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**AN 18TH-CENTURY FARMHOUSE WITH A 20TH-CENTURY FLAVOR:
ESTEN-BOWEN HOUSE LISTED ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER**

A historic house in Burrillville has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of architecture and agriculture. Edward F. Sanderson, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added the Esten-Bowen House to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Built ca. 1790, the Esten-Bowen represents Burrillville's development from a period of agricultural growth and expansion from the end of the 18th century through gradual decline and subsequent transition to exurban residential uses in the early 20th century. The house also is significant for its distinctive amalgamation of historic 18th-century building fabric and updates made in the 1940s in the Early-American mode.

Set back from Iron Mine Road on a 32-acre lot, the one-and-a-half-story, center-chimney, wood-frame Esten-Bowen farmhouse was built around 1790. The house is sided in clapboards and rests on a stone foundation of rubble and dressed granite blocks. The interior was originally laid out in a traditional five-room plan, supplemented by a kitchen ell, and it remains intact except where two rear rooms have been combined.

Stone walls divide the land into farmyard, lanes, fields (now grown over), and woodlots. Other landscape features near the house include crabapple trees and perennial beds added in the mid-20th century. Surviving outbuildings include a shed and a privy. The stone foundations of a large barn, several sheds, and other outbuildings are located east and west of the house. The farmland has reverted to woodland for the most part.

The Esten-Bowen House was built by John Esten (1761-1851) on the large farm he assembled in northeastern Burrillville. Esten served on Burrillville's first Town Council (1806) and later was a member of the Rhode Island General Assembly and a Justice of the Peace. Due to his extensive investments and his many family members in this section of Burrillville, the area was known as the "Esten Neighborhood." John divided his holdings among his sons, and passed the 90-acre Esten-Bowen property to Amasa in 1848.

In the early 19th century, Burrillville was largely an agricultural community. The town's farmers typically grew enough food for their own use and only limited surpluses for trade. This changed beginning with the introduction of water-powered textile manufacturing on the Clear and Branch Rivers in the 1820s-1840s, and the development of mill villages. By the 1840s, local farmers were providing dairy, poultry, hay, lumber, and other products for sale in nearby mill villages and in the urban markets further afield in Worcester and Providence.

Amasa (1799-1869) married Olive Stone in 1824 and following her death in 1829, married her sister, Lois (Louisa). He supplemented his agricultural operation with work in a blacksmith shop, carpentry shop, and wheelwright shop on the farm. In 1879, Civil War veteran Gardner Ballou (1830-1922) acquired the farm—now reduced to 30 acres—in 1879 and lived there until his death in 1922. It appears that after the passing of his widow, Alice Luella Ballou (1850-c.1935), the farmhouse was left vacant, and many of the outbuildings were deteriorated.

The property entered a new phase in 1941 when it was acquired by Esther H. Bowen (1900-1984), an employee of the Amica Insurance Company. Bowen was interested in the Early American style, and she kept a scrapbook of magazine articles on “colonial” interiors and decorating taste. She was searching for an old house in a country setting when she found the deteriorated but intact farmhouse in rural Burrillville.

Bowen documented the house with floor plans and photographs before, during, and after the renovation process. Besides the Victorian exterior doors and two-over-two window sash, the house had not been modernized or altered significantly from its late 18th-century form. It did not have plumbing or central heat and the original floor plan was intact. The farm had continued to be used for sheep grazing, so the fields remained open, though nearly all the agricultural buildings had disappeared or were in ruins. By 1947, the restoration was essentially complete, and Bowen took up residence in the house.

Bowen's restoration of the house in the “Early American” taste demonstrates the popularity of this trend in the mid-20th century. Bowen retained many original materials, room features, and configurations. The kitchen ell was modified slightly with a cabinet sink and eating nook. Outbuildings that were salvageable were restored or converted to storage uses, and outbuilding foundations were retained. Some of the farm fields were allowed to revert to woodlot; others were maintained as hay field. All of this work survives with considerable integrity, refreshed by recent preservation work on the house.

In contrast to the refined academic aspects of the Colonial Revival movement, the Early American mode exemplified by the 1940s Esten-Bowen House restoration, conveys a more rustic interpretation. It is typically found in small and less formal dwellings with a focus on early colonial furniture designs and utilitarian, rather than high-style pieces. Typical finishes include mixed woods such as maple, hickory, knotty pine, poplar and chestnut; varnished floors with rag, hooked, or braided rugs; cotton, wool and linen fabrics; and wrought iron fastenings and lighting fixtures. The Early American trend allowed for an owner's interest in the colonial era to be blended with a comfortable, relaxed, and livable home in keeping with mid-20th century lifestyles. Spurred by well-illustrated articles in contemporary mid-20th-century shelter

magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, and *American Home*, vernacular Colonial-era houses like the Esten-Bowen House were adapted to modern residential use in this taste.

The National Register nomination for the Esten-Bowen House was prepared by preservation consultant Richard C. Youngken with RIHPHC architectural historian Robert O. Jones. Edward F. Sanderson of the RIHPHC said, “Rhode Island’s legacy of historic residential architecture and homeowners’ affection for their historic buildings is exemplified by the well-preserved Esten-Bowen House.”

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning of Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed on the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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