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. Incomes 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 stanched 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.

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

IMMIGRATION AND THE POPULATION

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<th>ENGLISH</th>
<th>AFRICAN</th>
<th>FRENCH CANADIAN</th>
<th>GERMAN</th>
<th>ITALIAN</th>
<th>PORTUGUESE</th>
<th>RUSSIAN &amp; POLISH</th>
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Providence Population 2010

- Hispanic/Latina: 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) Viennese, Afghan, Cambodian, Guatemalan, Colombian, Mexican, Dominican, Nigerian, Liberian and Ghanaian.

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.

Raymond L.S. Patriarca (1908-1984)

Raymond L.S. Patriarca was a leader in social work, social justice, and the humane treatment of animals, as well as being an accomplished artist and photographer.

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 (1831-1945)

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.

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.

The Tirocchi Sisters

Anna (1884-1947) & Laura (1891-1912)

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

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.

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.

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

"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."
Giuseppe Garibaldi Park and the Welcome Gateway

99 Atwells Avenue

In the spring of 1975, women with dudgeonness marched on what was then Federal Hill Park to attack a dispirited bathhouse. In 1912 to serve the crowded Italian immigrant community of Federal Hill, the bathhouse had become an annex of Providence’s first Italian-American mayor, Vincent “Buddy” Cianci. Thus began the public relations disaster in a city of public relations disasters. Federal Hill has been the epicenter of the Italian-American experience in Rhode Island and Buddy made the park a memorial to that history. The gateway arch, decorated with “Sta. Perpetua,” a symbol of hospitality, now welcomes newcomers to the home of the Italian diaspora to celebrate Italian culture.

Burrington Anthony House

138 Atwells Avenue

This Federal-style house was the headquarters of a political revolution. Burrington Anthony House was the home of Burrington Anthony, who led the movement for African-American rights in Rhode Island. Anthony was a leader in the fight for abolition and was instrumental in the establishment of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. He is remembered as a precursor to the civil rights movement.

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 a dilapidated bathhouse. Built in 1911 to serve the Italian community, the bathhouse had become a source of frustration due to its poor conditions and high prices. The incident became known as the Federal Hill Riots of 1914 and marked a significant moment in the history of Federal Hill.

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 quake-timated and wide plaza is one of the Federal Hill revitalization efforts. Back in the day, thousands of Italian immigrants passed through this narrow streets and triple-decker. The Cappelli Block was completed in 1929 by Antonino Cappelli, one of the earliest Italian arrivals on the Hill, when Irish immigrants dominated the area. Along these streets, too, were the famous pizzerias, serving every variety of flour and vegetable.

Cain-O-Matic

107 Atwells Avenue

The Cain-O-Matic was the headquarters of the Patriotta crime family, one of the most ruthless and powerful criminal organizations in the United States. Raymond J. Patriotta ran his criminal organization from this location, using it as a money laundering front. The organization was involved in gambling, prostitution, theft, extortion and murder. It wielded influence as far away as Miami and Las Vegas in the 1970s.

Columbia Theatre

270 Broadway

After opening in 1926, the Columbia Theatre was toured as “a sensation” in the Italian media. The late Barone-Art Theatre was built, designed and decorated by Italians. The theatre was the largest Italian theater on the East Coast. Elaborate decor by George DeFece made this a very sleek and virtually intact showplace. The theater was equipped for movies and vaudeville at its opening, but struggled with changes in audience and neighborhood. Reopening in 2012 as a music venue, the Columbia has become one of the hottest live music venues in town.

Barnaby Castle

299 Broadway

This extravagant mansion was designed in two phases (1907 and 1908) by renowned Providence architects Carpenter & William. But tradition states that the actual person built the house. Barnaby Castle is a symbol of hospitality, now welcoming people into the home of the Italian diaspora to celebrate Italian culture.

Sts. Vartanants Armenian Apostolic Church

Completed in 1929 to serve the wealthy Episcopalian of Broadway and homesteaders for 10 years to the American-Armenian Church of the Savior, this Alphess C. Moreau-designed Romanesque Revival building is home to the Sts. Vartanants (St. Saints) Armenian Apostolic Church since 1960. Armenians fled genocide in the Ottoman Turkish interior of the 1910s and after the immigrant stream settled their new homes in Providence the “Catala” (influx) for the community’s strength and activism. The community continues to send aid and support through aid to a host of aid as Armenia across the globe facing conflict and persecution.

