How did Providence, Rhode Island become the “Jewelry Capital of the World”? The first steps were taken by Nehemiah Dodge and Jabez Gorham in the late 18th century, who established the Jewelry District, but the pace for what was to come. Jewelry made in Providence was going to be affordable, mass produced and based on innovative technologies, particularly electroplating. After the Civil War, most of the state’s jewelry manufacturing moved into the Jewelry District south of downtown.

Between 1830 and 1890, the industry grew from 27 companies with 280 workers to 200 firms with 7000 employees. At the turn of the 20th century, 80 percent of all costume jewelry in the U.S. was produced in Rhode Island. Distinctive, multistory brick manufacturing buildings, with rows of tall windows, flat roofs and heavy, slow-burning wood floors appeared from the 1880s onward — such as the Champlin and Doran buildings, or the structures at Imperial Place. Concrete post and beam structures with larger windows, such as the A.T. Wall, Little Nemo or Cora buildings followed in the early 20th century.

The Great Depression of the 1930s, growing international trade, increased labor costs and safety requirements at home, led to the industry’s local and global dispersion. Jewelry manufacturers began moving to “modern” single-story factories in the suburbs. Many buildings in the Jewelry District fell victim to the construction of the interstate highway in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the increased need for parking spaces close to downtown. The district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985. The tall manufacturing buildings were converted into condominiums and the last jewelry manufacturing shop closed in 2017. Since the arrival of several educational institutions and technology firms in recent years, innovation is once again driving growth in the district.

Interstates I-195 and I-95 When President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal Highway Act in June of 1956, he allocated $26 billion for the construction of a 41,000-mile “National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.” It promised “speedy, safe transcontinental travel” and “quick evacuation” in case of an atomic attack.

Mayors lobbied to have highways routed through their city centers in order to appropriate federal funds for urban renewal projects.

The intersection of I-95 (the major East Coast highway to the Panama Canal and commuters into Providence, the highway also cut a wide swath through the Jewelry District, taking down scores of industrial and residential buildings, churches, public parks and schools.

Decades later, the highway’s concrete substructures showed unmistakable signs of decay. Between 2006 and 2010, the 1.6-mile stretch through the Jewelry District was moved 2,000 feet south, just outside of the Hurricane Barrier, freeing up 20 acres of prime real estate close to the historic center of the neighborhood. The I-195 Redevelopment Commission has overseen steady growth in the area, with a mix of residential, business and educational buildings. A park on the banks of the Providence River and a footbridge on the foundation of the old highway serve as a harbinger of the promising rebirth of the once vibrant neighborhood.

“Design, like music, language, mathematics, art, science (curiosity) and the rest — is part of the structure of the mind … Done by nature with blind but dazzling elegance and by us with human purpose — designs to no more cultural perfection, but in a...” — Malcolm Fraser (1831–1916)

The Jewelry District

Providence Personalities

Thomas Arthur Doyle
(1827–1886)

Thomas Arthur Doyle was mayor of Providence for three intervals between 1864 until his death in office in 1886. He turned Providence from a “large manufacturing village” of 54,000 inhabitants into a “little metropolis” of 120,000. He oversaw the construction of City Hall, introduced the police force and a sewer system, greatly improved the school system, and acquired the land for Roger Williams Park.

“Doyle’s mayoral career was absolutely free from the taint of jobbery, dishonesty, or malfeasance and deserving of studious attention on the part of those interested in the difficult and undefined art of municipal government.” — Boston Advertiser, 1886

Nehemiah Dodge
(1769–1843)

Nehemiah Dodge is often called the “father of America’s jewelry industry” and Providence’s first jewelry maker. His innovations in plated gold paved the way for the production of affordable jewelry for a mass market.

Amos Chafee Barstow
(1813–1894)

Amos Chafee Barstow was a successful businessman, politician and civic leader. Founding the Barstow Steel Company in 1849, he also served as first president of the YMCA, mayor for one term and finally in 1875, President Grant appointed him to the Board of Indian Commissioners, which led to several trips to the American West.

Sarah Elizabeth Doyle
(1830–1922)

Sarah Elizabeth Doyle was an educator and educational reformer, helping found the Rhode Island School of Design and Providence Athenaeum. She led the campaign to admit women to Brown University, succeeding in 1891, with the admission of the first six women, and was the first woman to receive an honorary degree from Brown University in 1894.

Jabez Gorham
(1792–1869)

Jabez Gorham, a silversmith and merchant, founded his first company in 1815 with three partners, inventing and producing a popular jewelry chain (“Gorham Chain”). In 1831 he founded his own company (initially called Gorham & Webster) to produce coin silver spoons.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman
(1860–1935)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a prominent American novelist, feminist and activist for social reform. She wrote ad copy and designed trade cards for soap manufacturer Kendall Manufacturing Co. Her best remembered work is the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” an important milestone for feminist literature.

