

Shirley Reichenberg
Irene Nebiker
Albert Couture

English settlement in the Union Village area began with the location in the 1660's of Richard Arnold on lands which today comprise the southern edge of the village. His house is incorporated into the Peleg Arnold Tavern. He was joined sometime later by his brother-in-law Samuel Comstock, who located to the west toward Premisy Hill. Their farms were beyond the bounds of the Indian purchases made by Edward Inman and John and Nathaniel Mowry, in an area over which the Proprietors of Providence and the Proprietors of Mendon had conflicting interests. It wasn't until 1707 that the Arnolds and Comstocks had ownership rights to their lands confirmed by the Proprietors of Providence.

As the eighteenth century progressed, Arnold and Comstock sons came of age, and their farms became part of the village landscape. Then Samuel Aldrich of Mendon settled in the area, and these three village families became instrumental in establishing the Friends Meeting House and Burying Ground in 1719 on land given by Richard Arnold's son John. Dwellings from this period of development include the Daniel Arnold house and the northern ell of the Walter Allen house.

One other eighteenth century house remains in the village. It is the Lapham house which represents a typical style of the 1790's. Another eighteenth century house, the Brayton house, was recently razed when vandalism and deterioration made it a safety hazard. Built before the Revolution by James Brayton, a former slave, this property assumes particular significance because of its tradition of continuous Black ownership.

With increased settlement came the need for access to lands beyond those fronting on the Great Road. Before 1700 the beginning of Woonsocket Hill Road was in use, allowing Richard Arnold access to his meadows at the edge of the cedar swamp near Woonsocket Hill. A route westward to the Comstock lands was extended to become the highway to Chepachet, the present Pound Hill Road. A roadway, which became in part the present South Main Street, led from Richard Arnold's dwelling to Woonsocket Falls, near which the Arnold family operated first a sawmill and later a grist mill. Thus, the connection of Union Village with transportation and communication routes was established very early.

With increased transportation came the need for public houses, taverns, and inns. Licenses for such establishments were issued to Joseph Arnold in 1733 and, after his death in 1745, to his widow Patience, who kept tavern until 1773. Joseph's brother Thomas received a license in 1739, keeping tavern in his father's house. His son Peleg carried on the tradition, and it is his name that is associated with the Arnold Tavern today.

During the early nineteenth century, Union Village underwent rapid development. More houses were built, earlier dwellings were altered or added to, and the scattered farms of the earlier village landscape were joined along the Great Road by the substantial houses which characterize the village today. Services to travelers continued to be a function of the village: the inns and taverns, popular stage-coach stops on the main route from Providence to Worcester, boasted comfortable lodgings and fine appointments. But the village function was not confined to stop-over service; its institutions broadened to include the first bank and the first post office in the area. Later in the century a succession of schools established the village as an educational center, and plans for railroad service to the village made prospects for the future bright.

The railroad never materialized, however, and gradually Union Village lost its place as a commercial center and stop-over point. The newer, rapidly growing settlement at Woonsocket Falls took over most of the commercial functions, and a secondary trade center developed at Slatersville. Union Village retired to become a residential area for families with some means or professional standing, who could afford to maintain the gracious homes and grounds which today identify the village.

The present residential function of the village is no less important in this day than the earlier, more diverse functions were in their day. The history and architectural design of the houses has significance in the present, and the character of Union Village as an historic district within the Town of North Smithfield is worthy of preservation.

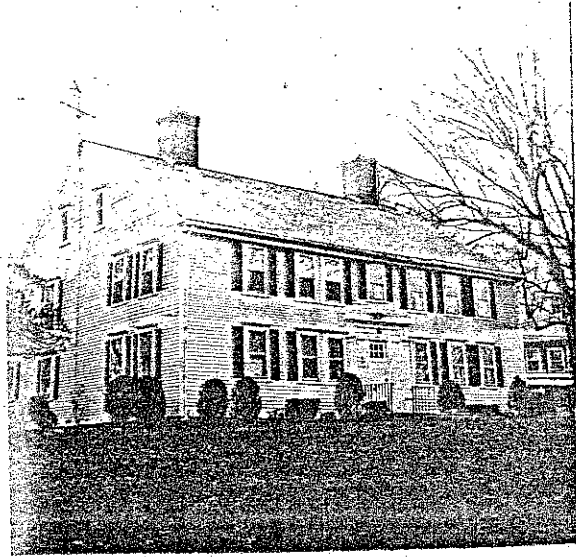
Within Union Village are houses of widely differing age, diverse in style. Each house is distinct, yet they all create a sense of unity through their situation along Great Road and their setting among fine old trees and well landscaped surroundings.

Perhaps the most noteworthy architectural feature in the village is the pedimented porch marking the front entrance of several dwellings. These porches represent an individual local treatment of the entrance doorway, and are unusual because they are different in style from any other type that has been as well and thoroughly developed in this part of New England.

