

Providence Walks: The West Side

STORIES OF IMMIGRATION AND ACTIVISM IN A GLOBAL NEIGHBORHOOD

Beyond Interstate 95 lies Providence’s West Side. A bridge arching over the interstate takes you into the city of immigrants and strivers, of industrialists in Broadway mansions and mill workers in cramped triple-deckers.

The Colonial town, built on shipping and the slave trade, huddled along the Providence River. By the early 19th century, textile mills had changed the economy, the result of Eli Whitney’s cotton gin and Samuel Slater’s industrial espionage. The new manufacturing city spread across the low-lying flats of the Weybosset side and climbed the hills south of the Woonasquatucket River.

The mills needed labor and recruiters looked abroad. First, the Irish from the mill towns of Ulster flooded in after 1845 to escape the famine. By 1865, a third of Providence’s 55,000 residents were Irish born; many settled at the east end of Atwells Avenue and further west around the mills of Olneyville.

After 1880, a sweeping current of immigration from Southern Europe poured into Providence on Fabre Line ships from Naples. The Italian arrivals worked in the mills and jewelry factories of the “Beehive of Industry,” a common nickname for Providence at the time. The turn of the century saw massive global migrations, and many nationalities contributed to the life of the multilingual city: Germans, Swedes, Portuguese, Polish and French Canadians; Jews escaping riots and attacks in Russia; and Armenians fleeing massacre. Many found a home on the city’s West Side.

By 1915, two-thirds of Providence’s 250,000 residents were immigrants or the children of immigrants. Income inequality was glaring and never more visible than on the West Side where the Broadway mansions of the elite fronted the factories and tenements of the back streets. The West Side’s radicals and reformers spoke their mind and fought for change.

In 1921, the flow of immigrants was stanchied by restrictive quota laws targeting Southern Europeans. Not until 1965 did the quota system change, bringing new arrivals to diversify a city struggling with the loss of industry.

Today the West Side is a dynamic community, home to those native-born and immigrant, coming from every corner of our country and our planet to build a better life in Providence. Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Peru and Guatemala; the Hmong, Cambodians and Vietnamese; Africans from Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria are all represented.

Walk the West Side and see the city of the Irish famine and French Canadian mill workers, the Italian diaspora and Armenian refuge, and the new city being built in one of the most diverse communities in America.

