

## The Search for Joseph Curwen's Town Home

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My House opp. Mr. Epenetus Olney's Tavern off ye Towne Street, Ist on ye N. side of Olney's Court. Distance from Boston Stone abt. XLIV Miles. (*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* [CF 2.270])

The *approximate* location of Joseph Curwen's house has never been a mystery. The "Towne Street" was the colonial-era name for Providence's Main Street, and "Olney's Court" has long been thought to be a short extension of Olney Street on the *west* side of Main Street. Since the house is described as being on the *north* side of Olney's Court, it would be logical to assume that it was at the *northwest* corner of North Main Street and Olney Street.

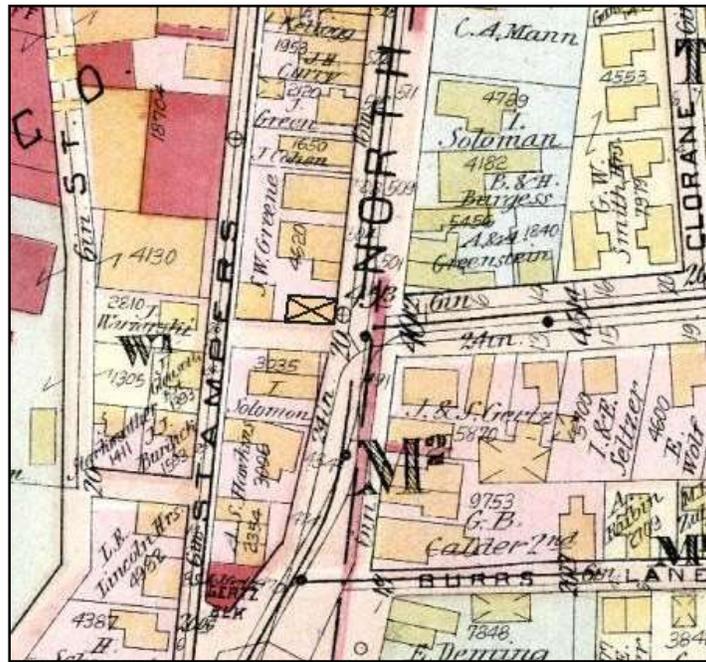
But did Lovecraft have an actual house in mind? And, if he did, what became of it? More importantly, why did he choose it? And does any evidence remain of it? More than four years ago, I set out to answer these questions.

Examining old plat maps of Providence, one can see that a house once stood at this location with an address of 6 Olney Street. Though the house number does not appear on the following scan from a 1918 plat map (see p. 100), it is designated by an "X" just to the left of the center:

The intersection of North Main Street (extending north and south through the middle of the image below) and Olney Street (entering from the east/right of the image) is at the center. The entire row of houses on the west side of North Main Street is no longer extant, nor are there any along Stampers Street. For that matter, Stampers Street itself no longer exists.

Originally, Olney Street began at Stampers Street and contin-

ued east. Likewise, the numbering of Olney Street began at Stampers Street, with the houses on the north side being numbered 2, 6, 10, 14, 16, and 20—these last three numbers can be seen on the image below.



So, what became of the house at 6 Olney Street? By May 1931 the house was owned by the city of Providence and in 1932 it was listed as being vacant. Around the same time, Lovecraft mentions the area in a letter:

Right now the ancient colonial houses on Stamper's or Constitution Hill at the foot of Olney St.—a niggerville—are about to succumb in the course of a widening of North Main's notorious bottleneck. (Lovecraft to Wilfred Blanch Talman, 24 March 1931)

Looking over later maps of the area, one finds that this portion of North Main Street was widened in 1931 and re-named Captain J. Carleton Davis Memorial Boulevard. If one overlays a modern map of the area with the 1918 plat map, one finds that what was formerly North Main Street is now the northbound (eastern) lanes of the new boulevard. Again, everything along the west side of the

street has been demolished all the way to Stampers Street. In fact, part of what was once Stampers Street now serves as the southbound (western) lanes of the new boulevard. The house at 6 Olney Street would have been in the very center of today's intersection, right in the middle of North Main Street's southbound left-turn lane just before it meets the northbound lanes.

But why did Lovecraft choose this address? A search through Providence city directories around the time Lovecraft wrote *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* turns up a "Delilah Townsend" living at that location. A search through Lovecraft's letters finds a black housekeeper named Delilah who worked for Lovecraft and his aunts from at least April 1923 to May 1930. Lovecraft nowhere explicitly gives her last name, but a letter to his aunt Lillian makes everything clear: "On this occasion I met for the first time the Michigan amateur Clyde G. Townsend (no relative of Delilah's, but a fine Nordic specimen with yellow hair and blue eyes!)" (Lovecraft to Lillian D. Clark, 1 August 1924; ms., John Hay Library).

