

PROVIDENCE WALKS: DOWNTOWN

THE GEOGRAPHICAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CORE OF RHODE ISLAND’S CAPITAL, PROVIDENCE’S DOWNTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD IS BORDERED BY THE PROVIDENCE RIVER AND INTERSTATE 95.

Colonial Providence was born on the East Side along the Providence River, but with both the success of the mercantile trade and the industrial revolution, the small city expanded west. With the advent of technology, Providence became a bustling manufacturing town. The metal machinery, textiles, silverware and jewelry industries all flourished due to the extensive railroad network. By the late 19th century, Providence was the transportation hub of southeastern New England and attracted a variety of industrialists, bankers and businessmen to its downtown.

The 20th century was an era that started with optimism, followed by the harsh reality of the depression and, ultimately, a transition for downtown. Providence was one of the wealthiest cities in the U.S. in the early 1900s. The opening of cultural and social hubs, like the Providence Biltmore Hotel, provided Rhode Islanders a place to gather and celebrate in style. This era also saw the creation of Providence’s modern skyline with new Art Deco structures, now icons of this prosperous time in Providence’s history. The Great Depression, as well as other recessions in the mid-20th century, shuttered those once thriving businesses and halted building activity downtown. As a result of preservation efforts, many architecturally significant buildings from Providence’s past still stand today, refashioned to fit the needs of 21st-century organizations.

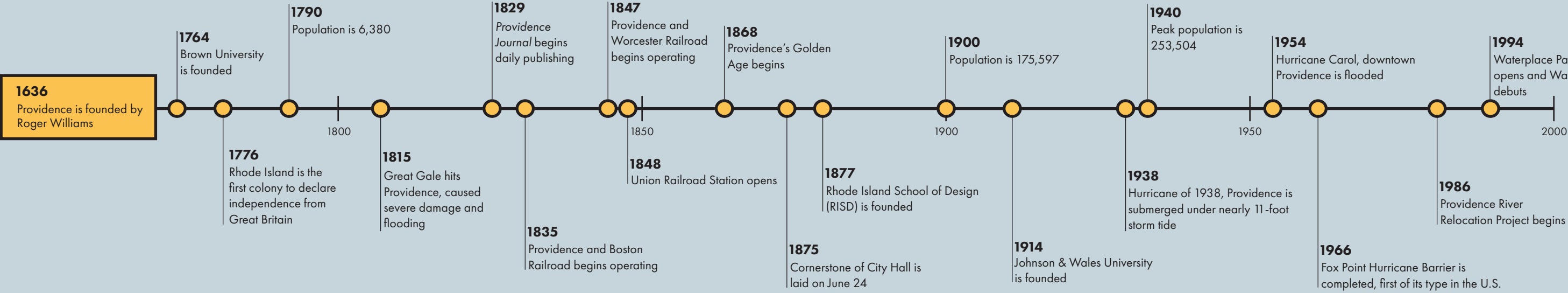
Today, downtown Providence is a vibrant mix of nationally recognized arts and cultural institutions, top-ranked restaurants, world-renowned universities, creative industries, financial and legal firms, and locally owned businesses earning the city the name, “The Creative Capital.” Preservation and an appreciation for architecture and history are a constant thread in this neighborhood’s story.



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HISTORIC TIMELINE



PROVIDENCE PERSONALITIES

“We can only be stronger as a community when we realize we each come with a unique inquisitiveness ...”



Umberto Crenca
(born 1950)

Founder of AS220, Umberto Crenca was honored by President Obama for “his work on building a collaborative community committed to supporting exchange of knowledge between innovative makers and creative thinkers.”

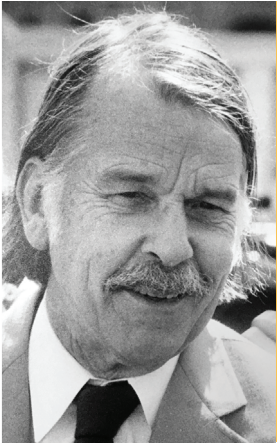
Christiana Carteaux Bannister
(1819-1902)

Known as “Madame Carteaux,” Christiana Carteaux Bannister was an astute businesswoman, hairdresser and abolitionist. She was married to renowned artist Edward Mitchell Bannister.