IMMIGRATION AND THE POPULATION

WAVES OF IMMIGRATION

EARLY ARRIVALS

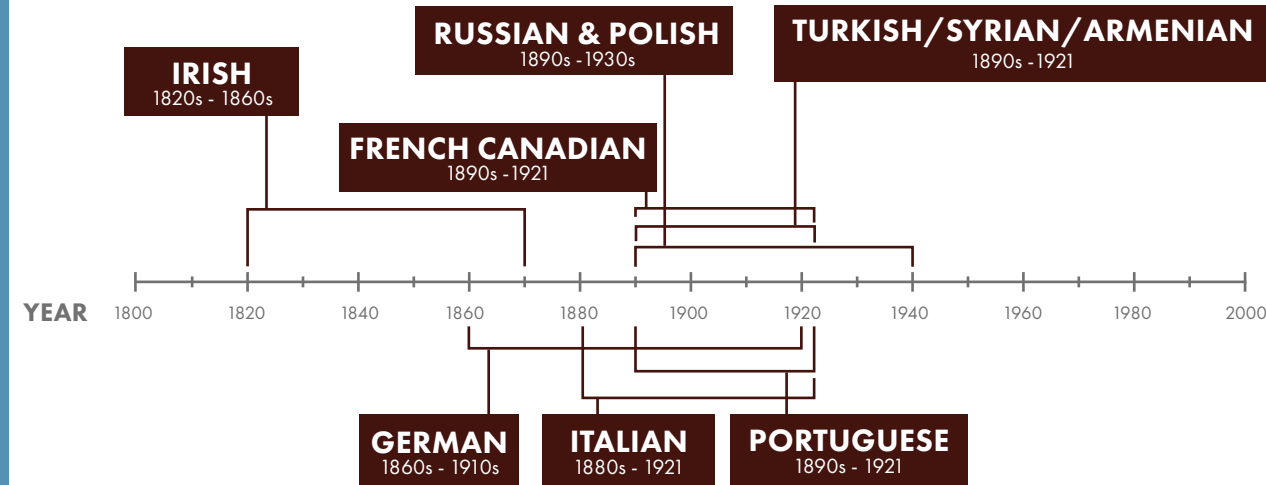
ENGLISH

17th - 18th Centuries

AFRICAN

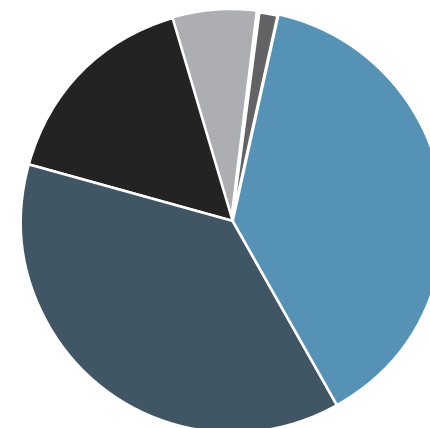
17th - 18th Centuries

19TH & 20TH CENTURY WAVE



Providence Population 2010

Total Population: 178,042



- Hispanic/Latino 38.1%
- White/European 37.6%
- African 16%
- Asian 6.4%
- Native American 1.4%

Today’s immigrants arrive under an immigration program designed by Congress and enacted in 1965. The refugees and asylum seekers living in today’s Providence are fleeing political upheaval and violent conflicts in their home countries, and include (without being limited to) Vietnamese, ethnic Hmong, Laotian, Cambodian, Guatemalan, Colombian, Mexican, Dominican, Nigerian, Liberian and Ghanaian.

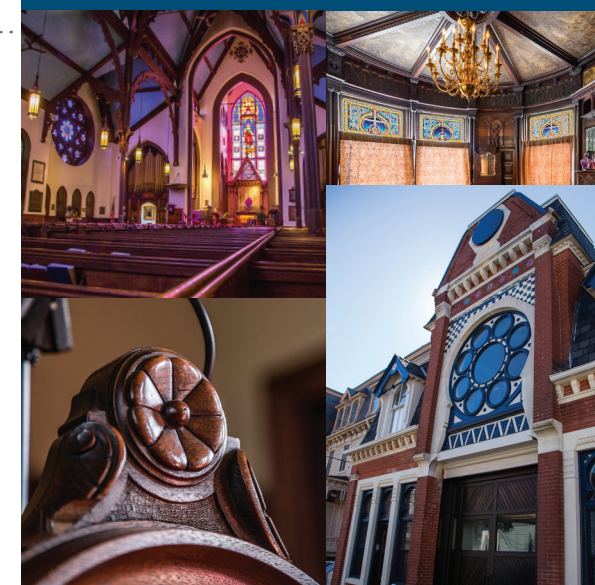
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Providence Personalities



Maritcha Remond Lyons (1848-1929)

Maritcha Remond Lyons testified before the Rhode Island General Assembly at the age of 16 to end public school segregation in Providence and became the first African-American to graduate from Providence High School.



James Eddy (1806-1888)

James Eddy was a wealthy art dealer and radical reformer who built a temple dedicated to his independent-minded religion.

Sarah J. Eddy (1851-1945)

Sarah J. Eddy was James Eddy’s daughter and a radical in her own right, fighting for women’s suffrage, social justice, and the humane treatment of animals, as well as being an accomplished artist and photographer.

“The true religion is one of faith in an Infinite Righteousness and Love, and the working out of those principles of the Divine nature in human life.”

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“The earth is ready, the time is ripe, for the authoritative expression of the feminine as well as the masculine interpretation of that common social consensus ...”
- Anna Garlin Spencer



Thomas Wilson Dorr (1805-1854)

Thomas Wilson Dorr was the scion of an old and wealthy family who fought to expand voting rights and led a failed rebellion in 1842.



Raymond L.S. Patriarca (1908-1984)

Raymond L.S. Patriarca was the head of one of the most powerful and ruthless organized crime syndicates in the U.S.

“Why do a lot of young fellows do a lot of things, when they haven’t a father?”

“The wealthy pamper their passions with the money earned by the people, while the producers of wealth starve in their barren homes.”

Luigi Nimini (1868-1912)

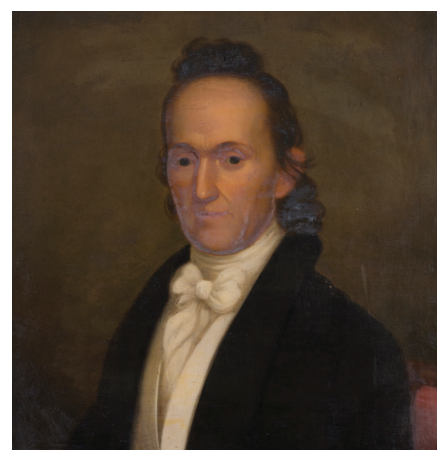
Luigi Nimini was a Verona-born labor organizer, newspaper publisher, and activist for the rights of the poor and working class.



