NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

1. NAME

COMMON:
Varnum (General James Mitchell) House

AND/OR HISTORIC:

2. LOCATION

STREET AND NUMBER:
57 Peirce Street

CITY OR TOWN:
East Greenwich

STATE:
Rhode Island, 02818

3. CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY
(Choose One)
☐ District
☐ Site
☐ Building
☐ Structure
☐ Object

OWNERSHIP
☐ Public
☐ Private
☐ Both

PUBLIC ACQUISITION:
☐ In Process
☐ Being Considered

STATUS
☐ Occupied
☐ Unoccupied
☐ Preservation work in progress

ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
☐ Yes:
☐ Restricted
☐ Unrestricted
☐ No

PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)
☐ Agricultural
☐ Government
☐ Industrial
☐ Private Residence
☐ Military
☐ Religious
☐ Educational
☐ Other (Specify)
☐ Entertainment
☐ Museum
☐ Scientific

☐ Transportation
☐ Comments

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

OWNER'S NAME:
The Varnum Continentals

STREET AND NUMBER:
Varnum Memorial Armory, 6 Main Street

CITY OR TOWN:
East Greenwich

STATE:
Rhode Island, 02818

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC:
Town Clerk

STREET AND NUMBER:
111 Peirce Street

CITY OR TOWN:
East Greenwich

STATE:
Rhode Island, 02818

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE OF SURVEY:
Statewide Survey of Historic Buildings

DATE OF SURVEY:
1971

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS:
Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

STREET AND NUMBER:
State House, 90 Smith Street

CITY OR TOWN:
Providence

STATE:
Rhode Island, 02903

FORM 10-300
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Built in 1773 by Revolutionary War General James Mitchell Varnum, the Varnum House is an elegant and commodious two-story, five-bay-wide, clapboarded house with two interior brick chimneys running through a gable-on-hip roof. Resting on a foundation of coursed granite ashlar, the house is set on a steep slope above the main street of East Greenwich and faces east towards East Greenwich Cove and Narragansett Bay beyond.

The central entrance, with its panelled door and one-story portico, forms the principal decorative feature of the exterior. The portico is simply a pedimented door design pushed forward and supported by fluted Ionic pilasters and free-standing, unfluted Ionic columns on bases. All windows are twelve-over-twelve-paneled, double-hung sash, with heavy molded sills and (on the first floor) projecting capping cornices—except for the stairway-landing window at the rear whose top is segments-ally-arched and which has twenty-light sashes. The elaborate, modillioned main cornice is not broken-out above the plainly-enframed windows of the second story.

Like its exterior, the interior of the Varnum House is very similar in design and plan to the Eldridge house at Peirce and Division Streets, the other large mansion of the 1770's in East Greenwich. The two interior chimneys each provide fireplaces for two rooms on either side of the central hall on both floors. At the back of the central hall, with its panelled wainscot and old French wallpaper, the stairway rises in three runs. The turned newels and the balusters, set three to a stair, support a ramped rail which has a curved termination on the first floor. Panelled wainscoting, dentil cornices (broken-out above openings in the walls), panelled shutters, and mantelpieces surmounted by simple shelves and panelling to the ceiling decorate the first-floor rooms. The particularly beautiful dining-room fireplace, with its broken-pediment overmantel, was copied by Stanford White for a building at the Jamestown Exposition of 1907. The kitchen, with its six-foot-wide fireplace and plain, unpainted paneling, is expectedly less refined than the other rooms of the main floor. Rooms on the second floor, with simple chair-rails and fireplaces without overmantel treatment, are also less elaborate. Much of the original hardware throughout the house and some of its original wide-board floors have been preserved.

Alterations have not been extensive. Two lateral bay windows have been extended from the rear rooms of the first story, and a two-story ell of sympathetic style was added, before 1900, to the rear. This ell is currently used as a museum of Varnum and local memorabilia. A spacious walled garden is still maintained.
The Varnum House is an exceptionally handsome and well-maintained example of a type of elegant, large-scale dwelling built in Rhode Island just prior to the Revolution. Like the nearby and contemporary Eldredge house, it is of refined but not elaborate design.

The house is noted, of course, for its connection with General James Mitchell Varnum. As a prospering young lawyer, Varnum built his house in 1773. He was appointed first commander of the Kentish Guards in East Greenwich in 1774, and in 1775 he led that company, including Nathanael Greene, to war. He served with distinction at the siege of Boston and in the battles of Rhode Island, White Plains, Long Island, Red Bank, and Valley Forge. During the Revolution, Generals Washington, Lafayette, and Sullivan were entertained at Varnum's house. Lafayette is believed to have stayed in the south-east chamber of the house on his visits to East Greenwich.

Following the war, Varnum returned to his law practice and was elected to Congress in 1780 and again in 1786. He made his place in legal history in the case of Trevett vs. Weeden (1786), the first well-authenticated American case in which an act of a legislative body, in this instance the Rhode Island General Assembly, was declared unconstitutional.

When the Northwest Territory was established in 1787, Varnum was appointed its District Judge. Leaving his wife behind, he arrived at Marietta (now in Ohio), the established seat of government for the region, in 1788, only to die there the following year.

Subsequent owners of the house have included Ethan Clarke, Revolutionary War officer and first president of the Rhode Island Central Bank, Chief Justice George A. Brayton of the Rhode Island Supreme Court, and Dr. William Shaw Bowen, noted physician and journalist. The house was purchased in 1939 by the Varnum Continentals for use as a museum and has been sympathetically restored.

### Geographical Data

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**Approximate Acreage of Nominated Property:** Less than one acre

**List All States and Counties for Properties Overlapping State or County Boundaries**

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**Form Prepared By:**

Clifford M. Renshaw, III, Consultant

**Organization:**

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

**Street and Number:**

State House, 90 Smith Street

**City or Town:**

Providence

**State Liaison Officer Certification:**

Rhode Island, 02903

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.

Chief, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation

Date

ATTEST:

Keeper of The National Register

Date
1. NAME
   COMMON: Varnum (General James Mitchell) House

2. LOCATION
   STREET AND NUMBER: 57 Peirce Street
   CITY OR TOWN: East Greenwich
   STATE: Rhode Island
   CODE: 02818
   COUNTY: Kent
   CODE: 003

3. PHOTO REFERENCE
   PHOTO CREDIT: Clifford M. Renshaw III
   DATE OF PHOTO: April, 1971
   NEGATIVE FILED AT: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Room 124, State House, Providence, Rhode Island

4. IDENTIFICATION
   DESCRIBE VIEW, DIRECTION, ETC.
   Exterior, view looking north-west.
**PROPERTY PHOTOGRAPH FORM**

**COMMON:** Varnum (General James Mitchell) House

**LOCATION:**

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- **CITY OR TOWN:** East Greenwich
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**IDENTIFICATION**

**DESCRIBE VIEW, DIRECTION, ETC.:**

Dining room fireplace.
**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES**

**PROPERTY MAP FORM**

*(Type all entries - attach to or enclose with map)*

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| COUNTY: Kent |
| CODE 003 |

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