Bell Street Chapel

5 Bell Street

Providence’s exquisite French neoclassical temple, the Bell Street Chapel, was built in 1875 for an art dealer James Eddy after design by renowned Providence architect William F. Walker. Eddy dedicated his church “to God in truth, and to all that makes Him loveable,” but he could not find one to lead a congregation according to his religious vision. In 1891, Eddy and activist Anna Grinnell organized an intellectual, cultural, and religious group and the New Church of Rhode Island and its first Female Colored Congregation was formed. This group was unique in the city of Providence and Universalism continues to be a part of the community. Today the church is known as the “Grace Church”.

St. Mary’s Church

310 Cranston Street

St. Mary’s is a Gothic Revival movement to the Irish history of Providence. The church, designed by Irish-architect James Murphy, was begun in 1841. The Irish congregation of the church, which included pagans and the Catholic and Jewish communities, continued to worship there until 1853. The building was expanded in 1911 with the addition of a balcony.

West Broadway Neighborhood Association

1660 West Street

Reopening, older structures are a benefit of historic preservation. Here, the West Broadway Neighborhood Association practices what it preaches. This 1920s Art Deco Moderno locusa station is a classic. Walter Denvane designed the building, but instead of pumping gas, this service station has become a fueling place for the community. Karl Lang has led the WBNM for 20 years and made the organization a model of engagement and community.

St. Francis Xavier Church

674 Westminster Street

This sweet English Gothic church, designed by German immigrant architect Emil E. Wiesler, was completed in 1893. The house today is undergoing a painstaking renovation to recapture its original splendor.

Debarcode

120 Westminster Street

This Federal-style house was the headquarters of a political revolution. Burrington Anthony House was the home of Burrington Anthony, who led the movement for African-American rights in Rhode Island. Anthony was a leader in the fight for abolition and was instrumental in the establishment of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. He is remembered as a precursor to the civil rights movement.

Canonicus Square

870 Westminster Street

Canonicus Square is named for a popular Suffolk auctioneer who offeredialgo to Roger Williams in 1656, but before this place was named for him it’s called a Colonial Reverend New, it was the busy shopping district known as “The City.” Cranston and Westminster were already busy highways in the early 18th century. Richardson matched his ornate space with up-to-date functionality in 1761. On the way to Yorktown. Back then, these sailors marched past the mighty Tower Room. In 1791, Haynes was a popular spot for gatherings and entertainment. A Citizens Bank, constructed in 1921, stands in place, the focal point of a square dramatically altered by late 20th century redevelopment.

Deep River Falls

On the same block, the Deep River Falls was a popular meeting place for the local community. The falls were a popular spot for picnics and social gatherings, and the area has remained a popular destination for outdoor activities.

St. Mary’s Catholic Church

538 Broadway

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Cranston Street Armory

310 Cranston Street

The yellow-brick, copper-turreted Cranston Street Armory, one of the most monumental structures in the city, was designed by William F. Walker & Son and completed in 1907. A form of social order in a ruling race of labor class in the early 20th century, military service was common. Citizen-drafted for the 40,000-square-foot drill shed, however, was immediate. The subject of history became each citizen’s pride and delight in the great city of Providence. These small squares were homes to Providence’s working class. When the industrial boom fell, many left these densely populated neighborhoods for the suburbs, leaving decayed properties behind. Organizations like the WWI and the Providence Revitalization Fund served as advocates and change-makers to revitalize and revitalize these now dynamic historic spaces.

Providence Hmong Church

46 Dexter Street

This sweet English Gothic church, designed by German immigrant architect Emil E. Wiesler, was completed in 1893. The house today is undergoing a painstaking renovation to recapture its original splendor.

Ebenen Church

Dexter Training Ground

73 Dexter Street

This nine-acre park was a gift from one of the greatest philanthropists in Providence’s history. Ebenen Church (1772-1824) donated this park for military purposes and a 40-acre acreage as the First Field for the benefit of the poor. This public space played an important role in the Civil War and World War I. The Rhode Island Heavy Artillery (Carnold), the first African-American company from Rhode Island to serve in the Civil War, was raised in Providence and trained here. Today Dexter watches over it, all in bronze by Gutzon Borglum in 1914.