Margaret Fuller
(1810-1850)

Noted Transcendentalist writer Margaret Fuller taught at the Greene Street School in Providence from 1837-1839, fostering self-reflection and independence in young women.



William D. “Bill” Warner
(1929-2012)

Bill Warner is often cited as having the greatest impact on revitalizing downtown Providence during the 1980s and 90s, leading the redevelopment of its historic waterfront to create Waterplace Park.

Barnaby Evans
(born 1953)

The artist behind WaterFire, Barnaby Evans is responsible for creating the “crown jewel” of the city’s modern renaissance. A graduate of Brown University, Evans is an artist who uses public art to rethink urban space.



“(WaterFire) is designed so people can interact with each other, with the artwork and with the urban environment.”

Anne Philomena Haven
(1842-1912)

Anne Haven, an immigrant widow, founded Haven Brothers, one of the oldest restaurants on wheels. The lunch cart grew into a legendary Providence food establishment still in operation today near City Hall.



Vincent “Buddy” Cianci
(1941-2016)

A famous figure in Providence political history, Buddy Cianci served as the city’s mayor from 1974 to 1984 and 1991 to 2002. Cianci’s sometimes turbulent time in office is noted for its substantial redevelopment efforts.



Gertrude I. Johnson Mary T. Wales
(1876-1961) (1874-1952)

In 1914, Gertrude Johnson and Mary Wales founded Johnson & Wales University. Beginning with one student and one typewriter, the women ran the school until their retirement in 1947.



James Bucklin
(1801-1890)

The most notable Providence architect in the 19th century, Bucklin’s Greek Revival work is still visible today. Bucklin designed hundreds of structures across the state.



PROVIDENCE WALKS
Downtown

Self-Guided
HISTORIC WALKING TOUR

“We should teach a thing not for its own sake, but as preparation for what lies beyond.”

- Mary T. Wales

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Trinity Repertory Company

201 Washington Street

The Tony Award-winning Trinity Repertory Company is one of the last resident acting companies in the U.S., performing in one of Providence's most historic venues. The former Emery Majestic Theater was opened by local vaudevillians in 1917. When movies became America's favorite form of entertainment, the Majestic became the premier theater downtown. However business slowed and its doors closed in the mid-20th century. The Majestic's history of live performance meant the building was a natural fit to house Providence's newly formed Trinity Repertory Company. Trinity Rep was founded in 1963 and is considered "one of the most respected regional theatres in the country."



Providence Public Library

150 Empire Street

Founded in 1875, the Providence Public Library (PPL) opened at its present Washington Street location in 1900, adding the Empire Street building in 1954. The first librarian, William Foster, stressed the library's important role in community service. This tradition continues as PPL remains dedicated to making the library and its resources accessible to all. PPL's services are still relevant today, from traditional lending, research and learning, to training programs in the latest technologies. PPL is focused on its role as a cultural and educational center, highlighting its unique and historical Rhode Island and Special Collections.

AS220

115 Empire Street

No organization embodies Providence's moniker, "The Creative Capital," more than AS220. Founded in 1985, AS220 began in one room above the Providence Performing Arts Center at 220 Weybosset Street and has since purchased, renovated, and now operates three mixed-used buildings. AS220 has been a major catalyst in reviving downtown Providence, founded on the belief in providing an "unjuried, uncensored" space for artistic expression. Today AS220 houses gallery spaces, a performance stage, a print shop, a darkroom, affordable live/work studios for artists, a bar and restaurant, and draws more than 51,000 people each year.