The Tirocchi Sisters

Anna (1884-1947) & Laura (1891-1982)

The Tirocchi Sisters immigrated from Italy and dressed the elite of Providence in Paris-inspired couture for more than 40 years.



Ebenezer Knight Dexter (1773-1824)

Ebenezer Knight Dexter was a role model of civic philanthropy, leaving large donations of land to the poor and the public good.

The base of his monument on the Dexter Training Ground is inscribed:
“Leaving nothing but a headstone to mark our passage through life does not make the world better. They live best who serve humanity the most.”

Anna Garlin Spencer (1851-1931)

Anna Garlin Spencer was the first female ordained minister in Rhode Island, a journalist, and a leader in social work, social justice and equality.





1 Giuseppe Garibaldi Park and the Welcome Gateway
99 Atwells Avenue

In the spring of 1975, women with sledgehammers marched on what was then Franklin Park to attack a dilapidated bathhouse. Built in 1911 to serve the crowded Italian immigrant community of Federal Hill, the bathhouse had become an eyesore. Providence's first Italian-American mayor, Vincent "Buddy" Cianci, turned the public relations disaster into a coup. Federal Hill had been the epicenter of the Italian immigrant experience in Rhode Island, and Buddy made the park a memorial to that history. The gateway arch decorated with "La Pigna," a symbol of hospitality, now welcomes people into the home of the Italian diaspora to celebrate Italian culture.

2 Burrington Anthony House
138 Atwells Avenue

This Federal-style house was the headquarters of a political revolution. Burrington Anthony was a supporter of Thomas Wilson Dorr's campaign to expand voting rights. At that time, only white men of property could vote, disenfranchising much of the state. In May 1842, Dorr came to this house a pretender-governor. Raided cannons were positioned in the middle of the avenue. Bells across the city tolled the alarm, but Dorr's cannon fizzled, and so did his revolution. Dorr was tried for treason and imprisoned, but ultimately pardoned. A new state constitution expanded the franchise but retained restrictions, particularly targeting foreign-born citizens.



3 Coin-O-Matic
168 Atwells Avenue

The Coin-O-Matic was the headquarters of the Patriarca crime family, one of the most ruthless and powerful criminal organizations in the United States. Raymond L.S. Patriarca ran his cash-only tobacco vending business here as a money laundering front for more sinister operations, including gambling, prostitution, theft, extortion and murder. He wielded influence as far away as Miami and Las Vegas, and his hold on power ended only at his death in 1984. Many in the neighborhood still remember the days of Patriarca.



The Federal Hill Riots of 1914/Frank P. Ventrone Block
240-244 Atwells Avenue

As World War I was breaking out, food prices spiked. A mob attacked wholesale grocer Frank P. Ventrone's business block here, smashing windows and hurling macaroni into the street. Commonly known as the "Macaroni Riots," five violent clashes over two weeks manifested the desperation of Providence's immigrant working poor. In the midst of poverty and social unrest, radicals like Luigi Nimini agitated for change. Nimini organized laborers into unions and founded the Karl Marx Club at the corner of Atwells and Dean, the same corner where radical speakers riled up the crowd in August 1914.



DePasquale Square
Atwells Avenue and DePasquale Avenue

If Garibaldi Park and the Gateway Arch are the welcoming arms of Federal Hill, DePasquale Square is its beating heart. The quatrefoil fountain and wide plaza are part of the Federal Hill revitalization effort. Back in the day, however, tens of thousands of immigrant families packed into these narrow streets and triple-deckers. The Cappelli Block was completed in 1909 by Antonio Cappelli, one of the earliest Italian arrivals on the Hill, when Irish immigrants dominated the avenue. Along these streets, too, were the famous pushcarts, selling every variety of fruit and vegetable.

OTHER POINTS OF INTEREST

6 Federal Hill House/Sprague House
417 Atwells Avenue

In 1887, Alida Sprague Whitmarsh and Harriet Richards formed the Mt. Pleasant Working Girls Club & Library (later Sprague House) to train and support young Irish women working in the mills. In 1910, they occupied part of the house to work in this crowded immigrant neighborhood, reforming as Federal Hill House in 1914. Settlement houses provided medical and food aid, language classes, and skills training to immigrants trying to navigate a new country. Early emphasis was on assimilation, but sensitivity to native cultures developed over time. Federal Hill House has a 130-year tradition of providing community and support to thousands of city residents, both newly arrived and native born.

