

Brass 'firedog'
can be a friend
to your hearth

See ANTIQUES, Page G-3

Home

Real Estate-Classified

THE PROVIDENCE SUNDAY JOURNAL, MARCH 20, 1977—SECTION G

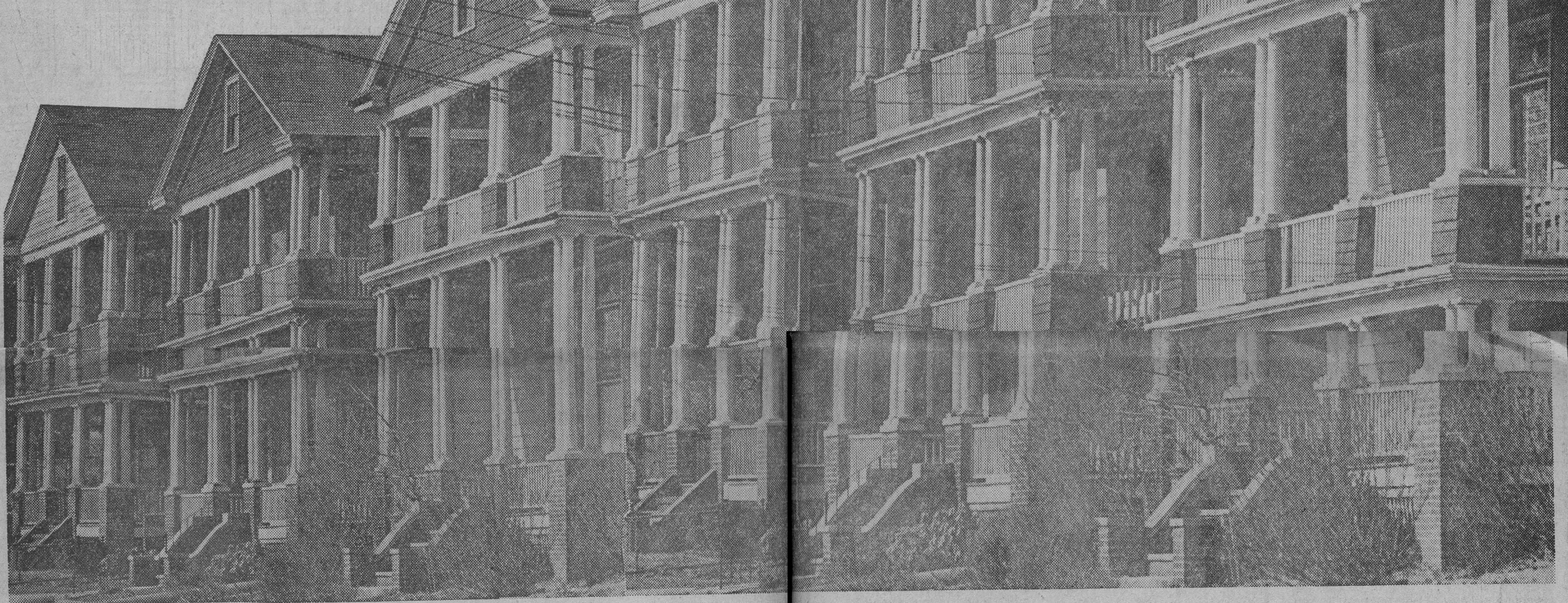
Keep plants potted
for a happy and
healthy garden

See DOWN TO EARTH, Page G-6

THREE-DECKERS

Life's stories stacked sky-high on streets that have watched the generations pass

PICTURES BY MICHAEL J.B. KELLY



BY CHESTER E. SMOLSKI
Special to the Sunday Journal

They line many of the streets in the older urban centers of Rhode Island. By present housing standards, they are considered out of fashion. Often in need of repair, built on small lots and crowded together, the multifamily, three-decker is a unique form of urban architecture.

With the exception of a few cities on the West Coast, this type of house is most common to southern New England and is usually equated with the low and moderate income families who live in it.

The three-deckers were an important element in the growth of cities and still continue to provide comfortable and inexpensive shelter. In some cases, middle class families have chosen to remain in these structures in their familiar neighborhoods rather than join in the flight to the suburbs.