In Union Village there may be found at least four examples of this pedimented porch. All are very much alike, differing only in the handling of their detail. Each is a porch of ample depth with rather wide spacing of the corner columns. Each has a plaster ceiling of spacious arch segment section. In each case the house wall inside the porch pilasters is rusticated, in contrast to the remainder of the front wall surface which is clapboarded after the usual and conventional fashion. In more than one case these porches appear on dwellings that are themselves obviously of dates much older than the classical lines of these porches would seem to suggest.

Those houses with historic significance because of age, function, or architectural features are described in the following section.

The sources of data on the Union Village houses are several. Basic information is found Rhode Island: A Guide to the Smallest State, a volume in the American Guide Series compiled during the 1930's. Additional data has been acquired from miscellaneous sources in print and manuscript, and from data collected for the statewide survey under the direction of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. Information has also been obtained from a paper on Union Village produced by the North Smithfield Heritage Association in 1971 for the League of Rhode Island Historical Societies meeting in Slatersville.

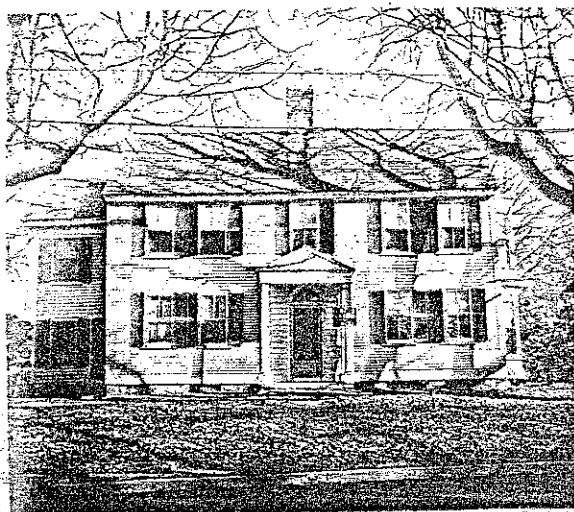


PELEG ARNOLD TAVERN

c. 1690.—The original building was about twenty feet square, the home of Richard Arnold, and probably the first house erected in Union Village in the late 1600's. About a century later it was enlarged by Peleg Arnold, then its owner, and was used as an inn. The tavern was designated in 1775 as the place where a stand of 100 arms was to be deposited for use by the townsmen in case of British invasion. Following the Revolution, the Arnold house gained renown as a thriving tavern, famous for its elegant furnishings, colonial pottery, and valuable silver service.

Peleg Arnold was a lieutenant-colonel in the Revolutionary army; he served as a delegate to the Continental Congress, 1786-88; he was Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, 1795-1809, 1810-12; first president of the Smithfield Union Bank, and chairman of the committee that founded Smithfield Academy.

In the 1930's the building was remodeled for tenement purposes. Presently it is in good condition, attractively maintained, and contains four apartments. It is a large $2\frac{1}{2}$ story house, rectangular in plan, with two brick chimneys rising from the peak of its gable roof. The two tiers of windows in the house are unevenly and asymmetrically spaced.



CAPTAIN DANIEL ARNOLD HOUSE - 71 Great Road

c. 1714. This $2\frac{1}{2}$ story frame structure is one of the oldest surviving dwellings remaining from the first dozen or so in the Union Village area. Although some of the original fabric remains (the original stone steps have been preserved), numerous additions and changes were made at various times, including a 2-story addition on one end, a porch at the back, and a 2-story bay window on the east side in more recent times, and the pedimented porch marking the front entrance, dating from an earlier time, probably about 1800.

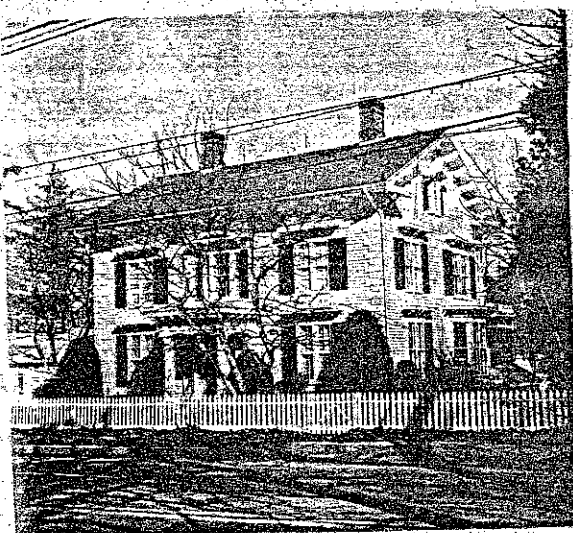


JOEL ALDRICH HOUSE - 76 Great Road

c. 1808. This $2\frac{1}{2}$ story frame dwelling was used at one time as a dormitory for the Linden Grove Seminary for girls, which subsequently moved to Pawtucket. Noteworthy are the graceful hall staircase, the pedimented porch marking the main entrance, and the large stand of rhododendron bordering the grounds.