7 Holy Ghost Church
472 Atwells Avenue

In 1889, Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini sent missionaries to Providence to form Holy Ghost parish and serve the spiritual and physical needs of the growing Italian community here. By 1909, this Italian Romanesque church was completed. Father Flaminio Parenti, the "Shepherd of Federal Hill," led the flock from 1922 to 1964 and continued the beautification of the church. The work of the Scalabrinian missionaries continues today as a lay organization, the Scalabrini Dukcevic Center, which provides support to all those in need. While immigrants from Latin America have joined the congregation and breathed new life into old traditions, Holy Ghost remains the "Mother Church" of the Italian diaspora in Rhode Island.



Columbus Theatre
270 Broadway

At its opening in 1926, the Columbus Theatre was touted as "a testimonial to the Italian people." The late Beaux-Arts theater was built, designed and decorated by Italians. The theater is named for the famous Italian explorer and has 1,492 seats. Elaborate murals by George DeFelice make this a rare and virtually intact showplace. The theater was equipped for movies and vaudeville at its opening, but struggled with changes in its audience and neighborhood. Reopened in 2012 as a music cooperative, the Columbus has become one of the hottest live-music venues in town.



Barnaby Castle
299 Broadway

This extravagant mansion was designed in two phases (1875 and 1888) by renowned Providence architects Stone, Carpenter & Willson, but tradition states that the emphatic personality of its owner determined the eclectic mix of shapes and styles. After retail king Jerothmul B. Barnaby's death in 1889, his widow Josephine fell under the spell of her physician Dr. Thomas Thatcher Graves. On a visit to Denver in 1891, she received a gift of poisoned whiskey by mail and quickly died. Graves' trial was a national sensation. He was convicted of America's first murder-by-mail and committed suicide in prison in 1893. The house today is undergoing a painstaking renovation to recapture its original splendor.

10 Sts. Vartanantz Armenian Apostolic Church
402 Broadway

Completed in 1892 to serve the wealthy Episcopalians of Broadway, and home for 10 years to the African-American Church of the Savior, this Alpheus C. Morse-designed Romanesque Revival church has been Sts. Vartanantz (All Saints) Armenian Apostolic Church since 1940. Armenians found refuge in the United States after being driven from their homeland by the Ottoman Turkish brutal genocide of 1915 and after. The immigrant arrivals called their new home in Providence the "Citadel" (mitchnapert) for the community's strength and activism. This community continues to aid and support those in need at home as well as Armenians across the globe facing conflict and persecution.



Bell Street Chapel
5 Bell Street

Providence's exquisite French neo-classical temple, the Bell Street Chapel, was built in 1875 for art dealer James Eddy after a design by storied Providence architect William R. Walker. Eddy dedicated his church "to God, to Truth, and to all that ennobles Humanity," but he could find no one to lead a congregation according to his religious vision. After Eddy's death in 1889, reformer and activist Anna Garlin Spencer organized an intellectual, crusading church here and was Rhode Island's first female ordained minister. Today's Unitarian Universalist congregation continues the fight for social justice with Reverend Margaret Weis at its helm.

12 Wedding Cake House/Kendrick-Prentice-Tirocchi House
514 Broadway

The extravagantly embellished "Wedding Cake" house was built for industrial innovator John Kendrick. The 1867 mansion, attributed to Broadway architect Perez Mason, reflects the euphoric froth of new money. In 1915, Anna Tirocchi bought the house and with her sister Laura made couture creations here for Providence's elite until 1947. After Anna's death, everything was wrapped in tissue and put away. Some 40 years later, RISD Museum curators were stunned, as if entering a fashion time capsule, when Laura's son invited them into the house to catalog and preserve the collection.



St. Mary's Catholic Church
538 Broadway

St. Mary's is a Gothic Revival monument to the Irish history of Providence. The stone church, designed by Irish-born architect James Murphy, was begun in 1864. The Irish congregation of mill workers donated much of the labor, including digging the foundations and cutting stone masonry, in a magnificent act of faith and community. Today there are Spanish language masses and a chapel is decorated with Peruvian icons brought by the new congregants, one of many Latin American countries represented in St. Mary's 21st century congregation.



14 West Broadway Neighborhood Association
1560 Westminster Street

Repurposing older structures is a tenet of historic preservation. Here, the West Broadway Neighborhood Association practices what it preaches. This 1930s Art Moderne Texaco station is a classic Walter Dorwin Teague prefab design, but instead of pumping gas, this service station has become a fueling place for the community. Kari Lang has led the WBNA for 20 years and made the organization a model of engagement and community.



