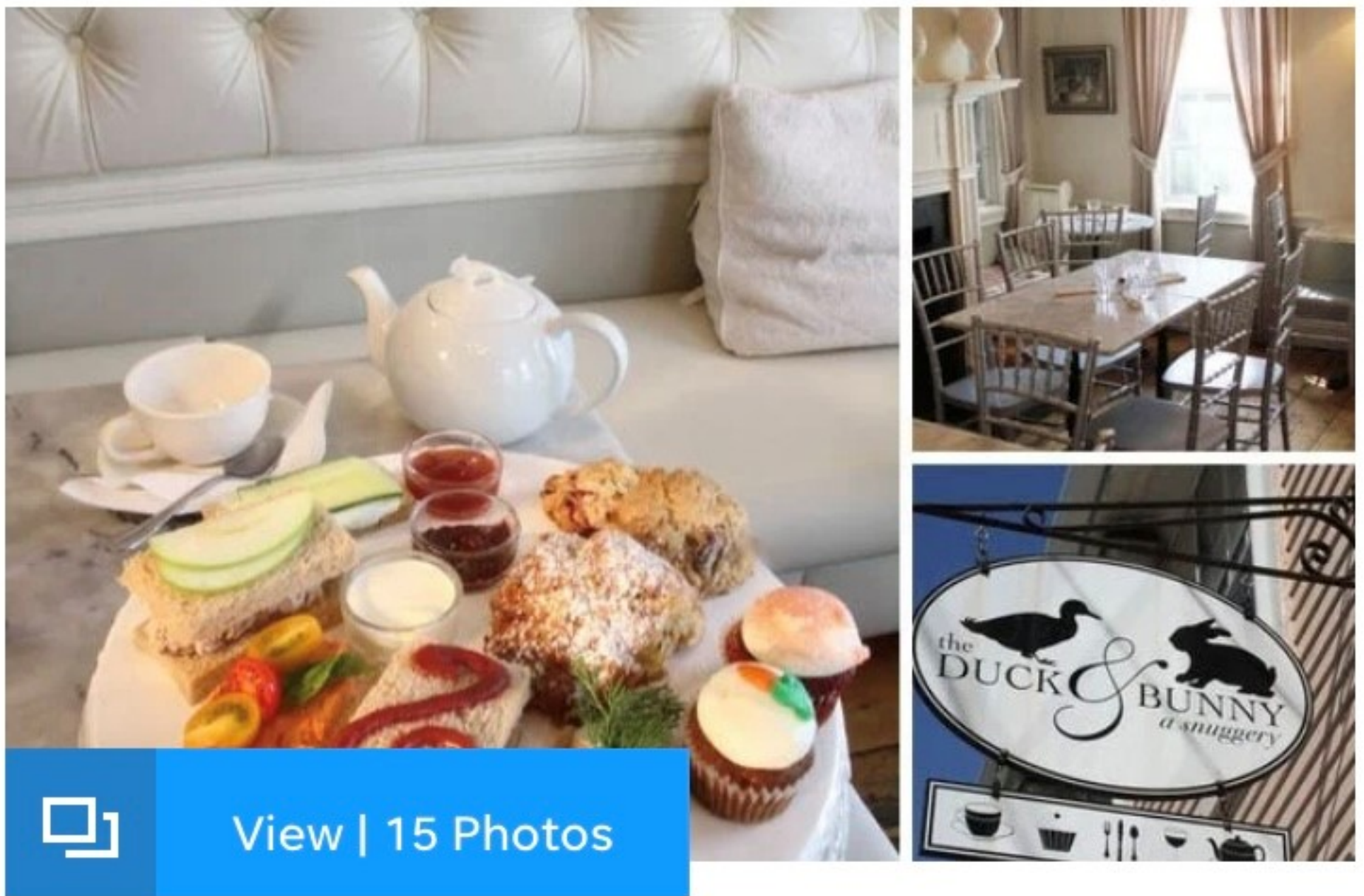


# The real story behind the teardown of Duck & Bunny on Wickenden Street



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## Duck and Bunny Providence restaurant plans to reopen

**GAIL CIAMPA** | THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL | 3  
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PROVIDENCE — From the minute it opened slightly more than a decade ago, the Duck & Bunny was a hit.

By offering an eclectic celebration of food and drink in a beautifully designed antique setting, it distinguished itself as unique. Tea sandwiches, creative crepes, cocktails and cupcakes were elegantly served. All this, and real porcelain, too, drew in diners who loved lavender, spice and everything nice.