STEPHEN BROWNELL HOUSE -- 86 Great Road

c. 1806. This 2-story frame house was built by Walter Allen, a general contractor who built several houses in Union Village. It was built in two sections. The rear section with the standard gable roof is probably the older section. Later a front portion was added. It differs from other houses in the village because of its hip roof and hip-ped-roof portico over the front entrance. There is on the grounds a well preserved barn with massive timber framing which once served as a school.

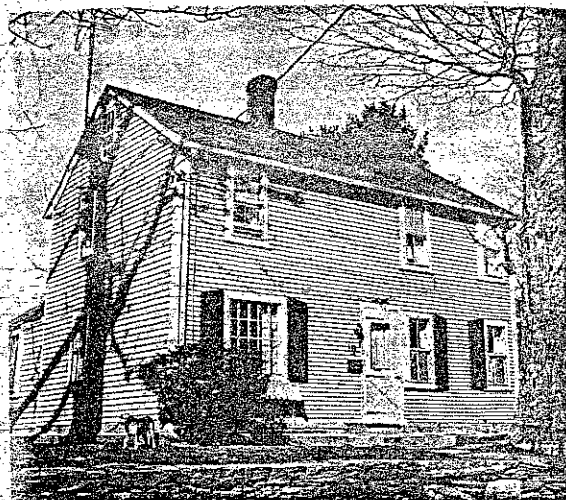


JACOB (OSCAR) MORSE HOUSE -- 101 Great Road

c. 1851. This 2½ story frame house, although basically similar in plan and size to the earlier dwellings of the village, exemplifies a change in approach to architecture in the course of less than half a century. The basic simplicity of the rectangular house is elaborated by a wide, bracketed cornice, bracketed hoods over the windows, quoins at the corners of the house, bay windows, and an elaborate portico, or entryway, that contrasts strongly with the simpler styles of the earlier nineteenth century. A notable feature of the interior is decorative plaster molding in the living room. In December, 1889, when Oscar Morse advertised the property for sale, it was described as consisting of 18 acres of land suitable for farming, with a house containing 11 rooms, heated by a furnace, and in the best of repair. There were also a barn, carriage house, and outbuildings on the property.

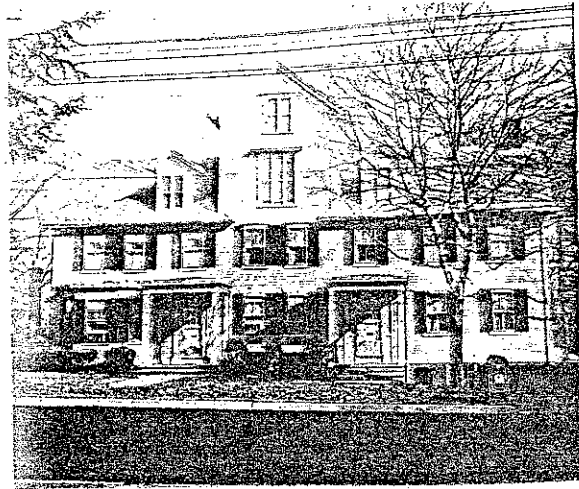
SETH ALLEN TAVERN - 120 Great Road

c. 1804. Now remodeled for dwelling purposes, this building of brick red and cream is a 2-story frame structure, rectangular in plan, with a 1-story addition in the rear. Two end chimneys rise from the peak of the gable roof. The house stands on a high basement story, and a terrace enclosed by a rail extends across the front. The main central doorway is protected by a square portico, topped with a simple balustrade. The portico and terrace are obviously later additions. The severity of the facade is relieved by the intimate scale of the many-paneled sash windows. Fronting both on Pound Hill Road and Great Road, it gives the effect of two houses at right angles. It was one of the noted Union Village stagecoach stopping places.



