



VIEW of Tockwotton House and harbor front, about 1881. Photograph in collection of Title Guaranty Company of Rhode Island shows steamer of Providence, Norfolk and Baltimore line.

TOCKWOTTON HOUSE

It stood where the Fox Point park is now, at first a fine mansion, then a hotel, then a reform school of grim memory

BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

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HERE the idlers and oldsters who frequent Tockwotton Park blink, doze and gabble in the sunshine that ricochets from the Bay off India Point there once stood a structure which played varied and significant roles in the social and institutional life of Providence—Tockwotton House. Built in 1810 as the mansion house of a post-Revolutionary notable, later altered into a hotel when the railroad center of Providence stood at tidewater, Tockwotton House is chiefly remembered as that grim corrective institution for the wayward young, the Providence Reform School (1850-1880) pictured on the opposite page and, from a distance, in the picture above.

Both photographs show Tockwotton House in its

Reform School period. The larger one, angled from Front Street (now George M. Cohan Boulevard) and East Street, hangs in the office of the Rhode Island Training School for Boys at Sockanosset, its successor. The other is a view of Tockwotton House from Fort Hill in East Providence.

The Providence Reform School was opened in 1850. There, for the next 30 years were housed—and occasionally clapped into dark cells on bread and water or lashed with a shoelace “cat”—all young people under 18 convicted of criminal acts or judged to be of vagrant or disorderly habit.

There little boys and girls were locked at night in cells fronting corridors where keepers eyed

them from glass peep-holes in corner rooms. The doors of the cells were covered with wire netting and there were heavier doors to slam shut on juvenile outbursts of hysteria. In Tockwotton House the children of the poor expiated the peccadilloes born of poverty. In Tockwotton House they were supposed to wash enough dirty linen and cane enough chairs and sole enough shoes to return the city a yearly profit, which sometimes ran as high as \$5000. That was all mighty fine and hunky-dory, but if the superintendent's annual report failed to show a substantial financial yield the Board of Trustees frowned and told the superintendent he would have to do better. The Mayor was always chairman of the Board, the other members were city council appointees.

The Providence Reform School was never anything but a juvenile jail.

It is pleasanter to reflect upon the early days of Tockwotton House.

John Brown, the great shipping magnifico of the 1790's and early 1800's, always believed that the best real estate in Providence lay closest to the water where his square-riggers rode. He encouraged James B. Mason, who married John Brown's youngest daughter Alice, to build near India Point.

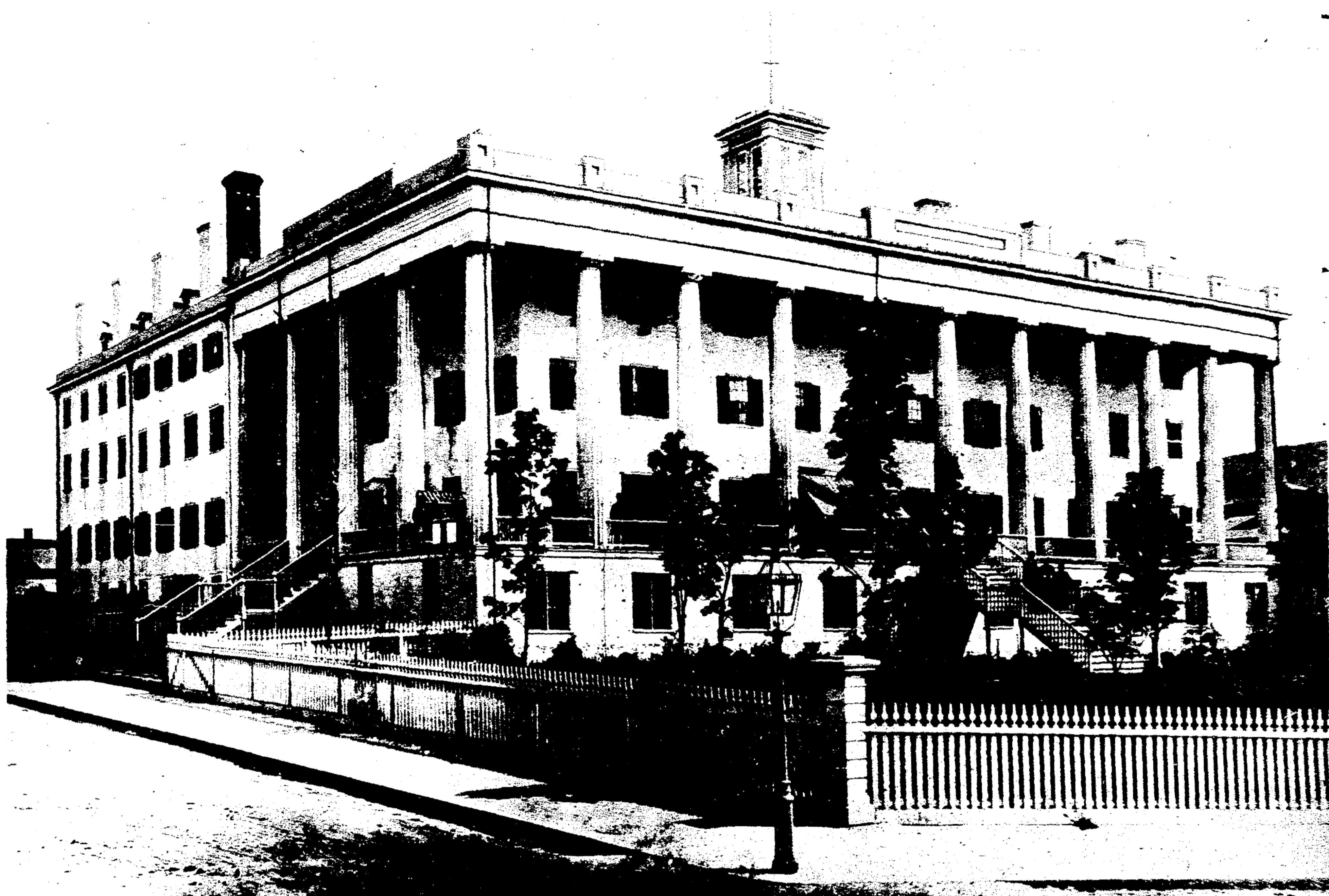
So James Mason built him a house—a brick house three stories high with a broad piazza and great wooden pillars on the west and south sides.

