Rhode Island State House

1. Commercial North Main Street: From Colonial to Cast Iron

2. Roger Williams National Memorial

3. The Changing City: View from the Roger Williams National Memorial

4. The Old Brick School House (ca. 1769) and the Providence Preservation Society

5. Providence College (1823), Manning Hall (1834), Slater Hall (1879),

6. Early Industry and Wood-Fired Pizza!

7. Providence Art Club

8. First Baptist Church

9. Rhode Island School of Design (RISD): Innovation and Design Excellence

10. Providence Athenaeum (1838)

11. Governor Henry Lippitt House (1865)

12. John Brown House Museum (1788)

13. Brown University Quadrangle

14. Stephen Hopkins House (ca. 1708)

15. First Unitarian Church (ca. 1818)

16. John Brown House Museum (1776)

17. Governor Henry Lippitt House (1855)

18. Providence Athenaeum (1828)

19. Providence College (1823)

20. The Providence Athenaeum (1838)

21. Governor Henry Lippitt House (1865)

22. John Brown House Museum (1776)

23. Stephen Hopkins House (ca. 1708)

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The East Side

PROVIDENCE WALKS

A Story of Innovators, Industrialists, Intellectuals and the Irrepressible.

Providence is, and always was, a place for the fiercely independent. The visionary leader Roger Williams established the city in 1636 as a haven for freedom of conscience, where all people could practice their own religious beliefs, a place where they were not merely tolerated, but enjoyed the right of true religious equality. Freedom of thought reigned, which opened the way for freedom of action. The economy boomed as the city grew into a great seaport in the 18th century and an industrial powerhouse in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Leading schools, libraries, art clubs, and literary societies were established and the arts flourished, but boom times were followed by economic and social busts.

The Great Depression, industrial decline, and the havoc wrought by demolitions and urban renewal in the 1960s left their mark. But the city survived and became noted for historic preservation of its treasures, its food renaissance, and a thriving artistic and cultural life. Innovation in every way has always marked the city. Today, the streets and waterfront are lined with elegant landmark buildings and quirky old houses and shops, all the legacy of a great past and a vibrant present. So walk the timeworn streets of this remarkably and defiantly preserved town with layers of history and continually evolving contemporary art, design, and food scenes. You will meet plenty of characters along the way. This walk brings you along the historic commercial zone of North Main Street and the residential area of Benefit Street in the heart of the College Hill District, noted for its concentration of 18th and 19th century buildings.

Historic Timeline

- 1636: Roger Williams establishes Providence as a haven for freedom of conscience, a place of religious freedom and liberty.
- 1772: King James II of England issues the Declaration of Liberty.
- 1774: Providence citizens burn the British ship Gaspee as an act of colonial defiance to British customs agents, later known as the “Gaspee Affair.”
- 1828: John Brown sends the first Providence ship, George Washington, to trade with China.
- 1849: George Henry Corliss of Providence patents the Corliss Steam Engine, a technological innovation fueling the Industrial Revolution in America.
- 1859: Rhode Island Chapter of the American Anti-Slavery Society meets in Providence.
- 1868-1913: The Brown family emerges as powerful financial, industrial and cultural leaders shaping many of the city’s institutions through the centuries, from churches and schools to industry and historic preservation.
- 1865: The first abolitionist society in Rhode Island, a philanthropist and pioneer industrialist.
- 1877: A hurricane floods downtown.
- 1936: Interstate Highway 195 is relocated from Downtown Providence to beyond the Fox Point Hurricane Barrier, allowing for future development.
- 1959: Ground is broken on the Capital Center re-development project, resulting in the shifting of rivers, train tracks and highways, and the re-shaping of Downtown Providence.

Providence Personalities

- ROGER WILLIAMS
  Visionary thinker on religious freedom, equal treatment of Native Americans, and founder of Providence. Williams’ ideas of liberty and freedom of conscience made Rhode Island a haven for persecuted religious groups, he laid the groundwork for the ideas of liberty, equality, and the separation of church and state in the U.S. Constitution.

  “... that no civil magistrate, no King ... have any power over the souls or consciences of their subjects, in the matters of God ...”

- THE BROWN BROTHERS
  Among the original settlers of Providence in the 1600s, the Brown family emerged as powerful financial, industrial and cultural leaders shaping many of the city’s institutions through the centuries, from churches and schools to industry and historic preservation.

  Moses (1733-1785) — Founder of the Providence Bank, first bank in Rhode Island, the first bank in Rhode Island.

  John (1729-1785) — Merchant and builder of a great fortune, instrumental in relocating Rhode Island College, later named Brown University, to Providence.

  Joseph (1733-1785) — College professor, astronomer and architect of several of the city’s major 18th century landmark buildings.

- WILLIAM J. BROWN
  The son of slaves owned by Moses Brown. William was a free African American born in Providence. A sailor, shoemaker, and temperance movement supporter, Brown wrote in his autobiography entitled Life (1885):

  “Mr. Brown, my grandfather’s master, seemed well satisfied with his help and thought that although they were his property - (it was) hence wrong to confine them any longer to servitude ... This was some time before the general emancipation in the State.”

- MARGARET BINGHAM STILLWELL
  A resident of Benefit Street and the accomplished librarian of the Annmary Brown Memorial, Margaret Stillwell wrote two books defending the street’s reputation in the 1940s when the area was in serious decline, calling for residents to repair buildings “to the spirit of youth which ... is still not too far gone to be recaptured.” Her vision was realized ten years later when Antoinette Downing and John Nicholas Brown helped launch the Providence Preservation Society.

- H.P. LOVECRAFT
  A master of weird fiction, the East Side resident Lovecraft achieved fame after his death. Author Stephen King described him as “... the 20th century’s greatest practitioner of the classic horror tale.”

  Influenced by Poe, who spent time at the Providence Athenaeum, Lovecraft created a unique world of fantasy and the macabre in stories such as the “Cthulhu Mythos.”

  In his book “The Shunned House” (1924), inspired by a Colonial house on Benefit Street, his fascination for tombs is apparent.

- MATILDA SISIERTA JONES
  Born in Virginia, but later making College Hill in Providence her home, this world-renowned soprano sang for four presidents at the White House and the British Royal Family. She was the first African American to perform at the New York City Music Hall, later known as Carnegie Hall.

- THE IRREPRESSIBLE SOCIETY
  A charitable organization founded in the mid-19th century by prominent ladies who lived on or near Benefit Street, the irrepressibles raised funds to pay poor families to make clothing for those in need, as well as provide new shoes, coal and other household goods.

- ANTOINETTE FORRESTER DOWNING
  Antoinette Downing and John Nicholas Brown helped launch the Providence Preservation Society.

  “... that no civil magistrate, no King ... have any power over the souls or consciences of their subjects, in the matters of God ...”

  “Cities are museums of buildings and the people are their curators; the citizens of old cities are responsible for finding ways to safeguard, renew, and bring historic architecture into living use in the contemporary world.”

  College Hill Study, Providence, 1959