Beneficent Church

300 Weybosset Street

One of the oldest churches in Rhode Island, Beneficent Church was originally known as the Church of the West Side, established as a separatist group from the First Congregational Church. The church was built in 1810 but was altered in the 1830s to James Bucklin's design, still evident today. Bucklin's addition of the Greek portico and gold dome makes it an architectural gem. In the 1980s the gold leaf dome needed repair and the congregation chose to replace it with the less opulent, more durable, copper sheeting visible today. Choosing copper meant the church could focus their finances on their mission of service.



Providence Performing Arts Center

220 Weybosset Street

Weybosset Street was alive with excitement as nearly 14,000 people attended the opening of Loew's State Movie Palace to see the movie "Excess Baggage" in 1928. The venue prospered for decades but encountered declining attendance and fell into disrepair. The aging structure faced demolition, but was saved in 1978 by seven local corporations and became a private, nonprofit organization, known as the Ocean State Theatre. In 1982, it became the Providence Performing Arts Center (PPAC). Hundreds of thousands of people visit each year to experience the magic of live performance at "the jewel of Weybosset Street."

Johnson & Wales University

Gaebé Commons, Weybosset Street

Johnson & Wales University is a world-renowned leader in experiential education, with degree programs in arts and sciences, business, culinary arts, education, hospitality, engineering and design, and more. In 1914, Gertrude Johnson and Mary Wales had careers in banking and dreamed of opening their own business college. The University has exceeded their dreams, evolving into an internationally recognized educator with several campuses in the United States.



The Arcade

65 Weybosset Street

Built in 1828, The Arcade is the nation's oldest existing indoor shopping mall and a National Historic Landmark. Designed by Russell Warren and James Bucklin, the architecture is notable due to two slightly different facades. Travel to the Weybosset Street side and you'll find Warren's design; six granite ionic columns rooted underneath a parapet. Venture to the Westminster side, and you'll discover six ionic columns connected to a pediment, designed by Bucklin. Today the skylight-lit interior is home to shops, restaurants and residential housing in the form of micro-lofts.



Custom House

24 Weybosset Street

A historic symbol of industry and the role of the river in shaping the economy, the Custom House was completed in 1857. It was home to the Federal District Court, Post Office, IRS, Steamboat Inspection and U.S. Customs. The building, occupied by the Federal Government through 1989, was converted to office space for the State Court Systems in 1992 as the John E. Fogarty Judicial Complex. This building is the centerpiece of the Custom House Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, including eight additional buildings associated with the growth of Providence as a business center in the mid-to-late 19th century.

POINT OF INTEREST



The intersection of Westminster and Weybosset streets serves as an entryway to the commercial district of downtown. Walk to the intersection and look up at the landmark Turks Head Building. In the early 19th century, shopkeeper Jacob Whitman mounted a ship's figurehead of an Ottoman above his business giving the building its name. The original was later replaced by a stone effigy.



Memorial Park

South Main Street

This sculpture-filled park pays homage to people who gave their lives during wars and conflicts around the world.

RI Holocaust Memorial - Created in 2015, the Rhode Island Holocaust Memorial pays tribute to "all that we have lost and all that we have learned" from the atrocities of World War II. The memorial was designed by RISD-based sculptor Jonathon Bonner and is composed of four parts: the Entrance Gate, the Path, the Life Stone and Memorial Columns. The memorial serves as a tribute for, and on behalf of, Rhode Island's remaining Holocaust survivors.

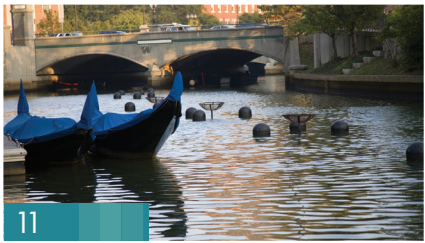
Korean War Memorial - The bronze statue speaks to the price of war and honors its veterans, depicting a kneeling soldier fighting off the rain and cold.

World War I & II Memorials - Standing 150 feet high, the World War I Memorial honors those who served in the First World War. The memorial was designed by architect Paul Cret and created in 1929. The memorial names specific battles Rhode Islanders fought in with the word "Peace" at the top of the tower. The World War II memorial was dedicated in 2007 and honors the generation of Rhode Islanders who fought in the Second World War.