Owners Jessica and Dan Becker branded it a "snuggery," adding still more charm by using an old world name to evoke a comfortable, intimate



The beauty of the antique Duck & Bunny home at 312 Wickenden St. didn't reveal the many structural issues within.

SANDOR BODO / THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL, FILE

All this intimacy and familiarity hit the fan Easter Sunday. That's when the pink house, home to the Duck & Bunny, was torn down. It paved the way to make room for a new building to house the restaurant, which had been closed for two years for renovations.

With the beloved Duck & Bunny gone, its fans, neighbors and preservationists screamed foul. How could a historic house be razed with no notice?

Dan Becker was in the hospital that weekend, unable to respond to media inquiries and calls from the public.

He heard speculation that he was building everything from a parking lot to condos. It was suggested he was cashing in on the real estate he only purchased in 2018. He felt vilified.



Afternoon tea and comfy banquettes made the Duck & Bunny a unique dining spot.

SANDOR BODO, FILE/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

"It was shocking – the vitriol," he said. "It's been a nightmare."

Before continuing with the details relevant to the teardown and the rest of the story, here's the reveal from an emotional Becker.

"The Duck & Bunny means everything to me. I promise it will come back.

"The curb appeal will maintain what is Wickenden Street."

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## History of the Duck & Bunny charm

Though they built the Duck & Bunny business as partners, the Beckers are now divorced and she no longer has financial interest in the business.

Still friends, Jessica has expressed upset at the way Dan and the teardown have been perceived. She shared a six-page proposed op-ed that documented many of the reasons the building at 312 Wickenden St. could not be saved.





Moldings and chandeliers paired with wide plank floors for a lot of charm at the Duck & Bunny.

SANDOR BODO, FILE/ THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

In conversation with both the Beckers, each stressed the same themes, most notably, that much of the historic charm, cited as reasons for saving the house, was added by Jessica, an interior designer by trade. Her company, Burrow & Nest Design Studio, is based in Westerly, and does home and restaurant design.

Prior to the Duck & Bunny, the building on Wickenden Street had been home to the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, the Dorr War Bookstore, and then restaurants Turchetta's Ristorante, Ristorante Romanza and The Blue Elephant. The second floor housed tenants not associated with the restaurant.

## **Duck & Bunny snugger**

When they first viewed the house to rent for their snugger, Jessica said there was no particular character to speak of beyond the fireplaces and the little angels above one hearth.

"I added crown molding that housed cove lighting, painted the ceiling with 'silver leaf,' hung traditional English wallpaper, and added all of the picture frame molding in both the tearoom and lounge. Despite the ceiling height, I installed crystal chandeliers, low enough to bang more than a few heads, and sconces on the walls," she said.

"When we got there, there was nothing outstanding about the house," Dan agreed. "She made the place feel like it felt like it was special," he said. "That was all Jessica's design."

## **Almira P. Allen House: 200 years in Providence**

The building, the Almira P. Allen House, was in the Federal style and it dated from 1810 to 1830.

Dan Becker had a demolition permit to tear



# Almira P. Allen House: 200 years in Providence

The building, the Almira P. Allen House, was in the Federal style and it dated from 1810 to 1830.

Dan Becker had a demolition permit to tear down the house. But he didn't seek it casually, only after extensive consulting with engineers and contractors.

"Initially, we did not even consider tearing it down," he said.

They put so much into the building, said Jessica. That included sharing the cost of re-roofing with their landlord before they bought the building three years ago.

Ultimately, engineers said the foundation was cracked, Dan said. The scope of a renovation would cost exorbitant amounts of money.

"It's very difficult to preserve something that had not been preserved, for so many decades," said Jessica.

She detailed the engineering report: "Since the rear wing was sunk below grade, it had to be torn down. To try and jack it up to create a new foundation where there was nothing but crawl space, while still attached to the front wing of the house, would have compromised the structure further, putting more strain on an already aged building with a crumbling foundation. That meant replacing at least that wing, which housed the kitchen."

After a certain percentage of renovations, everything must be brought up to code in the entire structure, she said. That would impact the restaurants in many ways, including making their tiny bathroom accessible to those with handicaps.

## **Should the Duck & Bunny have been torn down?**

Before the teardown, Providence Preservation Society Executive Director Brent Runyon asked Dan Becker if it was necessary. Becker took him on a tour.