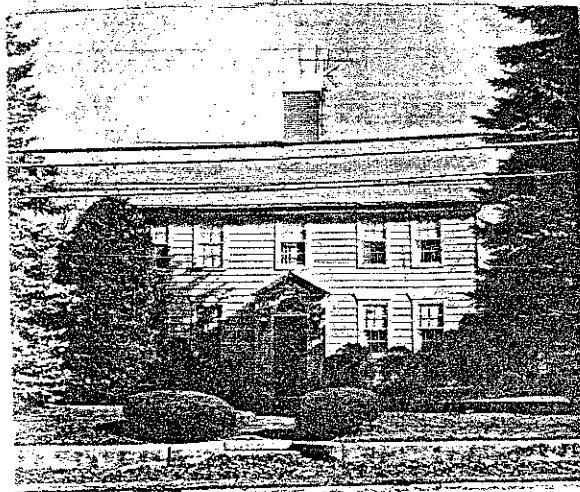
THE UNION BANK - 21 Pound Hill Road

Once used as a dwelling and store by Walter Allen, this structure was changed into a bank in 1805. The banking institution, the first one of its kind in this part of the state, remained in these quarters for over fifty years. The building, now remodeled for a dwelling house and considerably changed in structure, inside and out, gives little evidence of its former use, although the small arched window on the gable end indicates a specialized function. It originally stood on the corner of Great Road, from which it was moved to its present location. The name of Union Village was derived from this bank.



GEORGE ALDRICH INN - 127-129 Great Road

c. 1804. Soon after its construction, this 2½ story frame structure was used as an inn. During the stagecoach era, and particularly in the early nineteenth century, there was a lively competition between this inn and the Seth Allen Tavern across the street. It is said that the competing proprietors stood in the middle of Great Road and vied for trade. In the mid-nineteenth century the inn reverted to a dwelling. It served as the house of James Bushee, headmaster of the Smithfield Academy; as a school for young ladies; and as the home of James Bushee's daughter Alice, professor of Spanish at Wellesley College. The most distinguishing feature of the building, now converted to apartments, is the large cupola in the center.



DENNY WILBUR HOUSE - 137 Great Road

c. 1812. Once used as a millinery shop, this house was built by John Osborne. Hand-hewn beams in the attic are joined by wooden pegs.



WALTER ALLEN HOUSE - 138 Great Road

c. 1802. The northern ell of the Allen house is part of an earlier building erected in the early eighteenth century by Hazadiah Comstock. The main house was built in 1802. This well preserved late Georgian dwelling containing ten fireplaces. It was reportedly the setting for the first Roman Catholic services held in the vicinity.



CAPTAIN LANDERS HOUSE - 171 Great Road

c. 1825. Built by Miss Southwick, headmistress of a young ladies' seminary, the house was first occupied by Captain Landers. Landers participated in the Dorr Rebellion of 1842, and was said to have kept a cannon on his front lawn as a memorial to the Dorr struggle for equal suffrage.



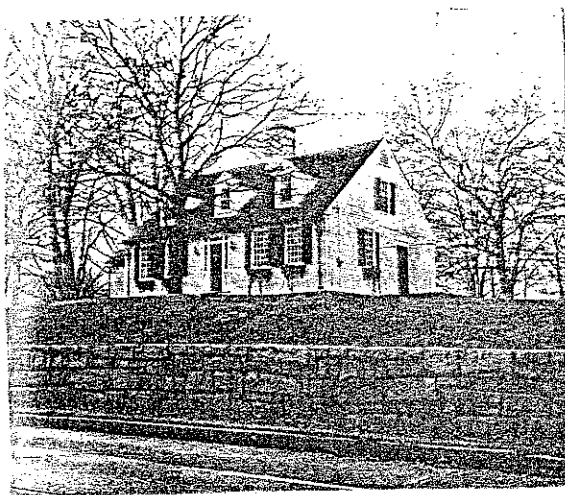
MARBLE HOUSE - 178 Great Road

c. 1805. Built by Christopher Almy, this house served as the area post office until 1844. It is said to have been a milliner's shop and also a men's hat factory. The plank-walled house still contains the original double pantries, brick fireplaces, and warming ovens. Mrs. Marble taught reading, chemistry, and mineralogy in Rhode Island Normal School for many years. Additions to the house were made while it was the property of Mrs. Marble. The new kitchen was built around a well, which was enclosed with a window through which water could be drawn.



ANSON ARNOLD HOUSE - 188 Great Road

c. 1806. This house was built by Anson Arnold, who kept a jig for his work of finishing whetstones.



LAPHAM HOUSE - 212 Great Road

c. 1790. Built on a bank high above Great Road, the Lapham house is an excellent example of the story-and-a-half, center chimney, colonial farmhouse. The distinctive central fireplace with adjoining warming oven is still in use.

Site of the BRAYTON HOUSE

The Brayton house, having been badly damaged by fire and vandals, has now been destroyed. A typical one-and-a-half story structure, the west wing was built prior to 1770. The original owner was James Brayton, a Negro soldier in the Revolution who had once been a slave. He built the house himself, paying for the materials by hiring out as a day laborer. Brayton is buried in the Friends Burying Ground adjacent to the meetinghouse on Great Road. Ownership of the house remained with his descendants until just a few years ago. This tradition of almost two centuries of continuous Black ownership makes the site of the Brayton house of great significance in Rhode Island history.