Market House

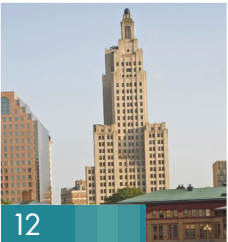
27 Market Square

Completed in 1775, the Market House served as a market and town hall for Colonial Providence. Over the years, the Market House witnessed two of the largest natural disasters to hit Providence; the Great Gale of 1815 and the Hurricane of 1938. The Great Gale brought an 11-foot storm surge, which is memorialized at the Market House, as it was one of the only buildings to remain standing. The Hurricane of 1938 was the largest modern disaster to affect downtown Providence, remembered through hurricane markers located downtown today. John Hutchins Cady rehabilitated the building in the late 1930s to house classrooms for the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).



RiverWalk Registers

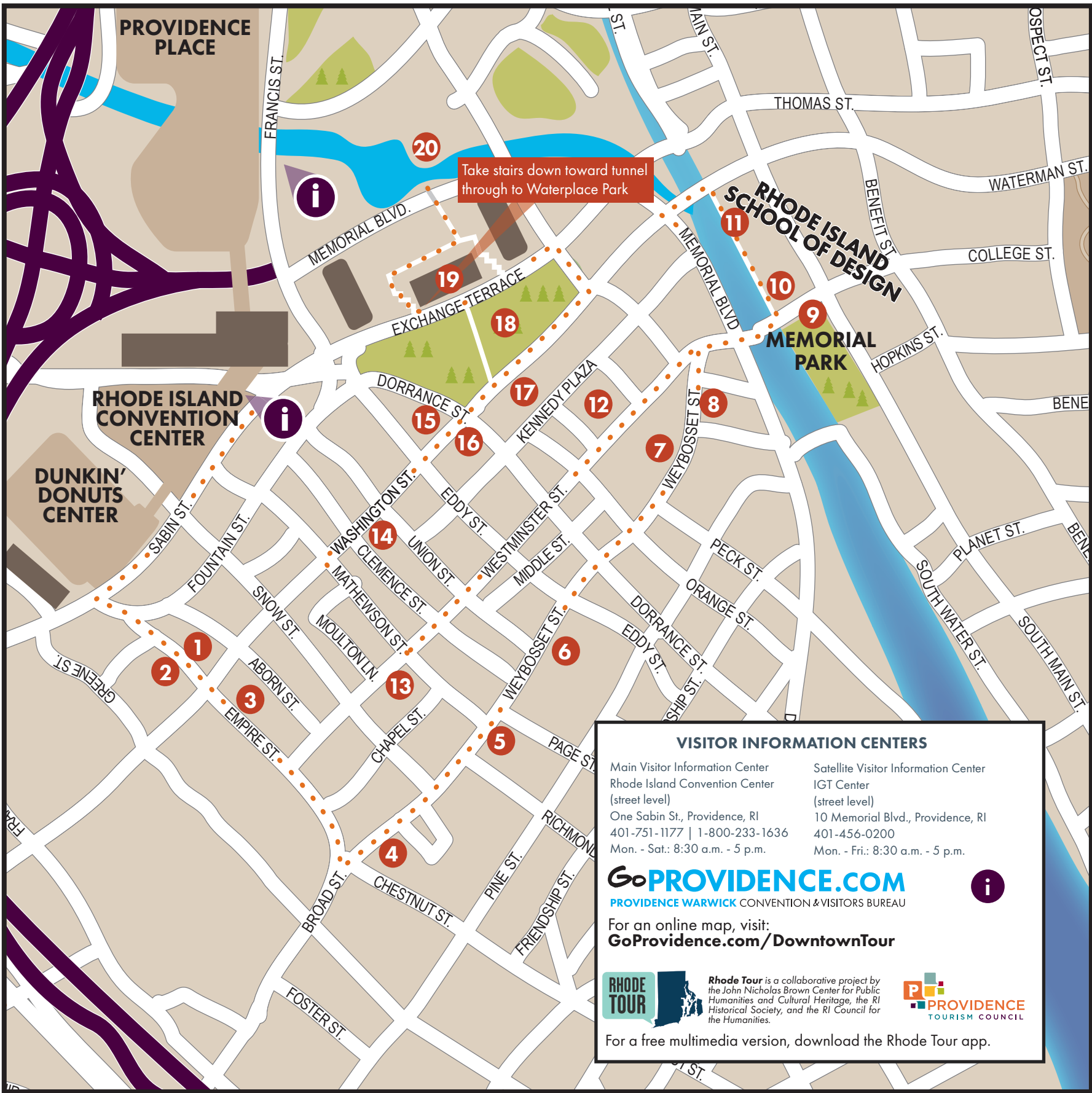
VSA Arts Rhode Island and the Rhode Island School for the Deaf worked together to orchestrate the RiverWalk Registers project. Students from the area created bands or "registers" of self-portraits, portraits of well-known Rhode Islanders, and images from the art collection at RISD. The artwork tiles cover the columns of the pavilion. A panel on the pavilion invokes the memory of Roger Williams, who founded a settlement here in Providence as a "shelter for persons distressed for conscience." Tiles in 26 languages remind the viewer of Williams' intention.