Delilah *Robinson* Townsend (December 1872–21 November 1944) lived at 6 Olney Street from 1918 to 1928. City directories variously give her name as "Delia," "Deliah," "Delila," "Dilah," "Dillia," or even "Lila." Delilah was born in Virginia but on 11 February 1895 married William J[oseph] Townsend (May 1872–?) in Lincoln, Rhode Island. William was from New Bedford, Massachusetts, but was living in Central Falls, Rhode Island, at the time. They had a son, William Joseph Townsend, who was born in March 1896 in Rhode Island.

In the 1900 census, the family was living at 46 Thayer Street in Providence (no longer extant). By the 1905 Rhode Island census, Delilah was listed as divorced and the head of the family. However, a dozen city directories after this point list her as widowed. (It is possible that Delilah found it easier to claim she was widowed rather than to admit to her divorce.) Delilah's son died of "angina pectoris" on 21 July 1915 at the age of just nineteen. Delilah, her son, her mother Amanda Robinson (1849?–5 March 1941), and her sister Mary Robinson (?–14 January 1934) are all buried in the cemetery of Providence's Grace Episcopal Church.

At this point, I had concluded that the house was real, found why it was no longer extant, and determined why Lovecraft had chosen it. But was there a chance I could find an actual *photograph*

of it? Given that many historic areas in New England have been thoroughly documented before their demolition, I decided I'd try to locate such documentation for the Olney Street house. But given that I lived in Minnesota at the time, most of this research could only be done while on my (frequent) vacations to Rhode Island.

In July 2011 I began with the Providence Department of Public Works which was able to show me some old construction maps, but could not offer any documentation on what existed prior to that construction. I got in touch with Paul Campbell, Providence City Archivist, who showed me documentation of several other construction projects, but we found nothing for the North Main and Olney Streets area.

At the Rhode Island State Archives, Reference Archivist Ken Carlson showed me some maps and photos, but we turned up nothing. I contacted Paul Wackrow, Director of Preservation Services, at the Providence Preservation Society, who sent me an image from a 1919 Sanborn fire insurance map. This map confirmed the house's address, but that was all. I also met with Rick Greenwood, Deputy Director at the Rhode Island Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission, which is housed in Rhode Island's Old State House (1762). He took the time to examine several maps and documents with me. Unfortunately, we still discovered nothing new.

Ken Carlson had suggested that I contact Michael A. Hebert, Supervising Historic Preservation Specialist/Archaeologist for the Rhode Island Department of Transportation. After some brief research, Mr. Hebert concluded that the widening of North Main Street probably was a city project, rather than a state project. Nevertheless, he took me back to the Rhode Island State Archives, where we examined some maps and photographs from the Howard W. Preston collection, but to no avail.

Mr. Hebert then suggested to me a collection of photographs that had been compiled by the National Society of Colonial Dames in Rhode Island. Their collection is housed in the basement of the Governor Stephen Hopkins House (1707, 1742), which is open to the public as a museum. Among many other distinctions, Hopkins was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Hopkins and his home even figure in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*: "Late in December 1770 a group of eminent towns-

men met at the home of Stephen Hopkins and debated tentative measures.” (CF 2.249)