Ebenezer Knight Dexter/Dexter Training Ground
73 Dexter Street

This nine-acre park was a gift from one of the greatest philanthropists in Providence's history. Ebenezer Knight Dexter (1773-1824) donated this park for military purposes and a 40-acre tract on the East Side for the benefit of the poor. This public space played an important role in the Dorr Rebellion and was a mustering site during the Civil War and World War I. The 14th Rhode Island Heavy Artillery (Colored), the first African-American company from Rhode Island to serve in the Civil War, was raised in Providence and bivouacked here. Today Dexter watches over it all, cast in bronze by Gorham Manufacturing in 1894.



Cranston Street Armory
310 Cranston Street

The yellow-brick, copper-crenellated Cranston Street Armory, one of the most monumental structures in the city, was designed by William R. Walker & Son and completed in 1907. A fortress of social order in a roiling sea of labor unrest in the early 20th century, military fanfare was common. Civilian demand for the 40,000-square-foot drill shed, however, was immediate. The bastion of military power became host for surprising and delightful aspects of city life for close to 100 years. Only partially occupied now, this remarkable historic building struggles to find its purpose, longing to be the "Castle for the People" once again.



Providence Hmong Church/Advent Christian Church
46 Dexter Street

This sweet English Gothic church, designed by German immigrant Anthony F. Trice was completed in 1910 for the Advent Christian Church. The Adventist sect arose from the millenarian preachings of William Miller in upstate New York. After Miller's predicted Second Coming did not occur in 1844, the sect splintered. Today the Providence Hmong Evangelical Church of the Christian and Missionary Alliance makes its home here, an evangelical church of the ethnic community from the mountains of northern Laos. During the conflicts across Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 80s, many Hmong sought refuge in the United States — and some of them found a home in Providence.



Grant Mill
299 Carpenter Street

Grant Mill began life in the mid-19th century as a textile mill. The current complex was built around World War I by textile moguls B.B. & R. Knight, whose flagship brand was "Fruit of the Loom." By 1935, jewelry firm Blacher Brothers was manufacturing here. The Blacher brothers were sons of Russian Jewish coppersmith David Blacher, who arrived in Providence with his family in 1900. Today Grant Mill has been repurposed into condominiums, a crucial form of adaptive reuse for a city burdened with vacant industrial space.



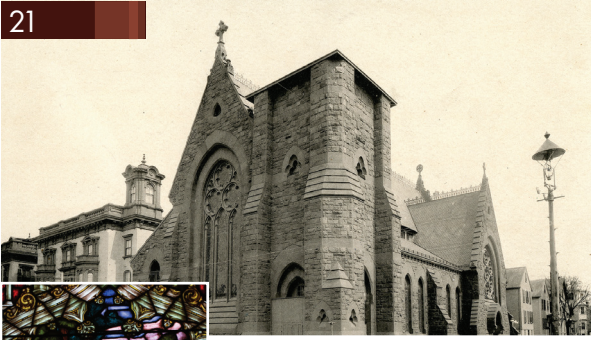
Luongo Memorial Square
Convergence of Carpenter & West Fountain streets

Thomas S. and Vincent Luongo Memorial Square was named in honor of World War I veterans who lived nearby. Before the name change in 1938, this was Decatur Square, and today a rare space evocative of 19th century city life. These smaller squares were home to Providence's working class. When the industrial bottom fell out, many left these dense neighborhoods for the suburbs, leaving derelict properties behind. Organizations like the WBNA and the Providence Revolving Fund served as advocates and change-makers to redevelop and reanimate this now dynamic historic space.



Canonius Square
870 Westminster Street

Canonius was the Narragansett sachem who offered refuge to Roger Williams in 1636, but before this place was named for him in a fit of Colonial Revival fervor, it was the busy shopping district known as Hoyle Square. Cranston and Westminster were already busy highways in the early 18th century. Rochambeau marched his armies down Cranston Street in June 1781 on his way to Yorktown. Back then, those soldiers marched past the Hoyle Tavern. Built in 1739, Hoyle's was a popular spot for gatherings and entertainment. A Citizens Bank, constructed in 1921, stands in its place, the focal point of a square drastically altered by late 20th century redevelopment.



All Saints' Memorial Church
674 Westminster Street

All Saints' Memorial Church is one of the few churches that remain of the religious communities that climbed up "Christian Hill" as Providence expanded westward. All Saints' Episcopal congregation was formed as St. Andrew's in 1846 but relocated here in 1868 with a new name to honor Bishop John P.K. Henshaw, the first independent Bishop of Rhode Island. Edward Tuckerman Potter's Gothic Revival design was left without a tower due to financial difficulties, but the interior features some of Providence's most remarkable stained glass. Today's congregation embraces the diversity of the neighborhood, including many from Providence's strong Liberian community.

This tour was researched and written by Taylor M. Polites.