Industrial Trust Company Building

111 Westminster Street

Popularly known as the "Superman Building" because of its resemblance to the iconic Daily Planet building in the television series, the Industrial Trust Co. Building is the tallest — at 428 feet tall — and the most iconic in the Providence skyline. Completed in 1927, it is a reminder of downtown's interwar building boom. The financial industry took off in Providence and several banks were born during this period. The Industrial Trust Co. Building was one of the most architecturally progressive buildings of the time. The Art Deco exterior features frieze work depicting labor and culture, with Gorham bronze doors on both the Kennedy Plaza and Westminster Street sides.



VISITOR INFORMATION CENTERS

Main Visitor Information Center
Rhode Island Convention Center
(street level)
One Sabin St., Providence, RI
401-751-1177 | 1-800-233-1636
Mon. - Sat.: 8:30 a.m. - 5 p.m.

Satellite Visitor Information Center
IGT Center
(street level)
10 Memorial Blvd., Providence, RI
401-456-0200
Mon. - Fri.: 8:30 a.m. - 5 p.m.

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For an online map, visit:
GoProvidence.com/DowntownTour



Rhode Tour is a collaborative project by the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, the RI Historical Society, and the RI Council for the Humanities.



For a free multimedia version, download the Rhode Tour app.



Grace Episcopal Church

300 Westminster Street

Among the banks and businesses of bustling Westminster Street, Grace Episcopal Church is a constant for the evolving neighborhood, with the bells ringing every day on the half hour, a tradition that began in 1861. Founded to serve parishioners who left the East Side in favor of the newly fashionable Westminster Street, the church sits on the site of the old Providence Theater. In 1846, Richard Upjohn, one of the most notable architects of the time, completed the new building design for the parish as the first asymmetrical Gothic Revival Church in America.

Shepard Building

80 Washington Street

The Shepard Company department store was a fixture of the 19th and 20th century Providence shopping experience. Built in the 1870s, Shepard's was one of the largest stores in Providence, occupying an entire city block. Inside, there was a restaurant and a variety of retail offerings. A true meeting place, locals often met "at the clock" to socialize downtown. The Shepard Company went bankrupt in 1974, but the exterior of the building and its iconic clock still remain largely unchanged. Today the Shepard Building is home to the downtown campuses of the University of RI and the Community College of RI.