The three-decker evolved as a distinctive house type shortly after the Civil War. The French mansard roof of the 1870s allowed full use of the third floor in former two-and-one-half story houses. The name "three-decker" or "triple-decker" comes from this time because of the resemblance of the porches to the decks of a ship.

The distinguishing features of this house type in Rhode Island resulted from the preference for and availability of wood and the desire for the separation of the structures, very different from the attached row houses found in other parts of the East.

The free-standing, wood, multifamily structure was in common use by the 1880s and prevailed until 1930 when the Depression and World War II stalled most building.

After the War, mass production and federally-backed mortgages opened the door for the construction of many single family, detached houses set on larger land plots.

The multifamily house was the common type erected in the older urban centers before World War II. As a result, in this state, there is a preponderance of multifamily structures as compared with the rest of the country. Only 13 percent of all housing in America is

buildings with two, three or four units in them while here the figure is 36 percent. In newer cities, like Warwick, less than two percent of 26,000 housing units are in three-and four-unit structures. The post-war boom of Warwick is reflected in its 86 percent of housing units, which are in one family, detached buildings.

There is no available accurate count of the number of people living in them nor a count of the number of three-deckers in New England. A limited study done in 1940 determined the proportion of people living in three story wood houses at that time to be: Worcester — 50 percent; Providence —

33 percent; and Hartford — 25 percent.

Using the 1970 census figures it can be seen that approximately 54,000 housing units in Rhode Island are in the three-and four-units category, with 40 percent of them located in Providence.

Although the greatest number of units is in Providence, only 32 percent of all the capital city's housing is in multifamily three and four unit buildings. Central Falls has a higher percentage with 55 percent of its units of this type and 30 percent of Woonsocket's units are in this category.

Built during the late Victorian period, the three-deckers reflect some aspects of the Queen Anne and neo-classical

styles incorporated into the more expensive homes then constructed for upper income families.

Ornate roof cornices, detailed trim and classical ornamentation are found on some, but more often the architecture is prosaic with the box-like appearance emphasized by the common flat or low-hipped roof.

Porches provide variety to the three-decker. Often located at the front, they provide sitting space in the warmer months. Limitations in space, sometimes made it easier to place the porches on the sides or rear of the house.

Built on small lots (50 feet by 100 feet was a common size), the three-decker

usually had the gable end facing the street. The rectangular shape of the building conforms to the long, narrow shape of the lot.

Communal driveways often are unable to accommodate all the tenants' cars so the typical three-decker may be accented by the bumper-to-bumper automobiles, many with parking tickets tucked under the windshield, lining the streets.

Entering the three-decker from a small front hall, one usually passes into the parlor or living room, separated from the dining room by an archway. The dining room could be called the kitchen because the stove and appli-

ances are often located there. In larger units, there is a separate kitchen.

Three bedrooms are usually off the central dining room, and in the rear of the home is the bathroom and pantry. A small rear hall and the front entry are outside the living space, quite different from the present style home with its interior hall leading to the bedrooms.

Although many of the three-deckers are without central heat, it would be a mistake to think of them as obsolete. Many owners have modernized them.

Built at high density, sometimes with up to nine of the them housing 27 families per acre, there is little room between buildings. Therefore, there is little sunlight that reaches into them. The presence of the porch further reduces the amount of sunlight entering the unit, keeping the interior cooler in the summer.

In this state, the three-deckers are essentially rental properties, but almost one-fifth of them are owner-occupied. Rents vary with location, but a typical rental in Central Falls will range from \$22 to \$35 per week, excluding heat or utilities.

The distinctive wood, detached, multifamily three-decker still serves as a useful piece of urban architecture. Many families have remained in them for successive generations, with married sons and daughters occupying the upper stories until they can buy their own home.

The three-decker also provides the necessary housing for immigrants, who look to cities for housing, jobs and services, which are found in close juxtaposition in these intensively used and compact centers.

Not beautiful but functional, old-fashioned but serviceable and comfortable, the three-decker should be recognized as a unique form of housing for the working and middle-class families of past generations.

FREE-STANDING, wood, multifamily homes are a haven for people who prefer to stay in bustling familiar old neighborhoods instead of joining the flight to the suburbs.

