

Who is Welcome Arnold, and why all this fuss about his house?

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Welcome Arnold was a prominent Providence gentleman at the time of the American Revolution. In 1772, at age 27, he plotted¹ the capture of HMS Gaspee in Narragansett Bay. As many Rhode Islanders know, this was the first act of civil disobedience against the British crown, three years before the Boston Tea Party. The following year, Arnold married Patience Greene in the Warwick house of her uncle, the Governor of Rhode Island.² Welcome, noted as one of five gentlemen in Providence who owned a carriage with horses, was a suitable choice for Patience. After the Revolution he became a leading Providence merchant, and in 1788 he and Nicholas Brown constructed a rum distillery in Fox Point. We can assume that he, like Nicholas, dabbled in the slave trade.

In 1773, soon after his marriage, Welcome purchased the Sabin Tavern, on the corner of what today is South Main - then Towne Street - and Planet streets. The previous owner was Marcy Dexter, the presumed widow of Edward Dexter, lost at sea. For a time, Marcy ran a tavern here, managed by James Sabin, a licensed innkeeper. But in May of 1773 she petitioned to sell her house to cover debts, and it was purchased for 93 pounds by Arnold and two of his brothers. The population of Providence then was around 7,000, and this area around Market Square was the fashionable part of town. The Arnolds' neighbors included the four Brown brothers, Joseph, John, Nicholas, and Moses – then being raised by their uncle, Obediah Brown, following their father's death.

In 1785 Welcome Arnold purchased land north of his house from William Morris, a plot with dimensions similar to those of 21 Planet Street, and built the house that stands here today. We can only conjecture its original purpose. Twelve years and several children after their marriage, the Arnolds may have built it to house some of their growing family, or perhaps for their servants. Nonetheless, as one of only two 18th century houses on South Main – the other being the c. 1787 Capt. Joseph Tillinghast House at 403 South Main – it is a rare reminder of this once-fashionable, 18th century, part of town.

The Sabin Inn was eventually torn down and the commercial Gaspee Building (c. 1891-1961) was built on its site. Today it is a parking lot. When the Inn was torn down, the section that housed the parlor where the conspirators plotted the capture of the Gaspee was moved up the hill and joined to an existing house, 209 William Street. For a time, this building served as headquarters of the Daughters of the American Republic.

A growing number of Arnold properties remained in the family until 1818, when the holdings were divided into four equal parts and distributed to Arnold heirs. Tristram

¹ We can safely assume Arnold was involved, though direct evidence is lacking.

² Patience was also courted by Nathanael Greene, later a renowned general in the Revolution. Had she married Nathanael, she would have suffered loneliness similar to that of Eliza Hamilton, wife of Alexander, during his many absences fighting in the Revolution.

Burgess and his wife, Mary (Arnold) at this time became the owners of the Arnold homestead and lot on Planet Street.

In 1895 William Bailey, executor for a later Tristram Burgess, sold the Planet Street property at auction to Henry Childs of Providence; and the house changed ownership several times after that. For a time in the early 20th century, this street and others nearby housed a thriving Cape Verdean Community. In her 2007 film, "Some Kind of Funny Puerto Rican," Claire Andrade-Watkins documents the rich culture of the many families living here. She remembers walking with her father to the docks when the schooner *Ernestina* arrived filled with emigrants and supplies. But in the late sixties, the building of Route 195 displaced many families; and simultaneously, as remaining homes became attractive to those wanting to live near Brown University, gentrification took a further toll on the community. When operations of the Port of Providence were moved from what is now India Point Park to Field's Point, across the river, the docks were no longer an extension of the community. Andrade-Watkins recalls that ten families, including her own, were displaced from the short block of South Main between Planet, Power and Benefit streets.

In 1947, Gino Conti bought 21 Planet from fellow countryman Angelo Scorpio and his wife, Elsa. Conti had come from Florence, Italy, as a child and graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1923. He became a well-known painter and sculptor, and his works can be found in museums here and in Europe. In the late 1930s, the Works Progress Administration commissioned Conti to paint six murals at The University of Rhode Island's Edwards Hall. These were forgotten as the building evolved and the murals covered up, but they were rediscovered and restored in 2010.

Conti taught children's art classes for many years from his home. He was much loved and remembered for his eccentricities. His pet turtles, for instance, walked about at night with candles attached to their backs. He also had a magnificent jade plant in a center room which blossomed once every ten years, and he cut away the ceiling to allow it to grow freely. More practically, to assure he had the light he needed in his studio, Conti bought a vacant lot across the street, where the Maria Brown house once stood. He also rented apartments to tenants, one to now-notable Rhode Island abstract painter Irene Lawrence.

The Welcome Arnold house continues to survive its most recent threat, demolition by a landlord who wished to build apartments on the site. Strong opposition by the Providence Preservation Society and others committed to preserving the little left of the early history of College Hill prevented its total destruction. But while the exterior remains, the interior has been gutted and replaced by five units. Until solutions can be found for more fully preserving these vulnerable fragments of our built past, we can expect more losses as the unbridled economics of housing continue unchecked.