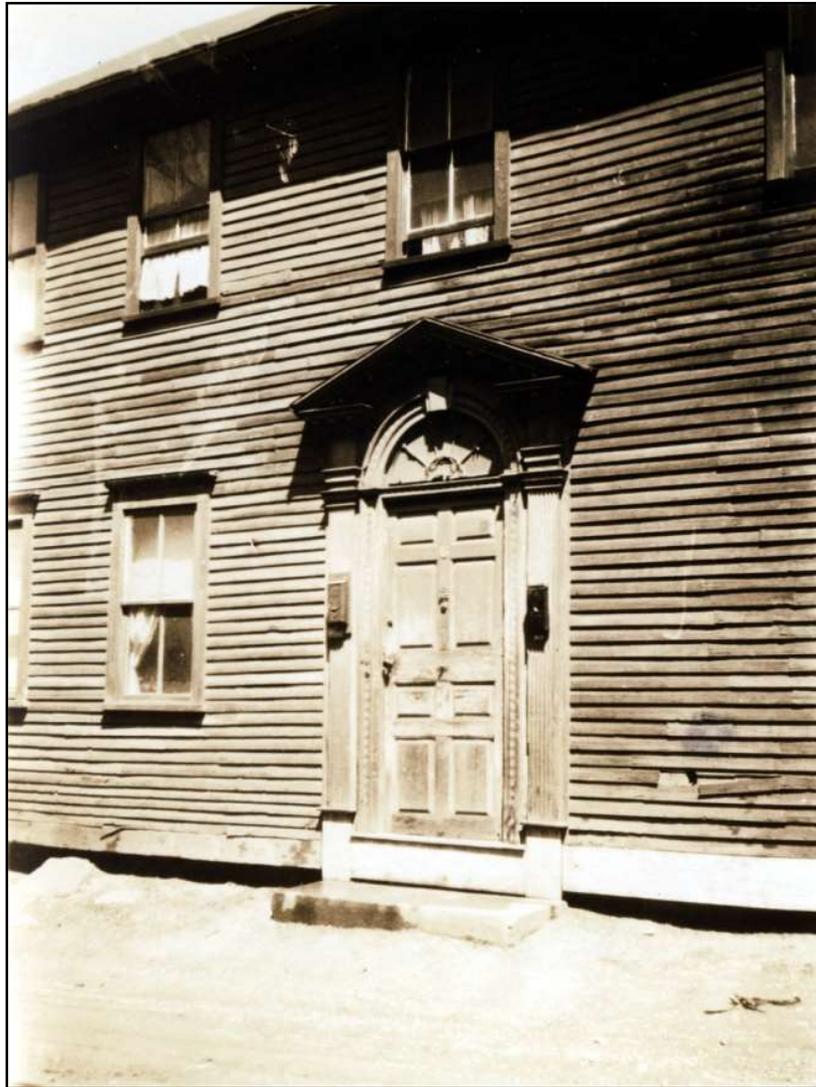
Mr. Hebert put me in touch with Kim Clark, Chair of the Stephen Hopkins House Board, who invited me to the house to see the photo collection in October 2012. The significance of my circumstance was not lost on me—I was going to the home of a signatory of the Declaration of Independence who was mentioned in *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*, in the hopes of locating information regarding the home of the story’s villain. In the basement of the house Ms. Clark showed me the collection: dozens of binders full of photographs of locations all over Rhode Island taken in the 1920s and 1930s by members of the Colonial Dames. The binders were grouped by township, and sometimes into individual neighborhoods, so I began searching through the one for this particular portion of Providence.

And there it was—after four separate trips to Providence over a 15-month period—just as Lovecraft had described it:

The place, now crumbling with age, had never been a mansion; but was a modest two-and-a-half story wooden town house of the familiar Providence colonial type, with plain peaked roof, large central chimney, and artistically carved doorway with rayed fanlight, triangular pediment, and trim Doric pilasters. (*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* [CF 2.271])



There was also a close-up photograph of the front door labeled as “10 Olney St.,” but it was clear by comparing the doorways in the two photos that it was actually of 6 Olney Street. In addition, several photos of 10 Olney Street—a very large gambrel-roofer at the northeast corner of North Main and Olney Streets—made it clear it wasn’t the same house. For that matter, the “6” on the door was a dead giveaway!



Questions still remain. Was the house actually razed or could it have been moved? It is possible that it could still exist somewhere, since many New England houses were moved, Lovecraft's final home being an example. However, this seems unlikely given that this area was a near slum and historic preservation wasn't very widespread in the 1930s. Also, determining this would probably require extensive searching through City Hall archives. And when was the house actually built? Lovecraft uses a date of 1761, but perhaps this simply best fit the narrative of the story. That answer may also be buried in archives somewhere.

*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* is probably Lovecraft's most detailed work, with countless elements of Providence's history finely woven into its fabric. It should come as no surprise that nearly ninety years after its writing it is still yielding up fascinating secrets.

### ***Special Thanks***

Thanks to Paul Campbell, Ken Carlson, Rick Greenwood, Michael A. Hebert, and Paul Wackrow for their assistance in tracking down this information. Thanks especially to Kim Clark and the Colonial Dames of Rhode Island for permission to publish the photos of the house at 6 Olney Street. For further reading on this subject, see "The Site of Joseph Curwen's Home in H.P. Lovecraft's *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward*" (Moshassuck Monograph Series No. 15) by Kenneth W. Faig Jr. and Jason C. Eckhardt. The monograph covers some of the same ground but further discusses the Stampers Hill area around the North Main and Olney Streets intersection.

### ***Works Cited or Consulted***

*Plat Book of the City of Providence, Rhode Island from Official Records, Private Plans and Actual Surveys.* Philadelphia: G. M. Hopkins Co., 1918.

The really crucial thing, though, and what in Dr. Willett's opinion formed the definite source of Ward's undoing, was the matter found in August 1919 behind the panelling of the crumbling house in Olney Court. It was that, beyond a doubt, which opened up those black vistas whose end was deeper than the pit. (*The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* [CF 2.226])