THE first floor had four rooms divided into double parlors connected by hinged doors, the second floor five rooms, the third floor eight. All the rooms were wainscoted and the fireplace mantels were of white Italian marble. There was a large hallway and a broad stairway with a black walnut balustrade.

The stair well went straight up to a skylight. From it you could see Fall River and away up the Seekonk, and look downriver as far as Rocky Point. Below the bluff on which the mansion grandly sat was the Bay with its press of shipping. Not far away was Fort Hill where dwelt Old Robert the Hermit, a Narragansett Injun who followed the un-



TOCKWOTTON PARK today. Save for the name, no memory remains of the great mansion house built by John Brown's son-in-law, James B. Mason, which later became grim corrective institution for wayward youths.



TOCKWOTTON HOUSE at East Street and Front Street (now George M. Cohan Boulevard), occupied present site of Tockwotton Park. As the Providence Reform School it preserved, in the 1870's, outer aspect it had as a palatial tidewater hotel.

Injunlike profession of gardener. Robert's shack was a little shy of Italian marbles but he had a nice flower garden and when he died he took exactly as much with him as the gentry on Tockwotton Hill.

Gen. Winfield Scott was a visitor at the Tockwotton Mansion House in 1812. There were other prominent guests, a couple of decades of fiddles and flounces, a time of gaiety and good living. And then, for some reason, the Tockwotton area began to deteriorate as a genteel residential site. Perhaps it was too close to the rowdy hustle and bustle of a waterfront toward which steel rails were reaching. In 1834-1835 the then owners of the property sold out to the Boston and Providence Railroad and Transportation Company and the company turned Tockwotton House into a hotel.

The hotel was never a financial success. Despite such advantages as the cool breezes that blew from the Bay, the fine boating to be had on the Seekonk and the pleasant drives available in East Providence, the various proprietors never made a go of it. In 1843 Tockwotton House was deeded to Charles Potter and in 1849 he deeded it to the city.

The last period in the history of Tockwotton House began with its transformation into a reform school, an institution petitioned into being by the Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers. They meant well.

The Providence Reform School was formally opened in October of 1850. New buildings were added, including a workshop for the boys and a brick cell block of two stories accommodating 46 girls. The dining room where Gen. Winfield Old Fuss'n Feathers Scott once sipped Madeira was turned into a schoolroom with a raised platform where female delinquents coned their book apart. Another large room became the boys' hospital.

A boy admitted to the Providence Reform School was given a number just like a real grown-up criminal. Then he was scrubbed in a tank and rinsed with a sprinkler. After that he was thrust into an institutional suit of clothes and the process of reformation began.

His day started at 5:00 a.m. with two hours of education on an empty belly. Breakfast was at 7:00

and at 8:00 he was hustled off to the workshop to cane chairs and make shoes until noon. Work resumed at 1:00 p.m. and continued until 4:00. Then came supper, followed by two hours more of schooling, and bed. The co-eds of the Reform School had precisely the same routine as the boys except that their work was different. They repented, of their misdeeds at the washtub.

In its first year of existence the Providence Reform School received 48 boys and three girls. Six inmates were discharged and three escaped. Its normal inmate population was about 100. In 1855 the superintendent reported that of those discharged only about one-fourth were "fully meeting expectations." One is tempted to wonder what these expectations were. Many Reform School graduates joined the Rhode Island regiments that fought in the Civil War. No doubt they made good soldiers, skillful foragers.

In 1868 there was a thumping big investigation of conditions at Tockwotton House. Charges made in a formal bill of complaint to the city council were that cruel and inhuman punishments were inflicted on the inmates, that the teachers used immodest and disgusting language and that offenses against chastity and good morals were rife. The Board of Aldermen investigating the charges turned in four reports, none of which was signed by the Mayor (chairman of the Board of Trustees) or by a majority of the aldermen, or—quite understandably—by the alderman who was also a trustee. Nothing much happened except some improvement in methods of discipline.

By 1880 the city was quite glad to transfer jurisdiction and management of its Reform School to the State Board of Charities and Correction, pursuant to an act of Assembly which also directed that the school be moved to Cranston at an early date. A few years later Tockwotton House was torn down, and that was the end of the great mansion John Brown's son-in-law built for its fine situation and extensive prospect. Vanished, not even a memory today, it saw the first attempt in this state to deal separately with the problem of juvenile delinquency. All things have to have beginnings, stumbling steps in the right direction.

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