Providence Biltmore Hotel

11 Kennedy Street

It is said that every Rhode Islander visits the Biltmore Hotel at least once. Now the Graduate Providence, the Biltmore opened in 1922 and became a hub for social activity in downtown Providence, a legacy that continues today. In its early days, the Biltmore sought creative ways to bring fresh produce to its tables in the middle of a bustling city; as a result, the building featured a rooftop garden where vegetables were grown. Sadly, the Biltmore experienced a financial slump, and closed its doors in 1974. After undergoing a million-dollar renovation and restoring its 1922 charm, the hotel was reopened in 1979, ensuring an elegant experience for native Rhode Islanders and visitors alike.



Providence City Hall

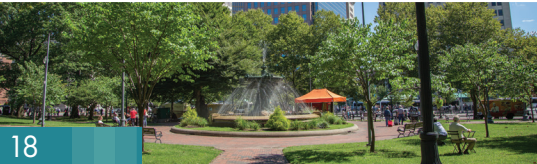
25 Dorrance Street

Though the area around it has changed over the years, Providence City Hall remains a constant in downtown Providence. Constructed in the 1870s, the cast iron and masonry structure witnessed the evolution of modern downtown. Initially Providence's government was located in the Market House, across the river. Needing more space, aldermen were split on where to put a new city hall. After a 30-year struggle over where to put the new building, the cornerstone was laid on the west side of the river in 1875. In the 1950s, the city considered demolishing City Hall, but it was saved, reflecting Providence's pride in its historical roots.



Kennedy Plaza

Kennedy Plaza is modern Providence's main hub for transportation — as many as 69,000 people move through this site daily. Created as Exchange Place in the 19th century, this plaza has always served transportation needs. Thousands of people stood here to see President Theodore Roosevelt, Harry Houdini, and presidential candidate John F. Kennedy. Today Kennedy Plaza remains a gathering place for the community, anchored by three city parks, including the BankNewport City Center & The Providence Rink, which features ice skating, recreation, music and arts.



Burnside Park

2 Kennedy Plaza

Adjacent to the 19th-century transportation hub of Providence, Burnside Park was dedicated in 1892. The park provided a space to showcase two major artworks, the Bajonotti Fountain and the statue of General Ambrose Burnside. Dedicated in 1902, the Bajonotti Fountain was a gift from Paul Bajonotti to the city to honor his late wife, Carrie Mathilde Brown, whose family was prominent in town. The Burnside statue, dedicated in 1887, commemorates former Rhode Island governor and Civil War General Ambrose Burnside. The park is not Burnside's only namesake, however — the term "sideburns" comes from his infamous facial hair.



Union Station

4 Exchange Terrace

Union Station was the central location for the powerful railroad-station complex in the late 19th century, becoming the hub of southeastern New England's transportation network. Goods came and went through this terminal, supporting the machinery, textile, and jewelry industries that fueled the growth of Providence. With the decline of rail travel in the 1980s, Union Station was closed and a smaller station opened closer to the State House. Modern structures built in the block of Union Station mirror the Italian Renaissance style architecture of the original building. The Roman triumphal arch, featured as the principle portal to the passenger station, is still evident today. This building is now home to the Rhode Island Foundation.



Waterplace Park and WaterFire

Memorial Boulevard

This area represents a vital part of early Providence history, serving as reminder of the water that covered the area once known as Great Sall Cove. Over time, the water was drained, land filled, and by 1898 railroad tracks ran through the area to support the many industries in the city. As times changed and business waned, the downtown area languished. However, the River Relocation Project of the 1980s and 1990s brought life back to the Providence city center along with a reimagining of the water that once ran through it. Today, Waterplace Park and the surrounding areas are home to walking paths, restaurants, concerts and WaterFire.

WaterFire

Tens of thousands of people gather around the Woonasquatucket and Providence Rivers several times a year to witness the city's signature attraction, WaterFire. This waterfront sculpture installation and performance art piece began with 11 braziers on New Year's in 1994. Nearly 100 wood-burning fires, music, and street performers lure visitors and residents alike to Waterplace Park and the Providence RiverWalk on WaterFire evenings. Former Mayor Buddy Cianci once said, "There is nothing like it anywhere in the world, even in Florence or Venice."

This tour was researched and written by Amelia Golcheski.