Champlin and Son was founded by Stanton and his son George in 1872 and produced gold rings and chains. George Champlin founded the United Wire and Supply Corporation in 1900. The family’s Champlin Foundation exists to this day, having disbursed more than $600 million in charitable grants since its founding in 1922.
**A. OTHER POINT OF INTEREST**

**Kendall Manufacturing Company**
90 Friendship Street

A parking structure for the adjacent courthouse today, this site long housed the headquarters of soap manufacturer Kendall Manufacturing Company. The present-day American Civic Association building was designed by Charles Goodhue and Gilmore (1900–1902), who lived in Providence during much of her youth and resided in the Rhode Island School of Design in 1878, made her income with the design of trading cards and the writing of advertising for the Kendall-Sharpless Company, and its flagship product, Soapette. These famous works, the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” appeared in 1892 in New England Magazine.

**James Doran and Sons Building**
150 Chester Street

James C. Doran commissioned the building in 1912 to house rental units for jewelry manufacturing next to his headquarters at 150 Chester Street. It was designed by Atkins & Johnson, a building engineering firm, who adopted the structure and aesthetics introduced four years earlier at the A.T. Wall Building. The earliest tenant was the German immigrant Albert Speidel’s company. This machine shop of 1848 is 2 ½ stories high, with gables on both ends and heavy random-ashlar walls. Perhaps most memorable are the three columns at the front of the building into lofts, and in the process, carefully restored its historical details, while keeping a visible sign of the former highway location.

**Imperial Place**
Between Imperial Place, Elm and Bessett Streets

What is today called Imperial Place was the site of the Granite Building, one of the buildings of the former Vermont Knitting Mills and Imperial Knit Company. The Vermont Knitting Mills (originally Elba Woolen Mills) grew from 30 looms, carding and spinning machines in 1888 to 175 looms in 1906. In 1898, producing women, men and children’s underwear. By 1905, Vermont Knit was a second Lathrop factory, an investment, to keep its weaving and knitting manufacturing. In 1916, Italian immigrants Felix and Michael DeCaro purchased the failed Lathrop Silk Company to produce specialized knits for jewelry. By the 1920s, it had become one of the largest and most successful jewelry manufacturers in the world. Its best-sellers were the Kamee-King, company knits.

**Phenix Iron Foundry**
193 Chestnut Street

The Phenix Iron Foundry had a national monopoly on producing machines for electric street cars and trolleys in Providence at the beginning of the 20th century. The original, southern building with stepped gable was added in 1913 as part of a major reconstruction in 1912 led by William H. Warner, the architect of the downtown river relocation and Waterplace Park.

**C. OTHER POINT OF INTEREST**

**Providence Children’s Museum**
152 New Street

The museum was founded in 1977 and moved to its current location 20 years later—a simple, 1950s industrial block structure with large metal-truss steel. The Barlow-Stove Factory, built the entire 2 ½-acre site for the entire 2 ½-acre site, the three-storied factory structure of 1849 with a clerestory window, east of this, a four-story structure from 1851, and a later structure at the corner of Point and Richmond streets. The company failed in 1930.

**D. OTHER POINT OF INTEREST**

**Point Street Grammar School**
20 Point Street

This public school was once known as the Providence Grammar School, an independent school for girls founded in 1863. It was replaced in 1907 by a new building on the site of the former school, which is now the Point Street Grammar School. The school was built in 1893 by Charles H. Rand, a noted architect and civil engineer, and re-opened in 1907. The four-story building consists of two main wings, connected by a two-story central section, and is constructed of brick and stone. The school was closed in 1969 and was converted to residential use in 1970.

**Iron and Russell Building**
90 Friendship Street

Charles Irvin and Charles Russell, manufacturers of pins and chains, occupied the building in 1902–04 from the prominent local architect Martin & Hall. The building consists of six stories with a flat roof, a basement level, and two brick buildings with “cobbled” courtyards—a well-decorated exterior facade. The prominent brownstone entrance on the main street is a piece of the city’s first fully electrically powered industrial structures.

**A.T. Wall Company**
90 Friendship Street

The Wood and coal stores produced by Anna Chafee Barlow in the Point Street foundry started in 1849 with limited success and won several national awards, as well as a medal of merit at the 1876 Vienna World Fair. Before the end of the century, the company had become the largest stone company in New England, employing 200 workers and offering 50 different kinds of stone. The Barlow-Stove Factory, built the entire 2 ½-acre site for the entire 2 ½-acre site, the three-storied factory structure of 1849 with a clerestory window, east of this, a four-story structure from 1851, and a later structure at the corner of Point and Richmond streets. The company failed in 1930.