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.
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 Empire Majestic Theater was opened by local real-estate investors in 1917. When movie theaters became the primary source of entertainment, the Majestic became the premier theater downtown. However business slowed and the doors closed during the Great Depression. The performance venue was not forgotten as a solution to downtown Providence’s problems. It was used for concerts, fairs, and even as a warehouse. The Majestic was eventually purchased, renovated, and now operates three mixed-used buildings. AS220 collaboration partners the Majestic with downtown Providence venues to create a new venue for entertainment. The Majestic became a symbol of the city’s resiliency during challenging times.

Custom House
22 Water Street

A historic symbol of industry and the role of the river in shaping the economy, the Custom House was completed in 1837. It was home to the federal District Court, Post Office, IRS, Steamboat Inspectors and U.S. Custom House. The building, occupied by the Federal Government through 1939, was converted to office space for the new Courthouse in 1949. It was the home of 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 late-19th century.

Providence Public Library
150 Empire Street

Founded in 1873, the Providence Public Library (PPL) opened at its present Washington Street location in 1900, adding the Empire Street building in 1914. The first librarian, William Foster, stressed the library’s important role in community service. This tradition continues as MPL provides services to all persons in need of learning and cultural resources. The library’s services are still relevant today, from traditional learning, research, and teaching programs to the latest technologies. MPL is focused on its role as a cultural and educational center, highlighting its unique and special collections.

AS220
150 Empire Street

No organization embodies Providence’s mission, "The Creative Capital," more than AS220. Founded in 1983, AS220 began in one room above the Providence Performing Arts Center and has expanded, purchased, renovated, and now operates three mixed-used buildings. AS220 has been a major catalyst in reviving downtown Providence, purchasing, renovated, and now operates three mixed-used buildings. AS220 is a non-profit arts organization, founded on the belief in providing an “unplugged, unencumbered” space for artistic expression. Today AS220 occupies 23,000 square feet in a historic building, a print shop, a darkroom, affordable free/low work studios for artists, a bar and restaurant, and draws more than 30,000 people each year.

Memorial Park
South Main Street

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

RI Holocaust Memorial
Touro Street

Located at 180 Touro Street, 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 Jonathan Boroski and is composed of four parts: the Eitken Gate, the Path, the Life Stone and Memorial Column. The memorial serves as a tribute to all, and on behalf of, Rhode Island’s remaining Holocaust survivors.

Korean War Memorial
- The sculpture stands to the price of war and honor its victims, depicting a kneeling soldier holding the rifle of war and cold.

World War I & II Memorials
Standing on South Street, the World War I Memorial honors those who served in the First World War. The memorial was designed by architect Paul Cost in 1929.

The Arcade
50 Weybosset Street

The Arcade, designed by architect Paul Cret and created in 1929, is the tallest — at 428 feet tall — and the most iconic in the Providence skyline. This building is the tallest — at 428 feet tall — and the most iconic in the Providence skyline. Work began in 1926 and the building was completed in 1928. The Arcade is renowned as the principle portal to the passenger station, is still a major commercial and retail destination.

Greene Episcopal Church
300 Westminster Street

Among the businesses and banks of building Westminster Street, Grace Episcopal Church is a constant for the walking neighborhood. With halls ringing every day on the half hour, the tradition began in 1860. Founded to serve parishioners who lived the East Side in favor of the fashionably Westminster Street, the church has the site of the old Parliament in Providence. In 1846, Richard Upjohn, one of the most notable architects of the time, completed the building design for the parish as the first gothic revival church in America.

Sheepdip Building
50 Weybosset Street

The Sheepdip Building company department store was a fixture of the 19th century, shopkeeper Jacob Whitman created a tradition that began in 1861. Founded to serve parishioners who lived the East Side in favor of the fashionably Westminster Street, the church has the site of the old Parliament in Providence. In 1846, Richard Upjohn, one of the most notable architects of the time, completed the building design for the parish as the first gothic revival church in America.

Providence City Hall
23 Daniel Street

Though the area around it has changed over the years, Providence City Hall remains a constant downtown Providence presence. Constructed in 1876, the central 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, additional wing was added in 1880. After a 30-year struggle over where to put the new building, the cornerstone was laid in the west side of the river on 1915. This was designed by the architect and Providence City Hall, it was saved, reflecting Providence’s pride in its historical roots.

Kennedy Plaza
2 Kennedy Plaza

Kennedy Plaza is a modern Providence’s main hub for transportation — as many as 50,000 people move through its six daily. Created as Exchange Place in the 1970s, the plaza has always served transportation needs. Thousands of people stand 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 the Alex and Ani City Center, which features arts and music programming, as well as roller derby and ice skating.

Burnside Park
2 Kennedy Plaza

Adjacent to the 19th-century transportation hub of Providence, Burnside Park was dedicated in 1972. The park provided a space to showcase three major attractions, the Baypoint Fountain and the statue of General Ambrose Burnside. Dedicated in 1902, the Burnside Fountain was a gift from Paul Bapst to the city to honor his late wife, Carnie Hophilde Bower, 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 reminder, however — the term “sideburns” comes from his infamous facial hair.

Waterplace Park and WaterFire
Memorial Boulevard

This area represents a vital part of early Providence history, serving as a reminder of the water that covered the area once known as Great Salt Cove. Over time, the water was drained and fields, and by 1899 railroad tracks ran through the area to carry the goods of the many industries in the city. At times cleared and business wanted, the downtown area languished. However, the Waterplace Project of the 1980s and 1990s brought the back to the Providence city center along with a reimagining of the waterfront that once ran through it. Today, Waterplace Park and the surrounding areas are home to walking paths, restaurants, concerts and WaterFire.

WaterFire
Ten of thousands of people gather around the Woonasquatucket Riverfront and Providence River several times a year to witness the city’s signature attraction, WaterFire. The waterfront sculpture installation performs on June 25 to New Year’s Eve in 1994. Nearly 100 wood-burning fires, music, and street performers attract locals and visitors alike to Waterplace Park and the Providence Riverwalk on WaterFire evenings. Formerer Buddy Cianci once said, “There is nothing like it anywhere in the world, even in Florence or Venice.”

This text was rewritten and written by Aricka Goldhaber.