Runyon understood after looking at it, he said in an interview.

"Just because a house was built in the 18th century doesn't mean it was built well," he said.

Lots of owners through the years altered the house, adding skylights in the roof and a kitchen addition.



Restaurateur Dan Becker at his newest place, Royal Bobcat on Federal Hill.

DAVID DELPOIO/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

"Even before the pandemic, it might have been difficult for a small business owner to rehabilitate a 200-year-old house that had a failing foundation and had been modified, poorly, several times," Runyon said.

For the Preservation Society, there are big-picture issues for the city of Providence to address.

"Without any demolition delay, an owner can destroy an historic house," Runyon said. "I wish there was some study."

He has written that a demolition delay ordinance, for perhaps 90 days, will help to ensure that no important historic resource can be demolished without consideration as to whether it can and should be preserved.

The bottom line about 312 Wickenden St. is: "We regret it, but not every old building can be saved. This was a person who loved this building," Runyon said, of Becker.

Runyon said the Preservation Society offers its help to get rebuild details right. "If we can help, we will," he said.

Becker is keenly aware of preservation.

## **Duck & Bunny rebuilding and reopening**

"We ripped out everything we thought we could use again, including the fireplaces," he said.

The new Duck & Bunny is going to to feel like it belonged there on Wickenden.

The first floor will be almost identical, except the kitchen will be full-size and there will be a second bathroom. They will have full storage in the basement including a cooler. They won't be gaining any seats. They will still have an outdoor space in the back yard.



The fireplaces are being saved for the new Duck & Bunny.


SANDOR BODO, FILE/PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

His plans for the new interior are for Jessica to make the magic happen again.

"The integrity of what we were will be there. We're not building a glass and steel monstrosity," he said. "This is a future historic house."

As for a timeline, Becker said, "It will take the better part of year to get permits," and "cost three times what we thought."





Ogie's Trailer Park opened four years after the Duck & Bunny.

SANDOR BODO, FILE/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

## **Dan Becker has 3 other Providence restaurants**

In 2010, Dan Becker was determined to make his first restaurant work.

"Now it is about making the city something unique," he said.

He isn't just about the Duck & Bunny. He's a restaurateur, owning three Providence businesses: Ogie's Trailer Park, Great Northern BBQ Co. and The Royal Bobcat.



He grew up in Providence before going to college at Syracuse University. He spent 16 years in New York City working in real estate, on Wall Street and in restaurants. "It was like my graduate school," he said.

He returned to open the Duck & Bunny, with Jessica Becker, as Providence was in a dining renaissance.

## **Ogie's Trailer Park**

They jumped right on board opening a second clever spot. While the Duck & Bunny was a cozy East Side eatery, Ogie's Trailer Park, at 1155 Westminster St., brought a very different vibe to the West Side. It opened in 2014 with food served from a mid-century-style trailer. It featured a tiki bar and a menu of mac & cheese croquettes and tater tots.

What the two restaurants had in common was that people liked hanging out at both of them.

Ogie's did well, pandemic-wise, Becker said. They moved the tiki bar from back to front and went to a full-service restaurant offering takeout and delivery. Previously it had followed an order

## **Great Northern BBQ**

Three years ago Becker opened Great Northern BBQ Co. at 9 Parade St., not far from Ogie's. Becker describes it as his "most food intense restaurant."

During the pandemic, he said, his staff really stepped up their game to meet the new need for takeout and delivery. Sean Bender is his pit master, cooking the food low and slow with elements of North Carolina and Texas barbecue style. Running the kitchen there is Erik Anderson, who had been the chef at the Duck & Bunny.

Great Northern has lots of outdoor seating with a patio, a trolley and beer and drink station.

## **The Royal Bobcat**

His newest opening came six weeks before the pandemic shutdown in 2020. He opened The Royal Bobcat at 422 Atwells Ave. on Federal Hill, with operational partner Eleanor Coyne.

It's a cocktail bar with a jazz-age New Orleans feel. Hanju Kitchen is their food partner next door, with Jenny Han as chef. She went down to

Louisiana to research Cajun food for her Korean Cajun menu, Becker added.



Becker said he is happy to see how vibrant Providence's food scene is today.

"Providence is about small businesses and being part of a community," he said. "It's small enough to make an impact."

"Mayors and governors can talk all they want about jobs, but here it's small businesses creating them."